

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PRIESTESS OF THE CIRCLE STONES

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Under the oppressive rule of the tyrannical Maern, rightful leader of the people of Nerin, and last of her bloodline, Roisline, is offered a deal by the duplicitous Maern ambassador, Corvinus, to steal into the Maern fort and assassinate the Commander in revenge for the death of her mother. In return, Corvinus plans to appoint his puppet, General Durand, in the incompetent Commander's place and eliminate the only woman with the ability to summon the Old Ones to war against the Maern, with one stroke. While Roisline considers this, she awkwardly befriends a Maern healer, Wuer and tries to distance herself further, from her village and her people. Consequently, Wuer is attacked and Roisline must nurse him to health. Roisline must choose between her people's need for a leader and her own selfish desires for revenge, but with Wuer's friendship, she only feels more conflicted.

PRIESTESS OF THE CIRCLE STONES

by

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Chapter I

It was her sharp knock on the door that awoke me and although I crawled to the edge of the loft as silently as I could, I did not manage to catch a word of what passed between her and the old man. Chiomara stayed for only a moment, before fleeing back into the darkness.

“Your mother is dead. She died of the wasting when you were a babe. You remember that today, Roisline,” Brishen says.

It is not a typical morning greeting, but Brishen and I do not have typical morning greetings. We share a wooden hut with a leaky, straw thatched roof, but little else. In truth, the hut belongs to neither of us. Though, I suppose, by inheritance it has been mine for those six summers. That I do not feel at home in it without my mother, means very little. It was built for her, the largest home in our village. The surrounding huts, numbering only six, are one room, with the exception of our blacksmith's. He built on a shed to work in a few summers ago, when his business picked up.

It was not her status as our Clan Mother which earned the building of the tiny second story loft where I sleep each night underneath musky furs and a single moth-chewed blanket. She preferred treating the ill and wounded in her own home. It was kept immaculately clean and all her herbs and tonics within arm's reach. Most importantly, she could devote the entirety of her attention to her patient, day and night without ceasing.

She was nothing, if not devoted to the well being of those under her care. Since her death, I find myself wondering during the cold hours of the night, if she had been less concerned with being the mother of our clan and more with being my own mother. Might she still be alive? I do my best to resist these musings. I know they will never offer me any peace. And peace, has never been what I desired most.

A bundle of fur and cloth wrapped around his thin body, Brishen sits in waiting for me to attend our little hearth. The embers are barely glowing now, untended during the night, they struggled to keep themselves from fading into ash. I take up the flint stones and smother the hearth with new tinder. The remnants of the previous flame sputter out into threads of smoke. Rekindling was a gift of my mothers I did not inherit.

When I have a new fire settled into the dried peat, I fill a small kettle with the last of yesterday's water. One palmful of shavings from the bark of the red elm, six clove buds, one halved root from a marshlight flower, two crushed leaves of sage, a handful of bayberries and a large drop of honey go into the bubbling water. I sit at Brishen's feet, while we wait for the morning tea to brew.

"You were in favor of her exile, but now her whisperings are good enough for your ear?" I ask.

“I keep to the Old Ways. That does not mean I shut my ears to all else,” he says.

“Did you pay her? Her services are very costly these days,” I ask.

Brishen turns his head towards me for the first time all morning. He furrows his brow, but with all his blankets, he looks like a grumpy turtle with wisps of white hair around his head, or nearly. The Maern plucked out his eyes when they conquered our clan, finding himself among the lucky. My grandmother lost her life and my mother, young as she was, would have shared her fate but when the clan surrendered, Brishen insisted that he was our clan's leader after my grandmother. It was a shallow ruse, but my mother had not even had her first bleeding. The Maern accepted our surrender and the ruse along with it, but thought our leader ought to remain with us as an example. His sacrifice inspired such compassion in my mother that she nursed him back to health, never leaving his side for weeks. In that time, she carved for him a walking stick of rowan wood, our most sacred tree. From the handle to the tip are the engravings and runes of the Old Ways, of Belan, our Sun and Father, of Nerin, our Home and Mother, of the Old Ones, our allies and our protectors. The stick sits by his side now. As a girl, I would ask to run my fingers over the pictures and imagine my touch summoning the Old Ones from hiding, bringing their wrath down upon our oppressors. But, it has been a long time since I knew those carvings were only the stuff of fairy tales, and not the truths Brishen clings to in his blindness.

“We have an agreement,” Brishen says.

A bit of spittle forms on the corner of his parched lips. He does not bother to wipe it away. I know now, that he will not tell what it is that Chiomara thought so important,

but I cannot stop myself from pushing him further. Whatever inspired compassion within my mother's heart does not delve so deep as to touch mine.

“She must be grateful. After all, it was *you* who swayed the clan to allow her to live as a Maern whore, instead of sentencing her to death for a crime which I committed,” I say.

It is an old debate, several whole summers past and I never tire of it. I never really tire of arguing with Brishen about anything. It amuses me, to see the false face of the wizened advisor fall away to reveal the embittered badger who is snarling over a bone that does not even have any marrow left to it. That is who he truly is, and I have always hated facades.

“It was her choice. She drank the tonic,” he says, as he always does.

“I mixed that tonic, and I mixed it wrong,” I answer.

“It does not matter! The Old Ways are hard for a barren woman, but they are our Ways,” he insists.

“The Old Ways were written so long ago that they are nonsense. Cling to them and die by a Maern blade, or do not cling to them and waste away slowly. It makes no difference in the end.”

This is always the end of it. The argument begins with my first mistake as Clan Mother, a tonic that was meant to take the life of Chiomara's child, forced on her by the Maern. The debate ends when I claim that the Old Ways, the same beliefs that demand all barren women to be exiled, are too old to be of any use to us. This is our stalemate.

“They may still save us,” he mutters.

“Whatever my mother may have passed down to me in her blood, she did not grant me the ability to call draken from the sky,” I say.

Even as the word escapes me, I can hear the old man intake a short gasp of cold air. I allow myself to smile. He cannot see the pleasure I take at his pain, so it hardly matters. I am still snickering quietly to myself when the walking stick swings around and hits me on the back of the head.

“*Draken piss,*” I shriek.

I immediately have to duck again. If he had not been blind, I am certain I would have two lumps forming on my head.

“How dare you!” he shrieks.

“What, you think because I don’t use their proper name, they’ll come roaring from the sky in fury? A lot of good that did against the Maern,” I snap.

I scoot away from him. The sweet scented tang that hangs in the air tells me that the tea is finished brewing, and I want to move away from the reach of the walking stick anyway. He grumbles under his breath, but I don’t bother to pick out much more than ‘irreverent.’ He ignores me while I move about the hut, pouring tea into two cups and giving him one with a stale piece of bread. He munches on it while he waits for the tea to cool, and by the way he grinds his teeth, you would think it were my arm, and not bread, he was whittling away.

We all have great cause to be irreverent towards the draken. When the Maern first landed upon our island, we looked to our highest authority for guidance and aid.

Sequestered away in the great white cliffs to the north, lived the Ladies of Belan. They

were the daughters of Nerin, the holiest of our matriarchs and the first to be named Dearheart to an Old One. Inside this ancient temple, the women of Nerin's bloodline trained themselves in the art of word, wit and wisdom. They trained their voices and their fingers to produce music fit for gods. They devoted their entire lives to this training, and every so often, an Old One would choose a young Lady to be named Dearheart. The Lady of Belan left all behind her when she left. That is the nature of the Dearheart. Once claimed, they belonged only to their draken and no other. They lived out their lives and died, never seen by any of their own kind again. It was our highest honor. Their daughters, sisters and nieces were heightened in stature and given authority over others within the temple.

The clans of Nerin offered tribute to the Ladies and the Old Ones both. In return, we were to be protected from all outward foes. I suppose, I cannot call the draken faithless. When the island was invaded, and the Temple of Belan threatened, they answered their summons. The story of the battle for Belan's Temple is known by every soul in our village, but one that is seldom repeated on the lips of our elders. For who wants to speak of broken scales and torn wings? Who wants to tell the story of the day their gods were struck down from the very sky and trampled upon by the feet of the unholy?

My mother always insisted that they were never gods. She told me they were once our friends, another form of life that was older and more mysterious than we could ever comprehend, but the hope of our people died when they fell. They may not have been gods in our stories, but they were gods in our hearts. Except for a few survivors, the

Ladies of Belan were slaughtered. My mother's mother was one who escaped that terrible day, though she hardly every spoke of it. She was a small girl when it happened, much younger than I am, and I wonder how she bore all that heartbreak at once. I wonder how she did not let the soul in her wither and fade, replaced with the bitterness of vengeance that leaves one hollow, that leaves someone like me.

I am not like my mother's mother. I am not like my mother. I imagine that I must also be nothing like Nerin, though her blood flows within my veins. My mother's mother fled south when the temple was destroyed. She united three clans and waged a bitter war against the Maern for most of her life, until she was killed on the field of battle. It was not long after that, the clans had dwindled in number so much, that my mother made the decision to surrender. She survived that day. She survived long enough to give birth to me; long enough to train me in the Old Ways for thirteen summers, before I watched General Durand slide a blade across her throat. For keeping with the Old Ways and not the Maern. For worshipping Belan, instead of an emperor across the sea whose name we could not even pronounce correctly. For instructing me as her mother had instructed her, so that one day, when our people might come across a draken, I could be presented in hopes of being named Dearheart, and call upon the draken again.

It is a fool's hope and I think I have known that, even when I sat upon my mother's lap and listened with awe as she described them, how beautiful and terrible and wonderful the Old Ones were. They could not be what my mother swore they were. If they had been from her stories, the Old Ones would have driven the Maern from our shores instead of suffering one great defeat and hiding away in the mountains, the

swamps and the coastal islands to lick their wounds like a kicked stray mongrel.

Whatever they might have been, it no longer matters. The Maern put an end to them or that is what I believe.

“Where are you going?” Brishen asks me.

I have already dressed, thrown a cloak over my shoulders and attached a large leather pouch to my belt before he even heard my movements over his angry chewing.

“My stock of Borterbane is low,” I say.

“The glen is not to be used for that purpose,” Brishen says.

“The glen is my closest resource, and as you are not even permitted to know its location, I hardly think it’s any of your concern,” I answer.

“Your mother would be appalled to see her most cherished place of worship turned into some common herbal garden for harvest,” Brishen says.

“How fortunate she is dead so she cannot be bothered with my disappointments,” I say.

The curtness of my tone silences him. I never tire of arguments, but he often does. He waves a hand dismissively in the air. Slamming the door behind me gives me the satisfaction that I have won this particular morning’s dispute, but I can still only guess at its origin.

Brishen had sounded almost fearful when he reminded me of my disguise. I have always thought it worthless. When my people surrendered, it was under the facade that we had lost our Clan Mother in battle and the sacred bloodline, which could summon the Old Ones to our aid once more, was extinguished. Only it lived on, secretly in my mother.

When I was born, she gave me to a woman who had birthed a stillborn and my mother made a show of mourning the stillborn. She burned the infant on a pyre and wept, while the morning patrol watched her. My life with my true mother was always behind closed doors. My training was always given in whispers, at least until I was old enough to apprentice myself under her properly. Even then, I was only instructed in the way of healing medicines, at least while there were others present.

Even when her bloodline was found out and she was executed, I cannot imagine the Maern could care a thing for me. I was only a girl of thirteen summers when she was taken. They must not consider me a threat and in that, they will find themselves wrong. The feel of my daggers against my hip as I walk comforts me. There is only one life I seek in return of my mother's, but I have not seen him emerge from the fort for many summers now.

The village is not yet stirring. Hearing only the caw of a crow on the still air, I walk along the path towards the eastern sea. The way is softened from the morning dew and the march of soldiers on patrol. The soles of my shoes stick, then slip a little as I trudge along through the mud.

There is one last hut to pass by; it lies well beyond the others, standing alone and forlorn. Although small, it is relatively well kept. There is even a cage with a hen inside, which is a rare treasure. A lantern hangs beside the door, unlit. Chiomara is sleeping now, although I have seen soldiers stumbling from her door at sunrise before, slinking back to the fort even as they pull their trousers up from around their ankles.

In the distance, two lights burn. Behind them lies a black, rectangular mass, reaching out over the land and into the sky. It gives the impression of an enormous beast with glittering eyes, lying in wait for the best moment to strike. This is not so far from the truth. Dawn will find a large encampment, protected by four massive walls, trees felled by rough and hasty axes. The tips of each log are hewn into spear points at the top and archers pace the walls, day and night, in case that is not enough.

They keep us all at the brink of starvation, only strong enough to harvest their crops and mend what they need mended. The clans in the North are still resisting. The Maern are afraid if we are not weak, we could rise up and challenge them on two fronts. Their forces never bring back slaves to add to our number and I hope that means the war is not going well. It is not a very strong hope.

The archers on the wall will not be able to see me through the shadow, but it would not matter. One Nerin woman is not worthy of their attention. Strangely, we do not present targets either. My mother told me once, when the southern clans were first captured and brought to live here, several men attempted to take advantage of our women. They found us significantly more trouble than they expected, but of course, a few succeeded. Tradition dictated that they pay for this violation with their lives, unless the woman raised her hand for mercy, but from fear of a devastating counter from Collucius, my mother thought her duty to protect Belan's children, as Clan Mother, was best served by allowing the men to return to their camp, unharmed. She confessed her surprise to me, when the men were hung outside the camp the next day and their bodies left for the vultures as a sign to any other man who felt an itching in his groin.

I think my mother might have even thanked Collucius for this personally, although she never admitted it, precisely. A lot of good it did her if that was the case. I doubt he lost any sleep over her execution. Chiomara's incident occurred long after. It was a new recruit, one who hadn't yet heard the stories, or maybe didn't believe them. He was hung like the rest, and Chiomara would stare up at his corpse every day, even when the vultures could barely pick at the bones.

Past the fort, the land recedes and my feet sink deeply into sand. I turn due north and take off my shoes, before walking along the edge of the waves. The water is bitter cold. It will turn my toes numb in a few minutes, but I like the green sea foam between my toes. And there are worse things than numbness.

Now, I have to strain my eyes out over the waves. The sky is only a faint lavender. Belan has not yet brought the morning's light, and it is difficult to see very far. On my left, the beach suddenly ends and rises up into salty crags; tall and impassable. On my right, the ocean crashes in a constant restlessness.

Just when I think I may have missed it, I see the marker. It is a boulder that stands bravely against the incoming surf. When I have lined myself up with the marker and the cliff, I approach the rock wall.

The craggy surface looks solid, and treacherous as it may be, it is not so impervious. My mother could find the little tunnel without fail. She came often to the glen to pray on the sacred ground. I have found less use for it over the summers, but Borterbane is as rare as it is essential.

After a few minutes of feeling around the wall for a moment, my hands press against a thick canopy of hanging vines, which seem to have plastered themselves against the cliff, but give way at my touch. I struggle through the tangle of slippery plants and tumble forward into a smooth opening. My mother used to say, an Old One must have hollowed out the passage for a Lady of Belan, and she used to tell me that she was certain one of them lived on top of the mountain, which casts its shadow over the glen. I must have asked her a hundred times if she had ever seen one, even though the answer was always the same. I will never understand the source of my mother's unwavering faith. Perhaps it was something her own mother said, that she did not get the chance to tell me before she was killed. More likely, she clung to it for my sake. There is no future for our people, for the Daughters of Nerin. The Maern are sweeping across the last of the northern expanses now. We will accept their rule, or we will perish.

Feeling my way through the smoothed out stone, I emerge from the tunnel to see a sweeping meadow, nestled like a bird's nest against the base of the great mountain. It looks more white than green in the dim light because the borterbane flowers grow so plentifully here. The blossoms are the quickest, most efficient way to stop a wound from bleeding, and their salve, when combined with bloodroot shavings, keeps a wound clean of infection and rot.

Borterbane is notoriously difficult to find. My mother once journeyed for six days to find a cropping of the flower. She barely made it back to the village in time to help me deliver my first babe, and I had only six summers then. If she hadn't returned, borterbane bundle in hand, when the babe failed to turn its head the proper way, I am certain that

neither the babe, nor its mother would have survived the night. There was so much more blood than I had ever expected, but now, as the village's only healer, I am used to the birthing fluids.

The glen is less than a half day's journey from the village, considering both trips to and from, even in the worst weather, but this is sacred ground. Nothing has ever known death by an outside hand here. No plant has been ripped from its bed. No bird or rabbit or deer has ever been struck down. Here, there is only life, the natural progression of birth, growth and rebirth that Belan watches over from dawn until dusk.

