

Prologue



There were pictures in the fire. Dragons and demons and warriors. The children would see them, as he did. The old man knew the very young and the very old often saw what others could not. Or would not.

He had told them much already. His tale had begun with the sorcerer who was called by the goddess Morrigan. Hoyt of the Mac Cionaoith was charged by the gods to travel to other worlds, to other times, and gather an army to stand strong against the vampire queen. The great battle between human and demon would take place on the sabbot of Samhain, in the Valley of Silence, in the land of Geall.

He had told them of Hoyt the sorcerer's brother, killed and changed by the wily Lilith, who had existed near a thousand years as a vampire before making Cian one of her kind. Nearly another thousand years would pass for Cian before he would join Hoyt and the witch Glenna to make those first links in the circle of six. The next links were forged by two Geallians—the shifter of shapes and the scholar who traveled between worlds to gather in those first days. And the

last of the circle was joined by the warrior, a demon hunter of the Mac Cionaoith blood.

The tales he had told them were of battles and courage, of death and friendship. And of love. The love that had bloomed between sorcerer and witch, and between the shifter and the warrior, had strengthened the circle as true magic must.

But there was more to tell. Triumphs and loss, fear and valor, love and sacrifice—and all that came with the dark and the light.

As the children waited for more, he wondered how best to begin the end of the tale.

“There were six,” he said, still watching the fire while the children’s whispers silenced and their squirming stilled in anticipation. “And each had the choice to accept or refuse. For even when worlds are held in your hands, you must choose to face what would destroy them, or to turn away. And with this choice,” he continued, “there are many other choices to be made.”

“They were brave and true,” one of the children called out. “They chose to fight!”

The old man smiled a little. “And so they did. But still, every day, every night of the time they were given, that choice remained, and had to be made anew. One among them, you remember, was no longer human, but vampire. Every day, every night of the time they were given, he was reminded he was no longer human. He was but a shadow in the worlds he had chosen to protect.

“And so,” the old man said, “the vampire dreamed.”

Chapter 1



He dreamed. And dreaming, he was still a man. Young, perhaps foolish, undoubtedly rash. But then, what he believed was a woman had such beauty, such allure.

She wore a fine gown in a deep shade of red, more elegant than the country pub deserved, with its long, sweeping sleeves. Like a good claret it poured over her form to set her pure white skin glowing. Her hair was gold, the curls of it glinting against her headdress.

The gown, her bearing, the jewels that were sparkling at her throat, on her fingers, told him she was a lady of some means and fashion.

He thought, in the dim light of the public house, she was like a flame that burned at shadows.

Two servants had arranged for a private room for her to sup before she swept in, and simply by being had silenced the talk and the music. But her eyes, blue as a summer sky, had met his. Only his.

When one of the servants had come out again, walked to him and announced that the lady requested he dine with her, he hadn't hesitated.

Why would he?

He might have grinned at the good-natured comments of the men he was drinking with, but he left them without a thought.

She stood in firelight and candlelight, already pouring wine into cups.

"I'm so glad," she said, "you would agree to join me. I hate to dine alone, don't you?" She came toward him, her movements so graceful she almost seemed to float. "I'm called Lilith." And she handed him wine.

In her speech there was something exotic, some cadence of speech that hinted of hot sand and riotous blooming vines. So he was already half seduced, and completely enchanted.

They shared the simple meal, though he had no appetite for food. It was her words he devoured. She spoke of the lands to which she had traveled, those which he'd only read of. She had walked among the pyramids, she told him, in the moonlight, had ridden the hills of Rome and stood in the ruined temples of Greece.

He had never traveled beyond Ireland, and her words, the images they invoked, were nearly as exciting as she herself.

He thought she was young to have done so much, but when he said as much she only smiled over the rim of her cup.

"What good are worlds," she asked, "if you don't make use of them? I'll make use of much more. Wine to be drunk, food to be tasted, lands to be explored. You're young," she said with a slow and knowing smile, "to settle for so little. Have you no wish to see beyond what you've seen?"

"I thought perhaps to take a year when I'm able, to see more of the world."

"A year?" With a light laugh, she snapped her fingers. "That is a year. Nothing, a blink of time. What would you do if you had an eternity of time?" Her eyes seemed like depthless blue seas as she leaned toward him. "What would you do with it?"

Without waiting for his answer, she rose, leaving the trail of her scent behind as she walked to the small window. "Ah, the night, it's so soft. Like silk against the skin." She turned back with a gleam in those bold blue eyes. "I am a night creature. And so, I think, are you. We, such as we, are at our best in the dark."

