

A decorative sunburst design with thin lines radiating from a central point, topped with a crescent moon and stars. Below the sunburst is a horizontal line with ornate scrollwork and a central diamond shape. The background is a dark, textured surface with green leaves and blue flowers.

MORRIGHAN

MARY E. PEARSON

MORRIGHAN

A REMNANT CHRONICLES NOVELLA

MARY E. PEARSON



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Before borders were drawn, before treaties were signed, before wars were waged anew,
before the great kingdoms of the Remnant were even born and the world of old was only a
hazy slate of memory told in story and legend, a girl and her family fought to survive. And
that girl's name was Morrighan.

She asks for another story, one to pass the time and fill her.

I search for the truth, the details of a world so long past now, I'm not sure it ever was.

*Once upon a time, so very long ago,
In an age before monsters and demons roamed the earth,
A time when children ran free in meadows,
And heavy fruit hung from trees,
There were cities, large and beautiful with sparkling towers that touched the sky.
Were they made of magic?*

I was only a child myself. I thought they could hold a whole world. To me they were made of—

*Yes, they were spun of magic and light and the dreams of gods.
And there was a princess?*

I smile.

Yes, my child, a precious princess just like you. She had a garden filled with trees that hung with fruit as big as a man's fist.

The child looks at me, doubtful.

She has never seen an apple but she has seen the fists of men.

Are there really such gardens, Ama?

Not anymore.

Yes, my child, somewhere. And one day you will find them.

—*The Last Testaments of Gaudrel*

Chapter One

Morrighan

I was eight years old the first time I saw him. In that terrifying moment, I was certain I was about to die. He was a scavenger, and I had never been that close to one before. Alone. I had nothing to defend myself except for a few stones that lay near my feet, and I was too gripped with fear to stoop and grab them. A handful of stones would have done me little good anyway. I saw the knife sheathed at his side.

He stood on a boulder, looking down curiously, studying me. Bare chested, with wild knotted hair, he was everything savage I had been warned about, even if he was little more than a child himself. His chest was narrow, and his ribs were easily countable.

I heard the distant thunder of hooves, and fear vibrated through me. More were coming, and there was nowhere to run. I was trapped, cowering between two boulders in a dark crevice below him. I didn't breathe. Didn't move. I couldn't even break my gaze from his. I was fully and utterly prey, a silent rabbit effectively hunted and cornered. I was going to die. He eyed the sack of seed that I had spent the morning gathering. In my haste and terror, I had dropped it, and the seed had spilled out between the boulders.

The boy's gaze shot up, and the clamor of horses and shouts filled my ears.

"Did you get something?" A loud voice. The one Ama hates. The one she and the others whisper about. The one who stole Venda.

"They scattered. I couldn't catch up," the boy called.

Another disgusted voice. “And nothing was left behind?”

The boy shook his head.

There were more shouts of discontent and then the rumble of hooves again. Leaving. They were leaving. The boy climbed down from the boulder and left too, without another glance or word to me, his face deliberately turned away, almost as if he were shamed.

* * *

I didn't see him again for another two years. The close call had instilled a heavy dose of fear in me, and I didn't wander far from the tribe again. At least not until one warm spring day. The scavengers had seemed to move on. We'd seen no sign of them since the first frost of autumn.

But there he was, a head taller and trying to pull cattails from my favorite pond. His blond hair had only grown wilder, his shoulders slightly wider, his ribs as evident as ever. I watched his frustration grow as the stalks he pulled broke off one after another and he came up with only worthless pieces of stems.

“You're impatient.”

He spun, drawing his knife.

Even at the tender age of ten, I knew I was taking a risk exposing myself. I wasn't even sure why I did it, especially once I saw his eyes. Feral and hungry, there was no recognition.

“Take your boots off,” I said. “I'll show you.”

He stabbed at the air as I took a step closer, but I sat down and removed my own calfskin slippers, never taking my eyes off him, thinking I might need to run after all.

As his fear receded, so did his wild, glassy gaze, and recognition finally spread across his face. I had changed more than he had in two years. He lowered his knife.

“You're the girl between the boulders.”

I nodded and pointed to his boots. “Take those off. You’ll have to wade in if you want to get some corms.”

He pulled off his boots and followed me out, knee-deep into the pond, the rushes springing up between us. I told him to feel with his toes, to work them into the mud to loosen the fat, fleshy tuber before pulling. Our toes had to do as much of the work as our hands. There were few words between us. What was there for a scavenger and a child of the Remnant to say to each other? All we had in common was hunger. But he seemed to understand I was paying him back for his act of mercy two years ago.

By the time we parted, he had a sack full of the fleshy roots.

“This is my pond now,” he said sharply as he tied the sack to his saddle. “Don’t come here again.” He spat on the ground to emphasize his point.

I knew what he was really saying. The others would come here now, too. It wouldn’t be safe.

“What’s your name?” I asked as he mounted his horse.

“You are nothing!” he answered, as if he’d heard a different question from my lips. He settled into his saddle, then reluctantly looked my way again. “Jafir de Aldrid,” he answered.

“And I am—”

“I know who you are. You’re Morrighan.” He galloped off.

It was another four years before I saw him again, and the whole of that time, I wondered how he knew my name.

Chapter Two

Morrighan

It seemed being afraid was in my blood. It kept me ever aware, but even at ten years old, I was weary of it. I remember I returned to camp warily that day. From an early age, I had known we were different. It was what helped us to survive. But it also meant little passed by the others, even the hidden and unsaid. Ama, Rhiann, Carys, Oni, and Nedra were strongest in the knowing. And Venda too, but she was gone now. We didn't talk of her.

Ama spoke without lifting her gaze from her basket of beans, her gray and black hair pulled back neatly in a braid. "Pata tells me you left the camp while I was gone."

"Only to the pond beyond the rock wall, Ama. I didn't go far."

"Far enough. It only takes a moment for a scavenger to snatch you up."

We'd had this conversation many times. The scavengers were wild and reckless, thieves and savages preying on the work of others. And sometimes they were killers too, depending on their whim. We hid in the hills and ruins, quiet in our footsteps, soft in voice, the walls of an empty world giving us cover, and where the walls were only dust, the tall grasses hid us.

But sometimes even that was not enough.

"I was careful," I whispered.

"What called you to the pond?" she asked.

I was empty-handed—nothing to show as a reason for my trek. As soon as Jafir had galloped off, I had left. I could not lie to Ama. There were as many questions in her pauses as in her words. She knew.

“I saw a scavenger boy there. He was tearing at the cattails.”

Her eyes darted up. “You didn’t—”

“He was a boy named Jafir.”

“You know his name? You *spoke* to him?” Ama jumped to her feet, scattering the beans in her lap. She grabbed my shoulders first, then brushed my hair back, examining my face. Her hands traveled frantically up and down my arms, searching for injuries. “Are you all right? Did he harm you? Did he *touch* you?” Her eyes were sharp with fear.

“Ama, he didn’t harm me,” I said firmly, trying to dispel her fears. “He only told me not to come to the pond anymore. That it is his pond now. And then he left with a sack of corms.”

Her face hardened. I knew what she was thinking—*they take it all*—and it was true. They did. Just when we had settled on the far side of a valley, or meadow, or among the abandoned shelters, they would come upon us, stealing and sowing terror in their path. I was angry with myself now for showing Jafir how to loosen the tubers. We owed the scavengers nothing when they had taken so much from us.

“Was it always so, Ama? Wouldn’t they be part of the Remnant too?”

“There are two kinds who survive, those who persevere and those who prey.”

She scanned the horizon, and her chest rose in a weary breath. “Come, help me collect the beans. Tomorrow we leave for a new valley. A far one.”

There were no valleys far enough from their kind. They sprouted as freely as burrs in the meadow grass.

Nedra, Oni, and Pata grumbled but said nothing more. They deferred to Ama because she was the oldest and the head of our tribe, the only one among us who remembered Before. Besides, we were used to moving on and searching for a peaceful valley of plenty. Somewhere there had to be one. Ama had told us so. She had seen it with her own eyes when she was a child, before the foundation of the earth was shaken and before the stars fell from

the sky. Somewhere there had to be a place where we were safe from them.

Chapter Three

Jafir

I wiped the blood running from my nose. I knew better than to draw my knife—but I would not always be a head shorter than Steffan. He seemed to know this too. The back of his hand came less frequently these days.

“You were gone all day, and you only have a bag of weeds to show for it?” he shouted.

Piers puffed on his pipe, gloating over Steffan’s display. “It is more than I see dangling from your hand.”

The others laughed, hoping the insult would escalate Steffan’s wrath into a brawl, but he only waved away Piers’s remark with disgust. “I can’t bring home a suckling pig every day. We must all contribute things of worth.”

“You stole the pig. Five minutes of effort,” Piers countered.

“What is your point, old man? It filled your stomach, didn’t it?”

Liam snorted. “It didn’t fill mine. You should have stolen two.”

Fergus threw a rock, telling them all to shut up. He was hungry.

So it went every night, our camp always on the edge of hot words and fists, but our strength came from each other too. We *were* strong. No one crossed us for fear of consequence. We had horses. We had weapons. We had earned the right to cut others down.

Laurida waved me over, and I dumped out my bag. We both began cutting off the tender corms, then peeling the tougher stalks. I had known she would be pleased. She favored the green shoots, frying them up in pig fat, and ground the larger stalks into flour. Bread was a rarity for us—unless it

was stolen too.

“Where did you find them?” Laurida asked.

I looked at her, startled. “Find what?”

“These,” she said, holding up a handful of the cut stalks. “What’s the matter with you? Did the sun fry your brain?”

The stalks. Of course. That was all she meant. “A pond. What difference does it make?” I snapped back.

She hit me on the side of the head, then leaned closer, examining my bloodied nose. “He’ll break it one of these days,” she growled. “For the better. You’re too pretty anyway.”

The pond was already forgotten. I could not tell them that the girl had found me at the pond today, stalked me, fallen upon me without warning, rather than the other way around. I would suffer more than a bloody nose. It was shameful to be taken by surprise, especially by one of them. Their kind was stupid. Slow. Weak. The girl had even revealed her stupidity when she showed me how to take her food.

The next day I went back to the pond, but this time I hid behind some rocks, waiting for her to come. After an hour, I waded into the rushes to harvest the stalks, thinking that might lure her out. It didn’t. Maybe she wasn’t as stupid as the rest. Maybe she had actually listened to my warning. Yes, Jafir had frightened her. It was my pond now. Jafir’s pond, forever and always.

I loaded my sack and rode farther south, looking for her camp. They had no horses—we made sure of that. She couldn’t be staying far from the pond, but there was no sign of her.

“Morrighan,” I whispered, testing the feel of it on my tongue. “*Mor-uh-gon.*”

Harik didn’t even know my name, called me something different each time he visited. But he knew hers. Why would the greatest warrior of the land know the name of a thin, weak girl? Especially one of them.

When I found her, I would make her tell me. And then I would hold my knife to her throat until she cried and begged for me to let her go. Just like Fergus and Steffan did with the tribespeople who hid food from us.

From a hilltop, I looked across the valleys, empty except for the wind waving a few grasses.

The girl hid well. I did not find her again for four more years.

Chapter Four

Morrighan

“Here,” Pata said. “This is a good place.”

A twisted path had brought us there, one not easily followed, a path that I had helped find, the knowing taking root in me and growing stronger.

Ama eyed the thicket of trees. She eyed the jumble of potential shelters. She eyed the hills and stony bluffs that hid us from view. But mostly I saw her eyeing the tribe. They were tired. They were hungry. They mourned. Rhiann had died at the hands of a scavenger when she refused to let go of a baby goat in her arms.

Ama looked back at the small vale and nodded. I could hear the tribe’s heartbeat as well as she could. Its rhythm was weak. It ached.

“Here,” Ama agreed, and the tribe laid down their packs.

I surveyed our new home, if you could call it that. The structures were dangerous, mostly made of wood and in ruin from neglect, the passage of decades, and of course from the great storm. They would collapse at any time—most already had—but we could make our own lean-tos from the scraps. We could make a place to stay that might last more than a few days. Moving on was all I had ever known, but I knew there had been a time when people stayed, a time when you could belong to one place forever. Ama had told me so, and sometimes I dreamed myself there. I dreamed myself to places I had never seen, to glass towers crowned by clouds, to sprawling orchards heavy with red fruit, to warm, soft beds surrounded by curtained windows.

These were the places that Ama described in her stories, places where all

the children of the tribe would be princes and princesses and their stomachs always full. It was a once-upon-a-time world that used to be.