My mother said Belan, and especially the Old One, would be offended to look down upon the glen and find this sanctity threatened. Of course, when I was a child, the enormous, fire-breathing draken peering down from its bone strewn cave seemed much more frightening than a distant ball of light in the sky. She insisted we live by Belan's principles, peace and solidarity and trust. And, when the Old Ones returned, one would name me as Dearheart, and I would be our people's savior.

I take out my leather pouch and begin tearing white flowers up by their roots, storing them into the pouch. It has been six summers that I have harvested the glen for its wealth of borterbane, and not once has a draken blackened Belan's light with his shadow to swoop over me and burn away my blasphemy. As for Belan himself, he had abandoned us long before I returned the favor.

A sharp cracking of rock jolts my head upwards. A mountain goat and two of her young kids stop their descent at my movement. We watch each other stiffly. For a minute,

we are paralyzed by the other's gaze. Finally, she sniffs the air, and with a snort, continues down the mountain.

One of her kids rushes to follow, but the other is slower. Little hooves catch on the edges of the cliff, he trips several times on his way down the slope. He is frail. Winters on the island of Nerin are harsh, and he will not survive his first.

When all three goats have descended into the glen, they put their twitching, whiskered noses to the clovers and borterbane. They take no more notice of me, because they think there is no need. The mother has probably found safe grazing here for many summers.

I reach into my cloak, keeping my movements slow and fluid. Around my waist, rests a bundle of tanned sheep skin. With just my fingertips, I reach into one end of it and take hold of a cold, smooth handle. I slide the dagger out; it shines brightly even in the dark. They are seven in total, each carved out of bone and engraved with a different depiction of a draken.

My mother gave them to me when I had five summers. They are made from the bones of an Old One, my mother used to swear. They are a treasure which was smuggled out of Temple of Belan before its destruction, and I would stare at them for hours in awestruck wonder.

My mother disliked speaking of the temple's ruin, though she always denied the rumors that there had been an eclipse during the attack. My people wanted some supernatural, abnormal explanation for why Belan had not granted them victory, but my

mother was resolute in guarding the truth. There had been a terrible battle and we had lost it. It was simple and hard, as truths often are.

The goats do not look up while I ease my weight to the soles of my feet. The sharpened bone becomes a part of me, an extension of my own body. We are fused by practice and familiarity. My left hand braces my weight, as I bend my knees and dig my feet into the soft, spongy earth. The goats continue drinking.

I bend my elbow slowly, very slowly and then thrust my weight forward. As my torso bends, flexing upwards to put weight on the balls of my feet, my right arm swings forward and lets loose the dagger. By the time the goat has lifted her old head, one of her kids has fallen forwards, a gurgling scream, neither human nor animal, escaping from its pierced throat.

Recognizing the sound of death, she bleats in fear and leaps for the safety of the mountain crags. Her kid, the stronger and surer of foot, follows after her. Crossing the glen, I lean down to examine my prey. The back legs twitch, and for a moment, my heart rate leaps forward. I lift his head, removing my dagger with one, swift tug. The blade opened up his throat and I know he died within seconds of its impact. It is only a natural spasm of death. Sighing, I wipe the sweat from my brow.

My aim has not always been as true and the memory of my first kill will never leave me. I was impatient, only a girl. My mother told me to let her take down the doe, but I wanted to claim my first blood.

“No, Roisline. The distance is too far. Let me,” she urged in a whisper.

She put a hand on my shoulder, gentle but firm. I wrenched away, stood and threw. The blade hit the doe well enough, but pierced her neck only a few inches. She bolted at the pain, but before looking for an escape route. Slamming into the side of a tree, she fell forwards over her front legs. The cracking of bone was loud and sent a jolt of pulsating electricity through my chest. She lay where she fell, kicking with her back legs and thrashing her head. And she wouldn't stop screaming.

I had seen my mother kill before, the arrow of her long bow piercing her prey's necks and hearts, but this wasn't like my mother's kills at all. When my mother killed, the prey was dead by the time it hit the ground. What I had done was mangle. I had wounded in the most tortuous way. Putting my hands over my ears, I cried and choked on sobs.

My mother took my hands from my ears and dragged me towards the doe. I resisted, but she was stronger. She did not hurt me. Still, I remember the grip around my wrists was relentless.

"Can you heal her, mother? P-please? I don't want her to d-die," I whimpered.

My mother looked down at me then. Her eyes were green, but bright, like the color of a new blade of grass in spring. For a long moment, she said nothing. Only stared at me. Somehow, I felt naked in that moment and that only made it all worse.

"No, Roisline. She is beyond that now. Cut her throat. You are cruel to leave her this way," she told me.

I stood over the doe, wailing almost as loud as the animal. Finally, my mother got on her knees and held the doe's head still, exposing her bloody neck towards me. Slowly, I crept around the weakening back legs and stepped carefully over the mangled front legs.

I fell to my knees beside my mother and wiped my forearm across my eyes, trying to clear my vision for a few moments. The blade handle was wet and warm, but nearly dislodged from the doe's neck after the struggle and I slid it out easily. Wiping the blood on my skirt hem, I held the blade with a trembling hand and brought it to the doe's throat.

“Hurry, Roisline.”

The blade slid through skin easily enough, but reached the tough muscle and sinew of the throat too quickly. I only managed to cut the artery open. A warm spray of blood squirted over my face and chest. I gave a horrified scream, but the horror of it all strengthened my hand and with a final thrust, my blade severed the gushing vein. The doe died before her blood had even cooled on my face.

From that day forward, I never threw a blade hastily. I practiced for hours until the callouses on my little hands had opened with pus and blood. But my next kill, a few months later, was as clean as my mother's, the same as every other kill I have made since that day.

Washing the bone clean, I return it to my leather pouch, beside its six sisters. I hoist the dead kid over my shoulders. Then, I throw my cloak over us both. Better to look like an old, hunched crone than be seen carrying fresh meat. If I hurry, I will be back before the Maern have started their first morning patrol. They will want the best of the meat, claiming it with their damned tax in the name of their emperor. It has never made any sense to me, why they must invoke his name to take food which they use to keep themselves satiated and leave the rest of us on the brink of starvation. It is not the emperor who helps himself to our meager gardens and livestock or the occasional

successful hunt. He receives a much harder tribute for us to bare, the best and strongest of our sons for his vast army, or that is what we are told. We have yet to see a single one return to us, and sometimes I wonder if they do not simply throw the children into the sea. Their cruelty is boundless.

My mind is lost to this bitterness when a clod of mud collides with the right side of my face. The weight of the kid throws me off my balance. I try to regain it, but my feet just slip into the sand and I cannot help but fall. The sand softens the impact, even with the kid on top of my shoulder, but before I can scramble to my feet, a wave of stinging salt water washes over me, tumbling my body over and then pulling me back.

Sputtering and coughing, I hear the sound of laughter as I snatch the kid from being pulled out to sea and stumble back towards the shore. It is a familiar laugh, and it only heightens as I spit up the last of the sea water. Throwing my prey onto the sand, I wipe the wet hair and mud from my face and fixate my eyes on the man. He is sitting a few feet away, bent over in hysterics. All I can see of him is the top of his head, topped with curly hair the exact shade of the sand, but that is more than enough.

“Callan, you dung-headed piss pot! What the hell are you doing?” I scream.

He is laughing too hard to answer me. My dress and cloak are soaked. The wind from the sea is biting into my back, and although I know once the sun rises, the chill will fade, this does nothing to soothe my temper. Unfortunately, there are two within our village who have never given much regard to my temper, despite my bloodline. The first is Brishen, because he is old and crotchety and beyond reason. The second is Callan, our shepherd and leather worker, and one of the few men left to us. He has little excuse for

his behavior, except perhaps that he and his twin brother, our blacksmith, were both trained by my mother in their crafts. We have grown into adulthood together as siblings.

Callan wipes away the tears from his eyes. Gasping for breath, he leans backwards and smiles at me. He and his brother have five summers more than I, and I swear Callan will have laugh lines amongst his freckles before he reaches thirty.

“You looked like you needed a laugh. You were walking along, scowling like an old hag and muttering to yourself, so I thought I’d just...you know, change your pace,” Callan says.

“And am I laughing?” I shout.

“No,” he answers, between gasps, “But it was worth it for me.”

“Why you...” I begin, but stop.

Instead of cursing him, which will do absolutely nothing, I pick up a pebble. It is about the size of a fingernail. With the same flick of my wrist I use to throw daggers, I shoot the pebble at Callan’s head. He yelps as it impacts with a satisfying thump and falls backwards, clutching his scalp.

“Aow! I only threw mud at you!” he cries.

I have already picked up another pebble. He starts to scramble to his feet, but I pelt him again, this time in his ribs. He yelps again, looking for something to throw back at me. He finds a rather large piece of driftwood, but before he can pick it up, I have hit him again on the back of his hand. He lets go of the driftwood, yowling and cursing. One last pebble strikes him on his left foot and he falls backwards, flinging up sand and dried seaweed as he lands on his back.

“Stop it! Stop it!” he yells.

I yield, but feel a smile stretching across my face. Callan leers at me sideways, his body still turned away in a defensive hunch.

“Those are going to leave *welts*,” he says, “*Bruises*.”

“Do not throw mud on a daughter of Nerin then,” I reply.

“Oh right, some Clan Mother you are,” he answers.

“I’m not Clan Mother at all,” I snap.

I get up, brushing the sand off myself. Callan watches, deflated that his comment has soured my mood. I know he did not mean it to wound me. I refused the title of Clan Mother, though it fell to me on my mother’s death. The clan did not name another in my stead, hoping that one day, I might perhaps change my mind, but they wait in vain. I walk towards the kid, but Callan gets to it before me, slinging it over his back with a grin.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than ambush me for your own amusement?” I ask.

“The flock is still fenced in. I’m ahead of schedule with my repairs so, no, not really,” Callan answered, “Anyway, Brishen asked me to fetch you.”

I wrinkle my nose, partly at Callan’s phrasing and partly at the mention of Brishen.

“I’ll return once I’ve finished my rounds. Aoine is weakening; she needs the best cuts from that goat. We have to get it to her before the Maern make their morning patrol,” I say.

“Speaking of that, Durand and a few other soldiers are waiting for you. Brishen is serving them tea that tastes like piss. Actually, it might really be piss,” Callan said.

My feet are suddenly too heavy to lift. There is a weight in my stomach, driving the tickle of nausea up my throat and into the back of my mouth. Callan goes on a few paces before he notices I have stopped.

“It’ll be fine, Rosy. They just want to ask you some questions. They know you’re our healer but...that’s all. They aren’t....it’ll be fine,” he says.

I nod slowly. His voice was barely above a whisper, but he believes what he says. Callan has a habit of speaking softly when he speaks sincerely, as though he doesn’t want others to overhear him when he is not acting like a complete fool. He gives my shoulder a gentle shake.

“Come on. You’ll just tell them all you know is a little healing and you don’t know anything about Old Ones or dumb traditions. They’ll piss off and we’ll go roast this goat and feast, eh?” he says.

“No,” I say.

I take the belt of daggers from around my waist and push it into his free hand.

“You take the goat to Aoine and the daggers. Tell her to hide them. I’ll be...back for them as soon as I can,” I say, trying to sound calmer than I feel.

Callan stares at me for a few moments, deciding whether or not it is worth arguing with me. But finally, he lets out a held breath and nods.

“Okay. I’ll see you when you get back and *then* the feast,” he says.

Callan smiles. It makes him look like a boy, at least to me. I have seen that grin my whole life, and while I have not always returned the smile, I have never been ungrateful for the sight of it. I lean into his chest, breathing in deeply. Callan always smells of sweat, leather and sheep filth. He kisses my forehead.

“I’ll see you soon, Rosy,” he says.

Callan winks at me before turning westwards, to circle around the village the long way. I watch the bobbing of his head until it disappears around a grassy hill and listen to his loud whistling for a moment longer. It makes me laugh a bit despite my nerves. Callan only whistles when he is nervous and doesn’t want anyone to notice. It only makes his state of mind more obvious, the jollier the tune, the worse his nerves. This morning, his lips were chortling a jig that could have made the dead rise up to join in the dance.

I take a few minutes to focus on my breath. It is difficult at first. My lungs feel small and weak. I can hear my heart beat against my temples, but after forcing deep intakes of cold, salty air, the pulsing slows. If the Maern have come in search of a true daughter of Nerin in me, they will at least not discover a coward.

Belan has risen and warms my back as I walk around the fort, the sounds of strange beasts stamping their metallic hooves and the clinking of armor as men march in formation rise into the air with him. I see the soldiers before they see me. Belan shines too brightly for the General or his company of four to make out my face until I am standing before them.

General Durand is a tall man, broad shouldered and with all the muscle of a seasoned man of war. His skin is the color of honey, the same shade of his eyes

underneath black, bushy eyebrows. He wears his hair long, tied behind him in a thick braid. He has one longsword at his hip and his armor is shining in the early morning light. His eyes flicker over me.

“Morning swim?” he asks.

“I fell,” I answer.

He sniffs, but only gestures with his hand towards the door. I stare at him for a few moments before I push open the door and walk in, leaving it open behind me. As my eyes adjust to the lower light inside the hut, I pick up the sound of sandals pacing upon our dirt floor.

“Ah and here she is. Good morning, Roisline,” a voice says.

I do not recognize it, but he speaks our dialect with ease. The other soldiers tend to speak clumsily, in short incomplete thoughts, even though our languages are remarkably similar. Finally, a form appears in the gloom of firelight. He is wearing long robes of dyed navy, embroidered with violet stitching at the sleeves and neckline. His skin is pale like mine, but his nose is large, angular and hooked. His hair is dark brown, or perhaps black. It falls to his shoulders and is held back by a delicate looking circlet of gold. He is smiling at me, holding a cup of steaming liquid in his hand. I can smell the awful stuff from the doorway and wonder for a brief moment if Brishen would really have the gall to serve a Maern piss in a cup.

“Roisline, this is Corvinius, the eyes and hand and tongue of the emperor,”

Brishen mutters.

Corvinius laughs. It is a light sound, airy and carefree. He shakes his head.

“I fear I am not as important as all that. I am merely an ambassador. Do you know what that means, Roisline?” he asks.

I shake my head. He smiles wider, like he is about to tell a bedtime story to a little child at his knee.

“My purpose is to create peace between your people and my own, as quickly and easily as possible,” he says.

Brishen grumbles something underneath his breath, but I cannot hear it. Corvinus acts as though he does not hear it either. We are left to stare at one another for a while, his face smiling and mine stoic.

“The Northern Clans are still at war, are they not?” I ask.

Corvinus’ smile fades, but where I expect to see a flash of anger, I see only weariness. He nods, sighing.

“Yes, yes, they are unwilling to speak with me, but that is why I have come here,” Corvinus begins.

I notice that Brishen has gone stiff. He leans towards the sound of my voice, just slightly, and I think I may have imagined it. His discomfort is obvious however, in the way the cup in his hand has begun to shake. His knuckles are slowly turning white, and it is only after I look back at Corvinus, that I find eyes of the Maern ambassador have never left me.

“If my suspicions are correct, I think you may be able to help me,” he says.

“I have already told you. She is not of Nerin’s bloodline,” Brishen snaps.

“That may well be, but she is still a gifted healer. I believe this alone would give her certain...advantages among the Northern clans that I certainly do not have,” Corvinus says.

“She is needed too gravely here,” Brishen answers.

“Of course, we realize Roisline’s importance to the village, which is why I arranged for a new healer to be brought and-” Corvinus begins.

“You will not rip her away from us to use as your puppet, and then slaughter her when you are finished!” Brishen shouts.

For the first time since I arrived, Corvinus turns away from me to look upon Brishen. His is frowning, but once more, I can find no traces of anger upon his face. He is unlike any Maern I have ever encountered. Corvinus looks at Brishen with pity. I might have thought it were a genuine sorrow if he were not a Maern, but they are incapable of such feelings.

“Honored elder,” he whispers, “I know your treatment has been...monstrous. You have my sincerest apologies, for what it may be worth, but I am here to foster a new relationship between the Maern and the people of Nerin.”

“Daughters,” I say, “We call ourselves the Daughters of Nerin.”

Corvinus’ eyes return to me immediately. He does not speak at first. Even when Brishen drops his cup, and the stone cracks down the middle, Corvinus never takes his eyes from me. He smiles, very slowly.

