

# Chapter 1



*Clare*

*The first day of September*

Through the house, still as a grave, Larkin limped. The air was sweet, fragrant with the flowers gathered lavishly for the handfasting rite of the night before.

The blood had been mopped up; the weapons cleaned. They'd toasted Hoyt and Glenna with the frothy wine, had eaten cake. But behind the smiles, the horror of the night's battle lurked. A poor guest.

Today, he supposed, was for rest and more preparation. It was a struggle for him not to be impatient with the training, with the planning. At least last night they'd fought, he thought as he pressed a hand to his thigh that ached from an arrow strike. A score of demons had fallen, and there was glory in that.

In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of Coke. He'd developed a taste for it, and had come to prefer it over his morning tea.

He turned the bottle in his hand, marveling at the cleverness of the vessel—so smooth, so clear and hard. But

what was inside it—this was something he'd miss when they returned to Geall.

He could admit he hadn't believed his cousin, Moira, when she'd spoken of gods and demons, of a war for worlds. He'd only gone with her that day, that sad day of her mother's burial, to look after her. She wasn't only blood, but friend, and would be queen of Geall.

But every word she'd spoken to him, only steps away from her mother's grave, had been pure truth. They'd gone to the Dance, they'd stood in the heart of that circle. And everything had changed.

Not just the where and when they were, he mused as he opened the bottle and took that first bracing sip. But everything. One moment, they'd stood under the afternoon sun in Geall, then there'd been light and wind, and a roar of sound.

Then it had been night, and it had been Ireland—a place Larkin had always believed a fairy tale.

He hadn't believed in fairy tales, or monsters, and despite his own gift had looked askance at magic.

But magic there was, he admitted now. Just as there was an Ireland, and there were monsters. Those demons had attacked them—springing out of the dark of the woods, their eyes red, their fangs sharp. The form of a man, he thought, but not a man.

Vampyre.

They existed to feed off man. And now they banded together under their queen to destroy all.

He was here to stop them, at all and any costs. He was here at the charge of the gods to save the worlds of man.

He scratched idly at his healing thigh and decided he could hardly be expected to save mankind on an empty stomach.

He cut a slab of cake to go with his morning Coke and licked icing from his finger. So far, through wile and guile he'd avoided Glenna's cooking lessons. He liked to eat, that was true enough, but the actual making of food was a different matter.

He was a tall, lanky man with a thick waving mane of tawny hair. His eyes, nearly the same color, were long like his cousin's, and nearly as keen. He had a long and mobile mouth that was quick to smile, quick hands and an easy nature.

Those who knew him would have said he was generous with his time and his coin, and a good man to have at your back at the pub, or in a brawl.

He'd been blessed with strong, even features, a strong back, a willing hand. And the power to change his shape into any living thing.

He took a healthy bite of cake where he stood, but there was too much quiet in the house to suit him. He wanted, needed, activity, sound, motion. Since he couldn't sleep, he decided he'd take Cian's stallion out for a morning run.

Cian could hardly do it himself, being a vampire.

He stepped out of the back door of the big stone house. There was a chill in the air, but he had the sweater and jeans Glenna had purchased in the village. He wore his own boots—and the silver cross Glenna and Hoyt had forged with magic.

He saw where the earth was scorched, where it was trampled. He saw his own hoofprints left in the sodden earth when he'd galloped through the battle in the form of a horse.

And he saw the woman who'd ridden him, slashing destruction with a flaming sword.

She moved through the mists, slow and graceful, in what he would have taken for a dance if he hadn't known the movements, the complete control in them, were another preparation for battle.

Long arms and long legs swept through the air so smoothly they barely disturbed the mists. He could see her muscles tremble when she held a pose, endlessly held it, for her arms were bared in a snug white garment no woman of Geall would have worn outside the bedchamber.

She lifted a leg behind her into the air, bent at the knee,

reaching an arm back to grasp her bare foot. The shirt rose up her torso to reveal more flesh.

It would be a sorry man, Larkin decided, who didn't enjoy the view.

Her hair was short, raven black, and her eyes were bluer than the lakes of Fonn. She wouldn't have been deemed a beauty in his world, as she lacked the roundness, the plump sweet curves, but he found the strength of her form appealing, the angles of her face, the sharp arch of brows interesting and unique.

She brought her leg down, swept it out to the side, then dropped into a long crouch with her arms parallel to the ground.

"You always eat that much sugar in the morning?"

Her voice jolted him. He'd been still and silent, and thought her unaware of him. He should've known better. He took a bite of the cake he'd forgotten he held. "It's good."

"Bet." Blair lowered her arms, straightened. "Earlier rising for you than usual, isn't it?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Know what you mean. Damn good fight."

"Good?" He looked over the burned ground and thought of the screams, the blood, the death. "It wasn't a night at the pub."

"Entertaining though." She looked as he did, but with a hard light in her eyes. "We kicked some vampire ass, and what could be a better way to spend the evening?"

"I can think of a few."

"Hell of a rush, though." She rolled any lingering tension from her shoulders as she glanced at the house. "And it didn't suck to go from a handfasting to a fight and back again—as winners. Especially when you consider the alternative."

"There's that, I suppose."

"I hope Glenna and Hoyt are getting a little honeymoon time in, because for the most part, it was a pretty crappy reception."

With the long, almost liquid gait he'd come to admire, she walked over to the table they used during daylight training to hold weapons and supplies. She picked up the bottle of water she'd left there and drank deep.

"You have a mark of royalty."

"Say what?"

He moved closer, touched a fingertip lightly to her shoulder blade. There was the mark of a cross like the one around his neck, but in bold and bloody red.

"It's just a tattoo."

"In Geall only the ruler would bear a mark on the body. When the new king or queen becomes, when they lift the sword from the stone, the mark appears. Here." He tapped a hand on his right biceps. "Not the symbol of the cross, but the claddaugh, put there, it's said, by the finger of the gods."

"Cool. Excellent," she explained when he frowned at her.

"I myself have never seen this."

She cocked her head. "And seeing's believing?"