He had risen when she did, and now as she came back to him, her scent and the wine swam through his senses. And something more, something thick and smoky that hazed over his mind like a drug.

She tipped her head up, and back, then laid her mouth over his. "And why, when we're best in the dark, would we spend the dark hours alone?"

And in the dream, it was like a dream, misty and muddled. He was in her carriage, with her full white breasts in his hands, her mouth hot and avid on his. She laughed when he fumbled with her kirtle, and spread her legs in seductive invitation.

"Strong hands," she murmured. "A pleasing face. It's what I need, and need, and take. Will you do my bidding?" With another light laugh, she nipped at his ear. "Will you? Will you, young, handsome Cian with the strong hands?"

"Aye, of course. Aye." He could think of nothing but burying himself in her. When he did, with the carriage swaying madly, her head fell back in abandon.

"Yes, yes, yes! So hard, so hot. Give me more, and more! And I'll take you beyond all that you know."

As he plunged, his breath coming short as he neared climax, her head reared up again.

Her eyes were no longer blue and bold but red and feral. The shock that rushed into him had him trying to pull back, but her arms suddenly wrapped around him, implacable as iron chains. Her legs hooked around his waist, keeping him inside her, trapped. While he struggled against her impossible strength, she smiled with fangs gleaming in the dark.

"What are you?" There were no prayers in his head; fear left no room for them. "What are you?"

Her hips continued to rise and fall, riding him, so he

was helplessly driven closer to peak. She fisted a hand in his hair, yanking back his head to expose his throat. "Magnificent," she said. "I am magnificent, and so will you be."

She struck, the fangs piercing his flesh. He heard his own scream, somewhere in the madness and pain he heard it. The burn was unspeakable, searing through skin, into blood, beyond the bone. And mixed with it, sliding through it was a terrible, terrible pleasure.

He came, in the whirling, singing dark, betrayed by his body even as it dipped toward death. He struggled still, some part of him clawing for the light, for survival. But the pain, the pleasure dragged him deeper into the abyss.

"You and I, my handsome boy. You and I." She dipped back, cradling him in her arms now. With her own fingernail, she sliced a shallow slice across her breast so that blood dripped from it as it did, horribly, from her lips. "Now drink. Drink me, and you are forever."

No. His lips wouldn't form the word, but it screamed through his mind. Feeling his life slipping away, he struggled weakly for that last hold on it. Even when she pulled his head to her breast he fought her with what was left of him.

Then he tasted it, the rich and heady flavor that flowed from her. The bulging life of it. And like a babe at its mother's breast, he drank his own death.

The vampire woke in absolute dark, in absolute silence. Such was the way for him since the change so long ago, that he roused each sunset with not even the sound of his own heartbeat to stir the air.

Though he had dreamed the dream countless times over countless years, it disturbed him to fall from that edge yet again. To see himself as he'd been, to see his own face—one he'd not seen while awake since that night—made him edgy and annoyed.

He didn't brood over his fate. That was a useless occupation. He accepted and used what he was, and had through

his personal eternity accumulated wealth, women, comfort, freedom. What else could a man want?

Having no heartbeat was a small price to pay, in the larger scheme of things. A heart that beat aged and weakened, and eventually stopped like a broken clock in any case.

How many bodies had he seen decay and die over his nine hundred years? He couldn't count them. And while he couldn't see the reflection of his own face, he knew it was the same as the night Lilith had taken him. The bones were still strong, the skin over them firm, supple and unlined. His eyes were sharp of sight and unfaded. There was not, and would never be, any gray in his hair, any sagging in his jowls.

Perhaps there were times, in the dark, in private, when he used his fingers to see his own face. There the high, prominent cheekbones, the shallow cleft in the chin, the deep-set eyes he knew were a strong blue. The blade of his nose, the firm curve of his lips.

The same. Always the same. But still, a small indulgence to spend a moment reminding himself.

He rose in the dark, his leanly muscled body naked, shook back the black hair that framed his face. He'd been born Cian Mac Cionaoith, and had gone by many names since. He was back to Cian—his brother's doing. Hoyt would call him nothing else, and since this war he'd agreed to fight might end him, Cian decided it was only right he should wear the name of his birth.

He'd prefer not to be ended. In his opinion, only the mad or the very young considered dying an adventure. But if that was his fate, at this time and place, at least he'd go out with style. And if there were any justice in any world, he would take Lilith with him to dust.