In the last month since Rhiann's death, we had never stayed anywhere for more than a day or two. Bands of scavengers had run us off after taking our food. The encounter with Rhiann had been the worst. Since then we'd been walking for weeks, gathering little along the way. The south had proved no safer than the north, and to the east, Harik ruled, his reach and reign growing every day. To the west over the mountains, the sickness of the storm still lingered, and beyond that, wild creatures roamed freely. Like us, they were hungry and preyed on anyone foolish enough to range there. At least, that is what I was told—no one I knew had crossed the barren mountains. We were hemmed in on all sides, always looking for a small hidden corner to settle. At least we had each other. We knit closer to fill the hole Rhiann had left.

And the hole Venda had left too. I was six when she went away. Pata said she was sick with storm dust. Oni said she was *curious*, making the word sound like an illness. Ama said she was stolen, and the other *miadres* agreed.

We set about making a camp. Hopes were high. This small vale felt right. No one would venture here, and there was ample water nearby. Oni reported there was a meadow of maygrass just over the knoll, and she spotted a grove of oak beyond that.

Altogether there were nineteen of us. Eleven women, three men, and five children. I was the oldest of the children by three years. I remember that spring I felt distanced from the rest. Their play annoyed me. I knew I was on the brink of something different, but with all the sameness of our daily lives, I couldn't imagine what that something might be. Every day was like the one before. We survived. We feared. And sometimes we laughed. What was the new feeling that stirred in me? I wasn't sure I liked it. It was a rumbling something like hunger.

We all helped to drag the pieces of wood, some of it with large letters that had once been part of something else, a partial message that didn't matter

anymore. Others found rusty metal sheets to lean against piled rocks. I grabbed a large plank flecked with blue. Ama said the world was once painted with colors of every kind. Now blue was a rarity, usually only found in the sky or in a clear pond that reflected it, like the pond where I had seen Jafir. Four winters had passed since I saw him last. I wondered if he was still alive. Though our tribe was ever on the edge of starvation, the scavengers were on the edge of something worse. They didn't care for their own the way we did.

Chapter Five

Morrighan

The vale welcomed us. The seeds we planted grew in the rocky soil with only a little coaxing. The distant fields, ravines, and hillsides offered small game, grasshoppers, and peace. In all my memory, these were the most serene months we'd ever had, and yet strangely, though I had always yearned for a place to stay, my restlessness grew. I eased the discord within me by venturing farther each day as I gathered greens or seeds.

One day as I sat on my haunches collecting small black seeds of purslane, I heard a voice as clear as my own say, *That way*. I looked up, but there was no “that way.” Only a wall of stone and vine lay ahead, but the words danced in me, *that way*, excited and fluttering—certain and sure. I heard Ama’s instruction, *trust the strength within you*. I walked closer, examining the stones, and found a veiled passage. Boulders blended together to disguise the entrance. The path led to a boxed-in canyon—and in the distance, a hidden treasure that I gazed upon with awe. I hurried through knee-deep grass for a closer look. Though much of the roof was caved in, there were wings to the once great building I had found, and within those wings, I found *books*. Not many. Most had been looted or burned long ago. Even our tribe had burned the dry paper of books on wet winter nights when nothing else would catch. These few books were scattered on the floor amid rubble and layers of dust. Books that had pictures—ones with color.

Every day after that, this abandoned structure became my destination. I gathered food along the way, then rested and read on the wide, sweeping

steps of the forgotten ruin. Alone. I imagined another time, long before seven stars were thrown to the earth, a time when a girl just like me had sat on these same steps staring up at the endless blue sky. Possibility became a winged creature that could take me anywhere I asked. I was wanton and reckless with my imagined wanderings.

Day after day, it was the same. Until one day.

I saw him out of the corner of my eye. At first I was startled, then angry, thinking Micah or Brynna had tagged along after me, but then I realized who it was. His wild blond hair was still the same, except longer than before, and it shone between the thick shrubs like a rare stalk of golden corn. *Crazy fool*, I thought, then kissed my fingers and lifted them to the gods for penance. Ama wasn't sure exactly how many gods there were. Sometimes she said one, sometimes three or four—her parents hadn't had time to school her in such things—but however many there were, I knew it was best not to test them. They controlled the stars of heaven, guided the winds of earth, and numbered our days here in the wilderness, and somewhere in Ama's recollection, she knew calling someone a fool was something the gods frowned upon. Wishing them dead was another matter.

Are the gods not wise? I remember asking. Why did they save the scavengers too? It was a long time ago, she answered. *They had not yet become scavengers.*

He crept closer, still hiding behind the bushes. I kept my attention on my book, but I stole glances at him from beneath my lashes. Even from his crouched position, I could tell he was taller than when I saw him last, and his shoulders had grown wider. The shreds of a shirt barely covered his chest.

I heard Ama's warning. *Run as fast as you can if you are caught unawares*. But I wasn't exactly unaware. I had been watching him for some time and wondering why he was hiding. Hiding quite poorly.

I knew it was coming, so when he burst from the bushes, shouting and brandishing his knife, I didn't blink or startle but slowly turned the page I had

finished, settling in with the next one.

“What’s the matter with you?” he yelled. “Are you not frightened?”

I raised my gaze to his. “Of what? I think it is you who is frightened, hiding in the bushes for the better part of an hour.”

“Maybe I was planning how I would kill you.”

“If you were going to kill me, you would have done it the first time we met. Or the second time. Or—”

“What are you doing?” he asked, eyeing my book, standing on the steps like he owned them. He was just like all the other scavengers, demanding, crude—and smelly.

“Do you ever bathe?” I asked, wrinkling my nose.

He looked at me confused, and then curious, his scowl softening.

I closed my book. “You don’t have to be so hostile to me, you know. I won’t hurt you.”

“You? Hurt me?” He threw back his head and laughed.

His smile made something hot pinch inside my belly, and before I could think, I swung out my foot, catching him behind the knee. He crumpled to the ground, his elbow making a loud painful thump when it hit the steps. The fierce scowl returned, and he whipped his knife in front of my face.

“I’m reading a book,” I said quickly. “Would you like to see?” I held my breath.

He rubbed his arm. “I was going to sit anyway.”

I showed him the book, turning the pages and pointing out the words. There were only a few on each page. Moon. Night. Stars. He was fascinated, repeating the words as I said them, and he set his knife down beside him. He touched the colorful pages rippled with time, his fingertips barely skimming them.

“This is a book of the Ancients,” he said.

“Ancients? Is that that what your kind call them?”

He looked at me uncertainly, then stood. “Why do you question

everything I say?” He stormed down the steps, and strangely, I was sad to see him go.

“Come back tomorrow,” I called. “I’ll read more to you.”

“I will not be back!” he yelled over his shoulder.

I watched him stomp through the brush, only his wild blond hair shimmering above the weeds until both he and his grumbling threats disappeared.

Yes, Jafir, I thought, you will be back, though I’m not sure why.

Chapter Six

Jafir

I separated the last of the meat from the skin—a nice plump hare that had made Laurida purr when I arrived back at camp. I hung the gutted animal from the tree. We'd had no fresh meat for our stew in four days now, and Fergus grew more sour each day at the few roots and marrow bones that flavored the water.

“Where did you get it?” Laurida asked.

I had cornered it in a gully not far from where I found the girl Morrighan, but Laurida didn't need to know that. She might tell Steffan, and he would take over my hunting ground like he took over everything else.

“In the basin past the mudflats,” I answered.

“Hmm,” she said suspiciously.

“I didn't steal it,” I added. “I hunted it.” Though in the end, it made no difference—food was food—Laurida seemed to enjoy the hunted kind more. “I'll go rinse these.” I grabbed the intestines to wash in the creek.

“Walk wide around Steffan this day,” she called after me. “He's in a surly temper.”

I shrugged as I walked away. When was Steffan *not* in a surly temper? At least tonight he couldn't box my ears or punch my ribs. He'd be shamed by Piers and Fergus for my catch. They both loved hare, and all Steffan had brought home lately were bony hole weasels.

It wasn't until I was halfway home that I realized I had forgotten to ask Morrighan why Harik knew her name. It was the first thing I was going to

say, but then she threw me off with all of her talk. *Do I bathe?* I swished the intestines beneath the water. What difference did it make? But then I thought about her skin, how it seemed to glow with the color of a smoky sunset. I had wanted to touch it and see what it felt like. Was it that color because she bathed? We had no girls in our camp—only boys, men, and three women like Laurida—their faces tough and lined with years. Morrighan’s cheeks were as smooth as a spring leaf.

I heard commotion and the whickering of horses. And then Steffan’s loud call that the others were back, as if it weren’t obvious. I shook out the intestines and trudged back up the slope to camp. My steps faltered when I saw Harik with the elders of the clan. He didn’t come by our camp as often these days, instead staying in his massive fortress on the other side of the river—the one he had named Venda after his bride, the Siarrah. But the water was rising and the bridge was leaning. It might not be long before his fortress was cut off from the rest of us, and he couldn’t come at all. Fergus said the river would swallow the bridge soon. Harik balked and said he would build another, which seemed an impossible task, but he was larger in power and hunger than most, and it was rumored that his father had been one of the mightiest Ancients. Maybe he had ways we didn’t know of.

“You remember the boy, don’t you?” Fergus said pointing at me.

“Steffan,” Harik said, clamping his massive hand down on my shoulder.

“That’s my brother. I’m Jafir,” I said, but he had already turned away and was settling near the fire with Piers.

The evening went as others—food, squabbles, and news of far-off kin. Fergus said our kin in the north mused again about what lay beyond the western mountains. They were considering venturing forth to search for better fortune than what the scrabble offered here and had asked Fergus to join them. I rolled my eyes. They were always “considering,” but nothing came of it. The mountains held the sickness. Nothing grew there. To go through them was to die. Even the mighty clans kept fear close to their hearts.

There were still a few among us, like Piers, who had been around when the cloud of death rolled across the land. He was only six at the time, but he recalled the terror.

After dinner Harik passed around a bottle he had brought with him. While food might be scarce, on his side of the river, they still managed to brew the foul liquid. Even though I sat at the ring with everyone else, none was offered to me. Piers reached past me to hand the bottle to Reeve, who sat on my other side. I tried to act like I hadn't noticed when Harik passed the bottle on to Steffan. He drank and choked on the spirits, and everyone laughed. I did too, but Steffan plucked my laughter out from the rest. He turned and glared at me, the kind of glare that said I would pay later.

Then the talk turned to the tribes. Harik wondered, as he had on past visits, where one tribe in particular had gone. They hadn't been seen in four years. The tribe of Gaudrel. When he said her name, I heard anger in his voice. "And that brat she drags with her," he added. "Morrighan."

I saw the hunger in his eyes. He wanted her. The most powerful man in the land—more powerful than Fergus—wanted Morrighan.

And I was the only one who knew where she was.

Chapter Seven

Morrighan

He didn't hide in the bushes this time. He strode up the wide marble steps in a frightening way. As if he owned them. Why was this scavenger so hard to understand? His chest was bare, and his face gleamed. He had bathed. With the dirt washed away, his skin was now a golden hue, and his long ropes of hair, brighter. The broadening of his shoulders made his meatless ribs look more pathetic. But the look in his eyes was fierce.

"I thought you weren't coming?" I said, taking a step back when he stopped in front of me.

He eyed me for a long while before answering. "I come and go, when and where I please. Why does Harik the Great know your name?"

I felt as if I'd been punched breathless. I'd heard whispers in camp between the *miadres*. Ama and the others hated him. His name was like poison, not to be touched. It alarmed me to think he might know my name. Jafir was wrong.

"He doesn't know my name," I said. "He doesn't even know me. I've only seen him from a distance, when he raided our camp long ago." I stepped away. "And for your information, scavenger, he is not great. He's a coward, like all—" I paused, measuring the words on the tip of my tongue, fearing it might send him sprinting away again—or worse.

"Like all of us?" he finished. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Why are we here? I thought. We were ever at odds, and yet our paths kept crossing. *No, Morrighan, not crossing by chance. You invited him to come*

back here. You wanted this meeting to happen. I didn't understand myself, nor all I had been taught to rely on. The scavengers were dangerous to our kind, but I was intensely curious about this one who had shown me mercy eight years ago when he was little more than a child himself.

"Jafir," I replied, saying his name with respect, "would you like to read?" And then as a sign of truce, I added his own description. "A book of the *Ancients*?"

We read for an hour before he had to go. It wasn't our last meeting. The first few continued to be rocky and tentative. Scavengers and those they hunted had no common ground. But here, hidden away by long trails and box canyons, we learned to leave at least part of who we were behind us. Our trust ebbed and grew in turbulent starts, but it was always an unstated agreement that our meetings would remain a secret. If he told anyone, I could die. If I told anyone, I would be forbidden to return.

