

Deirdre

An Ancient Tale of Ireland

Miriam Newman

Deirdre

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Deirdre

Born at a royal banquet for King Conor MacNessa of Ulster, Deirdre is predicted by Conor's own druid to be blessed and cursed with a beauty which will make kingdoms contest over her. He names her "Deirdre of the Sorrows" and urges the king to slay her. But Conor, unwilling to murder a babe, takes her under his protection only to fall prey to the curse when she is nearly grown. Captivated by her youth and beauty, the aging king will go to any extreme to possess her.

When Deirdre innocently falls in love with one of Conor's chief warriors, it sets in motion a tragedy that will involve kings and countries, famous fighting men and sages alike: Cuchullain, champion of the Cattle Raid of Cooley; King Fergus MacRi of Ulster; Queen Medb of Connaught; Catha the Druid, and others.

Join author Miriam Newman for her bardic-style version of a legend told countless times in Ireland over the centuries—a classic Irish tale of love, loyalty, betrayal, and revenge.

Chapter I

In the court of Fergus MacRi, King of Ulster, dwelt a widow named Ness together with her son, Conor MacNessa. They were of the minor nobility, which only enabled Ness to seek the King's charity, but what she lacked in descent Ness made up in beauty, and she set out to seduce Fergus.

Rich and powerful though he was, Fergus could not obtain her consent to marriage despite his constant courtship. At last, when she had worn Fergus to the bone, Ness agreed on one condition—he should leave his kingship for a year, placing Conor on the throne during that time so Conor's issue could claim descent from the line of a king.

Fergus was reluctant to concede this point, calling it only a sop to her pride, and rightfully so. For when he finally agreed, and he and Ness were wed, she lost no time in suborning the people to Conor. Abundant favors and rich bribes won them so that when Fergus went to retake his throne none would have him, saying if he had left it for a woman it could not have meant much to him.

Leaving Ness behind, Fergus and a band of followers departed for Connaught, where they were welcomed at the court of Queen Medb, the intoxicating one, and her then-beloved, Aillil MacMatach.

It came to be, during that time, Fergus fought alongside the men of Connaught against his own Ulstermen, which he had never thought to do. But in the Tain Bo Cuaighe, the Cattle Raid of Cooley where Ulster's champion Cuchullain met with Medb's army, Fergus did so in the hope of regaining his throne. It being impossible to prevail against the great hero, the men of Connaught were turned back and Fergus with them. And Fergus descended into deep bitterness and grief for the loss of his lands, saying that he must have sight of them again before he died.

In time, Conor heard of his distress. Ness had died and Fergus asked that he might return to Ulster to mourn her. Conor's own heart had been softened by time and the loss of his mother, and Fergus had been kind to him at one time. And so Fergus was welcomed once again to the court at Ulster and given high honors, but it soon became apparent that certain of the older chiefs would have been glad enough to see him back on the throne.

Privately, Conor began to seethe with anger towards Fergus and to regret he had ever permitted him back. And Conor bore a cold black anger that caused people to turn away from him.

While Fergus sought refuge at Queen Medb's court, the old Ulster custom had sprung up once again whereby each chief presented a great banquet for the king and his retinue. At length it became the turn of Felim, Conor's chief story-teller, to hold this feast.

No effort or expense was spared; indeed, preparations took the fullness of a year. A great hall of oak was built next to Felim's castle, with shining inlays of precious stone, and every care was taken for the comfort of the guests, the better to host and impress them. Felim was determined that never would his vast entertainment be forgotten.

Chapter II

At this time, Conor had a guard made up of his finest knights. With these Red Branch Knights, he set out to Felim's entertainment. A grand sight they were, for always Conor wanted people to see him covered in glory and to say, "There goes our King, Conor MacNessa, and no other."

Though Conor had grown used to his kingship and had no mind to relinquish it back to Fergus, in the furthest corner of his mind he knew he had done nothing to deserve it and was thereby all the more determined that men should acknowledge him.

Rows of knights in bright colors preceded him, wave upon wave grandly mounted and bearing full arms, though they went to a place of peace. Their banners glittered in the sun. Behind them, still more knights richly attired were driven in chariots and at last came King Conor himself in the grandest war chariot of all, with many hundreds of his lesser retinue following afoot.

At first, they went under a shining sun, with cheering people lining the road. But as the day grew late, clouds and winds beset the land, the wind stirring up dust so that it settled upon all the people and chariots, cloaking their bright banners.

Conor the king proceeded in a cloud of choking dust, but little glory.

No sooner had they reached the castle of Felim the storyteller than there was a huge crash from the heavens. Blue-white lightning split the land, casting an eerie glow upon the castle and all the outbuildings Felim had raised at such cost. Clouds writhed above as if the hounds of hell had been loosed to course the very heavens. Rain emptied from those clouds in a torrent and Conor was hard put to make his way to the doorway of the castle, so relentlessly did rain pelt and winds blow as if to prevent him.

Nonetheless, Felim his host came to Conor, greeting him gladly and with many inquiries after his good health which Conor had begun to doubt!

Once inside, the king and his guests found beef and mutton and pork...fowl and venison and fine, firm pink salmon borne on ice across the sea from Alba where ice was often to be found. Curds and whey they had, and all else that a dairy might supply. There were breads and cakes,

pies and pasties of every sort and great quantities of wine, honey mead, and ale both light and dark.

Yet, so deep went Conor's unease that he had no appetite for them. Singers, dancers, and musicians both foreign and native performed, male and female alike, but the crash and roar of the storm drowned out the sounds of their merry-making. Men marked that never had such a storm visited Ulster. Irishmen all they were and accustomed to the rains and gales of their island, but even Conor agreed it seemed no natural storm and that he, too, had a feeling of doom.

"Nonsense," Felim insisted stoutly as the king merely nibbled at his food, for he saw all his plans dashed to destruction and the favor he wished of Conor turned to stone. "'Tis but a storm!"

Hardly had the words left the storyteller's mouth than a terrifying scream split the air, a sound to raise the bristle hair on a hound's back.

"'Tis only my wife, who labors," Felim insisted, but the king took not a bite further of his food and sat with a pale and ashen face.

"Bring her here," Conor ordered, "that I may see if that is the scream of any mortal woman, for I much doubt it."

And so the unfortunate woman was required to present herself to the king.

"Tell me true," Conor demanded, "was it you who screamed?"

Felim's haggard and trembling wife, fearing for her life, nonetheless shook her head, for she knew her maidservants would give her away if she lied to the great king.

"Nay, my lord," she replied. "'Tis the child that screamed from inside my womb."

