

CHAPTER 1

DARKNESS

If Lurna and I were to catch the thieves, we'd no time to lose. I crept inside the large roundhouse where her *fine* slept and eased the door shut, fearing to wake the forty sleepers sprawled across the floor under furs and rugs. By firelight, I scanned the great room and the spot where she'd be. The air trembled with snoring and heavy breathing. The odor of sweat and animal skins and the sweet smell of pine smoke tickled my nose. By a near wall, I spied her tawny hair spread wild across black fur, then stepped over rugs and bodies, knelt, and gently shook her.

She opened her eyes, focused on mine. "Wh-what? Taran?" A smile spread from her lips to her eyes, blue and sparkling by firelight. "'Tis time?"

"Aye, tonight we'll catch them. I heard footsteps outside, heading toward the pens."

"Sure, and we'll go, but first you must guess what I've made for you." She rubbed her eyes and gave me a lopsided smile. "For every wrong answer, you owe me a kiss."

"A brooch to hold my cape?"

"'Tis na that."

I grinned, leaned over and pressed my lips to hers, feeling their wet warmth against mine. "Lassie, I could play this game, and play to lose, all night. But we've got to hurry."

Smiling, she pulled on a tunic, shoes, and cape, and we tiptoed through the sleepers and out the roundhouse door into the chill of an early spring night. As we hurried over the hard-packed earth between houses, a full moon topped the eastern mountain, lighting the way.

When we passed the farthest house of the village, we saw them. They were leaving the animals' rock pen and entering the forest. One thief led a stolen kid by its tether. A second carried a blazing torch. Both wore white robes.

My heart quickened. I barely whispered the word. "*Druids.*"

They were our healers. Administrators of justice. Advisors to my father, the Rí Tuath, who, along with the *comhairle*, or ruling council, led the clan. They kept the spells of healing and cursing, memorized and passed down from before the days of the Fir Bolg. They were our priests. They gave their souls to the spirits of trees, streams, and rocks in hope of learning their secrets. Once I was with them. And then I grew cold, dead, and shriveled inside, for they worshiped the darkness. They worshiped the dread idol of gold, Crom Cruach. The Bent and Bloody One. And he owned their souls.

A shiver rippled down my back.

I pulled Laurna behind the trunk of a yew. "This thievery, 'tis druid business."

"There's na good in this. Na good at all." She frowned.

"We must follow them, see what they do."

Laurna caught my glance, put her hands on her hips, and her frown melted into a smile. "Aye, let's follow them."

Thus begins my story of long ago, with Laurna and I sneaking away in the wee hours to solve a mystery of stolen goats. I sit here now, warming old bones by a fire of pine logs, with a pile of vellum parchment and quills. I marvel at how young and brazen we were then. Had we known the trouble to come, the lives we'd upset, we might have returned to our beds.

Instead, we followed the druids' torch down a twisting forest path across the mountain. Never close enough for them to hear or see us, we crept between pines, then oaks, until we reached the rocks above the little falls. They dragged and pushed the goat up a rock face and disappeared over a ridge of boulders. From beyond came the sound of crashing water.

We skirted a patch of loose scree and climbed to the ridgetop. Hiding behind a boulder, we watched the two white-robed men in the clearing below.

Cormag, his hair as white as his robe, knelt by the kid. A knife flashed once in the moonlight. Its throat slit, its strength ebbing fast, the goat kicked against the leather binding its legs and tried to bleat. I squirmed but didn't look away. Over the sound of cascading water came the rhythmic chanting of their spells. Spells I knew only too well.

“Taran, what if they find us out?”

“We’re safe in the shadows. Let’s watch a bit. Then we’ll leave.”

She gave me another lopsided smile. “Only if you make another guess.”

“A brass ring for my finger?”

She shook her head, and a sassy smile spread across her lips.

I leaned over, held her head with both hands and pressed my lips to hers, lingering. “I like this game. I don’t think my guesses will improve.”

“’Tis fine with me. But what’s this spell they do? Do you ken its secrets?”

Still enjoying the warmth of her lips, I stared into her eyes, silent, smiling.

“Three years you were with them. Sure, and you ken their ways.”