He shrugged. "My aunt, Moira's mother, had such a mark. But she rose to queen before I was born, so I didn't see the mark become."

"I never heard that part of the legend." Because it was there, she swooped a fingertip through the icing of his cake, sucked it off. "I guess everything doesn't trickle down."

"How did you come by yours?"

Funny guy, Blair thought. Curious nature. Gorgeous eyes. Danger, Will Robinson, she thought. That sort of combo just begged for complications. She just wasn't built for complications—and had learned it the hard way. "I paid for it. A lot of people have tattoos. It's like a personal statement, you could say. Glenna's got one." She took another drink, watching him as she reached around to tap herself on the small of the back. "Here. A pentagram. I saw it when we were helping her get dressed for the handfasting."

"So they're for women."

"Not only. Why, you want one?"

"I think not." He rubbed absently at his thigh.

Blair remembered yanking the arrow out of him herself, and that he'd barely uttered a sound. The guy had balls to go with the gorgeous eyes and curious nature. He was no slouch in a fight, and no whiner after the battle. "Leg giving you trouble?"

"A little stiff, a little sore. Glenna's a good healer. Yours?"

She bent her leg back, heel to butt, gave it a testing pull. "It's okay. I heal fast—part of the family package. Not as fast as a vamp," she added. "But demon hunters heal faster than your average human."

She picked up the jacket she'd tossed on the table, put it on against the morning cool. "I want coffee."

"I don't like it. I like the Coke." Then he smiled, easy, charming. "Will you be making yourself the breakfast?"

"In a little while. I've got some things I want to do first."

"Maybe you wouldn't mind making enough for two."

"Maybe." Clever guy, too, she thought. You had to respect his finagling. "You got something going now?"

It took him a moment, but he tried to spend a little time each day with the miraculous machine called the television. He was proud to think he was learning new idioms. "I'm after taking the horse for a ride, then feeding and grooming him."

"Plenty of light today, but you shouldn't head into the woods unarmed."

"I'll be riding the fields. Ah, Glenna, she asked if I'd not ride alone in the forest. I don't like to worry her. Were you wanting a ride yourself?"

"I think I had enough of one last night, thanks to you." Amused, she gave him a light punch in the chest. "You've got some speed in you, cowboy."

"Well, you've a light and steady seat." He looked back out at the trampled ground. "You're right. It was a good fight."

"Damn right. But the next one won't be so easy."

His eyebrows winged up. "And that one was easy?"

“Compared to what’s coming, bet your ass.”

“Well then, the gods help us all. And if you’ve a mind to cook eggs and bacon with it, that’d be fine. Might as well eat our fill while we still have stomachs.”

Cheery thought, Blair decided as she went inside. The hell of it was, he’d meant it that way. She’d never known anyone so offhand about life and death. Not resigned—she’d been raised to be resigned to it—just a kind of confidence that he’d live as he chose to live, until he stopped living.

She admired the viewpoint.

She’d been raised to know the monster under the bed was real, and was just waiting until you relaxed before it ripped your throat out.

She’d been trained to put that moment off as long as she could stand and fight, to slash and to burn, and take out as many as humanly possible. Because under the strength, the wit and the endless training was the knowledge that some day, some way, she wouldn’t be fast enough, smart enough, lucky enough.

And the monster would win.

Still there’d always been a balance to it—demon and hunter, with each the other’s prey. Now the stakes had been raised, sky-fricking-high, she thought as she made coffee. Now it wasn’t just the duty and tradition that had been passed down through her blood for damn near a millennium.

Now it was a fight to save humankind.

She was here, with this strange little band—two of which, vampire and sorcerer, turned out to be her ancestors—to fight the mother of all battles.

Two months, she thought, until Halloween. Till Samhain, and the final showdown the goddess had prophesied. They’d have to be ready, she decided as she poured the first cup. Because the alternative just wasn’t an option.

She carried her coffee upstairs, into her room.

As quarters went, it had it all over her apartment in

Chicago where she'd based herself over the last year and a half. The bed boasted a tall headboard with carved dragons on either side. A woman could feel like a spellbound princess in that bed—if she was of a fanciful state of mind.

Despite the fact the place was owned by a vampire, there was a wide mirror, framed in thick mahogany. The wardrobe would have held three times the amount of clothes she'd brought with her, so she used it for secondary weapons, and tucked her traveling wardrobe in the chest of drawers.

The walls were painted a dusky plum, and the art on them woodland scenes of twilight or predawn, so that the room seemed to be in perpetual shadow if the curtains were drawn. But that was all right. She had lived a great deal of her life in the shadows.

But she opened the curtains now so morning spilled in and then sat at the gorgeous little desk to check her e-mail on her laptop.

She couldn't prevent the little flicker of hope, or stop it from dying out as she saw there was still no return message from her father.

Nothing new, she reminded herself and tipped back in the chair. He was traveling, somewhere in South America to the best of her knowledge. And she only knew that much because her brother had told her.

It had been six months since she'd had any contact with him, and there was nothing new about that, either. His duty to her had been, in his opinion, fulfilled years ago. And maybe he was right. He'd taught her, he'd trained her, though she'd never been good enough to merit his approval.

She simply didn't have the right equipment. She wasn't his son. The disappointment he'd felt when it had been his daughter instead of his son who'd inherited the gift was something he'd never bothered to hide.

Softening blows of any sort just wasn't Sean Murphy's style. He'd pretty much dusted her off his hands on her eighteenth birthday.

Now she'd embarrassed herself by sending him a second



message when he'd never answered the first. She'd sent that first e-mail before she'd left for Ireland, to tell him something was up, something was twitching, and she wanted his advice.

So much for that, she thought now, and so much for trying again, after her arrival, to tell him what was twitching was major.

He had his own life, his own course, and had never pretended otherwise. It was her own problem, her own lack, that she still coveted his approval. She'd given up on earning his love a long time ago.

She turned off the computer, pulled on a sweatshirt and shoes. She decided to go up to the training room and work off frustration, work up an appetite lifting weights.