"This is a thing I have never known!" Conor exclaimed, while beside him his druid Catha stood abruptly to lay a hand upon the mother's belly, his expression dire.

"'Tis the scream of a girl child," he predicted, "and her name will be Deirdre, the call of alarm, for she will bring war."

Greatly troubled, Conor the king ordered Felim's wife back to her chambers, where in due course she gave birth to the predicted female

child. Hearing it, the Red Branch Knights (who knew Catha's predictions to be accurate) demanded the death of the infant.

Conor was a hard man, who had done hard things, and he also knew his druid's prowess, but it was not in the heart of him to murder a helpless infant. "No," he refused his guard, "for this would be an evil deed." Once more he asked his druid to prophesy, and Catha went out onto the ramparts beneath a sky still dark but no longer bearing rain. There, while the others at last began to enjoy the comforts of the castle, Catha scried the future of the child he had called Deirdre, but no difference could he find from his first prediction.

At last he returned to the banquet, where all men noted the king choked on his drink while looking into the face of his druid.

"There is no change, my lord," Catha told him. "Deirdre shall grow to be a woman of such beauty that kingdoms will contend for her. She is born for misfortune."

Over the protests of his men, Conor had the child brought in again. But he saw only an adorable small babe and his mind was set upon its path.

"I know well your powers and honor them, Catha," he said. "This part I shall make true; I shall make her my queen. She shall be taken from here to a secret place and raised under my protection. He that would try to harm her acts against me and shall pay the price."

The knights all were silent, still fearing the child meant their doom but unable to speak against him. Only Catha dared that and his words were grim.

"You will regret this, my king," he said bluntly, "but as it is your will, I shall name her Deirdre of the Sorrows."

Chapter III

In several far off places, Conor had hidden fortresses known to only a very few, and it was to one of these that he had Felim's daughter removed. Protected by wall and moat, it was impregnable, and he ordered no one should enter but himself, Catha, and an old nurse, Leabhar. Lacking other company besides Conor and Catha, who came but seldom, Leabhar and the child grew close as grandmother and granddaughter, for Leabhar was far from her youth.

Nonetheless, she taught Deirdre well of birds and flowers, roots and herbs, and the ways of animals. Even some scrying of the stars she taught to her. It was a pleasant way for a child to be raised, if a trifle lonely, yet Deirdre bore that well enough while she turned from a pretty girl into one with beauty to awe the very stars she studied. Seeing her dear one change into young womanhood—and noting that the king and his druid came much more often then—the old nurse became fearful, yet nothing did she say. What indeed could she say?

It was Deirdre who spoke, by and by. Standing one winter's day at her bed chamber window, she spoke low and sad to Leabhar.

"Alas, it is a lonely day and I am lonely, too."

A chill ran through the older woman, who knew what was prophesied.

"And how could you be lonely, child," she chided, "when everyone here dances attendance upon you?"

But Deirdre turned to her with no trace of her usual smile. "I am lonely for one of my age, Leabhar, though I love you dearly. The king is old, and I've no wish to wed him. It's a younger man I'm dreaming of."

At first Leabhar was wont to hush Deirdre for fear of the king, but then a worse fear started inside her and she queried, "What man?"

"One as fair of skin as I am," Deirdre responded dreamily, "with raven hair and red lips. Each night when I sleep he is there, waiting for me in my dreams."

Then Leabhar did quiet her in earnest, the fear inside of her growing deadly.

"You must not speak of him, child," she said with a nervous cast to her eye, as though Conor might lurk behind any door. He had been known to do so when he spied upon his lovely charge of whom he was becoming increasingly desirous, to the point of obsession. "If you do, surely the great king will have Naisi murdered."

"Naisi?" Deirdre inquired, with a smile like sunlight.

"There is but one who looks as you describe," Leabhar told her, worry lining her whole face. "A son of Usna, who is one of the chiefs of Ulster. Naisi is of the Red Branch Knights." She remembered the demand of those knights, that the child Deirdre be killed lest she destroy them. "You must put him from your mind. This is a doom you think upon."

But Deirdre did not answer, only murmuring, "Naisi. My love."

Chapter IV

The most beloved of the Red Branch Knights were the sons of Usna: Naisi, Ainle, and Ardan. Fierce in battle or the hunt, they were equally skilled in peace, and Naisi especially enjoyed the sound of the harp and was a skilled musician. The land being peaceful at that time, he found enjoyment wandering in the woods, listening to the sound of his music. Even animals were charmed by it and as for people—why, they had no choice. It filled them with contentment and joy.

It was at this time, as well, that Deirdre – knowing her unwanted marriage to the king was approaching – sometimes made her escape to walk in the scarce-known world beyond gate and moat. Leabhar, who should have prevented it, was touched by the girl's deep unhappiness, for she herself had loved a man when she was young. So Leabhar let Deirdre walk, and no fairer nor more innocent maid ever trod the woods that belonged to the king.

Neither did Naisi fear to go there, for he and the king were on good terms and he knew of no reason he should not. And that is why, on the fairest of summer days, he sat beneath a tree on a hillock making music yet more fair.

It was that which pulled Deirdre in, of course. She could no more resist it than a trout does the lure, and when she saw the sheer, pure beauty of the man making it, that drew her more strongly yet, for she knew him from her dreams.

Still, Leabhar had raised her to be circumspect, so no word did she say. Instead she only passed Naisi, eyes downcast like any modest maid's so that no evil could be said of her.

But beauty speaks for itself and Naisi, seeing it, was struck to the heart and he spoke, "How fair a doe my music has called."

"What use to be a fair doe where there are no bucks?" she responded.

Now the son of Usna was no fool, being himself a chief in Ulster, though a young one. He had heard of Felim's daughter secreted in a fortress of the king and suspected this must be the girl, so he tested her, saying, "I think you have the prize buck of this land."

"Yet, if I were to choose," Deirdre persevered, "I choose the young buck." And she looked at him so straightly that Naisi knew full well what was in her mind.

It was in his, as well. A more comely maid he had never seen, and the urge was strong in him to pull her down into the long grasses and have his way with her.

"But you are the king's," he protested weakly.

"Not yet," she said.

Eve to his Adam—or so Naisi told himself—the young woman with hair black as his own, and skin as white, led him to the very thing he feared. They lay together all the long afternoon, embracing in the heart of love, telling each other of their dreams and hopes as young lovers do. So enamored of each other were they that they swore only death would part them.

At last, when Naisi feared his brothers who had gone hunting would soon return, he and Deirdre tidied themselves. And sure enough, Ainle and Ardan came a-whistling through the deep woods, no longer silent since they had taken their share of game.

