

## THE SHIMMERING FLAME – Jeanne Barrack

Copyright, January, 2008.

### Prologue

*Ireland--1268 B.C.E.*

“Are you sure they’re dead?”

Torc Flatnose’s whisper echoed in Cull’s ear. He scratched his dirty, bird’s nest of a beard and replied, his voice hushed, “How should I know? There’s been no sound from where they are supposed to rest. Why don’t you go see?”

“Who, me? I’m not going. Last time I played scout I led us into an ambush that cost me this.” He jabbed his thumb at his distorted face where his ripped off nose once held prominence. “You go.”

The sound of scuffling feet put a halt to their words as Ma’an joined them in the cave mouth. He crouched next to Torc and tapped him on the shoulder. “Did you find them?”

“Quiet! We’re not sure. ‘Tis rumored that they’re quartered inside the cave, but we’ve not heard a sound since we arrived.”

Ma’an shook his head in disgust. “Let me light a torch and let’s see if they’ve left or await us. We can’t remain here with our thumbs up our arse!”

He drew out a short, rough wooden stake from his pouch and carefully wrapped a greased rag around one end. “Here. Cull, hold it steady while I light the flame.” Taking his precious fire starter from its holder, he struck the two stones together until a spark sprang to life, catching onto the soaked rag. “There. Now, follow me and keep your swords drawn.”

He led them farther into the cave. Their soft, leather shoes made little noise on the dusty cave floor. They held their breath as they turned corner after corner, going deeper within the earth. One last turn led them straight to their goal. Shadows gathered in the corners of the rocky chamber as though ready to pounce on the intruders. On the ground before them lay twelve warriors, stretched out on their sides on their bleached woolen cloaks. They formed an unmoving circle.

“By the teats of the Morrigan, they’re here!” Cull’s outcry pierced the silence.

Torc’s hand shot up, covering Cull’s mouth. “Lugh’s balls, man, do you wish to wake them?”

Ma’an shook his head and shoved the torch into a crevice in the roughewn chamber. “There’s no noise loud enough to wake this bunch. They’re dead.” He paused. “I wonder who did our job for us?” He shrugged. “No matter, as long as Nimhnach believes we did the deed.”

Cull looked around the chamber. “Where’s Dagda?”

“Not here fortunately.” Ma’an took another step into the chamber until he stood in the center of the circle. “Listen carefully. Nimhnach said we are to sever their hands from their bodies and bring them back with us.”

“What, their hands?” Torc scratched his head in confusion. “Why not their heads?”

Ma’an spat into the dust of the cave and sighed, raising his eyes. “Do you regularly risk your life by questioning the druid’s commands?”

“Even one as strange as this?”

“Strange or not, ‘tis what we were commanded to do and so it shall be done.”

“We’ll need more light,” Cull said and grabbed the torch from the rocky wall. “Here, I’ll hold it while you and Torc...”

Ma’an squared his shoulders. “Do what must be done to save our families from the druid’s wrath.”

\* \* \* \*

*Ireland--The present*

*1st April*

“They’re dead, aren’t they, Sean?”

“What do you think this is, man, some bloody American horror flick?”

Sean’s powerful flashlight cast a harsh beam on the terrible scene before them. Eerie shadows danced on the cave walls revealing twelve mummified bodies. The naked corpses lay on their sides in a precise circle, their heads pointed toward the center, their legs bent.

Liam’s voice quivered with fear.

“If this isn’t a horror movie, then where the hell are their damn hands?”

## Chapter One

*Present Day Ireland*

*28th April--Late afternoon*

"In other news this weekend, the mummified corpses discovered in a cave in County Donegal have been dubbed the 'Twelve Warriors.' Ethan Clark, a noted archeologist, calls this one of the greatest finds of the last seventy-five years and expects the examination of the Warrior Cave site to draw some of the world's most noted anthropologists and archeologists. And now for today's weather report..."

The portly innkeeper flicked off the small TV perched behind the registration desk and turned to the American couple waiting to get their keys. "Mummies. The TV people took up every spare room in town. Thanks be to God, they didn't mention Carrigclarseach, else we'd have every loony in the country descending on us. Praise be, they packed up their bags and moved out the other day. 'Tis lucky you are anyway to get Thorn Cottage. Professor Clooney fell and broke her hip, poor woman, and had to cancel her regular stay with us. She would have loved getting her hands on those corpses."

A giggle escaped the young woman. "I thought they only had mummies in Egypt."

"Nay, Dublin, too. 'Tis crawling with 'em."

"Crawling, eh?" The man smiled briefly at the loquacious fellow. "I guess we're lucky they're not crawling around here."

Connelly nodded. "Aye. Lucky, indeed."

The young woman smiled. "That's for sure."

Connelly was dazzled. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Hair as gold as the sun and eyes gray-blue like the heavens on a soft day when a fine mist silvers the sky. Her husband looked to be a bit older, but quite distinguished looking. "And what brings you to our town?"

"It was a last minute decision on my part." He glanced at his young companion with a fond look. "I wanted to give her a surprise belated birthday gift."

"Well, 'tis a wonderful gift then and welcome, *cead mile failte* and may your stay with us be a happy one."

He presented the guest book and they signed their names. He checked them against their registration. Kawsantower, that was a right queer name, but Brigid, now, that was a fine Irish one. He handed over the old-fashioned keys with a flourish. "Mr. and Mrs. Kawsantower, you'll find cheese and tomato sandwiches in your fridge with some pop. The missus thought you might be hungry after your drive from the airport. Will you be needing help with your luggage?"

Brigid shook her head. "No thanks. We packed light and the larger suitcases can be wheeled."

"And please, it's Brigid and Gabe. C'mon, Bridge. Let's unpack. I could use a hot shower after driving all the way from Shannon."

Connelly heard Brigid's laughter drifting back through the front door as it slowly swung shut.

“You just want to have your wicked way with me, you greedy thing.”  
He grinned. If he were Gabe Kawsantower he’d want his way with that one.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, Gabe, it’s charming!”

The little thatched cottage was like something from another time. From the outside it looked like a centuries-old dwelling. Brigid knew it came with all the modern conveniences--the printout from the Irish tourist board website listed them with pride--yet the thought that came to her when she looked at the white-washed walls was to wonder if her great, great, great, grandmother had lived in one like it. She had no idea. Her grandmother had never spoken much about the town; there was an odd reluctance to even mention its name. When she was little she’d badgered her for tales of the old country, but she’d purse her lips and shoo her away. Then she died, leaving her alone until Gabe came into her life. Even Gabe claimed he didn’t know anything about Brigid’s ancestors. Whatever she knew about Ireland she learned on her own. Truth to tell, she found that she had the same unwillingness to delve too deeply. If Gabe hadn’t tricked her, she never would have thought to come this way. But here they were and she was determined to enjoy herself.

“I knew you’d like this place.” Gabe smiled. “I’ll bring in the bags. Aren’t you glad I insisted we come?”

“Don’t break your arm patting your back. I expected to be sunning myself in Cancun, not a town in the back of beyond.”

“Well, I felt it was more than time to find out about your roots.”

“I guess you’re right. I wonder if anyone’s left who knew my people?”

“Maybe. We’ll see.”

They entered the cottage and stowed the bags in the bedroom. The queen-sized bed sported a rainbow-colored handmade quilt. Further exploration revealed a remodeled kitchen and a cozy breakfast nook that looked out onto a flowering garden. The parlor’s polished wood table was draped with lacy, fairy-web doilies, and an immense fireplace filled one entire wall. As Brigid admired the room, she heard Gabe’s voice through the open bedroom door. “The john’s tiny, but adequate.”

“Let me see.” Brigid re-entered the bedroom and peeked into the bathroom. “Yep, we’ll have to share the shower.” She yawned and flung herself onto one of the beds. “Damn, I’m beat. The time change must’ve gotten to me.”

“I know what you mean. Let’s turn in early. We’ll do some exploring tomorrow.”

“I’ll get those sandwiches Connelly mentioned.” She kicked off her sandals and strolled barefoot into the kitchen.

“Great, I’m starved.” Gabe slipped off his loafers, taking a moment to wiggle his toes in the plush rug lying on top of the shiny oak floor. “Let me help. I’ll set the table.”

Brigid laughed. “This I have to see.”

They gobbled up the sandwiches as if they hadn’t eaten for days. “I’m so full I can’t move.” Brigid licked the last crumb from the side of her mouth and heaved a contented sigh.

“Me, too.” Gabe downed the last of his pop and stretched. “We’ll sleep late, take a picnic lunch tomorrow and then check out the area.”

“Sounds like a winner.” She yawned, then grinned. “Dibs on the bathroom.”

“Fine. Just don’t use up all the hot water.”

They carried their dishes to the sink and Brigid turned to Gabe. “You can go first. Take a nice, long shower.” She smiled wickedly. “Maybe I’ll join you later.”