“I was under the impression that only those of Nerin’s bloodline called themselves thusly,” Corvinus says.

“No. The people of the island are the Daughters of Nerin. The women of her bloodline are known as the Ladies of Belan,” I answer.

“But the Ladies of Belan were all killed at the temple a long time ago,” Brishen adds.

“Of course, forgive my mistake,” Corvinus says, smiling wider.

“A simple mistake for a Maern, as your women are little more than trinkets to be owned,” I respond.

“Another misunderstanding between our people, Roisline, but perhaps we may continue this conversation in my personal quarters. We have...much to discuss, and our new healer is very eager to meet you,” Corvinus says.

“Why?” I ask.

“Unlike our last healer, who has so fortunately retired from service, Wuer would like to learn what the island’s natural herbal life could offer the health of his patients, instead of simply hoping that a ship may arrive in time to restock his limited supplies. He is very...unassuming. You may even approve of him, given enough time. If you will only come and meet him,” Corvinus answers.

Brishen stands up so abruptly that he knocks into the table. He has to grasp at his cane before it can clatter to the floor and he even stumbles forward a bit. Corvinus moves aside, but I remain where I am. This is mostly due to the fact that I feel frozen where I stand. The Maern has just offered me something I have desired for six long summers and he has absolutely no inkling of it.

“The last time our healer went into that fort, she came out in bonds and her throat was slit,” Brishen snaps.

“I assure you-”

“I don’t give one damn about your assurances, Maern. She isn’t going. You bring your fool healer to her and state your terms here, in her own home,” Brishen says.

“No,” I interrupt, “I will go.”

Corvinus bows his head, letting out a held breath. I can hardly believe I have spoken. The voice sounded so sure and calm, which describes nothing of my fluttering heart and sweaty palms.

“Many thanks, Roisline,” he says.

“No! I won’t allow it!” Brishen screams.

There is a hint of irritation about Corvinus now. His body posture has become less fluid and the muscles around his mouth seem tense. Still, he remains calm, even as the old, blind man stomps his cane into the floor.

“Well, you are certainly welcome to accompany her, Elder. Then you may discover for yourself that I mean her absolutely no harm,” Corvinus says.

I am awed by his composure. Brishen cares for it less than I do, but he is paranoid. If the Maern wanted to kill me, they wouldn’t waste nearly this much time in doing it. Perhaps Corvinus does have other motives, but whatever he is after, it is not my life.

“Fine,” Brishen says, “But I warn you, she stays within my ears. At all times!”

I purse my lips, trying not to smile, but it is difficult. He looks ridiculous, an old blind man waving a cane at what may as well be a live draken before us. There can be no struggle of power between us. Corvinus has but to say the word, and no grouching from Brishen would stay a Maern blade. Knowing that this will not stop him from digging in his heels all the way to the fort, I cross the room and take his arm in mine.

“Quiet yourself. You will have the entire village in hysterics,” I say.

Brishen grasps me tightly to his side but says nothing. His jaw is quivering but he nods up at me. Corvinus smiles at us both, gesturing towards the open door. At his motion, I lead Brishen out of the hut and start us towards the fort. Corvinus, Durand and the company of soldiers follow us in silence.

When we stand before the enormous wooden doors, I feel the air in my lungs wisp away. I hear the great metal bars scratch against the wood as they are slid away, just before the creaking starts. The sound sends a shiver down my spine. I have waited six long summers for this moment. I thought it would be in darkness, the first time I managed to sneak through these doors. I thought I would be scrambling to find the bed of Collucius before an alarm was raised, so that I could slide a blade across his throat before another was slid against mine. Now, the fort is open to me. I can walk under Belan’s light and search for the man that killed my mother, for the man who ordered her execution.

Revenge is not something Belan would ever condone. It is not something my mother would have wanted. It will leave my village without a healer, without anyone to deliver their children or fend away their fevers or keep their weakened bodies from the brink of starvation. Truthfully, my death is probably a death for all. It is a cruel sentence

to give those who trust their lives to me, but I can give no other. The day my mother died, the girl that had been Roisline, the girl destined to call upon the Old Ones and lead her people to salvation died too. What remains is only a phantom, a vengeful spirit that has waited and waited for the chance that Corvinus has just given me.

“Roisline?” Corvinus whispers at my side, “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I say and step inside.

Chapter II

There are so many soldiers. On morning and evening patrols, we only see half a dozen. Scouting parties leave through the main gates, comprised of ten to fifteen men seated on snorting, metal-shoed monsters. Rarely, an entire company will leave for the North. They number thirty to fifty men, wearing silver chain-mail from their heads down to their feet. The noise they make as they march is deafening, but even that is nothing compared to what lies before me.

There are tents draped over poles scattered across the yard. The tents alone must house a hundred men, maybe more. A large building on my right, two stories and almost the length of the entire southern wall, contains what must be about two hundred more rooms and that is only a rough guess. Directly before me, across the yard of tents and fire pits, is another building, but this one is grander. It is three stories, instead of two, and although it does not have the length of the soldier's barracks, it has two great flags on either side of the door. They are red and bare the seal of the emperor, his own likeness

stitched into dyed fabric that Belan fades with each passing day. The columns are encased in thin silver, tarnished with a thin film of green at the bases.

Corvinus offers me his arm. Perhaps if there were not so great a crowd, I would refuse, but the soldiers are so many, that I take the Maern's arm and allow Brishen and I to be lead forward. General Durand goes before us, and I find that there is nothing to fear from the crowd. The moment their eyes happen upon the General, every soldier stops and moves from our path. Some allow their gaze to flicker backwards and rest upon me with a heavy shadow. Before we are even halfway across the fort, I cannot bare to look at anything but the back of the General's armor. The only thing I want is directly before me anyway. Soon, a shadow passes over me and I know we have crossed the threshold Collucius crosses each day and night.

The building is plain on the inside. Wooden and drafty, little candles hang on the walls and cast a dim flickering all around us. I wonder if my mother was brought here, before she was killed, or if Collucius merely gave the order. I am trying to see within the nearest rooms when Corvinus gestures to our right. I have little choice but to follow. Any disobedience now would only give away my motive and there are too many soldiers, not to mention General Durand, on my heels.

Just before we reach the end of the hallway, we pass a corridor of spiral shaped stairs. I stop, mostly on accident, and Brishen comes to a stumbling halt a few steps ahead of me. Corvinus turns back to look at me but remains silent. It is Durand who breaks the silence. His voice is so loud that I jump at the sound.

"The ambassador's quarters are this way, girl," he barks.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“It’s all right. I understand this must be very unnerving for you, Roisline,”

Corvinius says.

This is enough to move my frozen feet forwards. Brishen latches onto my arm again with such desperation that his grip burns the skin on my wrist. But I don’t twist away from him. Durand and the others are watching me too closely. Collucius will not die today, but now I know where my mother’s murderer lays his head at night. Surely, his chambers will be on the third floor. I have never been able to find a way past the outer defenses to sneak through those great gates or over the walls. Until this day, I have been unable to admit to myself that the task was impossible, but without help from the inside, it would be.

Corvinius’ chamber is large, bigger than our hut. There is a roaring fireplace at the foot of the finest bed I have ever seen. It must be large enough to hold four people and the sheets are pristine and shining. Tapestries cover every wall in vibrant waves of color. This room, unlike so many of the others I have caught glimpses of, is warm and bright. It is difficult to feel uncomfortable here, although the lavish settings remind me of the grime beneath my fingernails.

In the middle of the room is a table with three chairs on each side. On the farthest side, a young Maern sits in the chair closest to the fire. He bares a striking resemblance to the General, although he must have seen far fewer summers. In fact, he looks as though he may only have seen one or two more than me. He gazes up at me with the same deep honey colored eyes as Durand, but where Durand has the scars and lines of a man of war,

this Maern has only youth. His black hair is even tied back into a braid like the General's, but he has woven a strand of golden ribbon down the left side. In his left ear hang three golden hoops. The only difference between them seems to be the shade of their skin. The General's skin has grown paler, while this Maern's skin is a deeper shade of bronze.

Corvinus directs me to sit in the chair directly across from the Maern. He seats Brishen to my left and he takes the seat across from Brishen. Durand remains standing by the door, leaning against the frame and out into the hallway. Brishen is still clutching at my arm, but his grip relaxes a bit now that we are seated. The Maern is staring at me, but not with disgust as I am accustomed to with soldiers. It is something else. His eyes travel across my face, trail down the length of my braid and linger upon my dress, which is still damp and smells of salt water.

“Roisline, this is Wuer. He has studied the art of medicine for most of his life and I think, under your tutelage of course, he could be most helpful to your people in your absence,” Corvinus says.

“She hasn't agreed to anything!” Brishen snaps.

Wuer looks at Brishen. His eyes have narrowed into slits. His jaw has stiffened and his lips are pursed. This is the look I recognize. Seeing it puts me more at ease.

“Who is this man? I was to speak to the village healer, not her senile patient,” Wuer says.

I think if Brishen were not so afraid for my life, he would take his free hand and swing his cane about in an attempt to bloody this man's face. Instead he snorts loudly through flared nostrils and stamp the cane onto the rug. Wuer is not perturbed that his

words have caused offense. He is only looking to Corvinus for an explanation, ignoring both of us completely.

“This man is Roisline’s father,” Corvinus begins.

“What does that mean? These people only claim their mothers as kin,” Wuer interrupts.

“My mother is dead,” I say.

Wuer turns his head abruptly, staring at me for only a moment before his gaze falls to the table in front of me. He says nothing more, nor does he offer up an apology, but I do not blame him for that. Until I met Corvinus, I thought that no Maern even understood the concept of an apology and Corvinus has his own reasons for earning my trust.

“Try to understand, Wuer. The Commander was forced to order the execution of their last healer,” Corvinus says.

“She was not killed because she was a healer,” he says.

“True, but surely you can see the reason for their hesitance? Roisline is needed by her village. The tax is hard on her people,” Corvinus says.

“It would not be so high if they would just submit,” Wuer says.

As he says this, his eyes return to my face. There is a bitter tone in his voice. The curiosity is gone, replaced by hatred. Now, I feel myself relax.

“That is why I have brought her, Wuer. She and I can, perhaps, end this war before her people are lost to it,” Corvinus says.

“Why do you think they will listen to me?” I ask.

“She is not a descendant of their goddess,” Wuer says.

“Nerin was not a goddess,” I say, loudly.

Both men turn towards me. Brishen squeezes my arm. The skin underneath his hand has grown raw, but I do not allow myself to wince. Wuer shakes his head, a cruel smile spreading on his lips.

“Your people are the *Daughters* of Nerin and you have named the island Nerin, but you do not worship her?” Wuer scoffs.

“Nerin was a woman, just as I am. But she was the first to be chosen as Dearheart to an Old One,” I say.

“A Dearheart?” Wuer asks.

“A companion, an...honored friend,” I add.

“A blood sacrifice, you mean,” he says.

“What?”

“Please, we are not here to argue over history, Wuer. The bloodlines have been purged of Nerin’s descendants. There will be no more of those sacrifices,” Corvinus says.

“In the Northern clans? There are...they have been killed? All of them?” I ask.

Corvinus lets out a heavy breath. Nodding, he clasps his hands on the table in front of him.

“Yes, a few weeks ago. I am...sorry. I know the Ladies of Belan were...very revered in your culture,” Corvinus says.

“I do not understand why the Northern Clans have not surrendered. If there is no longer a Lady of Belan to lead them...” I say.

“I do not understand it either,” Corvinus says, “They are suffering greatly. Our forces keep them on the move. We find the corpses of their elderly, their young, their sick and weakened. They kill them, rather than let our soldiers bring them south, for food and rest.”

“For enslavement. The Northern Clans prefer death and freedom,” Brishen snaps.

“That is not the choice you made, old man,” Wuer says.

“I have had enough dark hours to reconsider my actions,” Brishen answers.

“More blood is never the right choice!” Wuer shouts.

“There was plenty of blood spilt when I surrendered to your masters, boy! I can still remember the gush of it over my cheeks!” Brishen says, his own voice rising.

Wuer is glaring at him. It is a ridiculous endeavor, trying to win a staring match with a blind man, but Brishen has furrowed his brow and his face is turned towards the sound of Wuer’s voice. They are both determined to claim the last word, even though their argument will never have an end.

“What is it that you would have me do, precisely?” I ask.

My voice breaks the stalemate between Wuer and Brishen. They commit to turning away from the other, Wuer staring into the fire and Brishen turning his ear towards the sound of my voice. His shoulders rising and falling softly, Corvinus sighs and gives me an appreciative smile. I do not return it.

“The Northern Clans are in great need of a healer, especially one of your skill. I believe that if you were to spend time among them, you could convince whoever leads them now that their resistance will only bring them greater pain and loss,” Corvinus says.

“And what of your forces? Is Roisline expected to dodge Maern blades on the field of battle while she plays the part of your puppet?” Brishen asks.

“Of course not, Elder. When Roisline joins the Northern Clans, we will stop all of our military advances. A few scouts will be sent out now and then, only so that we may assure ourselves and you, that Roisline has not been harmed,” Corvinus says.

“Say she accepts and your whining little whelp here learns enough to keep us alive until she gets back. How long are you giving her to accomplish this...absurdity?” Brishen snarls.

“From the day Roisline is accepted in the Northern Clans, she will have one year,” Corvinus says.

“A year?” I repeat, unable to stifle the disbelief in my voice.

“I am a politician, my dear. I realize that these things take time. I also realize, and may His Sovereign see me wrong, it may be impossible for you to reason with the Northern Clans. If you return to us alone after one year, you will be returned to your village, unharmed,” Corvinus says.

Brishen lets out another snort, but the rest of us slip away into silence. I follow Wuer’s gaze, allowing my eyes to settle on Corvinus’ fire. Unlike other Maern who use timber, which is scarce and burns too quickly, there is peat in the ambassador’s fire.

These dense bricks of packed earth will keep his chambers twice as warm for three times as long. The man has more sense in his head than all the rest of the Maern on Nerin combined.

“When would you like my decision?” I ask.

Brishen stirs, jolting a bit in his chair. I suppose he did not think I would consider the offer at all. In truth, I am not. I have no interest in playing Corvinius’ game, or convincing the Northern Clans to surrender. Their fate does not concern me. However, there are advantages to training a Maern healer. Earning his trust could grant me access to Collucius. Perhaps when I am dead, he may even feel compelled to aid the village in my absence. This is at best, unlikely, but it is better than knowing their deaths are a certainty.

“Is four weeks enough time?” Corvinius asks.

“Yes,” I say.

I have no reason to ask for any more time. He has given me more than I expected, already. It will have to be enough. Four weeks to get close enough to Collucius and reveal to the Maern Commander that Scayah had a daughter after all.

“I will train Wuer in that time, no matter my decision,” I add.

“You teach him, you’re healing Maern soldiers,” Brishen snaps.

“I can hardly call myself a healer woman, if I am unwilling to heal,” I answer.

Wuer looks away from the fire to stare at me. The hatred is gone from his face. He does not smile, but there is an intensity in his gaze. He is trying to decide something about me, and by the scrunching of his brow, having great difficulty with whatever it may be. Corvinius, on the other hand, is smiling.

“Thank you, Roisline. You are truly the example of what both our people need,” Corvinius says.

“You have my thanks as well. If we could begin right away, some of the men who arrived with me have a deep cough. They are burning, but the sweat does nothing to cool them. I have tried my remedies, but it only keeps the fever in check,” Wuer says.

“That is a common malady here, but they’ve no strength to withstand it. Give them the root of the marshlight flower. Three times each day, until the fever passes,” I say, but he just blinks at me, “The marshlight flower is a four petaled flower, with tall stem and flowers pale lavender in color. They grow south of here, just before the sea, on the grass dunes before the sand.”

Wuer stands abruptly, nodding his head. Already, Durand has left his sigil at the door and strode away with brisk purpose. Wuer follows but stops, just before the threshold. He turns back, nodding at me again, and then finally manages to open his mouth.

“Thank you,” Wuer says, again.

He stands there, staring at me until I realize that he expects me to speak. I simply nod back at him. This releases him, and he jogs after his older brother. Wuer is single-minded, an excellent quality for a healer to have, even if the idea of a man trained in the healing arts is still absurd to me.

“When should I return to the fort?” I ask.

“To train him? Oh, Wuer will come to you. After all, it is Nerin’s herbs and land that he must learn,” Corvinius answers.

“Good,” Brishen adds, gruffly.

