
ADRIAN LOCKE
AIDAN BYRNE
HEIR OF THE SUN

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# Chapter 1
# The Worst Birthday in the History of Dublin

If Aidan Byrne had known that his eighteenth birthday would end with a fish-man trying to eat him in an alley off Camden Street, he would have skipped the nine o'clock lecture.

He would have skipped the pub, too. He might have skipped being born on Halloween altogether, but nobody had asked him about that.

Being born on Halloween sounds cool until you've done it for eighteen years. It means every birthday party is a costume party whether you want one or not. It means your cake has a pumpkin on it. It means your little brother tells everyone at school that you were found on the doorstep in a basket, left by witches, and your mam doesn't correct him fast enough.

It also means, it turns out, that you wake up on the one night of the year when the doors between the worlds don't close properly. But Aidan didn't know that yet. At nine o'clock that morning, the worst thing in his life was Professor Higgins.

Higgins taught Early Irish History to eighty first-years in a lecture hall that smelled like wet coats and canteen coffee. He was a narrow man in a tweed jacket with wire-rimmed glasses he never actually looked through. He only looked over them, usually at Aidan.

That morning he was walking them through the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, the Book of Invasions, which was medieval Ireland's attempt to write down its own history. As far as Aidan could tell, the history went like this: some people arrived in Ireland. Something terrible happened to them. Some other people arrived. Something worse happened to them. Repeat for six hundred pages, and add a plague whenever the monks got bored.

Normally Aidan liked this stuff. He was a history student. Liking dead people's problems was the whole job.

But he'd woken at five from the drowning dream again. It was always the same: black water closing over his head, so heavy he couldn't move, and the

absolute certainty that if he opened his mouth, the sea would come in. He'd had it since he was eight. After this morning's round, instead of going back to sleep like a normal person, he'd sat up until dawn reading his father's old journals by the light of his phone. The pages were water-stained and full of sketches he didn't understand. He'd been doing that a lot lately. He couldn't have told you why.

Now his eyes stung, and something was wrong with his skin.

It felt tight. It hummed, the way your teeth hum when you stand too close to a big speaker. The feeling had started when he woke up and had been building all morning. By now it was right behind his eyes, not quite a headache yet.

Above him, a fluorescent tube flickered and whined. He rubbed his temples.

Then he noticed the shadows.

Aidan had always been good at noticing things. If it was a superpower, it was the most annoying one going. He noticed which leg people favored when they walked, what the rain was doing on the window, the exact second the girl two rows down stopped taking notes and started texting. Patterns jumped out at him whether he wanted them or not.

And the shadows under the exit sign in the corner were not behaving like shadows. They were too thick. They were moving, very slightly, in a room with no draft, the way seaweed moves underwater.

The hairs on his arms stood up. He had the clearest feeling that someone was standing just out of sight in that corner, watching him, and only him.

"Mr. Byrne."

Aidan jumped. Eighty heads turned.

Higgins had lowered his glasses. "Perhaps you can help us. Wave after wave of invaders arrives in Ireland, and every single wave ends up fighting the same enemy. The Fomorians. The things from the sea. Why do you think the Fomorians keep turning up in the record?"

Aidan's brain did what it always did under pressure, which was leave the building.

"Um," he said. "Because..." He glanced at the corner. Just shadows. "Because people needed someone to blame? Crops failed, storms hit, boats

didn't come back. That's chaos. It doesn't have a face. So they gave it one. A lot of them, actually, and none of them nice."

A few people laughed. Higgins didn't.

"Half marks," he said. "It's a good answer, Mr. Byrne. It's the answer in all the textbooks. But you might ask yourself why every one of those people, centuries apart, gave chaos the same face." He turned back to the board, then added, without looking around, "And mind yourself tonight. It's Samhain. The old stories say the doors don't close properly."

The girl beside Aidan snorted. Aidan didn't. When he looked back at the corner, the shadows under the exit sign were perfectly ordinary, and somehow that was worse.

His phone buzzed against his leg.

It was his mam. *Happy 18th to my big man!! Liam made you a card, it's mostly glitter, I'm so sorry. Ring me tonight xx*

A second message arrived before he could answer. *Your dad would be so proud of the man you're turning into. Love you.*

Aidan read that one twice. Then he put the phone face down on his notebook and looked at nothing for a while.

Ten years ago, when Aidan was eight, the Guards had found his father's car parked at the top of the cliffs at Horn Head, in Donegal, with the keys in the ignition and nobody in it. There'd been searches. There'd been boats and helicopters and a man from the Guards who kept calling Aidan "young fella" and wouldn't look him in the eye. There'd been no body. There had never been an answer, either. They had just learned to live without one.

From the house where Aidan grew up, on a clear day, you could see Tory Island sitting low on the horizon. When he was small, his father used to tell him that a giant with one terrible eye had once kept a tower out there, and that a hero made of sunlight had come across the water to put that eye out. It had been Aidan's favorite story. He'd made his father tell it so many times that Declan Byrne used to do the giant's voice without being asked.

Liam's card was in his bag, still sealed. Aidan was saving it for later. He didn't know what for. Maybe just for a moment when he felt like being ten years old and covered in glitter.

Higgins droned on about the Fir Bolg. The fluorescent tube whined. The hum under Aidan's skin got louder.

By nine that night, the headache had gone, but he couldn't keep still.

He was in a pub on Camden Street with his roommate, Ben, because Ben had insisted, and because nobody can say no to Ben.

Ben was a lanky, sandy-haired medical student with a wispy attempt at a beard and an appetite that could have been studied by science. He was in first-year medicine. He had been in first-year medicine, as far as Aidan could work out, for several years, though he was vague about the details. He was the nicest person Aidan had ever met. He was also, tonight, dressed as a goat.

A plain brown goat, about as far from sexy or ironic as a Halloween goat gets. Furry trousers. Little horns on a headband. He'd even done the beard, which on Ben mostly meant drawing on the parts that were missing.

"I still don't get it," Aidan said.

"It's ironic," Ben said.

"How is it ironic?"

Ben thought about it. "You'll get it later," he said, and stole one of Aidan's chips.

He would get it before midnight, and when he did, he would want to throw Ben into the Liffey.

The pub was packed and loud and hot. Halloween in Dublin is not a quiet affair. There were vampires at the bar, a group of nurses dressed as zombie nurses, which seemed like a lot of effort for very little change, and at least four separate Barbies. Somebody had come as a traffic cone. It was going down well.

Aidan sat in a corner booth nursing a pint he'd barely touched.

"Earth to Aidan," Ben said, waving a hand in front of his face. "Are you going to drink that, or are you just going to glare at it until it evaporates?"

"Long day," Aidan said. "Too much reading."

"It's your eighteenth, man." Ben clinked his glass against Aidan's. "You're legally allowed to make terrible decisions now. I've already made three on your behalf. One of them was the chips. The other two are coming."

Aidan laughed, but his eyes kept moving around the room. Every clatter of glass felt too sharp. Every burst of laughter was too loud and too close. His heart was beating too fast, and his blood felt hot, like he was sitting too near a fire.

The lights over the bar dipped. Then they dipped again, in time with his pulse.

*That's a coincidence*, Aidan told himself, because he was a sensible person.

The lights dipped a third time, exactly as his heart thumped, and the barman glared up at them and said something about the electrics in this kip.

Ben had gone very still. His eyes were on the door, and his nose was doing a strange twitchy thing.

"You okay?" Aidan asked.

"Grand," Ben said, too fast. "Grand, grand. Totally grand." He sniffed again. "Does it smell like low tide in here to you?"

"It smells like Guinness and fried onions."

"Right. Yeah. Course it does." Ben's knee had started bouncing under the table. "Listen, are you finishing those chips?"

"Ben."

"It's a medical question."

Aidan pushed the chips across. "I need some air," he said, and slid out of the booth before Ben could argue.

He pushed through the heavy doors into the night.

It was raining, the fine, cold, sideways Dublin rain that doesn't so much fall as hang around waiting for you. Camden Street was full of people in costumes. Down the side of the pub ran a narrow alley, cobbled and dark, smelling of bins. Aidan leaned against the wet brick wall and closed his eyes and let the drizzle hit his face.

Breathe in. Breathe out. He was fine. He was tired, and he'd had half a pint and barely eaten, and it was his birthday, and his father was still missing, and his skin was trying to crawl off his body. Totally normal Thursday.

A sound came from the far end of the alley.

It was a slow, heavy grinding sound, like something enormous dragging itself over the cobbles.

Aidan opened his eyes.

The streetlight at the corner flickered, buzzed, and died. The alley dropped into darkness. The temperature fell so suddenly that his breath came out in a white cloud. Under the smell of bins and rain was a new smell, thick and rotten: old seaweed, salt, and something dead.

Every instinct he had told him to run.

Because Aidan was a sensible person, he didn't. He said, "Hello?"

This, he would decide later, was the first of many mistakes.

From the dark came a wet, dragging footstep. Then another.

Before anything else could happen, four lads dressed as zombies came staggering around the corner from the street, arms around each other, singing something that might once have been a song. They walked straight into the alley.

One of them stopped. He squinted into the dark.

"Ah, here," he said. "Lads. *Lads.* Look at the cut of that."

The shape at the end of the alley had stepped forward into the faint light from the street.

It was huge. Seven feet tall at least, shoulders hunched and impossibly broad, draped in rags of rusted chainmail that clinked when it moved. Its skin was a mottled, waterlogged gray. It didn't really have a face. It had a jagged slit where a mouth should be, and above that, a single eye.

Just one. Pale and swollen and milky, like a boiled egg left in seawater.

It was looking at Aidan.

"That's class," the zombie lad said with deep sincerity. "Is that latex? Fair play to you, man. Best one I've seen all night." He pulled out his phone. "Get in, get in, lads, selfie with the fish fella."

"Don't," Aidan said. His voice came out as a croak.

Nobody heard him. The four zombies crowded around the thing, grinning, and the flash went off, and the thing just stood there and let them. Its single eye didn't move from Aidan's face.

"Legend," said the zombie lad. He gave it a thumbs-up. Then the four of them staggered back out to Camden Street, still singing, to tell the world about the best costume in Dublin.

Aidan stood frozen against the wall.

He would learn, later, that this was how it worked. People see what they can bear to see. On any normal night, a seven-foot fish-man in a Dublin alley would have been a problem. On Halloween, he was the fourth-best costume on Camden Street.

The thing took another step forward. Water ran off it in streams. The chainmail scraped.

"Who are you?" Aidan said. "What do you want?"

The slit of its mouth didn't move. But a voice spoke anyway, low and grating, right inside Aidan's skull.

*We found you.*

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# Chapter 2
# Never Throw a Cinderblock at a Fish-Man

There are a lot of things you could say to a seven-foot fish-man who has just spoken inside your head.

Aidan's brain, which had read four hundred books about Irish history and could tell you the date of the Synod of Whitby, came up with: "Sorry?"

The thing lunged.

Something hot snapped through Aidan's veins, and his body moved before his mind had finished the word *lunged*. He threw himself sideways. A massive gray hand slammed into the brick wall exactly where his head had been, and the wall cracked. Shards of brick sprayed out, one of them slicing across his cheek, and Aidan scrambled backward over the wet cobbles on his hands and heels.

The creature pulled its fist out of the wall. Brick dust trickled off its knuckles. It hissed, and the alley filled with the stink of stagnant seawater.

"What the hell are you?" Aidan choked out.

*The key,* said the voice in his skull. It vibrated against his teeth. *The blood.*

"I don't know what that means!"

*It means,* the voice said, almost kindly, *that you will come with us.*

Aidan ran.

He did not run toward Camden Street, where there were lights and people and a bouncer named Dessie who could have helped. The thing was between him and the street. So he ran the other way, deeper into the maze of lanes behind the pub. His canvas messenger bag slapped against his hip. His breath came in short, ragged gasps.

And something strange was happening.

The world was suddenly too loud and too bright. He could hear his own heart thudding. He could hear, behind him, the wet slosh of the creature's

footsteps echoing off the walls, and he could count them, and they were getting closer. It moved far too fast for something its size. Something that big should not be able to corner like that.

A rusted chain-link fence blocked the lane ahead. Aidan didn't even slow down. He jumped, grabbed the top, and vaulted it, which was surprising, because Aidan Byrne had once failed to climb a rope in PE so completely that the teacher had asked if he wanted to talk to someone.

As his palm brushed the metal, a crack of static snapped out of his skin. It numbed his whole arm to the shoulder. He hit the ground on the far side, rolled, and came up running, shaking his tingling hand and trying not to think about what had just happened.

He bolted down a narrow service lane lined with the back doors of restaurants, a gauntlet of dumpsters and grease traps and stacked crates. Mounted on the brick above him was a row of security floodlights.

They began to hum as he got close. The hum climbed in pitch. It matched his pulse.

*Crack.*

The first floodlight exploded in a shower of sparks as he passed under it. Aidan flinched and threw an arm over his head.

*Crack. Crack. Crack.*

One by one, all the way down the lane, the bulbs burst as he ran beneath them, raining glass onto the tarmac. The neon sign of a closed laundrette flared bright white, buzzed, and died. The lane went dark behind him.

*Power surge,* the sensible part of Aidan's brain suggested. *Dodgy wiring. Old city. Happens all the time.*

But the air smelled like ozone, sharp and metallic, the way it smells right before a thunderstorm. It was strong enough to cover the smell of the rain. The hairs on his arms stood straight up, and his skin was buzzing.

The surge was coming from him.

"No," Aidan said out loud, to nobody, still running. "No, absolutely not, I'm not doing this, I have a sociology essay due Monday."

He skidded around another corner and slammed shoulder-first into a steel door. He grabbed the handle and yanked. Deadbolted. He spun around.

Dead end. A loading dock, boxed in on three sides by three stories of windowless brick. The only way out was the way he'd come in.

And the way he'd come in was full.

The creature stopped at the mouth of the dock. In what little light reached the dock, Aidan could see it properly for the first time, which he didn't enjoy. Its mottled gray flesh looked waterlogged, swollen, like it had been soaking for a few hundred years. Black veins pulsed under the surface. Seaweed was tangled in the rusted rings of its chainmail. There were barnacles on its shoulders. Actual barnacles.

And that eye, pale and diseased, fixed on him and nothing else.

"Stay back," Aidan said.

He looked around for a weapon. There was a lot of rubbish in the loading dock and not much of it useful. A broken pallet. A traffic cone, which he suspected was not going to help. His fingers closed around a loose chunk of cinderblock.

The creature tilted its huge head and made a noise. It was wet and rattling, and it took Aidan a horrible moment to realize it was a laugh.

*You do not even know what you are,* the voice said. *Little godling. You are an open vein. You are bleeding light into the dark, and everything that lives in the dark can see it.*

It took a slow, deliberate step forward.

"I'm not a godling," Aidan said. "I'm a first-year. I live in halls. I have a meal plan."

Another step.

His hands were shaking. The electric hum in his blood was climbing toward a pitch he could feel in the roots of his teeth. The pressure behind his eyes came back, so hard that for a second his vision went white at the edges.

"I said stay back!" Aidan yelled, and threw the cinderblock with everything he had.

For the record, it was a good throw. It flew straight and hard, right at the creature's eye. Any hurling coach in the country would have been proud.

The monster swatted it out of the air with the back of its hand. The cinderblock burst into dust against the wall.

*That,* Aidan thought, *is the last time I throw a cinderblock at a fish-man.*

The creature lunged.

It crossed the distance in a single bound. There was no time to dodge. There was barely time to think. Aidan threw his hands up in front of his face. The hum inside him rose until he couldn't bear it.

*BANG.*

Light exploded out of his palms.

It was a shockwave of pure white light, so bright that for an instant Aidan could see the bones of his own hands through his skin. The recoil threw him backward into the steel door with a clang that rattled his skull.

The creature took the full blast, point-blank. It shrieked, a sound like a ship's hull tearing open, and the force of the light threw it across the loading dock into a stack of wooden pallets. The pallets disintegrated. Splinters rained down.

Then the light was gone.

Aidan slid down the door and sat on the wet ground, gasping. His arms ached right down to the bone. His palms throbbed, hot and raw, as if he'd pressed them flat on a cooker. Little aftershocks of static kept crawling up his wrists. He looked at his hands. They looked like his hands. They did not look like hands that had just fired a beam of light at a monster. He didn't know what hands like that were supposed to look like, but he felt there should be some kind of sign.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay. Okay. That happened."

His muscles were burning and his head was ringing, but he made himself get up onto his knees. He didn't know much about anything right now. He knew that lying there meant dying there.

Across the dock, the pile of splintered wood shifted.

Aidan froze.

A gray hand came out of the wreckage. It found the edge of a dumpster and gripped it, and the metal crumpled under its fingers like a crisp packet. Slowly, horribly, the creature pulled itself up. Part of its chest was blackened and smoking where the light had hit. One side of its face was

scorched. Its single huge eye had gone bloodshot, and it was fixed on Aidan.

The blast had only made it angry.

*Godling,* the voice said, and this time there was nothing kind in it at all.

Aidan scrambled backward until his shoulders hit the steel door again. He searched the ground with his eyes for anything, anything at all. There was nothing but splinters and broken glass and the traffic cone.

He held out his palms and tried again. Nothing. His arms ached, and the hum was gone.

The monster crossed the dock in three long strides and stood over him. Water dripped off it onto his shoes.

It raised a clawed fist the size of a bin lid.

And Aidan Byrne, eighteen for less than a day, realized he was about to die on his birthday, in a loading dock, beside a traffic cone.

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# Chapter 3
# A Girl with a Sword Ruins Everything

The fist didn't come down.

Instead, the creature reached down with its other hand, grabbed Aidan by the front of his jacket, and lifted him off the ground like he weighed nothing. Aidan's feet kicked uselessly at its chainmail. The smell of rotting sea life filled his nose and mouth, and he gagged. He grabbed its wrist with both hands and dug his fingers into the cold, spongy flesh, trying to pry himself loose. It was like trying to bend a lamppost.

*The blood,* the voice scraped inside his skull. *We take it back.*

It raised its free hand. Its claws were long and jagged and dripping something black. Aidan brought his arms up in front of his face, knowing it wouldn't matter. He braced for the hit.

A sharp metallic ring echoed down the loading dock, steel on stone.

Something dropped from the fire escape above. It landed on the lid of the nearest dumpster with a heavy *thud* of boots on metal, and in the dim light Aidan caught a flash of silver.

"Put him down."

The voice was female. It was sharp and flat and very calm, the voice of someone who has said those words before and is getting tired of saying them. It had a west-of-Ireland lilt that had no business at all in a Dublin back lane.

The monster froze. Slowly, it turned its huge head toward the dumpster.

Then it opened its hand.

Aidan dropped. He hit the ground hard, and the air went out of him in one big *oof*. He rolled onto his side, coughing and clutching his ribs, but he forced his head up, because whatever was happening, he wanted to see it.

Standing on the dumpster was a girl.

Young woman, he corrected himself. A year or two older than him, maybe. She was dressed in dark leather armor reinforced with thin metal plates. On most people it would have looked like a costume. On her, it didn't. Her dark hair was pulled back tight, and her face was set in an expression of total, almost bored focus. When the light caught her eyes, they were a startling green.

She was holding a sword.

It was long and slightly curved, and the blade gave off a soft silver light of its own.

On any other night, Aidan's first thought would have been *Is that legal?* Tonight his first thought was *Please let that be on my side.*

The creature roared. It was a wet, gurgling explosion of rage, and it forgot about Aidan entirely. It charged the dumpster, swinging both fists to smash her flat.

She didn't flinch.

As the first fist came at her, she jumped straight at it. She twisted in midair, cleared the clumsy swing, and planted her boot on the monster's shoulder like it was a step on a stile. She used it as a springboard and flipped right over its head, and while she was upside down in the air, almost lazily, she swung the sword.

The silver blade cut through the creature's back. Black, oily blood sprayed across the brick wall.

The monster shrieked and stumbled forward, clawing at the wound. The girl landed lightly on her feet, right between Aidan and the beast. She didn't look back to check on him. Her whole attention stayed on the threat, the sword held low and ready.

"You're a long way from the water, Fomorian," she said.

Aidan's brain snagged on the word. *Fomorian.* Higgins's word. The things from the sea. It wasn't possible.

The creature made a hissing, gargling sound. Its single eye darted between the glowing blade and the black blood running down its own side.

"Crawl back to the dark," the girl said. "Or die here. I genuinely don't mind which."

For a long moment, nothing moved. Rain fell. Somewhere out on Camden Street, somebody was singing "Monster Mash" very badly, which felt personal.

Then the creature turned and went up the wall.

Its claws punched into the brickwork like it was wet clay, and it hauled itself three stories in about four seconds and disappeared over the edge of the roof into the night.

After that, the loading dock was quiet except for the patter of rain and Aidan's ragged breathing.

The girl let out a slow breath. With one flick of her wrist, she cleared the black blood off her blade, and then she slid the sword into a scabbard on her back in a single smooth motion. The glow went out.

She turned around and looked down at him.

Aidan had the strong feeling of being assessed, measured, and found to be roughly what she'd expected, which was not a compliment.

"My name's Maeve," she said. She held out her hand. "And if you want to live to see tomorrow, you need to come with me right now."

Aidan stared at the hand.

There were roughly a hundred questions queued up in his head. *What was that. Who are you. Why does your sword glow. Did I just shoot light out of my hands. Is this a prank. Is this a breakdown. Should I be in a hospital. Are you a hallucination. If you're a hallucination, why are you so annoyed with me.*

What came out was: "Okay."

He took her hand. Her grip was strong and calloused and very warm, and she pulled him to his feet in one movement. His knees buckled. He clung to her hand until he could stand. His palms throbbed. They were blistered and bright red.

"We need to move," Maeve said. She glanced up at the roofline. "That was a scout. It'll bring others."

"Others," Aidan repeated.

"Walk now. Panic later."

"My friend's still in the pub. Ben. He'll be looking for me."

Something passed over Maeve's face. It might have been irritation. "Your friend," she said, "is fine. Your friend is in a great deal of trouble, but he's fine. Walk."

They walked.

She led him out of the lanes and away from Camden Street, keeping to the shadows and skirting the light under the streetlamps. Aidan's wet trainers squeaked on the pavement. They cut down toward the river, and soon they were walking along the quays with the Liffey running beside them, black and swollen with rain.

Dublin felt wrong now. It was the same city it had been an hour ago: the same takeaways, the same buses, the same drunk lads in costumes shouting at each other across the street. But it all looked flimsy to Aidan now, like a stage set, and he couldn't stop wondering what was behind it. He could feel the low thrum of the city's electricity in his fillings. He kept checking the dark doorways as they passed.

After ten minutes of fast walking, he couldn't take another step. He grabbed a lamppost and hung on.

"Give me a minute," he rasped.

Maeve stopped. She scanned the quay in both directions, then stepped close and took his wrists, turning his hands palm up under the streetlight. She looked at the blisters. Her mouth went tight.

"You channeled raw light," she said. It came out sounding almost like an accusation. "With nothing. No conduit."

"No what?"

"Conduit. Silver, iron, the right kind of wood. Something to carry it so it doesn't go through you." She turned his hands over, inspecting the backs, as if checking for further stupidity. "You pushed it straight through your own skin. You're lucky your hands didn't burn to ash."

"I didn't push anything," Aidan said. "I don't even know how I did it."

"Your blood did it." She let go of his wrists. "Survival instinct. But you've run yourself down to nothing, and we've a way to go yet. Put your arm over my shoulder."

Aidan hesitated. There was a small but stubborn part of him, the part that had once walked home from a hurling match on a sprained ankle rather than let his mam carry his gear, that did not want to be helped down the quays by a girl with a sword.

Maeve rolled her eyes, grabbed his arm, and pulled it over her leather-clad shoulder herself. She took his weight without a grunt.

"You're heavier than you look," she muttered.

"You're shorter than you sound," Aidan said.

She snorted and adjusted his arm across her shoulders.

They went on like that, slowly, along the river. Maeve answered exactly zero of his questions. He asked what that thing was, and she said, "Later." He asked where they were going, and she said, "Indoors." He asked if her sword was legal, and she said, "No," and that was the only answer he got all night that he fully believed.

At last she turned away from the river, up a narrow side street, toward an old stone church Aidan must have walked past a hundred times without ever really seeing it. Ivy had swallowed most of it. The stained-glass windows were boarded up, and a faded sign on the railings said something about planning permission. Maeve didn't go to the front doors. She guided him around the side and down a narrow flight of slick stone steps to a rusted iron door set into the basement wall.

She pressed her bare palm flat against the metal.

For a second, nothing happened. Then a faint silver light traced itself across the iron: a Celtic knot, the endless looping kind they put on tea towels for tourists, glowing like a wire heated in a fire. Somewhere deep inside the door, a heavy lock *clunked* open.

Aidan stared. His history-student brain, which was used to explaining things, tried very hard to explain this. It came up empty.

"Did you just do a magic trick on a door?"

"It's not a trick," Maeve said, shoving the door open with her shoulder. "It's a key. The door knows my blood. Get inside."

Inside was warm and dry, and it smelled of old paper, dried herbs, and candle wax. Bookshelves lined the stone walls, packed tight with leather-

bound books. A huge wooden table filled the middle of the room, covered in hand-drawn maps and some very old, very sharp-looking weapons. In the corner sat an iron stove and a narrow cot.

Maeve slid three thick iron bars across the door behind them. Aidan sank into a wooden chair and put his face in his hands.

"Okay," he said, his voice muffled. "The monster's gone. We're behind a magic door. Please tell me I'm hallucinating from cheap pub chips."

"You're not hallucinating, Aidan Byrne."

He looked up. "How do you know my name?"

Maeve was unbuckling the sword from her back. She didn't look at him. "Because I've been following you for three weeks."

He opened his mouth. Shut it again.

"You get the same sandwich from the same shop on the corner every single day," she went on, setting the sword on the table. "Chicken and stuffing. It's a terrible sandwich."

"It's a great sandwich," Aidan said automatically. And then: "*Three weeks?*"

Before she could answer, something hammered on the iron door so hard that dust shook down from the ceiling.

Maeve had the sword back in her hand before Aidan saw her move.

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# Chapter 4
# Ben Has Hooves Now, Apparently

"Let me in!" yelled a voice from the other side of the door. "It's me! It's Ben! There's a seagull following me and I don't like the way it's looking at me!"

Aidan was on his feet. "That's Ben."

"I know who it is," Maeve said through her teeth. She didn't lower the sword. "Say the words, púca."

"Oh, come *on*—"

"Say them."

There was a long-suffering sigh from outside. "Iron and oak, salt and stone, the door stays shut to all but our own. Happy? Can I come in now? The seagull's back."

Maeve slid the bars and hauled the door open, and Ben fell into the room.

He was still wearing the goat costume. Mostly. The headband with the little horns was gone, and his hair was full of rain and what looked like kebab sauce. The furry brown trousers had torn open at both knees. And below the knees, where Aidan had spent eight weeks of shared halls seeing a perfectly normal pair of skinny, pale, ankle-socked human shins, there was fur.

Real fur. Shaggy and brown and soaking wet. It ran all the way down to where his feet should have been, and ended in hooves. Two small, neat, cloven black hooves, clicking on the stone floor.

Aidan looked at the hooves for a long time.

"Ben," he said at last. "Why do you have hooves?"

Ben looked down at himself. "Ah," he said. "Okay. So. Funny story."

"You lost him," Maeve said. Her voice was very quiet, which Aidan was beginning to understand was much worse than loud. "You had one job. One. On *Samhain*. And you lost him."

"He said he needed air. I thought he'd be right outside. I stayed to finish the chips." Ben's ears had gone pink. "I'd smelled something in the pub. I

should've gone after him straight away. By the time I got outside, he was gone. I followed the scent. I ran the whole way. I lost a shoe." He held up a hoof. "Well. I lost both shoes. But I lost the first one *running*."

"And by the time you got there?"

Ben's face fell. "By the time I got there, you'd already done the hard bit." He looked at Aidan, and his eyes were wide and guilty and, Aidan noticed for the first time, the wrong shape. The pupils were horizontal bars. Like a goat's. "I'm sorry, man. I'm really sorry. You were supposed to be safe."

Aidan sat back down in the chair. He wasn't sure his legs were going to give him a choice about it.

"Ben," he said slowly. "What are you?"

"I'm a púca." Ben said it the way you'd say *I'm from Cork*: a bit defensive, like he was used to people having opinions. "Shape-shifter. Old family. We take a few shapes, mostly. Goat's my comfortable one. I can do a hare if I'm in a hurry. I can do a horse, but I don't like to talk about it."

"You're my roommate."

"I can be both. I contain multitudes." Ben pulled out the chair across from him and sat, and his hooves clicked under the table. "Finn sent me. That's my boss. It's sort of my job to find the ones who are going to wake up, before the bad things find them. Púcas have good noses. I could smell it on you from the first day of Freshers' Week. You smell like..." He searched for the word. "Like the inside of a toaster. In a good way."

"And the medicine?"

"That's real," Ben said, sounding hurt. "I really want to be a doctor. I just keep failing first-year anatomy. Human bodies are so *weird*, Aidan. You've only got one stomach. How do you live like that?"

Aidan thought about the costume. The plain brown goat. *It's ironic. You'll get it later.*

"I'm going to throw you in the Liffey," he said.

"That's fair."

"Not now. But at some point. When you least expect it."

"I'd expect nothing less," Ben said, and then, hopefully, "Is there any food here?"

Maeve slammed the bars back across the door and gave them both a look that could have curdled milk. Then she went to the iron stove in the corner, struck a match on the stone wall, and dropped it inside. A small fire caught. Shadows stretched across the bookshelves.

"Right," she said, without turning around. "You get one explanation. I'm not doing it twice, so listen."

Aidan listened.

"Everything your professor told you this morning is true," Maeve said. "Not the dates. The monks got the dates wrong. But the rest of it. The invasions. The battles. The Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland and fought the Fomorians for it, and they won, and then a long time later they lost Ireland to the Milesians, who were people. Your people. Mostly." She turned around. "When the Tuatha lost, they went under the hills. Every fairy fort and passage tomb and lump in a field your granny told you not to cut down. That's where they went. You'd call them the Sídhe. The Good People."

"And the Fomorians," Aidan said. His mouth was dry.

"Went under the sea. Into the deep places. The Tuatha bound them there, behind seals made with their own blood, and they've been down there ever since, nursing a grudge you would not believe." She folded her arms. "Both of them are still here. Right alongside your Ireland of motorways and Tesco and the Late Late Show. Just out of sight."

"That's not possible," Aidan said. He heard how weak it sounded. "Somebody would notice. Somebody would have a video. There'd be..." He waved his hand. "Reddit threads."

"There are," Ben said. "They're very funny."

"Nobody notices," Maeve said, "because of the féth fíada."

Aidan's history brain stirred. He knew that word. He'd read it in a footnote somewhere, in a book about the old gods. "The mist," he said slowly. "The magic veil. The thing the Tuatha used to make themselves invisible."

Maeve looked at him again, her eyebrows lifting. Aidan sat a little straighter.

"Manannán mac Lir laid it over this whole island when the Tuatha went under the hills," she said. "It's still there. It helps people not see things. Mortals see what they can bear to see. Something impossible happens, and

their minds just..." She made a smoothing gesture. "Tidy it away. A monster is a man in a costume. A sword is an umbrella. On Samhain, it barely has to try."

Aidan thought of the zombie lads and their selfie. *Best one I've seen all night.*

His hand went to his pocket. He pulled out his phone before he'd even thought about it.

He had eleven new messages. Most of them were from the lads' group chat.

*where did aidan go*

*left w some girl dressed as a viking*

*FAIR PLAY*

*birthday boy!!!*

Below them was a news alert from RTÉ. *ESB blames electrical fault for Camden Street blackout. No injuries reported.*

He stared at the screen. A monster had punched a hole in a wall and chased him through half a dozen lanes. A whole lane of floodlights had exploded. And the world had already rewritten it into a power cut and a girl in a costume.

Maeve crossed the room in two strides and plucked the phone out of his hand.

"Hey—"

"Don't use that." She powered it off and dropped it into a tin box on the shelf. "Signals can be followed, and people aren't the only ones following. There are things that listen to the currents. Every time that phone talks to a mast, it's shouting where you are."

"I need to ring my mam," Aidan said. "She'll be expecting me to call. It's my birthday. If I don't call, she'll—"

"If you call her," Maeve said, "you put a target on her back. And on your brother's. Do you want that?"

Aidan opened his mouth to argue and couldn't. He thought of Liam, ten years old, all elbows and glitter, sitting at the kitchen table in Donegal making him a card.

"No," he said.

"Then you don't call."

He looked down at his hands. The blisters had started to weep. They were the only proof that any of this had happened, and he was almost glad of the pain, because it meant he wasn't mad.

"So what's wrong with me?" he said quietly. "I blew a monster across a loading dock with my bare hands. The lights blew up when I ran past them. What am I?"

Maeve was quiet for a moment. When she answered, her voice was softer.

"Nothing's wrong with you," she said. "The Tuatha didn't keep to themselves under the hills. Not always. They had children with people. Lots of them, over a lot of centuries. Half the country has a drop of the old blood in them somewhere. Mostly it sleeps. People go their whole lives feeling a bit different, maybe. Strange dreams. Good instincts. Luck at cards." She shrugged. "But in some people, it wakes up. Usually around eighteen. We call it the Waking."

"On my birthday," Aidan said.

"On Samhain, when every door between the worlds is hanging loose. And the moment it woke, every Fomorian scout on the east coast smelled it." She nodded at his hands. "That's what it meant about bleeding light. Your blood's awake, and it's loud."

"It called me a key," Aidan said. "It said it wanted the blood."

Maeve's jaw tightened. She looked away, into the fire.

"The Fomorians want out," she said. "They want the surface back. And they believe the right blood can break the seals that hold them. Some families' blood more than others."

"I'm an eighteen-year-old history student," Aidan said. His voice was climbing. "I'm struggling to pass sociology. I don't know anything about ancient wars or magic seals. This is a mistake. You've got the wrong guy."

"The blood doesn't make mistakes," Maeve said. "And the Fomorians don't care about your sociology essay. They have your scent now. They won't stop."

For a while nobody said anything. The fire popped. Ben had found a packet of digestive biscuits on one of the shelves and was eating them as quietly as he could, which was not very quietly.

"So what do I do?" Aidan asked.

"You sleep," Maeve said. "First thing tomorrow, we're leaving the city. I'm taking you to a man called Cormac. He knows more about the old bloodlines than anyone alive. After that, if you're still in one piece, we go to the Rock."

"The Tearmann," Ben said, through a mouthful of biscuit. He pronounced it three different ways in the same breath, and Aidan suspected none of them were right. "It's a sanctuary. It's safe. Well. It's safer. It's out west. You'll love it, there's loads of sheep."

"Your people," Aidan said to Maeve. "The ones who've been watching me. Is that who sent you?"

She hesitated a moment too long. "I'm Vanguard," she said. "The Vanguard guards the human side of the barrier. My commander's a man called Eamon. He wanted you brought straight to the Citadel."

"And instead you're bringing me to this Cormac."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Maeve picked up the nearest candle. "Because Eamon doesn't trust anything he can't lock in a room," she said. "And I don't trust Eamon." She blew the candle out. "Sleep."

She took the chair by the door, laid the sword across her knees, and didn't say another word.

Aidan lay down on the cot because there was nowhere else to lie down. Ben curled up on the rug at the foot of it, and after a minute there was a soft pop, and where Ben had been there was a small, shaggy brown goat with its chin on its front hooves. It sighed contentedly and went to sleep.

Aidan stared at the goat. Then he stared at the ceiling.

He didn't sleep. He lay there listening to the rain on the boarded windows and the soft scrape of Maeve's whetstone along her blade, and he held his

burned hands against his chest, and he thought about black water. For ten years, it had stayed in his dreams where it belonged.

Tonight, he could feel it rising.

Somewhere far off, a church bell struck midnight. His birthday was over.

At the foot of the bed, the goat bleated something in its sleep that sounded very much like *happy birthday*.

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# Chapter 5
# Cormac Gallagher Doesn't Do Doorbells

When gray morning light finally leaked through the cracks in the boarded windows, Maeve was already up. Aidan was fairly sure she hadn't slept at all. She finished wrapping his burned palms in linen, then tossed a canvas duffel bag at his chest.

"Get up. Long drive."

Aidan caught the bag. "Where are we going?"