His eyes were as keen as his other senses, so he moved easily in the dark, going to a chest for one of the packets of blood that had been transported from Ireland. Apparently, the gods had deemed to allow the blood, as well as the vampire who required it, to travel through worlds from their circle of stones.

Then again, it was pigs' blood. Cian hadn't fed on humans in centuries. A personal choice, he mused as he broke open the packet, poured its contents into a cup. A matter of will, he thought, and well, manners, come to that. He lived among them, did business with them, slept with them when he was in the mood. It seemed rude to feed off them.

In any case, he'd found it simpler to live as he liked, to stay off the radar, if he didn't kill some hapless soul on a nightly basis. Live feeding added both thrill and flavor nothing else matched, but it was, by nature, a messy business.

He'd grown accustomed to the more banal flavor of pigs' blood, and the simple convenience of having it at his fingertips rather than having to go out and hunt something up every time hunger stirred in him.

He drank the blood as a man might his morning coffee—out of habit and the need for a kick on waking. It cleared his mind, jump-started his system.

He troubled neither with candles nor fire as he washed. He couldn't say he was overly pleased with the accommodations of Geall. Castle or not, he imagined he was as out of place in this medieval atmosphere as both Glenna and Blair.

He'd lived through this sort of era once, and once was enough for anyone. He preferred—much preferred—the daily conveniences of indoor plumbing, electricity, Chinese bloody take-out, come to that.

He missed his car, his bed, the damn microwave. He missed the life and sounds of city life and all it offered. Fate would have given him a solid kick in the ass if it ended him here, in the era, if not the world, of his beginnings.

Dressed, he left his room to make his way to the stables, and his horse.

There were people about—servants, guards, courtiers—those who lived and worked within the Castle Geall. Most avoided him, averting their eyes, quickening their pace.

Some made the sign against evil behind their backs. It didn't trouble him.

They knew what he was—and had seen what creatures like him were capable of since Moira, the scholarly gladiator, had battled one in the playing field.

It had been good strategy, he thought now, for Moira to ask him along with Blair and Larkin to hunt down the two vampires who'd killed her mother, the queen. Moira had understood the importance, the value of having vampires brought back alive so the people could see them for what they were. And see Moira herself fight and end one, proving herself a warrior.

She would, in a matter of weeks, lead her people to war. When a land had been at peace as long as Geall was reputed to have been, it would take a strong leader, a forceful one, to whip farmers and merchants, ladies-in-waiting and creaky advisors into soldiers.

He wasn't sure she was up to the task. Brave enough, he mused as he slipped out of the castle, crossed a courtyard toward the stables. More than bright enough. And it was true she'd honed considerable fighting skills over the past two months. No doubt she'd been trained since birth in matters of state and protocol, and her mind was clever and open.

In peace, he imagined she'd rule her pretty little world quite well. But in wartime, a ruler was general as well as figurehead.

If it had been up to him, he would have left Riddock, her uncle, in charge. But little of this business was up to him.

He heard her before he saw her, and scented her before that. Cian very nearly turned around to go back the way he'd come. It was just another annoyance to come across the woman when he'd been thinking of her.

The problem was, he thought of her entirely too often.

Avoiding her wasn't an option as they were inexorably bound together in this war. Slipping away now unseen was easily done. And cowardly. Pride, as always, refused to let him take the easy way.

They'd housed his stallion at the far end of the stables, two stalls away from any of the other horses. He understood and tolerated the fact that the grooms and farriers were wary of tending to the horse of a demon. Just as he was aware either Larkin or Hoyt groomed and fed his temperamental Vlad in the mornings.

Now it seemed Moira had taken it upon herself to spoil the animal. She had carrots, Cian saw, and was balancing one on her shoulder, cajoling Vlad to nip it off.

"You know you want it," she murmured. "It's so tasty. All you have to do is take it."

He'd thought the same about the woman, Cian mused.

She was gowned, her dress draped over a plain linen kirtle, so he assumed whatever training she'd done that day was complete. Still, she dressed simply for a princess, in quiet blue with only a hint of lace at the bodice. She wore the silver cross, one of nine Hoyt and Glenna had conjured. Her hair was loose, all that glossy brown falling down her back to her waist, and crowned with the thin circlet of her office.

She wasn't beautiful. He reminded himself of that often, nearly as often as he thought of her. She was, at best, a pretty thing. Slender and small-framed, small of feature as well. But for the eyes. They were long and dominant in that face of hers. Dove gray when she was quiet, pensive, listening. Hell smoke when she was roused.