I cannot help it. I feel a weight drop down into my stomach, anchoring me to my seat and threatening to drag me to the floor. I know it shows on my face. Corvinus has watched my expression struggle with my despair and, although I try my best to mold my features into stoicism, he has already seen enough.

“Elder, would you be so kind as to give Roisline and I a few minutes alone?”

Corvinus asks.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Brishen snaps.

For the first time this morning, I do not chastise him. I keep my focus on the table in front of me. There is a bit of candle wax that has dripped onto its surface. I focus on the yellow dots, as I hear Corvinus rise from his chair and step into the hall. He returns with what sounds like at least three armored men. Still, I do not look up.

“I am afraid that I really must insist, Brishen,” Corvinus says.

Brishen is taken by the shoulders and yanked to his feet. He swing his cane around, but it is caught midair. He shouts, as the soldiers drag him towards the door. Screaming my name, I hear a solid thump, which could only be the impact of a fist into the abdomen of a man. Brishen lets out all the air in his lungs and is silenced.

“Enough,” Corvinus shouts, “Enough. I will not see him harmed. Return him to his home *gently*, or there will be consequences. Do you understand?”

The soldiers mutter their acknowledgement. Brishen is taken away. I can hear him trying to struggle, but with the air knocked out of his chest, it is only a whimper that fades in moments. Corvinus closes the door behind him, and sits back down. The silence

is oppressive. Despite myself, tears are stinging at my eyes, and I cannot blink fast enough to restrain them. My heart pounds against my temples. I hate myself, for having so misjudged him. I am already wondering if I got to the door before him, if I could manage to climb the stairs, but what then? I do not even know which room is Collucius' or if he is even in it. Brishen was right, and I have realized it too late.

“You are Scayah’s daughter, are you not?” he whispers.

I take in a raspy breath.

“Are you going to have me killed?” I ask.

“No.”

Now, I look up at him. A few tears have spilled down my cheeks, cooling the hot skin of my face.

“How did you know?” I ask.

“Someone told me of her. You have her eyes, Roisline. They remind me of the sea. Not the sea here, the sea from my own home. The water is clear to the very bottom when the sun shines through it and such a bright green that it almost hurts to look on it...” Corvinius says.

His voice has taken on a strange tone, soft as a whisper and tender enough for tears. But his eyes are dry. I wipe my face with my sleeve.

“I have a daughter about your age, although...I have not seen her in many years,” Corvinius says softly.

“I...if you know I am of Nerin’s blood, then why-”

“Because, as I said, I believe you can help me. I believe you can put an end to this horrible war. Do you think everything I told you was a lie? Do you think I would rather witness this bloodshed, than hold my daughter in my arms?” Corvinus asks.

I do not know what to say. I cannot stop myself from crying now, even though the shame of my weakness burns hot on my face. Corvinus reaches into his robes and gives me a piece of soft, purple cloth. I bury my face in it, letting my face scrunch up with pain until I can breathe normally again. When I have wiped away the tears and mucus, the cloth is sopping, but Corvinus takes it back without pause.

“I know what it is you really want, Roisline. I could see it in your face when we brought you into the fort. It is why I insisted we come here, so near to Collucius’ chambers. I only wish I had been wrong,” Corvinus says.

“He killed my mother,” I say.

“Yes, he did. And when you kill him, then you will be killed. Your village will be without aid. The Northern Clans will rebel until there is nothing left of your people. I did not have the honor of knowing your mother, Roisline, but I sincerely doubt that is what she would have wished for you, or for the Daughters of Nerin,” Corvinus says.

“If you think to change my mind with your Maern sympathies, you should know that Brishen’s stubbornness is nothing compared to mine,” I say.

Corvinus sits back in his chair. Leaning sideways, he stares into the fire. My burst of anger has not effected him in the least. I feel the swell die within my chest. It is so strange, being honest with a Maern.

“I would like to make an agreement with you,” Corvinus says.

“If it does not involve Collucius’ head on a pike, I doubt it will be to my liking,” I answer.

“Would you care to hear my terms before you refuse them?” he asks.

“Very well.”

“Celebrate solstice with your people,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

Corvinus leans forward. The grey in his eyes reflects the firelight like fish scales. His hands are grasped in front of him, sitting on the table, but as he speaks they move, and I am captivated by them. I had not noticed he wore a ring before, but it is enormous, golden with an onyx stone. There is some sort of engraving in the stone, but I cannot make it out.

“As a show of good faith, we will allow your people to celebrate the summer solstice, in honor of the Old Ways. You may even leave a tribute to your draken,” he says.

“We could not spare the food.”

“I will have the tax lifted until the solstice,” he says.

The summer solstice is a little over three weeks away. It is, perhaps a day or two shy of the four weeks during which I have sworn to teach Wuer. Corvinus knows this of course, and has thought of it all along.

“Teach Wuer and consider my offer, Roisline. Swear to me in that time, you will consider going to the Northern Clans and doing what I ask,” he says.

“And in return?” I ask.

“And in return, I will leave the final decision up to you. If you take my offer, then Wuer will care for your village while you and I put an end to bloodshed,” he says.

Now, I lean forward. We are speaking in hushed tones now, but I am so breathless, I feel as though we have been shouting.

“If I refuse?”

“Then I will open the gate for you on the night of the summer solstice. That is all. You understand? What you accomplish once you are inside is your responsibility alone. I will not raise an alarm, but I will not direct you towards Collucius either,” he says.

“Why?” I whisper, “Why would you do this?”

Corvinus pauses.

“Collucius is incompetent. His methods are bloody and ineffective. Durand would be far better suited for the position and if you managed to kill the commander...then I would make the recommendations for his replacement,” Corvinus says.

I gulp at the air, because I have been holding my breath. My heart is pounding again, but this time, it is not in fear. It is adrenaline pumping through my veins and making my limbs tingle.

“So I will be your ally or your assassin?”

“The decision is yours,” he says.

“And if I wanted to be neither?”

“Then I would feel compelled to inform Collucius that Scayah had a daughter,” he says.

And now, Corvinius and I understand one another fully. I am surprised at how similar we are. We share dedication, and the will to do whatever is necessary to fulfill that will. Maybe that means I have more Maern in me than Nerin, but I would rather not consider this possibility.

“You will have my decision on the day of the solstice,” I say, rising.

Corvinius rises too, but stays where he is.

“Very well. I suppose you know your way out?” he says.

The corner of my mouth twitches upwards. It is his first test, although a rather crude one. I suppose it will still accomplish what he wants.

“I do,” I say.

Turning around, I open the door, but he calls my name. I look back at him, standing upon the threshold.

“If I could sway your decision, I do hope you choose to work with me, Roisline. You and I could save *hundreds* of lives,” he says.

“You couldn’t,” I say.

The mid-morning light is so bright that I must stand, blinking and blinded, for a few minutes once I am outside. Slowly, I can make out my feet and the trampled grass underneath them. I don’t care anymore, that the soldiers glare at me. It doesn’t frighten me to walk among them. I know it’s nonsense, but I feel impossibly powerful. After all these summers of futile resentment, I will have vengeance for my mother.

Instead of hanging my head, I allow my eyes to wander around the fort. A strange machine catches my eye, around the corner of the barracks. It is something I have never

seen before, or at least, not on this scale. It looks like the Maern bows, which fire short bolts instead of arrows, and can hold their own string taut without the arm of its archer. But this machine is enormous. The bolt alone is nearly as thick as my waist. The bow is attached to a rolling platform, with four wheels and the tip pointed towards the sky. It is the most wicked looking thing I have ever seen.

I don't know why, but it makes me sick to look at it. The Maern must truly believe that draken still roam our island if they think they need such weaponry. With my stomach uneasy, I hasten towards the fort's entrance. The doors are swung open without any request from me and I do not pause. I am nearly at a run when a familiar voice shouts my name.

Chiomara is standing outside her door. Her bright copper hair is in tangles, whipping around her white, freckled face in a flurry of vibrant fire. I have always wondered, since Chiomara began selling her company, if even one soldier has ever realized her beauty. Right now, her cheeks are flushed and she is biting her lip. I cannot remember the last time I have seen Chiomara nervous. It is simply not an emotion that I associate with her.

"Come in," she says.

Her tone of voice does not imply that this is a request, and the absurdity, that an outcast whore has just given a Daughter of Nerin an order, almost makes me laugh. Not that I have ever cared for Chiomara's exile. It was not something I agreed with, but since I had refused the mantle of Clan Mother, my voice was drowned out by the others.

Barren women have no place within a clan. Those who are unable to bring forth life are

considered to be cursed by Belan, who gives life to all. It is a hard truth, but one that has been passed down for so long that my defense on her behalf fell upon deaf ears. When she chose the life of a whore over starvation, the clan was adamant that no one would acknowledge her. But it was my mistake that made her barren, my first as healer after my mother's death, and I have always felt I owed Chiomara a great debt.

For her part, she has never treated me with the disdain that I would expect. Chiomara even barter with me, my healing arts when she needs them for whatever information she can provide me from her clients. The soldiers sometimes have loose lips upon her bed, but there has never been anything to get me within the fort walls. Although, I know countless ways of failing to get to Collucius, I have never considered this knowledge worthless. Especially now, when Corvinius is willing to open the way for me, it seems more and more crucial. Maybe that is why I find myself sitting at Chiomara's table. She is slowly pacing around the room. It is a habit of hers, when she is thinking. I find the effect mesmerizing, and simply wait for her to speak.

“What is it that Corvinius wanted?” she asks.

I am not surprised she has heard of the ambassador. She has probably heard more than just whispers of his name. There is an edge to her voice. Her steps are jolting and tense, and this seals my lips. Chiomara has always been the only one to know of my plans. She has never questioned me or confronted me, not once.

“He wants me to go to the Northern Clans, to convince them to submit,” I say.

Chiomara stops. Her body turns around to face me, but she remains rooted to the spot. Her hearth is low, but I can see her eyes have narrowed.

“Do not lie to me. You are a terrible liar, Roisline. You always have been,” she says.

I don't say anything, mostly because I know she's right. Even if I could spin a falsehood without feeling my cheeks grow warm, Chiomara would still see through me. It is a talent of hers. Staring at the floor, I hear her make a gargled scoff in the back of her throat before crossing the room and sitting down beside me. We are both staring at the far wall.

“Corvinus said he was here to recruit you, which means he is here for something else,” Chiomara says.

“He came here?” I ask.

“No. His attendant did,” she says.

“What is an attendant?”

“Apparently, Maern ambassadors need someone to dress them and feed them,”

Chiomara sneered.

“He is...very different,” I say.

“He is very dangerous,” she answers, “Does he know who you are?”

I take a breath.

“Yes.”

“I thought so,” she says, “You wouldn't be useful otherwise.”

“He gave me a choice,” I say.

“Slave or?”

“Assassin,” I finish.

Now, Chiomara turns to look at me. I stay where I am. I don't want to see whatever expression is on her face. She keeps staring for a long minute, until I can barely stand sitting still.

"What did you decide?" she whispers.

"I haven't," I say.

I sense her tense up, but this time, she doesn't call my bluff. Maybe she doesn't really want to know. She is the only one in the village who may not need me to survive and I think she is the only one who might miss me, and not miss the healer. She deserves the truth from me at least, but I keep silent.

"You won't say anything...to Brishen or anyone else?"

"What would that do? Corvinus would call me a liar and have us both killed, instead of just you," she snaps.

I smile, unable to help myself. Chiomara has a way of assessing a situation without any emotion attached to it. I have always been envious of this particular ability. I have never seen her overcome with anger or grief. She is simply impervious. I have often wondered if she even cried when she was a babe. She's certainly never shed a tear in front of me.

"How long?" she asks.

"Until solstice. I'm training their healer. The tax will be lifted until we can celebrate properly," I answer.

"That sounds like Corvinus," she says, "Everything always in his favor."

Her voice has taken on a tone of disgust. Because I've begun to feel nervous shivers, I stand up, but she stands up with me. This pauses me, if momentarily.

“A slave can always turn on its master, Roisline. A dead woman is just dead,” she says.

I suppose I should be grateful that this is the only thing she will ever say on the matter. She knows whatever choice I make, I will make it alone. Her words still twist at my heart, because I know what she is asking. She wants me to take Corvinus' offer, to bide my time, and after years of earning trust, to kill Collucius in a manner that would leave me a route of escape. I could take my revenge and live if I were patient, but I do not have the strength for what she asks of me. I have burnt too hot, like the last bit of peat surrounded by soot. There is not enough left to rekindle.

Chiomara allows me to leave without another word. There are no soldiers on the path to the village, and I am grateful for the solitude. It doesn't last, but it is enough time for me to regain myself. I know everything has changed, so I must appear as if nothing has changed. The clan will be infected with enough fear, probably no thanks to Brishen and his obstinate distrust of the Maern. I have a feeling that Corvinus will not tolerate dissension, especially when the tax on our food has been lifted and we have been given leave to celebrate solstice.

The village is stirring now, but for all the faces peering out of windows and open doorways, a heavy silence seems to hang over the spattering of little huts. I follow the path towards the blacksmith's hut, and slowly, as if they are making sure I am not an

apparition, a frantic whispering rises in the salty air. I am a few steps away from Cathal's door when his mother reaches out and tugs at my arm.

Myrna's face is lined with decades of grief and anxiety, but she bears her life with a quiet resoluteness. Her small shoulders are never slumped, as most of our elderly. The brown of her eyes is as rich as Nerin's soil, and the braid behind her back is as white as birch bark. The clan has looked to her for guidance, in the face of my refusal and she has not disappointed them. Her foremothers were once Clan Mothers, before my foremothers united the clans in the South and took the burden of leadership upon themselves. Although, I have always suspected Myrna's dedication stems from a love of my mother, more than ancient duty. It was my mother that taught her twin boys, Cathal and Callan, the trades which made them indispensable to the Maern. While other sons were sent away to serve as soldiers, her sons remained with her and she is one of the few whose family is relatively whole.

"Roisline, I have called the council," she says.

"I will attend after I see to Aoine," I answer.

Myrna looks as though she wants to protest, but she lets go of my arm. Aoine is the mother of her grandson, and soon to bare her another grandchild. I know Myrna worries for her.

"Very well. We will wait for you," she says.

"It makes no difference to me," I say.

The bitterness in my voice causes Myrna to wince away from me, but I turn away from her before she can say anything further. Without a Clan Mother, the clan calls

together its mothers, its elders and a few of the old men who have proven themselves wise over their lives and a vote is cast. Although there has not been a true voice of authority since my mother's passing, the council goes on without her and does the best it can. Truthfully, I should have no place in it. I have not born any children, but my bloodline is more important to the others than my refusal to give life to the clan. Yet, my voice is counted only as one and not supreme, like my mother's once was.

Myrna retreats, and only Cathal is outside to greet me. Already damp with sweat, his shirt sticks to his lean back and broad shoulders. His hair is red but dark like rust, a stark contrast to his twin. Sweat is dripping down his forehead, trickling off his nose as he steps away from his forge, but a frown has passed over his features.

"Callan brought us the goat. Are you all right?" he asks.

"Yes."

"They didn't hurt you?" he presses.

"I'm fine, Cathal," I answer.

He nods his head. He doesn't look satisfied, but Cathal knows his place better than Callan. He sits down on his workbench, wiping the sweat from his brow with a rag.

"How is she?" I ask.

"Out of bed, but still weak," he answers, quietly.

"The tax will be lifted until solstice. She must eat as much as she is able," I say.

Cathal lifts his brow.

"We are allowed to celebrate, and in return, I am to train their healer and consider going to the Northern Clans on the Maern's behalf," I explain.

Cathal takes a deep breath. He leans over, bracing his arms on the top of his knees. For a moment, his hands pass over his face but then he peers up at me again.

“Rosy, you know how the Maern respond to ‘no,’” he says.

“I have until solstice to decide,” I say.

It is not what he wants to hear, but it is enough information that he allows me to pass by him without further pestering. Aoine is sitting at her table, her arms resting over her swollen belly. The bags underneath her eyes are dark, and her hair hangs behind her in a thin wall of dull brown. Her cheekbones are sharp, and with the angular shape of her nose, she almost resembles a field mouse in human form. She turns her head when she hears me and tries to smile.

“How is the babe?” I ask.

“Restless and not fond of sleep, it seems,” she replies, “For nearly a fortnight, I’ve-”

“Rosy! Rosy! Rosy, look at what Da made me!” Oweyn squeals.