The house, she'd been told, had been the one Hoyt and his brother, Cian, had been born in. In the dawn of the twelfth century. It had been modernized, of course, and some additions had been made, but she could see from the original structure the Mac Cionaoiths had been a family of considerable means.

Of course Cian had had nearly a millennium to make his own fortune, to acquire the house again. Though from the bits and pieces she'd picked up, he didn't live in it.

She didn't make a habit out of conversing with vampires—just killing them. But she was making an exception with Cian. For reasons that weren't entirely clear to her, he was fighting with them, even bankrolling their little war party to some extent.

Added to that, she'd seen the way he'd fought the night before, with a ruthless ferocity. His allegiance could be the element that tipped the scales in their favor.

She wound her way up the stone stairs toward what had once been the great hall, then a ballroom in later years. And was now their training room.

She stopped short when she saw Larkin's cousin Moira doing chest extensions with five-pound free weights.

The Geallian wore her brown hair back in a thick braid

that reached her waist. Sweat dribbled down her temples, and more darkened the back of the white T-shirt she wore. Her eyes, fog gray, were staring straight ahead, focused, Blair assumed, on whatever got her through the reps.

She was, by Blair's gauge, about five-three, maybe a hundred and ten pounds, after you'd dragged her out of a lake. But she was game. Having game held a lot of weight on Blair's scale. What Blair had initially judged as mousiness was, in actuality, a watchfulness. The woman soaked up everything.

"Thought you were still in bed," Blair said as she stepped inside.

Moira lowered the weights, then used her forearm to swipe her brow. "I've been up for a bit. You're wanting to use the room?"

"Yeah. Plenty of room in here for both of us." Blair walked over, selected ten-pound weights. "Not hunkered down with the books this morning."

"I . . ." On a sigh, Moira stretched out her arms as she'd been taught. She might have wished her arms were as sleek and carved with muscle as Blair's, but no one would call them soft any longer. "I've been starting the day here, before I use the library. Usually before anyone's up and about."

"Okay." Curious, Blair studied Moira as she worked her triceps. "And you're keeping this a secret because?"

"Not a secret. Not exactly a secret." Moira picked up a bottle of water, twisted off the cap. Twisted it back on. "I'm the weakest of us. I don't need you or Cian to tell me that—though one or the other of you make a point to let me know it with some regularity."

Something gave a little twist inside Blair's belly. "And that sucks. I'm going to tell you I'm sorry about that, because I know how it feels to get slammed down when you're doing your best."

"My best isn't altogether that good, is it? No, I'm not looking for sorry," she said before Blair could speak. "It's

hard to be told you're lacking, but that's what I am—for now. So I come up here in the mornings, early, and lift these bloody things the way you showed me. I won't be the weak one, the one the rest of you have to worry about."

"You don't have much muscle yet, but you've got some speed. And you're a frigging genius with a bow. If you weren't so good with it, things wouldn't have turned out the way they did last night."

"Work on my weaknesses, and on my strengths, on my own time. That's what you said to me—and it made me angry. Until I saw the wisdom of it. I'm not angry. You're good at training. King was . . . He was more easy on me, I think, because he was a man. A big man at that," Moira added with sorrow in her eyes now. "Who had affection for me, I think, because I was the smallest of us."

Blair hadn't met King, Cian's friend who'd been captured, then killed by Lilith. Then turned, and sent back as a vampire.

"I won't be easy on you," Blair promised.

By the time she'd finished a session with the weights and grabbed a quick shower, Blair had worked up that appetite. She decided to go for one of her favorites, and dug up the makings for French toast.

She tossed some Irish bacon into a skillet for protein, selected Green Day on her MP3 player. Music to cook by.

She poured her second cup of coffee before breaking eggs in a bowl.

She was beating the batter when Larkin strolled in the door. He stopped, stared at her player. "And what is it?"

"It's a—" How to explain? "A way to whistle while you work."

"No, it's not the machine I'm meaning. There are so many of those, I can't keep them all in my brain. But what's the sound?"

"Oh. Um, popular music? Rock—of the hard variety."

He was grinning now, head cocked as he listened. "Rock. I like it."

"Who wouldn't? Not going for eggs, this morning. Doing up French toast."

"Toast?" Disappointment fell over his face, erasing the easy pleasure of the music. "Just cooked bread?"

"Not just. Besides, you get what you get when I'm manning the stove. Or you forage on your own."

"It's kind of you to cook, of course."

His tone was so long-suffering, she had to swallow a laugh. "Relax, and trust me on this. I've seen you chow down, cowboy. You're going to like it as much as Rock, especially after you drown it in butter and syrup. I'll have it going in a minute. Why don't you flip that bacon over?"

"I'm needing to wash first. Been mucking out the stall and such, and I'm not fit yet to touch anything."

She lifted a brow as he strolled right out. She'd seen him slip out of all manner of kitchen duties already. And she had to admit, he was slick about it.

Resigned, she turned the bacon herself, then heated a second skillet. She was about to dunk the first piece of bread when she heard voices. The newlyweds were up, she realized, and added to the batter to accommodate them.

Effortless style. It was something Glenna had in spades, Blair thought. She wandered in wearing a sage green sweater and black jeans with her bold red hair swinging straight and loose. The urban take on country casual, Blair supposed. When you added the pretty flush of a woman who'd obviously had her morning snuggles, you had quite a package.

She didn't look like a woman who would rush a squad of vampires while she bellowed war cries and swung a battle-ax, but she'd done just that.

"Mmm, French toast? You must have read my mind." As she moved to the coffeepot, Glenna gave Blair's arm an absent stroke. "Give you a hand?"

"No, I got this. You've been taking the lion's share of KP, and I'm better at breakfast than dinner. Didn't I hear Hoyt?"

"Right behind me. He's talking to Larkin about the horse. I think Hoyt's a little put out he didn't get to Vlad before Larkin did. Coffee's good. How'd you sleep?"

"Like I'd been knocked unconscious, for a couple hours." Blair dipped bread, then laid it to sizzle. "Then, I don't know, too restless. Wired up." She slanted Glenna a look. "And nowhere to put the excess energy, like the bride."