'Twas far more they took from the king's bounty that day, after Deirdre had plied them with kisses and Naisi with pleas. Well they knew the king's wrath would exceed all previous bounds, yet taking Deirdre with them, they returned to their father's strong castle where Naisi made haste to marry her that very eve. Thus had he taken claim of her in all ways possible, but it would be no protection from King Conor.

As soon as the sun had risen, the four young people took a retinue, hounds, and servants, and sought refuge with a king more friendly to themselves than to Conor.

Chapter V

Now Conor was wroth with black rage so profound some feared he would go mad, or perhaps had done. Though he had wives and sons in plenty, it was Deirdre he had always envisioned as the breath of life that would keep his old age at bay. Robbed of that hope, for months on end he pursued her and Naisi and Usna's other sons the length and breadth of Ireland.

Catha's prediction that Deirdre would cause war was fulfilled. So great was the threat Conor posed to other kings, at long last Naisi found himself unwelcome in any court and was obliged to make his way by sea to Alba, the land of wild men. Yet he had been careful to take a retinue large enough to secure a place in that land and in time built a fortress called Glen Etive where he and Deirdre were happy.

King Conor could not touch them, for not only did they have a mighty keep, but the same council which had rejected Fergus when he left the throne for a woman made much the same response to Conor. Did he bankrupt their country to fight for a mere woman, they told him, they would find another king. And it was no idle threat, for always men sought to depose him, circling like a waiting wolf pack.

Conor was therefore compelled to hold his tongue, but never did he restrain his cunning. He caused a mighty feast to be held at Emhain Macha—one attended by every lord and noble of Ulster. Fergus MacRi was there and Conor's great warrior Conall Cearnach, as well as Cucullain.

Before all of them in that mighty hall sat the three empty seats of the sons of Usna.

Conor plied his guests with food and drink and entertainment until all were exceedingly merry and then he tested them, asking, "In any country have you seen so fine a thing as Emhain Macha?"

"Never!" they responded in a roar.

"And yet there is one thing lacking," Conor averred, "and that is the presence of the sons of Usna."

Now the assembled throng fell silent, fearing the king's madness on this subject.

"Let us send a message to Glen Etive bidding them to come home once more," he continued.

All of the men were still uneasy, none of them daring think the king had offered forgiveness, and as for themselves, most of them had pursued Naisi and the others.

"Nay, king, we cannot," one offered, "for Naisi will not trust us."

There are those whom he would trust, Conor thought. And though he seemed to let the matter die, later that evening when the festivities were waning, he called three men in turn to his private chambers: Conall, Cuchullain, and Fergus. To each he proposed fetching Naisi home, confiding however that he feared the reaction if by chance any harm came to Usna's beloved son while in the company of Conor.

Conall and Cuchullain responded with anger, discerning Conor's purpose and assuring him by the manner of their response that they would hold him accountable and seek revenge. And so Conor was far more careful in his conversation with Fergus, of whom he had more hope.

He greeted his stepfather warmly, with the kiss of kinship and many solicitations, so that Fergus's heart which had grown despondent waxed hopeful once again. And he responded to Conor in much different wise than the warrior and champion had done, for he held a different position: a cast-off king returned home to die, sustained only by the charity of the stepson who had supplanted him.

So it was that Fergus and his sons Illan and Buinne, and his shieldbearer Caillan, set sail the next day, charged with bringing Naisi once more to Ulster.

And as soon as they had gone, Conor hastened to the hall of Borrach, a local chief who was preparing the yearly feast for his king. Pleading matters of state pressing upon him, he asked that Borrach entertain Fergus and the sons of Usna instead, when they returned.

Borrach, a Red Knight bound in loyalty and hospitality to Naisi and the others, delighted in the thought that they might return and agreed readily, knowing their oath of brotherhood required them to accept his invitation. But Conor knew this as well, and plotted how to separate the brothers from Fergus, who was likewise bound. At length he realized the oath Fergus had made to him when he returned to Ulster superceded even that

pledge, and so Fergus could be summoned to Emhain Macha whilst the sons of Usna might be left in Borrach's holding.

Chapter VI

In her fine castle in Alba, Deirdre had dwelt for many seasons with Naisi and his brothers in perfect peace. One night that peace was disturbed by a dream. In the quiet of the night, Deirdre was consumed by a terrifying vision of three birds arriving on their castle wall, bearing a drop of honey each in their beaks. But, inexplicably, when the birds took flight again each bore away three drops of blood from the three sons of Usna.

And therefore the next day, lazing in the garden with Naisi, when she heard a call from the river she knew what it portended.

Naisi leapt up, a smile on his face, for he had longed time out of mind to see or hear a bit of his native land and it was an Ulster voice that carried on the waters.

"I am minded that is Fergus!" he cried in glad excitement, but Deirdre tried to restrain him.

"It is," she cautioned, "but he brings nothing good with him."

"Nothing good?" Naisi cried again. "It is Fergus, my love, who was always true to us."

And forthwith he sent a servant to show the Ulsterman his way to their private garden. The sight of his old friend and fellow Red Branch Knight overjoyed Naisi, who greeted Fergus with joy, and the older man responded in kind.

"Good tidings!" he assured them. "Indeed, the best. Conor wishes you to return to Emhain and to return your lands and all your property. His heart is healed of its madness, yet if you doubt his offer then know I am to be the pledge for your safety."

Nowhere in his face or bearing could they spy any sign of insincerity, but Deirdre would not be swayed. "You are powerful here, as Conor is in Ulster," she insisted to her husband. "Do not go, Naisi."

But Naisi was equally stubborn, for his heart had grown increasingly troubled by his absence from the place of his birth. No Irishman is willingly parted from his soil and it was that which drew Naisi like a moth to the flame.

"I would rather be a pauper in Ireland than a rich man here," he said, "and Conor offers to return all that was taken from me and sends word through the most honorable of his men." When Deirdre would protest further, he held up a hand as he was seldom wont to do to her. "No more tears," he bade her firmly. "Prepare with your ladies to remove the household and do it in haste, for we will leave tomorrow. I cannot be parted any longer from Ireland."

As full a banquet as could be prepared upon short notice was got together, and Naisi and the men set to with a will, rejoicing in the manner of friends long parted.

But Deirdre left it early, making the excuse that she must prepare her household to remove. No effort did she make toward leaving, however. Instead, she sat into the long hours of the night in her quiet bower, weeping for the loss of her home that she loved and from the fear eating her heart.