We are interrupted by Aoine’s first child, though he looks much more like his father than her. A kindness of Belan, though I’ve never said as much. The boy is four summers now, tall and strong and with a head full of messy orange curls, cheeks dotted sweetly with freckles. Waving a wooden sword above his head, he nearly spills the cup of milk over his plate, an egg and a piece of bread crust. The blacksmith’s family has always eaten better than the others, as the Maern seem to always need swords mended and their metal clothing reinforced. They never bring back slaves from the North, and I had always

hoped that meant they were doing poorly. With Nerin's bloodline extinct, their victory is assured.

"Psh, finish your breakfast, or I'll have your Da skin you along with tonight's supper," Aoine scolds.

Oweyn protests, but I ignore their banter, drawing from my cloak the satchel of herbs and berries I have brought for Aoine's morning tea. With herb in one hand and mortar and pestle in the other, I busy myself about their hearth.

Crushing a dried, withered bud, I watch closely as it releases a few drops of thick, yellow syrup, completely coating one side of the cup. Turning back to the hearth before it can dry into crust, I scoop the bubbling tea into the cup and begin swirling the tonic gently in my hand. Before long, the murky green has lightened into a yellowish tone.

"It looks like piss!" Oweyn shrieks.

His mother reaches down to swat at his head, but he sprints away, laughing and dragging his wooden sword behind him. I hear Cathal stop his blade-sharpening to yell at his son to stay in sight. Aoine shakes her head.

"I'd scold him worse, but I'm afraid it doesn't taste much better than piss, Roisline," she says.

I just wrinkle my nose at her, the way she always does when Oweyn has disobeyed her. She sips the tea and her face mirrors my own.

"I brought that little devil into this world. I can do it again," I say.

"Aye, your mother would be proud," she says.

"Drink," I snap, more sharply than I mean it.

Aoine does as she is told. I settle myself next to her as she drinks, placing my hands over her womb. Underneath my fingers, I can feel the child push against her flesh. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. Her stomach is not as large as I would like after eight months, but the child moves well.

Too many women in our village bare children with no breath in them. They are half-starved and over-worked. Aoine is one of the few women who can endure a pregnancy with little danger of her own life. She and Cathal married in the Maern tradition, and with Cathal's work, he is able to provide the best of the food that is not taken by the tax. There are many who resent them, but I have always simply thought Aoine to have good sense. Her son will never be ripped from her arms when he comes of age. Oweyn will remain with us and take on his father's trade. He will be able to build a life of his own, within Maern law and custom, but to Aoine, that is better than the alternative.

"Is something wrong? Cathal was so quiet this morning," Aoine asks.

"No, Aoine. Nothing is wrong," I say.

She nods, trusting my word without hesitation. I tell her I will return around sunset and tell her to go back to bed. Cathal is waiting outside, sitting beside his glowing forge in a kind of paralysis.

"The babe is fine," I answer, before he can ask.

He nods, gratefully.

"Whatever you decide to tell her, do not upset her. She and the babe are not strong enough yet for a birthing. I think it will do her well if I move in early," I say.

“Aoine would appreciate the company and we could use the help with Oweyn. Myrna is too old to keep up with him and the others...they say they cannot,” he says.

“I will collect my things,” I say.

Cathal nods again, but goes back to his forge. I watch him for a minute. The sparks flying from his metal hammer have always fascinated me, but I don't allow myself to remain in this trance. Aoine will need almost constant attention and there is a council waiting for me. I remember Chiomara telling me how bad of a liar I am, and remind myself that the less I say, the better. If Brishen were to understand Corvinus' offer, I do not doubt that he would have me taken away and he would not need my agreement to do it. Callan would be more than happy to gag me and drag me into the wilds, if he thought it would save my life.

I cannot afford for anyone to realize the truth. Corvinus, Chiomara and I will be bound together in silence, and I can only hope that Chiomara's sense of self-preservation will remain stronger than her affection for me. There are so many different people pulling the strings of my life and none of them realize there is nothing there to pull. At least now, I know it will end soon enough.

Chapter III

I know they are waiting for me, because Myrna's son Glendon is standing outside Brishen's door. At thirty nine summers, he is the youngest male to be included in the decisions of the clan. Normally, men must be much older, but Myrna is so well respected and we are so few we cannot afford to be as strict as the Old Ways would dictate. He is tall and crowned with the deep brown curls that his mother passed to him. Glendon bows when I approach. It is a needless formality, but most of the men in the village insist upon it. Brishen and the twins are the exceptions, but the twins are too young to be present.

When I walk into the room, the hushed whispers are silenced at once. Glendon closes the door behind me, then joins Felan and Brishen who are standing against the far wall. By the hearth, Myrna stands with her daughter, Neave. Branna, the oldest woman of our clan, sits at the table surrounded by her daughter, Alanna and her granddaughter, Orla. Aoine would be sitting beside her sister, Orla, if she were strong enough, but Aoine has never raised her voice against mine. Of course, not all of Branna's offspring are

present. The old woman was the first to agree to Chiomara's exile, and I have never forgiven her for it. A mother should speak for her daughter, even against tradition, but I hate Branna for more than the abandonment of Chiomara. I have hated her with violent passions for six summers and with good reason.

Myrna steps forward. This subtle movement is all that is required for her to gain the attention of the room. Although Branna is her senior, the older woman never vied for my mother's status when she passed. Out of guilt, I assume.

"As many of you have heard, Roisline has been asked to go to the Northern Clans on behalf of the Maern. The Maern expect them to surrender soon, because they believe the bloodline of Nerin to be extinguished," Myrna says.

Suddenly, the attention of the room has shifted. The extinction of Nerin's bloodline in the North had been a rumor until only a moment ago, and now everyone knows that I am the last. Orla, who is fairer and stronger than her younger sister, speaks first.

"If the Maern believe she could sway them, do they know she is a Lady of Belan?" Orla asks.

"I am no Lady of Belan," I say.

I stare at each pair of eyes until they fall to the floor. Only Brishen does not lower his head, but he cannot see the fury in my face.

"But you could be," Brishen says.

I hate how calm his voice sounds.

“A Lady of Belan must complete years of training. There is no one left to teach me. I will never be one of them. The Ladies of Belan are dead,” I answer.

There is nothing left for anyone to say. I can almost hear their shoulders slumping and their held breaths of hope released into the stale air. It is better this way. They will not miss my absence so much, if they know that I could never have been the answer to their prayers. If they realize that their only future lies with the Maern, maybe my death will only assure this truth and they will follow after Aoine, tie themselves to a man and allow him to speak for them and their household.

“Is Roisline in danger?” Alanna asks.

“Not at the moment,” Brishen answers, “If they knew who she was, she would be dead. The Maern would never risk leaving one of Nerin’s direct descendants alive.”

“But?” Myrna asks.

“But that Maern means to find out exactly how much she knows. This healer, Wuer, is a spy. He’ll be prodding her for information, I’m sure of it,” Brishen says.

“Wuer is not a spy,” I say.

I have no hesitation to speak on his behalf. There is no worry that the others will see any discomfort, because it isn’t a falsehood. The deal with Corvinus is a trap, but not in the way that Brishen has managed to convince the others. Wuer has no knowledge of Corvinus’ plans. Corvinus would never trust a boy-soldier fresh off the boat, even if it meant the promotion of his older brother. Truthfully, I doubt even General Durand knows of it.

“If he asks you anything other than herbs-” Brishen begins.

“I won’t answer. I will pretend I do not know. Is that satisfactory?” I ask.

“There has to be more to this, Roisline,” Brishen snarls.

“Why?” I ask, “Because you are determined to see what is not there? What if Corvinius was telling the truth. What if this war that keeps him from his woman and his children weighs on him, as it does us? What if he really wishes for peace?”

The room falls silent again. It is another argument that they do not wish to hear. For so long, we have believed that the Northern Clans would stall the Maern advance long enough for a Lady of Belan to reunite with an Old One and summon them to battle once again. But I have seen the horrific contraptions of war with my own eyes. The enormous crossbows on wheels which shot the draken from the very sky are real. The sooner they realize our only hope for survival is with the Maern and not against them, the better.

“Corvinius has lifted the tax until the solstice. We are invited to celebrate Belan’s solstice, in the Old Ways, as long as we give tribute to their emperor too,” I say.

“You see!” Brishen shouts, “They want to know if Roisline knows the traditions!”

“Shadow take you,” I say.

The curse flung from my lips causes some in the room to flinch. Brishen is not one of them. Myrna is staring hard at me, and if she were my mother, I think she would have struck me for using such language. She is one of those who believes such words hold power, but she is wrong. And if they did, I certainly would not have the authority to cast them. Myrna is obsessed with Nerin’s bloodline, like Brishen and my mother, so she does not correct me. She thinks she is beneath me, a thought that disgusts me.

“Roisline, we must...at least, proceed with caution. If Corvinius suspects you know too much of the Old Ways...” Myrna says.

“Fine. Then do not celebrate the solstice. I do not care,” I say.

Myrna closes her eyes, her brow furrowing. She looks as though I have physically struck her, but since that is precisely what I feel like doing, I don’t mind that my words have had the same effect.

“But...if we are allowed to bring tribute, might that not...draw out an Old One?” Alanna asks.

Her voice is breathless. It takes me a few seconds for my mind to process her whispered phrases. When I have understood, I scoff. The others ignore me.

“It is possible,” Branna says finally.

It is the first time the old woman has bothered to speak. She remains slumped over the table, her shoulders curved inward and the white hair on her head, thin and frail. But her eyes, blue as the summer sky, are still clear.

Branna glances upwards at me. She remembers better than I, how my mother would horde food and bits of metal, whatever other treasures she could manage during the year. Together in secrecy, they would bring the tribute to the circle stones at the base of the mountain and pray for Belan to send an Old One to accept their measly gifts.

I was never permitted to go with her, because if they were discovered, it would mean death. One year, it did mean my mother’s death, but Branna was not with her that night. Nor was she with my mother when she was marched into the Maern fort at dawn for their idea of a just trial which ended with my mother’s throat slit. I asked Branna once

why she was not with my mother the night she was discovered in the midst of the circle stones. Branna refused to answer me, and we have not spoken to one another since.

“And what would you do with a draken, Branna? If you managed to call one?” I ask.

This time, everyone in the room cringes. I am determined to shout blasphemies at them until they realize that they are not blasphemies at all. A draken has not been seen for longer than Branna’s entire life, for longer even than her ancient, senile brother Brishen’s life.

“A treaty may be brokered by-” Branna begins.

“By a Dearheart and a Dearheart only,” I finish.

“But a Lady of Belan-”

“Could be chosen as a Dearheart, if a draken took a liking to her, but they are all dead. There are no Ladies of Belan left, and the draken have been slain by the Maern,” I say.

The summer sky eyes of Branna fall back down to the table in front of her. Alanna puts an arm around her mother’s shoulders and hugs her, gently. There is no comfort against the reality of our future. I think, perhaps, finally I have forced them to face the truth, but then Orla looks around the room and then up at me.

“Shouldn’t...shouldn’t we at least try? Just once more?” Orla whispers.

“It would put Roisline in danger,” Neave reasons.

“It doesn’t have to,” Myrna answers.

Myrna is staring at me. The others are looking to her, waiting with held breath. She does not make us linger.

“I know many of the solstice preparations. The others can be told to me by Roisline, in private. We can easily make it look as though all the decisions are coming from me. If there is retribution, I will pay it,” Myrna says.

“Myrna, if anyone is to endure this danger, it should be me,” Branna says.

“I could not agree more,” I say.

“No,” Myrna says, “You are not strong enough for the journey to the circle stones. The danger will be mine.”

“This is futile. There is no reason to celebrate at all, if you believe it is some sort of Maern trap,” I say.

“If Corvinus is genuine in his wish for peace, then you can have no cause to fear for me, Roisline,” Myrna says.

I grit my teeth, but say nothing more. Myrna is right but, of course, I do not know if Corvinus is sincere. It is simply that I did not care. My fate has already been decided, but now Myrna is determined to throw her lot with mine without having any idea of the stakes. She is risking her life in an attempt to save mine, and the futile effort may cost her.

“I believe it is time we make our decision,” Myrna says, “Roisline, Daughter of-”

“No. If the tribute were accepted by a draken, the Old Ones have never had dealings with anyone, but a Lady of Belan. There are no Ladies of Belan left. We would be better to stockpile our resources while the tax is lifted,” I say.

“Very well,” Myrna sighs, “Myrna, Daughter of Mairead would see Belan honored at his solstice. It is our last chance. I will oversee the preparations and accept any consequences of the Maern.”

“Branna, Daughter of Brigid, would see Belan honored at his solstice.”

“Alanna, Daughter of Branna would see Belan honored.”

“Neave, Daughter of Myrna would see Belan honored.”

“Orla, Daughter of Alanna would see Belan honored.”

“Aoine would not speak against me. She would see the value of taking advantage of the lifted tax,” I snap.

Myrna nods.

“As you say,” she agrees.

I am glaring at the men standing against the wall. Two of them will not have the disrespect to speak against me, but it will not matter. And the eldest of them already knows it.

“We honor Belan, but keep Roisline out of it. She must be kept safe. Half trained or not, she is the last descendant of Nerin,” Brishen says, not even bothering to speak with formality.

“Felan, Son of Branna, would not speak against the Daughter of Scayah.”

“Glendan, Son of Myrna would not speak against the Daughter of Scayah.”

“Then it is decided. We will safeguard Roisline, but proceed with our solstice traditions, with me at the head,” Myrna says.

Brushing past Myrna and Neave roughly, I begin collecting my things. I throw a few extra dresses into a sack and then begin going through my shelves of dried herbs. The others take their leave quickly. They know that whatever food they collect in the coming days can be savored, eaten and stored away, at least until solstice. Tonight, there will be full stomachs for the first time in longer than many of them can remember.

Brishen waits until only Myrna and I remain, then slumps down into his chair by the fireside. Myrna stays where she is. I can feel her eyes watching me, but I ignore her, focusing instead on the herbs that will best strengthen Aoine and her babe.

“Do you believe Corvinus?” Myrna asks softly.

I stop, but I do not turn towards her. Brishen turns his ear towards me. I take a long breath, knowing I must choose each word with care. Finally, I throw the sack of my spare clothes and herbs over my shoulder and turn towards Myrna.

“I believe he wants this war to end. And that he believes Collucius’ methods have not been...successful towards that end. What Corvinus’ methods may be...I truly do not know,” I say.

Myrna stares at me in silence. I feel my heart rate quicken a bit, but I force my breathing to remain slow and rhythmic. I remind myself that I have told the truth, if not all of it. Slowly, Myrna nods her head once.

“You will be moving in with Aoine?” she asks.

“Yes, until the child comes,” I answer.

“How does she fare? I know Branna worries,” Myrna says.

“Branna is welcome to come and see for herself.”

“You know she tries to avoid you, child,” she answers.

“As well she should,” I say, marching towards the door.

“It was not Branna’s fault, what happened to your mother,” Myrna says.

“I will believe that the day Branna believes it,” I say.

It is the first time that Myrna has ever commented on the silent unease that exists between myself and Branna. For the most part, Myrna has always let me go my own way, even when I know she must disagree, but Myrna has never forgotten the authority that my bloodline granted me and my mother. I have always suspected that it was love of my mother, more than the Old Ways themselves which discouraged Myrna from any serious reprimands. Now that she could lose her life in the coming weeks, I suppose she will be less and less hesitant to communicate her actual opinions of my behavior. It is not a change I look forward to, but it has always been difficult for me to treat Myrna with any real cruelty. She took on the mantle of Clan Mother, the responsibilities and risks, when it should have fallen to me, and she has never once resented me.

The village is deserted as I pass through it again. The others have hurried to the fields and gardens. Only the children are left, watched over by Neave’s girls, Riona and Keera. Both are nearing womanhood, but unblooded. They wave at me, as I pass, knowing that I will return soon. Orla’s youngest, a daughter of two seasons, is still recovering from a mild illness of the lungs and while I believe the girl is no longer in danger, my mother taught me never to take chances as a healer.

The echo of the blacksmith’s hammer is pounding in my head by the time I am standing in front of Aoine’s home once more. Cathal’s hair is slick with sweat, sticking to

his neck and forehead in the midday summer heat. I watch while he molds the orange, glowing metal, then removes it from the coals to thrust into the basin of water. Steam hisses from the bubbling surface and fogs the air between us. When it clears, I can see the sword clearly beneath the water. It is long, longer than the typical Maern blade and engraved into the hilt is a long, serpentine neck with open jaws breathing out flames.

“Is that for the tribute?” I ask.