"I have to admit, I'm feeling pretty loose and relaxed this morning. Except." Wincing a little, Glenna massaged her right biceps. "My arms feel like I spent half the night swinging a sledgehammer."

"Battle-ax has weight. You did good work with it."

"*Work* isn't the word that comes to mind. But I'm not going to think about it—at least not until I've gorged myself." Turning, Glenna opened a cupboard for plates. "Do you know how often I had a breakfast like this—fried bread, fried meat—before all this started?"

"Nope."

"Never. Absolutely never," she added with a half laugh. "I watched my weight as if the, well, as if the fate of the world depended on it."

"You're training hard." Blair flipped the bread. "You need the fuel, the carbs. If you put on a few pounds, I can guarantee it's going to be pure muscle."

"Blair." Glenna glanced toward the doorway to ensure Hoyt hadn't started in yet. "You've got more experience with this than any of us. Just between you and me, for now, anyway, how did we do last night?"

"We lived," Blair said flatly. She continued to cook, sliding fried bread onto a plate, dunking more. "That's bottom line."

"But—"

"Glenna, I'll tell you straight." Blair turned, leaning back on the counter for a moment while bread sizzled and scented the air. "I've never been in anything like that before."

"But you've been doing this—hunting them—for years."

"That's right. And I've never seen so many of them in one place at one time, never seen them organized that way."

Glenna let out a quiet breath. "That can't be good news."

"Good or bad, it's fact. It's not—never been in my experience—the nature of the beast to live, work, fight in large groups. I contacted my aunt, and she says the same. They're killers, and they might travel, hunt, even live together in packs. Small packs, and there might be an alpha, male or female. But not like this."

"Not like an army," Glenna murmured.

"No. And what we saw last night was a squad—a small slice of an army. The thing is, they're willing to die for her, for Lilith. And that's powerful stuff."

"Okay. Okay," Glenna said as she set the table. "That's what I get for saying I wanted it straight."

"Hey, buck up. We lived, remember? That's a victory."

"Good morning to you," Hoyt said to Blair as he came in. Then his gaze went straight to Glenna.

They shared coloring, Blair thought, she and her however-many-times great-uncle. She, the sorcerer and his twin brother, the vampire, shared coloring, and ancestry, and now this mission, she supposed.

Fate was certainly a twisty bastard.

"You two sure have the glow on," she said when Glenna lifted her face to meet Hoyt's lips. "Practically need my shades."

"They shield the eyes from the sun, and are a sexy fashion statement," Hoyt returned and made her laugh.

"Have a seat." She turned off the music, then brought the heaping platter to the table. "I made enough for an army, seeing as that's what we are."

"It looks a fine feast. Thank you."

"Just doing my share, unlike some of us who're a little more slippery." She met Larkin's perfectly timed appearance with a shake of her head. "Right on time."

His expression was both innocent and affable. "Is it

ready then? It took me a bit longer to get back as I stopped to tell Moira there was food being cooked. And a welcome sight it is.”

“You look, you eat.” Blair slapped four slices of French toast on a plate for him. “And you and your cousin do the dishes.”

## Chapter 2



Maybe it was the post-battle itches, but Blair couldn't settle. After another session with Glenna, everyone's injuries were well on the mend, so they could train. They *should* train, she told herself. Maybe the sweat and effort would work off the restlessness.

But she had another idea.

"I think we should go out."

"Out?" Glenna checked her chart of household duties and noted—God help them—Hoyt was next up on laundry detail. "Are we low on something?"

"I don't know." Blair scanned the charts posted prominently on the refrigerator. "You seem to have the supply and duty lists under control—Quartermaster Ward."

"Mmm, Quartermaster." Glenna sent Blair a twinkling look. "I like it. Can I get a badge?"

"I'll see what I can do. But when I say we should go out, I'm thinking more a little scouting expedition than a supply run. We should go check out Lilith's base of operations."



"Now there's a fine idea." Larkin turned from the sink, where soap dripped from his hands, and he was not at all happy. "Give her a bit of a surprise for a change."

"Attack Lilith?" Moira stopped loading the dishwasher. "Today?"

"I didn't say attack. Throttle back," Blair advised Larkin. "We're outnumbered by a long shot, and I don't think the locals would understand a bloodbath in broad daylight. But the daylight's the key here."

"Go south to Chiarrai," Hoyt said quietly. "To the cliffs and caves, while we have the sun."

"There you go. They can't come out. Nothing they can do about us poking around, taking a look. And it'd be a nice follow-up to routing them last night."

"Psychological warfare." Glenna nodded. "Yes, I see."

"That," Blair agreed, "and maybe we gather some intel. We see what we see, we map out various routes going and coming. And we make a point of letting her know we're there. Or were there."

"If we could lure some of them out. Or go in just far enough to give them some trouble. Fire," Larkin said. "There should be a way to set a fire in the caves."

"Not altogether a bad idea." Blair thought it over. "Bitch could use a good spanking. We'll go prepared for that, and armed. But we go quiet and careful. We don't want some tourist or local calling the cops—then having to explain why we've got a van loaded with weapons."

"Leave the fire to me and to Glenna." Hoyt pushed to his feet.

"Why?"

In answer, Glenna held out her hand. A ball of flame shimmered in her cupped palm.

"Pretty," Blair decided.

"And Cian?" Moira continued to deal with the dishes. "He wouldn't be able to leave the house."

"Then he stays back," Blair said flatly. "Larkin, if you're done there, let's go load up some weapons."

"We have some things in the tower that might be useful." Glenna brushed her fingers over Hoyt's arm. "Hoyt?"

"We can't just leave him without letting him know what we're about."

"You want to wake up a vampire this time of day?" Blair shrugged. "Okay. You go first."

Cian didn't care to be disturbed during his rest time. He figured a closed and locked bedroom door would be a clear signal to anyone that he wanted his privacy. But such things never seemed to stop his brother. So he sat now, awake in the dim light, and listened to the plan for the day.