Next day they sailed to the harbor near Borrach's fort, where he greeted them fulsomely, but took Fergus aside.

"My brother of the Red Branch," he greeted Fergus.

Fergus was on guard at once, for it was not a title he was accustomed to hearing and it portended some demand upon him, the which was not long in coming.

"I have prepared a banquet of honor for you," Borrach went on smoothly, for by this time he had ascertained the King's plan and fallen in with it. "As for the sons of Usna, Conor asks that they take their feast with him at Emhain Macha."

Now Fergus went hot and cold with rage, for he realized what Conor had done and Fergus was a man of honor still. And making Borrach no reply, he went at once to Naisi and Deirdre, to warn them.

"The price of dinner is not the lives of the sons of Usna," Deirdre replied disdainfully.

"Indeed it is not," Fergus agreed. "And I and my sons will remain with you here, to give you our protection."

But at this Naisi was much offended. "My arms are strong enough and always have been," he thundered.

Still, Deirdre tried to reason with him. "Let us go to Cuchullain until Fergus may accompany us," she argued, but the men felt this would make them out to be cowards and would not agree.

Then Deirdre, worn out with arguing, took to sleep when they reached a resting place, yet she roused quickly enough when Naisi sought to wake her and greeted him in stark terror.

"What is it, love?" he pressed gently, holding her trembling body.

"I have dreamed again," she told him, "this time that you and the sons of Fergus were headless and bloodied, but Buinne the Red who was present was unwounded. By the which I know that he will slay you at Emhain Macha. In my dream, a blood red cloud lay over the fortress. Is that not omen enough?"

But Naisi shook his head, smiling. "You dream too much, Deirdre."

Then in a low voice she counseled, "You will know it to be true if Conor seeks to keep you from his hall, for no king can have it said he slew a guest of his home. But if he sends you elsewhere, he means to kill you."

And surely enough, when they reached Emhain Macha, King Conor did not bid them welcome to his mighty palace, but instead asked that they spend their first night in the House of the Red Branch.

There was nought they could do but turn aside from Emhain Macha, for any other course would have marked them cowards. A banquet was spread for them at the House of the Red Branch, but Deirdre did not partake of it.

Chapter VII

In his palace, knowing Deirdre to be so near and yet so far away, Conor sought for some way to spy upon her, for he was still obsessed with her memory. At length he sent for Leabhar, who surely would be welcomed by Deirdre, and sent her to the House of the Red Branch. "Report to me of her beauty, if it yet lingers," he instructed.

But Leabhar was greeted warmly by the woman she had raised and she warned Naisi and Deirdre plainly of the treachery Conor plotted. "Guard yourselves well until Fergus returns," she counseled. "For you will need his men to prevail against Conor's evil."

When at length she had to return to the king, she told him she had good news and news not so pleasant. "Surely it is to the good that the champions of Ulster are once more with you," she tried to placate the king. "But as to Deirdre, I find her much changed by the sorrows she has endured and not the woman she once was."

At first this mollified Conor, but when Leabhar had gone from him he thought further upon her words and distrusted them, for she had not said Deirdre had lost her beauty—only that she was not as she once had been. And so he called Trendorn, whose father had been killed by Naisi in one of the many chases up and down the Isle, before Naisi and his people removed to Alba.

"Is it that you would like to avenge your father?" Conor asked, and Trendorn answered in the affirmative.

"Then go now to the House of the Red Branch Knights and spy upon Deirdre," the king instructed. "Return here to tell me whether or not she has remained beautiful."

Though Trendorn was not quite sure how this avenged his father, still he hurried to do as Conor requested. But when he had reached the House, he found nearly every door and window barred and bolted and was obliged at last to climb to a small window high in the house to seek a glance inside. Unfortunately, it was there in the highest and most defensible room that Deirdre and Naisi had retired to play a game of chess.

Deirdre, glancing up, saw Trendorn's face at the window.

Naisi, having no other weapon close to hand, flung the chess piece in his hand with such force that it struck Trendorn's eye and drove it from the socket. Conor's henchman fell straight back upon the earth with a cry of agony.

Yet Trendorn escaped to the woods whilst Naisi and his companions needed to rouse from the hall, and he made his way to Conor. Seeing Trendorn bloody and blinded, Conor knew at once he had the excuse he sought. His rage was only increased by his knight's report that Deirdre remained as fair as a morning rose.

At once, Conor rushed into his hall with Trendorn cursing and grimacing by his side. "Naisi has tried to kill my servant!" Conor screamed in every appearance of high dudgeon. "I am betrayed and he has wounded a fellow Knight of the Red Branch, grievously and without cause. It is in my mind that he seeks to be king!"

When Naisi's fellow knights still hesitated, Conor went straight to a troop of mercenary soldiers he had assembled after Fergus left for Alba. Paid from his own pocket, they were accountable to no one else and, when Conor bade them attack Fergus' sons and the sons of Usna, they rallied to his cause.

More than one hundred troops attacked the House of the Red Branch Knights, trying to burn its oaken walls. But it had been built for just such a siege and the walls withstood their efforts. At last they withdrew and Buinne the Red rushed out with a force of men to pursue them, attacking with such vigor that Conor inquired as to his identity.

"It is Buinne, son of Fergus," someone said, and upon Conor's face spread a mask of guile.

"As I bought the father," he declared, "so will I buy the son."

To the surprise of all, Conor then stopped the fighting and bade Buinne come to him under flag of truce. And Buinne came, his sword dripping, not minded to have word with Conor.

And sure he should have followed his heart, for Conor's words were poisoned honey. "You know what I have given your father for his allegiance," he reminded Buinne, "and I will give you ten times the like if you will join with me, for I see you are a fierce warrior but now trapped within my troop, and I have no mind to kill you."

Buinne, seeing himself ringed by Conor's men who were mercenaries without honor, knew he and the sons of Usna would die that day in any case, and he agreed.

"Like father, like son," Deirdre spat in disgust as she saw him walk to Conor's troop and join them. But Illan the Fair and his men would not leave Naisi and Deirdre and instead rushed out to make deadly onslaughts upon Conor's mercenaries before retreating once more to the House of the Red Branch. But though they had slain many, Conor's throng once more sought to fire the House, at which Illan and his men again rushed out and dispatched thrice the number they had before.

Now Conor, watching from a distance, inquired for the name of the valorous knight defending Naisi and Deirdre. He knew by Illan's actions that the young knight would not come to him as Buinne had done, so he called to him his favorite son and warrior, Fiachra. And giving Fiachra his own sword, shield and spear, he asked him to go and fight Illan.