I never thought it would last. After all, our tribe never stayed anywhere for long. Moving on was our way. Soon we would leave the vale, go somewhere far, and these days would end. But the tribe didn't leave. There was no need to. The vale was well hidden, and we were able to gather and grow without worry. No one ventured there. Our days turned to seasons, and seasons turned to years.

I taught Jafir letters, and from there, words. Soon he was reading to me too. He practiced writing, his finger tracing letters in the dust. "How do you spell Morrighan?" he asked. Letter by letter, he repeated each one as he wrote it on the ground. I remember looking at the letters long after he had written them, admiring the curves and lines his finger had made and how my name looked different to me than it ever had before.

Over the course of weeks and months, we shared everything. His curiosity was as great as mine. He lived with eleven people. They were kin, but he wasn't sure how most of them were related. Fergus didn't explain such things to him. They weren't important. A woman named Laurida claimed him as her

son but he knew it wasn't so. She was Fergus's wife, but she hadn't come to the clan until Jafir was seven years old—from where he wasn't sure. One day she simply rode in with Fergus and stayed. He had a hazy memory of a woman he thought might have been his mother, but it was only her voice he remembered, not her face.

He asked if Gaudrel was my mother. I explained that she was my grandmother, a term he didn't know. "My mother's mother," I explained. "Ama raised me. My own mother died in childbirth."

"And your father?"

"I never knew him. Ama says he is dead, too."

Jafir's lips pulled tight. Perhaps he was wondering if my father had died at the hands of one of his own kin. He probably had. Ama would never say just how it happened, but her eyes always sparked with anger before she turned away from the subject.

I was curious about his brother. Jafir only shrugged when I asked about him. He pointed to a scar on his arm. "Steffan speaks more with his hands than his mouth."

"Then I shouldn't like to meet him."

"And I *shouldn't like* you to meet him," Jafir said, poking fun at the way I said things differently from him, and we both laughed.

I didn't know that what we were forging was a friendship. It seemed impossible. But I discovered that the boy who had once kept me hidden from his fellow scavengers had other kindnesses in him as well—a bracelet woven from meadow grass, a chipped plate rimmed in gold that he had found in a ruin. One day he gave me a handful of sky when he saw me gazing up at the clouds, just to see me smile. I put it in my pocket. Other times we maddened each other beyond telling with our different ways, but we always came back, our squabble forgotten. We changed together, imperceptibly day by day, as slowly as a tree budding with spring.

But then one day, everything changed in one leap, permanently and

forever.

He had stunned a squirrel that morning from ten paces with his slingshot, and was trying to instruct me how to do the same, but shot after shot, my stones went miserably off course. He was chiding me for my aim, and I was leveling frustrated glares at him.

“No, not like that,” he complained. He jumped up from where he lay in the meadow and marched over to me. “Like *this*,” he said, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around mine. He took my hands in his, his chest against my back, slowly pulling back the sling. Then he paused, a long uncomfortable pause that seemed to last forever, but neither of us moved. I tried to understand why it seemed so different. His warm breath fluttered against my ear, and I felt my heart racing, felt something between us that hadn’t been there before. Something strong and wild and uncertain. He let go of my hands suddenly and stepped away. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I have to leave.”

He got on his horse and left without a good-bye. I watched him ride until he was out of sight.

I didn’t try to stop him. I wanted him to go.

* * *

The longhouse buzzed with chatter, but I didn’t feel part of it. I stared at the poles and rushes and animal skins that made up the walls as I stacked the clean gourds.

“You’ve hardly said a word all night. What’s wrong, child?”

I whirled. “I’m not a child, Ama!” I snapped. “Can’t you see that?” I sucked in a breath, startled by my own outburst.

Ama took the gourds from my hands and set them aside. “Yes,” she said softly. “The child in you is gone, and a ... young woman stands before me.” Her pale gray eyes glistened. “I just refused to see. I’m not sure how it happened so fast.”

I fell into her arms, holding her tight. “I’m sorry, Ama. I didn’t mean to be short with you. I—”

But I had no more words to explain myself. My mind tossed and pitched, and my body no longer felt like my own. Instead hot fingers squeezed my gut with the memory of Jafir’s warm breath on my skin.

“I’m all right,” I said. “The others wait.”

Ama pulled me to the center of the longhouse where everyone had settled around the fire. I sat down between Micah and Brynna. He was thirteen, and she, twelve, but they seemed so young to me now. The twins, Shay and Shantal, eight, sat across from me. To me, all of them were children.

“Tell us a story, Ama,” I said. “About Before.” I needed a story to soothe me, for my mind still jumped like a grasshopper of the fields.

The children called out their choices, the towers, the gods, the storm.

“No,” I said. “Tell us about when you met Papa.”

Ama looked at me uncertainly. “But that’s not a story of Before. That is a story of After.”

I swallowed, trying to hide my misery. “Then tell us a story of After.” I had heard the story before, but it was a long time ago. I needed to hear it again.

“It was twelve years after the storm. I was only a girl of seventeen. By then I had traveled far with the Remnant who had survived, but only to a place that looked as desolate as the last. We lived by our wits and will, my mother showing me how to trust the language of knowing within me, for little else mattered. The maps and gadgets and inventions of man could not help us survive or find food. Each day I reached deeper, unlocking the skills the gods had given us since the beginning of time. I thought this was all my life would ever be, but then one day, I saw him.”

“Was he handsome?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Was he strong?”

“Very.”

“Was he—”

“Stop interrupting,” I told the children. “Let her finish!”

Ama looked at me. I saw the wondering in her eyes, but she continued.

“But the most important thing I noticed about him was that he was kind. Desperation ruled the world, and kindness was as rare as a clear blue sky. We had come upon one of the cellars from Before. There was still some food to be found in those days, pantry stockpiles that hadn’t yet spoiled or been raided, but it was risky to venture into such places. The leader saw us coming and waved us away, but your papa intervened, pleading for us, and the leader relented. They allowed us in and shared what little food there was. It was the last time I ever tasted an olive, but that small taste was the beginning of something far more ... satisfying.”

Pata rolled her eyes, and the other *miadres* laughed. *Far more*. The hidden meanings of Ama’s stories no longer escaped me.

* * *

“Where are you in such a hurry to?” Ama asked. “The beetles of the field will take you to task if you’re late?” Her tone held suspicion. I had seen her watching me as I raced through my morning chores.

I slowed my steps, ashamed that I hadn’t told Ama about the building of books—or Jafir. But not so ashamed that I came forth with the truth. One thing I had learned was that Ama could not read my mind as I had once believed. But she knew my mind. She breathed it. She lived it. Just as she did with the whole tribe. It was a heavy weight for her to bear. Part of that weight would one day pass to me.

“Is there something you need, Ama?”

“No, child,” she said caressing my cheek. “Go. Gather. I understand the need for solitude. Just stay aware. Don’t let this time of peace cause you to let your guard down. The danger is always there.”

“I always watch, Ama. And I always remember the dangers.”

Chapter Eight

Morrighan

I flew through the fields. Ran breathlessly down the canyon. The day was already hot, and sweat rolled down my back. I stopped to gather nothing, my empty bag flopping wildly in my fist. When I reached the trail that led to the old building of books, I saw his horse tied to the low branch of a tree. And then I saw him.

He stood in the middle of the wide porch entrance between two pillars watching me approach. He was early, just as I was. I slowed at the base of the steps, catching my breath. I looked at him in a way I never had before—in a way I hadn't allowed myself to see him. How tall he had become, a head taller than me. His ribs no longer poked out pathetically, and his knotted ropes of hair had somehow become a thing of beauty and power. They fell gracefully over his shoulders, which were now wide and muscled. My gaze traveled to his chest, broad and strong, the chest that had brushed my back yesterday.

He watched me walk up the steps but said nothing. I said nothing, but I knew today would not be like yesterday or all of our days before that. When I reached the landing, a small quiet hello escaped from my lips.

He stepped back and swallowed. "I'm sorry I left so quickly yesterday."

"You don't need to explain."

"I just came to tell you I won't be coming anymore. There's better hunting elsewhere."

My gut turned hollow. My mind spun with disbelief.

“I can’t waste my days here with you,” he added.

In a single beat, my disbelief ignited into anger. I glared at him. “Because being friends with a girl of the Remnant is one thing, but being—”

“You don’t know me!” he yelled as he pushed past me, almost hurtling himself down the steps.

“Go, Jafir!” I yelled after him. “Go and never come back!”

He untied his horse with quick, angry jerks.

“Go!” I yelled, my vision blurring.

He paused, staring at the saddle, his hands clamped in tight fury on his reins.

My heart pounded painfully in a long hopeful beat, waiting. He shook his head, then mounted his horse and rode away.

Whatever air was in my lungs vanished.

I stumbled back into the ruin, my hand sliding along walls for support. The cool darkness swallowed me. I reached a pillar and slid to the ground, no longer trying to hold back my tears. My thoughts tumbled between grief, resentment, and rage. *I will never come back here again either, Jafir! Ever! I will forget everything about this valley, including you!*

But even in my anger, I ached for him.

I ached for all our yesterdays.

A door had been opened that couldn’t be closed again, no matter how angry he made me. He was in my thoughts, my hair, my fingers, my eyes, his memory in places where no one else had been, in a hundred ways that made no sense. I stared at the empty bag still clutched in my fist, my knuckles pale.

“There is no future for us, Morrighan. There can never be.”

I startled, looking up. He stood in the doorway, a tall silhouette against the bright day behind him. I knew he was right. A future was impossible. I could never embrace his home or kind, nor he mine. What did that leave us?

I stood. “Why did you come back?”

He stepped into the coolness of the cavern. “Because...” His brows pulled

down, his eyes becoming dark clouds, still angry. “Because I could not leave.”

He walked closer until only inches separated us. His gaze was sharp and searching. There was so much I didn’t know about the ways between a man and a woman, but I knew I wanted him. And I knew he wanted me.

“Touch me, Jafir,” I said. “Touch me the way you did yesterday.”

His chest rose in a deep breath and he hesitated, but then he lifted a single finger, slowly tracing a line up my bare arm, his eyes following the path as if he was memorizing it, and then the path turned and his finger traveled across my collar bone, resting in the hollow of my neck. Something bright and liquid and hot rushed under my skin and through my chest. My fingers went slack, and I dropped the bag still in my grip.

I reached up and laid my hands on his chest, my fingertips searing, trembling at the feel of his skin beneath mine, the rapid beat of his heart, and I breathed in the scent of everything that was Jafir, earth, and air, and sweat. My hands burned, meeting in the middle and slowly traveling down, feeling his ribs and the muscles of his stomach. His breath faltered, a catch, and his hands came up to cradle my face, his thumb swiping across my cheek. We brought our lips closer, misjudged, bumping noses, but then my head turned one way, his another, and our mouths met, our tongues met, and it seemed there was no other way for us to be, tasting each other, exploring the feel of each other, discovering each other in ways we never had before.

His hands slid down my back, strong, pulling me snug against him, and his lips brushed over my cheekbone, my lashes, my temples, and all the empty spaces between.

I didn’t think about his world or mine or the future we couldn’t have. I only thought about the warm light behind my eyelids, his soft murmurs in my ear, and the fullness of what we had in that moment. And we touched in all the ways of yesterday and more.

Chapter Nine

Jafir

She knelt behind me, her hands covering my eyes. “Don’t look.”

“I’m keeping them shut,” I promised as I reached up and brought one of her hands down to my lips.

“Jafir, pay attention,” she said tugging her hand away. I turned and pulled her down on top of me, drawing her face to mine, kissing her, whispering between breaths, “You are all I need to taste.”

She smiled, tracing a line around my mouth. “But one day you will be glad for a berry to quench your thirst.”

“You are—”

“Jafir!” she said, sitting up, straddling my stomach and placing a finger to my lips to quiet me.

I closed my eyes obediently.

I had asked her about the knowing, the gift the Siarrah of Harik the Great was said to have. She had frowned and said it was a gift to many in the tribes of the Remnant, except that some sought it more earnestly than others.

Here, she had told me, pressing her fist gently against my ribs.

And here, she said again, pressing it against my breastbone.

This is the same instruction my ama gave to me.

It is the language of knowing, Jafir.

A language as old as the universe itself.

It is seeing without eyes,

And listening without ears.

It is what led me here to this valley.

It is how the Ancients survived in those early years.

How we survive now.

Trust the strength within you.

Now she tried to teach me this way of knowing.