Gabe snagged her around the waist and cupped her behind, pressing her against his groin. “How about joining me now?” His tongue delved between her lips. “A little welcome home gift?”

He lifted her and carried her into the bedroom, setting her down at the foot of the bed. She stripped off her clothes, tossing them on the chair by the window and waited while Gabe got rid of his clothing, throwing them on top of hers.

Brigid glanced down at his crotch and grinned. “Guess you’re not too tired, huh?”

“Guess not. C’mere, babe. Shall we try out the bed first?”

He watched, transfixed, as Brigid moved over to him and gave him a slight push. He fell backward, drawing her with him. She shifted, straddling his thighs and stroked the underside of his shaft. He shuddered. The touch of her hands on his bare skin never failed to arouse him. She moved down, taking him between her lips and he bucked within her mouth’s moist embrace. She swirled her tongue around his aching penis as she cupped his balls and fondled them. He groaned. If he let her continue, he’d come in her mouth and that wasn’t his plan right now.

He stretched out his hand and gently caressed her silky hair. He took a deep breath and let it out before he could speak. “Enough, babe. Sit up. I want a taste of you, too.”

The golden fall of her hair brushed against his cock as she slid up his body and rested her hands on his shoulders. He drew a taut nipple into his mouth and suckled. She tasted sweeter than the honeyed mead of Ireland and her skin was softer than swan’s down. He cupped her round ass, urging her to shift and take him into her body. He heard the smile in her voice. “Is that an invitation?”

He smacked her lightly on her smooth butt.

She gasped, but managed to respond, still teasing him. “Have I been a naughty girl or do you want me to be one?”

He pinched the nipple not engulfed in his avid mouth.

“Ow! Too hard!” she exclaimed and pulled away from him.

*My God, did I hurt her?* “Bridge, are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “Idiot, of course not. Now, be quiet while I get naughty.”

She raised her arms above her head, lifting her breasts like an offering. She sank down on his erection and slowly began to move, rising and falling like waves of music. His hands slipped to her waist and held her as she increased the tempo. Their harsh gasps filled the cottage as they came closer to reaching their climax. Gabe heard that little whimper she made when she was almost there and he urged her on. “Faster. Come with me, darling. Come for me.”

He shouted as his climax struck and his name was wrung from her lips as she attained her own release and collapsed limply on his chest. She sighed as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Forget about the shower. We’ll just lie here until they cart us away.”

Gabe chuckled. “We better move. You don’t want to shock Mrs. Connelly, do you?”

“You’re right.” She rolled off him and touched his cheek. “You go first. Take a nice, long shower.” She paused, turning serious. “I know you’re still having those bad dreams. You look like you could use a good night’s rest.”

“I look that lousy, huh?” He grimaced. “That’s okay. Go ahead, hon. I’ll wait my turn.”

\* \* \* \*

Gabe watched as Brigid drifted off to sleep. He rolled his shoulders, trying to unknot them. Even the hot shower he’d taken hadn’t relaxed his tense muscles. Maybe if he explored his memories calmly while he was still awake, the distorted images in his nightmares would stop. He’d tried everything else. He leaned back against the pillows and let his mind drift. He could still remember that day fifteen years ago as if it were yesterday.

When he’d gotten the call from the Keepers of the Environment that he had a special assignment, he hadn’t expected to find a teary-eyed, eleven-year-old girl sitting in the KOTE lawyers’ waiting room. He’d left her curled up in one of the leather armchairs while he’d received his briefing. Brigid’s grandmother, the woman who had raised the orphaned child, had been killed in a car accident. Her death had set off a chain reaction that brought to light a family of Terran Keepers who had gone to ground over one hundred and fifty years ago, and an entire lost group of Irish Keepers. The family journal that found its way to Claire Galliardi spoke cryptically of an Irish woman who had hid from an ancient, nameless evil. The majority of the writing was in a code that still remained unbroken, but that tiny bit of information and the last few words were in plain English--attempt no contact with these Terrans, keep Brigid’s Terran origin hidden from her until her twenty-seventh birthday and then bring her home. The words were treated as a sacred trust and Gabe, as a Protector, had followed those directions. He’d taken her home with him and she thought he was a distant relation. For a while she’d called him uncle.

And then things changed. He’d fallen in love with her.

He couldn’t remember when he’d first realized it. Perhaps it had been when Brigid had turned twenty-one and graduated from college with a degree in English and a teaching job at the private school run by KOTE in New York City. She could have moved out of the three-story brownstone they shared with his housekeeper, Mrs. Doherty. And he waited for her to do so. She had her own apartment on the ground floor and she went out on dates and they took separate vacations. She had her own life, though she never shut him out of it. She had boyfriends and he sensed the day she had her first sexual experience. But he kept his own counsel, expecting her to say she wanted to leave.

And then, one day she confronted him.

“Enough. I’m tired of waiting for you to get past the age differences and tell me what you feel. I love you and I know you love me. Let’s make it official.”

They had and with the full approval of KOTE. It seemed the seer had foreseen their marriage, but didn’t want to force them to wed.

Gabe couldn’t believe it; he still couldn’t believe it. And for the last five years their life together had been incredible.

He sighed. Brigid’s birthday came and went and they remained in New York. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the insistence of Donovan Callahan, he might never have brought Brigid to Ireland. He had yet to tell her who she was. Now he no longer had a choice. Callahan had told him that Brigid’s presence in Ireland was foreseen in the Book of

Sorhineth. Though it was unclear why, it was imperative that she arrived in Ireland before May first--Bealtaine.

Gabe shuddered. The dreams had started in February after Brigid's birthday and they were horrifying. Fire, blood and magic--powerful, evil magic. And scenes of Brigid trapped in a ring of fire and crying out to him to help her, that she didn't know what to do. And it was Gabe's fault. He'd done his best to encourage Brigid to develop her physical and creative abilities, but he couldn't help her with her Terran abilities. He didn't even know what element she had an affinity with and Brigid knew nothing of magic. In those terrible dreams Brigid had asked him why he'd failed her. Gabe could only watch while blackness darker than night engulfed her. He prayed that it was just his guilty conscience and not an as yet unknown gift of prophecy.

He bent and brushed a silky curl from Brigid's forehead and steeled his resolve. He wouldn't let those dreams come true. He'd do anything to keep her safe.

Anything.

\* \* \* \*

*28th April--Midnight*

Gortham leaned against one of the birch trees near the surveillance van. He glanced at the glowing green face of his watch and frowned. Brennan was late. Had the bastard sworn off the booze since his last buy? Shit! He needed the son of a bitch. Nimhnach had need of him. He took another drag from his cigarette, then crushed the butt beneath his heel. He heard a scuffling noise and smiled.

Good. Brennan was here.

The shambling figure of the Warrior Cave guard came around the van, his flashlight bobbing in his hand. The beam caught Gortham in his eyes and he flinched. "Get the goddamn light out of my face, asshole! It took you long enough to get here."

Brennan licked his lips. "Sorry, sorry. I fell asleep in the van. I didn't hear my watch alarm go off."

"Enough chitchat. Where's the cash?"

Brennan moved closer to Gortham's burly figure. He reached into his pocket and drew out the notes with a trembling hand. "Here. Where's my whiskey?"

Pocketing the money, Gortham handed over the bottle. "Go ahead. Take a swig. You look thirsty."

Brennan needed little urging and upped the bottle to his mouth, the amber liquid spilling down his chin. "What the hell?" He gasped and gagged and the bottle dropped from his suddenly weak fingers. His eyes bulged, drool trickled from between his lips and he collapsed, grasping his throat. He stumbled into Gortham's arms, clutching at his shirt as he sagged to the ground, his body twitching.

Gortham watched as the movements finally stopped, then kicked him in the side. Nothing.

Good. Whistling, he knelt and shoved up the sleeves of Brennan's jacket, revealing hairy wrists. Reaching behind the tree, he drew out a gleaming machete. One stroke, two. Brennan's hands were severed. He gathered them up and placed them in the plastic lined sack he'd brought with him. Grabbing Brennan under the shoulders, he dragged his body and shoved him beneath the heavy underbrush.

Done.

Nimhnach would be pleased by this night's work.

\* \* \* \*

*29th April--Dawn*

Torc Flatnose yawned and scratched his backside. He peered closely at a tiny black dot as it crawled along his index finger. He must have fallen asleep on top of an ants nest. Shaking his coarse, woolen tunic, he dislodged several more insects.

He turned his head, surveying the dimly lit interior of their den. Ma'an lay on his back near the mouth of the woven reed hut, snoring so fiercely the very air vibrated. Cull, curled in a ball like a hedgehog, whimpered in his sleep. Torc shifted the branches shielding them from the light of day and looked out. A cloudless blue sky greeted him. With a sigh of resignation he took his war hammer and nudged Cull in the side. "Wake up, my friend, 'tis another day."