"West." She strapped the sword to her back and pulled a long waxed coat over the top, and just like that she looked like any other tired young woman heading out into the rain. The sword hilt sticking up over her shoulder could have been an umbrella. Aidan was starting to understand how this worked. "The city's a trap. Too many eyes. Too many currents."

Ben was human again, or human from the waist down, at least. He'd found a pair of tracksuit bottoms somewhere that were six inches too short for him. His ankles were pale, hairless, and entirely human, and he kept glancing down at them, like he didn't quite trust them to stay that way.

"Takes concentration," he explained, catching Aidan looking. "When I'm nervous, they slip. Don't make me nervous."

"I'll do my best," Aidan said. "Is there anything else I should know about you? Do you eat tin cans? Do you have a second set of eyelids?"

"Only one set," Ben said, offended. "And I only ate a tin can once, and it was a dare, and it was in 1986."

Aidan decided not to follow that up.

Maeve's car was a battered green Land Rover parked two streets over, so old and so dented that it looked like it had been through a war, which Aidan would later learn it had. It smelled of wet dog, although there was no dog, and it made a noise like a dying cow every time Maeve changed gear. Ben climbed into the back with a family-size bag of cheese and onion crisps he'd

produced from nowhere. Aidan got in the front, pulled his jacket tight, and watched Dublin slide away behind them.

The drive took three hours. They left the motorway after the first hour and wound through smaller and smaller roads, past small towns with one church and four pubs, past bogs and stone walls and fields so green they looked fake. The last ragged stands of old oak forest crowded close in places. Above it all, the sky was a low purplish gray, and it looked like rain.

Somewhere in the second hour, Ben fell asleep across the back seat, and there was a soft pop, and the sound of crisps being crushed under a small goat.

Aidan glanced at Maeve. She was driving with one hand, eyes on the road, sharp and quiet.

"You're not from Dublin," he said.

"What gave it away?"

"You say *the city* like it smells bad."

Something that was almost a smile crossed her face. It was gone again by the next gear change. "Connemara," she said. "Out where the roads run out and the bog begins."

"Long way from home."

She glanced at him, then back at the road. "So are you, now."

Aidan didn't have anything to say to that. He looked out the window at the stone walls running past.

"This Cormac," he said, after a while. "Who is he?"

"Cormac Gallagher. He fought for the Vanguard for a long time. Longer than anyone. He stepped away a few years ago."

"Why?"

Maeve's hand tightened on the wheel. "He got tired of watching good people die."

Aidan decided not to push.

They finally turned off the road onto a dirt track hidden under a canopy of oaks so thick that the day went dim around them. The Land Rover bounced through potholes the size of paddling pools. At the end of the track stood a

sturdy stone farmhouse, built right into the side of a steep, rocky hill, with smoke drifting from its chimney. Past it, through a gap in the trees, Aidan caught a glimpse of gray sea.

There was a hand-painted sign nailed to the gate. It said:

NO CALLERS. NO HAWKERS. NO DOORBELL. BEWARE OF THE DOG.

"Does he have a dog?" Aidan asked.

"No," Maeve said. "He thinks people are more polite when they think there's a dog."

The Land Rover hadn't even stopped rolling when the front door of the farmhouse opened.

A man stepped out onto the step. He was in his late forties, tall and broad, in a faded flannel shirt and heavy work boots. His face was weathered and deeply lined, the face of someone who'd spent a lot of years outside in bad weather doing worse things. A thick graying beard hid most of his jaw. He was holding a double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his arm, the casual way some people hold a newspaper.

Aidan swallowed and got out of the car.

"You're late," the man grunted. His voice was pure gravel. He didn't lower the shotgun.

"Traffic was terrible," Maeve said. She walked straight up the step past him, completely unbothered by the gun. "Cormac, this is Aidan Byrne."

Cormac turned his sharp, cynical eyes on Aidan. He looked him up and down, from his wet trainers to his bandaged hands to his pale, sleepless face, and let out a long, slow, deeply disappointed sigh.

"This is him?" he said. "The great hope of the Tuatha? He looks like a strong breeze would knock him over."

Aidan felt heat flush up his neck. He stood up straighter.

"I survived a sea monster last night," he snapped. "I blew it across a loading dock with my bare hands. I've had no sleep, no breakfast, and somebody stole my phone. Excuse me if I'm not looking my best."

Cormac raised an eyebrow. The corner of his mouth twitched under the beard. He lowered the shotgun and leaned it against the doorframe.

"A temper," he said. "That's a start." His eyes moved past Aidan to the Land Rover, where a small goat with crisp crumbs in its beard was peering out of the back window. "And you've brought Finn's goat."

There was a pop. Ben's head appeared in the window, human, indignant. "Púca!"

"Wipe your hooves," Cormac said, and went inside.

The farmhouse was warm and smelled of woodsmoke and old leather. Every flat surface was stacked with books, and the books were stacked with older books, and those were stacked with things that looked like scrolls. Swords and axes and a few weapons Aidan couldn't name hung on the walls beside hand-drawn maps of Ireland, some of them covered in pencil notes and pins. There was a radio on the windowsill so old it had valves. It looked like the house of a retired professor, if the professor had retired from something much more dangerous than teaching.

Cormac poured four mugs of black tea from a pot that looked like it had been stewing since the Famine, pushed one across the oak table at Aidan, and sat down heavily. Ben grabbed his mug and three slices of brown bread from a plate on the counter and retreated to the corner, chewing.

"Maeve says your blood woke," Cormac said. He rested his big scarred hands flat on the table. "She says you threw raw light."

Aidan wrapped his hands around the hot mug. It hurt his blisters, but the heat felt good. "It just happened," he said. "I was terrified. The lights blew up when I ran under them, and then it came at me, and I just... blasted it."

"Pure light," Cormac murmured. He looked at Maeve. She gave a single nod. Cormac leaned back in his chair and scratched his beard. "That's not common, kid. Most of the old blood wakes up as something useful but small. A bit of extra strength. Healing quick. A feel for the weather, or the sea. Pure light narrows down who you are by a long way."

Aidan leaned forward. "Narrows it down to who?"

"Lugh," Cormac said.

The kitchen went quiet.

"Lugh Lámhfhada," Cormac went on. "Lugh of the Long Arm. The sun god. The best warrior the Tuatha Dé Danann ever had, and the best everything else, too. They called him Samildánach. You know what it means?"

Aidan did. It was one of those words that had stuck to him in lectures. "Skilled in all the arts," he said. "He turned up at the gates of Tara and the doorkeeper asked him what he could do, and he said everything. Smith, harper, warrior, poet, healer. They didn't believe him, so he proved it."

"And he wasn't boasting." Cormac studied him. "Tell me something. You ever notice you pick things up faster than you should?"

Aidan opened his mouth to say no. Then he thought about vaulting a fence he couldn't have climbed a week ago. About throwing a cinderblock like he'd been doing it all his life. About the patterns that had always jumped out at him, whether he wanted them to or not.

He closed his mouth.

"Thought so," Cormac said. "That's the blood. It learns. If you're Lugh's, you'll learn anything you watch long enough. That's the good news."

"What's the bad news?"

"Balor."

Something cold slid down the back of Aidan's neck.

"Balor of the Evil Eye," he said slowly. "King of the Fomorians. He had one eye that killed whatever it looked at. They had to lever the eyelid open with a hook." His voice went strange. "He had a tower on Tory Island."

Cormac went very still.

"My dad used to tell me that story," Aidan said. "Every night, nearly. A giant with one terrible eye, and a hero made of sunlight who came across the water and put the eye out. You could see Tory from our kitchen window. I thought it was just a story."

For a long moment, Cormac didn't say anything at all. He looked at his tea. He looked at the window. When he finally spoke, his gravel voice had gone lower.

"Your father told you that story," he said. "Every night."

"Yeah."

"Course he did." Cormac rubbed his face with one big hand. Then he seemed to set something aside, and his voice came back hard. "Here's the part they don't put in the school books. Balor was Lugh's grandfather. Lugh's mother was Balor's daughter. Half Fomorian, half Tuatha. Lugh

grew up, came to Tara, and at the second battle of Mag Tuired he killed his own grandfather with a single shot through that eye." He tapped the table. "So when that thing in the alley told you it wanted the blood back, it meant it. Literally. It thinks part of you belongs to them."

"So I'm related to them," Aidan said faintly.

"Distantly," Cormac said. "Don't let it go to your head."

In the corner, Ben snorted into his tea.

"Balor's long dead," Cormac went on. "But he left an heir. A prince of the deep. And Balor's Heir has been hunting for years now, quieter than anyone in the Vanguard wants to admit. He's looking for a way to break the seals. He believes the blood of Lugh is the key that'll do it."

"Why me?" Aidan asked. "There must be other people with the blood."

"There aren't," Maeve said from the doorway. "Not many. Not anymore. The line's nearly gone. You're one of the last."

Cormac leaned across the table and fixed Aidan with his dark eyes.

"So you've a choice to make," he said. "You can run. You can hide. Change your name, move to Australia, never go near the sea again. Maybe they don't find you for a while." He shrugged. "They'll find you. Or you stay. And I teach you to control that light before it burns you out from the inside. I teach you to fight back."

Aidan looked at Maeve, leaning against the doorframe with her arms folded. He looked at Ben, who had stopped chewing. Then he looked down into his tea.

He thought about the car at Horn Head, with the keys still in the ignition and the driver's door left open. He thought about the searches, and the silence after them. He thought about his father doing the giant's voice in the dark, night after night, telling the same story over and over, as if he were trying to make sure Aidan learned it by heart.

Whatever this war was, it had been in his family long before last night. It had already taken his father.

He set his mug down. The tea was untouched.

"Teach me," Aidan said.

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# Chapter 6
# Declan Byrne's Terrible Handwriting

Cormac didn't answer right away. He studied Aidan, then glanced at his burned hands. Then he grunted and pushed back his chair.

"Saying the words is the easy part," he muttered. He crossed to a big iron safe in the corner of the kitchen. "Living long enough to regret them is where it gets complicated."

"He needs to know the truth, Cormac," Maeve said from the doorway. "All of it. He needs to understand what's hunting him."

"I'm getting to it." Cormac spun the brass dial.

While he worked the lock, Aidan's eyes wandered across the cluttered table. Maps. A whetstone. A jar of something green that he hoped was pesto. And half buried under a stack of papers, a small leather notebook, scuffed and worn soft at the corners, with two initials stamped in faded gold on the cover.

*D.B.*

Aidan's hand stopped above the notebook. Then he pulled it toward him and opened it at random.

He knew that handwriting.

Anyone who'd ever seen it would know it. It was famously, legendarily terrible. It looked like a spider had fallen into a pot of ink and then had some kind of breakdown across the page. His mam used to say that Declan Byrne's shopping lists needed a translator, and once, memorably, he'd written *a dozen eggs* so badly that she'd come home with a dozen eels. Aidan had spent the hours before dawn yesterday squinting at this exact scrawl in the water-damaged journals stacked under his desk in halls.

"Where did you get this?" His voice cut across the room.

Cormac froze with his hand on the safe door. He turned slowly. He was holding a long wooden box covered in carved knotwork. He set it down on

the table and looked from the notebook to Aidan.

"Your father didn't abandon you," Cormac said.

Aidan gripped the edges of the notebook so hard his blisters split.

For ten years, his family had lived with that question. His mam never said it out loud, and neither did his grandparents or the man from the Guards with the kind eyes and the notebook. It was there anyway, at every birthday and every Christmas and every parent-teacher meeting where there was only one chair filled. *Did he leave? Did he just walk away? Did he want to?*

"His name was Declan," Cormac went on. He didn't look away from Aidan. "He was a researcher for the Vanguard. One of the Archive lads. The kind who knows every hill in the country by its Irish name and three of its rumors. He spent his life tracking the old doors, the hidden ways in, and keeping the Fomorian cults off the coast."

"You knew him," Aidan choked out. "You knew what happened. And you let my mother think he just *went*."

"I know he died," Cormac said. "Or I believe it, which some days is worse. Declan worked out that the Fomorians were waking up. That they were hunting for Lugh's blood. And then he realized his own son was carrying the strongest trace of it anyone had seen in three hundred years. So he left. He drove up to Horn Head that night with every hunting pack on the north coast on his trail, and he led them away from your house. Away from you and your brother. We found his blood on the rocks below the cliffs, the next morning. A lot of it." His voice went rough. "He made sure they followed him instead of you. That was the job, as far as he was concerned."

Aidan stood up so fast that his chair scraped across the stone floor.

He wanted to throw something. He wanted to throw the table. Ten years of his mother crying in the bathroom with the taps running so the boys wouldn't hear. Liam asking if Daddy was coming back for his birthday. Ten years of Aidan lying awake wondering whether there was something wrong with him, something that made a man drive away and not come back. And the whole time, there'd been an answer, and the answer had been sitting in a farmhouse in Connemara, drinking stewed tea.

The air in the kitchen went heavy. It started to smell of ozone. The mugs on the table began to rattle against the wood, and the bulb hanging over the

table flared so bright it hurt to look at.

"Control it," Maeve said. Her hand had dropped to the hilt of her sword. "Aidan. If you let it loose in here, you'll take the roof off."

In the corner, Ben had pressed himself against the dresser, his eyes huge. "I really like this roof," he said in a small voice.

Aidan clenched his fists. His blistered palms burned. He made himself breathe.

He pictured the cliffs at home. Not the night his father vanished. The other times, before that. The wind coming in off the Atlantic and his dad's hand on his shoulder and the gulls wheeling and screaming over the water, always the gulls. He breathed in for four and out for four, the way the school counselor had taught him in sixth class, and he held on to the sound of those gulls.

Slowly, the pressure behind his eyes eased. The light dimmed. The mugs stopped rattling.

He sat back down. His hands were shaking.

"Sorry," he said. "About the mugs."

"The mugs are fine," Cormac said quietly. "Your father broke more than that in his time."

Aidan looked down at the open notebook. The pages were crammed with sketches and scrawl. A battlefield drawn from above, with arrows. Lists of place names in Irish. Notes about the Tuatha Dé Danann that went off into the margins and climbed up the sides of the page. And on one page, a careful, detailed drawing of a skull. It was huge and lumpy, with one great empty socket in the middle of its forehead. Underneath, in Declan's terrible, unmistakable hand, was a single label.

*Ugly.*

Aidan laughed. It came out wet and cracked, and it surprised him so much that he put a hand over his mouth. Sixty pages of careful research, and then: *ugly.*

"He did that," Cormac said, and something almost like a smile moved under his beard. "Drove the Archive mad. Every report he ever filed had a joke in it somewhere."

"What does it say about them?" Aidan asked. "The Fomorians. What do they actually want?"

Cormac tapped the notebook. "The surface. Same as always. Your father's notes are mostly about their prison. The seals that hold them down are made from the blood of the Tuatha. Balor's Heir believes the blood of Lugh is the one thing that can shatter them. They want to drag you down into the dark and drain you on an altar."

"Good," Aidan said weakly. "Great. Love that."

Cormac unlatched the wooden box and lifted out a jagged chunk of dark stone about the size of a brick. It was black and rough, but fine veins of gold ran through it, like a map of rivers seen from very high up.

"A piece of a Sídhe doorway," he said. "Your father found it on a dig in Meath and never told the Archive. It still remembers the old magic. Only someone with the blood can wake it."

He set it on the table and stepped back.

"Last chance," he said. "You can walk away right now. I'll put you in a car myself and nobody will think less of you. But if you want to do what your father did, if you want to learn how to fight the things that took him, then put your hand on that stone."

Aidan looked at the stone. He thought about the alley, and the light, and how it had gone off with no aim and no control. He thought about his father driving up to Horn Head in the dark to face a nightmare alone, so that his sons could sleep.

He stood up and pressed his palm flat against the stone.

It was instant.

Gold light erupted from the rock and rushed up his arm like he'd grabbed a live wire. Power poured into him, wild and enormous, straining against the inside of his skin.

Aidan gritted his teeth and hung on. The light flared. Shadows jumped across the kitchen walls. He could feel the stone pulling at him, and he pulled back, trying to drag the wild current into something steady. He didn't have a name for what he was doing. He just knew that it was too much, too fast, and that he had to make it go at his speed instead of its own.

*Slower, he thought. He eased the flow of light until it matched his heartbeat.*

Gradually, the blinding flare settled. The gold veins in the stone began to pulse, slow and even, in time with his heartbeat. Aidan gasped and pulled his hand away.

The stone stayed lit. A warm, steady glow spread over the pages of his father's notebook.

Cormac stared at it for a long moment. Then he let out a breath and looked at Maeve.

"No doubt now," he said. He turned back to Aidan. "Welcome to the war, kid. We start your training right now."

"Now?" Aidan said. "I haven't had breakfast."

Ben held out a slice of brown bread. It had a bite out of it.

The training yard was behind the farmhouse, a square of churned mud enclosed by a high wooden fence. The rain had stopped, but a heavy mist clung to the hill behind it. The wooden posts were scarred with deep gouges. Battered targets leaned against bales of wet hay. The whole place smelled of mud and splintered pine and, faintly, of something burnt.

"Magic's a muscle," Cormac said, propping his shotgun against a barrel. "If you don't know how to work it, it'll tear you apart from the inside. Your father learned that the hard way, and he didn't have a quarter of your blood."

He tossed a heavy wooden practice sword at Aidan's chest. Aidan caught it clumsily. The rough grip scraped his blisters.

"The light answers to feeling," Cormac said, pacing the edge of the mud. "Fear set it off in that alley. But fear's chaotic. Fear burns dirty. If you run on panic, you'll drain yourself dry, and one day your heart will just stop. You need intent."

Maeve came out of the house with a second practice sword. She shrugged off her long coat and hung it on the fence, leaving her in the dark leather armor. The cold didn't seem to touch her.

"Intent needs focus," she said, stepping into the mud. "You pull it from your core, not your nerves. Show me your stance."

Aidan raised the sword. He set his feet apart and tilted the blade in a way that he was fairly sure he'd seen in a film once.

Ben was sitting on the top rail of the fence, eating an apple. "Ooh," he said.

Maeve swung.

Her sword cracked against Aidan's ribs before he even saw it move.

He staggered sideways, wheezing. Pain flared bright and sharp all along his side.

"Ooh," Ben said again, with feeling.

"Too slow," Maeve said, already back in her ready position. "Your head's still in the kitchen with that notebook. Bring it out here."

She came at him again. This time he got his sword up. Wood cracked against wood, and the shock went up his forearms and rattled his teeth. He shoved back, swung wide and sloppy, and Maeve stepped around it like it was a puddle and tapped the backs of his knees with the flat of her sword.

He went face-first into the mud.

"Get up," Cormac barked. "The Fomorians won't wait for you to get comfortable. You fall, you die."

"Go on, Aidan!" Ben called. Then, quickly, "Sorry, Maeve."

Aidan pushed himself up. Mud soaked through his jeans and ran down his neck. His ribs ached and his hands burned. He wiped his mouth hard with his sleeve and raised the sword again.

He stopped trying to look like someone in a film.

He watched her instead.

It was the same thing he did in lectures, on buses, in the queue for the chipper: he watched for the pattern. And there was one. Right before she struck, her back shoulder dropped. Not much. Half an inch. Her weight rolled onto the ball of her front foot. Her chin came down a fraction, like she was about to head a ball.

Shoulder. Weight. Chin.

Her shoulder dropped.

Instead of backing away, Aidan stepped into the swing. He caught her blade on the crossguard of his own and shoved, hard, and for one split second Maeve was off balance.

In that second, Aidan pushed.

This time the push came from somewhere calmer than fear, and all he wanted was a spark. He reached into the center of his chest, where the warmth had settled after the stone, and he sent a thread of it down his arms and into the wood.

A bright gold flash leapt from his practice sword. It hit Maeve's blade with a crack like a whip. The tip of her sword splintered, and static jumped through the damp air, and the whole yard suddenly smelled of thunderstorms.

Maeve dropped the ruined sword, shaking out her numb fingers. She looked at the smoking wood in the mud. Then she looked up at him.

A slow, real smile broke across her face.

"Better," she said.

It was the first time he'd seen her smile. Properly smile, not the flicker in the car. For a second, Aidan forgot his ribs hurt.

On the fence, Ben looked from one of them to the other and took a long, thoughtful bite of his apple.

Cormac walked over and nudged the broken sword with his boot. "Not terrible," he admitted, in the tone of a man paying a large bill. "For a beginner. You found the trigger. But a spark won't stop a hunting pack, and they won't be swinging wood."

He looked past them, toward the dark line of oak trees at the edge of his land. The mist had thickened among them, white and heavy and very still.

"And we haven't time for beginners," he said. "They know you're awake. They'll sweep every ley line in the west until they find this farm." He picked up his shotgun. "Clean yourself up, kid. We need to start moving the armory."

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# Chapter 7
# The Armory Is Not a Petting Zoo

The armory was at the end of a narrow hallway, behind an oak door with three iron deadbolts and a horseshoe nailed over the frame. Cormac unlocked the bolts one by one and shouldered the door open.

It smelled of gun oil, old leather, and something sharp and metallic that Aidan could taste on the back of his tongue, like he'd licked a battery. The walls were lined with hundreds of weapons. Modern shotguns sat on racks beside rune-carved broadswords. Spears tipped with black glass leaned in a barrel like umbrellas. There were bows, crossbows, a rack of throwing axes, a hurley with iron studs hammered into the bas, and something in a glass case that looked like a set of brass knuckles shaped like a wolf's jaw.

Ben reached for a short spear with a wobbly-looking blade.

"Don't touch that," Cormac said, without looking.

Ben's hand moved to a coil of silver wire.

"Don't touch that either. That one's worse."

"What does it do?"

"Nothing good. This is an armory, not a petting zoo." Cormac threw a heavy canvas tarp onto the floor. "Grab those crates by the back wall. Silver-edged blades first. The Fomorians heal fast. Pure silver burns their blood and stops the healing."

Aidan dragged a dusty crate into the middle of the room and lifted a short sword from the nearest rack. The blade was unnaturally cold. Fine knots were etched along it, and when his fingers brushed them, he felt something stir faintly under his fingertips. He laid it carefully in the crate.

Across the room, Maeve was loading ammunition into the pockets of a tactical vest, her hands quick and practiced.

"Your father spent ten years building this," she said. "He knew the wards holding the Fomorians down were weakening. He collected anything that could hurt them."

Aidan paused, holding a dagger with a handle carved from bone. "Did he ever use them?"

"Every chance he got," Cormac said. He was hauling two duffel bags onto his shoulders by the door. "Declan was a scholar first. But he learned to survive. He mapped the ley lines. He tracked the scout packs up and down the coast. Best tracker the Vanguard had in a hundred years, and he'd never have told you that himself."

Aidan laid the dagger in the crate.

The picture didn't fit. The father he remembered was a quiet, untidy man with a beard he trimmed with the kitchen scissors, who sat in his study surrounded by old maps and drank coffee so bad it was practically a weapon. He used to forget to collect Aidan from football, but he could tell you the Irish name for every townland between Letterkenny and the sea. Aidan tried to picture him in this room, choosing a sword. He couldn't make it work.

But maybe the maps in the study had been battlefields all along. Maybe all those late nights hadn't been about history at all.

He reached for another sword on the top rack, and his hand brushed against something else.

It was a long, narrow bundle, wrapped in dark leather, shoved right to the back of the top shelf, behind a box of crossbow bolts. Someone had put it there on purpose, somewhere nobody would look. As his fingers touched it, a strange warmth tingled into his blistered palm, like sunlight on skin after the cold of the silver.

He pulled it down.

The leather was old and brittle and flaked away under his fingers. He unrolled it on top of the crate.

Inside lay a shard of golden metal no longer than his hand. It was the point of a blade, broken off whatever it had belonged to. The break was ragged. The rest of it was flawless, without a speck of rust or tarnish, as if it had been forged that morning. Fine spirals covered its surface, and they were glowing, very faintly, in the dim light of the armory.

Behind him, Cormac dropped both duffel bags. They hit the floor with a thud that shook the racks.

Maeve looked up from her vest. Aidan heard her breath catch.

"Put that back in the leather," Cormac said. His voice had gone low and tight, all the gravel gone out of it.

Aidan looked from Cormac to the shard. It felt warm in his hand. Alive. The hum in his blood had shifted, and he realized it was matching the faint pulse of the spirals. "What is it?"

"That's the tip of the Gáe Assail," Maeve whispered. She came across the room slowly, like someone approaching a wild animal. "The Spear of Lugh. It's a myth. It's supposed to be lost."

"Last night you told me myths were history," Aidan said.

"I know what I said." She couldn't take her eyes off it.

"Your father found it," Cormac said. He was staring at the gold. "He told me he'd found something in a collapsed mound at Knockma, three days before he disappeared. He wouldn't tell me what." He shook his head slowly. "We all thought the Fomorians took it off him that night. We'd no idea he'd hidden it here. In my house. Behind my crossbow bolts."

Aidan closed his fingers around the shard.

Power washed over him, clean and bright, and the room got lighter. And under the power was something else, something that made his throat go tight. His father had held this. His father had carried it out of the dark, wrapped it in leather, and hidden it on a high shelf in his friend's armory, behind a box of bolts, where only someone who knew how to look would ever find it.

*Where only someone who notices things would find it,* Aidan thought.

"Ben," he said, without looking up. "You've gone quiet."

Ben was standing very still by the door. His nostrils were flaring.

"Aidan," he said. "I need you to put that away and get a sword. Like, now."

Before anyone could ask why, a high, piercing shriek split the air outside the farmhouse. It came through the thick stone walls as if they weren't there. It sounded like something tearing: metal twisting, glass shattering, all at once, and very loud.

Cormac swore. He grabbed his shotgun off the rack, broke it open, and thumbed in two shells.

"That's the perimeter wards," he said. "They just broke. They've found us."

"Six," Ben said. His voice had gone high. "At least six. Maybe seven. One of them has had a very bad diet."

Maeve drew her silver sword. It hissed out of the scabbard and woke, glowing. She looked at Aidan, and her face had gone hard and flat again, every trace of the smile in the yard gone.

"Wrap it up," she said. "Keep it on you. Whatever happens, they do not get that. If they get their hands on it, this war's over before it starts."

Aidan rolled the gold shard back into the brittle leather and shoved it deep into his messenger bag, down beside his father's notebook and Liam's unopened card. He slung the strap across his chest. The fear was back, cold and sharp, but this time it didn't freeze him. The shard warmed his hip through the bag. He grabbed the silver short sword from the crate. The leather grip was worn smooth, and it fit his hand.

"Let's go," he said.

They ran back down the hallway into the kitchen just as the front door shuddered under a massive, splintering blow.

The second blow buckled it. The top hinge tore out of the stone. Wood exploded inward, and Cormac stepped in front of Aidan and leveled the shotgun.

"Stay behind me," he said.

The door gave way completely. Three huge gray shapes forced their way in through the broken frame. They were like the thing in the alley, but somehow worse in a kitchen, where Aidan could see them next to ordinary things. A Fomorian beside a kettle. A Fomorian knocking a tea towel off a hook with its shoulder. They stank of saltwater and rotting fish, and they wore rusted chains and rags of old leather.

Cormac fired.

The blast in the small kitchen was deafening. It caught the first Fomorian full in the chest and threw it back against the doorframe. It roared. Then, as Aidan watched in horror, the hole in its chest began to close, black oily flesh crawling back over itself like time-lapse video of something growing.

"Silver!" Maeve shouted, and darted past Cormac.

Her sword cut through the air and took off the second creature's hand as it reached for Cormac. The monster shrieked. The stump smoked, and the smell of burning was terrible. That one didn't heal.

The third Fomorian ignored both of them.

It shouldered past the table, knocked Ben flying into the dresser, and turned its single pale eye on Aidan. Aidan knew, the way you know when someone's staring at you on a bus, that it could smell the shard in his bag. It wanted the gold. It wanted *him*.

His heart slammed. He could feel the same panic that had sent light blasting out of his hands in the alley. He shoved it down. *Intent,* he told himself.

The creature lunged. It swiped a clawed hand at his face. Aidan ducked under it, and the claws raked across the oak table, carving four deep grooves into the wood. Aidan came up and slashed at the creature's ribs.

The silver edge bit deep. Smoke poured out of the wound, and the monster hissed in agony. But it didn't stop. It backhanded him across the chest, almost casually.

The hit lifted Aidan off his feet. He flew backward across the kitchen and crashed into the iron safe. All the air left his body. He tasted blood.

The Fomorian came after him, raising both fists.

Then a small brown goat hit it in the back of the knees at about forty miles an hour.

It would never make it into the old stories. The monster's legs folded like a deckchair, and it went down on one knee with a crash that shook the plates on the dresser, and the goat bounced off it, landed, and bleated something that was almost certainly a swear word.

That gave Aidan two seconds. He used them.

He pushed himself up against the cold iron of the safe and tightened his grip on the sword. He reached inside himself, down into the center of his chest, for the warm, steady place he'd found at the stone. He poured it, slowly, the way you'd pour water into a glass, down his arm and into the silver blade.

The sword blazed with golden light, so bright that it lit the whole kitchen.

The Fomorian surged back to its feet and brought both fists down at him. Aidan thrust the blazing blade straight up into its chest.

The silver went in. The light went with it.

It spread through the creature in an instant. For one terrible second the monster glowed from the inside, every black vein lit up gold under its skin, and its scream went higher and higher. Then it collapsed, all at once, into a heap of smoking, stinking ash on the stone floor.

Aidan slumped against the safe, gasping. The light faded from the sword.

He had killed it.

He couldn't stop staring at the ash. His sword hand shook.

Across the kitchen, Cormac fired his second barrel into the face of the first Fomorian, and Maeve stepped into the gap and took its head off with a single stroke. The one-handed creature was already scrambling backward out through the broken doorway, hissing into the mist.

"They're pulling back," Maeve said, breathing hard. "But they're calling the rest. I can feel it."

"The house is lost," Cormac said flatly. He cracked the shotgun open and shoved in two more shells. "We take the tunnels. Follow me."

Ben popped back into a human shape, still sprawled by the dresser. He was holding his head. "I think I've concussed myself," he announced. "Is anyone else seeing three Cormacs?"

"One's plenty," Cormac said, hauling him up by the collar. "Move."

He led them to the pantry at the back of the kitchen and kicked aside a heavy woven rug. Under it was a wooden trapdoor with an iron ring. He heaved it open. A narrow tunnel sloped down into the dark earth, and cold air came up out of it, smelling of clay and old roots.

"Go," Cormac said.

Aidan went down the ladder first, his chest throbbing where the monster had hit him, the sword still warm in his hand. Maeve came right behind him, then Ben, muttering. Cormac climbed down last and pulled the trapdoor shut over their heads. He slid a thick iron bolt across it just as a dozen heavy, dragging footsteps thundered into the kitchen above them.

Dust rained down in the dark.

They were trapped under the earth, in the pitch black, with a pack of monsters stamping around over their heads.

But they were alive. And Aidan was starting to understand that in this new life of his, that was going to have to count as a good day.

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# Chapter 8
# The Scenic Route Is Underground

Cormac clicked on a heavy flashlight. The beam cut through the dark and showed them a narrow tunnel, shored up with thick timber beams, sloping away into the earth. Pale tree roots hung down from the ceiling. Somewhere, water was dripping.

"Keep your voices down," Cormac said. "They can hear a heartbeat through ten feet of rock."

"Great," Ben whispered. "Mine's going about three hundred beats a minute. They can probably hear it in Galway."

They walked in single file. Cormac led with the flashlight. Aidan went second, pressing one hand against his bruised ribs. Ben came next, sniffing the air every few steps, and Maeve took the rear, her sword glowing pale silver in the dark behind them like a nightlight.

The air got colder the deeper they went. It smelled of wet clay and old rot. Aidan fixed his attention on the steady crunch of Cormac's boots on the gravel and tried not to think about the weight of earth over his head, or the monsters stamping around on top of it. In his bag, the shard of the Gáe Assail pulsed against his hip, faint and warm. It was the only warm thing in the whole tunnel. He found he kept touching the bag to make sure it was still there.

"Where does this go?" he whispered.

"Old smugglers' route," Cormac said, not looking back. "Brandy and tobacco, back in the day. Comes out in the sea caves three miles along the coast. Your father mapped it. We've a boat waiting in an inlet. From there, we go to the islands."

"Please don't say boat," Ben said.

"Boat," Cormac said.

Ben made a noise like a deflating balloon.

They walked for what felt like an hour. The tunnel sloped down and down, twisting through the bedrock. Behind them, the muffled sounds of the pack

tearing the farmhouse apart faded and died, and there was only the dripping and their breathing. Aidan almost started to relax.

Then the tunnel shook.

It was a single massive thud, somewhere above and behind them. Dirt sifted down from the ceiling. Then a second thud, closer, and one of the timber beams gave a loud, unhappy crack.

"They're digging down to us," Maeve said.

Ten yards behind them, the ceiling caved in.

Earth and gravel and broken roots poured down in an avalanche. Maeve jumped back to avoid it. Through the dust, a huge clawed hand punched down through the hole in the roof, groping blindly.

"Run!" Cormac yelled, and gave up on stealth entirely.

They ran. The flashlight beam bounced wildly over the walls ahead of them. Aidan's bag slapped against his side. Behind them, the tunnel roof gave way completely with a roar.

Aidan risked a glance over his shoulder.

Something had dropped through the hole. It was smaller and leaner than the brutes in the kitchen, its gray skin stretched tight over its ribs, and it ran on all fours, low to the ground. Its single eye was fixed on the glow of Maeve's sword.

It was fast. It closed the distance in seconds.

"Maeve!" Aidan shouted.

She spun around and brought her sword up to block, but the scout leapt inside her guard. It hit her square in the chest and slammed her against the tunnel wall, and the impact knocked the glowing sword out of her hand. It went clattering away into the dark. The creature snapped its jagged jaws at her face, dripping something foul onto her armor. Maeve got her forearms up under its throat and held it there, inches away, her arms shaking with the effort.

Aidan didn't think. He stopped running and turned around.

Ben grabbed his sleeve. "Aidan, don't—"

Aidan pulled free. He didn't have time to get close enough to use the sword. So he reached for the light instead, and this time he went past the panic to the warm, steady place he'd found in the farmyard, and he pictured exactly what he wanted: a single, narrow line.

He raised his open left hand. "Hey!"

The scout ignored him. Its jaws snapped. Maeve's arms were buckling.

Aidan pushed.

A beam of gold light shot from his palm, narrow and focused. He aimed it straight at the creature's single pale eye.

The scout shrieked. It reeled backward off Maeve, clawing at its face, blinded, and thrashed wildly in the gravel.

Maeve didn't waste a second. She swept the creature's legs out from under it. In one fluid movement, she pulled a long knife from her boot and drove its silver blade down into the base of the scout's skull.

The monster went rigid. Black blood pooled around it in the gravel, smoking where the silver had touched.

For a moment, the only sound was the four of them breathing.

Maeve yanked the knife free and went to find her sword. She came back with it glowing in her hand, and she looked at Aidan, her chest heaving. The gold light had already faded from his fingers, leaving them tingling and warm. Last night, one burst of light had left him crawling around a loading dock. This time, he was tired, but he was still standing.

"Good shot," Maeve said.

As she passed him, her hand closed on his forearm. A quick, hard squeeze, there and gone.

Aidan stood very still for a second after she'd let go.

Ben looked at him. Ben looked at Maeve's back. Ben opened his mouth.

"Don't," Aidan said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were going to."

"I was going to say *good shot*," Ben said, with enormous dignity. "Which it was."

"More coming," Cormac warned from ahead. He swept the flashlight back over the collapsed tunnel. The sounds of digging and wet, guttural roaring were coming through the gap. "These beams are done. The whole section's going to come down."

"Then we keep running," Aidan said.

So they did. They ran until Aidan's lungs were on fire and his legs felt like someone else's legs. The sounds of pursuit faded into a muffled roar as they rounded a sharp bend. Then the air changed. The smell of clay was gone, and he could smell salt and seaweed instead. The sea.

There was light ahead of them, faint and silver.

The tunnel spat them out onto a slick limestone ledge, into the roar of the ocean.

It was a cave, but a huge one, carved out by thousands of years of tide and storm, so high that the ceiling disappeared into shadow. Daylight filtered through a jagged crack far above, and below them, black water churned and heaved and boomed against the rock.

It was the most beautiful thing Aidan had ever seen. He hated it immediately.

"Down the steps!" Cormac shouted over the noise. His flashlight found a stair cut into the rock face, slick with spray. At the bottom, a big black inflatable boat bobbed and jerked in the swell, tied to a rusted iron ring.