When it began to seem that Illan would prevail, Fiachra took refuge beneath his father's shield called Moaner for its way of moaning if the man beneath it was in peril of his life. So it did for Fiachra, which should have portended his death, but the greater warrior Conall Cearnach heard it and rushed to Fiachra's aid, striking Illan from behind.

"Who strikes without honor?" Illan cried in his death agony. And Conall, who had not until then seen his face, was mortified by his guilt, for he saw that Illan would perish.

"You shall not go unavenged," he promised, and struck off Fiachra's head.

And with that, Illan died, while Conall walked from the field of battle unmolested, for men respected and feared him.

However, even this would not quench the ire of the mercenaries, who knew they would go unpaid that day if they did not prevail, so again they tried to burn down the hall.

It was Ainle this time who came forth and did battle with them, and then his brother Ardan, and finally Naisi himself. They fought until the dawn while Deirdre remained within the House of the Red Branch. But at last the hall took fire, and the sons of Usna rescued her from within and, bearing her in the midst of their last troops for her protection, swept down upon Conor.

Thrown upon his last bulwark, King Conor summoned Catha the Druid and bade him do battle with magic. At first Catha refused, but then Conor argued cunningly that he would prefer better to have the sons of Usna fight with him than against him and that he would offer them truce if Catha would but keep him alive to do so. Then Catha first raised a deep, dense wood between himself and Naisi's phalanx.

But Naisi's men strode through it without a backwards glance, so intent they were upon Conor's destruction.

The druid then drew upon all his strength to conjure an evil, reeking swamp that dragged down the men and sucked relentlessly at their limbs, rendering them useless. But Conor's men were not so cursed and ran through the bog to bind Naisi's men, and Conor despite Catha's protests called for one of them to kill the sons of Usna. But none would do so, mindful of Catha's ability to curse them. Three times the king called for someone to come to his aid, but the men did not move.

So Conor called forth one who had not battled and this was Mainni Rough Hand, an uncouth and savage man of unsound mind whose brothers had been killed by Naisi some years before. And hearing that he could avenge his brothers whose company had been his only solace, Mainni came forth from Emhain Macha and did his king's bidding, striking the heads from the shoulders of Usna's three sons, bound and helpless.

Chapter VIII

Now Deirdre descended into near-madness, tearing at her clothes and hair, flinging herself over the bodies of her husband and his brothers. Conor's troops, now sure of their fee and sickened by the king's actions, treated her kindly, though they would not free her. In disgust, Conor returned to Emhain Macha while the soldiers dug a grave at Deirdre's direction.

"Leave space for me by Naisi," she instructed, "for I will not be long in joining him."

Conor was otherwise minded, of course, and had Deirdre brought to him at Emhain Macha where he kept her for a full year.

Never during that time did Deirdre show any sign of living; the women were forced to dress, bathe, and feed her. As for filling Conor's bed, so corpse-like was her appearance that he could not bring himself to touch her. But he knew one who would and when at length her disdain had infuriated him past bearing, he taunted her cruelly, asking, "What do you hate above all things?"

"You and Mainni the executioner," she responded bitingly.

"So I thought," Conor replied in cruel satisfaction, for he knew Mainni would do to Deirdre what he could not, for she was still beautiful and her husband's slayer desired her, as Conor knew full well. And he thought if he could not summon the will to have Deirdre, then he could enjoy vicariously the passion of one who would.

And so he ordered his fleetest horses and a chariot, to bear Deirdre with himself and Mainni to the hall at Durracht which he had given Mainni for his service at the battle of the House of the Red Branch Knights.

Deirdre knew what would be her fate, for Mainni cast many a lascivious glance upon her. Conor watched the both of them with a smile of pure evil etched upon his face, for perverted passion had finally unbalanced him completely.

The king's charioteer charged upon the hills of Ulster at top speed, for neither man could wait to have Deirdre between them, and finally Conor taunted her with ultimate cruelty, saying, "You have the look of a ewe caught between two rams, my dear."

Yet, though Deirdre had uttered no word, she had marked their passage most carefully and seen that they were approaching the place where Naisi and his brothers lay... Where she had bidden Conor's troop leave an extra grave.

Without hesitation, she leaped from the chariot straight upon the grave, dashing her head upon the marker so that she died.

Conor was wrenched back into something approaching sensibility, though Mainni was not. Bidding the driver stop, he went to Deirdre's body, feeling for the beat of life in her body, and finding none. "Oh, what have I done?" he cried in anguish. "For I loved her!"

He bid the charioteer return and bear Mainni away from his sight, and further bid him bring soldiers to bury Deirdre, which the man did willingly for he had been sickened by the king's actions and the death of a young and beautiful woman.

Conor's soldiers seemed likewise minded and turned up the earth, and to their amazement when they had uncovered the body of Naisi they found it uncorrupted and fresh as the day he had perished. Marveling greatly, they lowered Deirdre's body beside him and one even placed her arms round Naisi's chest, since her husband's head had been severed. Nonetheless, feeling they had done all they could for the unfortunate young woman, they buried her with reverence and wept upon the grave, watering it with their tears.

Chapter IX

It was the very early spring when Deirdre perished, still half winter so that the men were only glad they had been able to turn the earth. At first Conor could not bring himself to go to her grave and Mainni never would, cursing her memory which haunted the king. But finally, as the earth settled in the summer, a thing so notable happened that even the king began to hear of it, borne on whispers by serving maid and child, then eventually even by his knights so that he felt compelled to visit the place where she lay.

There, to his utter stupefaction, Conor saw that in the place where men had dropped their tears into the fecund earth, two slender yew trees had sprung, their leaves and branches so tightly entwined that their bower formed a framework above the place where Deirdre and the sons of Usna lay.

But the king was compelled to leave that sight, for it was then that word came to him that Fergus, who had left Ulster in a rage when he learned the fate of Naisi and Deirdre, was come upon him with a host from Connaught.

And this time he brought Catha, grandfather to the sons of Usna, who in his wrath decreed that never would one of Conor's blood rule Emhain Macha.

Then, when even Cuchullain had been slain, strapped to a rock and killed by Medb's host, Catha caused Emhain Macha to be razed and burned.

Soon it was not to be found, so overgrown it was by waving grasses and a pair of graceful yews whose branches formed the shape of a heart.