Cathal sits down on his workbench, letting out a sigh. He begins tapping his foot, though the rest of his body remains rigid. This can only mean he does not wish to answer me. Unlike his twin, Cathal has always tried his best to avoid my temper. Finally, he wipes his arm across his forehead and meets my gaze.

“It’s for Callan,” he says.

“And why would Callan need a blade like that?”

“I hope he never will,” he says.

“We are forbidden to have weapons, Cathal,” I say, with more anger.

“I know, but with the tax lifted...it is my only chance to-”

“To what? Arm the clan? Against what precisely?” I snap.

Cathal looks down. He knows that the Maern would punish all of us, not him alone, if anyone was discovered with weapons. We are allowed one or two bows for hunting, but they must be shared. I have always been very careful to hide my daggers, though a set of little knives would probably give no Maern soldier reason to pause. It is swords, axes, and shields that are forbidden; the tools of war.

That Cathal would jeopardize Aoine and his children's safety is infuriating. It is also nearly impossible to believe. By the way he is staring at the ground and the scarlet shade of his cheeks, I know the idea must not have originated with him. Cathal would have wanted to use the ore left in his shed to get ahead of the Maern's requests. Perhaps to make a few pretty things for the tribute but never this.

"Brishen put you up to it, didn't he?"

"It was the will of the council," he begins.

"Draken piss," I say, "Only Brishen would be so reckless."

Cathal does not correct me this time, and I swear again, loudly. With my mind racing, I begin to pace. It has always helped me to think, so long as my feet carry me from one point to another. But I can still feel my throat restricting and my heart rate climbing.

Corvinus might have expected this. Our clan has never had such freedom under Maern rule, to use our own resources for our own means, even if that time is limited to a few weeks. How could I ever convince the Northern Clans to surrender, if I cannot even keep my own clan in line? I wonder if this is truly another test of his, and hope, desperately, that it is not. I am already failing, and I have no guarantee that Corvinus will stay true to his word, if he observes how worthless an ally I would be to him. After all, I am certain he would prefer an ally to a would-be assassin.

"What does Brishen think he can accomplish?" I hiss.

Cathal leans forward, peering from side to side to ensure that we are alone.

"Not a battle. He wants us to flee North, after you. He wants unity," he whispers.

I should have known the old badger would fall back on the first strategy. After all, he is old enough to remember it. He was by my grandmother's side when she united the two clans in the South. They were traveling North when they were ambushed, routed and finally captured. My mother had ordered our surrender under the assumption that we would bide our time, or perhaps even be rescued by the other clans.

They refuse to understand. Even if we were united, we would still fall. The Maern are stronger than us. They outnumber us, and their resources are endless in comparison with ours. This is what Corvinus would have me convince the Northern Clans to believe, and while I do not have the intention of becoming his ally, I am afraid if I fail so miserably with my own clan, the deal may be revoked.

"And do you think Aoine could make that journey? With Maern soldiers on her heels?" I ask.

Cathal continues to avoid my gaze. I know he has thought of this, but it isn't enough.

"Do you honestly think Brishen and the others will wait until your family is ready? You know how they feel about Aoine's marriage claim. You are expendable to them. You, Aoine, Oweyn and that babe," I snarl.

"No," he says, "We are part of the clan."

"Like Chiomara was?"

"That was different. The Old Ways-"

"Are an excuse," I snap, "As soon as you have served your purpose, they won't care what happens to you."

There is a slight trembling to his broad shoulders. He has tried to convince himself that what I'm saying isn't true, and by the redness of his face and his shallow breathing, I know he has failed. My stomach twists itself into a knot. I know how he feels. My revenge may be selfish, but at least I know they are no better.

"Do not make their weapons, Cathal. You will only feed a fire that is destined to burn you and Aoine and everyone else," I say.

Slowly, he nods. He bends over, wiping his face with his sleeve and straightens back up. He sniffs loudly, blinking quickly. He does not let a single tear fall, and for that, I want to reach out and put my arms around his neck. But I know that will only make things harder for him.

"So it's really over then, isn't it? We will call ourselves Maern," he whispers.

I sit down beside him before I realize what I am doing. He smells of sweat and soot, but I don't mind. Leaning towards him, I nestle my shoulder against his and we stare into the glowing coals together.

"It won't be so bad once the war is over. Once we're...Maern citizens, the taxes will be light. We'll have privileges..." I say.

"That is not what most of the women say," he answers.

"They will get over their pride. Their husbands can act as their mouthpieces. They will not have authority in name but they will have it," I say.

"For how many generations, I wonder," he says.

I cannot give him an answer to this, but by his tone, I know he was not seeking one. It is a question we have all wondered. How long until our children count their age in

years, instead of summers? Until they look to their father for guidance, instead of their mother? How long until they begin to think of themselves as Maern, instead of the Daughters of Nerin? I wonder if they will even believe that Nerin was a real woman.

“What would your mother want?” Cathal asks.

I twist away from him, looking up from the forge to stare at him. He does not return my gaze. He just keeps staring straight ahead, his face smooth and without a flicker of emotion. Even his eyes seem dark and empty.

“It doesn’t matter. She is dead,” I say.

“It matters to me,” he whispers.

I stand up. It is such an abrupt movement that Cathal flinches and stares up at me. Turning my back on him, I swing my belongings back over my shoulder and head towards the door.

“Rosy,” he says.

I stop. He so rarely calls me by my childhood nickname. When my mother died, Cathal stopped treating me like his younger sister. He treated me with all the respect that a Clan Mother would expect, even though I wasn’t one. It put a distance between us, one that neither of us have ever really crossed, or tried to. It hurt me at first, when he pulled away and acted as though he was beneath me. Now, it is this gentle nudge towards familiarity that feels as if he is picking at an old wound, stiff and callous.

“One day, you’ll have to forgive her,” he says.

“No,” I answer, keeping my back to him, “I won’t.”

Aoine is asleep. I am careful not to disturb her as I put my belongings beside the table. Tonight, I will sleep on a few extra furs near the fire with Oweyn curled up beside me. For now, I take out a variety of dried herbs and store them in my pockets.

It takes me the rest of the day to see to everyone in the clan. The summer harvest has been difficult on everyone, and I grateful for the tax lift which will grant everyone a full stomach tonight, and for many more nights. This will do more for overall health than many of my remedies, but I still ration out a few teas to a few who have a cough that radiates from their chests. Normally, after my rounds are completed, I relieve Callan from watching our herd of sheep, and he returns to the fields with the others. But with the sun already setting, I turn my steps back towards Aoine's home.

When I return to the blacksmith's hut, Aoine is already asleep again, but Cathal is waiting with a hot bowl of stew and crust of bread. He does not mention our discussion and I wonder if he has spoken with Aoine about it. Oweyn sits beside him, having refused to go to bed before me. The little boy chatters at me about his day, telling me of all the bugs and monsters he slew with his wooden sword, while I slurp down my dinner. The pieces of flesh from the goat's kid are stringy, but filling. My eyelids are heavy when Cathal takes away my plate. He tries to take Oweyn's sword away, but the boy begins to cry.

"It's all right. I'm not afraid to sleep next to a warrior," I say.

Cathal shakes his head, but lets me take Oweyn, sword and all, into my arms. We nestle onto the floor between deerskins and a woolen blanket. The sword is only as long as my forearm and I can maneuver my body around it well enough for Oweyn to fall

asleep at least. He pushes his head into the crook of my arm, and stares up at me. His eyes are luminous by the light of the fire, flecks of golden shine against brown as rich as the earth.

“Can I have a story?” he whispers.

“Of course you can. What do you want to hear?” I ask.

He bites his lip, squinting at me while he concentrates.

“I want to hear about the Old Ones,” he says.

This is almost always his answer. Oweyn likes to hear about how large they are and how they could breathe fire from their mouths. But tonight, he looks more pensive.

“Are they real?” he asks.

It is the first time he has asked me this. Instead of answering right away, I run my fingers through the tangles in his red curls. I am smoothing them along his forehead when he squirms away from me.

“Rosy, are they real? The Old Ones?” he asks again.

“Yes,” I say, “But they aren’t what we thought they were.”

“What are they like then?” he asks.

I sigh, unsure what to tell him. He is only a child, but I have never lied to him. I think it is abhorrent to lie to children. They seem to always know you are lying, and when they discover the truth for themselves, they are prone to hate those who lied to them.

“I do not know. I have never even seen one,” I say.

“They were supposed to protect us,” he says.

“Yes.”

“But they tried, didn’t they? At the Temple of Belan?”

“Yes. That is when the Maern killed so many of them,” I say.

“Do you think there are any left?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, “No one has seen one in a very long time.”

He stops to consider all this information. His face is turned downwards, and for a minute, I think he has drifted off to sleep. But when I try to remove the sword, he suddenly reaches out and clutches it.

“If they all died, then the stories would still be true. They could still be good,” he says.

“I guess so.”

“Because good things can get beaten. That’s why we have to be Maern now,” he says.

I just nod, because I don’t want to say it out loud. We both slip into silence again. I know that I will not see Oweyn grow into manhood. I will be dead, and there will be few things that he recalls about me. He will serve as blacksmith, like his father, and he will take a wife in the Maern fashion and watch her bare children who will claim his kinship more than hers.

“But we can keep our stories,” I whisper.

He doesn’t respond. He does not even nod.

“Do you want me to tell you the story of the first Dearheart?” I ask.

For a moment, he lays in my arms without any sign that he has heard me. But then he nods slowly, and I breathe out a sigh. Hugging him tighter, I kiss his forehead.

“Nerin was the most beautiful woman in her whole clan. She could sing and play the harp and was very, very wise. She knew all the plants to make sick people better again. One day, she was out gathering those plants and she came across an Old One. Now, it was forbidden for anyone to approach an Old One, but this one was not flying high in the sky like all the others. He was lying on the ground, because he was very sick,” I say.

“He was the biggest thing Nerin had ever seen. His wings were-”

“You can skip that part,” Oweyn says, “I know what they look like.”

“Okay,” I say, “Well, Nerin went against the clan’s rules. She stayed with the Old One for days and days, nursing him back to health.”

“How did she know how to heal him?” Oweyn asks.

“She was a healer, remember.”

“But do they need the same plants as us when they’re sick? I thought they were very different.”

I bite my lip. Oweyn has always had a habit of asking very perceptive questions, when other children are just content to listen.

“Maybe they are the same and they just need more,” I suggest.

“How much more? How did Nerin know all that?” he asks.

“Maybe she tried one cure and then another until she found one that worked. That is how healers treat a new illness,” I say, certain that this will satisfy him.

“She could have made him sicker, or killed him,” Oweyn says.

“Yes, but she didn’t. He got better,” I say.

“She was a lucky healer, I bet,” he says.

I stifle a laugh, because if the story is true, then Oweyn is probably right. I have not spent a great amount of time thinking about Nerin, not in many summers, but she must have been a brazen, reckless woman. I do not know what the punishment for approaching an Old One would have been, but I imagine it would not have been an easy one.

“Well, the Old One did get better, and when he did, he loved Nerin very much. He asked her to live with him forever and ever. Nerin said that she would, if he and his kind would promise to protect her and her kind. The treaty was agreed to, so long as Nerin’s kind would offer tribute to the Old Ones in repayment for their protection. So Nerin became the first Dearheart, and we became the Daughters of Nerin,” I say.

“And...Nerin’s children, the ones who were related to her...were the Ladies of Belan,” he says, yawning.

“Mmhmm.”

“And your mom was a Lady of Belan,” he says.

“She was.”

“But you aren’t a Lady of Belan.”

“No, Oweyn. I’m not,” I say.

“Why?”

He is fighting to stay awake. Sliding the sword from between us, I place it beside us on the ground and curl my body around him. His eyes are shut, even as he mumbles against my neck. I kiss the top of his head.

“I don’t know how to be a Lady of Belan,” I say, hoping he will remember this and forgive me for it one day.

Chapter IV

Our breakfast in the morning is enormous, and uneasy. At least, it is uneasy for the adults, who cannot help but wonder if the miraculous lift of taxes on our food will continue another day. I cannot help but imagine a belligerent morning patrol shouting abuses and throwing people aside, taking what we are told we owe their emperor. By their faces, Aoine and Cathal are perhaps considering something similar.

Oweyn, on the other hand, eats his extra portions of bread, egg, and precious dried mutton in large gulps. Then he looks to my plate, which has barely been touched, and asks if he can have mine.

“Aoine?” I ask.

She shakes her head. Her plate still has a bit of bread on it, but she has eaten well enough. It is always harder in the morning. I think she would not have been able to keep anything down, if not for the tea I brewed her when I woke up.

“No, I can’t,” she says.

I pass the plate to Oweyn, who is now looking at his mom. Then he turns to me, eyes bright in the early light.

“Ma wants it to be a girl. I do too,” he says.

I smile.

“You’d like a sister?”

Oweyn shrugs, turning on my leftovers with a vengeance.

“I guess. I just don’t want it to be taken away by the soldiers,” he says, through a mouthful of bread.

My breath catches in my throat. In his few summers, he has seen many sons of our clan torn from their mother’s arms and loaded into ships to become soldiers of the empire. Because of Aoine and Cathal’s acceptance of the Maern customs, Oweyn has always been granted safety, but he has lost friends. Neither of his parents will meet my gaze across the table, and the silence is growing heavier every second.

“Oweyn...whatever it is...they won’t take it away. Your mother...and father, are Maern now,” I say.

“But they only need one blacksmith,” he says, “So it needs to be a girl, just to be safe. The Maern don’t care about girls.”

For the second time this morning, none of us have anything to say. There are no reassurances. At least, none that could be genuine. Having just finished my plate, Oweyn looks around and notices our somber expressions.

“Rosy,” he says, “Whatever it is, you won’t let it hurt my Ma, will you?”

“Oweyn-” Aoine begins, but I hold up my hand.

“It’s all right,” I say, “I got you out of her tummy, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” he says, smiling.

“And you think I can’t do it again?” I say.

“I guess so.”

“You guess?”

“Will you promise?” he asks.

“Oweyn, sweetheart, that isn’t-” Aoine whispers.

“I promise,” I say, “I promise that as long as I am here, I won’t let anything hurt your Ma.”

Oweyn stares at me for a moment. His little round face is very still. Finally, he nods once and smiles.

“Ok,” he says, “Ma, can I go play?”

“Yes but stay in Callan’s sight. I don’t want to hear that he had to chase you down like a wandering lamb,” Aoine says.

Oweyn jumps from his chair and races for the door. He flings it open without pausing to look where he is going and collides with Wuer, who had just risen his hand to knock. Both of them utter a stifled cry, mostly of surprise. Oweyn falls back, landing on his bottom and begins to cry. Wuer stares down at him, then at me with his mouth slightly ajar.

Cathal is the first to respond, although I think if Aoine were not so weak, she would have done so a moment sooner. His father sets him back on his feet and makes

Oweyn look at him, as he dusts his boy off. Aoine watches them, but her eyes flicker upwards at the Maern standing at her door. Wuer is still staring down at Oweyn.

“Is he ok?” he asks, looking at me.

I stand up, walking past Cathal who is still bent down and whispering assurances to Oweyn that everything is all right. I place my hand on the top of Oweyn’s head for a moment before I grab my satchel and gesture for Wuer to follow me out into the morning air.

“You frightened him. That’s all,” I say.

“He ran into me. It wasn’t my fault,” he says.

I freeze. Wuer stumbles a few paces more and looks back at me. I know that the fury I feel rising in my chest and causing my view of him to fade in and out of focus are clear on my face. Wuer stiffens at first, then turns away.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

I take a few moments to catch my breath.

“You should have told him that,” I say.

I let my shoulder collide with his as I stomp past him. My temper is somewhat satisfied as he grunts, twisting away, but losing his balance in an attempt to put more distance between us. I would have greatly liked to see him mimic Oweyn’s fall, but he is able to keep his feet. It is another long minute before I hear him shuffling along behind me. We do not speak again until he has followed me into Brishen’s hut. The old man is already awake, turning his head as we open the door.

“Roisline?”

“And Wuer,” I add.

“He isn’t welcome,” Brishen says.

“Of course he isn’t, but I’ve agreed to teach him, so here he is,” I say.

Brishen snorts, adjusting himself in the chair by the fire. I gather the herbs for Brishen’s tea and lay them out on the table. I tell him what each is called, where it grows, how best to identify it, and the effect it has when brewed in this amount. Brishen clears his throat, loudly, and frequently during my lecture. Wuer glared at him a few times for this, but mostly he is making scrawling notes in a tiny, brown leather book. When I am finished, Wuer is still scratching away, so I go ahead and put the kettle above the fire.