Cull sprang up, hitting his head on the rough, low ceiling. With an oath, he smacked Torc's shoulder. "Why do you do that? Each time you rouse me, you startle me and I bash my head."

"Don't blame me. You'd think by now you'd know not to jump up like that."

"Cut the caterwauling." Ma'an broke in. "What does the day look like?"

"Clear as a babe's eyes." Torc shrugged. "As ever."

The three shared a determined glance.

"Are you ready?" Ma'an asked.

"As ready as I've been each time." Cull spat in the dust, leaving a glistening drop of moisture quickly absorbed by the thirsty earth.

Torc hefted his hammer. "I pray to the gods that this day the spell placed on us shall be lifted and that we put an end to Dagda and any who may deter us from our goal."

"May your words fall upon the ears of the gods." Ma'an bowed his head.

They set out with a light step. Perhaps today they would finally be freed from Nimhnach's enchantment.

That sly bastard. 'Twas only after they made several fruitless attempts to reach Dagda's cave that they realized they were bound by some spell. Endlessly, they would seek his hiding place only to fail by the fading light and return to the vacated campsite and their small hut to sleep once more.

They came upon few people and seemed invisible to those they did. The people's garments changed, as did the language they heard, but they kept apart, dimly aware that time didn't flow straight. As the days passed, fewer and fewer people crossed their path. In fact, they hadn't seen anyone for more days than they cared to recall. The loneliness of their existence tore at them. When would it end?

They entered the forest slowly, the mists swirling around their feet.

"Does it not seem thinner to you?" Cull pointed to the wisps lapping at their heels.

"Aye. I believe you're right." Torc glanced around. "What think you, Ma'an?"

"I think we must be vigilant. We have been disappointed too many times. Let's move cautiously and see what transpires."

Single file, they inched their way through the woods. The mist evaporated the

farther they trod. Finally, they reached the point at which they always faltered. The three paused and looked at each other and kept on moving.

\* \* \* \*

“Demons!”

“Druids!”

“Magic!”

The trio stared in awe and horror at the scene before them. They had reached Dagda’s cave, but to what end? There, camped before the entrance were strange creatures of both sexes. Short clothing revealed shapely female limbs and firm busts. Unknown objects made of strange, shiny material set upon wheels, formed of what appeared to be leather, were scattered about the encampment. Some of the people wore insect antennas upon their heads and spoke into small amulets attached to their exotic headgear. Instruments of magic were placed throughout the camp, performing who knew what kind of sorcery.

“Ma’an, what manner of creatures are these? Be they druids, demons?” Though Cull tried, he couldn’t keep his voice from trembling.

“I don’t know. I do know we must observe this strange scene carefully.”

“I like it not that they feel so secure they post no guards.” Torc caressed the handle of his war hammer.

“They may have other safeguards in place that are not visible to us, Torc.”

Ma’an took a deep, fortifying breath and stiffened his spine. They had gone through many trials together and they would get through this one. He slapped Cull and Torc on their backs with forced confidence. “Come, friends, let’s explore the area some more.”

\* \* \* \*

“Then ‘tis agreed. Cull, you shall try your skill with words to gain some understanding of what they plan. Torc, protect Cull. I shall maintain watch. If you hear a wood warbler call twice, return immediately to our meeting place. May the gods go with us.”

The three moved as silently as the flies flitting in the woods. Cull and Torc crept closer to the perimeter. Torc motioned Cull toward a strange, large, wheeled object parked some distance away from the main activity. One of the men from the camp opened its narrow end and climbed inside, shutting a door behind him. Torc noticed a small square cut out from one side of the box with light emanating from within it.

“Creep closer and look into this thing. Perhaps you can see what the man does in it.”

Cull nodded and, bending low, sneaked below the little window. Strange sounds could be heard coming from inside, but the opening was set too high. Turning, he saw a tree’s low, hanging branch and swiftly clambered onto it. Stretching out as far as he dared, he peered into the brightly lit interior. Covering all sides were more magical contraptions with colorful lights that flickered and danced. He gazed past the shoulder of the man who had entered and watched as he placed the insect headgear on and fiddled with short sticks and pebbles fitted into the flat surfaces of the magic tools.

A small box with a shiny side sat before the man. Suddenly, the inside of Dagda’s

cave appeared in it, lit up by magical sun catchers and much reduced in size. Tiny creatures rushed to and fro around the bodies of twelve men. Cull's hold on the tree limb slipped as fear overwhelmed him. He tumbled to the ground, his breath knocked out, and found himself staring at a pair of feet encased in strange footwear.

"Are you in one piece?"

"Aye, but I'm not sure if he is." He pointed toward the feet sticking out from the bush and Torc dragged the body from under it. "By Lugh's balls, he has no hands!"

"By the teats of the Morrigan, what have you done now, Torc?" Both men jumped, startled by Ma'an's voice as he moved into the small clearing. "He's dead, I presume."

Torc hung his head. Somehow Ma'an could always make him feel like an untried warrior. "Aye. 'Twas not my fault, Ma'an. We found him this way."

"'Tis no matter now. Strip him. His attire should be of some use for us. And take up all his possessions. Carefully! Then conceal him again. We have no time to bury him."

Within minutes, a bloody, naked body lay hidden beneath the forest debris.

"Now, back to camp to examine our booty," Ma'an whispered. "And try not to kill anyone else, Torc."

As silently as they came, they slipped back into the shadowed forest realm, their fears still unallayed and their goal still not reached.

\* \* \* \*

*29th April--Noon*

Ethan Clark knelt next to the corpse lying at the one o'clock position. He was careful not to touch the body's leathered skin, although his examination gloves prevented any of his skin's oils from clinging to the mummy's aged surface. That was the first mystery about this site. Conditions were not right for this type of preservation. And the nudity of the bodies was highly unusual for their ritualistic burial. He glanced up at the carvings incised in the cave wall. Arranged in a circle, it took no great thinker to figure out that the *ogham*-like lines gave the names of the men placed so carefully in a sacred circle. Each body lay on its side, the knees slightly bent, the hair neatly arranged over the shoulders. They were healthy looking specimens for their time, somewhere between 2000 and 1000 B.C.E. They seemed ready to spring up with spear or club in their hand. And that was the damndest thing of all.

They had no hands. Not a one of them. Twelve pairs of hands neatly severed with one stroke. It shouldn't even have been possible, not with the type of weapons available back then. And no sign of a struggle of any kind. There should have been. Twelve strong, healthy men don't just lie down and calmly wait to have their hands cut off while they bleed to death. Even if they had been sleeping, someone should have woken up and heard the sounds of men screaming as their hands were struck from their wrists.

The blood spatters were all over the place, not pooled beneath the corpses. This led Clark to speculate that they had been moved during and after the massacre. Who had done that? Where were the hands? Where were the clothes and weapons? Why were they slain in this manner? And why had they found a fresh corpse murdered exactly as these ancient men had been slaughtered?

The body of Tom Brennan, one of the guards, had been discovered earlier that morning stashed beneath some heavy underbrush near the perimeter of the site. His

lips were drawn back in a hideous rictus of pain. And his hands were gone, just like those poor souls in the cave. A soggy, heavy dual trail of blood led from behind the electronics van, where it appeared he had fallen, to the brush, where his body had been found. His watch and all his jewelry had been stripped from him. His gun, his walkie-talkie. Everything.

There was no family to inform of his murder. His wife had died the year before in an accident and he had been drinking more and more each day. Clark had hired him only as a favor to Eddie Doohan, one of the other guards. They hadn't even looked that hard for him, figuring he'd drunk himself into a stupor and was somewhere sleeping it off. Eddie had found him and, after puking up his guts, had beat himself up for not searching harder for Tom. It was only when they realized that he had been dead long before Eddie had found the body that he stopped blaming himself.

Eddie had driven into town and informed Macklin, the *garda* officer. They all agreed to keep it under wraps for the present. No need getting the townspeople upset. Yet. Only Lord Nolen had been informed as he was informed of everything that went on in the town.

Who the hell could have killed poor Tom? And in such a manner? Macklin had immediately thought of the members of the Warrior Cave team, as they called the people working on the site. Other than Macklin, they were the only ones who had seen the inside of the cave, the only ones who knew about the missing hands. Whoever had done this had to be crazy and no one on the team had any history of mental illness. But they were the one lead that Macklin had in this bizarre, horrible murder.

Clark could only be grateful that the camera crews had left before the body had been discovered. He sat on the cave floor and pondered the bodies. Something niggled at his brain. Something about the hands, but damned if he could put his finger on it. Well, nothing more he could do now. Macklin was questioning each of the team members one by one inside the electronics van. It would be his turn soon. Till then he'd sit here in the quiet of the cave and try not to think of hands.