About the Author:

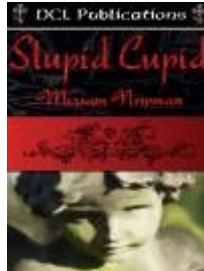
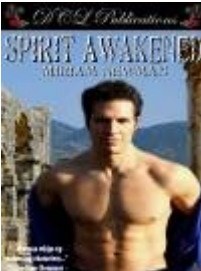
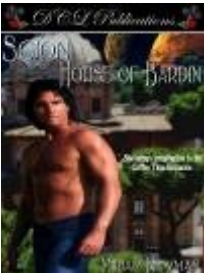
Fantasy poetry driven by myths and legends has been Miriam Newman's passion for as long as she can remember. Published in poetry before catching the romance writing bug, she brings that background to her writing along with a lifelong addiction to horses, an eighteen year career in various areas of psychiatric social services and many trips to Ireland, where she nurtures her muse. Her published works range from contemporary fantasy romance to fantasy historical, futuristic, science fiction, and historical romance.

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You can view more about her books at

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The King's Daughter

The Chronicles of Alcinia: Part I



Born to a dying queen and an ambitious king, Tarabenthia is heir to the crown of Alcinia. Yet when the idyll of her childhood ends she will defy her father, tipping the balance in a world poised on the brink of destruction and leaving history to judge whether she is heroine or harlot.

In a time of war, what would you surrender in the name of love?

Prologue

I was the King's daughter once, so many years ago that sometimes now it is hard to remember. Before the tide of time carried away so many things, so many people, it was worth something to be the daughter of a King.

Our little island nation of Alcinia was not rich, except for tin mines honeycombing the south. It wasn't even hospitable. Summer was a brief affair and fall was only a short time of muted colors on the northernmost coast where my father sat his throne at the ancient Keep of Landsfel. Winter was the killing time and spring was hardly better, with frosts that could last into Fifth-Month. But from the south, where men cut thatch in a pattern like the bones of fish, to the north where rock roses spilled down cliffs to the sea, it was my own.

One thinks such things will never change, yet all things do.

Chapter One

My pet gander's racketing woke me at dawn. I had not slept until late into the uneasy hours and cursed as I swung my bare legs from a mattress stuffed with new hay and sweet herbs, encountering icy cold even through a thick bed of rugs. From the corner of my eye, I saw Marus, the serving girl, back out the door with a tray in her hand.

"Shut up, you fool," I mumbled, pulling back drapes to open my bed chamber shutter. Outside a window with a specially inserted pane, the gander sat atop a ramp. Born of a misalliance between a domestic goose and a gray one, my pet was a roan color that caused the tame white geese to shun him, but he was too heavy to fly south each fall with his wild brethren. I had taken pity on him when I heard him honking his life away on a promontory and so he haunted my mornings, fat and entitled.

"Here." I tossed him half-frozen bread with a rude gesture, though I did want to be up early. On this Awakening Day when I was ten-and-eight, two years past the age of betrothal, Father had finally given his word that I would be pledged. The only question was...to whom?

Seeking solace, I raised my eyes to the impregnable defense of the cliffs. A scant handful of yards out and three hundred feet below, the Alcinic Ocean roiled, jade green frothing against black rock. Gulls and terns floated on thermals, white specks against darkness, while hardy Alcinic sheep grazed perilously close to the edge. My vision was keen and I could see fog banks sitting like guardians offshore, nearly obscuring the island called Lady's Weeping for its habit of causing wrecks. The rank, icy wind blowing out to sea promised a foul day, but should delay the arrival of our ancestral enemies. It had been a dreadful winter, so cold that I saw a hen with its eyeballs frozen, and everyone knew the Tumagis were starving. As soon as that wind ceased, they would swarm upon our shores like hungry demons.

I had no appetite, just a heavy sense of dread. A fancy dress and accoutrements lay spread on benches and I knew Marus lurked outside with my breakfast, so I made haste to the door and slid its bolt, locking her out. There must be no witnesses to my next actions. I was freezing, but I didn't stir up the fire before going to my altar. It was penance.

While I had been on retreat with the Holy Sisters, supposedly preparing for marriage, my father had had an altar constructed next to my hearth. Though I could expect to use it for only a short time, no trouble or expense had been spared. Father would give me anything but freedom; he could hardly grant what he did not possess. Instead, I had a private niche of blue marble from Easterling—creamy white stone shot with blue-green mineral stain, highly prized, available only to the wealthy. But the king, of course, was wealthiest of all.

Shivering, I knelt on freezing marble willing myself to calm as I turned a fixed gaze upon tapers burning for Goddess, Lady and Mother. Focusing on blue-orange-yellow flame, I sought the trance that would enable me to shed bodily concerns. I had been well schooled by Sisters and the state came quickly, giving me a serenity which touched the eternal.

"Lady, You know my heart," I appealed to the ruling face. This was proper for one of Royal blood expected to rule upon earth as the Lady did in the Ether. "I come to You with a true heart to ask Your intercession and I make you my Vow. If, of Your grace, You grant me the man I desire, a child of my womb will return in service to You. It is sworn."

Recalled to the earthly plane by the effort of speaking, I felt a flush of triumph. No offer of a Royal child had been made in centuries. The dowry for such a daughter was magnificent and would not come from the Treasury, but from funds which were mine upon marriage. It was a splendid bribe. My vow could not be contravened once made to the Deity. It committed the life of an unborn child to a fate that child had not chosen and I was not unaware of the moral implications. Yet, after much soul-searching, I had concluded that it was not wrong to promise a child away from the lonely life I saw beating my father to his knees.

When had that begun? I thought it began with Omana.

* * * * *

There was dust on the Landsfel road the day troubles came. I saw it from my self-appointed post above the gate. The dust grew closer, defining itself as it spurted from the hooves of a horse galloping up the road that jutted like a sternum from the ribcage shape of mounded earth below our hill fort. As the horse came on, I saw that the rider was Lianone, my father's squire. Like the messenger who had come three hours earlier, Lianone would alert our Keep to the now-imminent return of the King and his Nobles. My father, King Vanus, was taking no chance that Mother

would be caught abed with her lover, but I was seven years old and knew nothing of such matters.

Clattering into a courtyard full of welcome, Lianone smiled at me as I went down steps from a catwalk which ran the entire length of our fortress. Swineherds cleared their charges from the grass and I wended my way among protesting pigs and half-grown piglets, up to the sweat-splotched chest of his horse. Although he was twice my age and more a friend to my cousin, Lianone heralded an end to a tedious month spent with Mother's women and their embroidery.

"Where are the men?" I asked anxiously.

"Behind the ridge. Lord Asbern makes water every hour. Your father has halted so he does not do it here."

Father detested men pissing in the courtyard as the older ones sometimes did, so I didn't question his delay. "They are within a mile," the squire added for the seneschal, who approached us. "They will adjourn to the Meeting Chamber with those Lords who remained here."