He'd had his choice of great beauties in his time—as a man with any sense and skill would given a few centuries. She wasn't beautiful, but he couldn't, for all the effort, lock her out of his mind.

He knew he could have her if he put any of that effort into a seduction. She was young and innocent and curious, and therefore, very susceptible. Which was why, above all else, he knew he'd be better off seducing one of her ladies if he wanted the entertainment, the companionship, the release.

He'd had his fill of innocence long ago, just as he'd had his fill of human blood.

His horse, however, appeared to have less willpower. It took only moments before Vlad dipped his head and nipped the carrot from Moira's shoulder.

She laughed, stroked the stallion's ears as he chomped. "There now, that wasn't so hard, was it? We're friends, you and I. And I know you get lonely from time to time. Don't we all?"

She was lifting another carrot when Cian stepped out of the shadows. "You'll make a puppy out of him, then what sort of war horse will he be come Samhain?"

Her body jerked, then stiffened. But when she turned toward Cian, her face was composed. "Sure you don't really mind, do you? He so enjoys a bit of a treat now and then."

"Don't we all," he murmured.

Only the faintest flush of heat along her cheekbones betrayed any embarrassment at being overheard. "The training went well today. People are coming in from all over Geall. So many willing to fight we've decided we'll be setting up a second training area on my uncle's land. We'll have Tynan and Niall working there."

"Lodging?"

"Aye, that's becoming a bit of a thing. We'll house as many here as we can manage, and at my uncle's as well. There's the inn, and many of the farmers and crofters nearby are sheltering family and friends already. No one will be turned off. We'll find a way."

She fiddled with her cross as she spoke. Not, Cian thought, out of fear of him, but out of nervous habit. "There's food as well to think of. So many had to leave their crops and cattle behind to come here. But we'll manage. Have you eaten?"

She flushed a little deeper as soon as the words were out. "What I meant is there'd be supper in the parlor if—"

"I know what you meant. No. I thought to see to the horse first, but he appears well groomed and fed." On the heels of the words, Vlad bumped his head against Moira's shoulder. "And spoiled," Cian added.

Her brows drew together as they did, he knew, when she

was annoyed or thoughtful. "It's only carrots, and they're good for him."

"Speaking of food, I'll need blood in another week. You might make certain the next pigs that are slaughtered, their blood isn't wasted."

"Of course."

"Aren't you the cool one?"

Now the faintest sign of irritation crossed her face. "You take what you need from the pig. I'm not after turning my nose up at a slab of bacon, am I?" She shoved the last carrot into Cian's hand and started to sweep out.

She stopped herself, "I don't know why you fire me up so easily. If you mean to or not. And no." She held up a hand. "I don't think I want to know the answer to that. But I would like to speak to you for a moment or two about another matter."

No, avoiding her wasn't possible, he reminded himself. "I have a moment or two."

She glanced around the stables. It wasn't only horses that had ears in such places. "I wonder if you could take that moment or two to walk with me. I'd be private on this."

He shrugged, and giving Vlad the last carrot joined Moira to walk out of the stables. "State secrets, Your Highness?"

"Why must you mock me?"

"Actually, I wasn't. Irritable tonight, are you?"

"It might be I am." She shoved back the hair that spilled over her shoulder. "What with war and end of days, and the practical matters of washing linens and providing food for an army meanwhile, it might be I am a bit irritable."

"Delegate."

"I am. I do. But it still takes time and thought to push chores into other hands—finding the right ones, explaining how it must be done. And this isn't what I wanted to speak to you about."

"Sit."

"What?"

"Sit." He took her arm, ignoring the way the muscles tensed against his hand, and pulled her down onto a bench.

“Sit, give your feet a rest if you won’t turn off that busy brain of yours for five minutes.”

“I can’t remember the last time I had an hour, all to myself and a book. Well, I can, actually. Back in Ireland, in your house. I miss it—the books, the quiet of them.”

“You need to take it, that hour now and again. You’ll burn out otherwise, and won’t be any good to yourself or anyone else.”

“My hands feel so full, they make my arms ache.” She looked down at them where they lay in her lap, and sighed. “And there, I’m off again. What is it Blair says? Bitch, bitch, bitch.”

She surprised a laugh out of him, and turned her head to smile into his face.

“I suspect Geall has never had a queen such as you.”

And her smile faded away. “No, you’ve the right of that. And we’ll soon see. We go tomorrow, at first light, to the stone.”

“I see.”

“If I lift the sword from it, as my mother did in her time, and her father in his, and back to the first, Geall will have a queen such as me.” She looked off, over the shrubberies toward the gates. “Geall will have no choice in it. Nor will I.”