Aidan started down the steps with his back to the wall. He kept his weight low. The stone was so wet it might as well have been ice, and one slip would put him in the water.

He didn't want to be in the water.

He'd never learned to swim. After the Guards found his father's car at Horn Head, his mam hadn't let either of her boys go near the sea, not even paddling, not even at the beach in Rathmullan on the one hot day of the summer. Aidan had never argued with her. He'd had the dream. He knew what was down there. Black water, closing over his head.

He kept a white-knuckled grip on the hilt of his sword and kept going down.

Maeve passed him on the steps like they were a pavement. "Tide's high," she called. "We've enough water to clear the reef."

Behind him, Ben was going down the stairs on his bottom, one step at a time. "Púcas don't do salt water," he explained, to nobody. "Makes us itchy. This is a well-known fact."

Cormac reached the bottom first and untied the mooring rope. "Get in. We haven't time to admire the view."

Aidan jumped into the boat. It pitched and rolled under him like a bouncy castle in a gale, and he grabbed the side and held on. Maeve vaulted in behind him, sword drawn. Ben fell in sideways and lay in the bottom with his eyes shut.

Before Cormac could step off the rock, the water around the boat exploded.

Three Fomorians launched themselves up out of the black water and Aidan saw straight away how wrong he'd been about them. Up there, they lumbered. Down here, in their own element, they were fast and smooth and terrifyingly precise.

A gray hand shot out of the surf and clamped around Cormac's ankle.

It yanked. Cormac went down face-first onto the rock. His shotgun flew out of his hands and vanished into the water with a dull *plunk*. The creature started dragging him toward the edge, toward the black water, and Cormac's fingers scraped and slid over the wet stone looking for anything to hold on to.

"Cormac!" Aidan yelled.

Maeve swung her sword at the water, but a second Fomorian surged up underneath them and grabbed the side of the boat. The whole thing tipped up on its edge. Maeve lost her footing and slammed into the console.

Aidan didn't wait for the boat to come back down.

He crawled to the edge of the side tube, the one hanging over the water. Over the dark water, with nothing between him and it. Cormac was halfway into the sea now, kicking at the monster's face with his free boot, but its grip on his ankle didn't budge.

Aidan's whole body was screaming at him to get back. Every single muscle. The dream was right there, inches from his face, black and heaving and

cold.

He went forward anyway.

He raised the silver short sword. There was no time to be careful, no time for a nice neat beam. He dragged the light up out of his chest, raw and hot, and shoved it into the blade so hard the silver blazed gold, and he drove it down into the thick gray forearm wrapped around Cormac's leg.

The Fomorian screamed. The sound went right through the water and into the rubber of the boat and up into Aidan's ribs. The light burned into its flesh, boiling its black blood, and it let go. It sank beneath the surface, leaving a trail of dark, smoking fluid behind it.

Cormac scrambled backward, coughing up seawater. Aidan grabbed his collar with his free hand and pulled, and between the two of them they got him over the side and into the bottom of the boat in a heap on top of Ben.

"Ow," said Ben.

"Engine!" Maeve shouted. She drove her boot into the face of the Fomorian trying to climb in over the side and kicked it back into the surf.

Cormac hauled himself up to the console and hit the ignition. The outboard engine coughed, spluttered, and roared to life. He threw the throttle all the way forward, and the boat leapt, its nose lifting clear of the water, and tore away from the rock into the dark.

Aidan fell back against the stern, gasping. The light died in his sword.

Behind them, gray heads broke the surface of the cave, one after another, their single eyes burning with rage. But even the Fomorians couldn't keep up with a hundred and fifty horsepower and an angry Cormac. The gap grew. The boat shot out through the mouth of the cave and burst into the open Atlantic.

The storm clouds had torn open. The sky ahead was the flat, pale gray of afternoon, and the air tasted clean and cold, with no trace of rot in it at all.

Aidan sheathed his sword with shaking hands. He pulled his bag into his lap and checked inside. The bundle was still there, warm through the leather. So was Liam's card, a little damp at the corner.

Maeve dropped down onto the tube beside him and sheathed her own sword. She put her hand on his shoulder, and she left it there for a moment

longer than she needed to.

"You were hanging over that edge like you'd never been in a boat in your life," she said.

"I haven't. Not really." He hesitated. "I can't swim."

She turned and stared at him.

"You can't swim," she said slowly. "And you climbed out over the water to pull him back anyway."

"Seemed like the thing to do."

Maeve shook her head. She looked out at the sea for a while. But she didn't take her hand away.

At the front of the boat, Ben was hanging over the side with his face a delicate shade of green. "If anyone needs me," he called weakly, "I'll be over here. Dying."

Cormac was steering with one hand and holding his ankle with the other. It was already swelling, and there was a bruise coming up on it the exact shape of a huge gray hand. He looked back at Aidan and wiped blood and seawater out of his beard.

"You did good, kid," he said.

Aidan was too tired to answer. He looked past him, at what they were heading toward. Out of the mist on the horizon, low and gray and rocky, a line of islands was rising from the sea.

"The Aran Islands," Maeve said. Her voice had changed, gone quieter. "Inis Mór."

"Is that where the Tearmann is?"

"Yeah." She was still looking at the islands. "It's the closest thing I've got to home."

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# Chapter 9
# Welcome to the Rock

Cormac eased off the throttle as they came in under the cliffs of Inis Mór. The mist parted around them, and the rock rose straight up out of the sea, dark and sheer and streaked with white where the birds nested. Aidan craned his neck and couldn't see the top.

Cormac steered toward what looked like a solid wall of rock. At the last second, a gap appeared in it, a narrow crack Aidan would have sworn hadn't been there a moment before, and the boat slid through.

The roar of the ocean cut off all at once. Inside, the water was smooth and black. A wooden dock jutted out from a little pebble beach, lit by old iron lanterns that burned with a steady, smokeless light.

A man was waiting at the end of the dock.

Maeve tossed him the mooring line. He caught it one-handed and tied it off to an iron cleat without looking, the way you'd tie your shoelaces. Then he stepped into the lantern light. He was older than Cormac by a good stretch, though it was hard to say how much. His head was shaved completely bald and gleamed in the light. He wore a thick cream Aran jumper, which seemed a bit on the nose, given where they were, and he carried a long spear with a silver tip, leaning on it like a walking stick.

"You brought trouble to my doorstep, Cormac," he said. His voice was soft and dry and seemed to carry without him having to raise it.

"Trouble found us first, Finn." Cormac hauled himself onto the dock and swore under his breath as his weight came down on his bad ankle.

Aidan climbed out after him. His legs were shaking. The adrenaline had all burned off somewhere out on the Atlantic, and a deep ache had settled into his bones. But he locked his knees and stood up straight. He wasn't going to fall over in front of a stranger.

Finn's pale blue eyes moved over him. They took in the bruised ribs, the bandaged hands, the silver sword strapped at his hip, and the bag he was holding tight against his side. Aidan had the oddest feeling that the old man had seen everything there was to see in about a second and a half.

"This is Declan's boy," Finn said. "He looks just like him."

"He fights like him, too," Maeve said, stepping onto the dock. "He saved Cormac in the sea caves. He put raw light through silver."

"And me," Ben said, clambering out last. "Sort of. I was underneath."

Finn's eyes moved to Ben, and Ben seemed to shrink about four inches.

"Benjamin," Finn said.

"Finn."

"You lost him. On Samhain."

Ben looked at his feet. They were human feet now, bare and very blue with cold. "Yes."

"We'll talk later."

"Brilliant," Ben said faintly. "Can't wait."

Finn turned back to Aidan. He lifted one hand and pressed his thumb against his bottom lip, thoughtfully, the way some people tap a pen. Then, absently, he gave it a small chew. Aidan noticed it, and filed it away under *weird things old men do*.

"Welcome to Inis Mór, Aidan," Finn said. "I'm Finn. I run this place. Let's get you out of the damp before you fall over."

They climbed a steep path cut straight into the cliff, switchbacking up and up, with the cove dropping away below them. Aidan's lungs were burning by the halfway point. Cormac was swearing on every step. Maeve went up like she was taking a stroll.

At the top, they came out onto a high, windswept plateau, and Aidan stopped to catch his breath and look around.

It was... fine. It was an Aran island. Stone walls crisscrossed the fields in every direction, a gray lace of them, holding in tiny patches of grass. There were sheep. There was a lot of sky. Far off along the cliff edge to the south, a great broken ring of stone walls stood against the clouds, right where the land fell off into the sea, and a line of tourists in brightly colored rain jackets was trudging toward it along a path.

"Dun Aengus," Maeve said, following his gaze. "The tourists love it."

"What is it really?"

"Old," Finn said, and didn't elaborate.

Aidan looked around again. Fields. Walls. Sheep. A single whitewashed cottage. He tried to sound polite. "So where's the Tearmann?"

Ben snorted. Maeve rolled her eyes. Finn just raised one eyebrow.

"Look properly," Maeve said.

"I am looking properly."

"No, you're looking like a tourist. Stop expecting fields." She stepped in close beside him and pointed. "Look at that wall. Not at it. Past it. Like you're trying to see the bottom of a pond."

Aidan felt ridiculous. He did it anyway. He looked at the stone wall and then let his eyes slide past it, unfocused, the way he used to do with those Magic Eye pictures in his granny's house.

Something gave.

It was like a soap bubble popping inside his head. The air shimmered, and then the fields weren't fields anymore.

There was a village.

It spread out across the whole plateau, hidden in plain sight. Long, low stone halls with thick turf roofs stood in a wide ring around a green, each one with a different symbol carved deep into the lintel above its door. Aidan saw a cauldron. A crow. A flame. A breaking wave. A harp. An open hand. Smoke rose from a dozen chimneys. There was a forge, ringing with hammer blows, its doors open and red light spilling out. There were training rings, and an archery range, and a long timber hall at the center with smoke curling from a hole in its roof. Down a path to the right, a full-sized hurling pitch stretched out toward the cliff edge, the goalposts made of silvered wood. Down in the cove below, a pool of seawater sat in the rocks, steaming gently in the cold air.

And there were people. Dozens of them. Young people, most of them around Aidan's age or a few years older. Two lads were sparring with spears on the green, so fast Aidan could barely follow the blades. A girl with a shaved head was standing perfectly still while a crow the size of a cat landed on her outstretched arm and whispered something in her ear. A group outside the hall with the harp over the door were arguing loudly in Irish about what looked like a tree branch covered in notches. A massive red-

haired guy built like a fridge freezer was walking across the green with a whole sheep draped over his shoulders, chatting cheerfully to it.

One of the tourists on the path toward Dun Aengus stopped, raised her phone, and took a photo of what she obviously believed was a very scenic stone wall. The red-haired guy waved at her as he walked through the shot. She didn't notice.

"Welcome to the Tearmann," Ben said. "The Rock, if you're not trying to impress anyone."

"*Tearmann*," Aidan said. His Irish wasn't great, but he knew that one. "It means sanctuary."

"It means sanctuary," Finn agreed. "It's been one for a very long time. Every one of the blooded who wakes up in Ireland, and a few from further afield, can come here, if they can find it. Most of them do. We teach them what they are. We teach them to survive it." He started walking. "Some of them stay. Some go back out into the world. Some join the Vanguard." His eyes slid briefly to Maeve. "We don't hold it against them."

Maeve's face did nothing at all.

As they crossed the green, conversations stopped. Aidan kept his eyes ahead. Behind him, the whispers started.

"Who's he?"

"Came in with Cormac."

"Is that *Joyce*? Thought she was off with the Vanguard."

"Somebody said he blew up half of Camden Street."

"Somebody said he's Lugh's."

"Get away. Lugh's line is gone."

Aidan kept his head down. The girl with the crow watched him pass with flat, black, unblinking eyes. So did the crow.

"Maeve Joyce! As I live and breathe!"

A young man came jogging across the green toward them. He was a couple of years older than Aidan, tall and easy in the way he moved, with dark curly hair and a scar through one eyebrow that somehow made him look

better rather than worse. He had a big, open grin that was hard not to return. He swept Maeve up in a hug that lifted her clean off the ground.

And Maeve, who had spent every hour since Dublin looking at the world like it owed her money, laughed. Properly. Out loud.

"Put me down, Darragh, you eejit."

"Never. Nine months, Maeve. Nine months, and not so much as a postcard." He put her down but kept one hand on her shoulder. "The Vanguard's been feeding you, at least? You look thin. You look dangerous. You always look dangerous."

Aidan looked away from Darragh's hand on her shoulder.

Darragh turned to him, and the grin didn't dim at all. He held out his hand. "And you must be the trouble Cormac brought in. Darragh Flynn. I look after the Unclaimed hall. Which means I look after anyone who turns up here and doesn't know where they belong yet, so I'm guessing that's you."

"Aidan," Aidan said, and shook it. Darragh's grip was firm and friendly and oddly cool, as if he'd just had his hand in the sea.

"Welcome to the Rock, Aidan. Two pieces of advice. One, never eat the stew on a Tuesday. Two, never get between Nessa and her crow." He nodded at the girl with the shaved head. "I learned both of those the hard way."

"Darragh," Finn said. "Later."

"Later." Darragh winked at Aidan, squeezed Maeve's shoulder once more, and jogged off across the green.

Aidan glanced sideways at Maeve. She was watching Darragh go with an expression he couldn't read.

"Old friend?" he asked, very casually. Too casually. He heard it himself and wanted to put his head in a bin.

"He was here when I came," she said. "After my mam." She didn't explain, and she didn't look at him, and she started walking again a little faster.

Finn's cottage was the largest one on the edge of the green, built low against a grassy ridge. Inside it was plain and warm, with a big stone hearth throwing out fierce heat and every wall covered in maps and star charts,

some of them drawn on vellum so old it had gone the color of tea. Finn bolted the door behind them and pointed at a long oak table.

"Sit. I'll get something for that ankle."

Cormac sank into a chair and rolled up the leg of his trousers. His ankle had swollen to the size of a grapefruit, and the bruise around it was deep, mottled purple, the shape of a huge hand.

Aidan dropped his bag onto the table. He was too tired to be careful about it. The flap fell open, and the old leather bundle slid halfway out into the light.

Finn stopped dead in the middle of the room.

For a long moment, nobody moved. The fire crackled. Aidan could hear the wind against the window.

"Tell me," Finn said quietly, "that that is not what I think it is."

"Declan found it," Cormac said, from the chair. "Before he died. He hid it in my armory. The kid pulled it down five minutes before the wards broke."

Aidan reached into the bag and pulled the leather loose. The golden shard caught the firelight and glowed, warm and steady, as if the damp chill of the island had nothing to do with it.

Finn walked to the table. He kept his hands at his sides and leaned closer to the gold.

"The Gáe Assail," he breathed.

He put his thumb to his lip again. Chewed it, absently. His eyes went far away. Then he blinked and looked at Aidan, and Aidan was startled to see awe in his face, and fear.

"They won't stop now," Finn said. "Not for anything. They'll tear the world apart to keep you from finding the rest of it."

"Then we find it first," Maeve said. "A tip's no use without the head it broke off, and a head's no use without a shaft that can carry it. The rest of Lugh's spear is out there somewhere. Declan thought so. And he needs to learn the old forms before he goes looking for it."

"He's untrained," Finn said. "Barely a day awake. If he tries to bind his light to a god's weapon, the feedback alone will burn him to a cinder."

"He held it," Cormac said, nodding at Aidan's bandaged hands. "He picked up the raw metal and it didn't burn him. It answered him."

Aidan looked down at his own hands. They throbbed under the bandages. But under the pain there was something else, a deep, steady hum.

He put his right palm flat on the golden shard.

The glow brightened. It threw long shadows up the walls, across the star charts, across Finn's lined face. The heat of it was right. It felt like stepping into a warm kitchen out of the rain.

"I'm done running," Aidan said. He looked straight at Finn. "Teach me how to use it."

Finn studied him for a long moment. Then the corner of his mouth moved, just slightly.

"First," he said, "you'll need somewhere to sleep."

"Fine. Where?"

Finn reached for his spear. "Now," he said, "that's the interesting question."

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# Chapter 10
# The Hall That Won't Open

The Hall of Lugh stood on its own at the far end of the green, a little apart from the others.

It was older than the rest. Aidan could tell just by looking at it. The other halls were built of the same gray island limestone as every wall on Inis Mór, but this one was built of something paler, almost white, and the stones fitted together so perfectly that he couldn't have slid a sheet of paper between them. Above the door, a sunburst was carved deep into the lintel, its rays crossed by a long, straight spear.

The door itself was solid oak, bound in bands of metal the color of old gold. It had no handle. It had no keyhole. Grass had grown up thick against the bottom of it, and a spider had built a web across one corner so big and so undisturbed that it looked like it had its own planning permission.

"The Hall of Lugh," Finn said. "It's been closed for three hundred and eleven years."

"Closed how?" Aidan asked.

"It doesn't open."

"Have you tried a crowbar?"

"Several," Finn said. "In 1802 a lad from the Dagda's hall tried a small cannon."

"What happened?"

"The door was fine. The lad was in the infirmary for a month, and he never heard properly out of his left ear again." Finn leaned on his spear. "The halls decide for themselves who comes in. Go on. Try it."

Aidan felt stupid, with half the Tearmann watching from across the green. He pushed against the oak with both hands. Nothing. It was like pushing a cliff. He laid his palm flat on the wood, the way he had with the stone in Cormac's kitchen. The wood was warm. Warmer than it should have been in the November wind. He thought he could feel something on the other side, faint and patient, waiting.

But the door didn't move.

"Right," Aidan said, taking his hand away. "So I'm not Lugh's, then. Great. Can I go home?"

"You're Lugh's," Finn said calmly. "A stone in Cormac's kitchen and a spear tip in your bag both agree on that. The hall will open when it's ready. Until then, you'll sleep with the Unclaimed." He looked over Aidan's shoulder. "Benjamin. Show him around. And Benjamin?"

"Yes, Finn?"

"Don't lose him."

Ben was a surprisingly good tour guide, mostly because he was so happy not to be in trouble anymore that he talked nonstop for an hour.

"Right, so, the Long Hall," he said, waving at the big timber building in the middle of the green. "That's food. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a sort of fourth meal that isn't official but everyone goes to. Every meal, a portion of the best of everything gets carried out and left on that stone." He pointed at a big, smooth boulder near the door with a deep round hollow worn into its top. "That's the bullaun stone. The food's for the Good People. The Sídhe. You don't touch it. Ever."

"What happens if you touch it?"

"In 1994 I ate one sausage off that plate," Ben said darkly, "and I had the hiccups for a month. A Sídhe month. Do you know how long that is?"

"No."

"Neither do I. That's the problem."

He walked Aidan around the ring of halls one by one.

The hall with the flame over the door belonged to the children of Brigid. It was the busiest place on the plateau. Brigid had been the goddess of fire and forge and healing and poetry all at once, Ben explained, and her descendants seemed to have inherited the energy of someone with three full-time jobs. They ran the forge beside the hall and the infirmary behind it, and a girl with soot on her face and burn scars up both arms waved at Ben with a pair of tongs as they passed.

The hall with the cauldron was the Dagda's. Its door was wide open and something incredible was cooking inside. The huge red-haired lad Aidan

had seen carrying a sheep was sitting on the step, playing a small harp with enormous, surprisingly delicate fingers.

"That's Tadhg," Ben said. "He's the strongest person on the island and he cries at ads. If you ever need anything lifted, ask Tadhg. If you ever need a hug, also ask Tadhg."

Tadhg looked up and gave Aidan a beaming, gap-toothed smile, as if they'd been friends since playschool. Aidan found himself smiling back.

The harp hall belonged to Ogma, the god of eloquence and poetry, who had invented Ogham, the old Irish alphabet of notches cut along the edge of a stick. His descendants were poets, linguists, storytellers, and, according to Ben, the most argumentative people in the western hemisphere. Through the window, Aidan could see a whole wall of shelves crammed with books, and three people shouting at each other about a semicolon.

"You'd love it in there," Ben said. "That's not a compliment."

The hall with the open hand belonged to Dian Cécht, the healer of the Tuatha, who had once made King Nuada an arm of solid silver. It was quiet and smelled of herbs. The hall with a swan over the door belonged to Aengus Óg, the god of love and youth, and every single person sitting outside it was so good-looking that Aidan had to look away, the way you look away from the sun. Two girls on the bench beside the door watched him go past and started whispering to each other immediately.

"Aengus lot," Ben said. "Gossips. Matchmakers. They run every betting pool on the island. Don't tell them anything. Don't let them see you looking at anyone. Don't look at anyone, ideally."

"Why would I look at anyone?"

Ben just gave him a long, flat, deeply patient goat look.

They gave the hall with the crow over its door a wide berth. It was the Morrígan's. Its windows were dark. Crows sat all along its roof in a line, completely silent, all watching the same thing, which was Aidan.

"The Morrígan," Ben said quietly, as if the crows might be listening. Aidan was fairly sure they were. "War goddess. Three goddesses, really, or one goddess in three, nobody's ever managed to get a straight answer. Her kids get battle-sight. They can tell how a fight's going to go before it starts. They

can tell who's going to die in it." He shivered. "Nessa runs that hall with her two cousins. They finish each other's sentences."

"That's not so bad."

"And occasionally, people."

The last of the main halls had a breaking wave carved above its door. It was small, and it seemed almost empty, with only one window lit.

"Manannán mac Lir," Ben said. "God of the sea. The féth fíada's his. The Glass Curragh's his. Half the stories about the Otherworld are about him, and the other half are about people he annoyed. There are only three of his blood on the island at the moment." He glanced sideways at Aidan. "Maeve's one of them."

Aidan stopped walking.

"Maeve's Manannán's?"

"On her mam's side. Niamh. Named after the famous one, Niamh of the Golden Hair. She was Manannán's daughter in the old stories." Ben shrugged. "Maeve can see through glamour like it's not even there. She knows when the tide's turning without looking. She can hold her breath for about eleven minutes. I've timed her."

Aidan thought about Maeve going down the slick steps in the sea cave like they were a pavement. Maeve looking at the waves the way other people look at their own back garden.

"So she's a child of the sea," he said slowly. "And I'm the guy who can't swim."

"Yep," Ben said cheerfully. "You two are like a joke that hasn't got a punchline yet."

The Unclaimed hall was at the end of the ring, and it was the only one with nothing carved over the door at all. Just a blank lintel, and a sign someone had painted and nailed up underneath that said WE'RE SOMEBODY'S, PROBABLY.

Inside, it was crowded, warm, and loud. Bunks lined both walls, three high in places, with sleeping bags and posters and laundry hanging off them. There were people of every age from about seventeen to twenty-five, some of them looking like they'd arrived last week and some like they'd been here

for years. Someone was playing a guitar badly. Someone was cooking toast on a sword over the stove.

"Unclaimed," Darragh said, appearing at Aidan's elbow with his easy grin. "Some of us are new. Some of us are mixed up, a bit of everything. Some of us are waiting for our halls to make up their minds." He shrugged. "Some of us aren't anybody's. Ten years, I've been here, and my hall never opened either. You get used to it."

He said it lightly, but Aidan didn't think he'd gotten used to it at all.

Darragh showed him to an empty bunk by the window, with a view down over the cove and the steaming pool in the rocks. Then he dug in his pocket and held something out.

It was a brooch. A silver one, in the old Irish style, a ring with a long pin through it, like the ones in glass cases in the National Museum. The ring was worked with a fine, swirling pattern that looked almost like water.

"Everyone who comes in gets one of these from the Unclaimed," Darragh said. "It means you belong somewhere, even before you know where. Fasten your coat with it. It's for luck."

Aidan took it. It was cold, far colder than metal usually is, like something taken out of a fridge.

"Thanks," he said, and meant it. He pinned it to the front of his jacket.

"No bother." Darragh clapped him on the shoulder. "Dinner's in an hour. Sit with us. Whatever you do, don't sit with the Morrígan lot."

Aidan did not sit with the Morrígan lot.

The Morrígan lot sat with him.

The Long Hall was huge and smoky and full of noise, lit by lanterns and candles and a fire pit down the middle. There was soda bread and stew and fish and potatoes and a mountain of something Tadhg proudly announced was colcannon. Aidan watched a girl from Brigid's hall carry the best portion of everything outside to the bullaun stone, and then he sat down at the Unclaimed table with his plate and his head down.

He'd taken exactly two bites when the bench across from him creaked, and he looked up into a pair of flat black eyes.

It was Nessa. The girl with the shaved head. Close up, she was a little older than him and very pale, with a silver ring through her lower lip and a stare like a hawk choosing a field mouse. On either side of her sat two more girls with the same black eyes. The crow sat on her shoulder. It tilted its head and looked at his dinner.

"So," Nessa said. "You're Lugh's."

"Allegedly," Aidan said.

"Lugh's line has been dead for three hundred years," said the girl on her left.

"And now a first-year from Dublin turns up," said the girl on her right.

"And says he's the sun god's last heir," Nessa finished. "Prove it."

The hall had gone quiet around them. Every head on every bench was turned toward the Unclaimed table. At the far end, Aidan could see Maeve, sitting alone at the Manannán table with a cup of tea, watching. She didn't move to help. He got the feeling she wanted to see what he'd do.

"I'm not going to prove anything," Aidan said. "I'm going to eat my dinner."

"Battle-sight says you're going to die young," Nessa said conversationally. "Messy, too. Lots of water."

Aidan's heart thumped.

It was the water. It was the stupid, cheap, cruel, accurate shot about the water, straight into the thing he'd been dreaming about since he was eight. He felt the heat surge up in his chest before he could stop it, and the hum, and the ozone.

Every candle in the Long Hall flared.

Every single flame shot up a foot high, all at once, white-gold and blinding, every lantern and every candle and the whole length of the fire pit. People yelled. Somebody fell off a bench. The crow on Nessa's shoulder shrieked and launched itself into the rafters.

Then every flame went out.

Total darkness. Total silence. Somewhere in the dark, a fork hit the floor.

"Sorry," Aidan said into the blackness. "Sorry. That was an accident. I'm really sorry."

There was a long pause. Then, from the far end of the hall, Finn's dry voice.

"Well," he said. "That settles whether he's awake. Somebody find a match."

When the candles were lit again, Nessa was still sitting across from him. Her black eyes were very wide. Her eyebrows were noticeably shorter than they had been.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled. It was not a reassuring smile.

"Interesting," she said, and she got up and left with her cousins, and the crow came down out of the rafters and followed her out.

That night, Aidan couldn't sleep. Big surprise.

He lay in his bunk in the Unclaimed hall listening to twenty people breathing and the wind going over the roof, with the silver brooch pinned to the jacket hanging beside his head. Eventually, he gave up, pulled his jacket on, and went outside.

The plateau was silver under the moon. The sea was a low, endless murmur far below. He walked across the wet grass of the green, past the dark halls, to the white one at the end, and he put his hand on the warm oak of the door.

*Come on*, he thought at it. *Please. I don't know what I'm doing. I could really use somewhere that's mine.*

The door didn't move. But he felt it again on the other side, waiting.

"It won't open just because you're sad at it."

Aidan turned. Maeve was sitting on the low wall behind him, her knees pulled up, her coat wrapped tight around her. He hadn't heard her come. He wondered how long she'd been there.

"Couldn't sleep either?" he said.

"I never sleep the first night back." She looked past him at the door. "It'll open."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're very annoying," Maeve said. "And sooner or later, it'll get sick of you standing out here."

It was nearly a joke. Aidan laughed, quietly, and after a second, the corner of her mouth went up too.

They stayed there for a while without talking, Aidan with his hand on the door and Maeve on the wall, until the moon went down over the sea.

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# Chapter 11
# A Spear Is a Staff with Ambitions

In the morning, Finn put a poultice on Cormac's ankle that smelled like a compost heap on fire and made Cormac say several words Aidan hadn't heard since his uncle's stag party. But by breakfast, the purple handprint had faded to a sickly yellow, and Cormac could put weight on the leg.

Then Finn turned to Aidan's hands.

He unwrapped the old bandages, looked at the raw, weeping blisters for a long moment, and coated them in a pale, waxy salve that was as cool as river water. The relief was so immediate that Aidan nearly fell off his chair. Finn bound them up again in clean linen, his fingers quick and sure.

"When you find the rest of that spear," he said, tying off the last knot, "you can't mount a god's weapon on a broom handle. You'll need a shaft. Ordinary ash or oak will go up in flames the second you put your light through it."

"What did Lugh use?" Aidan asked.

"Rowan," Maeve said from the hearth, where she was drinking tea out of a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST GRANDAD. Aidan decided not to ask. "Cut from the sacred groves the Tuatha planted when they first came to Ireland. Most of those were felled a thousand years ago."

"Most," Finn agreed. "Not all. There's a small grove on the north ridge of this island. It grows over one of the old roads, and it's been drinking that magic for two thousand years. The wood is dense enough to carry a sun god's fire." He stood and reached for his spear. "If it'll let you take it."

The grove was in a hollow at the very top of the island, where the limestone pavement dipped down into a deep, sheltered bowl out of the wind. Aidan smelled it before he saw it. Something sweet and green and old, like incense in an old church.

Then they came over the lip of the hollow, and he stopped.

The trees shouldn't have been there. Nothing on Inis Mór was taller than a stone wall. The wind made sure of that. But here, in the bowl, two dozen

trees stood tall and straight and close together, and their bark was silver. Real silver, shimmering faintly in the pale light. Their leaves were a deep violet, and they stirred and whispered even though there wasn't a breath of wind down in the hollow. Clusters of bright red berries hung from the branches.

The air around the grove felt thick, and it hummed, a low, deep sound just below hearing that fell into time with the pulse in Aidan's chest.

Finn stopped ten yards from the trees. He pulled a hatchet from his belt. Its edge was silver, and he held it out handle first.

"I can't cut it," he said. "Nobody can. The grove protects itself against ordinary steel and ordinary men. Only the blood can ask for a branch."

Aidan took the hatchet. It was heavy in his bandaged hand. He walked forward.

As he passed between the first silver trunks, the light changed. The shadows went deeper and bluer. The trees seemed to lean in over him, and their branches scraped together over his head. The hum got louder, pressing against his eardrums.

He stopped in front of the biggest tree in the middle of the grove. Its trunk was massive and scarred, so old that the silver bark had gone dark and deeply grooved. Near its base grew a branch that was perfect. Thick and straight and long, exactly the shape a spear shaft ought to be.

Aidan raised the hatchet, took a breath, and brought it down hard.

Before the blade touched it, the bark turned black.

It happened in an instant. The silver went dark and dead, and the branch turned as hard as stone. The hatchet hit it with a clang. The shock went up both of Aidan's arms, through his shoulders and into his teeth, and dropped him straight onto his knees.

He looked at the hatchet. There was a chip the size of a fingernail missing from the silver edge.

"It's rejecting you," Maeve called from the lip of the hollow. "You're treating it like firewood. It's alive, Aidan."

Aidan knelt there in the moss, gritting his teeth, his arms still ringing.

*Okay,* he thought. *Okay. Think.*

He looked at the chipped hatchet, then at the bark. The stone in Cormac's kitchen had answered when he'd steadied the light. He hadn't needed to strike it.

He tossed the hatchet away into the moss.

He got to his feet, and he put both bandaged hands flat on the cold, black, petrified bark.

He closed his eyes. He found the warm place in the middle of his chest, and this time he let it flow, slow and steady, into the tree.

And he didn't know what else to do, so he just told it the truth.

He showed it the shard of gold in his bag, broken off and waiting. He showed it the shape of the spear it had been broken from, the shape he could almost feel in his hands. He showed it his mam, crying with the bathroom taps running. Liam's card. His father's handwriting. The Fomorian's single eye in the alley, and what it wanted. He told it: *I don't want to hurt you. I need help. I don't think I can do this on my own.*

The hum in the grove changed pitch.

It dropped and deepened into something warm.

Under Aidan's hands, the black stone faded away. The bark turned silver again, warm to the touch, and the whole tree shuddered from its roots to its crown. A shower of violet leaves came down over his head and shoulders. Then, with a sharp, clean crack, the straight branch near the base came free of the trunk all by itself and fell neatly into Aidan's waiting arms.

He stood there holding it. It was heavy and smooth and alive. He could feel it humming against his chest.

The grove went quiet.

Aidan walked out of the trees carrying the silver branch, with violet leaves still stuck in his hair.

Maeve was waiting at the lip of the hollow with her arms folded.

"Firewood," she said.

"Don't."

She laughed.

Her laugh was quieter than it had been with Darragh on the green. Aidan found himself grinning.

He decided not to think about that very much.

Finn looked at the unbroken branch, then at the chipped hatchet lying in the moss, and gave a slow, grim nod of approval.

"The island recognizes you," he said. "Now all you need is the rest of the weapon that killed a king."

Finn gave him one afternoon to sleep. Then he put him to work.

By the time the light began to go, the old man had Aidan out on the green with the rowan branch in his hands, still rough with silver bark, and the Atlantic wind doing its best to knock him off his feet. Half the Tearmann had found reasons to be passing.

"A spear is a staff with ambitions," Finn said. He circled slowly, a length of knotted blackthorn held loose in one hand. "Learn the staff, and the spear will forgive you most things. Feet wider. Lead hand loose. Your back hand does the work."

Aidan widened his stance. The branch was heavier than it looked, and it hummed faintly against his bandaged palms like a power line in the rain.

Finn's blackthorn cracked across his knuckles.

"Ow."

"Loose, I said. You're strangling it. Hold it like a bird, not a hammer."

For an hour, Finn walked him through the same six movements. A thrust. A sweep. A high block. A low block. A sharp turn of the wrists that brought the butt of the staff up into an imaginary jaw. And a sideways step that Finn called the crossing, and that Aidan privately called falling over with intent.

Every time he got one wrong, the blackthorn told him so. Every time he got one right, Finn said nothing at all. By the end of the first hour, Aidan had worked out that silence was as close as the old man came to praise.

And he was getting a lot of silence.

He watched Finn demonstrate a movement, then copied it. On the next attempt, his feet found the right positions without a reminder. Samildánach, Cormac had said. The blood learns.

Near the end, without quite deciding to, he let a thread of light run down his arms and into the wood.

The rowan soaked it up. A warm golden glow slid along the grain from his hands all the way to the tip, without a wisp of smoke.

Somebody on the edge of the green whistled.

Finn stopped circling. "Again."

Aidan did it again. It came easier the second time.

"Silver would have cracked under that," Finn said. "Oak would be ash by now." He lowered the blackthorn and nodded at Aidan's hands. "Unwrap those."

Aidan peeled back the linen. Yesterday, his palms had been raw meat. Now the blisters had shrunk to shiny pink patches, already knitting together at the edges.

"You heal fast," Finn said. "That's the blood waking up. Don't get cocky about it. It'll keep healing you right up until the day it doesn't."

He went into his cottage and came back carrying a sword in a plain leather scabbard. It was shorter than Maeve's, and the blade, when Aidan drew it an inch, was a dull, dark gray, with a grip worn smooth by someone else's hand.

"Cold iron," Finn said. "That silver toy of yours is fine for the shallows. Silver burns their blood. But the deep ones wear scale like armor plate, and silver's soft. Iron holds an edge. And it'll carry your light without cracking."

The metal was cold enough to sting. "Whose was it?" Aidan asked.

"Mine, once."

"When?"

Finn put his thumb to his lip. Chewed it, absently, looking out to sea.

"A long time ago," he said, and walked off before Aidan could ask anything else.

Supper was in Finn's cottage that night: mutton stew and soda bread so dense you could have used it to stop a bullet. It was the best thing Aidan had ever eaten. Ben ate four bowls and then looked longingly at the pot until Finn pushed it toward him without a word.

Finn and Cormac sat at opposite ends of the long table and argued the way only very old friends can argue, about nothing in particular and without any heat at all. Cormac's ankle was propped on a stool.

"You've gotten old," Finn told him.

"You've gotten bald."

"I've always been bald."

"Then you've always looked old." Cormac reached for the bread. "Tell me you've something stronger than tea on this rock."

Finn produced a bottle of poitín with no label. Maeve declined it. Aidan, after one look from Cormac, declined it too. Ben asked if it went with stew and was ignored.

Maeve sat on the hearth step with her sword across her knees, running an oiled cloth along the blade. Finn watched her for a while before he spoke.

"That's Niamh's blade," he said.

Maeve's hands didn't stop moving. "Cormac had it reforged."

"I'd heard it was broken."

"Sídhe steel doesn't break. Not really." She turned the sword so the firelight ran down the blade. "It remembers what shape it's meant to be. You just have to find a smith who can remind it."

"She'd have hated you doing this," Finn said quietly. "The Vanguard. All of it."