## Chapter Two

*29th April--Midday*

"It's gorgeous here. I'm so glad we came."

Brigid's smile lit up the forest as she twirled, her unbound hair flaring around her. She threw herself down next to Gabe, who lay stretched out on the blanket they had brought with them, the remains of their picnic scattered about him. She sighed with contentment and turned her head to look at him. For the first time in a long time, he had slept through the night without any bad dreams. When she'd tiptoed to open the window for some fresh air, he had been sleeping so deeply, he hadn't heard her raise the squeaky window.

They'd slept late, making love before they had even gotten out of bed and then fallen back to sleep, not leaving the cottage until after they'd raided the fridge and found a feast. Lemonade, sliced beef and cheese sandwiches, potato cakes, apples and pears had been left for them. In the cabinets were hand-crafted crockery, linen napkins, chunky glass goblets making for the most elegant picnic Brigid had ever had. She gazed at the beautiful birch trees, listened to the clear running stream and the birds. It was like paradise. To think, they'd almost missed out on all this. "I'm going to rinse everything at that stream we passed. Shouldn't take me long. Just relax."

She rose to leave, but he grabbed her hand.

"Not yet. It's very secluded here." He smiled and ran his hand up her arm. "Connelly told us not many of the townspeople come this way." He tugged her and she fell across his chest. "Make love with me. Here. Now."

His fingers tangled in her hair as he plunged his tongue in her mouth. She moaned and pressed against him, undulating her body. His hands slipped under her T-shirt and he groaned as he felt her smooth skin beneath his fingers.

No bra.

He pulled the shirt over her head, exposing her breasts to the fresh air, and her nipples tightened. He slid his hands under her shorts, trying to take them off.

"Let me," Brigid said.

She lifted off Gabe's body and, with trembling hands, unbuttoned and unzipped her denim shorts. She pulled them off with her panties and tossed them on to the blanket. She'd never seen him like this before. Oh, he was a vigorous lover, but yesterday and this morning, he was demanding, a little rough and seemingly insatiable. They had made love only a little while ago and now he was hungry for more. She giggled. Maybe it was something in the air.

"What's so funny?"

"You. Me. Us. Making love where anyone could find us."

He frowned. "You're right." He brightened. "I'll leave my clothes on. Make love to me now before they find us."

"You!"

She undid his fly and released his penis. He was hard and hot in her hands. She rose to her knees and then sank down, feeling him slip into her sex as easily as a key in

a lock. She closed her eyes and rocked on him, the sun kissing her skin while she inhaled the potent mix of sex and the forest smells. She pictured what the two of them looked like in the middle of the woods, making love. She moved faster, an exquisite ache building in her core. She kept her eyes shut as she thought of the shadows of the leaves dappling their skin, the fresh, pure touch of the morning dew coating their bodies. Faster. She moved faster, racing to achieve her climax. She grunted as her movements grew choppy. She felt rough, callused hands on her ass, kneading her flesh, urging her to come with him. Join with him.

“That’s it, my bright love. Now!”

The orgasm that ripped through her was greater than any she had ever experienced. She screamed and opened her eyes.

And for one split second, the man beneath her was a total stranger.

And she fainted.

\*

“Bridge? Darling? Are you okay? Wake up!”

She felt a soft cloth on her brow and opened her eyes. Gabe gazed down at her, his face filled with concern.

“You scared me, darling. You’ve never fainted after we made love.”

“I’m okay.” She smiled. “You’ve never before made love to me like that.” She chuckled. “You’ve become a randy goat in your middle age!”

He laughed. “Yeah. You’re okay, all right.” He cupped her bare breast. “Get dressed and relax. We’ll clean up later.” He smiled ruefully. “I think I could use a little time to recharge my batteries.”

“I didn’t know you used batteries,” she teased as she put on her clothes. “I want to freshen up a bit. I’ll take the picnic dishes with me. I promise I’ll hurry back.”

“You sure, hon?”

She nodded.

“Well, you know, I think I *will* take a snooze. Wake me up when you come back and we’ll do some exploring.”

Brigid gathered everything up in one of the large linen napkins and headed to the stream about a half-mile away. The countryside pulled at her; the woods seemed eerily familiar. She shrugged off the feeling. All forests looked the same. All birds sang as sweetly. Every breeze caressed her skin. There was nothing different about this place. Nothing. Except that she thought she had just fucked a stranger! She shook her head. It was just a weird dream.

Right.

She found the stream without any problem and knelt by the water. For a few moments she let her fingers drift in the gentle current. The water was so clear you could see straight to the bottom. Was it drinkable? She cupped her hands and brought a small mouthful to her lips. It tasted sweet and pure. She splashed her face and neck with the glittering drops, letting them trickle down the front of her T-shirt. She closed her eyes and savored the moment. The scents of the forest. The peace.

\* \* \* \*

Torc gazed in fascination at the woman. He had strayed from Cull and Ma'an to empty his bowels. Heading back to cross the stream, he heard the sounds the female had made as she marched noisily through the woods. He watched in silence as she knelt on the bank. Watched as her buttocks were displayed for his pleasure by the strange, tight clothing she wore. Her skimpy blouse barely shielded her full, lush breasts and he could see her nipples thrusting out the material. Golden hair like the sun swung freely, shielding her face as she bent to drink from the stream. He could span her waist with his hands and her sweetly rounded ass begged to be fondled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been with a female. His cock grew as he thought of how it would feel to take the woman from behind. She might get up at any moment. If he were to take her, now was the time to act. He crept slowly toward her, his silence at odds with his size.

Closer now.

\*

Brigid grunted as the breath was crushed out of her by the great weight that crashed on top of her. Her head was flung forward, her face into the muddy bank, her hair slipping into the water. She felt a rough, hairy hand grab at her waistband, trying to drag it down. The smell of an unwashed body overwhelmed her as she raised her head from the water. There was dirt in her mouth as she tried to catch her breath and escape.

The bastard kept trying to pull down her denim shorts. The stiff material cut into her flesh. Her hand groped blindly for the utensils, trying to find a knife, even a fork, to stab him. She gasped as a blade cut into her palm as she fumbled with it. She could feel blood seeping from her wound, but she thrust wildly behind her, striking flesh and causing the man to rear back. Quickly, she rolled over and opened her eyes. And stared in mute horror at a hideously deformed face, a gaping hole where the nose should be. She opened her mouth to scream when a fist the size of a dinner plate blotted out the horrible vision and brought blessed oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

"By Luchain's cock, what have you done now, Torc?"

Ma'an's voice assaulted Torc's ears and he winced.

"Is the woman dead?" Cull asked.

"Nay." Torc's voice was filled with wonder. "'Tis Brigid."

"Dagda's daughter?" Ma'an laughed incredulously.

"'Tis her," Torc insisted. "Even with a mud bespattered face, she is beautiful enough to be a goddess."

Ma'an and Cull took in their fill of the unconscious woman. Her scanty attire displayed her slim arms and long, shapely legs. Torc wiped the dirt from her skin as best he could and then only a bruise marred the fairness of her cheek.

"Beauteous I'll grant you, and a strong resemblance, but the goddess Brigid? Why didn't she pierce you with her arrows or cause you to go blind?" Ma'an asked.

"I surprised her from behind. She couldn't speak with a mouth full of mud and she is weaponless. She did attempt to kill me with that puny knife. I don't know for sure whether she be Brigid, but can we take the chance?"

"True. For once you are not thinking with your cock. Cull, bind her hands. We'll take her back with us to the camp. Mayhap we can obtain useful information from her."

“She tried to scream when she saw my face.”

“We want no screams, nor do we want her to curse us. Cull, gag her then wake her and tell her that she is our ... guest. And treat her with care. I shall search the woods nearby and make sure she travels alone. I’ll join you shortly.”

Cull gently shook Brigid’s shoulder. She started, her eyes wide with fear as she looked into Cull’s bearded face. She bucked and kicked as he pulled her up into a standing position.

“Brigid, daughter of Dagda, you are our guest. We mean you no disrespect, but we must insist that you come with us.”

\*

Brigid shook her head. What was he saying? Her eyes darted like a trapped fox’s as she looked for Gabe. He was nowhere in sight. Could they have found him back at their picnic site and killed him? Tears blinded her and she offered no further resistance as the man bound her wounded palm with a strip of cloth cut from her shirt and tied her wrists with a narrow leather belt from his waist. He grasped the trailing leather end and led her away from the stream.