The older man nodded. "Is the business in hand?"

"So I heard." Dropping lithely from his worn horse, Lianone handed the reins to a stable boy.

Our seneschal laughed, briefly. "That is devoutly to be wished, before every purse is hid from the tax man!"

His comment drew a cheeky grin from the young squire. "Yes, I saw his subjects in ditches and hedgerows, bowing to their King and burying coin."

"A resourceful people, our Alcinis." Several pages hovered nearby, receiving instruction. Nearly as anxious as I for some sort of activity, the boys hurried to comply while I climbed back to my perch. Sentries had already sighted the column, but they let me be first to call, "They come!"

Lightly armored because Tumagis would not attack in summer when they also were bringing in crops, the relatively unburdened riders made good time. A snaking line of men and horses, fluttering pennants and sun glinting on metal, they rode two-by-two. Father's regard for his most esteemed Noble showed in the fact that Lord Asbern rode abreast of him. But the King's chestnut war horse strode out in the shadow of the gate and

came on several paces ahead as I flew down the steps once more. I could hear my mother's maid Edda calling to me from the shelter of the walls, but I knew she was afraid of the milling horses and would stay there. I—on the other hand—was Alcinic High Born, taught to ride almost before I could walk and unafraid of anything on four legs, so I went among the war horses up to my father's stallion, Cunli.

"How, now?" Father greeted me, checking the horse with one hand and hauling me up with the other.

I landed on Cunli's withers, facing my father and laughing. He was a small, spare man in his thirty-and-fifth year, still wearing the ginger beard he had affected to conceal his youth when he first took the throne. Impulsively, I threw both arms around as much of him as I could embrace and was rewarded by his chuckle and his rough stroke on my hair.

"And what have you done in my absence?" he asked. It was never an idle question.

"I went to the Point," I confessed, knowing I risked his wrath but that it was better if he heard it from me. I had gone over the cliffs on a rope after birds' eggs and nearly been caught by Sir Aremon, old Lord Asbern's son. That would have been a disaster. He had the ear of the Queen, people said, and other parts, as well.

To my surprise, Father only laughed. "You are too bold by half, Tia. Do you not know how easily you could be blown over there?"

The wind struck atop those cliffs with the force of an arrow, so brutal that the few trees growing there did so sideways. But it was a place where not even sheep would go and I could lie prone on my belly to feel the hot, sweet joy of pounding surf and the wonder of where it had been.

"I am careful," I began defending myself, but then—thankfully—his look left me and I knew Mother was coming. Only for her did he wear an expression of wary longing, but in the way of a child I knew only that this happened, not why.

"We give you greeting, My Lord," she said, holding up the welcome cup, "and rejoice at your safe return."

"My thanks, Lady," he replied, equally polite, quaffing the wine in two swallows except for a bit he saved for me. Our eyes met across the rim, blue on blue, as I drank and then handed the empty cup to my mother with

an unconscious arrogance that mirrored my father's. She did not correct me, but only stood with a stiff breeze stirring her homespun gown. I knew it was not proper dress for the occasion and did the King no honor.

"What ocean is it you see from the Point, Tia?" Father returned to testing me before his Lords. It would be another two months before I went to Landsreel, the Great Home of the Holy Sisters of the Goddess, to be taught and have my Powers awakened. Even a Princess was not exempt from that requirement. Only Sisters devoted their lives to study of the inherent gifts of High Born women: the ability to scry with a consecrated bowl, to foresee events to the extent permitted by the Goddess, and to convey thoughts with animals. No High Born girl was ever left to her own devices to learn those things, but I was not unschooled in other matters.

"The Alcinic Ocean," I replied.

"And which one does that join?"

"The Alteel?"

"That is correct. And where does that ocean end?"

I thought for a moment. "Omana."

"Yes. Omana. Our new partner." Father sighed so slightly that only I heard him. I was the last of my line—the future for Alcinia—and my father never lost sight of the fact, but something else called to him then. I felt it in his subtle push in the small of my back, looking for someone to lift me down.

Mother, permanently weakened by three days of labor at my birth and another spent between life and the Goddess, could not bear my weight and it was Sir Aremon who stepped forward to take me. Since I was fond of the young man who carried peppermints for children in one pocket and biscuit for hounds in the other, I went willingly as Father released me and turned to his business.

Edda was no longer seeking me, so Sir Aremon exchanged a look with my mother and bore me away from the crush around to the back of our Keep, through a seldom-used door into the Meeting Chamber. We were a familiar sight and pages preparing places for the returning men barely glanced at us as I slid to the floor, palming a couple of candies from my benefactor. I slipped like a wraith behind floor-to-ceiling drapes that covered high, narrow windows. They had often doubled as arrow-slits.

"Remember, Tia," Sir Aremon murmured softly through the concealing cloth. "This King's Council will be again the Queen's Council one day. See how your father bullies those he cannot coax and coaxes those who will not be cowed. It will be your job when that day comes."

For once, I had not been in the stables and there was no manure trail to disclose my hiding place as he vanished out the door. Moments later, men crested in a wave through the front entrance, boots hammering the floor, bearing the mixed scent of sweat, leather, and horses with them. Their presence was intoxicating to me, suggesting adventures. I heard varying thuds of greater and lesser buttocks meeting chairs, the solid sound of drinking vessels on the wooden table, and then silence.

"I give special thanks to those who have kept company with me from the South," Father began without preamble as he entered. I popped a peppermint into my mouth. "It was a grueling journey and I will not keep you overlong, but the matter of tin tribute is pressing and we must come to agreement with Omana. The patience of an Emperor is a thin reed."

"An Emperor without ships to reach us in winter must have forbearance," some bold Lord asserted.

"Spring always comes," his sovereign reminded him, "and if we must meet Omanis and Tumagis together when it does, we will not prevail."

There was a hum of assent, albeit reluctant in a few cases. "They could invade in succession," another voice concurred. "Tumagis in spring, Omanis in summer. I do not put it past King Edred to strike his own bargain with Omana."

"Nor I," Father agreed. "The mines are yielding well, but the people are not. Need I remind you how many we will lose this winter? Even if we take but one man in five for military service next year, it will be a near thing to get in the crops. We cannot eat ore."

"But when does a dog take the first bite of a bone and not want more?" The man who had first spoken pressed his case. "Their demands will increase yearly until we can no longer meet them."

"Granted. However, my daughter is growing older."