She had already taught me much—the difference between berries that could nourish or kill, the seasons of the weed thannis, and the gods who ruled it all. In the last few months, I hadn't missed a day of riding to the concealed valley to be with her. She consumed my thoughts and dreams. Everything had changed between us the day she held my slingshot and I placed my arms around her. It frightened me, this change, the way it made me feel and even think differently, but every day since then, as I rode to the valley, all I could think of was holding her again, kissing her, listening to her, watching her laugh.

Just as she had since the first time I saw her, she fascinated me, except that now I needed her like a raven needs the sky. It was a dangerous game we played, and from the beginning, we had known it couldn't last, but now I wondered. She wondered. We talked about it. Love. Was that what this was? *I love you, Jafir*, she would say at any moment of the day, just to hear it said aloud. She would laugh and then say it again, her eyes solemn, looking into mine. *I love you, Jafir de Aldrid*. And it didn't matter how many times she said it, I waited for her to say it again.

“Now what do you hear?” she asked, her hands resting on my chest.

I heard nothing but the distant chirp of a beetle, the ruffle of my horse's breath, the swish of meadow grass in the breeze—and then she placed a berry in my mouth, sweet and juicy. “It calls to you, Jafir. It whispers, a voice riding the wind, *Here I am, come find me*. Listen.”

But all I heard was a different kind of knowing, one that even Morrighan couldn't hear, a knowing that felt as sure and old as the earth itself. It whispered deep within my gut, *I am yours, Morrighan, forever yours ... and*

when the last star of the universe blinks silent, I will still be yours.

Chapter Ten

Morrighan

From the time I was small, Ama had told the stories of Before. Hundreds of stories. Sometimes it was to prevent me from crying and revealing our hiding place in the darkness when the scavengers ranged too near, desperate whispers in my ear that helped keep me silent. More often, at the end of a long day, she told them to satisfy me when there was no food to fill my belly.

I clung to her stories, even if they were of a world I didn't know, a world of sparkling light and towers that reached to the sky, of kings and demigods who flew among the stars—and princesses. Her stories made me richer than a ruler in a great kingdom. Stories were the one thing she gave me that couldn't be stolen, not even by a scavenger.

*Once upon a time child,
Long, long ago,
Seven stars were flung from the sky.
One to shake the mountains,
One to churn the seas,
One to choke the air,
And four to test the hearts of men.
A thousand knives of light,
Grew to an explosive rolling cloud,
Like a hungry monster.
Only a little princess found grace,
A princess just like you....*

Ama said the storm lasted for three years. When it was over, few were left

to tell of it. Fewer still cared to speak of it. Survival was all that mattered. She was only a small child herself when the storms began, her memory shaky, but she filled in the details with what she had learned along the way, more parts filled in by the need of the moment, and the message was always the same. A blessed Remnant survived—would always survive—no matter the hardship.

Other things survived too. Things we had to watch for. Things that sometimes made my faith in the Remnant waver, like when Papa was struck down, trampled by a horse; when Venda was stolen; when Rhiann lost a baby goat and her life with the single slash of a knife.

These became stories too, and Ama charged us to tell them, saying, *We have already lost too much. We must never forget from where we came, lest we repeat history. Our stories must be passed to our sons and daughters, for with but one generation, history and truth are lost forever.*

And so I told the stories to Jafir as we explored the very small canyon that was our world.

“I have never heard of glass towers,” he said when I told him about where Ama once lived.

“But you’ve seen the ruins, haven’t you? The skeletons that once held the walls of glass?”

“I have seen skeletons. That is all. There are no stories to go with them.” I could hear the shame in his tone, the defensive boy I had met so long ago.

I circled my hands around his waist, taking in the warmth of his back against my cheek. “Stories must begin somewhere, Jafir,” I said gently. “Maybe they can begin with you?”

I felt the stiffening of his shoulders. A shrug. He broke loose from my grip, turning suddenly. “Let’s go for a ride. I want to show you something.”

“Where?” I asked suspiciously. There was not a corner of this small closed-in canyon we hadn’t explored.

“Not far,” he said, taking my hand. “I promise. It’s a lake that—”

I frowned and pulled my hand away. We'd had this conversation before. The boundaries of the small box canyon seemed to grow smaller each day. Jafir chafed against its limits. He was used to riding freely in the open plains and fields, a risk I couldn't take. "Jafir, if someone sees me—"

He drew me close, his lips grazing mine, stalling my words that waited there. "Morrighan," he whispered against them, "I would cut out my own heart before I would let any harm come to you." He reached up, stroking my head. "I would not risk a single hair, or a lost eyelash." He kissed me tenderly, and heat flooded through me.

Suddenly he jumped back, lifting his arms to the side to show his muscles. "And look!" he said, a grin teasing at the corner of his mouth. "I am strong! I am fierce!"

"You are a fool!" I laughed.

He put on a startled face, feigning fear and looking heavenward. "Beware the gods!"

Perhaps I had told him too many stories.

His smile faded. "Please, Morrighan," he said quietly. "Trust me. No one will see us. Let me ride with you and show you some of the things I love."

My heart thumped, the familiar *no* beating behind it, but ... I did love to ride with him. At first I'd been afraid, but Jafir was a good teacher, gently coaxing me onto the huge animal's back, and quickly I discovered I loved the feel of his horse beneath us, Jafir's strong arms circling around me, the strange sense that we were connected, forever inseparable as we rode together. I loved the giddy feeling as the meadow blurred beneath us, the feeling that we had wings, that we were swift and powerful and nothing in the world could stop us.

I looked at him and nodded. "Just this once," I said.

"Just this once," he repeated.

But I knew I was opening another kind of door, and like before, it was one that could never be closed again.

Chapter Eleven

Morrighan

“What is beyond the mountains, Ama?”

“Nothing for us, child.”

We sat in the shade of a sycamore, full and leafy with summer, grinding the last of our amaranth seed into powder.

“Are you certain?” I asked.

“I’ve told you the story before. It was where your papa journeyed from. Only he and a handful of others made it out. The devastation was even worse there. It was far more brutal than anything on this side of the mountains. He watched many die.”

She had told me about the choking clouds, the fires, the shaking ground, the wild animals. The people. All the things that papa had told her.

“But he was only a child, and that was a long time ago,” I said.

“Not long enough,” she answered. “I remember the fear in your papa’s eyes when he spoke of it. He was glad to be where we are now, on this side.”

I saw the age on Ama. She was still healthy, robust even, for a woman her age, but weariness lined her face. Moving on and keeping the tribe safe had been an endless journey for her. Here in this vale she had found rest now for almost two years, but lately I had seen her scanning the surrounding hills and bluffs. Did she sense something else? Or was it just an old habit resurfacing? Was she afraid to believe that peace could last?

I desperately wanted to tell her, *The scavengers are leaving*. Our peace and boundaries would only grow if we stayed. But she’d wonder how I knew,

and I couldn't tell her what Jafir had told me—that our nearest threat might soon be gone forever. His clan wanted to leave. They talked of going to the other side of the mountains. Maybe even beyond that. I had seen the worry in his eyes when he told me. I felt it in my heart. If they left, would he leave too?

“What kind of animals?” I asked.

Ama paused from her grinding and looked at me. Studied me.

“I'm only curious,” I said and ground at my seed more earnestly.

“I don't know all their names,” she answered. “One he called a tiger. It was smaller than a horse, but with the teeth of a wolf and the strength of a bull. He watched one of the creatures drag a man away by the leg, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The animals were hungry too.”

“If the Ancients were like gods and built towers to the sky and flew among the stars, why did they have such dangerous animals that couldn't be controlled? Weren't they afraid?”

Ama's gray eyes turned to steel. Her head turned slightly to the side. “What did you just say?”

I looked at her, wondering what caused the sudden sternness in her voice.

“You called them *Ancients*,” she said. “Where did you learn that term?”

I swallowed. It was the word Jafir used. “I'm not sure. I think I heard it from Pata. Or maybe it was Oni? It's a good description, isn't it? They are a people from a time long past.”

I could see her turning my explanation over in her head. Her eyes warmed again, and she nodded. “Sometimes I forget how long past.”

I was more careful with my words after that, realizing there were many terms I had learned from Jafir. It was not just I who had taught him. *Arroyo, mesa, palisades, savanna*. His were the words of a wide open world. I had watched him come alive in new ways as we raced across a lowland or when he expertly guided his horse up a rocky hillside. This was his world, and he was confident, no longer the sometimes awkward boy who kissed me in a

cramped box canyon.

I came alive with him, allowing myself to believe, however briefly, that it was my world too, that our dreams lay just over the next hill, or the next, and we had wings to take us there. But I always watched over my shoulder, always remembered who I was, and where I was destined to return, a hidden world where he would never fit in.

There is no future for us, Morrighan. There can never be.

Jafir had a knowing about him too. It was a knowing I didn't want to think about.

Chapter Twelve

Jafir

“You are a lone wolf, always going off by yourself.” Fergus threw a blanket onto the back of his horse. “You’ll ride with us today.”

I had already promised Morrighan I would meet her early and we would ride to the falls where the knotweed grew. She had spotted it on one of our rides. If I was lucky, I might spear a fish in the pools of water there too.

Fergus hit me with the back of his hand, sending me stumbling into my horse. I regained my footing and tasted blood in my mouth. My fingers curled to fists, but I knew better than to strike the leader of the clan.

“What’s the matter with you?” he yelled. “Are you listening to me?”

“There is nothing wrong with hunting alone. I always bring back game to feed everyone.”

“Rabbits!” Steffan sneered, readying his own horse. “He’s not a lone wolf! He’s nothing more than a duck. Always preening in the water.”

“It is called bathing!” Laurida yelled from where she stood by the ovens with Glynis and Tory. “It would do all our noses some good if you followed Jafir’s example.”

The rest of the clan, who were also saddling up, laughed. Fergus ignored Laurida, eyeing me instead, a dark scowl on his brow. “We do not hunt today. We take. Liam spotted a tribe yesterday.”

“A tribe? *Where?*” I asked.

He mistook my quick reply for eagerness and smiled. It was a rare sight on his face, especially if it was directed at me. “An hour’s ride north,” he

answered. “Their bellies were fat, and their baskets full.”

I breathed relief. Morrighan’s tribe was south and to the west. Our clan hadn’t raided a camp since last spring. The tribes had either become better at hiding or had moved far from us.

“You don’t need me,” I said, looking at Piers, Liam, and the rest. “You have enough—”

Fergus grabbed me by my shirt, jerking me close, his expression a threatening storm. “You ride with us. You are my son.”

There would be no dissuading him. I nodded, and he released his grip. I stared after him as he mounted his horse, wondering what ate through him. It was not like him to even remember that he was my father.

They did not fight back. It sickened me how easily their food was taken. It was a small tribe, only about nine, but none defended their ground. An iron poker lay near their fire, a knife on a rough wooden table, rocks at their feet, but none lifted a hand toward us. *Fight back*, I wanted to say, but I knew if they did, we would cut them down. Not all of them, but enough to send the message. *Do not fight us. We are hungry like you, and we deserve this food as much as you, even if it was gathered by your hand.* It had always made sense to me before, but now the words seemed jumbled, different, as if they had been rearranged.

It is them or us. The whisper was faint now, and I wondered if I had ever heard it at all. I couldn’t remember her face anymore, not even the color of her hair, but I still felt my mother’s lips against my ear, warm, sickly, the sour smell of death on them, whispering the ways of the clan. *The tribes have a knowing about them, a way of conjuring food from the dry grasses of the hills. As the gods have blessed them, so should they bless us.*

I tied a sack of acorns to the back of my horse, while the rest of the clan pillaged or brandished their weapons as warning. I kept my gaze down, concentrating on tightening the rope, avoiding looking at any of them, but I couldn’t ignore the whimpers of a few. These acorns, gathered by another

hand, were no blessing to me, and the bile rose in my throat. My father's scorn surfaced again. *What's the matter with you?*

Steffan eyed a girl cowering behind the older women of the tribe.

"Come here," he called to her.

She shook her head wildly, her wide eyes glistening. The women pulled closer, shoulder to shoulder.

"Come!" he yelled.

"We're finished here," I said, grabbing his arm. "Leave the girl alone."

"Stay out of it, Jafir!" he yelled. He threw off my arm, advancing toward her, but Piers stepped into his path.

"As your brother said, we are done." Steffan had come to blows with Piers before, but Fergus, Liam, and Reeve were already riding off. The others were also mounting their horses to leave.

Steffan glared at the girl. "I'll be back," he warned, and left with the rest of us.