Brigid stumbled after the bearded man, the stench of his unwashed body nearly gagging her. The horrible creature who had assaulted and tried to rape her followed behind. She glanced over her shoulder once and saw his appalling face glaring at her. He winked and rubbed his crotch, grinning. From then on, she stared straight ahead at the back of her other captor. Where the taller man was, she had no idea. Suddenly, her assailant called out and she looked behind. The clean-shaven man hurried after them. He was naked from the waist up, except for a short, dusty cape thrown over his shoulders. In one hand he carried a bulky bundle made from a dirty, bloody jacket. The men greeted him briefly, their conversation incomprehensible to her. The newcomer quickly took the lead. They led her deeper and deeper into the forest, away from the village, she assumed. She tripped once and the disfigured creature picked her up, hoisting her back to her feet. He whispered something into her ear, his stale breath making her gag. She knew his words were some lewd suggestion.

The bearded man gave her tether a slight jerk and she tripped after him, trying her best not to stumble again. Finally, they reached a large clearing. A small, grassy knoll jutted prominently at one end. A large, centuries old ash tree posed as sentinel across from her. Off in the distance, amethyst-tinged mountains climbed to the sky. As they entered farther into the glade she saw the ashy remains of a campfire.

The air around her seemed different, as though the world had taken a deep breath and hadn’t let it go.

All her strength disappeared. She fell to her knees in the dirt near the stone-encircled campfire.

She sagged forward in utter dejection. She still couldn’t believe what happened. The day had started off so wonderful. Now, her world was destroyed. This town ... they should never have come here.

\*

Cull stared at the dirty, forlorn female. She sat in total silence, her knees drawn up to her chest, her head bowed. Her glorious, golden hair was tangled with forest detritus. Her condition tore at Cull’s heart. Could this pathetic creature be Dagda’s daughter?

She acted as if she couldn't understand their speech. He shook his head. He would soon find out. He hunkered down and set to it. Grasping her chin, he lifted it and stared into her sky-blue eyes.

"Cull." He pointed to his chest. "Brigid." And he pointed to her. She repeated his name and he nodded.

He picked up a piece of kindling and drew a picture of the sun in the dirt. He pointed at it and named it, then pointed to Brigid. She was smart and caught on quickly. Soon, he had the words for dozens of objects. She nodded encouragement as he parroted them back to her. He still couldn't communicate any sort of complicated sentence. He needed to hear more. He had always had a talent that enabled him to understand any language of which he heard enough. The best way he knew to encourage speech was to converse as much as possible. Taking a deep breath, he began.

He told her the tale of how he and his comrades found themselves in their present situation, though he believed she understood not a word. He spoke eloquently, the story flowing from him like a gushing river. Finally, he stopped, the words once more dammed up. He waved a hand in her direction and smiled as she slowly began to talk.

"I don't know who you are, Cull, but you're a bastard and you and your friends deserve to die a slow death, your eyes pecked put by crows and your pricks cut off. If I get the chance, I'll kill you. So don't turn your back on me, you piece of filth and don't leave anything by me that I can use as a weapon, for I will use it and I will gladly strike you down. I swear it."

She stared into his eyes and defiantly spat at his face.

Cull wiped the spittle from his cheek. By the time she had finished her tirade, he had understood her. Maybe it was the intensity of her words, but he had never gleaned the understanding of a language as quickly. Maybe it was because she truly was Dagda's daughter. He grinned widely. His ability to speak her tongue would shock her. Perhaps he could provoke her to confirm or deny her identity.

"Brigid of the golden hair, are you Dagda's daughter?"

Her mouth dropped open in astonishment. But her eyes held no reaction to Dagda's name when she responded. "Dagda? I'm Brigid Kawsantower, daughter of Sean Dunleavey. You sneaky bastard, you speak English. Well, I hope you understood every word I said. And I meant every word I said. Who the hell are you? Why did that ugly bastard accost me? Why am I here? What do you want from me?"

Cull shook his head. "English? I do not know this word. Then Dagda is not your sire?"

The woman stared and shook her head. She looked so tired. The afternoon's events must have battered at her strength.

She rubbed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. "Why won't you leave me alone? Why did I ever come here?" Her voice trembled. "Maybe if I shut my eyes and wish real hard this whole day will go away."

As though she willed it, her eyes closed and she slumped forward into the dirt at his feet.

\* \* \* \*

*"Brigid, daughter, listen and do not speak. I am Dagda, your father. Let your Terran*

*sprit awaken now in this time of need. Glean what you can from these three and know that there is another far more dangerous who threatens to destroy all who stand against him and his unbridled desire to bring the world to its knees."*

*Brigid moaned and stirred. As though viewing a movie, she saw a heavily muscled man in his middle years, his golden hair lying in a long, thick braid that reached the middle of his back. In one hand he carried a huge hammer, its wooden handle carved with ancient runes. He wore a short cape of woven, natural wool and a knee-length linen tunic the color of spring grass. He stood tall and proud in an immense cave brightly lit by torches. His blue eyes looked tender and he smiled as though he could see her.*

Brigid's mind was in turmoil. Was she Dagda's daughter? He spoke in a language similar to the three men who had abducted her. How could she understand him? What did he mean by Terran? The one thing he said that made sense was that she must bide her time and try to stay alive until she could find out more information.

She would keep this vision to herself and her newfound comprehension of the language her captors spoke a secret.

The torchlight flickered, and as though doused by a single breath, plunged the cave into darkness and Brigid back into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Gentle drops of rain fell upon Brigid's skin. She rolled over and buried her face in the crook of her elbow. A roughened hand nudged her shoulder and turned her over onto her back.

"Wake up, Brigid, daughter of Sean, you've rested long enough. Ma'an wishes to speak with you."

She recognized Cull's voice and opened her eyes. She lay on the ground in the glade. Pure, crystal water dripped on her chest from the small wooden cup he offered her. She sat up and drank from it greedily, holding it in her tethered hands. So, it wasn't a dream. But what of her vision of the cave and Dagda?

"I shall translate what Ma'an says. I urge you to respond truthfully."

Brigid nodded briefly and listened intently as Ma'an spoke. Now was the time to test her comprehension. She bent her head to hide her reaction in case something he said might cause her to respond too strongly.

"Ask the woman again if she is Dagda's daughter. Find out whether those we saw at Dagda's cave are gods or druids or mortals. Where are Mil and his men? Where is Nimhnach?" Ma'an paused. "Get as much information from her as you can. Then, if she truly is not Dagda's get, kill her."

Brigid bit her lip. She understood the language all right. All too well.

Cull spoke softly. "Must we kill her, Ma'an? Surely she cannot harm us."

"If she is no goddess, she is a burden to us."

"Mayhap she may be ransomed."

"Look at her attire. She is barely clothed. She has but one slim band of gold about her finger. She certainly does not appear to be of any worth."

"Please, Ma'an, let us keep her alive. She may have valuable information for us."

Ma'an threw up his hands. "Then pray she is not Dagda's daughter for if she is, her wrath may consume us."

Brigid listened intently, her mind whirring. Unless she could convince these men that she was Dagda's child she'd either be killed or raped or both. So that's who she'd become.

"I ask you one last time, be you Brigid, daughter of Dagda? Lift up your eyes and answer me." Cull spoke slowly in heavily accented English.

Brigid's eyes blazed blue fire as she raised her head. "There is no further need for me to deny my name. I am Brigid and you have grievously insulted me. If I had had a weapon handy, you would have all been dead by now."

Torc lifted his hammer at her threatening tone, but Cull swiftly stayed his hand. "She now says she is Brigid. Put down your weapon."

Torc reluctantly lowered the hammer.

Ma'an spoke again. "Tis all well and good that she says she is Brigid, but she has yet to prove that she is whom she claims to be. Can she offer us a demonstration of her power?"

Cull translated Ma'an's words. "Ma'an wishes to see some proof that you are indeed the goddess Brigid."

Brigid's thoughts raced. She had no magical powers. She had no weapons; she had nothing, not even a cell phone to call for help. Then she remembered the palm-sized digital camera nestled in her pocket. Awkwardly, with her hands still loosely tied together, she drew out the camera, praying it hadn't been broken. She heard the men gasp as she displayed the undamaged, shiny, silver-toned object. Quickly, she snapped their picture and turned the camera around so they could see their image caught in the view screen.

"There, I have captured your spirits. If you dare harm me, I'll destroy them. Is this sufficient proof or would you like to see more?" She raised the camera, fingered the flash control and a brief, bright light blinded them.

The men blinked, trembling in fear, white spots dancing before their eyes, silenced by this display of power.

"Beg her pardon for Torc's rough treatment and remove her bonds. Tell her we knew not her identity or we would not have shown her such disrespect. How can we make amends?" Ma'an paused. "And ask her how comes it that she speaks in this unknown tongue."

"Ma'an wishes to know what language you speak."

"The common language that all people speak now."

"Now? What do you mean 'now'?" Cull asked as he untied her.

"How many years do you think have passed since you set foot in this country?" Brigid rubbed her wrists, wincing at the pain.

"It must be at least twelve years since we landed with Mil of the thousand captives."