Wuer sits behind me. As I steep the herbs, I know he is watching my every movement. I described the process well enough, but there is a subtlety to healing which cannot be taught except by the mentorship of another healer. Not everyone has the capacity for it, although it was a required skill for any woman training to be a Lady of Belan. Clan Mothers too, of course, have always been expected to practice the care of those beneath them. This knowledge was never denied to any woman outside those bloodlines, but my mother believed healing was a gift, and not truly a teachable skill.

When the tea is finished, I give the cup to Brishen. The steam rises in silver tendrils, and he breathes them into his nostrils. Clearing his throat, he begins to sip the warm liquid slowly.

“What are his symptoms?” Wuer asks, quietly.

“All the ones you’d expect a starving old man to have,” Brishen answers.

A flush passes over Wuer's face. His jaw trembles, and I think he will make some remark in anger. Instead, he takes a few deep breathes through his nose, his nostrils flaring, but when he speaks again, his voice remains calm.

"I would like to know of any previous illnesses that could resurface," Wuer says.

It is a perceptive question, and this surprises me. Not every woman has the aptitude for healing, and I have never met a man who I judged with any potential for the gift. Men are better at taking life, than giving it. The nurturing of life requires a woman's sensibilities, her empathy and humility. I don't expect to see such things from Wuer, but at least he has a good mind for it, if nothing else.

"He took a cough the winter before last. He recovered, but his breathing has always been weaker for it. The tea does more than just soothe his throat," I say.

"The herbs strengthen his body's natural defenses against further infections," he asks.

I nod, and he makes some more notes in his little book.

"He probably wouldn't survive a second infection of the lungs," Wuer mutters.

"One less problem for you," Brishen says.

"One less problem for all of us," I add sharply.

Wuer looks at me, his eyes wide. I know he spoke thoughtlessly, or at least without the intention to offend. Brishen's hostility is genuine and relentless. I remember the way Cathal looked yesterday. Suddenly, the morning feels very warm.

"Wuer, would you give us a few minutes to speak privately," I say.

Wuer stands immediately, snapping his journal shut, and nods. He tells me he will wait outside for me. I wait until he has closed the door behind him before standing up myself. I cross the room and peer out the window. Wuer is standing in the center of the village path, rocking back and forth on his feet while studying his notes. There are several yards between him and our door, for which I am grateful. I am not certain how low I will be able to keep my voice.

“I spoke with Cathal,” I say.

Brishen doesn't respond. He doesn't even frown or smile. The lack of reaction only fuels my own. I cross the room and bend, placing my face a few inches from him. I grip his arm with my hand, digging my fingernails into his arm.

“He won't be making any weapons. No more bloodshed. It's over,” I say.

Now, his brow furrows. I hear him begin to grind his teeth, and I know what is coming. Only this time, I do not see how we will ever be able to find a stalemate.

“That isn't his decision to make,” he says.

“It is his decision to make, when his family is the one you'd sacrifice.”

“His family? You sound like one of them. The clan is one family.”

“Like Chiomara? Aoine and the babe would never make the journey North,” I say, without any attempt to hide the disgust that I feel for him.

“And you think I would? Sacrifices in war are necessary,” he says.

“This isn't a war, Brishen. It used to be, but we have lost it.”

“No, you could rally the northern clans-”

“If I go north, it will not be to fuel more slaughter,” I say.

Brishen grows quiet. He wants me to accept Corvinius' offer, or at least, appear to accept it. Truthfully, he wants the same thing he has always wanted. He wants me to become my mother. I know how impossible this is, more than anyone.

"You can't mean that," he says.

I pull away from him. There are red marks from my fingernails, and I know his frail arm will be bruised for weeks. I feel nothing, not even a lessening of anger. The damage I have done to him is nothing compared to what he would do to the others. I know that my abandonment of the clan is wrong, but it is better than Brishen's thirst for what can only mean extinction for every woman and child, every man that is left to us. Even without their healer, they have a chance at survival. If Wuer is still willing to care for them after Collucius' death, they will have more than a chance. But that chance will be shattered if Brishen has his way. I have only a few weeks left to convince them to submit to the Maern. I owe them more than this. I know it, but this is all I can offer. Belan will cast me into the eternal darkness, but I cannot allow my mother's murderer to live. I am not strong enough to bare it.

"We can call ourselves Maern or die. There is nothing left," I say.

"Scayah didn't believe that," Brishen says, softly.

"And she is dead, isn't she?"

Brishen's shoulders convulse. He raises a hand to his scars and covers his face. I leave him this way, pain radiating through a body that can no longer be relieved through tears. I doubt that he has really given up, but at least for now, I know he faces despair.

Not even he is delusional enough to believe that this war could be won without a descendent of Nerin. I can only hope when I am dead, he will finally give up.

Once outside, I gesture Wuer to follow me. We have a few more visits around the village before I need to relieve Callan from watching the herd. I am anxious to finish and regain my solitude.

“You and your father don’t get along?” Wuer asks.

“No.”

“And do you remember your mother at all?” he asks.

“I never got the chance to know her,” I say.

It is not truly a lie. I may have had thirteen summers with my mother, but I feel as though I only ever knew the Clan Mother, the healer, the Lady of Belan. Scayah was a woman whom I didn’t know. She was a woman who taught me the Old Ways, but not why she believed in them, or why she followed them at the risk of her life. She barely spoke of her own mother, except to say that she died on the battlefield and once, when she was very young, she had seen a draken at the Temple of Belan. When I was only a girl, I think I asked her more about this draken than my own grandmother. She finally told me that the draken was covered in scales the color of lavender flowers and that her voice was soft and sweet enough to make me cry at the sound of it. I wonder now if her mother told her this, or if she was simply lying to me.

“I’m sorry your mother was taken from you at such a young age,” Wuer says.

He is walking in step with me now. I think he is looking at me, but I don’t turn my head, or make any sign that I have heard him.

“I miss mine every day. I was the youngest, so she is alone now,” Wuer says.

“Did she have daughters that were sold to other men?” I ask.

“We don’t...we don’t sell our daughters,” he says.

“But when they are given to a man, that man must give her father goats or sheep?

Or those strange beasts you are always riding?”

“They are horses. And it is considered a gift, an honor,” Wuer says.

“But a woman of higher birth warrants more horses?”

“Yes,” he admits.

“Then she is being traded. It is not different,” I say.

We have arrived at Myrna’s hut, where she lives with her daughter Neave and her grandchildren. It is the youngest grandchild, that I am concerned with. A week ago, Neave’s boy of seven summers was vomiting everything, but the blandest of broths. I am still unsure of the illness’ source, but I have a hunch the boy found some berry or flower in our fields. Not every herb from Nerin’s earth is meant to nurture. I have my suspicions but the boy gave me little description to go on. He is lying on his mother’s bed when we enter, where he has been for nearly six days. Myrna is mending a hem near the hearth.

“Roisline...” Neave says.

I hear the question she is too afraid to voice. Myrna looks up, her gaze settling on Wuer and remaining there.

“It’s all right. This is the Maern healer, Wuer,” I say.

“Good morning,” Wuer says, bobbing his head in a jolting fashion.

Neave tries to smile at him, but when she sits down beside her son, she leans over his little body. Her body is rigid and she keeps her eyes fixated on me. Wuer stands against the wall. Like Neave, he tries to see nothing but me inside the room. Myrna says nothing. She continues to stare at Wuer, which causes him to fidget. I am amazed that any Maern soldier could be so intimidated by a few women.

“How has he been eating?” I ask Neave.

“No trouble. He ate a great deal this morning,” she says, smiling easier.

I pull down the covers and ask Bron to remove his shirt. He does so, already accustomed to this routine.

“Tell me when it hurts,” I say.

He just nods. I press my fingertips gently into his sides, on each side of his abdomen and over his belly. There is no swelling and Bron even smiles a bit, when I pass over his rib cage. I let my fingertips run over his ribs, just light enough that he breaks out laughing and pushes me away.

“Laughing at pain? You’ll make a real warrior some day,” Wuer says.

Bron stiffens. His mother looks at Wuer for the first time, her eyes narrow and brow furrowed. Her whole body is trembling and she clutches the side of the bed so tightly that I can hear the scratch of the sheets against her nails. Myrna stands and places herself at the foot of the bed, even as tears well up in Bron’s eyes.

“I don’t want to be a soldier. I don’t want to leave my Ma,” Bron says, choking.

Neave leans over, gathering him into her arms. She whispers into his ear, soft and urgent. He hiccups, but does not begin weeping. Wuer is staring at them.

“I didn’t mean-” he says.

“Just get out,” I say.

He bursts out the door without pause. Myrna shakes her head, looking at the closed door.

“He is still a boy. He didn’t mean anything by it,” Myrna says.

“He should know better,” Neave says.

“Roisline is teaching him, isn’t she? He’ll learn,” Myrna says.

I leave the argument to them. I do not want to admit I don’t believe anyone can teach a Maern compassion. They know I may leave them in Wuer’s care and this would do little to reassure them. Bron is fit enough to begin playing, but there is no need for him to push himself in the fields, not with the tax lifted. I tell the boy he is not to eat berries without showing them to an adult first, though he has probably learned his lesson well enough.

When I meet Wuer outside, I tell him the boy likely ate a few elderberries and describe the poisonous plants which grow commonly on the island. He takes more notes, but doesn’t respond. In fact, he keeps this silence as we make our final rounds. When we have finished our last visit, I inform Wuer I must relieve Callan from watching the flock and turn towards the western hills. To my surprise, Wuer follows.

“I said, we are finished for the day,” I say.

“But there is more to learn,” he says.

My jaw stiffens and I accidentally bite the inside of my cheek. The taste of blood on my tongue just irritates me further.

“We have covered enough herbs today. Notes or not, you can only memorize so many things a day,” I say.

“I know. You’re right but...I want to learn more than just Nerin herbs,” Wuer says.

For a moment, I remember Brishen’s paranoia that Wuer is a spy, sent by Corvinus to judge whether I know enough of the Old Ways to be a threat. My throat feels very dry. I try to remind myself that Corvinus already knows who I am, and if he thought I could become a threat, he would not risk allowing me to live or offer what might be an escape to the Northern Clans. Corvinus is a man of such perception, I think he already knows what my decision will be, and the teaching of Wuer will ease the blow of my execution for the rest of my clan. It may even be that last push that the others need to surrender in authenticity.

“They won’t let me care for them,” Wuer says.

I blink, realizing that I have been staring at him while lost in my own thoughts.

“If I can’t understand them, they won’t let me care for them. Healing is more than knowing which herbs do what. I need you to teach me....everything you can,” he adds.

I know he is right, but I feel cold all over. I nod, very slowly, because suddenly my head feels light. I don’t know if this is a trap. The others would certainly believe it. But Wuer, even with his naivety and arrogance, does not seem like the other soldiers. The practice of healing is more important to him than the rules of the Maern.

“I will...I promise to listen. I won’t deny I think your people’s...ways are strange, but I must learn, if I am to care for them in your absence,” Wuer says.

I can tell he is finished. For the past few minutes, he has been turning his journal over and over in his palms and staring downwards. Now, he meets my gaze and stands perfectly still.

“Don’t tell the others of this. They won’t approve,” I say.

He smiles, uncertain at first, but the smile spreads wider and wider until he is nodding.

“Yes, no, of course. I understand. I will tell no one. I cannot imagine my brother would encourage it. It wouldn’t be *fitting* for a Maern soldier,” he says.

I laugh, because I cannot help myself. I gesture for Wuer to follow me and we fall in step again.

“This is something the General must say frequently?” I ask.

I glance over at him to see a sly smile, which he is trying to hide and failing badly.

“Durand has always wanted to be a soldier, ever since we were little. Our father was a great General,” Wuer says.

“But not you?”

“No,” Wuer says, “I have never wanted it. I studied medicine so that I could save lives, instead of only taking them. I was trained in swordplay and archery but I hope to never see a battle in my life.”

“I wish that too,” I say.

“You have never seen battle?” he asks.

“My...clan surrendered before I was born,” I say.

We slip into silence. Wuer can tell I chose my words with care. There is much I left unsaid. I am grateful that he does not press me for it now. The midmorning sun warms us as we trudge over a wide field of vibrant green. Callan sees us coming from a boulder where he perches to watch over the flock. He meets us halfway, the shepherd's crook slung over his shoulder and a frown on his face.

"You're going to teach him about sheep too?" Callan asks.

"No, but there is much for him to learn," I answer.

Callan snorts, but shrugs his shoulders. He looks down at me with a weary expression.

"Fine. I'll stay until you're finished for the day," he says.

"No. You'll break his concentration. You're too much of a distraction," I say.

Callan stares at me with wide eyes. He leans down so that we are on eye level with one another. It is another of his mannerisms I am familiar with, but one much less endearing than whistling when he is nervous. I can smell the sweat on his face and feel his breath on my own.

"Are you sending me away?" he asks, his voice a whisper.

"Yes," I answer, loudly.

Callan shoves the shepherd's crook into my arms and pushes past Wuer. It is the second time the Maern is nearly knocked over today, but this time it is less deserved. We watch him go and Wuer turns to me with raised eyebrows.

"Aren't you always his authority? Because you're a woman?" he asks.

"We were raised as siblings," I say.

“Ah,” Wuer says, “That is not so strange.”

The rest of the day I spend telling stories. I avoid the Old Ones, except for the story of Nerin, but we have many other stories. He is especially interested in our Clan Mothers, why they are chosen to lead clans, and their various responsibilities as warrior, healer and peace keeper. He is astounded that seven separate clans existed on the island without war for so many generations.

“But it wasn’t just the seven clans. There was another clan, that lived in the Temple, right?” Wuer asks.

It is well into the afternoon. We are both lying in the grass, listening to the sounds of sheep bleating and chewing their green tufts with a dull grind. They are lazy in the heat and I have not been forced to chase any wanderers. Even I had been in danger of dozing off, but now, I find myself wide awake. Wuer has noticed the change in me. He leans over on one shoulder, so that he can look at me, but I keep staring up at the clouds.

“The Ladies of Belan were not a clan, but I’m not supposed to speak of them anymore. No one is,” I say.

“I know,” Wuer says, “I’m sorry. I just wondered if you knew anything about them.”

He stares at me for a moment longer and then collapses onto his back again.

“I wish there had been another way, but I think it’s good that they’re gone,” he says.

“Why?”

“They were...they did horrible things. Corvinus told me. He was there, at the beginning. He saw with his own eyes what they did to one another. Dearhearts were chosen to be sacrificed. It was...monstrous,” Wuer says.

“You think the draken ate them?” I ask.

“Firebreathers, yes. They’re just animals, Roisline. They aren’t...intelligent,” Wuer says.

“Have you seen one?”

“From a distance, yes,” Wuer says.

The sky is pressing down on my chest, and making it hard to breathe. I sit up, hugging my knees to my chest. My vision is dotted with black spots for a few seconds, so I just close my eyes. There are things I suspect my mother lied to me about, but not this, never about the Old Ones. She wanted me to become a Lady of Belan, like her and she wanted me to be chosen as a Dearheart. It was her greatest hope and my people’s only hope for summoning the draken to war alongside us. Would my life have been the price of that? Wuer is not lying, but that does not mean he isn’t wrong. He has to be wrong. I look down at him to find him staring back at me.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Did the draken...did any firebreathers defend the temple when the Maern attacked it?”

“There weren’t any firebreathers there at all, as far as I know,” Wuer said.

I shut my eyes again, leaning forward to hide my face. Wuer wasn’t there, so he can’t be certain. It is still possible that the draken simply couldn’t get to the temple in

time. But why would my mother lie about that? Why not simply tell us that we could not find the draken? It cannot be easy to summon such a huge creature. My mother said they only visited the temple when one desired a Dearheart, but that was rare. Generations would pass without sight of one. I cannot believe draken are only animals, but if my mother lied about the battle at the temple, there is more to this than I can possibly know.

“I should probably go,” Wuer says.

I don't move. My breath is still coming in short, shallow rasps and the ground underneath me feels unsteady. Wuer leaves me this way, and I am left alone with only the sheep to see my crying. When I have no tears left, it is nearly twilight and my head hurts. I have tried in vain, over and over, to reconcile what Wuer has told me with what my mother told me. One of them is wrong about the draken, and if it is my mother, she may have lied about more than even I suspected. I know she loved me, dearly. But I know how fiercely she loved her clan and our people too. Would she have sacrificed one life to save hundreds of others? Even if it was mine?