We traveled swiftly over the grasslands and hills back to camp, and with each mile, my anger grew. *Fight back.* Conflicting words pounded in my head. *Them or us.*

By the time we got to camp, only one thing was certain to me.

I would never ride with them again.

I would see my kin starve first.

I returned to the raided camp the next day, alone, with two peafowl that had taken me all day to hunt down. All that remained of their camp were the cold ashes of a fire and scattered scraps left behind in haste.

The tribe had moved on to someplace where we wouldn't find them again, and I was glad to see them gone.

* * *

Our clan from the north arrived the next day. Fergus had told them to come. Liam was angry. Their numbers were greater than ours, but most were

women and children. Mouths that would need to be fed. While we had eight strong men in our clan of eleven, they only had four in their clan of sixteen.

“They are our kin,” Fergus argued. “The numbers will make us strong. Look at Harik the Great. His kinsmen number in the hundreds—that means power. He could squash us all in one fist. The only way our clan will be as great is if our sons have wives and our numbers grow.”

Liam argued there was barely enough food in the hills to feed our own.

“Then we will find new hills.”

I looked at the children huddled together, too afraid to speak, their eyes circled with hunger and days of walking. Laurida poured water into the kettle over the fire to make the stew stretch and then added two large handfuls of the salted meat we had stolen from the tribe. The mother of one of the children began to cry. The sound cut through me, strangely familiar—*them or us*—and for a fleeting moment, I was glad for what we had stolen.

The evening passed, prickly and uncomfortable, the children eating quietly, the heated words between Liam and Fergus weighing on the rest, Liam still casting glares at the newcomers. With their soup finished, the children and mothers looked glumly into the fire. The silence was stifling. I preferred squabbles and scuffles to the taut hush.

Anger welled in me, and I whispered to Laurida, “Why do we never tell stories?”

Laurida shrugged. “Stories are a luxury of the well-fed.”

“At least stories would fill the silence!” I snapped. “Or help us understand our past!” And then lower, under my breath as I glared down at the ground. “I don’t even know how my own mother died.”

Fergus’s boots suddenly filled my circle of vision. I looked up. His eyes blazed with anger. “She starved to death,” he said. “She hid away her share of food and gave it to you and Steffan. She died because of you. Is *that* the story you wanted to hear?”

On a different night, I might have felt the back of his hand again, but his

expression was so filled with disgust, the effort to hit me must not have seemed worth it, and he turned away.

No, it was not the story I wanted to hear.

Chapter Thirteen

Morrighan

“Where were you?” I asked, running to meet him as he got off his horse. He hadn’t come for three days, and I had feared the worst.

He drew me into his arms, holding me tight in a strange, desperate way.

“Jafir?”

He pulled back, and that’s when I saw the side of his face, a purple bruise coloring it from cheekbone to jaw, circling under his eye.

Fear skittered through my chest. “What beast did this?” I demanded, reaching for his cheek.

He brushed my hand away. “It is nothing.”

“Jafir!” I insisted.

“It wasn’t a beast.” He tied his horse’s lead to a branch. “It was my father.”

“*Your father?*” I couldn’t hide my shock, nor did I want to. “Then he is the worst kind of animal.”

Jafir spun, lashing out at me. “He’s not a beast, Morrighan!” And then more quietly, “Our northern clan arrived. There are many mouths to feed. He must show strength, or we will all become weak.”

I stared at him, dread rushing through me. It was no longer just talk. They would cross the mountains. I kept my voice even, trying to hide my fear. “Will you leave with them?”

“They’re my kin, Morrighan. There are small children—” He shook his head, and in a tone that held both regret and resignation, he added, “I am the

best hunter of the clan.”

That was because his kin were lazy and impatient. They wanted what they hadn't worked for. I had seen Jafir carefully setting his snares, patiently sharpening his arrows, scanning the grasses with the steady eye of a hawk, looking for the slightest rustle.

“Before they leave, you could teach them. You could—”

“I cannot stay in this canyon, Morrighan! Where would I go?”

I didn't need to say the words. He saw them in my eyes. *Come with me to my tribe.*

He shook his head. “I'm not like your kind.” And then more sharply, almost as an accusation: “Why don't you carry weapons?”

I bristled, pulling back my shoulders. “We have weapons. We just don't use them on people.”

“Maybe if you did, you wouldn't be so weak.”

Weak? My fingers curled to a fist, and swifter than a hare, I punched him in the stomach. He grunted, doubling over.

“Does that seem weak to you, mighty scavenger?” I taunted. “And remember, our numbers are twice that of yours. Maybe it is you who should follow our ways.”

His breath returned, and he looked up at me, his eyes gleaming with playful revenge. He sprang, knocking me to the ground, and we rolled in the meadow grass until he had me pinned beneath him.

“How is it that I've never seen this great camp of yours? Where is it?”

A member of the tribe never gave away the location of the rest, even if caught. Ever. He saw my hesitation. The corner of his mouth pulled in disappointment that I didn't trust him. But I did—I trusted him with my life.

“It's a vale,” I said. “Just a short walk from here. A canopy of trees hides the camp from the bluffs above.” I told him I took the narrow ridge just outside the entrance to this canyon to get there. “It's not far. Do you want to come with me to see it?” I asked, thinking he had changed his mind.

He shook his head. “With more mouths to feed, there is more hunting to be done.”

A knot grew in my throat. His kin needed him. They would take him away from me. “Past the mountains there are animals, Jafir. There are—”

“Shh,” he said, his finger resting on my lips. His hand spread out to gently cradle my face. “Morrighan, the girl of ponds, and books, and knowing.” He stared at me like I was the air he breathed, the sun that warmed his back, and the stars that lit his way—a gaze that said, *I need you*. Or maybe those were all the things I wanted him to see in my eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he finally said. “We won’t leave for a long while. More supplies need to be gathered for such a journey, and with so many mouths to feed, it is hard to save up. And some in the clan oppose the journey. Maybe it will never happen. Maybe there will be a way for us to go on as we always have.”

I clung to those words, wanting them to be true.

There has to be a way, Jafir. A way for us.

We rode through the glades and the gorges, setting snares, stalking fowl, and waded at the edges of ponds, wriggling corms loose with our toes. We laughed and squabbled and kissed and touched, for the exploring never ended. There were always new ways to see and know each other. Finally, with six rock doves and a bag of corms hanging from the back of his saddle, he told me there was another piece of his world that he wanted me to see.

* * *

“It’s magnificent,” I said. Strangely and bizarrely magnificent.

We stood on the edge a shallow lake, the water lapping at our bare feet. Jafir stood behind me, his arms circling around my waist, his chin brushing my temple.

“I knew you would like it,” he said. “There must be a story there.”

I couldn’t imagine exactly what that would be, but it had to be a story of

randomness and chance, of luck and destiny.

On a knoll in the middle of the lake was a door, surely part of something greater at one time, but the rest long swept away. A home, a family, lives that mattered to someone. Gone. Somehow the door alone had survived, still hanging in its frame, an unlikely sentinel of another time. It swung in the breeze as if saying, *Remember. Remember me.*

The wood of the door was bleached as white as the dried grass of summer. But the part that left me most in awe was a tiny window no bigger than my hand in the upper half of the door. It was made of red and green colored glass pieced together like a cluster of ripe berries.

“Why did that survive?” I asked.

I felt Jafir gently shake his head. And then the afternoon sun dipped lower and the rays skipped through the panes just as Jafir promised they would, casting us both in jeweled light.

I felt the magic of it, the beauty of a moment that would soon be gone, and I wanted it to last forever. I turned and looked at the prism of light coloring Jafir’s hair, the ridge of his lip, my hands on his shoulders, and I kissed him, thinking that perhaps one kind of magic might make another last forever.

Chapter Fourteen

Jafir

Liam was dead.

Fergus had killed him.

When I arrived back at camp, Fergus was strapping the body to the back of Liam's horse to dump elsewhere. There were only careful whispers among a few. Even Steffan held his tongue.

Reeve pulled me aside and told me what had happened.

A baby had been squalling all afternoon, and Liam was on edge, telling the mother to shut the child up. By the time Fergus rode into camp, Liam was primed and searching for a fight. He laid into Fergus again, and they argued, but this time Liam wouldn't let it go. He wanted the northern kin to leave and the clan to stay put. If not, he was leaving with his share of the grain. Fergus warned him if he touched one bag of the supplies, he would kill him, saying the food was for the whole clan, not just one. Liam ignored him and hoisted a bag onto his shoulder, carrying it toward his horse.

"Fergus was true to his word. He had to be. Liam betrayed the clan. He had to die," Reeve whispered, not saying exactly how Fergus had killed him.

The northern kin looked on the spectacle with both fear and respect. Laurida hung back in the shadows, her gaze fixed on Fergus, the lines at her eyes heavy with misery.

I looked at him, *my father*, pulling the strap tight on Liam's body. Determined. Angry. His silence said more than anything else. Liam was his brother.

The evening wore especially long, the silence growing like a thorny hedge between us, and after the last of the children were put to bed and Fergus had returned with Liam's empty horse, I headed for my own bedroll.

Steffan shouldered me in passing as if by accident. "Where were you all day, Jafir? *Hunting?*"

I looked at him, caught off guard by his question. He never brought up my hunting, since I was the most skilled at it.

"The same as every day," I answered. "Didn't you see the game and food I brought back?"

He nodded. Then smiled. "So I did. Well done, little brother." He patted my back and walked away.

I left early the next day, setting extra snares along the way, carelessly tripping some and having to reset them. I couldn't concentrate. My focus was splintered, jumping from my last image of Liam, his arms dangling loose from Fergus's horse, to Reeve's words—*Liam betrayed the clan. He had to die*—and then to the image of the mothers hushing their children in camp this morning, afraid of stirring another fight. How could the wild animals that lived beyond the mountains be any worse than this? With the last trap set, I pushed my horse faster to get to Morrighan, blocking out the world, as if the wind rushing past could carry away what lay behind me.

Chapter Fifteen

Morrighan

It had been a long morning, and worry needled through me as each hour passed. Though I had finished my chores early, weeding the garden, repairing the frayed baskets, and stripping new rushes for the floor, when I told Ama I was off to gather, she found yet another chore for me, and another. Morning turned to midday. My anxiety burned deeper as I watched her cast glances toward the end of the vale, and when I finally grabbed my bag to leave, she said, “Take Brynna and Micah with you.”

“No, Ama,” I groaned. “I’ve worked with them through every chore this morning, and neither ceases from their chatter. I need some peace. Can I not at least gather alone?” Worry etched her face, and I stopped, eyeing the furrows across her brow. “What is it?” I went to her, taking her hands in mine and squeezing them. “What’s unsettling you?”

She swiped a gray strand of hair from her face. “There’s been a raid. Pata went to the flats early this morning to gather salt, and she spotted a tribe traveling south. Their camp three days north of here was attacked by scavengers.”

I blinked, not quite believing what she said. “Are you certain?”

She nodded. “They told Pata one of them was named Jafir. Isn’t that the scavenger you met all those years ago?”

I shook my head, scrambling for an answer, trying to make sense of it. *No, not Jafir.* “He was just a boy,” I said. “I—I can’t remember his name.” Every part of me was breathless. “It was a long time ago.” My mind spun,

and I couldn't focus. *Scavengers? Jafir raiding a camp?*

No.

No.

I yanked my doubts to a halt and steadied my breath. "We are safe, Ama. We are hidden. No one knows we are here, and three days north is a very long way."

"Three days of walking, yes. But not for scavengers on swift horses."

I assured her again, reminding her how long we had been here without ever seeing anyone outside of our tribe. I promised I would be cautious, but said we couldn't let one sighting miles away make us fearful of our own home. *Home.* The word floated in my chest, feeling more fragile now.

She reluctantly let me go, and I hurried down the path to the canyon, through the meadow, and up the steps of the ruin into its dark cavern. He wasn't there yet. I paced, waiting, sweeping the floor, stacking the books, trying to keep my hands and thoughts busy. How had someone heard Jafir's name? He spent every day with me.

Except for those three days he hadn't come.

I remembered how he held me when he finally showed up, a strange embrace that felt different. But I knew Jafir. I knew his heart. He wouldn't—I heard footsteps and turned.

He stood in the doorway, bare-chested as he was most days of summer, tall, his hair a wild mane, his arms tan and muscled, his knife secure at his side. A man. But then I saw him as Ama and the rest of the tribe would. *A scavenger. Dangerous. One of them.*

"What's wrong?" he asked and rushed over to me, holding my arms as if some part of me were injured.

"There's been a raid. A tribe in the north was attacked."

I saw all I needed to know in his eyes. I pulled free, sobs jumping to my throat. "By the gods, Jafir." I stumbled away, unable to see clearly, wishing I were anywhere else but here. I staggered deeper into the darkness of the ruin.