Brigid laughed raucously, her voice tinged with hysteria. She had read of Mil, ruler of the Milesians. So, these men claimed to be from a time before Christ? They must have escaped from some asylum, but they still held the upper hand. Could she keep them off-balance by making them believe that they actually had traveled through time? She would have to try.

"Mil is long dead. It's more than three thousand years since his reign ended. Someone must have cast a powerful spell upon you that you should still be alive in this day and age, since you are only mere mortals."

“Nay.” Cull shook his head in denial. “It cannot be. It cannot be.” In his agitation, he spoke in his native tongue.

“What cannot be?” Ma’an demanded. “Speak, damn you. What did she say? What did that display of her power mean?”

“She captured our spirits in that object of hers and threatens to destroy them should we attempt to harm her. She speaks the common tongue of all who dwell in this land now.” He took a deep breath. “And it is over three thousand years since Mil lived.”

Horror gripped all three as Cull’s words slowly sank in. Torc cursed, stomping his feet and gnashing his teeth.

But Ma’an silenced them all when he pronounced one name. “Nimhnach. That bastard, he put that spell upon us that we could not achieve the task he demanded of us. He stole our land.”

“Our wealth.” Cull spat.

“Our women.” Torc’s bellow split the air.

Brigid smiled. She had more than accomplished her goal; they thought they had journeyed thousands of years. But who was Nimhnach? Could he be the one of whom the dream Dagda spoke? She didn’t know what to think; she would have to learn more.

“Why did she let us capture her? What does she want of us?” Ma’an spoke urgently, his words tumbling after themselves. “And ask her again about those at the cave.”

“I shall ask. We must keep our wits together.”

Brigid listened carefully. She had a few questions of her own that needed answering. “I heard you mention Nimhnach’s name. What is his involvement with you?”

Cull spoke quietly.

“I will tell you the truth; I have no reason to lie to you, my lady. Nimhnach betrayed us. You remember ‘twas a time of war and we were but common soldiers trying to carry out the commands that were given to us. Nimhnach held our families hostage and threatened to kill them.” He halted, gathering his thoughts. “We were sent to destroy your father and his most loyal lieutenants. We found his men already dead and cut off their hands as we were instructed, but we could not find your sire. We returned to camp and we were told our mission would not be completed until Dagda was found and ... executed. Our families would not be freed until we bore proof of our success.

“We tried in vain to return to the cave, but each time we did so, a fog arose that stopped us. Nimhnach, that druid bastard, must have put a spell upon us, for in vain we sought, day after day, to find the cave. We knew something was not right, but never in our wildest dreams could we have imagined that thousands of years had flown by.”

He tugged at his beard as the words poured from him.

“Finally, this morning for the first time we were able to reach the cave and ‘twas then that we saw all the wondrous magic and the druids who gathered there. We know not who they are, nor if Nimhnach still lives. Who rules Eire today is of no importance to us now. Dagda is no longer our enemy. ‘Twas Nimhnach who betrayed us and broke his promise to reward us and free our families. We humbly beg your pardon for insulting you and offer you our allegiance in defeating our common enemy.”

He knelt and bared his neck before her, motioning Torc and Ma’an to do the same.

Brigid gazed at the men groveling in the dirt at her feet. The final vestige of doubt left her. These men were not acting. They spoke a language she had never heard

before, but somehow understood. Inexplicably, they had come from the far distant past and collided with her safe, happy world, turning it upside down in an instant. But their actions appeared to be guided by another, Nimhnach, a druid of remarkable powers. She still didn't believe that she was the goddess Brigid or a Terran--whatever that was--after all she had no godlike powers, but Cull and the others believed so and she would play on that as long as possible.

"I accept your service for I need your aid, otherwise I would destroy you. Mortals in this day and age follow new gods and I have neither the time nor the desire to ally myself with those upstarts. My father still sleeps, safely hidden away, so it falls upon me to see to his protection and wreak my vengeance upon Nimhnach. But I must return to the village and ferret out more information. None of you would be able to infiltrate the area; only you speak the language, Cull, and your actions would immediately expose your ignorance of the modern day world. I will come back later and share what I learn with you all."

"Lady, I shall speak with my comrades and tell them of your plan."

"Don't waste time in idle discussion. I need to be on my way so I may prime the trap. The longer we delay, the more chance there is that Nimhnach will escape us." *There, that should speed things up.*

Cull related their conversation to Ma'an and Torc.

"Tis a good plan," Torc said.

"Can we trust her?" Ma'an asked.

"We must. We are fortunate she did not destroy our spirits, but she does need us. She will return," Cull stated.

"She has not answered many of our questions," Ma'an reminded him.

"There will be time for answers later. What we need now is action." Cull turned toward Brigid and saw her fondling the shiny, silver object. "And I think she grows impatient."

Ma'an threw his hands up in defeat. "Tell her we agree with her plan and pray that she is true to her word."

Brigid's sense of relief at Ma'an's agreement was outweighed by her indignation. "I am always true to my word."

The men gasped as they realized that Brigid understood all they had said.

"I need no longer conceal my knowledge of the language. I wished to measure your honesty and determine your intentions toward me." She turned toward Ma'an. "'Tis no matter whether you approve of my plan or not. But luckily for you, I needn't kill you all now. I will need your assistance later."

Ma'an found his courage and spoke. "When shall we expect your return?"

"I cannot say." She paused. "I think it would be better if you laid low for now."

"Laid low?"

"Stay here. You don't want to draw any attention to yourselves."

"Aye. Who knows if that dead body has been found yet."

*Dead body? My God, what else haven't they told me?*

\* \* \* \*

Gabe awoke with a start. He'd dreamt that Brigid was in trouble. He didn't think; he reacted. He ran, crashing through the forest back toward the stream. Dashing headlong,

he tripped over a fallen, concealed branch and went sprawling. Rising to his knees, he crept toward the stream. He peered through the dense undergrowth and checked out the small clearing. Empty. He entered the open area, peered at the sandy shore and dropped to the ground.

Blood. There were drops of blood on the sand. Shoved underneath the bushes were crockery shards. And a bloodied knife. He shuddered, took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind.

There wasn't much blood, perhaps it wasn't Brigid's, but belonged to whoever had taken her. He crawled toward the bank and examined the sandy shore. Grabbing a handful of mud, he concentrated and gathered all his Earth Keeper skills to read the dirt. The remnants were too meager. All he could discern was that more than one pair of feet had been there. He clenched his hands. What good was his Protector strength when it couldn't have prevented this and couldn't tell him where Brigid was--or if she was still alive? He dabbed his finger in a clot of blood. It was Brigid's. He had to believe that she hadn't been killed. There would have been a body. Less than fifteen minutes had passed. Not enough time to... No. He wouldn't think like that. Brigid was still alive and hadn't been touched. He would have known.

He stood. Enough. He needed to get help. He'd have to trust the humans in town for the moment. But only for the moment.

## Chapter Three

*29th April--Mid-afternoon*

Brigid swiped at another heavy branch punishing her legs, using the sturdy flashlight she'd taken from the glade. Her skin beaded with little ruby scratches. The thick forest growth seemed bent on pricking her and tearing at her clothes. Her right arm ached from being raised to shield her face. If she didn't know better, she'd think the birches were purposefully whipping at her. Half the time she stumbled when she inadvertently closed her eyes to protect them. She tried to keep the sound of the stream on the right. She thought that was the way she should go to get back to town.

Cull had been no help. He had no idea where the town was. He didn't even know that one existed and she had been in too much shock to pay attention to their route when they dragged her away from the stream. She forged on anyhow, putting as much distance as she could between her and the glade.

She was frantic to get back to Gabe. He must be worried sick wondering what had happened to her. Knowing Gabe, he would have gone to get help. Had it been only a few hours ago that they had made love in the forest?

The trees finally thinned out, but somehow she had lost the stream. She stopped indecisively. Which way should she turn? Towering oak trees on her right seemed to beckon her. She shrugged. It was as good a way as any. She thought she was headed east toward where the town should be.

The woodlands grew dense again and she despaired of ever finding her way out. She made one last turn and abruptly reached a dead end. A sheer cliff soared high, blocking her path. She sank to the ground, her hands clenched. Her fingernails pressed into her wounded palm and blood seeped through the makeshift bandage. She wanted to strike out at something. Anything. Instead, she hauled herself to her feet and approached the rock face.

*Could she climb it?*

Slowly, she ran her hands over the rough stone. She inched her way around the gray wall. Then she saw it--a small opening hidden by a crease in the rock and some heavy brush. A cool draft flowed freely from out of the darkness within. If air was coming from somewhere inside, there had to be a way through to the other side.

She was more than grateful that she had ordered Ma'an to give her the flashlight. She'd tested it and miraculously it still worked, although she had expected to use the sturdy torch to use as a club, not a light.