"So, if I have this right, you woke me to tell me you're going out, down to Kerry to poke at the caves?"

"We didn't want you to wake, find us all gone."

"My fondest dream." Cian waved that lazily away. "Apparently, the good, bloody fight last night isn't enough for the hunter."

"It's good strategy, going there."

"Didn't work out so very well, did it, the last time we went there?"

Hoyt said nothing for a moment, thinking of King, and the loss of him.

"Nor, for you or me, the time before that," Cian added. "You ended up barely able to walk away, and I took a fucking header off a cliff. Not one of my happiest memories."

"Those times were different altogether, and you know it. It's daylight now, and this time she won't know we're coming. And being it's daylight, you'll have to stay behind."

"If you think I'll sulk about that, you'd be wrong. I've plenty to keep me busy. Calls and e-mails, which I've largely neglected these past weeks. I still have businesses that need my attention, which might as well be tended to since you've pulled me out of bed in the middle of the damn day. Let me add it'll be a pure pleasure to have five

noisy humans out of the house a few hours, that I can promise you."

He rose, walked to his desk and wrote something on a notepad. "Since you'll be out and about, I'll need you to go here. There's a butcher in Ennis. He'll sell you blood. Pigs' blood," Cian said with a bland smile as he handed his brother the address. "I'll ring him up, so he knows someone's coming. Payment's not a problem as I have an account."

His brother's writing hand had changed over all this time, Hoyt noted. So much had changed. "Doesn't he wonder why . . ."

"If he does, he's wise enough not to ask. And he's no doubt pleased to pocket the extra euros. That's the coin here now."

"Aye, Glenna explained it to me. We'll be back before sunset."

"Better hope you are," Cian warned when Hoyt left him.

Outside, Blair tossed a dozen stakes in a plastic bucket. Swords, axes, scythes were already on board. All of the fiery variety. It was going to be interesting explaining things if they got stopped, but she didn't scout out a vampire nest without going fully loaded.

"Who wants the wheel?" she asked Glenna.

"I know the way."

Blair checked the need to take control, climbed in the back, took the seat behind Glenna as the others joined her. "So, Hoyt, have you ever been in the caves? I don't figure that kind of thing changes much in a few hundred years."

"Many times. But they're different now."

"We've been in them," Glenna explained. "Magically. Hoyt and I did a spell before we left New York. It was intense."

"Fill me in."

Blair listened, one part of her brain marking the route, landmarks, traffic patterns.

In any part, she saw what Glenna described. A labyrinth of tunnels, chambers blocked with thick doors, bodies stacked like so much garbage. People in cages like penned cattle. And the sounds of it—Blair could hear that in the back of her mind—the weeping, the screaming, the praying.

“Luxury vamp condo,” she murmured. “How many ways in?”

“I couldn’t say. In my time the cliffs were riddled with caves. Some small, barely big enough for a child to crawl through, others big enough for a man to stand. There were more tunnels, wider, taller than I remember.”

“So, she excavated. She’s had plenty of time to make it all homey.”

“If we could block them off,” Larkin began, and Moira turned to him in horror.

“There are people inside. People held in cages like animals. Bodies tossed aside without even the decency of burial.”

He covered her hand with his and said nothing.

“We can’t get them out. That’s what he’s not saying to you.” But it had to be said, Blair thought. “Even if a couple of us wanted to try a suicide run, that’s just what it would be. We’d die, they’d die. A rescue isn’t an option. I’m sorry.”

“A spell,” Moira insisted. “Something to blind or bind, just until we free those who’ve been captured.”

“We tried to blind her.” Glenna flicked a glance in the rearview to meet Moira’s eyes. “We failed. Maybe a transportation spell.” She looked at Hoyt now. “Would it be possible for us to transport humans?”

“I’ve never done it. The risks . . .”

“They’ll die in there. Many have already.” Moira scooted up in her seat to grip Hoyt’s shoulder. “What greater risk is there than death?”

“We could harm them. To use magicks that may harm—”

“You could save them. What choice do you think they would take? What choice would you?”

"She's got a point." If they could do it, Blair thought, if they could save even one, it would be worth it. And it would be a good hard kick in Lilith's ass. "Is there a chance?"

"You need to see what you move from one place to another," Hoyt explained. "And it's more successful if you're close to the object. This would be through rock, and we'd be all but blinded."

"Not necessarily," Glenna countered. "Let's think about this, let's talk it through."

While they talked—argued, discussed—Blair let it all stew around in the back of her mind. Pretty day, she thought absently. The sun shining on all that green. The lovely, long roll of land with cows grazing lazily. Tourists would be out, taking advantage of the weather after yesterday's storm. Shopping in the towns, or driving out to gawk at the Cliffs of Mohr, getting their snapshots and videos of the dolmen in The Burren.

She'd done the same thing herself, once upon a time.

"So, does Geall look anything like this?"

"Quite a bit really," Larkin told her. "It's very like home, except, well, the roads, the cars, most of the buildings. But the land itself, aye, it is. It's very like home."

"What do you do back there?"

"About what, exactly?"

"Well, a guy's got to make a living, right?"

"Oh. We work the land, of course. And we've horses, for breeding, selling. Fine horses. I've left my father short-handed. He may not be too pleased with me right at the moment."

"Odds are he'll understand if you end up saving the world." She should have known he worked with his hands, Blair realized. They were strong and hard, and he had the look, she supposed, of a man who spent the bulk of his time outdoors. All those sun-streaks in his hair, the light golden haze on his skin.

Whoa, settle down, hormones. He was just another member of the team she'd been pulled into. It was smart to learn

all you could about who was fighting beside you. And stupid to let yourself get little tingles of lust over them.

“So you’re a farmer.”

“At the bottom of it.”

“How does a farmer know how to use a sword the way you do?”

“Ah.” He swiveled around to face her more directly. For a moment, just a short moment, he lost his trend. Her eyes were so deep and blue. “Sure we have tournaments. Games? I like to play in them. I like to win.”