“Let me explain,” he begged, following, grabbing at my hand, trying to stop me.

I jerked free and whirled. “Explain what?” I yelled. “What did you get, Jafir? Their bread? A baby goat? What did you take that didn’t belong to you?”

He stared at me, a vein rising on his neck. His chest rose in deep, controlled breaths. “I had no choice, Morrighan. I had to ride with my clan. That is how I got this,” he said, motioning to his bruised face. “My father demanded that I go. Our northern kin were coming and—”

“And their mouths were more important than the tribe’s?”

“No. That’s not it at all. It is desperation. It’s—”

“It is laziness!” I spat. “It is greed! It is—”

“It is wrong, Morrighan. I know that. I swear to you, after that day, I vowed never to ride with them again, and I won’t. It sickened me, but—” He shook his head and turned away as if he didn’t want me to look upon him. He truly did look sick.

I grabbed his wrist, forcing him to turn back to me. “But *what*, Jafir?”

“I understood too!” he shouted, no longer apologetic. “When I saw the children eating, when I heard a mother crying, I understood their fear. We die, Morrighan. We die just like you! Not all of us hit our children. Sometimes we die for them—and maybe even do the unspeakable for them.”

I opened my mouth with a biting reply, but the anguish in his expression made me swallow it. Fatigue washed over me. I looked down at the floor, my shoulders suddenly heavy. “How many?” I asked. “Children?”

“Eight.” His voice was as thin as mist. “The oldest is four, the youngest only a few months old.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. *It was still no excuse!*

“Morrighan. Please.”

I looked up. He pulled me to his chest, and my tears were warm against his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he whispered into my hair. “I promise it won’t

happen again.”

“You’re a scavenger, Jafir,” I said, feeling the hopelessness of who he was.

“But I want to be more. I will be more.” He lifted my face to his, kissing away a tear on my cheek.

“So ... *this* is what you’ve been hunting every day.”

Jafir and I jumped apart, startled by the voice.

A man walked through the door, a casual swagger to his step. “Well done, brother. You found the tribe. Where’s the rest?”

“Why are you here?” Jafir demanded.

“Pretty thing. What’s your name, girl?” he said, ignoring Jafir. His cold blue eyes slowly rolled over me, and I felt like prey in the sights of a hungry animal. He stepped closer, studying me, then smiled.

“She’s a straggler from the tribe we raided,” Jafir told him. “They are moving on.”

“I don’t remember seeing her among them.”

“That’s because your sights were set on another.”

I couldn’t breathe. A wild beat pounded in my head.

“Moving on, but not before you have some fun?” He looked back at me. “Come here,” he said, waving me forward with his hand. “I won’t bite.”

Jafir stepped in front of me. “What do you want, Steffan?”

“Just what you’ve been enjoying. We are kin. We share.” He moved to step around Jafir, and Jafir lunged at him. They both stumbled back and slammed up against the far wall. Dust rained down around them. Though Jafir was taller, Steffan was stout, built more like a bull, and there was weight behind his fist. He punched Jafir in the gut, then again in the jaw. Jafir staggered back but in the next breath swung, his fist cracking against Steffan’s chin. He lunged again, knocking Steffan to the floor this time, and in an instant, his knife was at Steffan’s throat.

“Go ahead, brother,” Jafir yelled between heaving breaths. “Move! I’d

love to slice this across your thick neck!” He pressed the blade closer.

Steffan glared at me, then back at his brother. “You are greedy, Jafir. Keep her to yourself, then,” he sneered. “Her kind are dull and stupid anyway.”

Jafir’s chest heaved with anger, his fist still tight on the knife, and I thought he might plunge it deep into his brother’s throat, but he finally stood and ordered Steffan to get up. Steffan did as he was told, indignantly wiping the dust off his clothes as if he had been clean before the fight.

“Go,” Jafir ordered. “And never come back here. Do you understand?”

Steffan smirked and left. Jafir stood in the doorway watching him go.

That was it? *Leave?*

My hands shook uncontrollably, and I pressed them to my sides, trying to make the trembling stop. I hadn’t said a word through it all—my throat had frozen in fear. A shaky whisper finally spilled out. “Jafir.” Terror pounded in my head. “How did he find us?”

Jafir’s eyes were wild, and his lip was bleeding, dripping and staining his chest. “I don’t know. He must have followed me. I was always careful, but today—”

“What are we going to do?” I sobbed. “He’ll come back! I know he will!”

Jafir grabbed my hands, trying to stop the shaking. “Yes, he will come back, which means you never can, Morrighan. Ever. We’ll find another place for us—”

“But the tribe! They’re not far! He’ll find them! How could you let him follow you, Jafir? You promised! You—” I whirled, wiping my brow with the heel of my hand, trying to think, panic rising in me.

Jafir grabbed my shoulders. “He *won’t* find the tribe. You said yourself the vale is well hidden. I’ve never found it. Steffan is lazy. He won’t even try.”

“But what if he tells others?”

“Tells them what? That he found a girl from a tribe we had already

raided? A tribe that had already abandoned their camp and were moving on? You have no worth to them.”

Jafir insisted on riding me back to the ridge that led to my tribe, just in case his brother had lingered, but Steffan was gone. The meadow and canyon seemed as it always had, quiet and free of threat. My heart began to beat its normal rhythm again. Jafir said he would meet me at a crevasse in the ridge in three days—time for Steffan to cool his heels and believe the raided tribe was long gone and out of reach. He clutched my hand as I slid from his horse, looking at me as if it might be the last time he saw me, a crease between his brows.

“Three days,” he said again.

I nodded, worry twisting in my throat, and I finally pulled my hand from his.

Chapter Sixteen

Jafir

My face stung with the wind. I rode as fast as I could, snatching up my snares as I went. They were all empty, but it didn't seem to matter. I could only think about Steffan and the way he had smiled at me last night. I understood now. Somehow he had spotted us, seen me riding with Morrighan. Or maybe when we were wading in the pond?

I retraced our steps, trying to think where it could have been. I never took her anywhere close to our camp, and Steffan was lazy and rarely strayed far from it. But Fergus had been more surly since the arrival of the northern kin. More insistent on building up our stores. No one was to come back empty-handed, and—now it struck me with clarity—of course Steffan would follow on my heels, since I was the better hunter. Maybe it was he who had already emptied my snares.

The image of him coming upon us flashed through my mind again. Standing in the doorway, composed and confident, with that same smile as the evening before smeared across his face.

Dread crept through me, and my hands tightened on the reins. *How long had he been standing there listening?* Fear exploded through my veins. *Morrighan.* I tried to remember every word I'd said, but it was all a jumble—me trying to convince her I would never raid a tribe again, the despair in her eyes, the disappointment, my promises. *But did I say her name?* Did he hear me call her Morrighan?

What's your name, girl? he had asked.

Why would Steffan care about a name unless he suspected? Unless he'd heard.

And the name Morrighan was of great worth—at least to one person—which made it valuable to Steffan too.

When I got back to camp, I jumped from my horse, not bothering to tether it. Laurida carried a child on her hip, letting it sip from a cup of broth.

“Where is Steffan?” I demanded.

She looked at me, lifting a single suspicious brow. “What is all the hurry today?” she asked. “Steffan just stormed past too. He’s down at the lodge ring with the others. Harik and his men meet with Fergus—passing the brew.”

Sweat sprung to my face. *No, not Harik. Not today.* I ran to the lodge, but it was already too late. Steffan was strutting around the cold fire ring, announcing his find to them all—a girl of the tribespeople.

“I found her,” he said. “Morrighan.”

The group fell silent. Harik’s features sharpened, and he leaned forward. Of course Steffan didn’t mention me—the find had to be all his. He basked in the attention of Harik and Fergus, telling them the story of his stealth.

I glared at him. “How would you know it’s her?”

“She was talking to a foolish little maiden who squeaked her name.”

When Fergus asked why he hadn’t brought her there, Steffan claimed he was on his horse on a ridge above them, and when the girls spotted him, they ran. But he saw the direction they headed. The camp was near. I was almost in awe at how quickly he conjured stories. I knew it was not to protect me but to keep all the glory to himself.

Harik took a long sip of his brew. “Then that means the old woman is near too. So many years...” He said it more to himself than to us. His voice was thick with curiosity. “Their supplies are probably great.” But his interest seemed to be in more than just their stores of food.

They began to make plans to ride to the camp, and Steffan quickly

backtracked, saying he hadn't seen exactly where it was, but he could lead them close enough, and at night they would surely see a fire to help lead them.

I stepped forward, scoffing at Steffan's claim. "I saw the tribe we raided a few days ago just east of here and heading south," I said. "She was probably one of them. Why waste our time?"

Steffan insisted she wasn't one of them, and the more I argued that we shouldn't go, the angrier he got—the angrier everyone got, except Harik. He regarded me with a cool eye, his chin lifting slightly. Everyone noticed and quieted.

"Let the boy stay behind if that's what he wants," he said as he stood. "But he'll enjoy none of the fruits of our ride." He looked at Fergus for confirmation.

Fergus glared at me. I had humiliated him in front of Harik. "None," he confirmed.

They all moved toward their horses—our men plus Harik and his four. I couldn't stop them all. I had to go along.

"I'm coming," I said, already trying to think of ways I could lead them astray. And if I couldn't do that and they should find the camp, I knew I had to keep myself between Steffan and Morrighan.

Chapter Seventeen

Morrighan

Jafir and I had had a lifetime between us. There seemed to be no before—not one that mattered. My days were measured not in hours but by the flecks of color that danced in his eyes as he looked into mine, by the sun on our hands laced together, our shoulders touching as we read. His smile came easily now, the scowling skinny boy a hazy memory. *His smile*. My stomach squeezed.

We had something that was too long and lasting to be wiped away in a single day—or by a mistake. He had promised he would never ride with them again. And now he had promised three days. In three days we would see each other again. Begin anew and make plans for a new safer meeting place.

For a few hours, it comforted me beyond reason. It spoke of the future. *Three days*. Jafir believed all would be right again. This would pass. My stomach settled. My pulse quieted. There was no need to alert the rest of the tribe and worry them. I went about my evening duties, but I knew that Pata and Oni noted I had brought nothing back with me today. I always brought *something*, even if it was only a few seeds or a handful of herbs. But they said nothing to Ama who was busy trussing the boar with Vincente. Maybe they thought I was sick. I rubbed my forehead a few times and saw a knowing nod pass between them. I tried to keep all my other actions and words casual.

But as dusk turned to night, even as we lifted up the skins and rushes to let a breeze pass through the long house in the summer heat, even as I added twigs and branches to the fire to keep the boar roasting, I knew. Jafir and I

would not meet at the crevasse in three days. We would not meet there ever.

It is in the sorrows.

In the fear.

In the need.

That is when the knowing gains wings.

Ama had used many different ways to explain it to me. *When the few who were left had nothing else, they had to return to the way of knowing. It is how they survived.*

But this knowing that crouched in my gut felt nothing like wings.

Instead it was something dark and heavy, spreading, squeezing at each knot of my spine one at a time, like steps getting closer. Those few days would come and go, and Jafir would not be there.

I leaned against the longhouse pole, looking into the dark hollows between the trees where crickets chirped their night songs, oblivious to what I felt in my heart. The twins danced near the fire, excited about the boar. Though they were eight years old, they had never tasted one, and its aroma hung in the air, lusty and pungent. Carys had bludgeoned it as she collected mushrooms in the shade of the poplar. It was a rare treat.

We took our meal outside, sitting on woven mats around the fire, and once I had eaten, I felt better. Nedra whistled a tune, adding to the festive air. My spirit lifted temporarily, and I wondered if hunger was what had been bothering me all along.

But as I stood and looked the length of our vale as far as the firelight would let me see, the heaviness gripped me again, squeezing away my breath. It made no sense. There was nothing but peace, but then Ama came up behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“What are you feeling?” she asked.

I saw it in her eyes too.

“Let’s douse the fire,” she said, “and get the children and others inside.” But it was already too late.

The sound roared down upon us, the pounding of hooves that seemed to come from all sides. There was confusion at first—the twins screaming, everyone turning, trying to see what it was—and then there they were, the scavengers surrounding us, circling on their horses, making sure none of us ran. The tribe froze as the predators closed in, all of us silent except for the whimpers of Shantal. Though it had been two years, Rhiann’s death was still fresh in all our minds.