“Do you wish it otherwise?”

“I don’t know what I wish, so I don’t wish at all—except that it was done and over. Then I could do, well, whatever needs to be done next. I wanted to tell you.” She shifted her gaze from whatever she saw in her mind, and met his eyes again. “I’d hoped we’d find a way to do this thing at night.”

Soft eyes, he thought, and so serious. “It’s too dangerous to have any sort of ceremony outside after sunset beyond the castle walls.”

“I know it. All who wish to witness this rite may attend. You can’t, I know. I’m sorry for it. It feels wrong. I feel the six of us, our circle, should be together at such a time.”

Her hand reached up for her cross again. “Geall isn’t yours, I know that as well, but the moment of this, it’s

important for what comes after. More than I knew before. More than I could have known."

She took a shaky breath. "They killed my father."

"What are you saying?"

"I have to walk again. I can't sit." She got up quickly, rubbing her arms to warm them from the sudden chill in the air, and in her blood. She moved through the courtyard into one of the gardens.

"I haven't told anyone—I didn't mean to tell you. What purpose does it serve? And I've no proof, just a knowing."

"What do you know?"

Easier than she'd believed it would be to talk to him, to tell him, she realized, because he was also so to the point. "One of the two that killed my mother, that you brought here. The one I fought." She held a hand up, and he watched her draw in her composure again. "Before I killed it, he said something of my father, and how he died."

"Likely trying to get a rise out of you, break your concentration."

"It did that well enough, but was more, you see. I know it, inside me." Looking at him, she pressed a hand to her heart. "I knew it when I looked at the one I killed. Not just my mother, but my father as well. I think Lilith sent them here this time because she'd had success with it before. When I was a child."

She continued to walk, her head bowed with the weight of her thoughts, her circlet glinting in the light of the torches. "They thought it was a bear gone mad. He was in the mountains, hunting. He was killed, he and my mother's young brother. My uncle Riddock didn't go as my aunt was close to her time with child. I . . ."

She broke off again as footsteps echoed, keeping her silence until the sound of them drifted away. "They thought, those who found them and brought them home, they thought it was animals. And so it was," she continued with steel in her tone now. "But these walk like a man. She sent them to kill him, so there would be no child but me."

She turned to him then, the torchlight washing red over

her pale face. “Perhaps, at that time, she knew only the ruler of Geall would be one of the circle. Or perhaps it was easier to kill him than me at that time, as I was hardly more than a baby and kept close watch on. Plenty of time for her to send assassins back for me. But instead they killed my mother.”

“Those that did are dead.”

“Is that comfort?” she wondered, and thought—from him—it likely was an offer of it. “I don’t know what to feel. But I know she took my parents from me. She took them to stop what can’t be stopped. We’ll meet her on the battlefield come Samhain, because it’s meant. Whether I fight as queen or not, I fight. She killed them for nothing.”

“And nothing you could have done would have stopped it.”

Yes, comfort, she thought again. Oddly, his pithy statement gave her just that. “I pray that’s true. But I know because of what was done, what was not done, what had to be, what comes tomorrow is more important than rite and ritual. Whoever holds that sword tomorrow leads this war, and wields it with the blood of my murdered parents. She couldn’t stop it. She cannot stop it.”

She stepped back, gestured up. “Do you see the flags? The dragon and the claddaugh. The symbols of Geall since its beginning. Before this is done, I will ask that one more be hoisted.”

He thought of all she might choose—a sword, a stake, an arrow. Then he knew. Not a weapon, not an instrument of war and death, but a symbol of hope and endurance. “A sun. To shed its light on the world.”

Surprise, with pleasure running just behind it, lit her face. “Aye. You understand my thinking, and the need. A gold sun on the white flag to stand for the light, the tomorrows we fight for. This sun, gold as glory, will be the third symbol of Geall, one I bring to it. And damned to her. Damned to her and what she brought here.”

Flushed now, Moira drew a deep breath. “You listen well—and I talk too much. You must come inside. The others will be gathering for supper.”

He touched a hand to her arm to stop her. "Earlier I thought you'd make a poor wartime queen. I believe it might have been one of the rare times I was wrong."

"If the sword is mine," she said, "you will be wrong."

It occurred to him as they started inside, that they'd just shared their longest conversation in the two months they had known each other.

"You need to tell the others. You need to tell them what you believe about your father. If this is a circle, there should be no secrets to weaken in."

"You're right. Aye, you've the right of it."

Her head was lifted now, her eyes clear as she led the way.