She could see that as well, though it was probably more Hollywood than Geallian. “Yeah, me, too. I like to win.”

“So then, do you play games?”

There was a teasing, playfully sexy undercurrent in the question. She’d have had to have been brain-dead to miss it. Brain-dead for a month, she decided, not to feel the little buzz.

“Not so much, but I win when I do.”

He draped an arm over the back of her seat in a casual move. “In some games, both sides are the winner.”

“Maybe. Mostly when I fight, I’m not playing around.”

“Play balances out the fighting, don’t you think? And our tournaments, well, they’ll have served as a kind of preparation for what’s to come. There are many men in Geall, and some women besides, who have a good hand with a sword or a lance. If the war goes there, as we’re told it will, we’ll have an army to meet these things.”

“We’ll need it.”

“What do you do? Glenna says that women must work for a living here. Or that most do. Are you paid in coin to hunt demons?”

“No.” He wasn’t touching her, and she couldn’t say he was putting moves on her. But she felt as if he were. “It’s not the way it works. There’s some family money. I mean we’re not rolling in it or anything, but there’s a cushion. We own pubs. Chicago, New York, Boston. Like that.”

“Pubs, is it? I like a good pub.”

"Who doesn't? Anyway, I do some waitressing. And some personal training."

His brows knit. "Training? For battle?"

"Not really. It's more for health and vanity. Ah, helping people get in shape, lose weight, tone up. I don't need a lot of money, so it works out okay. Gives me some room, too, to take off when I need to."

She glanced over. Moira was staring out the side window like a woman in a dream. In the front, Hoyt and Glenna continued to talk magic. Blair leaned closer to Larkin, lowered her voice.

"Look, maybe our magical lovebirds can pull this transportation bit off, maybe not. If they can't, you're going to have to handle your cousin."

"I don't handle Moira."

"Sure you do. If we've got a shot at executing a little cave-in, or firing up those caves, we have to take it."

Their faces were close now, their voices down to whispers. "And the people inside? We burn them alive, or bury them the same way? She won't accept it. Neither can I."

"Do you know what torment they're in now?"

"It's not of our doing."

"Caged and tortured." She kept her eyes on his, and her voice was low and empty. "Forced to watch when one of them's dragged out of the cage, and fed on. Terrified, or well beyond that while they wonder if they'll be next. Maybe hoping they will just so it ends."

There was no playfulness now, in his face, in his tone. "I know what they do."

"You think you know. Maybe they don't drain them, not the first time. Maybe not the second. They just toss them back in the cage. It burns, the bite. If you live through it, it burns. Flesh, blood, bone, a reminder of the impossible pain when those fangs sank into you."

"How do you know?"

She turned her wrist over, so he could see the faint scar. "I was eighteen, pissed off about something and careless.

In a cemetery up in Boston, waiting for one to rise. I went to school with the guy. Went to his funeral, and heard enough to know he'd been bitten. I had to find out if he'd been turned, so I went, and I waited."

"He did this?" Larkin traced a finger over the scar.

"He had help. No way a fresh one would've managed it. But the one who sired him came back. Older, smarter, stronger. I made some mistakes, and he didn't."

"Why were you alone?"

"Hunting alone is what I do," she reminded him. "But in this case, I was out to prove something to someone. Doesn't matter, except that it made me careless. He didn't bite me, the older one. He held me down while the other one crawled over toward me."

"Wait. Can you tell me, is that the way of it with a sire? To provide . . ."

"Food?"

"Aye, that would be the word for it, wouldn't it?"

It was a good question, she decided, good that he wanted to understand the psychology and pathology of the enemy. "Sometimes. Not always. Depends, I'd say, on why the sire chose to change instead of just drink. They can form attachments, or want a hunting partner. Even just want a younger one around to do the grunt work. You know, sort of work for them."

"I see that. So the sire held you down so the younger could feed first." And how terrifying, he thought, would that have been? To be restrained, probably injured. To be eighteen and alone, while something with a face you'd once known came for you.

"I could smell the grave on him, he was that fresh. He was too hungry to go for the throat, so he got me here. That was the mistake, for both of them. The pain woke me up. It's unspeakable."

She said nothing for a moment. It threw her off her stride, the way he laid his fingers on that scar now, as if to



ease an old wound. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had touched her to comfort.

"Anyway. I got a hand on my cross, and I jabbed it right into that bastard's eye, the one holding me down. Christ, did he scream. The other one's so busy trying to eat, he doesn't worry about anything else. He was an easy kill. They were both easy after that."

"You were just a girl."

"No. I was a demon hunter, and I was stupid." She looked Larkin in the eye now, so he would see that comfort, sympathy couldn't stand in front of sense and strategy. "If he'd gone for the throat, I'd be dead. Yeah, probably, I'd be dead and we wouldn't be having this conversation. I know what I felt when I saw that thing coming for me. In the good black suit his mother had picked out for him to be buried in. I know what those people inside those caves feel, at least I know a part of it. If they can't be saved, death's kinder than what's waiting for them."

He closed his hand over her wrist, completely covering the scar, surprising her with the gentleness of the touch. "Did you love the boy?"

"Yeah. Well, the way you do when you're that age." She'd almost forgotten that, nearly forgotten how sad she'd been, even through the pain. "All I could do for him was take him out, and take out the one who'd killed him."

"It cost you more than this." Larkin lifted her hand, brushed his lips over the scar. "More than the pain and the burn."

She'd nearly forgotten, too, she realized, what it was like to have someone understand. "Maybe it did, but it taught me something important. You can't save everyone."

"That's a sad lesson. Don't you think, even when you know you can't, you should try anyway?"

"That's amateur talk. This isn't a game or a contest. Somebody beats you in this, you die."

“Well, Cian’s not here to dispute the matter, but would you want to live forever?”

She let out a short laugh. “Hell, no.”

There were others along that lonely stretch of cliff and sea. But not as many as Blair had expected. The views were amazing, but she supposed there were others, equally dramatic, and more easily accessible.