"She did this." Maeve slid the sword into its scabbard with a soft click. "Right up until it killed her."

The cottage went silent. Maeve stood up, said she was going to check the boat, and went out into the dark. The door banged behind her.

Cormac stared into his cup. Finn sighed and rubbed his bare scalp.

Aidan looked at the door for a long moment.

Ben leaned over and said, very quietly, "Go on."

"Go on what?"

"Go after her, you eejit."

"She wants to be on her own."

"She's Manannán's," Ben said. "They always want to be on their own. It's a whole thing. Go on."

Aidan found her down at the cove, sitting on a flat rock beside the pool in the stones. Up close, he could see that the water was warm. Some old spring of the island fed it from below, and it lay there smooth and dark and gently smoking in the cold, with the real sea booming against the rocks just beyond it.

He stopped a few feet away. She didn't turn around.

"If you're going to say you're sorry about my mother," she said, "don't."

"I wasn't going to."

"Good."

The sea boomed. The steam curled.

"Dawn," Maeve said. "Tomorrow. Here."

Aidan blinked. "What for?"

She turned her head and looked at him, and in the dark her eyes were more gray than green.

"Because sooner or later, this war is going to drag you into the sea," she said. "And when it does, you're going to know how to swim."

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# Chapter 12
# Maeve Tries to Teach Aidan to Swim, and Nobody Dies

The only wetsuit on the island that nobody was using belonged to Tadhg.

Tadhg was roughly the size of a garden shed. The wetsuit was roughly the size of a garden shed. Aidan was not.

He came down the path to the cove at dawn with the arms rolled up four times and the legs rolled up five, and the rest of it hanging off him in great black rubbery folds, like a seal that had let itself go. Ben had helped him get into it. Ben had laughed so hard while helping that he'd had to lie down on the floor of the Unclaimed hall for a while.

Maeve was already in the pool. She was wearing a plain black sleeveless wetsuit that actually fit, and she was floating on her back in the steaming water with her eyes closed.

She opened one eye.

"What are you wearing?"

"Tadhg's wetsuit."

"You look like a tent."

"I'm aware of how I look," Aidan said, with as much dignity as he could manage, which wasn't much. "Can we just get this over with?"

The pool sat in a hollow of black rock at the edge of the cove, maybe twenty yards long. At the near end, the water was shallow, lapping over a shelf of smooth stone. At the far end, it went dark. Properly dark. Beyond the far wall of rock, the real Atlantic heaved and boomed and threw white spray up into the pink morning sky.

The water steamed gently in the cold. It smelled of salt and, faintly, of something sweet, like apples.

Aidan stood on the edge and looked down at it.

It was fine. It was a warm pool. Children could play in it. He'd watched three Brigid lads cannonball into it yesterday afternoon, screaming happily. There was nothing to be afraid of.

His heart was pounding. His mouth had gone dry. He kept both feet planted on the rock.

*Black water. Closing over your head. Open your mouth and it comes in.*

"Okay," he said, out loud. He didn't move.

Maeve swam slowly over to the shallow end, stood up so the water came to her waist, and waited.

It took Aidan four minutes to sit down on the edge.

It took him another three to put his legs in. The water was warm, warmer than a bath, and he'd been braced for cold, and the warmth was somehow worse, because it meant he'd run out of reasons.

"I need you to know," he said, "that I'm aware this is ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous."

"I'm eighteen. I've blown up a fish-man. I'm scared of a swimming pool."

"You're not scared of a swimming pool," Maeve said. "You're scared of something that happened when you were eight. That's different." She held out her hand. "Come on. Up to your waist. That's all. That's the whole of today if you want it to be."

He took her hand. He slid off the edge.

The water came up to his waist, and then to his ribs, and the wetsuit filled with warmth and ballooned around him, and he grabbed Maeve's arm with his other hand too and held on so hard he knew he was hurting her. She didn't say anything about that, either. She just stood there and let him hold on until his breathing slowed down.

"Okay," he said, after a while. "Okay. I'm in."

"You're in."

"What's next?"

"Next," Maeve said, "you're going to lie back."

"No."

"I'll have my hand under you the whole time."

"Absolutely not."

"Aidan." She waited until he looked at her. "Lungs full of air, you float. Everyone floats. Ben floats, and he's about sixty percent sausage. I promise you, you'll float."

He looked at her for a long time. Her face was serious and calm and completely certain, and there were drops of water caught in her eyelashes.

"Fine," he said. "If I drown, I'm haunting you."

"Noted."

He leaned back.

It was the worst feeling in the world. His feet left the stone, and there was nothing under him, nothing at all, and the water came up around his ears and the sound of the world went muffled and strange and he knew, he absolutely knew, that he was going to go under. He thrashed. He sank. Water slopped over his face.

A hand pressed flat against the middle of his back and pushed him up.

"Breathe," Maeve said. "Big breath. Hold it. Don't look at the water. Look up."

He looked up.

The sky over Inis Mór was turning gold. The clouds were lit pink and orange from underneath, and a pair of gulls were wheeling and crying high up over the cliff, the same way they used to over Horn Head when he was small, before. He breathed in. He held it. He watched the gulls.

The hand under his back stayed exactly where it was. Warm and steady.

Slowly, very slowly, his body stopped fighting.

He lay on the warm water with his arms out and his ears full of the sea, staring at the sky. He was floating. He was actually floating.

"You're floating," Maeve said.

"I'm drowning slowly."

"That's what floating is," she said, and he heard the smile in her voice even though he couldn't see her face.

They stayed like that for a while. The sun came up over the edge of the island. The spray from the real sea hissed against the far rocks.

"I have this dream," Aidan said to the sky. He hadn't decided to say it. It just came out. "Since I was eight. Since the night the Guards came to the door about Dad's car. I'm underwater, and it's black, and it's so heavy I can't move. And I know that if I open my mouth, it'll come in." He tried to laugh, but it didn't really work while floating. "I used to think it meant he drowned. That I was seeing it, somehow. Now I don't know what it means."

Maeve was quiet for a moment.

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "It's just fear with good timing."

"That's comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be comforting. It was meant to be true." Her hand shifted under his back, just slightly. "My mam taught me to swim. In a lake up near Maam Cross, when I was four. It was freezing. I screamed the whole time. She said the sea's like a big dog. It doesn't hate you. It just doesn't know its own strength, and you have to show it you're not afraid, so it'll calm down."

"Is that true?"

"No idea," Maeve said. "I was four. I believed her."

Aidan turned his head a little in the water so he could see her. She was looking out at the sea beyond the rocks.

"She was in the Vanguard too?" he asked carefully.

"Best sword in it." Maeve kept her eyes on the water. "She went into a building in Belfast when I was ten, and she didn't come out. Cormac brought back her sword. It was in three pieces." A pause. "That's all. That's the story. I don't do the long version."

"Okay," Aidan said.

"Okay?"

"You don't have to tell me the long version."

She looked down at him then. For a second, she looked like she didn't know what to do with that. Then she said, "Good," and looked away again.

"Also," she added, "I took my hand away about two minutes ago."

Aidan's whole body seized.

He sank like a rock. Water closed over his face. He came up thrashing and spluttering and grabbed at the nearest solid thing, which turned out to be Maeve, and found himself clinging to her arm with both hands, coughing, his feet scrabbling for the stone shelf, his face about four inches from hers.

She was holding him up. One arm around his back, completely steady.

Neither of them moved.

It was very quiet in the cove. The water dripped off his hair. Her eyes in the morning light were green again, very green, and very close, and there was a small scar on her chin that he'd never noticed before.

Maeve let go of him and stepped back.

"Again," she said.

Her voice was perfectly normal. Her ears had gone slightly pink. Aidan decided that was the cold, even though the water was warm.

They did it again. And again. By the time the sun was fully up, he could float on his own for a whole minute. Then she taught him to kick. Then she made him put his face in the water and open his eyes, which was the hardest thing so far, harder than the alley, harder than the sea caves. The first four times, he couldn't do it.

The fifth time, he made himself.

He opened his eyes underwater and saw blurry green light, and the pale stone shelf, and bubbles going up, and Maeve's face right in front of him, under the water too, perfectly calm, her dark hair floating out around her head.

She crossed her eyes at him.

Aidan laughed, which was a mistake, because he was underwater. He came up choking and coughing and still laughing, and Maeve came up beside him and pushed her wet hair out of her face, and she was laughing too.

Up on the cliff path, someone wolf-whistled.

They both turned. Two girls from the Aengus hall were sitting on the wall at the top of the path, eating toast. One of them waved.

Maeve's face went completely blank.

"Lesson's over," she said, and climbed out of the pool, and walked up the path past the Aengus girls without looking at them. Aidan heard one of them say, "Morning, Maeve!" in a voice like syrup, and Maeve say something back in Irish that he was fairly sure wasn't *good morning*.

By lunchtime, according to Ben, the Aengus hall had a betting pool.

"On what?" Aidan asked.

"On nothing," Ben said quickly. "On the weather. I don't know. I haven't put money on it."

"Ben."

"I put a tenner on it," Ben admitted. "I'm not telling you which way."

Darragh found him that afternoon by the archery range, where Aidan was failing to hit a target with a borrowed bow while three Brigid kids gave him advice that all contradicted each other.

"Heard you went swimming," Darragh said, grinning.

"I went *drowning*," Aidan said. "Supervised."

"Maeve doesn't teach anyone anything, you know." Darragh took the bow out of his hands, nocked an arrow, and put it dead center in the target without even seeming to aim. "She taught me sword once. She was eleven and I was thirteen and she hit me so hard I saw the Milky Way." He handed the bow back. "So you must be special."

Aidan didn't know what to say to that. Darragh didn't seem to need him to say anything. He clapped him on the shoulder.

"Tomorrow night's the Táin," he said. "Unclaimed are with Brigid and the Dagda this time. You're on our team. Get some sleep, Sunshine. You'll need it."

He strolled away whistling. Aidan watched him go. Then he looked down at the brooch on his jacket. Even in the afternoon sun, it was still cold.

That night, for the first time in ten years, he had the dream and it was different.

He was in the black water, the way he always was. It was heavy, the way it always was. It pressed down on him from every side, and he couldn't move, and he knew that if he opened his mouth it would come in.

But this time, there was a hand. Flat and steady in the middle of his back, holding him up.

He woke up in his bunk in the Unclaimed hall in the gray before dawn, and lay there looking at the ceiling, and smiled at it like an idiot.

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# Chapter 13
# How to Steal a Bronze Bull

"It's basically capture the flag," Ben said. "Except the flag is a cow."

"A bull," Darragh corrected him.

"A bull. Sorry. And there are swords. And sometimes people get set on fire. But other than that, it's basically capture the flag."

They were standing on the green at dusk, in a crowd of about eighty blooded young people all buckling on armor and arguing about tactics, and Aidan was beginning to suspect that *basically* was doing a lot of work in that sentence.

The Táin was named after the most famous story in Irish literature, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Aidan had written a two-thousand-word essay on it in October. In the story, Queen Medb of Connacht goes to war with the whole of Ulster to steal one bull, the great Brown Bull of Cooley, because her husband has a better bull than she does and she isn't having it. Thousands of people die. It's a classic.

The Tearmann's version had fewer deaths and more rules. Two teams. Each team guarded a bull: a bronze statue about the size of a Labrador. The Brown Bull, Donn Cúailnge, sat on a stone at the eastern end of the plateau. The White-Horned Bull, Finnbhennach, sat at the western end. Between them, the island's only stream ran right across the plateau, from the ridge down to the cliffs, about knee-deep and fast. Everyone called it the Ford.

To win, you stole the other team's bull and carried it back across the Ford. Weapons were blunted. Gifts were allowed. Maiming was not, though Ben said this was more of a guideline. The healers of Dian Cécht stood on the sidelines with stretchers and an expression of deep weariness. Finn stood on a tall standing stone in the middle of the plateau, leaning on his spear, as referee.

"Unclaimed, Brigid, Dagda and Ogma," Darragh announced, to a roar from their side. "We've the Brown Bull. They've got Morrígan, Aengus and Manannán. They've got the White."

Aidan's head snapped around.

On the far side of the green, in the middle of a group of black-eyed Morrígan girls and impossibly good-looking Aengus lads, stood Maeve. She was strapping a blunted practice sword to her back. She caught him looking, and she raised one eyebrow, very slowly.

"Manannán's on the other team," Aidan said.

"There's only three of them," Darragh said. "Doesn't matter."

"Maeve's one of them."

Darragh's grin widened. "Oh, it matters a bit."

He gave everyone their positions. Tadhg and the Dagda lot would go up the middle like a herd of cows. The Brigid kids would hold the Brown Bull, with the Ogma poets shouting insults from behind them, which was apparently a real tactic, and which, Ben said, worked about half the time. The Unclaimed would raid around the sides.

"Aidan," Darragh said. "Left flank. Down at the bottom of the Ford, by the cliffs. Nobody ever comes that way, it's too rocky. Just keep an eye on it. Shout if you see anyone."

"That's it?"

"Border patrol." Darragh clapped him on the shoulder. "First Táin. Nobody expects you to win it. Just don't fall in."

Aidan took his rowan staff, because he didn't have a blunted spear and Finn had said the rowan wouldn't hit harder than he wanted it to, and walked down to the bottom of the Ford. It was quiet down there. The stream ran fast and white over black rocks toward the cliff edge, where it fell straight off into the sea in a long thin waterfall that the wind kept blowing back up in spray. The noise of the crowd up on the plateau was faint. The noise of the sea was not.

He stood on a flat rock with the staff in his hands and felt, very strongly, like the kid on a football team who gets put in goal because nobody wants him in the way.

Up on the standing stone, Finn raised a horn to his lips and blew.

The sound rolled across the island, long and low and old. And the Táin began.

From down by the cliffs, Aidan could see most of it. It was chaos. The Dagda's hall charged straight up the middle in a tight wedge with Tadhg at the point, roaring a song, and the Morrígan girls met them head-on and somehow, impossibly, seemed to know where every blow was going to land before it was thrown. The Ogma poets stood behind the Brown Bull shouting rhyming insults across the field. One of them, a skinny lad with glasses, got so good a hit on an Aengus boy's mother that the Aengus boy stopped, burst into tears, and walked off the field. A Brigid girl set a hedge on fire. A púca Aidan didn't know turned into a hare, grabbed a flag, and ran in circles until everyone got dizzy. Somewhere in the middle of it all, he saw Ben, as a goat, headbutting an Aengus lad in a very expensive-looking jacket.

Nobody came anywhere near the bottom of the Ford.

Aidan waited. The light went from gold to orange to purple. The noise went on. He shifted his grip on the staff. He was just starting to wonder if he could sit down without anybody noticing when he heard a soft splash downstream.

He turned.

Maeve was standing in the Ford, ten feet away, with the water rushing around her boots and her practice sword drawn. She'd come up the rocks from the cliff side, the side nobody ever came, as if it were a staircase.

"Evening," she said.

"You're not supposed to be down here."

"I'm on the other team, college boy. I'm not supposed to be anywhere you'd like me to be." She tilted her head. "Are you going to let me past?"

"No," Aidan said, and lifted the staff.

Her eyes lit up.

She came across the stream at him fast. He watched her. Shoulder. Weight. Chin. Her back shoulder dropped, half an inch, the way it always did, and he stepped in to meet the swing, the way he had in Cormac's yard.

The swing didn't come.

She'd faked it. The shoulder dropped and her weight didn't follow it, and while he was stepping into empty air, she slid around him like water around

a rock and tapped him across the back with the flat of her sword, just hard enough to make the point.

"Never trust a tell," she said.

He spun around. "You knew I'd read it."

"You read it in front of me in Cormac's yard. Your face does a thing." She was grinning. Actually grinning. "Like you've just solved a crossword."

"My face does not do a thing."

"It's doing it now."

He swung the staff at her, and she ducked it, laughing, and he swung again, and she blocked, and for thirty seconds he kept her busy, blocking and turning and trying not to laugh himself.

Then the crows started screaming.

It was every crow on the island, all at once. A huge black cloud of them burst up off the roof of the Morrígan's hall, shrieking. Up on the plateau, the fighting stuttered to a stop. Aidan heard Nessa's voice, high and cracked, nothing like the bored drawl from the Long Hall.

"The water! Something's in the water! *That's not ours!*"

Maeve's head whipped toward the stream.

The Ford was boiling.

Right between them, the fast white water bulged upward like something huge was rising beneath it. Which it was. The stream was only knee-deep. There shouldn't have been room in it for anything that large. But a shape came up out of it anyway, and it kept coming, and coming.

It was a dog. Sort of. It was the size of a horse, long and sleek and black and slick as an eel, with webbed feet and a thick otter's tail and a head that was mostly jaws. Its eyes were small and red. Water streamed off its fur. It opened its mouth and whistled, high and piercing, so loud it made Aidan's ears ring.

"Dobhar-chú," Maeve breathed. The water hound. "That's impossible. They can't get through the wards. They *can't*."

The dobhar-chú didn't seem to know that. It turned its red eyes on Aidan.

It lunged.

Aidan threw himself sideways and the jaws snapped shut on the air where his arm had been. He swung the rowan staff and cracked it across the creature's skull. It was like hitting a wet tire. The beast shook its head, whistled again, and came at him a second time, and this time its shoulder caught him in the chest and knocked him clean off his rock.

Into the Ford.

The water closed over him.

It was cold and black and fast, and it dragged him downstream toward the cliff edge, toward the long waterfall into the sea, and for one second, one terrible, endless second, he was eight years old again and the dream had come true and the black water was pressing down on him and he could not move.

*Look up.*

He looked up. Through the rushing water, there was light. Orange sky.

*Lungs full, you float.*

He kept his mouth shut and his body still, and he let the water lift him, and he kicked, the way she'd shown him, and his head came up into the air. He gasped. His feet found a rock. He shoved himself up out of the stream onto his knees, streaming water, with the edge of the cliff ten feet behind him.

He was still holding the staff.

The dobhar-chú came at him out of the water, jaws wide.

Aidan didn't think about it. He didn't have time to be afraid. He grabbed the rowan staff in both hands, found the warm place in his chest, and poured. Everything. All of it. The light roared down his arms and into the wood and the whole staff lit up, so bright that for a moment the dusk around him turned back into day.

He drove the blazing end of the staff straight into the creature's chest.

The dobhar-chú gave one last high whistle that went up and up until it cracked, and then it simply came apart. It dissolved into water. A great splash of black stream water fell onto the rocks around Aidan and ran back down into the Ford, and the beast was gone.

Aidan knelt on the rock, panting, with the staff still glowing in his hands.

Then he noticed that everyone was staring at him.

The whole Tearmann had come running down the plateau. Eighty people stood in a ragged half circle along the banks of the Ford, mud-streaked and bleeding and holding blunted weapons. Maeve was in the front, her practice sword dropped, her face white.

They were looking just above his head.

Aidan looked up.

Hanging in the air over him, burning gold against the purple sky, was a sign. A sunburst. A circle of fire with long straight rays spreading out from it, and through the middle of it, a single shining line, like a spear. It was the same sign that was carved over the door of the white hall. It was turning slowly, and humming, and the hum was the same note as the grove.

From the far end of the green came a deep, grinding groan. The sound of old wood moving for the first time in three hundred years.

Every head turned. Up on the plateau, the oak door of the Hall of Lugh was swinging slowly open. Golden light was pouring out of it across the grass.

Finn stood at the edge of the crowd. He had his spear in one hand. He looked at the sign over Aidan's head for a long moment. Then he lowered his eyes, bowed his head, and went down on one knee in the wet grass.

"Lugh Lámhfhada," he said, and his dry voice carried over the sound of the sea. "Samildánach. Master of every art."

One by one, all along the bank, the blooded of the Tearmann knelt. The Brigid kids. The Dagda kids, Tadhg already sniffing. The Ogma poets, for once with nothing to say. The Aengus hall. Nessa and her cousins, her black eyes enormous, her eyebrows still growing back. Ben, who had popped back into human shape, mostly, and knelt with one hoof still showing. Maeve knelt, too, slowly, looking at him with an expression he couldn't read at all.

Darragh knelt last.

He took a long time about it. And for one second, before he bowed his head, Aidan saw something cross his face. It was gone too fast to name. But it wasn't anything Aidan had ever seen on his face before.

The sign over Aidan's head flickered and faded and went out.

"So," said a cheerful voice into the silence. Tadhg was standing at the back of the crowd with an enormous bronze bull tucked under one arm. "While everyone was looking at that, I sort of... took this. Across the Ford, like. So. Do we win?"

Later, when everyone else had gone up to the Long Hall to celebrate, Finn stood alone on the bank of the Ford, looking down at the black water. Aidan came and stood beside him, dripping and shivering.

"A dobhar-chú," Finn said quietly, "doesn't wander through a ward that's held for a thousand years. It can't."

"Then how did it get in?"

Finn put his thumb to his lip. Chewed it. His face was very grim.

"Someone let it in," he said.

That night, for the first time, Aidan slept in the Hall of Lugh.

It was beautiful, and it was the loneliest place he had ever been. The inside was all that same pale, gold-veined stone, and a fire had lit itself in the hearth the moment he stepped through the door. There were twenty beds. All of them had been empty for three hundred years, and nineteen of them were going to stay that way. On the wall over the hearth, names had been carved into the stone, one under another, going back so far that the top ones were in Ogham. The last name had been cut three hundred and eleven years ago.

Under it, the stone was smooth and blank.

Aidan sat on the edge of a bed with the dust of three centuries on it and looked at that blank space for a long time.

There was a knock on the open door. Ben put his head around it, holding a sleeping bag.

"Can I sleep on your floor?" he asked. "The Unclaimed snore. And also," he added, more quietly, "I didn't think you should be on your own in here."

Aidan found that he couldn't say anything. He nodded.

Ben came in and unrolled his sleeping bag in front of the fire, and a minute later there was a soft pop, and a goat was snoring on the floor of the Hall of Lugh, and the place didn't feel quite so empty anymore.

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# Chapter 14
# Finn Bites His Thumb and Ruins Dinner

Being the heir of a sun god, Aidan discovered, did not get you out of washing up.

It did get you a lot of looks. All the next morning, people he'd never spoken to nodded at him on the green. Somebody left a hurley outside the Hall of Lugh with a bow tied around it. Two of the Aengus girls asked him, very seriously, what his skincare routine was. The Ogma poets had already written a song about the dobhar-chú, and it was terrible, and it had eleven verses, and by lunchtime the whole island was singing it.

Aidan escaped to Finn's cottage with his father's notebook.

He'd been reading it in pieces since the farmhouse. His father had written the way he'd talked: fast and sideways and full of jokes only he understood. There were sketches of Sídhe mounds covered in arrows and question marks. There was a long rant about the Vanguard's filing system. There was a recipe for brown bread, for some reason, with a note at the bottom: *Don't tell Siobhán I used her mother's.*

Near the back, Aidan found a page headed THE FOUR.

*The Stone of Fál, that cried out under the true king. The Sword of Light, that no one escaped. The Dagda's Cauldron, that no company ever left hungry. The Spear of Lugh, that no battle was ever won against.*

Below that, underlined twice, so hard the pen had nearly torn the paper:

*The tip came out of the mound at Knockma. The head went under the wave. Ask the star-glass at Glendalough. G. knows the road.*

Aidan read it three times. Then he turned the notebook around and slid it down the long oak table.

"Cormac," he said. "Who's G.?"

They were all there. Finn at the head of the table, Cormac with his ankle up, Maeve by the hearth, Ben working his way through a plate of scones. And

Darragh, who'd come in with a message from the Brigid hall about the forge and stayed when Finn nodded at a chair. As head of the hall Aidan had been sleeping in until last night, Finn said, he had a right to hear.

Cormac read the page. Something moved across his face and was gone.

"Gallagher," he said. "Me. Your father always wanted to walk the old roads. He never had enough of the blood to open one. So he made me learn them instead. Every map. Every way in." He shook his head slowly. "I thought he was mad. I learned them anyway."

"What old roads?"

"You know the Tuatha went under the hills when they lost Ireland," Cormac said. "Every hill, every mound and fort and cairn in the country. And they built roads between them. Silver roads, under the earth. You can walk from Donegal to Kerry in an afternoon, if you know the way. And if the road lets you." He tapped the page. "That grove you cut your staff from is sitting right on top of one."

"And Glendalough?"

"There's a hall under the upper lake," Finn said. "We call it the Hollow. The Sídhe keep a star-glass there. A sort of map. It tracks the things they care about. The Four Treasures, among others."

Aidan looked at his father's line again. *The head went under the wave.*

"Tír fo Thuinn," he said slowly. "The Land Under the Wave. Higgins said it was a Sídhe paradise. A whole country at the bottom of the sea, with orchards and music."

"It was," Finn said. "Once."

Nobody said anything for a moment. The fire crackled.

"So I go," Aidan said. "I open the road from the grove, I go to Glendalough, I look at the star-glass, and it tells me where the head of the spear is."

"*We* go," Cormac said, and started to get up.

"You'll sit down," Finn said, without raising his voice. Cormac sat. "You're still limping. Your ankle won't stand a journey like this. And the roads won't open for you anyway. They'll open for the blood." He looked at Aidan. "Three go. It's always three. That's older than me, and I'm older than most things."

"Maeve," Aidan said, before he could stop himself.

Maeve looked up from the fire. Her face didn't change.

"Eamon will have my head," she said. "He sent me to bring you to the Citadel, and instead I brought you here, and now I'll be taking you on a walk under the sea with the Vanguard's most wanted artifact in your bag." She stood up and buckled on her sword. "Fine. Obviously. Who else?"

Everyone looked at Ben.

Ben stopped chewing. He looked at the scone in his hand. Then he looked at Aidan, and his strange goat's eyes were very serious.

"I lost him once," he said. "I'm not losing him twice."

Darragh, across the table, smiled at them all. "Look at that," he said softly. "A proper quest."

That night, the whole Tearmann ate together in the Long Hall to see them off. It was supposed to be a celebration. For about half an hour, it was. Then Finn bit his thumb.

Finn was halfway through a sentence to Tadhg about turnips when he stopped, mid-word, and put his thumb in his mouth and bit down. Hard. Aidan saw a bead of blood. He saw Finn's pale blue eyes go wide and turn bright silver.

Every candle in the hall dipped low.

The hall went quiet, table by table, until the only sound was the wind on the roof. A girl from Brigid's hall dropped her spoon, and it sounded like a gunshot.

Finn stood up. He didn't seem to be looking at anything in the room. When he spoke, his voice was deeper and older than his own, and it seemed to come from the stones of the hall itself.

*"Sun-child, you'll walk the roads beneath the hill,*

*And find a grave the drowned have failed to fill.*

*The one who breaks your bread will sell you to the tide;*

*The sea will lend you passage, and its price will bide.*

*What broke will mend upon the island's crown,*

*And one you mourned will call from where the drowned are bound."*

The silver drained out of his eyes. His knees buckled.

Tadhg caught him before he hit the floor and lowered him gently onto the bench. The candles came back up. Finn sat there with his bleeding thumb in his lap, breathing hard, looking a thousand years old.

Nobody in the Long Hall said a word.

Aidan sat very still. The lines were going around and around in his head. *Grave. Drowned. Sell you to the tide.*

"Well," he said finally, into the silence. His voice came out a bit high. "That's a lot of rhyming."

"Could be worse," Ben whispered. "The last one rhymed *Kildare* with *despair*."

Somebody laughed, nervously, and then a few more people did, and slowly the hall got noisy again. But people kept glancing at Aidan and then away.

And Aidan was staring at Finn.

At the old man's thumb, bleeding into a napkin. At the knowledge that came out of him when he bit it. At the name, *Finn*, and the spear he always carried, and the jumper, and the bald head.

There was a story everyone in Ireland learned in primary school. A boy was set to cook a magic salmon for an old poet. Anyone who ate the first bite would know everything in the world. The boy burned his thumb on the skin of the fish, and stuck the thumb in his mouth, and got the knowledge instead. And for the rest of his life, whenever he needed to know something, all he had to do was bite his thumb.

"Oh my God," Aidan said out loud. "You're Fionn mac Cumhaill."

Finn looked up at him wearily. "Don't spread it around," he said. "People expect me to be taller."

"But you're... you'd be about two thousand years old."

"Eighteen hundred and some. I stopped counting." Finn dabbed his thumb with the napkin. "Some of the Fianna were put to sleep under a hill, until Ireland needed us. Ireland keeps waking me up. Usually for the most trivial things."

"And the Vanguard..."

"The Vanguard," said Fionn mac Cumhaill, "is what the Fianna turned into when they started filling out forms."

At the next table, Cormac snorted into his poitín.

It was Nessa, of all people, who said what everyone was thinking. She was sitting very still with her crow on her shoulder, and her black eyes were fixed on Aidan.

"*The one who breaks your bread*," she said. "That's somebody on this island. Somebody you've eaten with."

Every person in the Long Hall looked down at the bread on their plates.

"I've eaten loads of your bread," Ben said, in a small voice. "Most of it, actually. In fairness."

"Prophecies are like Ben's cooking," Maeve said flatly, standing up. "You never know what's actually in them until it's too late. Come on. We leave at dawn. We need to sleep."

But Aidan noticed that as she said it, her eyes went once around the room, slowly, from face to face to face. Like she was counting.

He didn't sleep. Of course he didn't.

He found Maeve, eventually, sitting on the cliff above the cove with her back against a stone wall and her knees pulled up, watching the iron lanterns on the dock far below. The sky over the sea was crowded with stars, more than he'd seen since leaving Donegal.

He sat down a careful distance away. She didn't tell him to leave, which he decided to take as an invitation.

"You don't have to come," he said.

"Neither do you."

"I sort of do. It's my spear. It's my dad's notebook. It's my rhyming."

"And it's my war," Maeve said. "It was my war before you knew there was one." She was quiet for a while. "Eamon is going to take my badge."

"You have a badge?"

"It's a metaphorical badge."

Aidan almost laughed. He didn't, quite. He looked at the stars instead.

"*The sea will lend you passage*," Maeve said, after a while. "That's my lot. Manannán's. If the sea's lending anything, it's him doing the lending." She pulled her coat tighter. "He never lends anything for free. Not to anyone. Not even to family."

"Have you met him?"

"Once. At my mam's funeral." She didn't elaborate, and Aidan didn't ask. "And the other line. *The one who breaks your bread*." She turned her head and looked at him in the starlight. "Someone let that water hound in, Aidan. Someone inside the wards. I've known everyone on this island since I was ten years old."

"So have you got a list?"

"I've got a list," Maeve said. "It's very short. Everyone's on it."

"Am I on it?"

She looked at him for a long moment.

"No," she said. Then she stood up, brushed the grass off her trousers, and held out a hand to pull him up, the way she had in the alley. This time, she didn't let go straight away.

"Get some sleep, college boy," she said. "Tomorrow, you find out if the road likes you."

At dawn, the whole Tearmann walked them to the grove.

Tadhg hugged Aidan so hard his ribs creaked, and cried a bit. The Ogma poets sang the dobhar-chú song again, all eleven verses. Nessa didn't say anything, but her crow flew down and landed on Aidan's shoulder for a moment, looked him in the eye, and pecked him on the ear. He decided that was a blessing. He hoped it was.

Cormac gripped his hand. "Bring it home, kid."

And Darragh came last. He hugged Maeve and murmured something in her ear that made her nod. Then he turned to Aidan, and his easy grin was back, as if that strange look by the Ford had never happened.

"You've still got the brooch?" he asked.

Aidan touched it, pinned to the front of his jacket. It was cold under his fingers, the way it always was.

"Good man." Darragh straightened it for him with careful fingers, the way a brother might straighten a tie. "Keep that on, Sunshine. For luck."

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# Chapter 15
# The Road Likes Aidan, the Road Hates Ben

The silver trunks gleamed in the gray light, and the violet leaves were stirring, though there was no wind. Aidan walked into the middle of the grove alone and stood in front of the great rowan that had given him his staff.

He laid his palm against the bark.

The hum was there, the same as before. Deep and steady, just below hearing. This time he just listened, the way he listened for a pattern in a lecture hall or a fight. And when he had the shape of it, he hummed along, using the light instead of his voice. He let it rise and fall inside him, matching the tree, until he couldn't tell anymore which of them was singing.

The ground between the roots opened without a sound.

It folded back, and there were steps going down. White marble steps, glowing softly from inside. A breath of air came up from below. It smelled of apples and summer rain and something else, something old and sweet that Aidan couldn't name.

Behind him, somebody gasped. He turned. Half the Tearmann was standing on the lip of the hollow, staring. Even Cormac looked shaken.

"Thirty years in the Vanguard," Cormac said hoarsely, "and I never once saw one open."

Finn came down into the grove and gripped Aidan's shoulder. His hand was surprisingly strong.

"Mind the road," he said. "Don't stop. Don't look at the walls too long. And don't eat anything you're offered."

"Offered by who?"

Finn just looked at him.

Aidan decided he didn't want to know. He hitched his bag up, with the leather bundle and Liam's card and his father's notebook all inside it, and

settled the rowan staff in his hand and Finn's iron sword on his hip. Maeve came down into the grove beside him. Ben came after her, looking at the glowing steps the way most people look at the dentist's chair.

"After you," Ben said.

"It's my road," Aidan said. "I'll go first."

"I know. That's why I said after you."

The silver road was a perfect tunnel of seamless white stone, round as the inside of a pipe, lit from somewhere inside the walls. It was cool and dry and absolutely silent, and their footsteps didn't echo, which was much creepier than if they had.

Distance went strange in there. They walked for what felt like twenty minutes. Aidan checked his watch, and it said four hours had passed. He walked another hundred steps and checked again, and it said nine minutes. Then it said a time that didn't exist, 26:71, and then it stopped altogether. He took it off and put it in his pocket.

"Don't look at the walls," Maeve said, without turning around.

"I'm not."

"You're about to."

He was. He couldn't help it. The walls weren't plain white anymore. If you looked at them out of the corner of your eye, they had things in them, the way clouds have shapes in them if you stare long enough. A field full of horses. A woman braiding a girl's hair. A city made of glass.

And for one second, as they passed, a man. A bearded man in a wool jumper, sitting at a desk, bent over a book, turning a page with ink-stained fingers.

Aidan stopped dead.

"Dad?"

A hand closed around his wrist and pulled. "Keep walking." Maeve's voice was low and fierce. "Aidan. Whatever you saw, it's not there. The road shows you what you want. That's how it keeps you."

He let her pull him. When he looked back, the wall was just white stone.

Ahead of them, from somewhere far up the tunnel, music started.

It was a harp, and a voice singing with it, a woman's voice, high and clear. It was so beautiful it hurt, like a bruise you can't stop pressing. The words were in no language he knew, English or Irish, and still he knew, the way you know things in dreams, that if he followed the music, he'd find somewhere he could stay forever, where nobody he loved would ever drown, and he'd never be afraid of anything again.

He realized he'd slowed down. He realized he'd started to turn toward the sound.

Maeve's hand was still on his wrist. She didn't let go.

"Don't," she said quietly. "That's not for us."

They kept walking. The music faded behind them. Maeve's hand stayed on his wrist for a long time after it was gone, and neither of them mentioned it.

The road, it turned out, liked Aidan.

The road hated Ben.

It wasn't subtle about it. Every so often, the floor under Ben's feet would tilt, just slightly, just enough to make him stumble. Twice, an archway opened in the wall on his side of the tunnel, only on his side, with warm golden light inside it and the smell of fresh bread, and then slammed shut again the moment he looked at it. His shoelaces kept tying themselves together. At one point, he walked straight into a wall that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Ow," he said, rubbing his nose. "Okay. Fine. I get it. Very mature."

"Púcas and the Sídhe have history," Maeve said.

"What history?"

"There was a misunderstanding," Ben said stiffly, "in 1740. About a horse."

"What kind of misunderstanding?"

"The kind where everyone overreacted."

Further on, something rolled out of a niche in the wall and bumped gently against Ben's foot. It was an apple. It was perfectly round and perfectly golden, and it smelled like every good thing Aidan had ever eaten, all at once. Ben looked down at it. His nose twitched. Very slowly, his hand reached toward it.

Maeve slapped it out of his fingers. The apple bounced off the wall and rolled away into the white glow.

"*Don't eat anything you're offered*," she said.

"I wasn't going to *eat* it," Ben protested. "I was going to *smell* it. Closer up."

"Ben."

"I was going to smell it with my mouth," Ben admitted.

The road ended in a hall beneath a lake.