She fumbled in her pocket for the single tube of lipstick she had shoved into it years ago, or so it seemed. She'd use it to mark the walls of the cave should she be forced to turn back. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath and plunged into the darkness, the flashlight beam her only ray of hope.

The eerie silence engulfed her. The blackness crept around the edges of the light. The dirt floor was uncannily smooth. The twists and turns of the underground tunnel led ever downward, but the fresh breeze continued unabated. Initially, she was able to walk upright, but soon the ceiling began to slope lower and she needed to duck her head.

Every so often she'd take the lipstick and mark the rough walls with a lurid blood-red arrow. Before long, she was crawling, the silky dirt cold against her hands and knees. She prayed that she wasn't heading toward a dead end because the thought of crawling backward all the way to the entrance was daunting. However, that alluring draft kept drawing her on.

Then the narrow shaft took a deep dip downward and a sharp veer to the right, almost turning upon itself. She tumbled forward, sprawling on the floor of a large cavern revealed by her flashlight's piercing beam as it rolled on the ground. Still on all fours, she groped for the rugged black tube and played the light upward. High overhead she caught sight of a small opening in the cave's ceiling. She stood cautiously. If the breeze only came from that hole, she was in big trouble.

She shuffled around the cave wall in the murky grayness, leaving the flashlight off to conserve the batteries, and almost missed the tight crevice.

*Should she try to squeeze through the slit in the stone?*

She had only one other choice and that was to go back the way she came. She shook her head. There was no choice. She'd have to attempt to slip through and see if she had found a dead end.

Taking a deep breath, she scraped through the narrow gap and gasped as a myriad of torches burst into flames illuminating a vast cavern with a gilded wooden throne and a man lying on top of a bed carved of stone incised with intricate, spiral designs and runes.

Dagda, her father--the man of her dreams.

She sank to her knees and squeezed her eyes trying not to faint. It was then that she felt a firm hand on her shoulder and heard a deep, golden voice whisper her name. "Brigid, my daughter."

She opened her eyes and smiled at the male figure that towered over her. "Father?"

He nodded.

She shook her head. "I can't believe it. You're real. Then I must be your daughter, but I don't remember anything about my life. You said I was a *Terran*. What is that?"

Raising her from her knees, Dagda led her over to the throne and seated her with tender care. He strode back and forth while Brigid waited for him to begin. He halted in front of her, his hands on his lean hips. "Where to start?"

"*Terrans* are a race separate, but similar to humans. Our connection with the elements--fire, air, water, earth and spirit--is an integral part of our being. To a greater or lesser extent, we can control these forces. We are called Keepers. You are doubly blessed for you bear an affinity to more than one element. You, my child, are tied to fire and water--elements diametrically opposed--and that is your great strength. Your mother was BoAnn, one of the strongest Fire Keepers, and my element is water. Of the two, water is the stronger for it can conquer fire and sustain life." His eyes took on a steely glint. "But in the hands of a strong, evil Keeper, water can also destroy, as it destroyed Atlantis. Water becomes an even more potent force when combined with an Air Keeper. Have patience and I will help you recall your powers for you were among the most adept among us."

He sat down by the wooden table and absentmindedly picked up a carved wooden goblet, running his fingers along the edges as he continued his tale.

"For thousands of years we lived on this island with the humans native to this land

and apart from the other Terrans, safe from humans who were spreading throughout the larger land mass in the east. Then Mil arrived, a human but with a renegade Terran advisor of great power. Our seer foretold that Mil could not be stopped at that time and he was right. The Milesians overwhelmed us through sheer numbers, but we could not and would not lie down meekly and let him take over our homes and enslave our people without a fight. There were few Protectors among us and even fewer able to use their strength in combat. Those few brave ones now trained to use those same talents to kill. It was a time of great despair.

“At first we tried to negotiate with Mil and Nimhnach, his druid counselor. I realized immediately that the druid was Terran, but one who had turned evil. His influence over Mil was enormous.”

He slammed the goblet down on the table and gazed at her with bleak eyes. “Do you remember how Mil’s eyes flamed with lust when he beheld you at my side? You came to me later and vowed you would end your existence rather than live as a captive to him.

“When we camped the night after the last great battle, you slept deeply, the magical music of *Ceol Mhor*, Uaithne’s harp, lulling you into a profound slumber. ‘Twas then that I took your spirit for safekeeping, merging it with the crystal spring that ran deep beneath the ground. I left your empty mortal shell for Mil to find, knowing he’d be fooled into believing you died.

“I urged our people to go deep into the caves below while I retreated to this cave with my twelve loyal Protectors. Here, Uaithne struck the same magic chords he’d played for you. I lay upon my stone-cold bed to sleep the years away until the time was right to fight again. I set my men to guard the main entrance to our lair. They slept peacefully, Uaithne’s magic causing them to lie as still as death.

“But we were betrayed.”

Dagda smiled ruefully. “‘Twas pillow talk that did it. Urian the Beautiful spent his last night with one of Mil’s camp followers. Urian, the fool, thought she loved him and would worry that he no longer came to her bed. He told her of our plans and she went straight to Nimhnach seeking a reward.” He shook his head. “Her treachery was swiftly recompensed. She was slain before she barely finished telling her tale. Then Nimhnach sent three of Mil’s warriors to slay my men while they lay helplessly asleep, seek out my resting place and kill me, too.”

Brigid let go the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “How did you find out about all of this?”

“Uaithne transformed into the whisper of the wind and heard Nimhnach gloating to Mil about what had transpired. ‘Twas too late to save my men for their hands had been severed and they bled to death, but Uaithne hid the mouth of the cave and created a barrier to prevent anyone else from finding it. Until the time was right.”

“And now the time is right, isn’t it, Father?”

“Aye. The cave has been discovered. The barrier has fallen and Nimhnach is vulnerable.”

Brigid frowned. “You seem to know a lot for someone who’s been in a coma for thousands of years.”

Dagda laughed. “‘Tis part of the magic that Uaithne created, for as I slept, I dreamed. The events of the years flowed through my slumber like scenes in a play. The

Terrans who went underground became the *sidhe*, creatures of myth and my story, the stuff of legends. Those that remained above often intermarried with the humans and graced them with their Keeper skills. They became the bards and singers, the artisans and healers.

"I knew the rise and fall of the rulers of this land, yet I slept on, though the people suffered under terrible oppression from within and without. But 'twas not until a great blight struck that I was roused for the first time from my slumber. The very source of their sustenance became diseased. Their piteous cries invaded my dreams and would not let me sleep. The children were eating the grass that grew by the roadside. The potatoes blackened. And I knew 'twas Nimhnach's doing."

Brigid nodded. "The famine. That was when my ancestor left."

"Aye. And on the first of the month of Beltaine, a widowed Terran woman staggered into the forest, blinded with tears, driven by grief. She stumbled and fell, rolling down a rocky incline, striking her head and breaking her arm. When she regained consciousness, she crawled toward the base of the cliff and her moans drew me to her side. I brought her here and tended her wounds. I played the strains of a healing slumber and she slept while she regained strength. I fed her with my own hands from my cauldron and her flesh bloomed with the flush of health. Her belly grew sweetly rounded, her breasts full. She was beautiful to behold.

"At last she awoke, opening her apple-green eyes for me and snaring me with their forest depths. She knew at once that I had saved her and recognized me as a Terran, though over the years the story of Mil and Dagda had become legends even among our own kind. She spoke and her voice was like music. 'I have naught to give you for saving my life, lord Dagda,' she said. I told her I asked for nothing.

"But she knew I lied. She saw the avidity of my gaze when I looked at her and knew what I craved. That day she came to me and offered her lush body for my taking. And I took my fill of her and gave her my seed.

"We knew she could not remain with me and I could not leave the cave because of Uaithne's spell. I could not help my people, so I enlisted her aid.

"I gave her my cauldron with its life-giving broth and told her to spill it out upon the earth. The brew would soak into the ground and spread throughout the land, destroying the blight. She would then leave the cauldron at the cliff entrance. I gave her gold and jewels to barter for passage on a ship sailing to the land called America to keep her and the child growing in her safe. I knew Nimhnach would recognize the renewal of the land for my work and try to take revenge on any that helped to foil his goals. I wanted your spirit to be far from his evil. She drank from the spring that flowers here and your spirit entered her body. Your essence was passed down from generation to generation, guarded by the females of your family.

"And she left to safety, taking with her leaves of parchment on which I wrote all this down in code that I taught to her and that only you can understand now that your roots are revealed."

Brigid shook her head. "I don't know anything about this. It must have been lost over the years."

He sighed. "We cannot worry about it now. Since you are the only one who can translate it, it should be safe enough."

She yawned and he smiled. "As I told you--'twas a long tale."