I sighed. Once she set her mind to a thing, Lurna wouldn’t give it up. “I ken the spell. The goat must bleed its life out beside a falls, for ’tis a gateway to the Otherworld. The animal must be stolen. And the deed must be done in secret.”

“Sure, and what kind of spell would that be now?”

“A spell to increase power. Cormag’s power. To steal power from the spirits beyond.”

As if the chief druid of Inis Creig had heard his name, the tall, gaunt man stood from his kneeling position and turned toward us. Torchlight glinted off his shiny scalp. Thin white hair fell in lonely strands over his pale forehead. His eyes glinted red by torchlight, appearing to stare straight at me. Cormag’s dead, pink eyes always troubled me.

I froze. Had he seen me in the shadows?

Oblivious to his movements, Lurna sat behind a boulder. When she whirled her head toward me, her tawny braids, wrapped in strips of blue and gold-dyed leather, swung in the moonlight.

“What if the spell’s no longer secret? What if they discover us?”

Motionless, alert to Cormag’s every move, I said nothing.

“Taran mac Teague, speak to me!”

Cormag arched his back, stretched, and knelt again by the dying goat. He mumbled more of the spell, then dragged the kid toward a woodpile they’d built. Mungan carried a sword on his belt.

Safe to move again, I turned to Laurna. “He nearly saw us. We mustn’t let him find us. If someone breaks the secrecy of this particular spell, it works the opposite way. Cormag’s power would then *decrease*.”

She shuddered. “He’d never let that happen.”

“Never. To preserve the magic he’d kill us first.”

Her eyes widened. “Sure now, and would he really?”

“If he thought he could do the deed in secret, aye.”

Laurna shuddered again.

Up the slopes in the pines, the hoot of an owl echoed—haunting, lonely. From the mountain came a scent of pine, and from the pool below, an occasional whiff of rotting leaves.

“’Tis what I’ve been saying and what you haven’t wanted to hear. Tonight they’ve stolen a goat to kill. Granted, a goat’s a small thing. Yet if we’re discovered, Cormag would rather kill us than give up any of the power he imagines he’ll gain by his ceremony. This is evil, Laurna, and it’s a symptom of the deeper evil they serve. It’s not just about them. It’s what they’re doing to the entire *tuath*. They’re leading the clan into darkness. I feel it. I sense it. I fear for us. Not only for you and me but for everyone.”

“Stop, Taran! You’re thinking too much.”

“You remember what happened last year. You were there. You saw them smash the head of Gormal’s baby, then burn the body. And you danced before Crom Cruach’s crooked stone, didn’t you? We all did. What did you feel then? Did you sense his presence pouring darkness into your soul, filling you with something wild and impure? At the Circle of Stones during that dance, I actually *wanted* them to kill the child. I couldn’t wait for it to happen. Think about what’s going on here. The druids kill a child and the sun god makes me *want* it. What’s happening to us?”

She frowned.

Often, she spent half the morning with the children, telling stories or playing hoops and sticks. Yet, with the sacrifices, like everyone else, she seemed blind.

“I . . . I know what you’re saying. I didna like giving him that baby. At first, that is. Such a tiny thing. But after a while, it seemed . . . almost . . . normal. I know how you feel. At first, I was troubled. Very much so. I didna like it, but only at first. Then, with everyone dancing and me joining in, I gave myself up to him. I threw my hands in the air like everyone else. I got used

to it. We all get used to it. Sure, and I admit I *did* enjoy it. We're supposed to. All my life 'tis what we've been told. Taran, we must sacrifice *someone*. It's the price we pay for his protection, for milk, a bountiful harvest, good fishing. 'Tis simply how it is."

I shook my head. "Don't you see? Crom Cruach has poisoned your heart. And he's done the same to all of us. To everyone in the clan."

She gaped at me. "He has not. It canna be." Her head was shaking no, but her widened eyes said something else. "'Tis simply how it's always been." She remained silent a while, then blurted, "I know you can sense things others can't, especially when it concerns the spirits, but I think you're wrong. Did Dughall give you these ideas?"

"Dughall's only spoken of a vast world beyond our own. Ruled by great peoples. Where great events occur."

"You think enough already. You donna need more strange ideas from Dughall."