Aidan came out of the tunnel and stopped and stared. The ceiling of the hall was open water. It just hung there above them, impossibly, a vast green ceiling, rippling, and sunlight came down through it in shifting bars of green and gold that moved across the floor like the shadows of leaves. He could see fish turning slowly overhead. Far above them, he could see the bright, broken surface of the upper lake at Glendalough, and the dark shapes of the mountains beyond it.

The walls were carved with knotwork so fine it looked woven. The floor was polished stone. Everything was clean and silent and very, very old.

A woman was waiting for them.

She was tall. Too tall. And so pale that she was almost translucent, like a jellyfish in sunlight. Her long hair was the color of lake water, gray and green and brown all at once, and it moved slowly around her shoulders as if she were underwater, though the air in the hall was still. Her eyes had no whites at all. They were dark, wet, and completely black, from edge to edge.

She looked at Aidan for a long time. He had the uncomfortable feeling of being read.

"The Long Arm's blood," she said. Her voice was low and clear. "It has been a long time since it walked our roads."

"Keeper." Maeve didn't bow. But she lowered her eyes, which was more respect than Aidan had seen her show anyone, including Finn. "We need the star-glass. Please."

"You want the Court's help."

"We want to look."

"Then look." The Keeper turned away, and her bare feet made no sound at all on the stone. "But looking is not helping. The Court does not take sides in the quarrels of mortals and the drowned."

"The drowned are coming up," Aidan said. "They attacked a farmhouse. They got a water hound inside the Tearmann."

"Then they will find the hills closed to them," the Keeper said, without turning around, "as they always have."

The star-glass stood in the center of the hall. It was a nest of thin silver rings, one inside another inside another, like the inside of a gyroscope, standing around a plinth of black glassy stone. In a groove on the top of the plinth sat a small cylinder of sea-green crystal, no longer than Aidan's finger.

"The core holds the chart," the Keeper said. "The glass reads it. The blood wakes the glass."

Aidan noticed the groove. He noticed that the crystal just sat in it, the way a battery sits in a remote. It could come out.

He laid his hand on the cold black stone and gave it the smallest thread of light he could manage.

The crystal brightened. The silver rings shivered. Then they began to turn, each in a different direction, faster and faster, humming, and in the air above them a map unfolded out of nothing. It was Ireland, drawn in lines of silver light. The coast, the rivers, the mountains. The sea around it. And out to the west, the edge of the continental shelf, where the seabed fell away into the deep.

Far out beyond the shelf, impossibly deep, a single golden star was burning.

"Tír fo Thuinn," the Keeper said softly. For the first time, there was something in her voice. It might have been sorrow. "The Land Under the Wave. It was ours, once. A city of light, beneath the sea. Then the drowned came up out of the trenches and took it." Her black eyes didn't blink. "And we did not take it back."

"And the spear's down there," Aidan said.

"The glass remembers what it was last told." The Keeper turned her head and looked at him. "The drowned have been knocking at that vault for a

very long time, son of the Long Arm. You might ask yourself why they have never broken it."

"Because it's sealed with Sídhe magic," Maeve said.

The Keeper said nothing at all.

Aidan looked at the star, burning out in the dark beyond the shelf. Hundreds of miles out. Thousands of feet down. *Under the wave.*

"How do we get down there?" he asked.

Something like amusement touched the Keeper's pale face. It didn't make her look friendlier.

"The old way," she said. "By boat. The Son of the Sea keeps a boat that can go where you need to go. Ask him for it." She paused. "He will want paying."

"Everyone wants paying," Ben muttered.

The Keeper's black eyes moved to him. "Everything does, little horse," she said, and Ben went very quiet.

The departure gate was an arch of mother-of-pearl set into the far wall, its pillars studded with dark crystals. When Aidan touched it, they lit one by one, sea-green, and the stone between the pillars dissolved into a slow swirl of silver light.

"Where does it go?" he asked.

"To the nearest hill that will have you," the Keeper said.

She didn't wish them luck. She didn't say goodbye. When Aidan looked back from the threshold, she was standing beneath the water-light with her hands folded, watching him go.

They stepped through.

Aidan had been expecting a palace. Something with crystal windows, maybe. Something by the sea.

He had not been expecting to fall face-first out of a hawthorn bush onto a grass verge at eight o'clock in the morning while a forty-foot lorry thundered past six feet from his head, blaring its horn.

He rolled over and stared up at a road sign. It was green and white and dripping with rain. It said *M18. Ennis 3. Galway 62.*

"Ah," Ben said, sitting up beside him with hawthorn leaves in his hair. "Latoon."

"What?"

"The fairy bush," Ben said, pointing at the hawthorn they'd just fallen out of. It stood alone on a little island of grass in the middle of the motorway verge, with the traffic roaring past on both sides. "They rerouted the whole motorway around it, back in the nineties, because nobody would cut it down. Biggest Sídhe door in Clare." He sighed. "The Keeper's got a sense of humor. Who knew."

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# Chapter 16
# Three Women Do Laundry for the Dead

It took them an hour to walk into Ennis in the rain, and by the time they got there, Aidan had developed a new and deeply personal hatred of County Clare.

Clare hadn't done anything wrong. It was a perfectly nice county. But he was soaked to the skin, and he'd barely slept, and his clothes had never properly dried since he'd fallen into the Ford, and they had started to smell: a swampy, otter-y, wet-dog-left-in-a-pond smell.

"You smell like a dobhar-chú," Maeve told him, as they walked up a narrow main street past a statue of Daniel O'Connell standing on a tall column, looking disappointed in everyone.

"I *fought* a dobhar-chú."

"You smell like you lost."

Ben wanted a breakfast roll. Ben was very clear about this. He had a sort of hunted look about him, the look of a man who'd been offered a golden apple and been forced to say no, and the only cure for it, he said, was two sausages, two rashers, a hash brown and a fried egg in a baguette, from a deli counter, with brown sauce. Maeve bought him two. She bought Aidan one. She bought herself a black coffee and drank it like she was angry at it.

Then she checked the timetable at the bus station. The bus to the Cliffs of Moher left at twenty to ten.

"Why the cliffs?" Aidan asked. "The Keeper said the Son of the Sea. That's Manannán. Wouldn't he be, I don't know, in the sea?"

"He's got a place in the cliffs," Maeve said. She said it the way people talk about a relative who's had a lot of work done. "He likes the view. Come on. You need to dry that jacket, or nobody's going to let you sit beside them on a bus."

There was a laundrette on a side street off the square, with steamed-up windows and a hand-painted sign that said WASH & DRY, SERVICE WASH AVAILABLE, NO DYEING. Somebody had scratched a second line underneath it: *except for us.*

Aidan should probably have noticed that. He'd remember later that he did notice it, and that he was too tired to care.

A bell jingled as they pushed in through the door. It was warm and humid inside, and it smelled of soap powder and hot cotton. A row of machines ran down one wall, churning. And at the back, beside a big old stone sink, three women were doing laundry.

The first one was old. Very old. She was small and hunched, in a black cardigan and a headscarf, and she had a nose like a beak. The second was middle-aged and solid, with wild red hair and a racing newspaper folded under her arm. The third was young, Aidan's age, maybe, thin and twitchy, with earbuds in both ears and her foot tapping to a beat that didn't seem to have any rhythm at all.

All three of them had the same eyes. Flat and black, edge to edge. Like Nessa's.

They were washing something in the sink. The old woman was scrubbing it, slowly, rhythmically, against a washboard. The water that ran off it was red.

Ben stopped dead in the doorway. Aidan felt him go rigid.

"Don't make eye contact," Ben whispered. "Don't make eye contact, don't make eye contact, don't make—"

"Sit down, sun-child," the old woman said, without looking up. "You're dripping on my floor."

Maeve's hand went to her sword.

"Put that away, Joyce girl," said the red-haired one, turning a page of her newspaper. "We're on our break."

Aidan didn't sit down. He couldn't seem to make his legs do anything. He was looking at what the old woman was washing.

It was a hoodie. A gray one, with his college crest on the front. It was the same hoodie he was wearing right now, under his jacket. Exactly the same. He could see the little hole in the left cuff, where he'd chewed it during a

lecture. He could see the bleach spot on the hood from when Ben had tried to clean the bathroom.

The old woman lifted it out of the water and wrung it, and red water ran down her wrists into the sink.

"That's mine," Aidan said. It came out as a croak.

"It is, pet." She dunked it again. "We wash for the ones who'll die. Always have. Down at the ford, in the old days, beside the river, before a battle. Now it's here." She shrugged her bony shoulders. "Ennis has better parking."

Aidan knew this story. He knew it the way he knew most things now, with a horrible little lurch of recognition. *The Washer at the Ford.* The war goddess, the Morrígan, in the shape of an old woman, washing the bloody armor of the men who were about to die in battle. Three goddesses. One goddess in three. Nobody's ever managed to get a straight answer.

"You're the Morrígan," he said.

"We are," said the old one.

"We are," said the red-haired one, licking her finger and turning a page.

"We aaaare," sang the young one, loudly, along with whatever was in her earbuds.

"Badb," said the old one, pointing to herself. "Macha." The red-haired woman raised her paper an inch, by way of hello. "And that's Nemain. Don't mind her. She's the frenzy. She's always like that."

Nemain grinned at Aidan with far too many teeth.

"So I'm going to die," Aidan said. He was surprised by how calm his voice was. It sounded like somebody else's.

"Everyone's going to die, pet. That's not news." Badb held the hoodie up to the light from the window. "But look. The water's not red all the way through. See that?" She pointed with a long, crooked finger. The water dripping from the hem was pink. Almost clear. "That means it can still change. It means *maybe*."

"Maybe's not great," Ben said faintly, from behind Aidan.

"Maybe's the best anyone gets, little horse. Even kings."

Macha looked up from her paper and studied Aidan with her black eyes, the way a punter studies a horse in the parade ring. "I wouldn't put money on you," she said frankly.

"I would," said Nemain, popping out one earbud. "Long odds pay best."

"Why are you telling me this?" Aidan asked. "If you're a war goddess. Doesn't that mean you're on someone's side?"

"War doesn't take sides, pet." Badb dunked the hoodie again. "War takes the dead. Both sides have plenty. We just like to know whose we're getting." She tilted her head, exactly like Nessa's crow. "You've a good face for it. Shame if it went to waste."

She looked at his chest. At the front of his jacket.

"Mind the pin," she said.

Aidan's hand went to the brooch without him meaning it to. Darragh's brooch. It was cold under his fingers, the way it always was. "This?"

"Pretty thing," Badb said. "Cold, isn't it? Pretty things that run cold." She went back to her scrubbing. "And mind the sea's son, while you're at it. He keeps accounts. He never forgets what he's owed."

"What does that mean?" Aidan demanded. "What's wrong with the pin? Is it __"

"Your dryer's finished," said Macha.

Aidan turned around. One of the dryers behind him had stopped. He hadn't put anything in it. But when he opened the door, his jacket was inside, warm and dry and smelling of fresh cotton, even though he could feel it on his own back. He reached for his shoulders. His fingers met the thin cotton of his hoodie. His jacket was in the dryer.

He pulled it out and put it on, his heart hammering, and turned back to the sink.

The sink was empty. The water was gone. There was nobody there.

On the counter, beside the big old washboard, someone had left a folded note, in neat, old-fashioned handwriting.

*Tell my Nessa her eyebrows suit her short.*

Nobody said anything until they were on the bus.

The 9:40 to the Cliffs of Moher was a big white Bus Éireann coach with condensation on the windows and about ten people on board. There was an elderly couple sharing a flask of tea, an American tourist couple in brand-new matching raincoats, a woman with a baby, and three lads in high-vis jackets and wellies who looked like they worked for the council. Maeve took the seats at the back. Aidan sat by the window. Ben sat in the aisle seat across from them and stared at his hands.

"Okay," Aidan said quietly, once the bus had pulled out onto the road. "So that happened."

"That happened," Maeve agreed. She was watching the other passengers.

"She told me to mind the pin." Aidan touched the brooch. "Darragh gave me this. Everyone in the Unclaimed gets one. Right?"

Maeve didn't answer right away.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I wasn't in the Unclaimed. I came in under Manannán." She frowned at the brooch. "Darragh wouldn't. He's... Darragh's Darragh. He's been looking after people on that island since he was fifteen."

"The Morrígan talks in riddles," Ben said. "Everybody knows that. She once told my uncle to mind the gap, and he spent forty years watching out for gaps, and then he was hit by a bus."

"Is that true?"

"No," Ben admitted. "But it could be."

Aidan looked down at the brooch for a long moment. Then he left it where it was. It was a present. Darragh had been kind to him when nobody else on the island knew who he was. And an old woman in a laundrette had said a weird thing in a weird voice, and the Morrígan, apparently, said weird things to everyone.

Later, he would remember this moment. He would remember deciding.

The bus wound out of Ennis and up into the hills, through little villages, past the bare gray limestone of the Burren in the distance. Rain streaked the windows sideways. Aidan watched the fields go by and tried not to think about red water. Almost clear. Not quite.

Across the aisle, Ben's nose twitched.

He sat up straight. He sniffed again. His eyes went to the front of the bus, and his face went white.

"Low tide," he whispered.

At the front of the bus, the three lads in high-vis jackets stood up.

They did it all at the same moment, like they'd practiced. They turned around in the aisle. They were ordinary-looking men, twenties and thirties, with faces you'd forget the second you'd seen them. But their eyes were wrong: milky and pale, like boiled eggs left in seawater. And on the inside of each of their wrists was a small tattoo: a single closed eye.

"The Tide," Maeve said through her teeth. "Cultists. Humans who serve the deep."

The bus lurched. Aidan looked toward the front and saw the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror. They were milky too.

The coach swung off the main road onto a narrow lane, heading toward the sea.

"Sun-child," said the man at the front of the aisle. His voice was perfectly flat and pleasant, like someone reading out the specials in a restaurant. "You'll come with us now, please. The deep is waiting for you."

"Hard pass," Aidan said.

The man drew a long, curved fishing knife from inside his high-vis jacket. So did the other two.

Things happened very fast after that.

Maeve went over the back of the seat in front of her, sword already out, and the elderly couple with the flask didn't even look up. The first cultist slashed at her and she caught the knife on her blade and twisted, and it went flying and stuck quivering in the ceiling. Ben shouted something and there was a pop, and a small brown goat shot down the aisle between the seats like a furry missile and took the second cultist's legs out from under him. Aidan was on his feet. The third cultist came at him with the knife, and he didn't have room to swing the sword, so he didn't. He swung the rowan staff, short and sharp, the way Finn had shown him, a turn of the wrists that brought the butt end up under the man's jaw.

*Crack.* The man went down like a bag of shopping.

The bus swerved wildly. The driver had both hands on the wheel and his foot flat to the floor, and the lane was getting narrower, and through the windscreen Aidan could see a gate, and a field, and past the field, nothing. Just gray sky. The edge of a cliff.

"Maeve!" he yelled. "The driver!"

Maeve vaulted over two rows of seats, landed beside the driver, and hit him very precisely on the side of the head with the hilt of her sword. He slumped over the wheel. She shoved him out of the seat, grabbed the wheel, and stamped on the brake.

The bus slewed sideways, smashed through the gate, plowed across the field in a spray of mud, and came to a shuddering, hissing stop about thirty feet from the edge of the cliff.

For a long moment, the only sound was the rain on the roof, and the windscreen wipers going back and forth, and the baby, who had woken up, laughing.

Aidan let out a long breath.

The three cultists were out cold in the aisle. The goat was sitting on one of them, looking pleased with itself. The American couple in the matching raincoats were staring at Maeve, who was standing at the front of the bus with a sword in her hand and mud on her face, and Aidan braced himself.

"Wow," said the American man. "Is it always like this?"

"Hen party," Maeve said, without missing a beat. "Got a bit rowdy."

"Lovely costume, love," the old woman with the flask told her, nodding approvingly. "Very realistic. My granddaughter did one of those Viking ones for Halloween."

Aidan sat down very slowly.

*People see what they can bear to see.*

They left the bus in the field, with the driver sleeping it off and the cultists zip-tied together with cable ties that Maeve had produced from somewhere in her coat, and walked the last two miles along the cliff road in the rain. Aidan kept touching the brooch on his jacket, and then making himself stop.

"How did they know?" he said, finally. "We came out of a random bush on a motorway. Nobody knew we'd be in Clare. Nobody knew we'd get that bus."

Maeve didn't answer. She was walking with her head down, frowning hard, the way she'd frowned in the Long Hall when she'd counted faces.

The Cliffs of Moher came up out of the rain ahead of them. Seven hundred feet of dark rock, dropping sheer into the Atlantic. There was a visitor center built into the hillside, and a car park full of tour buses, and hundreds of tourists in rain jackets leaning on the walls and taking photos of the mist.

And at the very edge of the car park, there was a little wooden kiosk, painted sea-green. A hand-lettered sign over the window said MAC LIR MARINE TOURS. A smaller sign underneath said ALL TOURS CANCELLED TODAY DUE TO WEATHER.

A man was leaning in the kiosk window. He was tall and handsome and silver-haired, with a deep tan that you definitely don't get in Clare. He wore a navy gilet over a very expensive-looking shirt, a lanyard, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses, although there had been no sun in this part of Ireland since roughly August.

He lowered the sunglasses as they approached. His eyes were the color of the sea in every kind of weather, all at once.

"Tours are cancelled today, I'm afraid," he said. His voice was rich and warm and amused. "On account of the weather." He smiled straight at Maeve. "Unless, of course, you're family."

Maeve stopped walking.

"Oh, no," she said.

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# Chapter 17
# The God of the Sea Wears a Gilet

"Maeve!" The man came out of the kiosk with his arms spread wide. "Look at you! Last time I saw you, you were ten years old and you kicked me in the shin."

"You deserved it," Maeve said.

"I'd brought a very nice wreath."

"You brought it to my mother's funeral," Maeve said, "and it was shaped like a dolphin."

"She liked dolphins!"

"She hated dolphins. She said they were the sea's estate agents."

The man paused, considering this. "That's fair, actually," he said. "That's very fair. She always did have a mouth on her." He beamed at Aidan and Ben. "Hello! Hello. Welcome. Don't mind the rain. I'm Manannán mac Lir. Lord of the Sea, Keeper of the Mist, Ferryman of the Otherworld, Rider of the Waves, and so on and so on, there's a lot of it, I'll send you a list. I'm Maeve's great-great-great-great-"

"Don't," Maeve said.

"-great-great-grandfather. Roughly. Give or take. Let's not count. Counting's ageing." He took Aidan's hand and shook it warmly. His grip was cold and wet, and Aidan felt it right up to his elbow. "And you're the sun boy. Lugh's last. Look at you. You're very..." He searched for the word. "Dry."

"Thanks," Aidan said. "I think."

"And this is a púca." Manannán looked down at Ben, who was trying to hide behind Aidan, which was difficult, because Ben was taller. "Hello, púca. I haven't forgotten 1740."

"That was a misunderstanding," Ben said weakly.

"It was a horse," said Manannán. "It was *my* horse." Then he smiled, all white teeth and charm, and clapped his hands together. "Anyway! Come in,

come in. You'll catch your deaths, and I'd hate that, the paperwork is horrendous."

The back of the kiosk had a door in it. The door opened onto a spiral staircase, going down into the rock. Aidan was fairly sure that the kiosk was about five feet deep and built on top of a car park.

He'd stopped expecting things to make sense.

They came out, after a long way down, into a palace inside the cliff.

Aidan had seen the Cliffs of Moher on a hundred postcards. He'd never imagined there were halls carved into the inside of them. Long galleries stretched away through the rock, floored in green marble, and set into the outer wall were tall windows made of perfectly clear crystal, so that the whole gray ocean lay spread out below them. Waves broke white against the foot of the cliffs, hundreds of feet down. From outside, Aidan supposed, the windows would look like nothing but wet stone. There were sofas. There was a bar. There was a large oil painting of Manannán himself, standing on a wave in a heroic pose, wearing considerably less than a gilet.

It looked like a five-star hotel lobby designed by an octopus with a lot of money.

"Sit, sit," said Manannán, flinging himself onto a huge velvet sofa the color of seaweed. "Drink? Snack? Anything?" He snapped his fingers, and a silver tray floated in from nowhere, piled with oysters.

Ben's hand moved toward the tray. Maeve slapped it.

"Oh, eat what you like, it's not Sídhe food, it's from Lidl," Manannán said. "Now. You want my boat."

"How do you know that?" Aidan asked.

"Everything wet talks to me, sun boy. Every puddle on this island is a gossip." He picked up an oyster and examined it. "The Keeper's been on to me. Very cross. She thinks I'm going to take sides." He tipped the oyster back and swallowed it. "I'm not, obviously. The Court voted. The Court always votes. The Court has voted on everything since the Milesians landed, including whether to have a vote." He set the empty shell down hard. "Nobody ever won a war with a show of hands."

It was gone again, as fast as it had come. He smiled.

"Tír fo Thuinn was mine, you know," he said lightly. "Well. Under my protection. A city of light under the waves. You should have seen it. Orchards of coral. Music in the currents. Salmon the size of a bus. And then the drowned came up out of the trenches, and they took it, and the Court said, how sad, and voted to do nothing." He shrugged. "So, no. I can't help you. That would be taking sides."

"So why are we here?" Aidan asked.

"Because I can *lend* you something," said Manannán. "Lending isn't taking sides. Lending is commerce."

Maeve was sitting on the very edge of an armchair, as if it might bite her. "Here it comes," she muttered.

"The Glass Curragh," Manannán said. "My little boat. It'll go anywhere in the sea. Down to the bottom of the deepest trench, if you ask it nicely. It'll get you to the vault." He spread his hands. "In return, a small debt. To be named later."

"Don't," Maeve said immediately. "Aidan. Don't. You don't know what he'll ask."

"*I* don't know what I'll ask," Manannán said cheerfully. "That's the fun of it. Nothing you can't afford. Probably. I'll know it when I see it."

Aidan looked at him. The god of the sea looked back at him, sprawled on his velvet sofa with an oyster in one hand, smiling, and Aidan thought about the prophecy. *The sea will lend you passage, and its price will bide.*

He had the feeling this had all been decided before they ever got here.

"What happens if I say no?" he asked.

"Then you'll take a fishing boat out to the shelf and try to dive twelve thousand feet," said Manannán. "And I'll be very sad, at the funeral, and I'll send a wreath."

"Shaped like a dolphin," Maeve said.

"Shaped like a *sun*, actually, I'm not a monster."

Aidan held out his hand. "Fine. A debt to be named later."

Maeve put her face in her hands.

Manannán shook it. The cold went right up Aidan's arm again, cold and wet and enormous, like the whole Atlantic was shaking his hand. When he let go, there was a mark on Aidan's right palm. A small, pale spiral, curling in on itself, like the shape of a wave just before it breaks. It didn't hurt. It didn't fade when he rubbed it, either.

"There," said Manannán, delighted. "Lovely. Doing business with you."

"Can I ask you something?" Aidan said. "The Keeper said the Fomorians have been trying to break into that vault for a very long time. And they've never managed it. She said I should ask myself why." He hesitated. "Do you know why?"

Manannán looked at him for a long moment. The sea in his eyes went very still.

"Everyone keeps asking you that," he said. "Haven't they?"

"Yes."

"And yet," said the god of the sea, "you haven't answered."

Aidan opened his mouth. Shut it again. He thought about it. *They've never broken it.* Because the Sídhe magic was too strong. Because the seals were too old. Because—

He couldn't get any further. The answer was right there, and it wouldn't come.

Manannán's eyes had moved, while he was thinking. They'd moved down from Aidan's face to his chest. To the silver brooch pinned on the front of his jacket.

"Pretty pin," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

"A friend gave it to me."

"Mm," said Manannán. "Friends." He picked up another oyster and didn't say anything else about it at all.

He showed them to the boat himself, down another long spiral stair that went deeper into the cliff, with Maeve walking ahead in stony silence. Halfway down, he dropped back beside Aidan and lowered his voice.

"I hear she's been teaching you to swim," he said.

Aidan nearly fell down the stairs.

"In my pool," Manannán went on, conversationally. "Well. It's not technically my pool. Everything wet is a little bit my pool. And I hear you're getting quite good. Floating for a whole minute. Opening your eyes underwater. Laughing, at one point, which I gather was a mistake."

Ahead of them, Maeve's shoulders had gone up around her ears.

"I'm going to say this once," Manannán said, still quietly, and something in his voice made Aidan look at him. The charm was gone again. "She's the best of my line in three hundred years. Maybe longer. She's stubborn, and she's sharp, and she's sad in a way she won't let anyone touch, and she's *mine*, in the way that the sea is mine. If you get her drowned, sun boy, I'll be very, very cross."

Aidan swallowed. "If anyone drowns," he said, "it's going to be me."

"Yes," said the god of the sea. "I did hear that." He clapped him on the back. "Good lad."

"I can *hear* you," Maeve said, without turning around. "Everyone in the cliff can hear you."

"I know, darling. I was projecting."

At the bottom of the stair, the palace opened out into a sea cave half full of black water.

Sídhe lamps burned along the walls with a steady, smokeless, greenish light. The water was perfectly still. It didn't move at all, though Aidan could hear the Atlantic booming somewhere on the other side of the rock. And moored in the middle of the pool, rocking very gently, was a boat made of glass.

It had the shape of a curragh, the old Irish rowing boat with the high pointed prow, the kind fishermen on the Aran Islands still made out of tar and canvas. But this one was sealed over the top like a seed pod, smooth and clear, its hull braced with ribs of silver. Through the glass, Aidan could see three pale seats, carved from something that looked like coral, and in the middle of them a pedestal of polished black stone.

"The Glass Curragh," Maeve said. Her voice had gone soft, and strange. "My mam told me about it. When I was small. I thought it was a bedtime story."

"Most of them aren't," said Manannán.

He didn't wish them luck either. Aidan was starting to think the Otherworld didn't really do luck. He just stood at the edge of the black water with his hands in the pockets of his gilet, and he put his sunglasses back on, though there was no sun at all in the cave, and he watched them go.

"Not one word," Maeve said to Aidan, as they walked down to the edge of the pool. Her ears were bright red. "Not one word about any of that. Ever."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it. Very loudly."

"I wasn't thinking anything."

"Your face is doing the crossword thing."

It was, slightly. He made it stop.

Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he unpinned the brooch and held it out to her on his palm. "Look at this for me," he said. "Properly. The way you showed me on the plateau."

Maeve looked at him. Then she looked at the brooch, and her eyes went soft and unfocused, the way his had when the fields turned into a village. She looked for a long time.

"Silver," she said at last. "Old. There's no glamour on it. No knot, no working, nothing I can see." She touched it with one fingertip and took her hand back. "It's cold. So is everything in this cliff."

"That's twice now," Aidan said. "Two people have gone out of their way to mention it. And the Tide knew which bus we'd be on."

"The Tide has eyes in every town in Clare. They could have picked us up anywhere between that bush and Ennis." But she was frowning. "Take it off, if it's bothering you."

He nearly did. He stood there with the brooch cold on his palm and made himself think it through, the way he'd work at a pattern in a lecture. On one side there was a goddess who washed clothes for the dead, a god who kept accounts, and a bus. On the other there was Darragh, who'd given him a bunk and a seat at dinner and a bit of silver for luck before anyone on the island knew what he was. And the only real test he had, the girl who could see through any glamour in Ireland, had come back clean.

Taking it off meant deciding his friend was a liar. He wasn't willing to decide that on the word of people who never said anything straight. He pinned the brooch back where Darragh had put it, and Manannán watched him do it from behind his sunglasses, and said nothing at all.

Then he looked down at the water. It was perfectly still and perfectly black, and he couldn't see the bottom. It looked exactly like the water in his dream.

He thought of a hand, flat and steady, in the middle of his back.

Aidan hitched the strap of his bag higher. He felt the warmth of his father's shard against his hip, and the cold of the brooch against his chest, and the strange new spiral on his palm, and he climbed up onto the glass hull to find the hatch.

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# Chapter 18
# The Glass Curragh Goes Down

Inside, the Glass Curragh smelled of dust, like a museum display case that hadn't been opened in a thousand years.

Aidan lowered himself through the hatch, and his boots hit the clear floor. Beneath his feet, he could see the black water of the cave, lapping against the hull. It was like standing on nothing. He decided not to look down.

Maeve dropped in behind him. Ben came last, slid on the curved glass, and landed on his back.

"Grand," he said from the floor. "Lovely. Very comfortable. Is there a seat belt?"

There were three seats, carved from pale coral, set in a triangle around the black pedestal in the middle. Maeve pulled the hatch shut over them and spun a silver locking wheel, and there was a long, pressurized hiss as the seal took hold. Then she slid into the front seat. Before she'd even touched anything, the silver ribs of the hull gave a faint shiver.

"It knows my blood," she said quietly. "Manannán's boat. It'll go where I tell it." She looked over her shoulder at Aidan. "But it won't go anywhere without power. Take the middle seat. You're the battery."

"I'm always the battery," Aidan said. "Am I ever going to get to be the driver?"

"Can you drive?"

"I did three lessons. I hit a bollard."

"Then you're the battery."

He sat down and put his hands on the smooth coral armrests. The small space pressed in around him. He was sitting in a glass bubble about to sink into the Atlantic Ocean. If he thought about that for more than a second at a time, his throat started to close.

So he didn't think about it. He found the warm place in his chest and let the light flow down his arms into the coral.

The ribs of the hull pulsed with a soft blue-white glow. A low hum rose up through the floor. On the black pedestal, a map shimmered into the air above them: the west coast, drawn in silver, and the shelf, and beyond it, far out and very deep, the single burning golden star.

"Hold that," Maeve said. Her hands moved over the silver fittings on the console in front of her as if she'd been doing it her whole life. "We're going under."

The Curragh slid forward without a sound or a shudder, out of the still black pool, through a gap in the rock, and out under the cliffs into the open sea, and then, smoothly, it tipped its nose down, and the water closed over the top of the glass.

The light changed. The pale gray of the surface faded, and faded, through green into a deep twilight blue. A shoal of mackerel flicked past the glass like thrown knives. Then the bottom fell away beneath them, and there was nothing below the clear floor at all. Just blue going down into black.

They kept going down.

It didn't hit Aidan all at once. It crept up on him. A pressure in his ears. A tightness in his chest. The slow, horrible realization that there were hundreds of feet of water above his head now. Then a thousand. Then more. All that water, stacking up and up and pressing down on the thin glass from every side, and him in the middle of it, in a bubble, holding his breath.

The golden light powering the ship flickered.

The ribs of the hull dimmed. The map over the pedestal went thin and ghostly. The hum stuttered.

"Aidan," Maeve said sharply.

"I know. I know. I'm trying." His hands were locked on the armrests. His heart was going like a bodhrán. "It's exactly like the dream. It's *exactly* like it."

Maeve unbuckled her harness. She left the controls, and the Curragh kept going on its own while she came back through the cramped cabin and knelt down beside his seat. She took his hand off the armrest and held it in both of hers.

"Breathe," she said. "Look at me."

He looked at her.

"You're awake," she said firmly. "This is not the dream. You're in a boat, and the boat is fine, and the water can't touch you. Okay? It can't touch you."

"The Fomorians live down here."

"And we're going to *hunt* them." Her green eyes didn't waver. "You carry the fire of the sun, Aidan Byrne. The dark should be terrified of you. Not the other way around."

He made himself keep looking at her. In the blue light from the ribs, he noticed things. The faint spray of freckles across her nose. The dark shadows under her eyes, from too little sleep. The small scar on her chin.

He breathed in. He breathed out. He matched his breathing to hers, without really meaning to.

Slowly, the light came back. The ribs brightened. The map steadied. The hum smoothed out into one long, deep, even note.

A small smile touched the corner of Maeve's mouth. But she didn't let go of his hand. She shifted to sit on the floor beside his seat, with her back against the coral, and kept hold of it.

"Did you know," said Ben, from the back seat, in the very high voice of a person who has been trying to stay calm for a long time, "that at this depth, the pressure is like having an elephant standing on your thumb? I read that. I really, really wish I hadn't read that."

"Thanks, Ben," Aidan said.

"Any time."

"What happens if we have to get out?" Ben asked. "Hypothetically. At the bottom. With the elephant."

"Then you hold on to me," Maeve said. She didn't let go of Aidan's hand. "The sea lends air to Manannán's blood, if you ask it properly. I can pull a skin of it round myself, and round anyone I can get my hands on. It keeps the cold and the weight off, and you can talk through it, if you don't mind sounding like you're in a biscuit tin."

"Then what was the eleven minutes about?" Aidan asked. "Ben said he timed you."

"He did. That's me on my own, with nothing." She tipped her head back against the coral. "A skin costs. Holding one is like holding a door shut in a gale, and every extra person is another door. I don't waste it on a swimming pool."

"And down here?"

"Down here, it lasts as long as I do."

"I'm going to pretend you said forever," Ben said.

They went down into the midnight zone.

Outside the glass, it was completely dark. No sunlight reached this far down. The only light came from the ribs of the ship and the floating silver map. And in the dark, things drifted past. Jellyfish like glowing lampshades, trailing long threads of blue. A fish with a lantern hanging from its own head on a stalk, and a mouth full of teeth like needles. A long, pale eel that turned to look at them with eyes the size of saucers, and then slid away.

Ben made a small noise and closed his eyes.

"We're coming up on the trench," Maeve said, glancing at the console. "Water's getting colder."

Aidan could feel something besides the cold. The magic in the water around them had changed. It felt heavy, thick, stagnant, like the air in a room where somebody had been sick. He wanted to fill the silence. He wanted something else to think about.

"Tell me about your mother," he said quietly.

Maeve looked down at their hands. "I told you. I don't do the long version."

"You could do the medium version."

She was quiet for so long that he thought she wasn't going to answer.

"The Tide set up a nest in an old hospital in Belfast," she said at last. Her voice was flat and careful. "A breeding nest. For the shallows. They'd been taking people off the streets for months, to feed them. My mam led a strike team in to clear it. I was ten. She left me at the safehouse with a packet of custard creams and told me she'd be back by teatime." Her thumb moved, once, on the back of his hand. "She wasn't. None of them were. Cormac went in two days later, with a bigger team. He brought back her sword. It was in three pieces."

Aidan didn't say anything. He didn't think there was anything to say.

"I joined the Vanguard on my eighteenth birthday," Maeve went on. "Eamon signed my papers himself. He said I had my mother's arm." She looked out at the dark. "He didn't say anything about the rest of her."

"I'm sorry," Aidan said.

"Don't make it a thing."

"I'm not making it a thing. I'm just sorry."

She didn't answer. But she didn't let go of his hand, either.

"Can I tell you something?" Aidan said.

"You're going to anyway."

"When I was in the Ford. When that thing knocked me in, and the water was going over my head. For a second, I was eight again. I was in the dream, and I couldn't move." He swallowed. "And then I heard you. *Look up.* Like you were right there. That's how I got out."

Maeve turned her head and looked at him.

She looked at him for a long time, in the blue light, at the bottom of the sea, and she didn't say anything at all. Her face was very still. Then her thumb moved across his knuckles again, slowly, just once.

In the back seat, Ben cleared his throat. "I'm just going to look out this window," he announced to nobody. "At this fish. This is a very interesting fish. I'm extremely interested in it. Don't mind me."

A sharp, chiming sound broke the quiet. Maeve was on her feet and back in the front seat in a second.

The map over the pedestal had changed. Around the golden star, deep in the dark, dozens of tiny crimson lights had appeared. They were swarming. Moving.

"Fomorians," Maeve said. "A lot of them. They beat us here."

Aidan leaned forward and looked out through the front of the glass.

A sickly green glow was rising out of the abyss below them. As the Curragh sank deeper, it grew, and spread, and took shape, until it filled the whole floor of the trench. It was a city. An entire city, sprawling across the bottom of a vast black gash in the seabed. Towers of black stone and rusted iron

spiraled up out of it, crusted with pale coral. Bridges of corroded metal and something that looked horribly like bone spanned the gaps between them. Everything glowed faintly, sickly, green, like the light off rotten wood.

"Tír fo Thuinn," Maeve breathed.

Whatever light it had once held was long gone. The city had drowned and gone on living anyway.

At the edge of it, set apart from the rest, there was a great dome of black stone, and around its doors, fifty or more deep-water Fomorians were swarming. Unlike the gray things on land, they were sleek and dark and heavily muscled, built for the deep, with ridges of jagged fins down their spines. And they were tearing at the doors of the dome. The doors were sealed with lines of glowing silver light, and the Fomorians were clawing at the light and hammering at it with rusted weapons, and the light was holding.

"They're trying to break the vault," Maeve said, drawing her sword. "If they get in, they'll take the spear."