They parked, and took what weapons and tools they could most easily conceal. Someone might spot her sword in its back sheath under the long leather coat, Blair decided. But they’d have to be looking. And then, what were they going to do about it?

She studied the lay of the land, the road, the other cars parked along it. A middle-aged couple had climbed to some of the tabletop rocks at the base of the cliff, where it now met the road. Looking out to sea—and completely oblivious to the nightmare that lived below.

“Okay, so it’s over the seawall and down. Gonna get wet,” she concluded, looking down at the narrow strip of shale, then the teeth of the rocks where the water swirled and plumed. She glanced back at the others. “Can you handle this?”

As an answer, Larkin rolled over the wall. She started to shout at him to wait, to wait one damn minute, but he was already heading down the jagged drop that faced the sea.

He didn’t change into a lizard, she observed, but he could sure as hell climb like one. She had to give him A’s for balls and agility.

“Okay, Moira. Take it slow. If you slip, your cousin should break your fall.” As Moira went over, Blair looked at Glenna.

“Never did any rock climbing,” Glenna muttered. “Never could figure out the damn point until now. So, I guess there’s always a first time.”

“You’ll be fine.” But Blair watched Moira’s progress,

and was relieved she was proving nearly as agile as her cousin. "The drop's not that bad from here. It won't kill you."

She didn't add that bones would be broken. She didn't have to. Hoyt and Glenna went over together, and Blair followed.

There were some reasonably good handholds, she discovered—as long as you weren't worried about your manicure. She concentrated on getting the job done, ignored the cold spray as she worked her way down.

Hands gripped her waist, lifted her down the last couple of feet. "Thanks," she told Larkin, "but I've got it."

"A bit awkward with the sword." He glanced up to the road, grinned. "Fun though."

"Let's keep the party moving. They probably have guards. Maybe some human servants—though it has to be tough keeping humans on tap if there's as many vampires in there as you said."

"I didn't see anyone alive outside of cages," Glenna told her, "not when we looked before."

"This time it's live and in person, so if they've got any, that's who they'll send out. Hoyt you'd better take point, since you know the area."

"It's different, you see it's different than it was." Some of what he was feeling leaked into his voice, the emotion and the sorrow. "Nature and man have done it. That road above us, and the wall, the tower with the light."

Looking up, over, he saw his cliffs, the ledge that had saved his life when he'd fought with what Cian had become. Once, he thought, he'd stood up there and called the lightning as easily as a man calls his hound.

It had changed, he couldn't deny it. But still, in the heart of it, it was his place. He made his way through the rocks, over them, through the spray. "There should be a cave here. And there's nothing but . . ."

He laid his hands on the earth and rock. "This is not real. This is false."

"Maybe you're a little turned around," Blair began.

"Wait." Glenna made her way over to him, put her hands next to his. "A barrier."

"Conjured," Hoyt agreed, "to look and feel like the land, but it isn't the land. This isn't earth and rock. It's illusion."

"Can you break it down?" Larkin thumped a fist against the rock, testing.

"Hold on." Frowning, Blair slicked back her damp hair. "She's got enough mojo for this, or has someone in there with enough, we don't know what else she has. This is smart." Blair tested the wall herself. "Really smart. Nobody gets in unless she wants them in. Nobody gets out unless she wants them out."

"So we just walk away?" Larkin demanded.

"I didn't say that."

"There are more openings, pockets in the wall. Were," Hoyt corrected. "This is a powerful spell."

"And nobody's curious—people who come here, live here—about what happened to them." Blair nodded. "That's powerful, too. She wants her privacy. We're going to have to disappoint her."

Hands on hips, she turned around, searching. "Hey, Hoyt, can you and Glenna carve a message into that big rock over there?"

"It can be done."

"What's the message?" Glenna asked her.

"Gotta think of one, since Up Yours, Bitch seems a little too ordinary."

"Tremble," Moira murmured, and Blair gave her a nod of approval.

"Excellent. Short, to the point, and just a little cocky. Take care of that, will you? Then we'll get started on the rest."

"What is the rest?" Larkin wanted to know. He gave the wall a frustrated kick. "A stronger message would be to break this spell."

"Yeah, it would, but right now I'm thinking she doesn't

know we're out here. That could be an advantage." She heard something like a small blast of gunpowder, and turned to see the word *Tremble* deeply carved into the rock. Below it was another carving, of what she assumed was Lilith. With a stake through her heart.

"Hey, nice job. I really like the artwork."

"A little flourish." Glenna dusted off her hands. "I paint, and I couldn't resist the dig."

"What do you need to try the transportation spell?"

Glenna blew out a breath. "Time, space, focus, and a hell of a lot of luck."

"Not from here." Hoyt shook his head. "The cliffs are mine. The caves are hers. However much time has passed, the cliffs are still mine. We'll work the spell from above." He turned to Glenna. "We have to see first. We can't transport what we can't see. It's likely she'll sense us, and do whatever she can to stop us."

"Maybe not right away. We won't be looking for her this time, but for people. She may not realize what we're doing, and give us the time we need. Hoyt's right, it's better done on the cliffs," Glenna told Blair. "If we can get anyone out, we wouldn't want to bring them out here in any case."

"Good point." Maybe they wouldn't get any solid intel out of this trip, Blair mused, but they might not walk away empty-handed. "So, what do we do with them if it works?"

"Get them to safety." Glenna lifted her hands. "One step at a time."

"I can try to help you. I haven't much magic," Moira added, "but I could try to help."

"Every little bit helps," Glenna said.

"Okay, the three of you go up. Larkin and I will stay here, in case . . . well, in case. Anything that comes out this way to give us trouble has to be human. We'll handle it."

"It could take a while," Glenna warned her.

Blair studied the sky. "Plenty of daylight left."

She waited until they'd started up before she spoke to Larkin. "We can't go in. If this magic deal opens up the

caves, we can't go in. I mean it." She punched his arm. "I can see what you're thinking."

"Oh, can you now?"

"Rush in, grab a maiden in distress or two, run out the hero."

"You're wrong about the hero end of it. That wouldn't be what I'm looking for. But now a pretty maiden in distress is hard for a man to resist."