The leader, Harik, motioned to more riders, who had hung back in the shadows, and they stormed into the longhouse on their horses, tearing down walls as they went. They dismounted and began grabbing sacks of grain and dried beans we had stored for winter, rummaging through other supplies, ripping skins from the walls, stuffing their bags with fabrics and clothing, taking anything they wanted and tossing the rest.

Another scavenger, one the others called Fergus, ordered more to search the darkness with torches, looking for pens of animals. We heard the squawk of our hens when they found them. They were stuffed into bags too.

It was a whirl of movement—flesh and arms and fervor—making it hard to distinguish one scavenger from another in their careless zeal. But then there was a color. A flash. A cheekbone. A chest. A long cord of hair.

The clamor was suddenly distorted and muffled, the world slowing. Tumbling upside down.

Jafir.

Jafir rode with them.

He hoisted a large bag of grain onto the back of his horse.

My bones turned to water.

He had led them here. He worked side by side with his brother. They were skilled at looting. It was quickly over, and they left the longhouse to circle around us.

Jafir’s eyes met mine, and my numbness vanished.

I trembled with rage. They showed no mercy or compassion. Steffan

reached for what little remained of the boar still on the spit and set about wrapping it in a skin to take too. I spotted the knife Carys had used to cut the meat only an arm's length from me, lying on a stone.

"Leave us something!" I yelled as I stepped forward to grab it, but Ama was lightning quick and pulled me back.

"Be still, child," she whispered. "Let them take it."

Harik turned his horse at hearing my voice and guided it closer. His silver knives glittered at his sides, and he eyed me. "She's grown."

Ama pushed me farther behind her. "You and your thieves have what you want, Harik. Now be on your way."

He was a man of enormous stature, his brows heavy, his fists thick and meaty. But it was his eyes that frightened me the most. They narrowed as he studied me before looking back at Ama. "It is my right, old woman, to have what is of my blood."

Ama did not back down, and I was stunned at their familiarity with each other. "You have no rights here," she said. "She is nothing of yours."

"So you'd like to believe," he said. His gaze turned back at me. "Look at her hair. The fierce gleam in her eye. She wants to kill us all. That is mine." I could not mistake the pride in his voice. My stomach turned over, and my head ached. I felt my meal rise in my throat, the boar alive and gamey. My memory flashed with the whispers of Ama, Oni, and Nedra, the whispers that I had long denied. The truth.

I looked back at him, swallowing my disgust and shame. "You are nothing but an animal to me, same as the others."

Steffan bolted toward me, spouting about lessons and my lack of respect, but Jafir stepped in front of him, knocking him to the side and advancing toward me in his place. He raised his arm, the back of his hand poised to strike me. "Hold your tongue, girl, unless you'd like me to cut it out." He leaned close, his voice lowering to a growl. "*Do you understand?* Now, step back with the others."

My eyes stung. Who was he? Not the Jafir I thought I knew. My vision blurred. “How could you do this?”

He glared at me, his face and chest glistening with sweat in the firelight. He smelled of horse, dirt, and deceit. “Step back,” he ordered again between gritted teeth.

I returned his glare. “I hate you, Jafir de Aldrid,” I whispered. “And I vow I’ll curse your name and hate you with my last dying breath.”

“Enough! Ride out!” Harik yelled, turning his horse around. “We have what we want.” And then at Ama, a pointed glare. “For now.”

They left, Jafir last of all, following on their heels.

Their departure was hasty and wild, just like their arrival, and Pata screamed, scrambling to avoid a horse charging in her direction. She fell, but the horses kept going. One stepped on her, crushing her leg. She writhed in pain, and we ran to her aid. Carys examined her and said the leg was badly broken. Six of us gently lifted and carried her to what was left of the longhouse and cleared a place among the scattered debris to lay her down. Carys began examining her leg as Oni whispered words of comfort into Pata’s ear.

Micah came running out of the darkness, dragging a bag behind him. “The last one dropped this! It slid from his saddle, and he didn’t even notice.”

“Then we may at least have something to be grateful for,” Ama said, as she took an inventory of what might be salvaged.

One bag of wild oats.

I would not be grateful for it! And I would never stay my hand again when a knife was in my reach.

Chapter Eighteen

Jafir

The revelry lasted late into the night. They piled the plunder in the lodge, ate what was left of the boar, and drank generously from Harik's brew. Fergus was in high spirits, looking over the pile. "Our clan will leave tomorrow," he said as if, with this much bounty, there would never be a better time. But Harik eyed the pile too. A hefty share was his. He and his men would stay the night, then head back to his fortress across the river in the morning. With the high water, it was too dangerous to cross at night. The water already lapped over its span.

I lay on my bedroll, staring up at the sky between the open rafters. Exhaustion raced through me. Every part of me had been tight and ready to pounce for hours. I'd done everything I could to lead them astray, even saying I had spotted fires in opposite directions. But when the strong smell of roasting boar wafted across our trail, there was no stopping them.

My muscles had coiled into knots, watching both Harik and Steffan, uncertain what they would do. Watching them all.

And then seeing Morrighan. Her eyes. Her expression.

I hate you, Jafir ... I will hate you with my last dying breath.

I closed my eyes.

We were leaving. She'd be grateful for that. She would never have to see me again.

But I would always see her. Until I drew my last breath, it would always be her face I saw when I closed my eyes at night, and her face again when I

woke each morning. I would force myself to forget the last words I heard from her lips. I would remember others.

I love you, Jafir de Aldrid. Words that, now, I was sure I had never deserved.

I finally fell asleep just before dawn and woke late. When I walked outside, Steffan was sprawled on the ground, passed out and straddling the doorway, still reeking of Harik's brew. I stepped over him and saw Laurida and Glynis packing up belongings, tying many of them in the skins we had stolen last night. Down near the paddock, I saw others loading up horses with more goods.

"Fergus wants your help with the supplies down in the lodge," Laurida told me. When I got there, he was alone, putting the supplies into stacks.

"Where are Harik and his men?" I asked.

"Gone." Fergus didn't look up, still consumed with the goods, his eyes heavy from little sleep.

I looked at the supplies. They were all still there. "Harik didn't take his share?"

"His gift to us. I think he was reluctant to part without any, but the girl was enough. He thanked us for finding her."

I was groggy from lack of sleep and thought I had missed something. "What do you mean, *the girl was enough*?"

"He thinks she has the knowing, like her grandmother. He went to get her before he crosses the bridge."

"He's taking her? Now?"

"It's his right. She's—"

"No!" I shook my head, turning in all directions trying to focus. *Think, Jafir.* "No. He can't—"

"Stop yapping like a wounded coyote!" Fergus snapped.

I whirled back to face him. "How long ago did he leave?"

"An hour ago. Maybe more." He stared at the stolen goods and began to

tell me how he would parse them out among the horses. “Along with our own supplies, there will be enough to—”

I grabbed a large sack of grain, pulling it from a stack. “I need this!” He moved to stop me, and I shoved him away. “I’m taking it. Stay back!”

His eyes filled with disbelief, then rage. I had never challenged him before. He lunged at me, and I swung, connecting with his jaw and knocking him to the ground. He lay there stunned by the blow. I grabbed the sack of grain and ran to my horse without looking back.

Chapter Nineteen

Morrighan

“You are all teeth and elbows! Stop fighting me, or I’ll drag you by a rope behind us!” Harik’s hand clamped around my arm, and my breath caught with pain. I nodded so he would stop. I had already pleaded, begged, and cried out for Ama, who had struggled to follow us. She was far behind me now. Nothing would sway him.

I rode on his horse in front of him, and two men almost as big as Harik rode on either side of us, with two more riding behind. Harik’s chest was a massive wall at my back, and his arms curved around me to hold the reins, imprisoning me like a giant shackle. Sobs still caught at my throat.

“And stop that noise!” he ordered. “I am your father!”

“You are no father of mine,” I seethed. “You are nothing!”

“The old woman has poisoned you against me.”

“No poison was required. You’ve earned my hatred all on your own.”

“Morrighan,” he said, not to me, but to the air. He grumbled a low sigh, as if the name brought him grief. “She chose that name long before you were even born. I cared for your mother.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn’t want to hear about my mother from him. I spat to the side, wishing I could turn and hit his face instead. “You cared so much that you stole my aunt too?”

“I stole neither. Venda came on her own, and your mother never left the tribe. She met with me secretly. Neither of us knew her heart was too weak to bear a child.”

“I don’t want to hear any more,” I said.

“Shut out the truth if you wish, but you must face the fact—”

“The truth?” I yelled. “The truth is you tricked my mother! You deceived her! Just as you deceived Venda!”

I felt his bulky chest rise against my back in a deep angry breath. “That is Gaudrel’s truth. Mine is another. Be silent now, girl. I’m weary of your chatter. You’ll contribute to my household from this day forward. That is all you need to know.”

One of his men snorted as if Harik had already allowed me to speak too much. I was less than a prisoner to them. I was property. But I knew I was something else too. Something so shameful even Ama wouldn’t speak of it.

I was one of them. Half scavenger. Was that why she had lied about my father being dead? Had she hoped that by erasing it from memory, she could erase it from my blood, too? Was there some part of me—his part—always in danger of coming to the surface? My skin crawled thinking of it, and I wished I could banish the knowledge of him from my head. The fortress on the other side of the river grew in the distance, hideous ruins that would soon be my home. I thought of my last glimpse of Ama reaching out for me, and tears welled in my eyes again.

We had been making a pallet to carry Pata when they came. In another hour, we would have been gone, but no one had expected a return visit so soon. We had nothing left for them to take—at least that’s what we had thought. I had already been choking back tears all morning. The sight of Jafir jumped again and again through my thoughts, the flash of events swirling, his words, so strained and measured, *Do you understand? Now, step back.* Something about them didn’t feel right, didn’t fit with everything else.

One of Harik’s thugs slowed his horse and stood high in his stirrups, squinting into the distance. “Someone’s coming,” he said. They all stopped, and we turned to watch the rider racing across the barren ground, leaving a long trail of dust behind him. I shook my head, confused. I knew who it was.

What was he doing?

The brute sat back in his saddle. “Only one of the Fergus clan.”

Harik slid from his saddle and pulled me down with him, announcing we would make a short stop while we waited for Fergus’s messenger. He shoved a skin of water toward me, but I refused it. “You will drink sooner or later. And thank me for it.”

“I will never thank *you* for anything.”

His brows pulled down sharply as if his patience was spent, his chest puffing up, and I thought he might strike me, but then he paused, studying me, and something else passed through his eyes. He blinked and looked away. I wondered if he had seen my mother when he looked at me. Ama said I looked just like her except for my hair.

The wild thud of hooves descended on us, and Jafir pulled back, bringing his horse to a quick stop. He slid from his saddle but avoided my gaze, looking only at Harik. He wasted no time letting him know the purpose of his visit. “I’ve come to trade. I have a bag of grain for her.”

Harik stared at him, then finally laughed, realizing Jafir was serious. “A single bag of grain? For her? She’s far more valuable than that.”

Jafir’s eyes turned molten. “It is all I have. You will take it.”

There was a drawn moment of held breath and then low snickers from Harik’s men. Their hands went to the swords, eager to draw them from their scabbards. I stared at Jafir, his feet planted as if nothing could move him. All he carried at his side was a dagger. Had he gone mad?

I would cut out my own heart before I would let any harm come to you.

“Do you hear yourself, boy?” Harik asked. “Are you still drunk from last night?”

“I am not drunk. I am waiting.”

“And if I don’t make the trade, then what?”

Jafir’s hand went to the dagger at his side, resting but threatening. “You are a man of reason. And you know value. You know what is best. You will

take the grain.”

Harik rubbed his chin as if amused by Jafir’s audacity, and his other hand curled around the hilt of his sheathed sword. I inhaled, choking back a moan. Harik’s gaze shot to me. I couldn’t breathe. He studied me, his expression impossible to read, and then he finally grunted, shaking his head. “So that’s how it is.”

He looked back at Jafir, deep lines furrowing across his brow in a scowl. “You are a fool, boy. I am getting the better deal. She is trouble, this one. Have it your way! Take her!” He shoved me toward Jafir, and I stumbled, almost falling at his feet. I got my footing and looked back at Harik uncertainly, wondering if it was a trick.

His eyes lingered on me, and then he abruptly turned to Lasky and yelled, “Take the grain from his horse, and let’s go!”

I watched them ride off, galloping toward the bridge.

“Get on my horse, Morrighan,” Jafir ordered from behind me. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

I whirled, staring at him, his eyes still full of fire. Fury reignited in me, and my hand flew toward his face. His hand shot up, catching my wrist in midair. Both of our arms strained against each other, our gazes locked, and then he pulled me to him, his arms holding me tight, my shoulders shaking, his chest wet with my tears.