"He's only told me the truth. In Bryton where the Romans held him a slave, Dughall heard of many things beyond our ken. He even tells of a new God they worship, of one God above all others. Laurna, they speak of a God who *loves*. Think of it. One God, not the many who confound and bedevil us, and a *loving* God. Would that I could learn more of *Him!*"

"But donna all peoples everywhere worship Crom Cruach, he who protects us? Is he na the spirit of the sun, the giver of all life?" Her words were strained, coming too fast. Looking back now, I think they were meant for her, not me. "He even begat Danu, mother of the earth. He's greater than the spirits of beasts, forests, and streams. For without the sun, everything dies. Have you forgotten everything the druids taught you?"

"You know I haven't. But someday, someone must speak up to warn the clan. The druids' power grows, as does their evil. Perhaps tomorrow, I—"

"Taran, you'll say nothing about this tomorrow night at your ceremony to join the *comhairle*. If you even hint of what you just told me, you'll na join the high council. Your father might protect you, but you mustna think such dangerous thoughts. You must never speak them."

In the clearing, flames engulfed the goat atop the woodpile, illuminating the falls and the rock face, and releasing the acrid smell of burnt flesh mixed with pine smoke. I glanced at Laurna. Her cape had fallen open.

"A leather armband."

“What?” She looked down at her waist, at the leather band tied with string to her belt. Her eyebrows dipped, and she hit me lightly on the arm. “You cheated, but I forgive you.” She untied the leather cuff and presented it to me. Etched with expert, tiny, red and yellow interlocking swirls, it gleamed with oil.

I slipped it up my right arm and secured it with the leather thongs she’d also made. “Thank you. I’ll wear it always.” I smiled.

“Now it’s my turn.” Beaming, she leaned over, wrapped her arms around my neck, pulled me close, and pressed her lips to mine. But when we parted, a trace of frown returned.

“And sure, you canna put me off by solving my riddle. If you say anything tomorrow, I donna ken what they’ll do. Have you forgotten we’re to be wed at the next full moon? Have you even *thought* about us? If Cormag turns against you—well, look what happened to old Bearach.”

“I remember.” Old, touched in the head, Bearach foolishly spoke the truth against the druids. Mad as he was, they banished him to a death in the sea.

Lurna shifted her feet. A rock tumbled and clattered down the slope behind us—loud, too loud. Alarmed, I spun toward the clearing.

By flickering firelight, Cormag now looked straight at our boulder. Beside him, peering into the darkness, stood Mungan, sword unsheathed. Then Cormag spoke in a voice I heard clearly, even above the crackling, hissing fire and rushing falls. “Go left by the boulders. I’ll go straight. They’ll na live to see the dawn.”

They started running.

“We’re found out. *Run.*” I grasped Lurna’s elbow and edged her away from the boulders, down a flat, sloping rock face. Half sliding, half racing, we ran until the pitch ended in a graveled clearing. Pebbles scattered. Combined with my racing heart, the noise nearly deafened me.

I glanced back, but they hadn’t yet topped the rise.

I ran in front, my feet glad to leave the rough stones, falling instead into the squishy loam of the forest path. I stumbled over a root, then recovered. Panting now, I looked back to see Lurna close behind, her face contorted, eyes wide. Soon the treetops closed, blocking the moonlight and embracing us with blackest night. I’d hunted this way many times, but it was dark, and at first the path eluded me. Finally, I found the narrow trail. Young saplings appeared from nowhere, ragged branches scraping our arms, wads of leaves slapping our faces. I stubbed a

toe on a rock. Now smothered in darkness, I stopped, glanced back. Lurna leaned over, grabbed her thighs, and tried to catch her breath.

Cormag and Mungan were fifty yards behind, wild and intent silhouettes under cold moonlight. Unused to the trail, they stumbled and groped off the path.

“Stop!” cried Cormag in our general direction. “Halt and present yourselves to your druids!” We were now in the thickest part of the forest. I didn’t think he could see us. Still, his voice sought us out. “I call the forest spirits down upon you.”

A chill rippled through me.