Brigid went to Dagda, laying her head on his chest. His arms closed around her convulsively as he drew her even tighter to him. She pulled back, her words hesitant. "Father, do you realize how long you've been in this cave?"

"By my reckoning, more than three thousand years." He moved away from her and once more paced the cave. "Nimhnach's quest for power has become so intense, I awoke once more from my sleep." He threw his body into the gilded throne and slumped forward. "But I am helpless. I cannot leave this cave. For Uaithne's spell works only if I stay here within the safety of the earth."

"Is that why I came back, to help you?"

He nodded. "When the seer foresaw that Mil would win, he also saw that Nimhnach would not ... at least not completely. His greatest plans over the course of the years would be stymied and he would be confined to Eire, although the demon Ba'al who gave him such great power would also keep him alive for centuries through demonic magic. The seer told me that when the time was right you would return and I wrote that down, too. 'Tis a sign that you are here now."

Brigid's head hurt. There was so much to absorb. She felt split in two. She paced restlessly around the crude chamber and strode over to a kettle bubbling over a fire. The aroma rising from it tantalized her and her mouth watered. "Whatever you're cooking smells wonderful."

He smiled. "Sup from it. 'Twill give you energy."

He picked up a bowl carved from bogwood and filled it, placing a spoon carved from hazelwood in the nourishing liquid. Brigid took the bowl and sat down by the table. Dipping her spoon into the savory contents, she took a small bite and moaned with delight. "This is fantastic." The next spoonful hovered near her mouth, but she set it down and sighed. "Father, I've been with the three who tried to kill you."

He nodded. "I know, remember?"

"Yes, I remember you told me earlier that there was a greater evil present. I've come to know these men. Their names are Cull, Torc and Ma'an. They were Nimhnach's dupes. They know he betrayed them, and to claim their revenge they've sworn allegiance to me." A sudden thought struck her. "But tell me, why did they sever the hands of your warriors?"

"Nimhnach needed the pure Terran blood and bone as a sacrifice to the demon Ba'al. Uaithne changed into motes of air and listened to him as he prepared his latest sacrifice to Ba'al. Concerned that Nimhnach might become aware of his presence, he left before the rite began."

Brigid squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. "I have to get back to my spouse and let him know I'm all right, but then I'll set out to find Nimhnach. Do you know where he is?"

"You're married? I didn't account for that." He frowned. "This will make the fight all the more difficult for you will have to trust your secret with your husband." He paused. "There is nothing to be done about it. At least you needn't travel far to seek Nimhnach, for he remained here, playing the loudest croaking frog in a small pond. Over the years, he's shielded his identity, but he cannot hide his need for power. The local people know him as Lord Nolen. He must be destroyed before he creates more evil for Ba'al."

"Tell me what I must do."

\* \* \* \*

*29th April--Late afternoon*

“Who the hell are you?” Ethan Clark’s anger was palpable, his words bristling in the air of the Warrior Cave.

“I... I’m...”

“Trespassing. How did you get past the guards? What are you doing here and why are you dressed like that?”

Ethan glared at the startled, beautiful blonde standing like a deer caught in a car’s headlights. She was dressed in the most outlandish manner. Her floor-length gown appeared to be made of natural wool and was gathered at the waist by a belt made of finely wrought gold links. A braided gold pin shaped like a crescent held together the material at her right shoulder and drew attention to her slim, bare arms. She carried a short bow over her back and he could see the feathered arrow tips poking from behind her slender neck. He squelched his immediate response to her and concentrated on the situation at hand.

Before she could open her mouth to speak, he answered his own questions. “Security is too lax. You probably batted your beautiful, baby-blues and Eamonn let you stroll right in. What did you tell him? You were dressed for some sort of ridiculous pageant and you wanted to soak up some authentic atmosphere? Who are you supposed to be? Queen Maeve?”

He made as if to rise from the campstool in front of the folding table where he had been resting, but abruptly sat back down as the female whipped an arrow from her quiver and notched her bow all in one smooth, swift motion.

“If you’ll just shut up for a moment, I’ll answer your questions. Do I have to keep this arrow aimed at your big mouth or will you let me speak?”

Speechless, he nodded and she lowered her weapon. In the back of his mind he noted her American accent.

“Now then. First, I didn’t sneak past your guards because I came from farther inside the cave.”

He snorted in disbelief, but wisely said nothing.

“The reason I sought you out is because I need your help. I’m dressed this way because my other clothes are in pretty bad shape.” She took a deep breath. “And here’s one I know you’re not going to believe. I’m not dressed up for any pageant. This is the gown my father gave me. I’m Brigid, Dagda’s daughter.”

She stared defiantly at him, daring him to doubt her.

Ethan was speechless. The woman was obviously out of her mind. For a split second he thought of the crazy way Tom had been killed. He shook his head. Couldn’t be. If she were homicidal, wouldn’t he already be dead, killed by one of her arrows? He decided to tread gently and humor her. “And just how do you know you’re Brigid? And how do you know my name?”

“My father told me my name in a dream. When we met face to face in Dagda’s Cave deep within this cliff, he advised me to seek your aid, though he didn’t tell me how you could be helpful to me. He said I’d find you in this cave. I knew your name from seeing you on the TV in town. Come on. I’ll take you to Dagda, first. Then we’ll head to Carrigclarseach. I’ve got to find my husband. He might be in danger.”

“Your husband--is he a god, too?”

She shook her head. "I'm not a goddess and I doubt Gabe is a god. I'm a Terran--I don't know if Gabe is one." She frowned. "Too much talk. Now, gather up your gear and take your laptop; we may need it."

She stepped farther into the Warrior Cave, past the curved wall, and it was then that she saw the bodies. For an endless second she stared at them. The bow and arrow fell from her fingers and she dropped to her knees and bowed her head. Tears welled up in her eyes and cascaded unheeded down her cheeks. She seized the arrow and before Ethan could prevent her, she slashed her left forearm. A thin, bright crimson line beaded up from pale skin and dripped onto the dirt. Without a thought to impropriety, she unclasped the pin holding up her bodice and, dipping her fingers into the bloody gash, dabbed the gory paint between her breasts in a circle intersected by twelve lines. She re-pinned the cloth and raised her head. Her eyes gleamed with anger--they seemed to throw off sparks. Then she spoke in a language that bore only a faint resemblance to the modern Irish that Ethan knew.

"I swear to you by my father Dagda's hammer, that I will avenge your deaths." She rose, then noticed that Ethan remained seated. "Why aren't you getting your stuff together? C'mon. The longer we dally the greater the danger we face."

"I didn't know they taught arcane languages in America. I got the name Dagda, but not much else. You appear to be familiar with some of the old myths."

"You don't believe me."

"No. Can't say that I do."

She stepped closer to him and her gaze boring into his. "My father said you might take some convincing." She nodded. "All right. You may not believe me, but you're intrigued, right? You want to know more, yes? Listen, I can tell you who, how, why and when these men were killed. If you come with me. *Now.*"

Ethan stared at the commanding female's face, then glanced down toward her clenched hands. He blinked and looked again. The deep, ruby mark that should have scarred her left arm was gone as if it had never been. "Tell me how you got rid of that wound and I'll come with you."

She checked the healed gash and smiled. "I'll give you that answer for free--become a Terran. Now, get your stuff and follow me." She turned and without looking back, strode out of the chamber.

Ethan scrambled to scoop up his laptop and notes, shoving them into the backpack he carried when he was at a dig and ran after her as she headed deeper into the stygian darkness. "Hey, you're going the wrong way! The entrance out of the cave is in the other direction."

She looked over her shoulder impatiently. "I told you I didn't sneak past the guard." She grinned. "Maybe it won't take too much to convince you after all."

"You found another way out of the Warrior Cave?" He fumbled in his pack. "Let me get a flashlight."

"No need, Ethan. This will give me a chance to practice. I brought my own light."

She started off again and, as she headed into one of the tunnels he knew was a dead end, a gleaming, orange glow surrounded her, as if she were encased in flames. It lit up the blackness and cast a comforting warmth as though it was a fire in some humble cottage hearth.

Ethan stood transfixed for a moment, before rushing to follow after the enigmatic

blonde.

\*

Brigid was keenly aware of the man following her. Dagda had told her he'd find help from a man in the Warrior Cave and nothing more. When she'd first seen him she thought she'd gone a little crazy. It was Professor Ethan Clark and she realized that he looked like the stranger she'd made love to in the forest! Could she and this man been lovers at one time? It wasn't possible--was it? Yet, when Dagda spoke of Uaithne, his harper, images flickered in her head. Fuzzy and out of focus, they danced at the corner of her mind refusing to sharpen. And when she had looked into his disbelieving brown eyes, she had seen them also filled with hot desire. For her. When she had pulled off her bodice to mark her chest with the pledge sign, she had felt as though he had seen her unclothed before.

She knew he thought she was crazy.

Maybe she was.