"We can't fight fifty of them," Aidan said.

"We're not going to fight fifty of them." Maeve reached over and turned a silver dial, and the glow of the ribs dimmed to almost nothing. The cabin went dark. The ship hung there in the blackness. "Ramming the front door is suicide. We need another way in."

Aidan was already digging in his bag. His father's notebook. He'd seen something in it, days ago, a sketch he hadn't understood. He flipped through the pages by the light of his own glowing fingertips, past the skull labeled *ugly*, past the brown bread recipe, until he found it.

It was a rough drawing of a dome, seen from the side. Squiggly lines for water. And at the bottom of the dome, at the base of the cliff it was built against, a small round door, with an arrow pointing at it and a note in his father's terrible handwriting.

*Back door. Maintenance hatch? Don't tell the Keeper.*

"Dad mapped this," Aidan said. His voice shook. "He was here. Or he found out about it, somehow. There's a hatch. At the bottom of the dome, by the cliff, where nobody'd look."

Maeve looked at the drawing. Then at him. "Your father," she said, "was a very strange man."

"Yeah," Aidan said. "Yeah, he was."

She turned the Curragh away from the swarm, dark and silent, and steered it down along the cliff face toward the base of the dome. There it was, exactly where the sketch said, half buried in coral: a round hatch of corroded metal, with a wheel in the middle of it and Sídhe knotwork carved around its rim. Maeve brought the ship gently to rest against it.

"It's sealed with the old magic," she said. "It'll want a pulse of light. A strong one. Push it through the hull, into the lock."

Aidan nodded. He gripped the armrests. He reached for the warm place in his chest, the way he'd done a dozen times now, and he pushed a hard surge of light down into the ship.

Too hard.

The hatch didn't open. Instead, every single silver rib of the Glass Curragh blazed at once, blinding white-gold, and the ship lit up the black water like a flare.

High above them, around the doors of the dome, fifty pale eyes turned, as one, and looked down.

"Oh no," said Ben.

"Change of plan," Maeve snarled, and hauled the dials around. The Curragh shot up off the hatch, up the cliff, and over the top of the swarm, scattering Fomorians like startled fish. Then it tipped its glass nose straight down at the great black dome of the vault.

"Everyone hold on to something," Maeve said.

"I've been holding on to something since Clare!" Ben yelled.

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# Chapter 19
# Breaking and Entering, Underwater

The Glass Curragh hit the roof of the vault at full speed.

Aidan kept his hands locked on the coral armrests and poured everything he had at his fingertips into the ship. Through the clear nose, the black dome rushed up at them. Fomorians scattered out of the way at the last second, like pigeons in front of a bus.

The impact was deafening. Manannán had built his boat to survive the bottom of the deepest trench in the world, and it turned out that made it a very, very good battering ram. The ancient stone of the dome had been soaking in the deep for centuries, and it gave way. The Curragh tore straight through it in an explosion of rock and water.

Inside, Aidan was thrown forward against his harness so hard that his teeth clacked together. Ben screamed. Maeve braced her boots against the console and roared something in Irish that was probably not a prayer.

They fell. Then they hit the floor of the vault with a scream of glass on stone, skidded, spun, and slammed sideways into a massive pillar, and stopped.

For three long seconds there was nothing but chaos. A torrent of black seawater came thundering down through the hole they'd punched in the roof, pouring in, flooding the floor, rising fast around the Curragh. Aidan watched it climb the glass and thought, very clearly, *well, that's it, then.*

Then the vault woke up.

Lines of silver light blazed across the walls, all the way up into the dark, a great web of glowing runes. A shimmering curtain of silver snapped into existence across the hole in the roof. The water cut off as if someone had turned off a tap. The flood around the ship began to drain away, gurgling, through grates in the floor that Aidan hadn't even noticed.

"Sídhe wards," Maeve said, breathing hard. "Still working. Thank the gods."

"Which gods?" Ben asked faintly.

"Any of them. All of them. Don't care."

Aidan looked out through the glass.

The vault was vast. Pillars of pale stone rose up into the dark, carved with spirals and knots. Racks of weapons lined the walls: swords and spears and shields and things he couldn't name, every one of them gleaming and perfect, untouched by rust or time. The light from the runes was cold and silver and very bright.

And picking themselves up off the wet stone floor, all around the ship, were Fomorians.

Dozens of them had been sucked in through the hole in the roof before the wards had closed it. They were the deep ones. Their skin was the color of midnight, slick and armored with thick, overlapping scales like the plates of a beetle. Jagged fins ran down their spines. They were getting up, shaking themselves, turning their single pale eyes toward the Curragh.

"Blow the hatch," Maeve said, unbuckling. "If they get round us, we're trapped in here."

Aidan glanced down at his bag. The leather bundle was in there. And something was wrong with it. Ever since they'd broken through the roof, the warm hum of his father's shard had gone strangely cold and quiet. He didn't have time to wonder why. He shoved the bag under his seat, where it'd be safest, and drew Finn's iron sword.

Maeve hit the release. The hatch above them blew outward with a pressurized crack.

She went up through it like a cork out of a bottle. She hit the stone floor rolling and came up in a low stance, her mother's sword blazing silver. The first Fomorian to reach her swung a rusted anchor on a chain at her head. She slid under it, spun, and drove her blade up into the soft joint under its arm. Black blood sprayed across the pale floor. It went down.

"Ben," Aidan said. "Stay with the ship."

"Stay with the ship," Ben repeated. "Yes. Good. That's a good job. I like that job."

Aidan climbed out of the hatch and dropped down onto the stone.

The moment his boots hit the floor, the whole room changed.

Every Fomorian in the vault stopped. The ones fighting Maeve stopped. The ones circling the Curragh stopped. Every single pale eye in that huge, cold room turned, at exactly the same moment, and locked onto Aidan.

*The sun-child,* said a voice in his head. Not one voice. Dozens of them, all speaking together, a scraping, grinding choir. *The key to the deep doors.*

"They're ignoring me!" Maeve shouted, parrying a blow from a Fomorian that was trying to shove past her to get to him. "Aidan! Get back to the ship!"

He didn't get back to the ship. There were already three of them between him and it.

He backed up, his boots slipping on the wet stone, and raised the iron sword in both hands. He reached for the warm place in his chest and pulled the light down his arms into the blade. The cold iron hissed, like a hot pan under a tap. Then it began to glow, a deep, steady gold, from the hilt to the tip.

Finn had been right. It didn't crack.

Three of the deep ones broke from the pack and came at him at once.

Aidan stepped hard to his left, the crossing, falling over with intent, and the first one's claws slashed through the air where his chest had been. He brought the glowing sword up and around in a heavy cut. The iron bit into its scales, and the light went in with it, and the creature howled and staggered sideways and crashed into the side of the Curragh. Inside the ship, Ben yelped.

The second one swung at his head. He ducked. He came up inside its reach, and the blade caught it across the thigh, and the light burst on impact, and its leg went out from under it.

The third one was faster. It got its claws into the shoulder of his jacket and yanked him off balance, and he would have gone down if a small brown goat hadn't come flying out of the Curragh's hatch, bounced off the creature's head with a noise like a coconut hitting a wall, and landed on its back.

"I left the ship!" Ben bleated, in goat. "I know! I'm sorry! I panicked!"

The Fomorian shook him off and roared. Aidan drove the sword into its chest. It burned gold from the inside and fell.

But there were too many.

For every one Maeve cut down, two more stepped over the body. They weren't fighting like animals. They were fighting with a horrible, cold discipline, like soldiers. They took their losses and kept coming, and slowly, steadily, they formed a wide semicircle around Aidan, and they started to push. They were herding him, driving him away from Maeve and Ben, step by step, deeper into the vault.

"Aidan!" Maeve was ten yards away, then fifteen, a blur of silver light and dark leather, bogged down by four of the huge deep ones. She couldn't get through.

Aidan backed up until the backs of his knees hit something solid. He risked a glance over his shoulder.

He'd been driven right into the center of the vault, up against a raised circular platform of white stone, a dais. And in the very middle of the dais stood a pedestal, carved with the same sunburst he'd seen over the door of the Hall of Lugh. He spun around, his heart leaping, expecting to see the Spear of Lugh, blazing on a cushion, waiting for him.

The pedestal was empty.

There was no spear. There was no spearhead. There was nothing.

Except, sitting in a shallow groove carved into the top of the stone, a small cylinder of sea-green crystal, no longer than his finger. It was glowing faintly. It was exactly like the core in the star-glass at Glendalough. *The core holds the chart.*

Aidan didn't think. He grabbed it, shoved it into the inside pocket of his jacket, and zipped the pocket shut.

Then the floor shook.

It was a heavy, rhythmic thudding, coming from the shadows at the far end of the vault. Footsteps. Enormous ones. The semicircle of Fomorians parted, silently, and every one of them bowed its head.

Something stepped out into the silver light of the runes.

It was bigger than any Fomorian Aidan had seen. Nine feet tall, at least. It wore armor of thick, overlapping plates of some dark metal, and even under the blazing runes there was a faint shadow clinging to it. Its face was sharp and angular, pale gray, like a shark's. And its eye wasn't milky, like the others. It was a deep, burning crimson.

*You are tiring, sun-child,* the warlord said. Its voice in Aidan's head was heavy and slow. *But to us you are merely a battery, little human.*

"Everyone keeps saying that," Aidan said. His voice shook. He kept the sword up. "Where's the spear?"

The warlord made a sound deep in its chest. It took Aidan a moment to understand that it was laughing.

*The Spear of Lugh? You truly believed we were trying to break into this dusty tomb to steal a weapon we cannot even touch?* It took a slow step forward, and the pressure that came off it was like the pressure of the deep itself, pressing on Aidan's ears and chest. *We knew the vault was empty. We have known for a hundred years. The Sídhe cowards moved the weapon long ago. But the old maps in your human archives still pointed here. So we merely rattled the locked door. Loudly. Year after year. And we waited for the guardians of the surface to send their key to open it.*

Aidan's stomach dropped through the floor.

*You might ask yourself why they have never broken it,* the Keeper had said.

*Everyone keeps asking you that,* Manannán had said. *And yet you haven't answered.*

They'd never broken in because they'd never needed to. What they wanted was him, down here at the bottom of the sea, a thousand miles from help, where the blood of the sun was weakest and the dark was strongest. And he'd come. He'd come right to them, and lit himself up like a lighthouse on the way in.

*And we were told when you would come,* the warlord added. *To the very hour.*

*Told?* Aidan thought. *Told by who?*

The warlord's crimson eye flicked down, just for a second, to Aidan's chest. To the silver brooch pinned on the front of his jacket. Something moved across its terrible face that looked horribly like satisfaction.

Then the eye came back up.

Aidan pressed his arm tight against his jacket, against the hard shape of the crystal in his inside pocket. The whole thing had been a trap. But they didn't know what he'd just taken. They didn't know he had the next piece of the map.

"I'm not opening anything for you," he said.

*You do not have a choice.*

The warlord moved.

It crossed the twenty feet between them in a single blurring step. Aidan swung the glowing sword with everything he had left, aiming straight for its neck.

The warlord raised one huge armored hand, almost lazily, and caught the blazing blade in its fist.

The light flared. It seared the creature's palm, and Aidan smelled burning, but the warlord didn't even flinch. It closed its fingers. With a slow, casual, brutal twist of its wrist, it snapped Finn's cold iron sword into three jagged pieces.

Aidan stumbled backward, holding nothing but a broken hilt.

Before he could reach for the light, the warlord's other hand shot out and closed around his throat.

It lifted him off the floor like he was nothing. It pinned his back against the cold stone of the empty pedestal. Aidan choked and kicked and clawed at the scaled fingers crushing his windpipe. The light flared out of his skin in desperate bursts, scorching the warlord's armor, but the grip only tightened. Black spots swam in front of his eyes.

"*Aidan!*"

Through the darkness creeping in at the edge of his vision, he saw Maeve. She'd broken through. She was running at the warlord with her sword raised high over her head, her face twisted with fury, and the goat was right behind her, head down, charging.

*Hold them,* the warlord said, without even turning around.

A dozen deep ones fell on Maeve and Ben at once. They went down under a mountain of black scales and rusted iron. Aidan heard Maeve shouting. He

heard Ben bleating. Then the roaring of his own blood in his ears drowned everything out.

The warlord leaned in close. Its crimson eye filled the whole world.

*Balor's Heir will be very pleased,* it whispered, inside his head. *The seals of the deep prisons will shatter. And your blood will drown the world.*

It raised its other arm. Wrapped around the wrist was a length of heavy, rusted anchor chain.

The chain came down on the side of Aidan's head.

Pain flashed through his head. Then he lost the room, Maeve's voice, everything.

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# Chapter 20
# A Cell with a Terrible View

This time, the water wasn't a dream.

Aidan floated in a dark with no light in it and no sound. The weight of the deep pressed in from every side. It squeezed his ribs. It pushed the last of the air out of his lungs. He waited for the panic. The burning in his chest. The thrashing, drowning terror that had chased him out of sleep every week for ten years.

It didn't come.

Instead, very faintly, he felt something in the middle of his back. Flat and steady. Holding him up.

And then the dark parted.

A single speck of light kindled far away in the black, and grew, and swelled, until it was a blazing golden sun, and in the heart of the sun stood a figure Aidan had never met. He was impossibly tall, armored in something that seemed to be made of morning light, and the spear in his hand was humming.

Aidan knew him. He knew him the way you know a face from a dream you've had all your life.

*Lugh of the Long Arm.*

"They told you that you bleed light into the dark," the figure said. His voice was warm and deep. "Let them. Light is the one thing the dark cannot drown."

"They keep calling me a battery," Aidan heard himself say.

Something like a smile moved in the light. "A battery is spent. A battery is used. You were not made to be used." The spear turned slowly in his hand. "You were made to *learn*. Watch, son of my sons. Watch everything. Learn it. Then do it better. That is the whole of what I am." The light grew brighter. "Do not let the water put out the fire. The spark is passed."

Aidan reached out. His own hand was glowing, faintly, with an answering heat.

Before their fingers could touch, a rusted iron chain lashed out of the void, wrapped around his wrist, and yanked him backward into the dark.

The sun shattered.

Aidan slammed back into his body with a gasp that tore at his throat.

He tasted copper and old salt. The side of his head was a single point of fire where the anchor chain had caught him, and when he tried to open his eyes, the world swam in doubled, sickening shapes. He was moving. Being dragged. Slick stone scraped his knees and shins. His arms were stretched painfully out in front of him, and his wrists were locked in something heavy and impossibly cold.

He reached for the light. It was there, buried down under his ribs. But every time he tried to push it outward, a spike of freezing pain drove into both wrists, and it went out.

He groaned. Something heavy and wet struck him in the ribs.

*The sun-child wakes,* hissed the scraping choir in his head. *Keep him bound. The prince demands the battery intact.*

Aidan forced his eyes to focus.

He wasn't drowning, which was the first surprise. A thin, wobbling film of air clung to him from head to foot, like the skin on boiled milk, and swelled into a bubble around his head and shoulders. It was a copy of Sídhe work, he guessed, like the skins Maeve had described in the Curragh, but a bad one, a corrupted one, and it stank of rotting seaweed and old blood. But it held off the cold and the crushing weight of the water, and it was air. They were keeping him alive. Of course they were. They needed his blood.

Through the warped skin of the bubble, he could see his captors. Two of the sleek, black-scaled deep ones were swimming ahead of him, holding the chains that ran back to his wrists, towing him through the dark water like a barge. They didn't even seem to notice his weight.

Panic rose in him, cold and sharp. He twisted his neck against the pain in his skull and looked back behind him into the black.

"Maeve," he croaked. "Ben."

There was nothing behind him but dark water.

The last thing he remembered was the warlord saying *Hold them*, and Maeve and the goat vanishing under a mountain of black scales and rusted iron.

A sick knot formed in his stomach. If they'd died because of him, because he'd lit the ship up like a Christmas tree, because he'd walked right into a trap that everyone had warned him about—

*No.*

Maeve had survived this war her whole life. She was the best of Manannán's line in three hundred years, and this was the sea. Her sea. And Ben was a púca, and a púca was the hardest thing in the world to pin down, and he'd once survived eating a tin can. They wouldn't go down that easily.

He strained to look back again, searching the dark for Maeve's silver blade.

The stone under him changed from smooth and pale to jagged and black. The cold black of the deep gave way to that sickly green glow. Then the two warriors dragged him over the lip of an underwater cliff, and Aidan forgot how to breathe.

Tír fo Thuinn.

From the Curragh, it had been a glow and a shape. Now he was inside it.

The city spilled down the walls of a colossal trench, tier below tier below tier, like a vast stadium built for something that had never been human. Towers of black glassy stone and rusted iron jutted up out of it, crusted with pale coral and veined with pulsing green moss. Bridges spanned chasms with no bottom, some of them built of corroded silver that must once have been beautiful, and some of them built of bones. Huge bones. Ribs as long as buses. The spines of things that had died down here before there were any people up above to know about it.

In Higgins's lectures, this place had been the Otherworld. Orchards and music beneath the sea. Whatever it had been once, it belonged to the Fomorians now.

And it was full.

Thousands of them lined the streets and the balconies and the bridges. Gray ones from the shallows, black-scaled ones from the deep, lean ones that ran on all fours, and other things, too, things Aidan didn't have names for and hoped he never would. There was a market, of sorts, in a square they

dragged him through. Stalls built from the hulls of wrecked ships. Things for sale that had come down from the surface over the centuries. A ship's bell. A rusted bicycle. A barnacle-crusted crate that, as far as Aidan could tell, was full of very old packets of Tayto.

*Of course*, he thought hysterically. *Of course there are Tayto at the bottom of the sea.*

Every single one of them turned to look at him as he passed.

The clicking started small and spread until it was a roar on every side, like a million teeth chattering. They knew what he was. They could smell it on him. The old blood. The sun that had driven them down into this cold dark thousands of years ago and kept them there.

Aidan had never felt so small in his life.

In the middle of the city, at the bottom of the trench, a statue rose up out of the dark. It was a giant, carved from black stone, a hundred feet tall at least, sitting on a throne with its huge hands resting on its knees. It had one eye, in the middle of its forehead. The eye was closed, a great carved lid of stone.

All around the base of the statue, Fomorians were kneeling.

*Balor,* Aidan thought, and his skin crawled.

He thought, for a second, of his father doing the giant's voice in the dark. *Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a Byrne-y one.* It had been a stupid joke. Aidan had laughed every single time.

Then, staring up at that closed stone eye, the panic in him began to turn into something else.

Anger.

This was the empire that had killed Maeve's mother. This was the dark his father had driven up to Horn Head to face alone. They'd been down here all this time, nursing their grudge, building their bone bridges, waiting to come up and drown the world. And they thought they'd won.

Aidan stopped fighting the chains. He let his body go limp. Let them think he was broken. Let them think the blow to his head had put out his fire.

And he watched. He watched the city slide past, and he memorized it, every turn, every bridge, every tower, the way he memorized a map before an

exam. *Watch everything. Learn it.*

The warriors hauled him away from the crowds, toward a squat, windowless fortress of solid basalt at the edge of a great volcanic crater at the city's heart. The water there was hotter, and thick, and the magic in it was so stagnant he could taste it. They dragged him in through a gate and down a long spiral stair cut into the rock, deeper and deeper, until the green glow died behind them. Somewhere ahead, a stone door ground open.

They threw him through it.

He hit a damp, freezing stone floor, hard, and scraped his cheek. The bubble around his head popped, and he gasped, because there was air in here. Real air, cold and stale. A dry cell, at the bottom of the sea.

Before he could push himself up, the two Fomorians were on him. One pinned his shoulders with a heavy scaled foot. The other grabbed his wrists. Aidan thrashed and kicked, his plan to play dead completely forgotten, and his boot connected with an armored shin, and it was like kicking a wall.

*Hold the battery still.*

Something heavy and cold snapped shut around his right wrist with a brutal metallic clack. Then his left. The foot lifted. The stone door slammed shut, and the cell went completely dark and silent.

Aidan pushed himself up until he was sitting with his back against the cold, wet wall. He pulled his hands toward his chest. The chains went taut, anchored somewhere in the rock behind him.

Then the iron came alive.

The gauntlets bit into his wrists, icy and sharp. The warmth beneath his ribs weakened. They were draining him.

Panic flared, hot and blinding. Aidan fought back without thinking. He slammed a huge surge of light into the metal to shatter it, the way he'd blasted the scout in the alley.

The gauntlets flared a sick, corrupted crimson. They swallowed the burst whole. And then they punished him for it, with a jolt of cold that went through his whole body like he'd been dropped into an ice bath, and left him gasping on the floor.

*Stop*, he told himself. *Stop. Think.*

*Fear burns dirty,* Cormac had said, in the muddy yard behind the farmhouse. *You need intent.*

He made himself breathe. In for four. Out for four. He listened for the gulls over Horn Head, and he couldn't hear them, but he pretended he could.

Then, very carefully, he made a light.

It was the smallest light he could make, a single golden spark, floating just above the palm of his chained right hand, no bigger than a candle flame. The gauntlets felt it and began to drink, but it was so small that they couldn't take it all at once, and for a few seconds, he could see.

He saw the cell. It was small and round and carved out of the black rock. The walls were wet and slick and furred with pale green slime.

And they were covered in marks.

Scratches. Hundreds and hundreds of them, in neat rows, cut into the stone. Little vertical lines, in groups of five, with a slash through each group. A tally. Somebody had been counting days in here. Somebody had been counting for a very long time.

Aidan's eyes moved along the rows. He couldn't help it. He counted the groups in one row and estimated the rows. Two thousand marks, at least, and they kept going, all the way around the curve of the wall and into the dark.

And in the middle of the tally, scratched into the stone at about the height of a seated man's head, there was a drawing.

It was a skull. A huge, lumpy skull, with one great empty socket in the middle of its forehead.

Underneath it, in letters that were scratched and crooked but which Aidan would have known anywhere in the world, there was a single word.

*UGLY.*

The little spark of light in his palm went out.

He sat in the dark with his heart slamming against his ribs. He didn't breathe. He didn't move. He lit the spark again, with shaking hands, and the gauntlets bit and drank, and he didn't care. He held the light up as high as the chain would let him and looked at the wall again.

Beside the skull, scratched over and over, again and again, so many times that the letters had worn into deep grooves in the rock, were three names.

*SIOBHÁN. AIDAN. LIAM.*

And below them, two letters. *D.B.*

The light went out again. This time, Aidan let it.

He sat there in the black at the bottom of the sea, chained to a wall in his father's prison cell, and for a while, he couldn't do anything at all.

Ten years. *We found his blood on the rocks below the cliffs. A lot of it.* Ten years of searches and silence and an empty chair at the dinner table. And his father had been here. Down here, in the dark, counting days, scratching his family's names into a wall so he wouldn't forget them.

*How long?* The tally went on past two thousand. Was that all of it? Was it more? Had the marks stopped because his father had stopped, or because they'd taken him somewhere else? He thought about the scratches, sharp-edged in the light. Some of them hadn't had any slime growing in them at all.

Some of them had looked new.

*And one you mourned will call from where the drowned are bound.*

Aidan put his chained hands over his face.

He let himself have one minute. He counted it. Sixty seconds, in the dark, with his shoulders shaking and nobody to see.

Then he wiped his face on his sleeve and lowered his hands.

*Watch everything,* Lugh had said. *Learn it. Then do it better.*

His father wasn't here. He looked at the door. He needed to understand the trap before he could break it.

So he leaned his head back against the stone, beside his father's drawing. He closed his eyes against the dark. He tuned out the throbbing in his skull and the crushing weight of the ocean overhead.

And he focused on the freezing iron clamped around his wrists. On the teeth. On the pull. He sent the tiniest thread of light into it, and he felt it drink, and he let it, and paid attention. He began to count his own heartbeats, slowly, in the dark.

And he waited for the iron to breathe.

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# Chapter 21
# Never Lie Down on a Fomorian Altar

Time didn't mean anything in the cell. There was no light and no sound and no way to tell an hour from a day. There was only the cold, and the iron, and the pull.

So Aidan studied the pull.

He fed a sliver of light into his right wrist. The gauntlet woke up and bit down and drank, and it hurt, a deep, aching cold like toothache in his bones. He gritted his teeth and held on. He held the light steady and paid attention, the way he'd watched Maeve's shoulder in the farmyard, the way he'd listened to the hum of the grove.

And slowly, he found it.

The enchantment *breathed*. There was a rhythm to it, like a tide going in and out. It drew, hard, for about four heartbeats. And then, for a fraction of a second, it paused. A tiny intake. A gap, while it gathered itself before the next draw.

It was built to feed on panic. Panic was a flood. It never stopped, and it never noticed the gaps.

But Aidan noticed gaps for a living.

He cut off the light and let the iron go quiet. He sat shivering in the black and let himself hope.

*If I push into the gap, he thought, I'll fill it. And it'll take the whole lot in one gulp, and it won't be able to stop.*

He didn't know if it would work. He thought it might kill him if it didn't. He decided not to think about that part.

He just needed the right moment.

The moment came with a grinding rumble, as the stone door scraped open and sickly green light spilled into the cell.

The warlord ducked in through the doorway, followed by two armored guards. Its crimson eye found him at once. It was carrying a rusted iron key as long as Aidan's forearm.

*The tide turns,* it said. *It is time, sun-child.*

Aidan didn't fight as the warlord unlocked the bolts that pinned his chains to the wall. He let his head hang. He let his shoulders slump. He wanted them to think he was finished. And he wanted to see the altar. He wanted to understand the trap the prince had built, before he tried to break it.

The chains dropped. His arms fell. The blood rushed back into his numb hands so painfully that he cried out, and he didn't have to fake it. The guards grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him upright. They left the gauntlets on his wrists. At the doorway, the bubble of air closed around his head again.

As they dragged him out, he looked back once at the wall. At the skull, and the word *UGLY*, and the three names.

*I'm coming back,* he told them. *I don't know how. But I am.*

They hauled him up the spiral stair and out into the open, onto a ledge high above the heart of the city. Below him, Tír fo Thuinn spread across the floor of the trench, and on every street and balcony and bridge, thousands of Fomorians had gathered. The clicking started the moment they saw him. It rose and rose, ravenous, until the water itself seemed to shake with it.

Aidan kept his chin up. He thought about Maeve, kneeling on the glass floor of the Curragh. *You carry the fire of the sun. The dark should be terrified of you.* He made himself look at them. He memorized them, too.

The guards dragged him down into the crater.

It was a vast bowl of black volcanic rock, and the heat inside it was incredible. At the very center was a vent, a ragged hole in the seabed, and scalding water surged out of it, lit from below with a deep red-orange glow, like the open door of a furnace. The water in the crater was so hot that the bubble around Aidan's head fogged, and the film over the rest of him pulled tight and hot, like cling film on a plate fresh out of the microwave. It kept the scalding water off his skin. It didn't keep the heat out.

Hanging over the vent, on four thick chains of blackened, corroded silver, was an altar.

It was a slab of polished obsidian, big enough to lay a man on, with circular hollows carved into it at the ends of two long grooves. And underneath it, twisting down into the boiling heart of the vent, was a machine. It was a tangle of ancient Sídhe crystals, cracked and stained, wired together with rusted Fomorian iron, coiling down into the red glow like the roots of some horrible tree.

Aidan looked at it, and he understood it, the way he understood a diagram in a textbook.

It was a cannon. The volcano was the barrel. They'd drain the light out of him through the altar, and the machine would feed it down into the vent, and the pressure of the volcano would amplify it and fire it upward, a thousand times stronger, all the way to the surface. Straight at the seals.

*They're going to shoot me at the sky,* he thought. *They're going to turn me into a bullet.*

A narrow bridge of black stone led out across the boiling water to the altar. The guards dragged him onto it.

And at the end of the bridge, waiting beside the altar, stood Balor's Heir.

He wasn't what Aidan had expected. Aidan had expected something huge. A monster. Something like the warlord, but worse. But the prince of the deep was slender and pale and almost beautiful. He wore long robes of some translucent stuff that caught the red light of the vent and shimmered. His black hair was very long, and it drifted around his shoulders in the hot current. His eyes were black from edge to edge.

He had two of them.

Somehow, that was worse.

Beside him stood a withered, hunched Fomorian in rags, older than anything Aidan had ever seen, its skin hanging off it in gray folds. It was holding a long, jagged dagger of black volcanic glass.

"Cousin," said the prince.

His voice was out loud, not in Aidan's head. It was soft and cultured and quiet, and it carried perfectly through the water.

"Please don't call me that," Aidan said.

"But we are family, you and I. Distantly." The prince smiled. It was a lovely smile, and Aidan didn't trust it at all. "Your ancestor killed my grandfather. That's practically a christening, in our family."

"Your grandfather's dead," Aidan said. "Lugh put a spear through his eye."

"Did he?" The prince tilted his head, and his black hair drifted. "My grandfather is not quite as dead as your songs say, cousin. Nothing down here is." He turned his black eyes up toward the statue at the center of the city, the giant with its great stone eye closed. "Not yet."

Aidan went cold.

"Where's my father?" he said.

For the first time, something flickered in the prince's face. Interest. Amusement.

"Ah. You found the room." He looked genuinely pleased. "He was a guest of ours for a long time. A very stubborn man. Very rude. He drew pictures on the walls." He waved one pale hand at the altar. "Ask me again when you're lying down."

The guards forced Aidan down onto the obsidian.

It was burning hot. They threw him onto his back and pulled his arms out wide, and they slammed the gauntlets on his wrists down into the circular hollows at the ends of the grooves. There was a loud mechanical click. Something locked. He was part of the machine.

The prince stepped back and raised both his hands.

Across the whole of the city, the clicking stopped.

In the silence, the prince turned to the withered priest and nodded once.

"Connect it," he said.

Beneath the altar, the Sídhe crystals flared a sick, corrupted crimson.

The pull hit Aidan all at once.

In the cell, the gauntlets had been sipping. This was the whole machine, drinking all at once, and it locked on to the light in his chest and *heaved*, like a magnet ripping iron filings out of sand. He felt the warmth tearing loose inside him. He felt it pouring out of him, down his arms, into the

gauntlets, into the stone, down into the boiling dark. His vision went red at the edges.

The old priest began to chant in the grinding language of the deep. It raised the glass dagger over Aidan's heart.

*Listen,* Aidan told himself. *Don't fight it. Listen.*

He shut his eyes. He shut out the heat and the pain and the priest and the dagger. He listened to the machine, the way he'd listened to the grove.

And there it was. It was bigger, and faster, and much stronger than in the cell. But it was the same pattern. It drew. It drew. It drew. And then, for a fraction of a heartbeat, it paused, to send the light down into the vent.

An intake. A gap.

The dagger started down.

Aidan went past his fear, past even the warm place in his chest, down to something he hadn't known was there until right now. Underneath the warmth, there was anger. Old anger. Ten years of it. An empty chair at a dinner table. Three names scratched into a wall. A girl waiting at a safehouse with a packet of custard creams.

He took all of it, and he forged it into a single, white-hot spike of light.

And as the machine drew its breath, he pushed.

Everything went into the gap at once. He felt it go. It went down through the gauntlets and into the stone and into the crystals, a whole sun's worth of blazing pure gold, and the corrupted machine took it all in one gulp, the way it had been built to, and couldn't stop.

The crystals beneath the altar screamed. It was the high, terrible sound of glass cracking under pressure.

*The current is reversing!* bellowed the warlord, from the edge of the crater.

The prince took a step back. For the first time, his perfect calm cracked. Sparks were spitting from the rusted iron pipes. "Kill him!" he shouted. "Cut his heart out! *Now!*"

The old priest lunged with the dagger.

Aidan screamed and poured in more. He felt the heat climbing through him, scorching his veins, like his blood had been swapped for molten metal. He

didn't stop.

The Sídhe crystals exploded.

A shockwave of gold burst up from the underside of the altar and blew the machine to pieces. Rusted iron pipes flew in every direction. The blast caught the old priest full in the chest and threw it backward off the bridge, dagger and all, down into the boiling red mouth of the vent.

The gauntlets on Aidan's wrists shattered.

He rolled sideways off the altar a split second before a slab of falling rock smashed down on the place where he'd been lying. He hit the stone bridge hard. His forearms were covered in angry red burns from wrist to elbow. His whole body was shaking.

But he was free.

The crater fell into chaos. A plume of scalding water shot out of the vent and swept across the crowded terraces, and the Fomorians shrieked and scattered. The chains holding the altar groaned.

At the end of the bridge, Balor's Heir stood with his robes singed and his black hair streaming, staring at Aidan. His calm had turned to fury. He raised both pale hands, and the water around them darkened and thickened and began to spin, gathering into a black sphere of crushing, churning pressure.

Aidan tried to get up. His legs wouldn't work. He reached for the light, and there was nothing there. The warm place in his chest had been scraped down to bare stone.

*So this is it,* he thought.

Then he heard the hooves.

It was a sound like thunder rolling across the floor of the trench, and it was coming closer, fast. Fomorians on the far side of the crater were being flung aside like skittles. And down through the churning water, onto the narrow black bridge, at a full gallop, came a horse.

It was enormous. It was coal black from nose to tail, with a wild, tangled mane and eyes that burned a horrible, glorious yellow, and it was breathing out great clouds of bubbles through its nostrils like an angry dragon. It was

the most terrifying thing Aidan had seen all week, and he had seen a lot of things.

And riding on its back, with her mother's sword blazing silver in her hand, was Maeve.

The horse thundered straight at the prince. The prince threw his black sphere at it. Maeve cut the sphere in half with her sword, and it burst in a harmless wash of bubbles, and the horse reared up and came down with both its front hooves on the bridge so hard that the prince was thrown backward off his feet.

Maeve swung down off its back and landed in a crouch on the bridge, right between Aidan and the prince. She glanced back over her shoulder at him. There was blood on her face and her armor was torn in three places, and she was grinning.

"You missed the extraction window, college boy," she said.

She reached back and pressed her palm flat against his chest. The Fomorians' rotten bubble burst, and a skin of clean, cold air closed over him in its place, with the same faint shimmer that clung to her and to the horse. It smelled of nothing but salt.

Aidan stared up at her. Then he stared at the horse.

The horse stared back at him with its terrible yellow eyes. It snorted out a cloud of bubbles.

"Never," the horse said, in Ben's voice, "doing. This. Again."

"How did you—" Aidan started.

"They forgot whose sea this is," Maeve said. "And Ben bit one. Very hard. In a delicate place." She pulled something off her shoulder and tossed it down beside him. It was his canvas bag, with the rowan staff tucked through its strap. "And you left this in the boat."

Aidan grabbed it. Through the canvas, he could feel the leather bundle, and the shard inside it was warm again. His father's shard. He almost laughed. He slung the strap over his head. The shard settled against his hip, and its heat came through the canvas like the warmth off a range in a cold kitchen. It wasn't much. But the scraped-out place under his ribs began, slowly, to fill.

Then he put his hand on the hot black stone of the bridge and pushed himself to his feet. His legs shook. His arms were on fire. But when he called the light, it came, gold and steady, into his blistered palms.

He stepped up beside Maeve, shoulder to shoulder, facing the prince and the screaming city.

"Sorry," he said. "I got held up. Can we go home now?"

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# Chapter 22
# The Road Under the Sea Starts Leaking

The prince picked himself up off the bridge.

He rose slowly and straightened his robes. A dark, oily stain was spreading across his shoulder where he'd struck the bridge. He didn't seem to notice. His black eyes were fixed on Aidan.

"You cannot leave the Abyssal Fracture, cousin," he said softly. His voice carried over the roar of the vent. "There is no way up. The surface is two thousand fathoms over your head. And your blood belongs to the deep."

"Yeah," Aidan said. "I've been getting that a lot."

The prince raised his hands. The scalding water around them shuddered, and darkened, and drew itself together into a long, jagged lance of black, compressed sea, so dense it seemed to bend the red light around it.

He threw it straight at Aidan's chest.

There was no time to dodge. There was no time to think. Aidan did the only thing he could, which was plant his feet on the bridge and throw his hands up in front of him.

He'd never made a shield before. He had no idea if it was even possible.

It turned out that it was.

A wall of solid golden light burst out of his palms, flat and wide and shining. The black lance hit it and simply stopped existing. It boiled away into a huge, hissing cloud of steam, and the shock of the collision rolled back along the bridge and knocked the prince off his feet a second time.

Aidan stared at his own hands. "Okay," he said, slightly hysterically. "Okay. I can do that. Apparently I can do that."

"Do it again later," Maeve said. "Run now."