“I had no choice, Morrighan,” he whispered. “I had to ride with them. Steffan told them about you. I tried to send them off course, but they caught the scent of the roasting boar.”

He stiffened and pushed me away. His shoulders pulled back. He looked different to me. Distant. Older. There were lines at his eyes that hadn’t been there yesterday. “I’ll take you back to your camp now.”

“So you’re not *buying* me with my own sack of grain?”

His nostrils flared. “You’ll never have to see me after today. I knew you’d be happy to hear that. I’m leaving with my clan. They still need me.”

I stared at him, a new ache worming through me. My mouth opened, but no words would form. “You’re leaving,” I finally repeated.

“This can’t be all there is,” he said. “It is no way to live. There has to be a better place than this. Somewhere. A place where the children in my clan can have a different life than the one I’ve had.” His jaw clenched, and he added with a harder edge, “A place where someone can fall in love with whoever they want and not be shamed by it.”

He grabbed his horse’s lead and motioned for me to get up.

All I wanted was to get back to the tribe, but I hesitated, feeling a strange nudge, his last words settling in some forgotten hollow. *Somewhere*. He motioned again, impatient, and I slid my foot into the stirrup. He got up behind me, reaching around to hold the reins as he had so many times, but now his arms felt rigid against my skin, as if he was trying to keep from touching me. We rode in awkward silence. I thought about the grain he had traded me for. *My grain*. Not his. I had a right to be angry. I owed him nothing.

But he hadn’t betrayed me.

Not in the way I had thought. I’d been quick to believe the worst of him.

And just now, he had risked his life to free me from Harik.

He was leaving. Today.

“It’s dangerous on the other side of the mountains,” I reminded him.

“It’s dangerous here,” he countered. I leaned back against his chest, forcing him to touch me. He cleared his throat. “Piers said he saw an ocean beyond the mountains when he was a boy.”

“He must be the same age as Ama if he remembers it.”

“He doesn’t remember much. Only the blue. We’ll look for that.”

Blue. An ocean that might not even exist anymore. It was a fool’s quest. And yet Ama’s memories had fueled my own dreams.

Are there really such gardens, Ama?

Yes, my child, somewhere. And one day you will find them.

Somewhere. I brushed back the hair whipping across my face and looked ahead at the windblown, barren landscape. *No, I will never find those gardens, and Jafir will never find his blue.* He and his clan would never make it. They would all perish. *Soon.* I felt the word burn in my gut as surely as I felt Jafir's chest at my back. They would die.

"Jafir—"

"What?" he answered, his tone sharp, as if hearing any more arguments from me was too much for him to bear.

There is no future for us, Morrighan. There can never be.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

I had once believed there might be a way for us, but now that seemed as lost and faraway as one of Ama's gardens.

Chapter Twenty

Morrighan

We saw it at the same time. It was a dust cloud rising behind a knoll, and in seconds, the cloud became something else. A caravan. Horses laden with packs. It looked like a small city, though I already knew the numbers. Jafir had told me. Twenty-seven, eight of which were children. Seven broke loose from the pack, a wild storm of hooves, muscle, and madness heading toward us.

Jafir pulled back on the reins and muttered a curse.

They stopped, surrounding us.

“Get down,” one of them ordered.

Jafir whispered his name to me. It was Fergus, his father. I slid from the saddle, and Jafir followed. “Stay behind me,” he ordered. But they moved like a skilled pack of wolves, positioning themselves in a circle around us. My heart banged in my chest.

Without warning, Fergus lunged forward, his fist flying through the air, hitting Jafir and sending him sprawling backward into the arms of two others. They held him so he wouldn’t fall. Blood spurted from Jafir’s mouth.

I cried out and rushed toward him, but Steffan grabbed my arms, jerking me back.

“*Where’s my grain?*” Fergus screamed at Jafir, his face contorted in rage.

“I gave it to Harik. It’s gone.”

Fergus looked at me, his eyes bulging. “For her?” he yelled in disbelief. “You gave it to him for *her?*”

Jafir wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “He and I made a deal. You are bound to honor it. Let her go, or you’ll defy Harik.”

A snarl twisted across Fergus’s face. “Honor?” He laughed and walked over to me, shoving his face close to mine. His breath was sour, and his eyes were slivers of black glass. “You have the knowing, girl?”

I hesitated, not sure what I should say. I didn’t owe this man the truth. Jafir’s gaze locked on mine, and I saw the misery in his eyes. He shook his head slightly. *No*. If I had no worth, they might still let me go.

I looked at the crowd gathering behind him. The rest of the clan had caught up, a sea of eyes and gaunt stares. A baby cried. Another child whimpered.

Soon. It clutched at my chest. *Four days out*.

“Answer me!” Fergus yelled.

“No,” I whispered.

He hissed out a frustrated breath and grabbed my chin, turning it one way and then the other. He looked at Steffan, who held me. “Fit enough for a wife. She’s yours, Steffan. She should be able to bear you a brat or two—my grain’s not going to waste.”

“No!” I yelled. “I won’t—”

Jafir’s roar came on the heels of my scream. “You can’t defy Harik! He —”

Fergus spun, punching Jafir in the stomach, the force of it vehement and brutal, making the men holding Jafir stumble back a step. He struck him again in the ribs. I screamed for him to stop. Jafir’s head lolled to the side, his feet collapsing beneath him. Only the men gripping his arms on either side kept him from crumpling to the ground. Jafir coughed, spitting out blood.

“Like you defied me?” Fergus yelled. He grabbed Jafir’s hair, pulling his head back so Jafir had to look at him. Jafir’s eyes remained defiant.

“You betrayed the clan,” Fergus growled. “You betrayed me. You’re no son of mine. Just like Liam was no brother.” He drew his knife and held it to

Jafir's neck.

"No!" I screamed. "Wait!"

Fergus looked back at me.

"Harik was right! I do have the knowing, and I am strong in it!" I said. "I'll guide you safely through the mountains and well past that, but only on one condition—I do it as Jafir's wife. Not Steffan's."

"Shut up!" Steffan yelled, shaking me.

Fergus smirked. "Look at yourself, girl. You're in no position to lay down conditions. You'll guide us at my orders."

A woman squeezed past the others, laying a hand on Fergus's shoulder. "Give her what she wants, Fergus. If she has no hope for the end of the journey, what's to keep her from guiding us into peril?"

"Or abandoning us to die halfway through the wilderness?" another woman called out. A rumble of fear ran through the rest of the clan.

"Hush!" Fergus yelled, waving his knife in the air. "She'll do as I say if she wants to live!"

You'll do as I say, if you want to live, I wanted to tell him. *I've already seen you all dead just four days out.* But I held my tongue because his moves were erratic and the knife still waved in his hand.

A man stepped forward. He was taller and older than Fergus. "It would serve us all to have one of her kind leading the way," he said. "But Laurida is right, if the girl has no hope for reward, it might spell our own doom."

Fergus took several steps, as if weighing the man's words, and sheathed his knife. He surveyed the clan and their worried glances, then walked back to me, fingering the hair on my shoulder. "Very well, Morrighan of the Remnant. I'll strike a deal with you. If you lead us safely to a place of my liking and you please me with your helpfulness along the way, at the end of the journey, you will be Jafir's. If not, you will be Steffan's. Do you agree to this without argument?"

I knew there was no way I would ever please this man. He would never

concede to my condition, but there was nothing else I could do. If I agreed, it would give Jafir and me more time—and maybe all of those who stood behind Fergus more time too.

“Yes,” I answered.

He told Steffan to release me, then turned to the men holding Jafir and nodded. They let go of his arms, and he fell to the ground, coughing. I ran to him and dropped to his side. His breaths shuddered, and he held his ribs. I cradled his head in my lap, wiping the blood from his mouth with my skirt.

“Morrighan,” he started to protest, but I put my finger to his lips. He knew what I knew. His father would give me nothing.

“Shh,” I whispered. My vision blurred with tears and I leaned closer so I was certain no one would hear. “For now, this is a way. *A way for us.* I love you, Jafir de Aldrid. I will always love you.”

I looked back at Fergus. He and Steffan already stood shoulder to shoulder, their eyes shining with victory. The clan was appeased, and he would still get what he wanted. But for now this agreement, however fleeting, bought Jafir and me more time. The only thing that was certain was that at the end of this journey, I would be the wife of an Aldrid.

Chapter Twenty-One

Morrighan

I was eighteen when we reached a place of staying. A place where fruit the size of fists hung from trees and a line of deep blue stretched across the horizon as far as we could see.

It had been a long journey. A terrible greatness had rolled across the land that none of us could have imagined. The wilderness howled with the desolation, carrying the cries of the dead.

Sometimes food was as scarce as courage. There were days I kept them alive on grass, bark, and false hope. I lied to keep them moving forward one more step. I told the children stories to distract them from their fears. Whether there was one god or four, I didn't know, but I called upon any who would listen. They whispered back to me. On the winds, in a glint of light, colors playing behind my eyelids, words tickling at my neck and nesting in my gut. *Keep going.* My ways were quiet, soft, a trusting and a listening that was sometimes not fast enough to stay Fergus's hand. If it wasn't my face that suffered the cost, it was Jafir's or that of anyone within swinging distance.

I mourned for the gentleness of my tribe, and at times thought I couldn't go on, but Ama was right. It was in the sorrows, in the fear, in the need, that the knowing gained flight, and I had much of all these. I remembered that eight-year-old girl I had once been, the one who had cowered between boulders waiting to die. In my years spent with the tribe, I'd thought I understood fear. I'd thought I knew loss.

I hadn't.

Not in the way I knew now.

Desperation grew teeth. Claws. It became an animal inside me that knew no bounds, unspeakable, just as Jafir had tried to explain to me so long ago. It tore open my darkest thoughts, letting them unfurl like black wings.

When the end of the journey was in sight, Fergus said what I knew he would all along. I was to be Steffan's wife. Jafir was to pay in flesh for his betrayal. For Fergus to give me what I had bargained for was the same as giving away power, and power was all that mattered to him, especially now that I had given him a new world and a fresh, limitless beginning was in his grasp.

There was no question in my mind what I would do. I had planned it for months. I killed Steffan first. He had possessively jerked me away when Fergus announced his decision, but in a quick, practiced turn, I buried my knife deep in his throat, and he gasped futilely for air. When Steffan fell dead at my feet, Fergus leapt at me, but Jafir was ready and brought his father down with a swift thrust into his heart. None mourned the loss of Fergus and Steffan, and Piers declared Jafir head of the clan.

"There," Jafir had said when at last he saw the green hills and vines of fruit. "It is all yours, Morrighan. You led us here." He reached out and plucked a handful of the wide blue sky and placed it in my palm.

"Ours, Jafir," I answered.

I dropped to my knees and wept for all the days, the weeks, the months—and for the lost—those who didn't finish the journey with us. Laurida, Tory, and the baby Jules. I wept for those I would never see again. Ama and my tribe. I wept for the cruelties.

Jafir knelt beside me, and we gave thanks, praying that this was truly the end, praying it was the new beginning we had sought.

We stood and watched as the clan ran ahead of us into the valley that would become our home. Jafir pressed his hand to the small mound growing

in my belly and smiled.

Our hope.

“We have been blessed by the gods,” he said. “The cruelties of the world are behind us now. Our child will never know them.”

I closed my eyes, wanting to believe him. Wanting to forget the blood that had been spilled by our hands, wanting to believe we could start fresh, just as my tribe had in that small vale so long ago, wanting to believe that this time our peace would last.

And then I heard a familiar voice on the wind, one I had heard so many times, calling out to me.

From the loins of Morrighan,

Hope will be born.

On its heels came a whispered name that was always just beyond my reach, not yet mine to hear, but I knew that one day my children’s children or the ones who came after would hear it.

One day hope would have a name.

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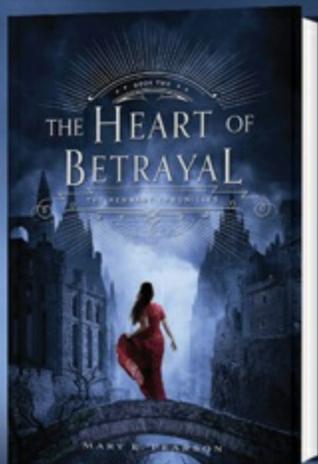
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Mary E. Pearson is the author of eight novels for teens, including *The Kiss of Deception*, *The Heart of Betrayal*, and the acclaimed Jenna Fox Chronicles. She writes full-time from her home in Carlsbad, California. marypearson.com. Or sign up for email updates [here](#).



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eBook edition January 2016

eISBN 9781627795418