We ran farther, finally pulling ahead. Then Lurna tripped over a root and went down. I helped her up, and pulled her forward, but her hand slipped from mine. She leaned against my shoulder, wincing in obvious pain. She looked at me, then down at her injured foot. I glanced back along the path. Any moment now, the druids would be upon us. “Lurna, *hurry*.”

“I can’t. My ankle.”

Looking around, I spied a large black mass. Ahead and to the right, the root ball of a giant, fallen oak. The rotting carcass of its huge trunk stretched at an angle into the dark. I cradled her shoulders, held one of her hands, and nearly carried her off the trail toward it. From the darkness, two yellow circles stared up at us, began to move toward us. We froze. Lurna’s glance locked with mine. Druid magic?

Some animal—I knew not what—burst from its hiding place and fled through the trees. Not magic. Just a dumb forest creature. I heard Lurna’s breath release, felt her shivering. I pulled her close, and for a moment, just held her. Then came the sound of feet blundering down the trail. I crouched first behind the root ball, and drew Lurna down beside me, our backs hitting a spongy wall of dirt and roots. At my feet, the moonlight caught some long, silvery, multi-legged insect slithering away. We tried to still our labored breathing and waited.

I heard feet straying from the path, rustling leaves and cracking twigs. The druids were inexpert, clumsy woodsmen.

“Did you see them?” said Cormag. “Did you see *anything*?”

“Nay, my lord,” said Mungan. “Only two shadows.”

“What good are you, druid? You’ve young eyes, yet you canna see what’s afore you.”

“One might ’ave been a woman. But . . . I donna ken.”

“No matter. We’ll find them in their beds tonight, I’ll wager, pretending to be asleep. If I find them out . . .” Then their feet carried them away.

When they’d left, I asked Lurna if she could walk. She stood and tried out her ankle. She favored it heavily, but she could at least walk.

“Now what will we do?” She put a hand on my shoulder for support. “They’re in front of us.”

“We’ll get to the village. Somehow, we must reach our beds without being discovered.”

I found a fallen branch, a crutch for Lurna. But now we traveled at a much slower pace. We traversed two miles across the slopes, through the forest, and up a steep trail to our high valley. After a time, she managed to put more weight on her ankle. It wasn’t sprained. We ran, walked, then ran again. I was breathing hard and sweating from the climb, even though a deep chill had settled over the night. I smelled old, wet leather. My tunic.

We burst out of the upper pine forest into our valley in time to see the druids walking the course between the six large roundhouses. They entered the first house, opposite the building where my *fine* slept.

“They’ll be checking everyone’s bed.” Lurna’s voice was a whisper.

“Go quickly to your bed before they come out again. They mustn’t see us.”

We ran, our feet pounding down the short path into the village. Raef, my collie, who slept outside, tried to greet me. But I motioned for quiet and he laid down again. I entered the roundhouse, and with the door open a crack, peered back out.

Lurna had rounded the corner toward her house. Good. She was already hidden from view.

The door to the opposite house opened. They’d finished their search.

I pushed softly, wood creaking on leather hinges, shutting me inside. Warm air engulfed me, tinged with the smells of wood smoke, pine logs, sweat, and animal hides. This was my *fine*, the home of my father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. We were only thirty now, too few for one house. Each winter more and more died of the coughing sickness. The blessings of Crom Cruach, if they were such, were harsh, indeed.

I wove past bodies sprawled across the floor, each in their sleeping furs. I found my bed, pulled off my tunic, untied the thongs of my shoes—but no time for my kilt—and slipped under

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my fur as the outside door creaked open. I lay there, still breathing hard from the climb, my heart pounding, and my forehead wet with sweat.

Moments later, feet shuffled across the floor. They stopped beside me, didn't move on.

I imagined eyes staring down at me. I tried to breathe slower.

"You've a sweat on you, Taran mac Teague," said Cormag, the words shooting through me like an arrow. "'Tis a chill evening for night sweats." He paused as if considering. "Or has my lad been running?"

My breathing didn't slow but quickened. I rolled away from him, pretending sleep.

He walked two paces and paused again. Then he returned to my bedside and, for some time, was motionless. He stood above me, waiting, watching.

My heart thumped wildly.

Instead of checking the rest of the beds, he left the house.