The steam was everywhere, white and thick, filling the crater. Through it, Aidan saw thousands of pale eyes, all over the terraces, all turning toward

the bridge. The clicking rose into a shriek. And then the whole city came at them.

They poured down the tiered cliffs. They streamed across the bone bridges. They came out of the steam in their hundreds, the gray ones and the black-scaled ones and the ones that ran on all fours, and every one of them was coming for Aidan.

Maeve met the first wave on the bridge.

She was incredible. Aidan had seen her fight before, but he'd never seen her fight like this, in her own element, in the sea. She moved through the water like she was part of it, her mother's sword a blur of silver, and she didn't seem to waste a single movement. A deep one swung a rusted blade at her and she just wasn't there anymore. Another lunged with its claws and she ducked and turned and the creature went off the edge of the bridge into the boiling vent.

Aidan didn't have a sword anymore. So he used what he had.

A bloated, wobbling thing with a mouth full of needle teeth dropped onto the bridge in front of him from a ledge above. He stepped inside its reach before he'd even thought about it, ducked its arm, and drove his glowing palm into its chest. The creature flew backward into a whole squad of warriors charging behind it, and they all went down in a heap of scales and flailing limbs.

The black horse reared up beside him and brought its hooves down on another one with a crunch.

"*Where*," it shouted, in Ben's voice, "are we *going*?"

It was a fair question. The Curragh was lying smashed against a pillar in the vault. They were at the bottom of the sea, in the middle of an enemy city, with the whole population trying to kill them.

And then Aidan remembered.

When they'd dragged him in, he'd watched. He'd memorized the city, every turn, the way he memorized a map before an exam. And on the way to the prison, in a narrow alley just behind the fortress, he'd seen something. He hadn't known what it was at the time. He'd just noticed it, the way he noticed everything. A round stone in the floor of the alley, half buried in coral. And under the coral, very faint, the lines of a Celtic knot.

*This city was the Sídhe's once,* the Keeper had said. *A city of light.*

And the Sídhe built roads between all their places.

"This way!" Aidan yelled. "Behind the prison! There's a door!"

They ran. Maeve guarded the rear, walking backward, her sword flickering. Ben charged ahead, a horse-shaped battering ram, scattering Fomorians out of the way. Aidan ran between them, throwing light at anything that got close, his burned arms screaming every time he did it.

They came off the bridge and into the streets. The city was a maze, all twisting alleys and black towers and terrible bone archways, but Aidan knew the way. He'd watched it go past him once, and once was enough. Left at the market with the Tayto. Under the bridge made of ribs. Past the gate of the fortress, and into the narrow alley behind it.

There it was. The round stone in the floor. The knot under the coral.

Three black-scaled warriors dropped into the alley from the walls above, landing between them and the hatch.

Ben didn't even slow down. He put his head down and went through them at a gallop. Two went flying. The third tried to grab the horse's mane, and Aidan hit it with a burst of gold that knocked it flat. Maeve finished it.

"It's sealed," Aidan said, dropping to his knees by the stone, scraping at the coral with his fingers. "I can't—"

"It wants blood. Manannán's blood. Not yours." Maeve skidded to her knees beside him. She pulled the knife from her boot and drew it across the palm of her hand without hesitating, as if it were nothing, and pressed her bleeding hand flat against the center of the knot. She closed her eyes. She spoke, low and quick, in a language Aidan had never heard before. It didn't sound like Irish. It sounded like rain on the sea.

For a moment, nothing happened. At the end of the alley, the shrieking of the pack got louder.

"Maeve," Aidan said.

"I know."

Silver light bloomed beneath the coral.

Somewhere deep inside the stone, heavy locks clicked open, one after another, *thunk*, *thunk*, *thunk*. Aidan grabbed the edge of the round stone

with both hands and heaved, and it came up, and under it was a shaft plunging straight down into the rock, with old rungs set into the side.

"Go!" Maeve shouted.

There was a pop behind him. Ben was a person again, swaying on his human feet, gray-faced and sweating. "I'm going to sleep," he gasped, "for a *week*," and he half climbed, half fell into the shaft.

Aidan went down after him, as fast as his burned arms allowed. Maeve came last. At the top of the shaft, she turned, and looked out at the first wave of Fomorians coming around the corner of the alley, and Aidan heard her say something to them in Irish that was definitely not *goodbye*. Then she dropped into the shaft and dragged the stone back into place over her head.

The noise of the city cut off.

At the bottom of the shaft, it was silent, apart from dripping water and the three of them breathing like they'd run a marathon. Aidan summoned a soft glow into his palm and held it up.

They were standing in a tunnel. A narrow, perfectly round tunnel, paved with smooth white stone, lit from inside the walls. It was exactly like the road under the grove.

"A silver road," Aidan breathed.

"An old one," Maeve said, wiping blood off her forehead with the back of her hand. "Very old. If it still goes anywhere, it'll go up. To a gate. To the surface."

"*If*," said Ben, from the floor, where he was lying flat on his back.

Maeve pulled him to his feet. "If."

It went somewhere. But it wasn't easy.

The road beneath the sea wasn't like the one under the grove. It was dimmer and colder, and the light in the walls kept flickering, like a bulb about to go. Aidan quickly realized why. Nobody had fed it for centuries. It was running on the very last scraps of its magic, and the moment they started walking, it started drawing on him to keep itself open. He could feel it, a steady pull on the light in his chest.

So he held the light. He held it steady, from the core, not the nerves, the way Maeve had drilled into him in Cormac's yard, and he walked, and the road stayed open around them.

For a while, it was quiet.

Then the floor began to shake.

It was a heavy, rhythmic pounding, coming from far behind them, back down the tunnel. And under it, faint at first, then louder, that horrible clicking.

"They're through the hatch," Maeve said.

"Run," Aidan said.

They ran. Aidan's light flared brighter as he pushed, throwing their shadows out ahead of them along the endless white curve of the road. Behind them, the dark thickened, and then the Fomorians poured into the tunnel, black scales and rusted iron and jagged fins, filling it wall to wall. They moved horribly fast.

"They're gaining!" Ben yelled.

And Maeve stopped.

She just stopped, in the middle of the road, and turned around to face them, and raised her sword. Her boots set. Her shoulders dropped. Aidan knew that stance. He'd seen it in the alley, on the first night.

"Maeve, *no*!"

"I'll buy you time!" she shouted back, without turning around. "Get to the gate! Get it open!"

"I'm not leaving you—"

"*Aidan.*" Her voice cracked like a whip. "If you stop feeding this road, it closes. With all three of us in it. *Go!*"

Before he could argue, the walls of the tunnel groaned.

It was a deep, grinding sound, and it came from all around them. The road had never been meant to carry an army. Whatever ancient magic held it together was straining, and failing, and as Aidan watched, a fine black crack zigzagged across the curved white ceiling over their heads. Black seawater began to seep through it in drops. They hissed where they hit the floor.

Ben grabbed Aidan by the shoulder of his jacket and pulled. "If the sea comes in," he panted, "we're paste. All of us. Her too. Come *on*."

Aidan turned and ran.

He hated it. He hated every single step. Behind him, he heard steel ringing on scale. He heard the wet shrieks of dying Fomorians, one after another after another, and under them, Maeve's breathing, ragged and furious. He couldn't let those sounds stop.

So he moved faster. He poured light into the road until it blazed around him, so bright the cracks in the ceiling glowed.

"There!" Ben gasped.

At the very end of the tunnel stood an arch of mother-of-pearl, set into the solid rock. It was exactly like the gate in the hall under the lake, its pillars studded with crystals. But these crystals were dark. Dead.

Aidan reached it and slammed both palms against the pillars. "*Open!*"

Nothing.

He pushed light into them, as much as he could. The crystals stayed dark. He could feel the deep pressing back against him, all that cold black water out there on the other side of the rock, smothering the gate the way the gauntlets had smothered him in the cell. The old headache came back behind his eyes.

Lugh had killed a king with a single cast across a battlefield, if Higgins's sources could be trusted.

Aidan only needed to open a door.

He put himself into it, every stubborn, furious, frightened, Donegal-born inch of him. Every night of the dream. Every year of the empty chair. *Watch. Learn. Then do it better.*

The crystals screamed. It was a high, musical, ringing sound, like someone running a wet finger around the rim of a thousand glasses at once. Then they flared to life, one after another up the pillars, a brilliant sea-green, and the stone between them dissolved into a swirling vortex of silver and green light.

"It's open!" Aidan shouted. "*Maeve! It's open!*"

He turned back.

Fifty yards down the tunnel, Maeve was surrounded. Her armor was torn half off her. She was bleeding badly from a long gash across her shoulder. She was still fighting, her silver sword a constant, flickering blur, but the black-scaled warriors were pressing her backward step by step, by sheer weight of numbers, and there were more of them than Aidan could count.

"Go," Ben said. "Aidan, go through, I'll—"

Aidan was already running back down the tunnel.

He didn't have a sword, and he didn't have a plan.

He let go. Everything he'd been holding back, everything he'd been keeping steady and careful and controlled, he let it all go at once. Golden light erupted from his whole body, from his hands and his arms and his chest and his eyes, and for a second he was a small, furious sun. He hit the back of the Fomorian pack, and the blast threw them against the walls of the tunnel, and their rusted armor shattered.

He grabbed Maeve by her uninjured arm and hauled her backward.

"You don't have to be fearless all the time!" he yelled at her, over the shrieking.

She stared at him. Her face was white and bloody, and her green eyes were huge. And then, of all the things in the world, she laughed. A breathless, cracked little laugh.

"You're an idiot, college boy," she panted.

For one second, in the middle of all of it, she smiled at him like none of this was happening at all.

"*Through the gate! Now!*" Ben roared.

They ran for the arch.

Behind them, the ceiling of the tunnel gave way with a roar, and the black water of the deep came down in a solid wall.

Ben dove into the vortex first and vanished. Maeve went a second later, her sword still glowing. Aidan was last. Just as he threw himself forward into the swirling light, he looked back.

Standing in the middle of the rushing black water, untouched by it, was Balor's Heir. His long hair drifted around him. His pale hands were glowing

with a sick crimson light. He was looking straight at Aidan with his bottomless black eyes, all the anger gone out of his face.

He looked patient.

His lips moved. He mouthed something. A single, silent word. And then the gate snapped shut, and he was gone.

The trip back to the surface was a blur of speed and pressure and screaming silver light. Aidan was spat out of it onto hard, wet ground with a force that knocked the wind out of him. He rolled over and over and crashed into a thorn bush. He lay there in the brambles, gasping, and the air going into his lungs was cold and sharp and salty, and it was *air*. Real air. The surface.

He pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

He was in the ruins of an old monastery, on a wide, grassy headland, in the gray light of very early morning. Crumbling stone walls stood around him, thick with ivy. A tall Celtic cross leaned at an angle in the middle of the grass, its carvings worn smooth by the weather. Rain was falling, light and cold. Far below the edge of the headland, the sea was gray and choppy and full of whitecaps. He could see a coastline running away to the south, and mountains behind it, and he knew it wasn't the Atlantic. It was the Irish Sea.

The road had thrown them clear across the country.

Maeve was sitting against the Celtic cross, tying a strip of her own shirt around her bleeding shoulder with her teeth. Ben was lying face down in the grass with his arms spread out, not moving.

"Ben?" Aidan said.

"Week," said Ben, into the grass. "I said a week. I meant it."

"We made it," Aidan whispered. He wasn't sure he believed it. A few hours ago he'd been chained to an altar at the bottom of the sea.

Maeve looked up at him.

Then she looked past him, and her face changed.

The ground under Aidan's hands had started to tremble.

It was a deep, bone-shaking vibration, the same one they'd felt in the tunnel. The air pressure dropped so fast his ears popped. The smell of ozone flooded the ruins, sharp and metallic, so strong it drowned out the smell of the rain and the grass and the sea.

In the middle of the monastery courtyard, the earth tore open.

A huge swirling vortex of black, corrupted water burst up out of the ground, ripping the old flagstones apart and flinging them into the air. It spun and roared like a drain, a whirlpool standing on its end. Balor's Heir was forcing a breach. He was using the power of the deep to punch a hole straight up through the earth, right through the barriers that had held for thousands of years.

And out of the whirlpool, gray hands began to reach.

Aidan got to his feet.

He didn't run. A week ago, in a Dublin alley, he would have run, and nobody could have blamed him. Instead, he stepped forward and stood beside Maeve as she pushed herself up off the cross, and Ben rolled over and groaned and got up too, swaying, shifting halfway to goat.

Aidan raised his hands. The light of his blood flared up gold in the gray dawn and lit the old ruins.

*Let them come.*

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# Chapter 23
# The Prince Comes Up for Air

The first wave of them dragged themselves up out of the whirlpool and onto the broken flagstones. They were the big gray ones from the shallows, the color of wet slate, streaming seawater, their rusted chains clanking in the quiet of the dawn.

This time Aidan held back. There wasn't much left to hold. Whatever the shard had given back to him on the bridge, the road and the gate and that last blaze in the tunnel had taken most of it. He kept the heat close and low, just enough to keep his muscles warm against the wind. He was saving it.

Maeve moved first. She always moved first.

She closed the distance between the leaning cross and the front of the pack in three long strides. She stepped inside the reach of the lead monster, knocked its rusted spear aside, and drove her sword straight through its chest. Then she kicked the falling body backward into the creatures behind it, and they went down in a tangle.

Ben went in low and fast on her left, mostly goat. He was so tired he could barely stand, but a goat doesn't need to stand very well to hit you in the knees, and he hit three of them in the knees in quick succession, and they all fell over.

Aidan stepped into the line beside them.

He had no sword now. But he could read a fight. He could see the dropped shoulder before a swing, the shift of weight before a lunge, the patterns, everywhere, as clear as print. A Fomorian swung a jagged iron cleaver at his head. Aidan dropped under it. He pushed a short, sharp burst of light into his palm, the size of a camera flash, and slapped it straight into the creature's face. It reeled back, blinded, and Aidan grabbed its overextended arm, used its own weight to pull it off balance, and drove his knee into its ribs. It went down. Maeve finished it without even looking.

"Not bad," she said.

"I watched you do it in the vault."

"I know. That's what's annoying."

The whirlpool widened. The flagstones around its edge cracked and tipped and slid into it. And out of the middle of the spinning black water, Balor's Heir stepped onto the grass.

He wore no armor. He didn't need any. The dark water of the deep clung to him, flowing over his shoulders and arms, shifting and rippling around him as he walked. This time he simply looked at the three of them, silent and unsmiling, and then he raised one pale hand toward Ben.

A torrent of freezing, high-pressure seawater blasted out of his palm like water from a fire hose. It hit the goat full in the side and threw him twenty feet through the air into a crumbling stone wall. Ben hit it with a horrible thud and slid down and lay still.

"*Ben!*" Aidan shouted.

Maeve was already moving. She lunged at the prince with her sword aimed at his throat, faster than Aidan had ever seen her move.

The prince caught the flat of the blade in his bare hand.

The water around his fingers turned white. It froze, instantly, into a fist of thick, glittering ice, and the Sídhe steel stopped dead in it, as if it had been set in concrete. Maeve heaved at the hilt. It didn't move. The prince twisted his wrist, almost lazily, and tore the sword out of her grip, and then he backhanded her across the face.

She went down hard on the wet grass. She rolled, and came up on one knee, gasping, blood running from the corner of her mouth.

And the prince turned to Aidan.

Aidan stepped between the prince and his friends. He pulled the heat up from his core and gathered it, all of it, into his forearms.

The prince thrust out his hand. A spear of black, compressed water shot at Aidan's chest. Aidan crossed his arms in front of him, and the water slammed into them, and the moment it touched his light, it boiled. It exploded into steam with a shriek like a kettle. The force of it shoved him backward, his boots sliding through the mud, but he held.

Another. And another. Each one pushed him back a little further. Each one took a little more out of him.

He couldn't out-burn the prince. Not here. Not now. He'd been chained to an altar a few hours ago, and his arms were burned to the elbow, and the prince had an entire ocean behind him. If they kept this up, Aidan would lose. He knew it the way he knew how a fight was going to go before it happened. It was just a pattern.

*Watch*, he thought. *Watch everything.*

So he watched.

And he remembered something Maeve had said in the road under the sea. *If you stop feeding this road, it closes.* The silver roads needed power to stay open. They needed something to hold on to. A road needed a battery.

So what did a breach need?

He looked past the prince, at the spinning black whirlpool. He watched the way it moved. And he saw it. It was spinning around something, bent toward it, the way water in a sink bends toward the plug.

At the far edge of the courtyard, half buried in nettles, was a block of old stone. It was broken across the middle, cracked in two. It had been an altar, once, the monastery's altar. And carved deep into its sides, so worn by centuries of rain that Aidan could barely make them out, were lines of Sídhe knotwork.

The black whirlpool was anchored to it. It was feeding on whatever old power was still sleeping in that stone, smothering it, using it to hold its door open.

"Maeve!" Aidan shouted. "*The altar!*"

She looked where he was looking. She scrambled to her feet, snatched her sword out of the half-melted lump of ice on the grass, and charged the Fomorians guarding the edge of the whirlpool, carving a path through them toward the broken stone.

The prince raised both hands for another strike at Aidan.

Aidan didn't wait for it. He dropped his guard and sprinted straight at him.

The prince's black eyes widened very slightly. He swung his hands around to meet the charge.

But Aidan wasn't going for him at all. At the last second, he dropped onto his knees and slid, on the wet grass and mud, straight under the prince's

outstretched arms and past him, and the crushing jet of water went over his head and smashed into the ruins behind. Aidan slid all the way to the broken altar and slammed both of his glowing palms down flat on the flooded earth at its base.

He left the whirlpool alone and pushed down.

Past the mud and the black water. Past the stones of the courtyard. Down into the ground underneath the monastery, where the monks had built their altar on top of something much, much older. He reached for it the way he'd reached for the rowan grove, and the hall door, and the stone in Cormac's kitchen.

*Please*, he told it. *Wake up. I need you. They're using you.*

Something in the earth beneath him recognized the blood of the sun.

It woke.

Light burst up out of the ground. The broken altar blazed. The leaning Celtic cross in the middle of the grass lit up from the inside like a lantern, and lines of shining knotwork raced across the flagstones from the cross to the altar and back, crisscrossing, joining up, forming a pattern that covered the whole of the courtyard, a vast and beautiful web of light. The ancient ward of the sanctuary snapped back into place, all at once, after a thousand years asleep.

A shockwave of pure white-gold light rolled out from the center of the courtyard.

It sheared straight through the whirlpool.

The black water shrieked, a sound like tearing metal. The ward was rejecting it. Pushing it out, forcing it down and back into the dark where it had come from. The spinning water staggered. The Fomorians on the grass shrieked and clutched their heads.

The prince stumbled.

Aidan saw it happen. The connection between the prince and the deep, the thread that had been holding all that power up, snapped, and the dark water clinging to the prince's body lost its shape. The water around his shoulders broke apart. It slid off him and fell onto the grass as plain, ordinary seawater. For one second, he was just a slender, pale young man with wet hair, standing in a field in the rain.

He turned and looked at Aidan.

The cold patience was gone from his face. What was underneath it was rage.

Before he could do anything with it, the ward closed.

The whirlpool collapsed in on itself, shrinking down to a single bright point of sickly green light, and then it winked out. The displaced air rushed back into the hole it left with a deafening *crack* that knocked every Fomorian in the courtyard flat on its back.

And the prince was gone. Pulled back down into the deep, like a fish on a line, a split second before the door slammed shut.

The handful of Fomorians left on the surface were in a bad way. Without the breach, without the power of the deep behind them, they seemed to wither in front of Aidan's eyes. They staggered. They moaned. Maeve moved from one to the next, her blade rising and falling, and when she was done, there was nothing left in the courtyard but wet ash and broken flagstones and the rain.

Aidan stayed on his knees by the altar. He let the light go. It faded out of the ruins, out of the cross and the knotwork, leaving only the soft gray light of the morning. His arms ached. His chest was heaving. But the hammering pressure in his skull, the weight of the deep that had been sitting on him since the vault, was gone.

*Ben.*

He staggered up and ran across the courtyard.

Ben was lying at the bottom of the wall, human again, curled up on his side. Aidan dropped to his knees beside him and turned him over.

Ben opened one eye. "Is it over?"

"It's over."

"Did I win?"

"You hit a wall."

"But did I hit it really well?" Ben asked.

Aidan laughed. It came out shaky and wet, and he didn't care. He helped Ben sit up. There was a lump the size of an egg on the side of his head, and

he was going to have a spectacular bruise, but nothing seemed to be broken.

"Púcas bounce," Ben said. "It's well known."

Maeve walked over, sliding her sword back into its scabbard. The rain had plastered her dark hair flat to her head, and her lip was split, and the bandage on her shoulder was soaked through red. She looked down at the scorched, cracked patch of earth where the breach had been. Then she looked at Aidan for a long moment.

"Show-off," she said.

But she was smiling.

They found the Vanguard cache three miles inland, exactly where Maeve said it would be: a rusted corrugated-iron shed hidden under a stand of pines on the edge of a forestry track, with a padlock on the door and a Vanguard knot scratched very faintly into the frame. Inside, along with a lot of tinned food and blankets and a frankly alarming number of crossbows, there was a battered old Land Rover Defender with the keys under the seat.

Within ten minutes, they were rattling up a muddy mountain road into the Wicklow hills, with the heater blasting hot, dusty air that smelled of old wool and older cigarettes. Ben was asleep in the back as a goat before they'd gone half a mile. Aidan sat in the passenger seat, shivering so hard his teeth chattered, as his soaked clothes slowly started to steam.

Maeve reached behind her seat without looking, dragged out a scratchy gray wool blanket, and dropped it in his lap.

"Wrap up," she said. She kept her eyes on the road. "You held the line today, Aidan. You didn't break."

He pulled the blanket around his shoulders. "I couldn't beat him by throwing fire at the water," he said. "There was too much water. I had to use what was already there."

"That's what Finn's been trying to teach the Rock for eighteen hundred years," Maeve said. "Most of them still haven't got it."

They drove in silence for a while. The pines went past. The rain came and went.

"I have to report in," Maeve said eventually.

Aidan looked at her. "To Eamon."

"To Eamon. There's a safehouse up here with a radio. If I don't call in, he'll mark me rogue. And then he'll send people looking for us anyway, and they won't be nice about it." Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "He needs to know the prince can breach the surface now. Everyone needs to know."

Aidan nodded slowly. Then he said, "Maeve. There's something I didn't tell you. About the cell."

She glanced at him.

He told her. The tally marks, thousands of them, running all the way around the wall. The skull, and the word *ugly*. The three names scratched into the stone, over and over, so deep they'd worn grooves. *Siobhán. Aidan. Liam.* And what the prince had said, on the bridge. *He was a guest of ours for a long time.*

By the time he'd finished, Maeve had pulled the Land Rover over onto the verge.

She switched off the engine. The rain drummed on the roof. For a long time, she didn't say anything at all.

"He's alive," she said finally.

"I don't know. He was. For years. Some of the marks looked new." Aidan's voice cracked, and he made it stop. "And the prophecy. *One you mourned will call from where the drowned are bound.* I thought it meant someone was going to die. I think it means him."

Maeve turned in her seat and looked at him properly. Her green eyes were very steady.

"Then we'll find out," she said.

Aidan nodded. He unclenched his hands beneath the blanket.

Then she started the engine again, and pulled back out onto the road, and drove on up into the mountains.

Aidan sat with the blanket around his shoulders and watched the pines go past, and he found that for the first time since the cell, he could breathe all the way down.

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# Chapter 24
# The Vanguard Would Like Its Asset Back

The safehouse was a low stone cottage built right into the side of a granite cliff, at the end of a logging track so steep and so washed out that the Land Rover nearly didn't make it. Its thatched roof was furred with moss. Its door was weathered gray and raw by about a hundred winters. It looked like nobody had lived there since the Famine.

Aidan was learning that this was exactly how the Vanguard liked their safehouses to look.

Maeve pressed her palm to the door. A faint knot of silver light traced itself across the wood, and the lock clunked open. Inside was one room. A heavy iron woodstove filled one wall. There were two narrow army cots, a scarred wooden table, two chairs, and a smell of cold ash and damp stone.

Maeve went straight to the window and pulled the heavy blackout shutters closed, then lit a single paraffin lantern. Yellow light jumped up the rough walls. She dropped her gear on the nearest cot and sat down, and started peeling the soaked, bloody strip of shirt away from her shoulder. Ben, still a goat, walked in a small circle on the other cot and collapsed on it with a sigh.

Aidan sat down at the table. He unzipped the inside pocket of his jacket and set the crystal from the vault down on the scarred wood. In the lantern light, it pulsed with a faint, slow, sea-green glow.

*The core holds the chart.*

Maeve didn't rest. As soon as she'd got the bandage off, she went to the floorboards beside the stove and pried one up with the edge of her knife. Underneath was a heavy olive-green metal lockbox. Inside the lockbox was a radio. It was ancient. It had valves, and dials, and a heavy brass telegraph key, the kind you see in films about the war.

"That," Aidan said, "belongs in a museum."

"That," said Maeve, "is the only radio in Ireland the Tide can't listen to." She unspooled a length of braided copper wire from the box. She clipped one end to the back of the set, and wound the other end tightly around an old iron nail that had been hammered into the wall, right through the middle of a small Sídhe knot carved in the stone. "No masts. No satellites. It runs through the ley lines in the bedrock. It's slow, and it's a pain, but it's safe."

She switched it on. The valves warmed up with a low hum and an orange glow. She put her fingers on the brass key and began to tap out a quick, complicated rhythm, and Aidan saw a faint flicker of silver run down the copper wire every time she pressed.

Then she stopped, and sat back, and waited.

Her shoulder was bleeding again. She'd taken a bottle of clear, strong-smelling spirit out of a cupboard by the stove and was trying to clean the wound one-handed, twisting her neck to see it. She hissed through her teeth when the alcohol hit.

Aidan got up. He walked over and took the rag and the bottle out of her hands.

She went tense for a second. Then, deliberately, she made her shoulders drop, and she let him.

He sat down on the cot beside her. The cut was long and ugly, across the top of her shoulder, where a Fomorian's claws had caught her in the road under the sea. He dabbed the alcohol along the jagged edges as gently as he could.

"You took a bad hit," he said quietly. "Holding the road."

"It kept you alive," Maeve said. She was staring at the stone wall as if it had insulted her mother. "That's the job."

"Is that all it is?"

She didn't answer.

Her shoulder was warm under his fingers. She held still while he cleaned the cut. He didn't ask again.

"The prince was fast," she said eventually. "Much faster than the records said. Nobody's ever seen one of them that close and walked away."

"He's anchored to the water," Aidan said, winding a clean strip of linen around her shoulder. "Everything he does, he does with the sea. When I

broke the anchor, he couldn't hold on to it anymore. He was just..." He thought about it. "A guy. A wet guy in a field." He tied the bandage off. "They're like gods in the deep. But up here, they have to play by our rules."

Maeve caught his wrist before he could take his hand away.

She turned it toward the lantern, the way she'd turned his palms up under the streetlight on the quays, on the first night. His forearm was burned from wrist to elbow. She unwound the wet linen from his palm and used a clean strip to bind his arm.

"A week ago," she said, "you couldn't throw a spark without blistering your hands. Today you fought a prince of the deep twice and you're still sitting up." She looked at the bandages, not at him. "Your light's getting steadier."

"I'm learning to pace it," Aidan said.

She was still holding his wrist.

Aidan left his hand in hers.

A burst of static exploded out of the set. Maeve let go of him so fast it was like she'd been burned. She was across the room before the static had finished, grabbing a heavy rubber headset off the lockbox.

The static crackled and hissed and resolved slowly into a voice. It was distorted and faraway, as if it were coming through ten feet of water. But it was a voice used to being obeyed.

"Joyce. Acknowledge."

Maeve pressed a switch. "Joyce here. I have a priority report." Her voice had gone completely flat. Aidan had never heard her sound like that before. Like a soldier. "Balor's Heir is active on the surface. He forced a deep-water breach at the old monastery on the Wicklow coast at dawn this morning. I have the Byrne boy with me. He's safe."

The radio went silent. It stayed silent for so long that Aidan thought they'd lost the signal. Nobody in the cottage moved.

"Status of the breach?" the voice demanded at last.

"Sealed. Byrne woke the old sanctuary ward and cut the anchor. The prince was pulled back. We also went into Tír fo Thuinn." Aidan saw her hesitate, just for a second. "The vault was empty. The spear had been moved. It was a trap. We recovered a navigational core. We think it may be a chart."

Another long, crackling pause.

When the voice came back, Aidan heard the change in it, even through the static. It was smoother. More careful.

"The boy fought a Fomorian royal," said Eamon, "and survived. Twice."

"Yes."

"Then he is far too valuable to risk in the field, Agent Joyce. Your orders are to hold your position. I am dispatching a heavy extraction team from the Dublin Citadel immediately. They will be with you in two hours to collect the asset and secure the core. You will not move him."

Aidan went very still.

*Asset.*

"He's not an asset," Maeve said into the headset. "He's a person, Eamon. He's eighteen."

"He is the only key we have," said Eamon, as if she hadn't spoken. "The continental wards are failing. You know that. Every year they're weaker. With the right equipment, with his blood bound into the ward stones at the Citadel, we could hold the seals for a century. Perhaps longer." The static rose and fell. "Balor's Heir will not stop hunting him. He will be safer in the Citadel than anywhere in Ireland."

"You mean you want to plug him in," Maeve said. "Like a battery. Forever."

Eamon didn't answer.

"Bring him in, Joyce," said Eamon. "That is a direct order of the High Council." His voice went softer, and somehow that was the worst part. "Your mother didn't follow orders either. You know how that ended. Don't make her mistakes. Eamon out."

The radio clicked dead.

Maeve stood there with the headset in her hand. Her face had gone completely white. Aidan had seen her face a monster, a god, a prince of the deep, and a sea full of blood, and he had never seen her look like that.

He didn't say anything. He didn't think there was anything he could say.

She looked at the radio for a long time. Then she looked at him.

Then she reached down and ripped the copper wire out of the back of the set.

The valves flickered and died. She pulled the iron nail out of the Sídhe knot in the wall, too, with one sharp yank, and dropped it into the lockbox. Then she reached up to the shoulder of her leather armor, where a small silver knot was stitched into the leather, the badge of the Vanguard. She took her knife and cut the stitches, one by one, and pulled it off, and dropped it on the table beside the glowing crystal.

"There," she said. Her voice shook, very slightly. "Now it's not metaphorical."

Aidan stared at the badge. Then at her.

"Maeve—"

"I've been ignoring Eamon's orders since Dublin," she said. "Seems a shame to stop now."

On the other cot, there was a pop. Ben sat up, human, rumpled and bruised, with a crease from the blanket across his face. He blinked around the room.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Maeve quit her job," Aidan said.

Ben looked at Maeve. He looked at the badge on the table. He looked at the dead radio.

"Oh," he said. "Good for you."

Maeve made a sound that was half a laugh and half something else, and turned away, and started buckling her armor back on over the fresh bandage. When she turned back around, her face was her own again. Hard and sharp and certain.

"Two hours," she said. "They'll come in force. Eamon doesn't send small teams."

Aidan picked up the crystal and zipped it back into the inside pocket of his jacket. Then he picked up his bag. Glitter from Liam's unopened card had worked its way into every single seam of it by now. It was on his hands. It was on the crystal. It was, he suspected, on the inside of his lungs. He'd given up trying to brush it off.

"So where do we take this," he said, "to read the map?"

Maeve thought about it. "There's an old Sídhe observatory," she said slowly. "Under the Burren. My mam took me there once, when I was small. It has a basin that can read the deep charts. If the Sídhe moved the spear, the core should show us where they put it."

"The Burren's in Clare," Ben said. "We were just in Clare. We were in Clare yesterday. We fell out of a bush in Clare."

"So we go back to Clare."

"I hate Clare."

"Everybody hates Clare this week," Aidan said, and pushed open the old gray door.

The rain was coming down hard over the mountains, and the pines were black and dripping, and somewhere out there, two hours away and closing, the Vanguard was coming to collect its asset.

"Eamon's going to be livid," Ben said, following him out.

"He'll get over it," Aidan said.

"He won't," said Maeve, pulling the door shut behind them.

"Good," said Aidan.

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# Chapter 25
# The Burren Has Opinions

The drive west across Ireland took four hours, and Ben had opinions about every single one of them.

He had opinions about the midlands ("flat"), about Athlone ("why is it there"), about the bypass at Loughrea ("pointless"), and about Maeve's driving ("terrifying, but in a way that makes me feel safe, if that makes sense, which it doesn't"). He had opinions about the radio, which was broken, and the heater, which was broken in the other direction and would only blow at full blast. He had opinions about the Vanguard and the High Council and Eamon, mostly unprintable. He ate a whole tin of peaches from the cache with his fingers and had opinions about those too.

Aidan let him talk. It was oddly comforting.

Maeve drove like she was being chased, which she was. She kept off the motorways and took the small roads, the back roads, the roads with grass growing up the middle of them, because the Vanguard would be watching the motorways.

Aidan sat in the back and watched the country go by in the rain. He flexed his bandaged hands. He was tired, so tired that his bones felt hollow. But underneath the tiredness, the light in his chest was steady now, nothing like the wild thing that had gone off in the alley. He could feed it or let it rest, as he chose.

He thought about the cell. About three names, scratched into a wall so deep they'd worn grooves.

He thought about a man in a wool jumper, in the wall of the silver road, turning a page.

The land outside the windows changed as they came into north Clare. The green fields gave out, all at once, as if someone had drawn a line, and in their place was rock. Mile after mile of bare gray limestone, cracked and fissured into great flat slabs, stretching away under the low sky all the way to the sea. There were no trees. There was barely any grass. It looked like

the surface of the moon, if the moon had been rained on for ten thousand years.

"The Burren," Maeve said.

"It's very..." Aidan searched for a word.

"Rocky," Ben supplied. "It's rocky. That's its whole personality."

Maeve pulled the Land Rover off the road and tucked it in under an overhanging shelf of limestone where it couldn't be seen from above. They got out. The wind coming off the Atlantic was bitter and wet and tasted of salt, and it went straight through Aidan's jacket like the jacket wasn't there.

"Where's the observatory?" he asked.

"Somewhere out there," Maeve said. She was frowning at the endless stone. "I was six. It was a sinkhole. A big one. My mam knew the way."

"So we're lost," Ben said.

"We're not lost. We're just not found yet."

They walked out onto the stone. It was hard going. The limestone was split everywhere into deep, narrow cracks, some of them deep enough to swallow your leg up to the knee, and the slabs between them were slick with rain. Little ferns grew down in the cracks, out of the wind. Aidan's history brain supplied the words, unhelpfully: *clints* for the slabs, *grikes* for the cracks. It didn't make them any easier to walk on.

After twenty minutes, Ben stopped.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, no. Not these lads."

Standing on a ridge of rock about fifty yards away, watching them, were goats.

Wild ones. There were about a dozen of them, shaggy and filthy and enormously horned, with long beards and expressions of deep contempt. They stood in a line along the top of the rock and stared down at the three of them the way a bouncer stares down a queue of teenagers.

"The Burren goats," Ben muttered. "They've been out here since before the Normans. They think they own the place."

"Do they?"

"Legally? No. In every way that matters? Yes."

The biggest goat, a huge old billy with one broken horn and a beard down to his knees, let out a long, rasping bleat.

Ben sighed heavily. There was a pop. A small brown goat trotted forward across the limestone toward the ridge, looking extremely reluctant about it.

What followed was the strangest conversation Aidan had ever witnessed, and he had recently watched a sea god eat oysters from Lidl. There was a great deal of bleating. There was some stamping. At one point, the old billy goat butted Ben in the side, not very hard, and Ben butted him back, and all the other goats made a noise that sounded alarmingly like laughter. Then there was more bleating.

At last, there was a pop, and Ben came back across the rocks on two legs, red in the face.

"Well?" Maeve asked.

"They know where it is," Ben said. "They'll take us."

"What did they say?"

Ben hesitated. "They said we're idiots."

"About what?"

"Generally," Ben said. "It was a general point. They also said the sun boy has a stupid walk, and Manannán's girl is all right, and I'm a disgrace to horned creatures everywhere because I live in Dublin and eat Pot Noodles." He paused. "They're not wrong about the Pot Noodles."

The goats led them across the stone for half an hour, picking their way over the cracks with total, insulting ease, while Aidan stumbled along behind them, trying not to think about whether his walk was stupid. The old billy goat kept looking back over his shoulder at him and snorting.