"Resist it. You don't know the caves, you don't know where she's holding the prisoners, and you don't know their numbers or how they're equipped. Listen, I'm not saying a part of me wouldn't like to go charging in there if it opens up, do some damage, maybe save some lives. But we'd never make it out alive, and neither would anyone else."

"We have the swords Hoyt and Glenna charmed. The fire swords."

She struggled with frustration. It was so damn irritating to have to explain basic strategy. "And we'd take some vamps with us, no question. Then they'd have us and the swords."

"I know the sense of what you're saying, but it's hard to stand by and do nothing."

"If the magic team pulls this off, it won't be nothing. You're too good in a fight for us to lose you trying something that can't work."

"Oh, a compliment. Not many of those spill out of your lips." He grinned at her while drops of sea spray glinted in his hair. "I won't go in. I give you my word on it." He held out a hand for hers. When she took it, he gave it an easy squeeze. "But there wouldn't be anything stopping us from slapping some fire in the hole should this bloody rock open. It would be what you call making a statement, wouldn't it?"

"Guess it would. Just don't get cocky, Larkin."

"Sure I was born that way, I'm afraid. What's a man to do, after all?"

He turned to face the wall, and leaned back on one of

the wet rocks as the spume sprayed. And looked relaxed enough, Blair noted, that he might have been sitting in the parlor by the fire.

"Well, likely we've got some time on our hands just now. So, tell me, how did you first know you'd be a demon hunter?"

"You want the story of my life? Now?"

He moved his shoulders. "Might as well pass the time. And I'll admit to some curiosity about it. Before I left Geall, I wouldn't have believed any of this, not at the heart of it. And now, well . . ." He stared thoughtfully at the wall of rock and sod. "What's a man to do?" he repeated.

He had a point she decided. She moved over to join him, angling her body so that she could scan one sweep of the cliff face while he took the other. "I was four."

"Young. Young to have any understanding of matters that dark. That they're real, I'm saying, and not just the shadows a child imagines are monsters."

"Things are a little different in my family. I thought it would be my brother. I was jealous. I guess that's natural enough, the sibling rivalry." She slid her hands into the pockets of her coat, idly toying with the plastic bottle of holy water she'd shoved in there before they'd left. "He'd have been six—six and a half. My father'd been working with him. Simple tumbling, basic martial arts and weaponry. Lots of tension in the house back then. My parents' marriage was falling apart."

"How?"

"It happens." Maybe in his world the sky was rosy pink and love was forever. "People get dissatisfied, feelings change. Added to it my mother was sick of the life, the things that took my father away. She wanted normal, and it was her mistake she'd married someone who'd never give it to her. So she was busy picking fights with my father, and he was busy ignoring her and working with my brother."

Which would mean, Larkin thought, that no one was paying attention to her. Poor little lamb.

“So I was always after my father to train me, too, or trying to do some of the stuff my brother was doing.”

“My younger brother trailed after me like a shadow when we were children. This is the same in all worlds, I suppose.”

“Bug you? Bother you?” she amended.

“Oh, drove me mad some of the time. Others, I didn’t mind so much. If he was close by, it was easier to devil him. And others yet, well, it wasn’t so bad as company.”

“So pretty much the same as with me and my brother. Then this one day they were down in the training area—a space most people would have a family room.” But you had to have a family to rate a family room. “We had equipment—weights, a pommel horse, uneven bars, rings. One whole wall was mirrored.”

She could still see it, perfectly, and the way they’d reflected her father and her brother, so close together, while she’d been off to the side. And alone.

“I watched them in the mirrors; they didn’t know I was there. My father was giving Mick—my brother—a rash of grief because Mick just couldn’t get this move. Back flip,” she murmured, “dive, shoulder roll, throw the stake into the target. Mick just couldn’t get it, and my father was dead set he would. Finally, Mick got pissy himself, and he threw the stake across the room.”

It had almost brushed her fingers, she remembered. As if it had been meant for her hand.

“It rolled right to me. I knew I could do it. I just wanted to show my father I could do it. I just wanted him to look at me. So I did. I called his name: ‘Watch me, Daddy,’ and I did it, the way I’d watched him do it over and over trying to get Mick to understand the rhythm.”

She closed her eyes a moment because she could still see herself, still feel it in her. As if the world had stopped, and only she was in motion for those few seconds.

“Hit the heart. Mostly luck, but I hit the heart. I was so happy. Look what I did! Mick’s eyes just about fell out of



his head, then . . . there was this little smile in them—just a little. I didn't know what it meant then, I thought he'd just gotten a kick out what I did, because we mostly got along pretty well. My father didn't say anything, not for a few seconds—seemed like an hour—and I thought he was going to yell at me."

"For doing something well?"

"Getting in the way. And, not yell, really. He never raised his voice; that's all about control. I figured he was going to tell me to go back up with my mother. You know, dismiss me. But he didn't. He told Mick to go upstairs, and it was just him and me. Just me and my father, and he was finally looking at me."

"He must have been very proud, very pleased."

"Hell no." Her laugh was short and without any humor. "He was disappointed. That's what I saw when he finally looked at me. He was disappointed that it was me and not Mick. Now he was stuck with me."

"Surely he . . ." Larkin trailed off when she turned her head, met his eyes. "I'm sorry. Sorry his lack of vision hurt you."

"Can't change what you are." Another lesson she'd learned hard. "So he trained me, and Mick got to play baseball. That was the smile. Relief, joy. Mick, he'd never wanted what my father wanted for him. He's got more of my mother in him. When she left, filed for divorce, I mean, she took Mick, and I stayed with my father. I got what I wanted, more or less."

She stiffened when Larkin put an arm around her shoulders, but when she would have shifted away he tightened his grip in the comfort of a one-armed hug. "I don't know your father or your brother, but I do know I'd rather be here with you than either of them. You fight like an avenging angel. And you smell good."

He surprised a laugh out of her, a genuine laugh, and with it, she relaxed against the wet rock, with his arm around her shoulders.