I don't want to know the answer. I can die contentedly without it. She was still my mother. She is still mine to avenge. But, there is something unsettling about the mystery surrounding the draken. I have always simply assumed they were beaten and driven away by the Maern, but I have never doubted their loyalty to the descendants of Nerin until now. I suppose it does not matter anymore. My clan will call themselves Maern after I am dead. They will learn to shoot firebreathers from the sky, if there are any left on the island and then there will be none left. Death is a final answer, if an unsatisfactory one.

My days with Wuer get easier. Mostly, because he learns to keep quiet when we are around the others. He saves his questions about my patients for when we are alone. I force him to recite all I have taught him, without the help of his notes, and I am surprised at how quickly he learns. When he begins to run out of an herb from his homeland, he does not ask for more to be sent. Instead, he describes the properties, and I offer an alternative herb that grows on the island. It is something the previous healer in the Maern military camp never did, and Wuer happily reports that illnesses among the soldiers are rarer. They recover quicker, even from wounds they sometimes receive during their every day drills and exercises.

Without any patrols or taxes, the village is more active. Those who are not in the fields feel free to walk and talk around their little gardens and huts, without fear of being harassed for laziness. Even Aoine is strong enough to stay out of doors, and I am pleasantly surprised to see the others more receptive towards her. I wonder if this is what it will be like, my people as Maern. They are happier, for the most part. Brishen and Callan avoid us, but I do not dwell on it.

“He’s late today, isn’t he?” Cathal asks.

Aoine and I finished breakfast, and I have just finished washing the last of their bowls.

“Yes, if he doesn’t hurry, I’ll have to drink Roisline’s tea,” Aoine teases.

I narrow my eyes at her, but there is a smile twitching on my lips. Wuer has been putting the root of a ginger plant in her morning tea. It is spicy and Aoine tells me that it nearly alleviates all her nausea. I am about to remind her that Wuer’s stores of ginger are

going to run out sooner or later, when I hear Oweyn shouting for his Da. I can hear the fear in his voice.

I am outside in another second, but Cathal has already found the source of his son's horror. The blacksmith has one of Wuer's arms hoisted over his shoulder and he is dragging the Maern towards me. His skin is an abnormal pale and he is covered in sweat. The front of his brown tunic is stained with blood, too much of it.

"He's been stabbed," Cathal says, brushing past me.

I stand at the doorway, watching as he lays Wuer on the kitchen table. Oweyn is crying quietly beside me.

"I didn't do it," Oweyn says, "I promise. I just found him."

"Roisline!" Cathal shouts.

Breaking into a short sprint, I come inside and stand over Wuer. I think, for a panicked moment, that he is already dead, but then I hear a ragged gasping of breath. I lift his shirt. It is not a stab, only a gash, but it is deep, probably from a broad sword and not a dagger. I have watched men die from less, but he has a chance.

Aoine has gathered Oweyn to her side and is clutching him, shaking so badly that she nearly loses her balance. Cathal looks at her for a moment, but then at me.

"Do what you can. I'll tell the General," he says.

"No!" Aoine shrieks, "They'll kill us! They'll kill us for this!"

"They'll kill us if we don't tell them," Cathal says.

He hurries out the door and Aoine collapses onto a chair, sobbing. There is no time to panic. There is not even time to wonder how this happened. I lean down and grab Aoine's chin, forcing her to meet my gaze.

"The best way to keep you and your family safe is to be helping me when the soldiers get here, do you understand? If we save him, we save ourselves, and I need your help for that," I say.

Aoine nods and sniffs, wiping her face on her sleeve. She tells Oweyn to lay down in our corner and be very quiet beneath the blanket. He does as he is told, but I can hear him whimpering still. Aoine works with me to cut off Wuer's shirt, with as little movement to disturb him as possible.

Wuer must have dragged himself towards the hut after he was cut, because there is dirt and grass in the wound. I am still cleaning the wound when the General bursts through the door.

"What happened?" he shouts.

"Now isn't the time, Durand. Cathal can answer your questions. I know nothing more," I answer, without looking up.

Surprisingly, the General does as he is told. I can hear him and Cathal conversing in voices that are barely restrained from screams, but I tune them out. Aoine and I have enough to do. She forces a broth of onion and garlic down his throat. After a few minutes pass, his wound does not stink and I know his stomach has not been punctured.

"Bring me Borterbane," I say

"How much?" she asks.

“All of it.”

Aoine is quick. She is no healer, but we have spent so much time together, she has picked up some of the more important herbs. She places the crinkled, white petals in my hands and takes away dirtied rag in another. She gives me a fresh one.

Durand returns, but he is quiet. He and Cathal sit down on the floor, across the room from us and watch in silence. Aoine presses down on Wuer’s wound, while I mash the flowers into a paste.

“Can you tell me how bad it is?” Durand asks.

“His stomach wasn’t opened, but he’s lost a lot of blood,” I answer.

I coat my fingers with the white paste. As a flower, Borterbane is sweet but crushed into a paste, the flower petals exude a new smell - sharp and strong and sour. Eyes stinging and nostrils burning, I slide my fingertips across the mangled, bloody flesh. The effect is immediate. The blood begins to clot, and although Aoine has to bring me yet another clean rag, I think it will be the last he soaks through.

With the blood loss controlled, I begin sewing the flesh back together with needle and thread. The work is slow and the needle slips from my hand several times, covered in the slippery wetness of the Wuer’s life blood. I can feel the question that hangs in the air between us. It has its cold fingers closed around my throat and I find I can hardly swallow. I do my best to ignore this. I know it will remain without an answer for hours still more, if I am lucky. Durand does not ask it and I am grateful.

Oweyn is snoring underneath the blanket. The day is hot and sticky and sweltering. Aoine tied a rag around my forehead, so that my sweat would not drip into the

wound. It was easy enough to stitch, though it took much time and even more thread. Cathal, Durand, and I watch in silence to see if the Borterbane stopped his blood loss in time. Aoine busied herself for as long as she was needed, but Cathal urged her to their bed a few hours ago. The stress wearied her greatly, but she has been tossing and turning all the while. I know she is not sleeping.

Without warning, a twitch of a finger and a parting of lips sends the three of us to our feet. Durand approaches first, his hand resting on the man's shoulder.

“Wuer? Wuer, can you hear me?” Durand asks.

I hold my breath in the stillness.

“Water.”

It is all he manages to say, but it lifts a great weight from me. Finally able to move, I hurry to bring water and help Wuer sip it slowly. Cathal smiles in my direction. His eyes are swollen and puffy, but he heaves himself off the ground to tell Aoine of this development. She utters a stifled cry of relief.

When I finally turn my attention to the General, I am jarred with the sight of tears welling up within his dark eyes. He notices my gaze, wipes his face and walks outside. I make sure Wuer is comfortable, or as comfortable as possible. When I am certain he is sleeping, I follow Durand outside.

He does not look at me when I emerge beside him. He simply stares ahead of us down the row of small huts. The village is deserted, or looks it. Though I feel as though I can almost hear the whispers behind curtained windows.

“Cathal said his boy found him just a few yards away. Wuer was dragging himself here. The blood trail leads to just outside your village, but on the other side. Do you have any idea why he would be there?” Durand asks.

“No, Wuer always came straight here,” I say.

“Cathal said he was muttering about an accident, but obviously, one of your people did this,” Durand says.

“We don’t know that. If he said it was an accident-”

“Wuer would say that just to ensure there weren’t executions,” Durand says.

“And you don’t think that’s reasonable?” I ask.

“I’m going to investigate this. Your people aren’t even supposed to be armed. I will find out who has done this to my brother,” he says.

“I will help you. Wuer isn’t a soldier. He’s a healer. I can think of very few in the village who would condone harming him.”

“But you can think of a few?”

“I can think of those who hold grudges against your people, with good reasons. Unless you would like to create more justified grudges, I suggest you move forward with caution,” I say.

Durand looks like he wants to strike me. His face is flushed red, and his posture is so stiff, I almost flinch when he finally does move. He turns around where he is standing, first to face the hut where his brother lies and then outwards again.

“Will he live?” he asks.

“I think so,” I say, “I will do everything I can to ensure that he does.”

Durand lets out a heavy breath.

“I know. Corvinus speaks very highly of you. Wuer too. Perhaps they are right to do so. You understand I must place a guard outside the blacksmith’s hut until Wuer can be moved?” he says.

I nod. I would have suggested it myself, in fact. I am not sure who might have done this, but the last thing the village needs is the younger brother of the General murdered.

“If you ever require assistance of any kind, and it is...possible for someone with my loyalties and duties to give it, then ask. It will be yours,” he says.

I cannot think of anything to say, so I remain silent.

“I am grateful,” he adds.

He turns away from me. And with long, swift strides, walks back towards the fort. A minute later, two soldiers replace me and I return inside. Aoine rustles in the bed, as I shut the door behind me, but she does not rise. She is probably sleeping heavily by now.

Cathal is sitting beside Wuer. He is crying and I feel panicked once again, thinking that Wuer slipped away while I was outside, but when I check on him, the rise of his chest is weak but steady.

“Cathal?”

“It’s my fault,” he says, his voice hoarse.

“You didn’t do this to him,” I say.

“No, but...I made weapons. Swords and axes while you and Wuer were out in the fields during the afternoon. You told me not to, but I did it anyway. I don't know why. I just...I was afraid and I thought we ought to be able to defend ourselves but you were right. Roisline, you were right. I just made it worse. It is my fault,” he cries.

I sit down beside him, forcing myself to breathe slowly even though I can feel my heart fluttering wildly.

“How many?”

Cathal just whimpers.

“Cathal, how many people in the village are armed?” I ask, more urgently.

“Seven or eight...I can't remember them all now. Belan protect us, what if it was Bron? Or Riona? They're just kids. They might not have meant it. What are we going to do?” he asks.

“Right now, we make sure Wuer survives,” I say.

“And then?”

“And then, it may not be up to us,” I say.

Cathal is exhausted and too upset to work, so I send him to bed. I take watch over Wuer but after a few minutes, Oweyn slips quietly out of the corner and sits in my lap.

“I didn't hurt him, Rosy,” he says.

“I know you didn't.”

“He's a good man, even though he's a Maern.”

“Yes.”

“And his older brother, he is good too,” Oweyn says.

I stare at him, then push the curls away from his forehead.

“He killed my mother,” I say.

“Because he was told to. I bet he didn’t want to, Rosy,” Oweyn answers.

Wuer stirs next to us, and I jump. I had thought he was deeply asleep but his eyes flutter open.

“He didn’t want to,” Wuer says, coughing a bit.

I feel as though I have had my own innards split open. I ask Oweyn to go play outside and he does so without a fuss. Wuer and I stare at each other for a few moments.

“You knew?”

“For a while now,” he says, “But I won’t tell.”

“How?”

“Your eyes. They’re the same as hers. Durand talked about your mother’s eyes in his letter. He said he’d never seen anyone die like she died. That she just...stared right at him.”

“I hope they haunt him,” I say, without thinking.

“They do,” he says.

I don’t know why but this doesn’t satisfy me in the way I expected. In fact, I feel like crying but I blink away the tears. I do not speak again until my breathing is slow and even.

“Who did this to you?”

Wuer closes his eyes, turning his head away from me.

“It was an accident,” he says.

“That isn’t true.”

“It is true. They didn’t mean it, not really,” Wuer says, but then he is coughing again, harder.

“Okay, enough. You shouldn’t even be talking, or awake for that matter. Lay still and go back to sleep, or I’ll give you an herb that will make you sleep,” I say.

Wuer responds with a rasping, pained laugh.

“With my heartbeat as weak as it is? Surely, that’s not the best treatment,” he says.

I give him a look that only makes him smile, but he closes his eyes. I watch him, the smile still on his ashen face and fading slowly. I can hardly believe how relieved I am at his condition. He will be weak, but as long as there is no infection, he will recover without much trouble. I know I can keep the wound clean and am confident he will be back on his feet within a month.

The next few weeks are a haze of routine. I wake, redress Wuer’s wound and feed him broth, or stew if he feels up to it. I tend to the others in the clan and then return, watched with suspicion and perhaps worse by the soldiers on guard. I stay with Wuer and after a few days, we are back to our lessons. Durand does not visit. We hear of house raids, soldiers looking for weapons, but none are found. I ask Cathal about it, but he says he knows nothing.

Mostly, Wuer sleeps, but I never stray far from his side. If his recovery is threatened, it will happen sooner rather than later. He teases me, when Cathal and Aoine are away, about watching him like a vulture might watch a lame animal. His absolute

ease in the situation unnerves me. I do not ask him about the accident again, but I know the peace will not last.

“The General’s coming,” Aoine says, pushing open the door.

The rays of sunlight wash over Wuer’s face. He stirs, acting as though he has just awakened, though I am sure he has not truly been sleeping. Aoine joins her husband outside, and I do not blame her for it.

“Slower,” I caution him.

He ignores me and continues to force his body upwards. Pain is etched across his face, so I hurry over to help him. The firm muscles of his arm stiffen at my touch, but he allows me to help him into a sitting position. By the time his older brother enters the cottage, Wuer has coaxed his face into a relaxed expression, as though he is completely free of all pain. I have the strong urge to thank him, but remain silent.

“Afternoon, brother. I assume the fort and its ranks have fallen into complete disarray in my absence?” Wuer asks cheerfully.

Without so much as a smile in his younger brother’s direction, he crosses the room and roughly lifts the hem of Wuer’s shirt. I am amazed that Wuer does not cry out in pain at the complete lack of gentleness, but not a trace of discomfort flickers across his smiling face.

“No infection. How do you feel?” Durand asks.

“Like I could choke the life out of a firebreather with my bare hands,” Wuer answers.

Durand snorts and I can only assume that he approves the rate at which his brother has been improving.

“Fine. You can return to the barracks,” Durand says.

“I would rather stay here, brother,” Wuer says.

Durand pauses. He looks at me, a hard glare that makes my cheeks flush. He turns back to his brother.

“It isn’t safe here,” he says.

“It is as long as I am with Roisline. I need to be with her, to continue my lessons and I can’t walk back and forth yet,” Wuer argues.

“You won’t be continuing your lessons,” Durand says.

“Is the offer....has Corvinus gone back on our deal?” I ask.

Both men turn towards me, surprised by my interruption. Only Durand’s expression molds into a grimace.

“Not for your part. He still wants you to go to the Northern Clans, but Wuer will no longer be responsible for your people while you are gone, not after this,” Durand says.

“Did Corvinus decide that?” Wuer asks.

“I did, as your commanding officer. The risk is too great,” Durand says.

“I disagree, and I think it should be my decision,” Wuer says.

“My decision has been made. There will be no discussion of it, not unless you would like to give the name of your attacker,” Durand says.

“There was no attacker,” Wuer says, without even a pause, “It was an accident.”

“That is your answer, your word?”

“It is,” Wuer says.

Durand turns on me.

“What about you, healer? You know your clan better than him. Have you learned anything?” Durand asks.

“Nothing that would give you the answer you seek,” I say.

He makes a growling noise in his throat, but waves in the soldiers posted as guards. They make their way to Wuer, but he holds up his hand.

“Wait, would you give me a word with Roisline? In private?” he asks.

Durand stares at him and unlike me, he looks back at his brother with no sign of discomfort. After a staring contest which I cannot hope to judge, Durand nods his head and ducks outside, taking the other guards with him.

“Roisline?”

He calls out my name softly, because I am staring after Durand and wondering who attacked Wuer, hoping it isn't who I suspect.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I wanted to tell you, if you decide to leave, I'll look after them. I might have to do it secretly, but Chiomara would help me,” Wuer says.

“She would....thank you,” I stammer.

“And...I don't think you should leave,” he says, “Your clan needs you, Roisline.”

“I...haven't made up my mind yet,” I say.

“Well, I'm asking you to stay. For them, I mean,” he says.

My cheeks and neck feel prickly hot. I open the door and tell the others Wuer is ready. I stare at the ground while they gently guide him away. Durand pauses for a moment, and I think he is looking at me. I just keep my gaze turned downwards. He is gone in another second.

For the first time, I think of Chiomara's request. That I play along with Corvinus long enough to kill Collucius with an escape plan already in place. But it would still leave my clan in danger. It would leave them without a healer and even if I escaped, I would never see any of them again. I would never see Wuer again. But letting Collucius live...is not something I can bring myself to consider.