Halfway there, Aidan looked up at the sky, and stopped.

The clouds over the sea were wrong.

They were moving too fast. Much too fast. And they were moving the wrong way, rolling in off the Atlantic against the wind, piling up into a great black wall on the western horizon, so dark that it looked like night was coming from the wrong direction. Under them, the sea had gone the color of slate.

Then came the thunder. It rolled across the Burren and Aidan felt it in his chest, slow and regular, like drums. Thousands and thousands of drums, beating together, somewhere very far away and very deep down.

"The prince isn't waiting," Maeve said quietly, beside him. She was watching the horizon too. "He's massing the horde. All of it."

"Where?"

She didn't answer. But her face had gone very pale.

The goats brought them to the edge of a sinkhole. It was a huge round hole in the limestone, maybe thirty feet across, dropping straight down into darkness. Thick vines of pale, dead-looking ivy hung down its walls. The old billy goat stood at the edge, looked at Aidan with tremendous scorn, bleated once, and walked off. The rest of the herd followed him without a backward glance.

"What did he say?" Aidan asked.

"He said good luck," Ben said. Then, honestly, "He didn't say good luck."

Maeve grabbed the thickest of the ivy vines and went over the edge without hesitating, climbing down hand over hand like it was a rope in a gym. Ben went next, muttering. Aidan went last. The limestone was wet and slick, and his boots kept slipping, but his hands held. A grip that hadn't existed a week ago. Whatever the blood was doing to him, it wasn't only the light.

At the bottom, the sinkhole opened out into a cavern.

It was huge and dry and absolutely still. After the wind on the surface, the silence was so complete that it rang in his ears. The air smelled of old dust and, faintly, of wild thyme. And the rough limestone walls of the cave gave way, after a few yards, to something else. Smooth white marble. Graceful arches. A vaulted ceiling rising up into the dark.

They'd found the Sídhe observatory.

It was nothing like the vault at the bottom of the sea. There was no rot here. No green glow, no Fomorian claw marks. It was clean and quiet and perfect, like a library at night. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling in carvings: sweeping charts of the stars, of the moon, of the sun's path across the year, all of them cut so finely into the marble that they looked engraved. And in the very center of the floor sat a wide, shallow basin, carved from a single piece of black obsidian.

Aidan walked slowly along the walls, looking up at the charts. Then he stopped.

Among the stars, there were four shapes. They were repeated again and again, each one set inside its own constellation. A stone. A sword. A cauldron. A spear.

"The Four Treasures," he said. "From Dad's notebook."

The stone, the sword, and the cauldron were dark. Just carvings. But the stars of the spear were glowing, very faintly, deep in the marble.

"It's awake," Maeve said softly, beside him. "Because you are."

She walked to the obsidian basin and ran her hand along its smooth black rim. "The projection matrix. Mam called it the Sky Bowl. The Sídhe used it to chart where the mortal world and theirs crossed over. If that core's a chart, this will read it."

Aidan unzipped his pocket and took out the sea-green crystal. It was glowing more strongly now, as if it knew where it was.

"How does it work?" he asked.

"Put the core in the middle," Maeve said. "Then give it a spark."

He leaned over the basin and set the crystal down, very carefully, right in the center. A week ago, he would have braced himself for pain. Now he just took a breath. He found the steady warmth in his chest, and touched his fingertips to the cold black rim, and offered it a small, focused thread of gold.

The observatory woke up.

Liquid silver light welled up out of nowhere and filled the obsidian bowl to the brim. The crystal in the middle rose up out of it, slowly, until it was floating just above the surface, and it began to spin, faster and faster, throwing shifting geometric shadows across the marble walls and the star charts and their three upturned faces.

The silver rose up out of the basin into the air. It spread and took shape, and formed a map, a glowing three-dimensional map of the west coast of Ireland, so sharp and detailed that Aidan could see the waves breaking white against the cliffs.

A bright gold star appeared on it.

Not out past the shelf. Not at the bottom of a trench. It was just off the coast, hovering right over a long, jagged island at the mouth of Galway Bay. Over a great semicircle of stone walls perched on the very edge of a sheer cliff.

Aidan stared at it. His mouth went dry.

"That's Inis Mór," he said. "That's Dun Aengus." He couldn't stop staring. "We were on that island. I looked right at it from the plateau. I *asked* Finn what it was."

"And he said *old*," Maeve said.

Ben started to laugh. It was a slightly hysterical laugh. "Eighteen hundred years," he said. "Finn's been sitting on that rock for, what, how long has the Tearmann been there? And the thing we've been looking for has been at the end of his garden. The *whole time*."

"The grove," Maeve said slowly. "The island gave you that branch, Aidan. It gave it to you straight away. Maybe it knew what it was for."

Aidan was thinking about the prophecy.

*What broke will mend upon the island's crown.*

He thought about Dun Aengus from the plateau, a great broken ring of stone right on the edge of the world. Like a crown somebody had set down at the edge of a cliff and walked away from.

"The Sídhe hid it in plain sight," he said. "Where the tourists walk past it every day. Where nobody would think to look."

"Dun Aengus is much older than the history books say," Maeve said. "Mam told me that, the time she brought me here. She said it wasn't built to keep people out. She said it was built to keep something in."

A tremor shook the cavern floor.

Dust sifted down from the vaulted ceiling. Out on the surface, far above them, the thunder cracked so loudly that the marble arches rang with it.

Maeve's sword was in her hand. "They're tracking us," she said. "The prince can feel the energy from the basin. He knows we're reading the map."

"How?" Aidan said. "How does he keep *finding* us? The monastery, the bus, the vault, *to the very hour*. Every single time."

He didn't decide to do it. His hand just moved, on its own, up to the front of his jacket. To the brooch. It was cold under his fingers. It was always cold. *Pretty things that run cold.*

His fingers closed around the pin.

And the cavern shook again, much harder, and a chunk of marble the size of a fridge came down out of the ceiling and smashed into the floor ten feet away from them, and the moment was gone.

"*Out!*" Maeve shouted. "Now!"

Aidan grabbed the crystal out of the air. The silver map collapsed back into the basin. They ran.

They came up out of the sinkhole into a howling gale. The black wall of storm had rolled in off the Atlantic, and it was right over them now, and the rain was coming in sideways, stinging like gravel. Out to the west, through the rain, Aidan could just make out the long dark shape of the Aran Islands, low on the horizon. Over them, the clouds were spiraling down out of the sky in a huge, slow funnel.

Right over Inis Mór.

"He's not coming for us," Maeve said. Her voice was very quiet, under the wind. "He knows where we're going. He's going to get there first."

Aidan felt the blood drain out of his face.

Finn was on that island. And Cormac, with his bad ankle. And Tadhg, and Nessa, and the Ogma poets with their terrible song. And the Aengus girls and their stupid betting pool, and the Brigid kids at their forge, and the kid who made toast on a sword. Eighty blooded young people, on a rock in the Atlantic, with a storm full of monsters coming down on top of them.

The Tearmann. The Rock.

Home.

"We need a boat," Aidan said. "We're going home."

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# Chapter 26
# The Battle of Dun Aengus

Maeve didn't ask anyone's permission at Doolin pier.

She walked straight down the slipway in the screaming wind, past the ferry office with its CLOSED sign rattling on its hook, and climbed aboard a battered steel-hulled fishing trawler called the *Mary Kate II*. She put her palm on the wheelhouse door. It opened. She put her palm on the ignition. The diesel coughed and roared.

"Is that legal?" Aidan asked, for old times' sake.

"I'm Manannán's," Maeve said, casting off the ropes. "Every boat on this coast is a little bit mine."

"That's not how property works."

"Take it up with the sea."

The crossing to Inis Mór was the worst forty minutes of Aidan's life, and he had recently been chained to an altar.

The storm was the deep, coming up. The sky had gone purple-black, and the swells were rising higher than the wheelhouse, great heaving gray mountains of water driven by something huge and angry moving underneath them. The trawler climbed each one, groaning, and hung at the top for a long, sick second, and then dropped into the trough like a lift with its cable cut.

Ben was sick four times. On the fourth time, he turned into a goat to be sick, on the theory that it might be easier as a goat. It wasn't.

Aidan sat on the floor of the wheelhouse, with his back braced against the bulkhead and his boots braced against the chart table, holding the rowan staff across his knees. He traced the smooth silver grain with his thumb. He could feel the eager hum in the wood. And in the bag at his hip, his father's shard had been restless ever since the Burren. It was warm through the canvas, almost hot, and it kept pulling. Tugging west, toward the island.

The sea raged outside the windows, black and white and enormous.

The old drowning panic never came.

He noticed that. He sat there in the middle of the worst sea he'd ever seen, and he waited for it, the black water closing over his head, the weight, the *open your mouth and it comes in*. And it didn't come. There was only the hum of the rowan, and the pull of the shard, and the steady warmth in his chest. And, faint, in the middle of his back, the memory of a hand.

Maeve stood at the wheel with her feet planted wide, perfectly balanced while the deck pitched under her. She'd strapped her mother's sword across her back. She caught him watching her in the dark glass of the windscreen.

"Don't fall overboard, college boy," she said. "I'm not fishing you out."

"You would, though."

She held his eyes in the reflection, a beat longer than she needed to.

"I would," she admitted. And she turned back to the storm.

"*There!*" Ben shouted, human again, pointing through the streaming windscreen.

Out of the boiling gray sea rose the cliffs of Inis Mór.

And the island was on fire.

Beacons had been lit all along the clifftops, great roaring bonfires that streamed sideways in the gale, and between them Aidan could see figures moving, fighting, small and dark against the flames. The féth fíada was torn. He could see the Tearmann without even trying, the ring of halls and the Long Hall and the forge, all lit up by fire, and he could see what was climbing up the cliffs toward it.

Fomorians. Hundreds of them. They were coming up out of the sea and crawling up the sheer rock face like ants up a wall, gray ones and black-scaled ones and things with too many legs, wave after wave of them, and at the top of the cliffs, the blooded of the Tearmann were holding them back.

Maeve steered for the hidden crack in the cliff, the one that led to the cove. In the storm, Aidan didn't see how she could possibly find it. She found it. The trawler shot through the gap with about six inches to spare on either side, and suddenly the sea was flat and black and still, and there were the iron lanterns on the dock, still burning.

They went up the cliff path at a run.

At the top, the plateau was chaos. It was the Táin all over again, but this time nobody was using blunted weapons and nobody was laughing. Aidan saw the Brigid kids at the edge of the cliff, throwing jars of something that burst into white fire as they hit the Fomorians climbing up. He saw Tadhg, roaring a song at the top of his lungs, swinging an entire wooden bench by one leg like a hurley and knocking monsters off the cliff three at a time. He saw the Ogma poets, standing in a tight knot behind the Brigid line, chanting something in old Irish that made the Fomorians nearest them clutch their heads and stumble. He saw Nessa and her cousins moving through the fighting like three black shadows, knowing where every blow was going to fall before it fell, and above them, a great storm of crows, diving and screaming.

And on the very edge of the cliff, with his back to the drop and a ring of dead Fomorians around his feet, stood Finn.

He'd taken off the Aran jumper. Underneath he was lean and old and hard as a whip, and his spear was moving in his hands so fast it blurred. Aidan had thought Maeve was the best fighter he'd ever seen. He'd been wrong. Fionn mac Cumhaill fought the way a river runs. He never stopped and he never hurried and nothing stood in front of him for long.

A few yards away, Cormac was holding a section of the wall on his bad ankle, with a brand-new shotgun from somewhere and an expression of tremendous irritation, firing silver into anything that put its head over the edge.

"*Kid!*" he roared, when he saw Aidan. "*About bloody time!*"

Finn turned. His pale eyes found Aidan across the fighting, and they went to the bag at his hip, and then out along the clifftops, south, toward the great ring of stone at the edge of the world.

"Dun Aengus!" Finn shouted, over the wind. "That's where he's going! Go! We'll hold them here!"

"How did you know?"

Finn put his bleeding thumb in the air, without a word, and went back to fighting.

"Sunshine! You made it!"

Darragh came running out of the smoke. He had a sword in his hand and blood on his face and his grin was as wide and warm as ever. He grabbed Maeve in a one-armed hug, and then clapped Aidan on the shoulder. "Thank God. We've been holding them since the storm hit. Where are you headed?"

"Dun Aengus," Maeve said. "The spear's there. It's been there the whole time."

Something flickered across Darragh's face. "Then I'm coming with you," he said. "You'll need someone at your back."

Aidan was already running for the path.

They ran south along the clifftops, the four of them, through the howling dark, past the burning beacons. The rain was coming in sideways, and the ground was shaking under them with the pounding of the sea against the foot of the cliffs. The shard in Aidan's bag was so hot now that he could feel it burning through the canvas against his hip.

Dun Aengus rose up out of the storm ahead of them.

It was a great semicircle of massive drystone walls, three rings of them, one inside the other, curving round and ending abruptly at the very lip of a three-hundred-foot cliff, as if someone had built a perfect circle and the sea had bitten half of it off. From the land side, it looked like a fortress. From here, in the dark and the storm, with the beacons behind it, it looked like what Aidan had thought when he first saw it. A broken crown, set down at the edge of the world.

They went through a low gap in the outer wall, and then through the inner wall, and came out onto the plateau at the center.

It was a wide, flat, bare floor of cracked limestone, backed by nothing. Just the edge. Just the drop, and the roaring dark, and the sea three hundred feet below.

And in the very middle of the plateau, there was a raised slab of stone. A dais. It was exactly like the one in the vault at the bottom of the sea, the one where Aidan had been sure he'd find the spear, and hadn't.

This one wasn't empty.

In a shallow hollow carved into the stone, there was a block of pale, cloudy amber, about the size of a shoebox. And sealed inside the amber, glowing

faintly like an ember inside honey, was a spearhead. It was long and leaf-shaped and forged from a metal that looked like solid sunlight.

It was flawless, except for one thing. The point was gone. Snapped off, leaving a ragged notch where the tip should have been.

"The Spear of Lugh," Maeve said quietly.

Aidan walked toward it. He could feel the heat coming off the amber from ten feet away. And at his hip, his father's shard woke up. It went so hot that he could feel it straight through the canvas and the leather, and it began to pulse, and its beat was matching his own heart exactly.

Behind them, thunder cracked across the whole sky.

Aidan spun around.

Over the edge of the cliff, black water was climbing.

It was crawling straight up the sheer three-hundred-foot limestone face, against the wind and against gravity, like ink running uphill. And riding it, pulling themselves up out of it onto the plateau, came Fomorians. Dozens of them. Black-scaled, finned, armored in rusted iron, slick with the sea.

And in the middle of them, stepping lightly up onto the stone with the dark water swirling around his feet, came Balor's Heir.

"The Sídhe hid it well," the prince said. His voice carried over the howl of the wind, soft and cold and perfectly clear. "Under the noses of the Fianna. On a hill full of tourists." His black eyes moved to the dais. "But human blood is fragile, cousin. And so are humans." He raised one hand. "Bring me the boy alive. Kill the others."

The Fomorians charged.

Maeve met them first. Of course she did. She went straight into their front rank, her mother's sword flashing. Ben went with her, and this time he didn't turn into a goat. There was a pop that was more like a thunderclap, and the huge black horse was there instead, with its burning yellow eyes and its wild mane streaming in the gale, rearing up and bringing its hooves down on the first Fomorian that got close. And Darragh was beside them, his sword flashing, fighting with an easy, flowing skill that Aidan barely had time to notice.

"Do it, Aidan!" Maeve yelled. "Whatever you're going to do, do it *now!*"

Turning his back on a charging horde went against every single instinct Aidan had.

He did it anyway.

He dropped to his knees in front of the dais and pressed his blistered, bandaged hands against the amber. It was hot. It was hard as glass. And the first thing he wanted to do was smash it. Grab a rock and break it open and rip the spearhead out.

*That's the Fomorian way,* he thought. *Force. Grab and smash.*

He'd learned better. In the rowan grove. In the cell at the bottom of the sea. On the altar.

So instead of smashing, he listened.

It took a moment. The noise of the battle behind him was deafening, steel and shrieks and hooves and the wind. But underneath it, faint and deep, the amber had a rhythm. A slow pulse, like the hum of the grove.

He found it. He matched it. He let the light in his chest rise and fall with it, until the amber and the light and his own heart were all beating together.

The amber hissed.

Instead of cracking, it came apart all at once, softly, into a glittering cloud of golden dust that blew away in the wind, and the spearhead lay bare on the stone.

Aidan tore open his bag.

The shard was already moving. He'd barely touched the leather when the bundle fell open and the golden tip leapt out of it, *pulling*, straining toward the spearhead so hard it nearly jumped out of his hand. Aidan let it go.

The tip slid home into the notch with a sound like a bell, struck once.

A seam of white-gold light ran across the break. It flared, so bright he had to look away. And then it faded, and the spearhead was whole. Perfect. As if it had never been broken at all.

Ten years wrapped in old leather behind a box of crossbow bolts, in a farmhouse in Connemara. Carried out of a collapsed mound by a man with terrible handwriting, three days before the dark took him. And it had come home.

Aidan picked it up.

It was impossibly heavy. It burned with a heat that should have stripped the skin right off his hands, and it didn't. It just felt warm. It felt like the stone in Cormac's kitchen, and the shard in the armory, and the grove, all at once.

He took the rowan staff in his other hand. He fitted the hollow base of the spearhead over the end of the silver shaft, and he pushed.

The magic took.

He felt it happen. The silver bark of the rowan crept up over the base of the gold, and the gold sank into the wood, and the two of them fused, seamlessly, into a single weapon. A long, straight spear of silver and gold. The hum of the grove and the heat of the sun, together. And the low hum of the whole island rose all at once into a deep, ringing note.

*The Spear of Lugh. That no battle was ever won against.*

Aidan stood up, holding it.

Across the plateau, the prince saw the spear. His bottomless black eyes narrowed.

He raised both his hands to the sky. And he didn't throw a lance this time. He didn't throw a sphere. He reached down over the edge of the cliff and he dragged up the *sea*.

It came up behind him. A wave. A black wall of water rising up out of the Atlantic, up and up, higher than the cliffs, higher than the beacons, higher than anything, blotting out the storm and the sky. It hung there over Dun Aengus, impossibly, a mountain of black water, tall enough to scour all four of them and the dais and the whole fortress clean off the island and into the deep.

"*Aidan!*" Maeve shouted. She was falling back toward him as the shadow of the wave came down over everything.

Aidan gripped the spear in both hands.

No blast he could throw would stop that much ocean. He knew it. He knew it the way he knew the patterns of a fight. The prince was swinging the sea like a club. All weight, no thought. And you didn't beat a club by swinging harder.

*The island recognizes you,* Finn had said, in the rowan grove.

*It wasn't built to keep people out,* Niamh had told her daughter, long ago. *It was built to keep something in.*

Aidan hoped they were both right.

He stepped forward, planted his boots on the cracked limestone, and drove the butt of the spear straight down into a deep fissure in the bedrock of Dun Aengus.

And he sent his light down through the spear, into the island.

The fortress woke up.

Every stone in every wall of Dun Aengus blazed. All three of the great rings lit up at once, gold and silver, and lines of light ran through the cracks of the limestone pavement under his feet, joining up, spreading, forming a vast and intricate pattern that he'd never have seen from the ground. The whole fort was a ward, the biggest in Ireland. And the spear was the key that completed it, the last piece of a circuit that had been lying open, waiting, for thousands of years.

A wall of solid, invisible force burst up from the edge of the cliff.

The prince's wave hit it.

The collision was deafening. The black water smashed into the ward and simply shattered, broke apart into a billion pieces, and came raining down harmlessly onto the plateau as ordinary rain, cold and clean and salty.

The backlash of the broken spell hit the prince like a slap. He staggered backward. His connection to the sea, that whole vast weight of water he'd been holding, was severed in an instant by the blazing ward. All around him, the Fomorians cut off from the deep dropped to their knees, clutching at their heads, shrieking.

Aidan pulled the spear out of the stone and leveled the golden blade at the prince.

He didn't say anything. The heat coming off the spear was so fierce that the rain hissed into steam before it could touch him.

The prince looked at the spear. He looked at the blazing walls of Dun Aengus, at the ward burning all around the island. And for the first time, his perfect face showed something other than contempt, or patience, or rage.

It looked a lot like arithmetic.

Then he stepped backward off the edge of the cliff and let himself fall.

He dropped three hundred feet into the churning black Atlantic and was gone. All along the cliff edge, the surviving Fomorians scrambled after him, hurling themselves over, fleeing the light.

And the storm broke.

The great black clouds over the island cracked open, and a single, sharp, piercing ray of late sunlight came down through the gap and struck the ancient stones of Dun Aengus.

Aidan lowered the spear. The fierce gold of the blade faded to a warm, steady glow. His chest was heaving. Every single muscle he had was shaking. But he stayed on his feet.

Footsteps limped toward him across the stone. It was Cormac, with his shotgun over his shoulder and his ankle wrapped and his beard full of rain. Behind him came Finn, and behind Finn, half the Tearmann, bloodied and filthy and staring.

Cormac stopped in front of him. He looked at the spear in Aidan's hands for a long time. His weathered, cynical face was completely serious.

"You forged it," he said.

"The island did," Aidan said. "I just asked."

"Your father carried that tip out of Knockma," Cormac said, and his voice had gone rough, "and never told a soul what it was. Not even me." He looked away, out over the sea, where sunlight broke through the clouds. "He'd have given anything to see this, kid."

*He might still see it*, Aidan thought. But he didn't say it. Not yet.

Maeve came across the plateau toward him. She was soaked and bloodied and swaying slightly on her feet, and her mother's sword was hanging from her hand. She stopped beside him and looked over the edge of the cliff, at the sea, at the last ripples where the prince had gone in. It was just a sea again. Gray and cold and ordinary, with sunlight on it.

She turned and looked at him for a long moment.

She bumped her shoulder against his. "Not bad, college boy."

"I'm learning," he said.

And this time, she didn't step away.

Behind them, somebody started to cheer. Then somebody else did. Then the whole Tearmann was cheering, on the plateau and along the clifftops, a great ragged roar that went out over the sea, and Tadhg was crying openly, and the Ogma poets were already arguing about the rhyme scheme for the new verse.

Aidan stood in the sunlight with the spear in one hand and Maeve's shoulder against his, and he let himself breathe.

It was only much later, when the cheering had died down, that he noticed two things.

The first was that the brooch on the front of his jacket had gone colder than it had ever been. So cold it burned.

The second was that nobody had seen Darragh since the wave.

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# Chapter 27
# The One Who Breaks Your Bread

They searched for Darragh through the night and into the next day.

They searched the halls and the Long Hall and the forge. They searched the cove and the dock and the steaming pool in the rocks. Tadhg walked the whole of the clifftops twice, calling his name in his huge, gentle voice, getting more and more upset. The Brigid kids checked the infirmary. Nessa sent her crows out over the island, and they came back with nothing, and Nessa didn't say anything at all, but her black eyes went to Aidan, and stayed there.

Everyone assumed he'd gone over the cliff in the fighting. Everyone assumed the sea had him.

Aidan didn't assume anything. He sat on the step of the Hall of Lugh with the Spear of Lugh across his knees and the brooch in his hand.

He'd taken it off, finally. It had been so cold against his chest that it had left a red mark on his skin, like a burn. Now he sat in the late afternoon light and turned it over and over in his fingers. The ring, worked with that fine swirling pattern that looked like water. The long pin. The silver, so cold it made his fingertips ache.

*Pretty things that run cold.*

He called up a tiny thread of light into his fingertips, the way he had in the cell, and held the brooch up close to it, and looked at the back.

It was so small that he'd never have seen it without the light, and without looking. Engraved into the back of the ring, no bigger than a grain of rice, was a closed eye.

The same closed eye that had been tattooed on the wrists of the men on the bus.

There was no glamour on it, and there never had been. That was why Maeve had seen nothing in the cave under the Cliffs of Moher. It was only a mark, cut small, on the side nobody ever turned over.

Aidan sat very still.

It all came at once, the way the answer to a question comes once you finally stop chasing it. *Mind the pin,* the Morrígan had said. *Pretty pin,* Manannán had said. *Where'd you get it?* The warlord's crimson eye, flicking down to his chest. *We were told when you would come. To the very hour.* The bus they couldn't possibly have known about. The monastery. The Burren. A water hound in a ward that had held for a thousand years, rising out of the Ford right where Aidan had been told to stand, on the left flank, by the cliffs, where nobody ever came.

*The one who breaks your bread will sell you to the tide.*

He'd eaten dinner with Darragh on his very first night. He'd sat at his table.

Aidan stood up. He took the spear. And he walked south along the clifftops toward Dun Aengus, alone, in the last of the light.

Darragh was sitting on the edge of the cliff, inside the great broken ring of stone, with his legs dangling over the three-hundred-foot drop. He was looking out at the sea. The sun was going down over the Atlantic in a long smear of red and gold. He didn't turn around when Aidan's boots crunched on the limestone behind him.

"Hiya, Sunshine," he said.

Aidan stopped about ten feet away. He held up the brooch.

Darragh glanced back over his shoulder at it. He didn't look surprised. He didn't look anything much. He just looked tired.

"You worked it out," he said. "I knew you would, sooner or later. You notice things." He turned back to the sea. "It's the most annoying thing about you."

"You let the water hound in," Aidan said. His voice came out very steady, which surprised him. "You put me on the left flank. You gave me this so they'd always know where I was. You told them when we'd get to the vault."

"Yes," said Darragh.

"Why?"

Darragh was quiet for a long moment.

"Do you know who Bres was?" he asked.

Aidan did. Of course he did. "Bres the Beautiful," he said slowly. "King of the Tuatha, for a while, before Lugh came to Tara. His mother was Tuatha.

His father was a Fomorian prince." He swallowed. "He was a terrible king. He starved them. He sided with the Fomorians in the end."

"That's the way the Tuatha tell it." Darragh's voice was very calm. "My hall never opened, Aidan. Ten years, and the door never so much as creaked. You want to know why? Because there isn't one. There's no hall for Bres's children. There never has been. We're the half-drowned. The ones nobody wants to claim." He laughed, quietly, without any humor in it. "Finn knew. He always knew. He let me stay, and he was kind to me, and he watched me every single day like I was a dog that might bite."

"So you bit."

"You know what Eamon wants you for," Darragh said, and for the first time his voice had heat in it. "*Asset.* That's what you are to them. That's what all of us are. Batteries, for their walls. The Sídhe sit under their hills and vote, and the Vanguard fills out its forms, and kids like us get plugged into the ward stones and used up and thrown away." He turned around then, properly, and looked at Aidan. His eyes in the red light were wet. "The prince is the only one who has ever looked at me like I was a person. He offered me a seat at his table. Not a leash. A *seat*."

"He tried to drain me on an altar."

"He wanted you alive," Darragh said. "I made sure of that. That was the deal. I never wanted you dead, Aidan. Not once. I liked you." He smiled, a small, crooked, painful smile. "I really did."

Aidan didn't know what to say to that. So he didn't say anything.

Darragh got to his feet. He stood on the very edge of the cliff, with the wind pulling at his curly hair, and the whole empty sea behind him.

"Come with me," he said.

"What?"

"Come with me. Tonight. Now." Darragh held out his hand. "Your father's alive, Aidan."

The world went very quiet.

"He was in that cell for nine years," Darragh said softly. "Counting. Drawing on the walls. They moved him last spring. Somewhere deeper. The prince keeps him safe. He's been waiting for you." He held his hand out

further. "*And one you mourned will call from where the drowned are bound.* He's calling, Aidan. Come with me, and you can see him tonight. You can talk to him. You can hug him. Ten years. Don't make him wait any longer."

Aidan couldn't breathe.

His fingers tightened around the spear. He could see it. His father's face. The beard trimmed with the kitchen scissors, the ink on his fingers. The giant's voice, in the dark. All he had to do was take one step. Take one hand.

He looked down at his own right hand. At the pale spiral of Manannán's debt on his palm. At the bandages, and the burns, and the spear.

He thought about a girl at a safehouse with a packet of custard creams.

He thought about eighty blooded young people on a rock in the Atlantic, holding the cliffs against a horde. Tadhg, swinging a bench and singing. Nessa and her crows. Ben, bouncing off a wall. Finn, eighteen hundred years old, fighting like a river. Cormac on his bad ankle. All of them. Every single one of them, sold to the tide, so that one boy could have what he wanted.

And he thought about his father, driving up to Horn Head in the dark, with every monster on the north coast behind him, so that his sons could sleep.

*He made sure they followed him instead of you,* Cormac had said. *That was the job, as far as he was concerned.*

"My dad," Aidan said, and his voice shook, "led those things to Horn Head so that nobody would get hurt because of him." He took a breath. "If he's alive, I'll get him back. I swear to God I'll get him back. But not like this. I'm not selling everyone on this island to the tide to do it."

He threw the brooch. It hit the limestone at Darragh's feet with a small, cold *clink*.

Darragh looked down at it for a long time.

"I'm sorry, Sunshine," he said quietly. "I really did like you."

"*Darragh.*"

They both turned.

Maeve was standing in the gap in the inner wall. Aidan didn't know how long she'd been there. Long enough. Her face was white, and her sword was in her hand, and her hand was shaking.

"Maeve," Darragh said. Something broke in his face. "Maeve, I—"

"Don't." Her voice cracked. "Don't you dare. You *braided my hair*. After Mam. You learned how off a video so you could do it for me, because I wouldn't let anyone else touch it." The sword came up. It shook. "You were the only person on this island I trusted."

"I know," Darragh said. "I'm sorry. Tell Finn—"

"Tell him yourself."

Darragh looked at her for one more moment. Then he looked at Aidan.

Then he stepped backward off the edge of the cliff.

Maeve screamed his name and ran forward. Aidan grabbed her before she could get too close to the edge, and together they looked down.

Three hundred feet below, the sea had risen up to meet him. A great black hand of water reached up out of the waves and caught Darragh as he fell, gently, and pulled him down into the deep. There was a swirl of dark foam. And then there was nothing at all but the red light of the sunset on the water, and the gulls.

Maeve sat down on the stones.

She didn't cry. Not at first. She just sat there, with her sword across her knees and her eyes on the place where he'd gone into the sea, like she was waiting for it to give him back.

Aidan sat down beside her. A careful distance away.

After a while, he moved a little closer.

After a longer while, without saying anything, without looking at him, Maeve leaned sideways and put her head on his shoulder.

Aidan stopped breathing.

"This doesn't mean anything," she said. Her voice was thick.

"Okay."

"I mean it."

"I know," Aidan said.

Neither of them moved.

The sun went down. The stars came out over the sea, and Maeve cried, eventually, quietly, into his jacket, and he sat there and let her, and didn't say anything.

"I should have known," Finn said the next morning.

They were in his cottage. All of them. Finn at the head of the long table, with his bandaged thumb. Cormac with his foot up. Maeve by the hearth, red-eyed and very quiet. Ben, eating nothing, which was how Aidan knew how bad things were. And the Spear of Lugh, lying on the table in the middle of them all, glowing softly in the gray light.

"You couldn't have," Cormac said.

"I bite my thumb for answers, Cormac. I don't always like the ones I get." Finn looked very old. "I knew what he was. I didn't know what he'd do. I thought kindness would be enough." He rubbed his bare head. "In eighteen hundred years, you'd think I'd have learned it never is."

Aidan told them about his father. All of it. The cell, the tally marks, the names. What the prince had said on the bridge. What Darragh had said on the cliff.

When he'd finished, nobody spoke for a long time.

Cormac's face had gone gray. He got up, on his bad ankle, and walked to the window, and stood there with his back to them all, looking out at the sea. His big shoulders were shaking.

"Ten years," he said at last, hoarsely. "I gave up on him, Finn. I stopped looking. I *stopped looking*."

"We all did," Finn said.

"Then we start again," Aidan said.

They all looked at him.

"The Vanguard wants to lock me in a room and plug me into a wall," Aidan said. "The Court's going to vote about it, probably for a hundred years. The prince wants me on an altar. There are three more Treasures out there that nobody's seen since the Middle Ages, and there's a hundred-foot statue at the bottom of the sea with its eye closed, and I don't think it's going to stay closed." He looked down at the spiral on his palm. "And I owe the sea god a

favor, and I don't know what it is." He looked up. "But my dad's alive. And he's down there. So we're going to get him back."

"We," Maeve said, from the hearth.

"We," Aidan said.

Cormac turned around from the window. His eyes were wet. "We'll get him back, kid," he said.

Finn looked at Aidan for a long moment. Then the corner of his mouth went up, very slightly.

"Then you'll want more training," he said. "A great deal more training. Starting tomorrow. At dawn."

Ben groaned and put his head on the table.

"We're not hiding anymore," Aidan said.

That afternoon, he rang his mam.

There was a phone box in the corner of the Long Hall. An old green Telecom Éireann one, from the eighties, with a slot for coins that didn't exist anymore. Aidan had walked past it every day and never asked about it. That first night in Dublin, Maeve had told him that ringing home would put a target on his mam's back, and he'd believed her. Finn said it didn't connect to anything that anyone would ever want to listen to. He'd kept it to himself anyway after the water hound. Someone inside the wards had been working for the deep, and he hadn't wanted them to hear where Aidan's family lived. Now Darragh was gone. Aidan didn't ask how it worked. He put the receiver to his ear and dialed the number of the house in Donegal, and it rang, and rang, and then she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Mam," Aidan said. "It's me."

There was a sound on the other end of the line that he'd never forget.

It took her a long time to be able to talk. When she could, she shouted at him for five full minutes, about how he hadn't called on his birthday, and how his phone had been dead for nine days, and how the college had rung, and how she'd been out of her mind, and how she'd been about to drive down to Dublin and kick in the door of his halls, and how she'd rung the

Guards, and how Ben's phone was dead too, and *where in God's name are you, Aidan Byrne?*

"I'm grand, Mam," he said. "Honestly. I'm... I'm doing a sort of semester abroad."

"*Abroad?*" His mother's voice went up an octave. "Without telling me? Where *abroad?*"

"Inis Mór."

There was a pause.

"Aidan," said his mother, "that's not abroad. That's *Galway*."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. He laughed so hard that he had to lean his forehead against the glass of the phone box, and his mam started laughing too, on the other end of the line, crying and laughing at the same time, and calling him an eejit, and asking was he eating properly.

He didn't tell her about Dad.

He wanted to. More than he'd ever wanted anything. But he couldn't. Not until he was sure. Not until he could bring him home through the front door and stand him in the kitchen and say *here*.

"I'll be home for Christmas, Mam," he said instead. "I promise. Tell Liam I said hi."

That night, in the Hall of Lugh, Aidan took Finn's knife and carved his name into the stone above the hearth.

It took him a long time, because the stone was hard and his hands were still burned, and because he wanted to get it right. He cut it underneath the last name, the one from three hundred and eleven years ago, in the smooth blank space that had been waiting for him. *AIDAN BYRNE*. When it was done, it looked small and new and a bit crooked, under all those old names going back into Ogham.

It looked like it belonged there.

Then he sat down on the bed in front of the fire, and reached into his bag, and finally took out Liam's card.

It was crumpled and damp at one corner, and it had been to the bottom of the sea and back. He opened it.

Glitter exploded everywhere. It went all over his hands and his jeans and the bed and the floor and the goat asleep on the floor, who sneezed.

Inside, in crayon, his little brother had drawn a picture of him. It wasn't a very good picture. Liam was ten. But it was definitely Aidan, with his hair sticking up the way it always did, flying through the air over a blue sea, with a huge yellow sun drawn on the front of his T-shirt. Underneath, in Liam's careful, wobbly capitals, it said:

*HAPPY BIRTHDAY AIDAN. YOU ARE THE BEST BROTHER IN THE WORLD. PLEASE COME HOME SOON.*

Aidan sat there for a long time, looking at it.

Then he got up and propped it on the mantelpiece, under the names carved in the stone, right beneath his own. It looked small there. It looked a bit ridiculous, all that glitter under all that history.

It looked perfect.

He went to the open door of the Hall of Lugh and stood there, looking out. The night was clear and cold. The stars were out over the Atlantic, thousands of them. Somewhere down the cliff, in the cove, the pool in the rocks was steaming gently in the dark, the way it would be at dawn, when Maeve would be waiting in it, and he would be late, in Tadhg's ridiculous wetsuit, and she would tell him he looked like a tent.

And somewhere out past the edge of the world, far beneath the black water, his father was waiting too.

Aidan watched the sea without looking away.

"Hold on, Dad," he told it. "I'm learning to swim."

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