I stopped chewing, but even so failed to recognize the voice of whichever Lord now spoke on my behalf. "Her mother will not lower the age of

betrothal for Tia, Sire, and even then she will not countenance a pledge outside of the Kingdom."

"My wife will do what is best for Alcinia," my father said. "We must play for time." Puzzled, I listened with every sense on edge.

"If Omana expands their percentage exponentially over the next ten years," he continued, "assuming the rate of increase I have been led to expect, we can meet the tribute. Not without pain..."

There was a chorus of suppressed groans and cynical laughter, but the men were coming to him as a hound comes to the one who feeds it: casting to the side, pretending disobedience, all the while on a straight line.

"Yet we can do it and I fear we must." His tone was carefully sympathetic. "It galls me, as well. But this new young general, Magistri, is a worrisome factor. It is said that he works closely with the shipwrights and has a good knowledge of engineering. The Omanis are setting sail earlier each year, with better ships. I believe he will target us one day if we are not very careful, and it is also said that he gives no quarter."

There was no disagreement on that point. Even I had heard that name—Magistri—in the way small children are terrified by reference to demons.

"Lord Tinthel and I have come to an agreement on price," Father went on smoothly.

I recognized that name, too; he was the Tin Lord, the one who owned our mines, given to his family generations before for services to the Crown. He was my father's watchdog on the southern half of the island and Father's personal friend, as well. Since he had suffered a serious war wound during a Tumagi invasion years before, Lord Tinthel did not often come to Court. Instead, the King went to him at Southfold.

"Our Treasury can bear the strain, if with some difficulty," Father continued. "He will not rob us. I propose we deal with this matter straightforwardly at present. Let us agree to terms and accept no aid in cash or kind from Omana, thus buying time for Tia to mature and make the best alliance for us."

"Would you truly promise her outside of your own household, Sire?" someone inquired. "We have never given Royal daughters to foreign lands. There can be no other for the throne."

I listened at strict attention because, although I was young, I already knew I was to be betrothed to my cousin-by-marriage, Andun. The perfect choice, everyone had called him, and I knew a girl must marry, especially a Princess. Only I bore Mother's blood, pure and untainted eighteen generations strong in a land where invasion and rapine had been so common that descent was always traced through the mother. That bloodline was crucial to Alcinia. Who else would care for the people? It was not the King's job to do so; his job was war. The Queen must see to the peace, and to the welfare of common folk. How could Father even think of sending me away? Had I displeased him so greatly?

"We have never before faced an enemy like Omana," he replied. "The Privy Council will remain apprised of my plans."

He had just cut out most of the Lords, but they would not protest openly. I could not protest at all and, as for the Queen, he held her lover's life in his hands.

"Now, take your rest and ease," he went on. "My secretary and I will complete the arrangements while you get back to your harvests. Fortify us with food! The Holy Sisters speak of another harsh winter and we will need everything you can produce."

That was always the case, but it gave the assembled company a point of departure and few of them would linger. When the last one had gone and the chamber was silent, I could hear the pounding of my pulse against my ear drums. Too young to know the meaning of mortal pain, I knew only how it sounded.

Chapter Two

But that had been more than ten long years ago and now I must deal with what had begun that day. Getting off my knees as hastily as their condition permitted, I unbolted the door and Marus came in so promptly I knew she had been lurking. A lifetime in my father's Keep had taught me caution.

"Morning, Miss." Her tone was tentative, but I answered civilly.

"Good morning, though it bids to be cold and evil."

"Cold, anyway." Smiling, Marus set my tray at the small table and hurried to stir up embers while I shrugged into an otter-skin robe and fur slippers, not waiting for her help. Even as the fire caught, I heard menservants bringing in the bathing tub. They averted their gaze from my relative undress, situated the tub before the fire, and left as a succession of serving girls streamed in with buckets of boiling and cool water.

I preferred to eat alone, but dutifully sampled what Marus had been hard put to procure. Food was scarce even in the King's household at this time of year, but there were precious eggs and honey-cakes, a small cheese, apples not too withered by rest in the root cellar, and tea. I ate without appetite, careful to leave a cake for Marus and fruit for the men who would haul out that heavy tub.

The minute I finished, Marus helped me into it, lifting my hip-length hair over the edge. It took hours to dry.

"Is there word from Mother's chambers?" I asked the servant as she handed me a sponge lathered with verbena soap, but she shook her head. "I fear it is too cold for her to withstand the trip to Landsreel."

Betrothal ceremonies took place at the great Home of the Holy Sisters, a two-hour ride from Landsfel, and we both knew my mother could not make the trip even in a litter. Yet she continued to insist she would attend and no one gainsaid the Queen.

"I believe so, Miss," Marus agreed. Her voice conveyed little emotion, yet I thought that no matter how longingly she might sigh over my wardrobe, Marus would not trade places with me. Lovely clothing, pomp, and

ceremony could not conceal the fact that I was a prize broodmare. I had been told often enough my duty was to breed up children and would have been glad enough to do so with Andun, my friend and confidante. But there was considerable doubt I would be left to do it. Mother's presence at the ceremony could not alter that fact.

"I will go to her chambers as soon as we finish," I said.

"Yes, Miss." Marus gave the expected answer, rinsing. "She will wish to see how you look today."

Everyone would wish to see how I looked this day, and I would not disappoint them. Gifted with a small but sinfully curvaceous body, I had the commingled tresses of copper and gold Alcinis called royal scarlet and my father's deep-set blue eyes, which appeared sultry on a woman. I had Father's look rather than Mother's beauty, but his countenance had been greatly softened in the feminine aspect and no man would complain of me.

"Have ye finished now?"

"Oh. Yes." I stood, letting Marus wrap me in towels, rubbing briskly and then creaming and perfuming me...grooming me for a husband. I shuddered from something which was not cold—it was the thought of intimacy with any man other than Andun. There would be no difficulty in going to his bed; I had been there often enough.

Patiently, though, I let Marus help me into the appointed wardrobe. They were pretty trappings for a pawn: silk underclothing, painstakingly stitched; silk stockings and garters; a silk chemise, under-petticoats, and then the gown itself. It was spring green with a creamy, laced bodice and discreet touches of violet needlework at the sleeves and flounced hem. Most gowns had split skirts to allow riding astride in the rough landscape of Alcinia, but I had embroidered a panel which obscured the skirt's division and would be donned as soon as I dismounted, preserving modesty. There were supple kidskin boots dyed to match the gown, secured by laces, and I watched Marus' bowed head pensively as the dexterous girl laced them. We had grown close as such relationships were reckoned.

"Do you have my ruby dagger?" I asked.

"Aye, Miss. I will keep it safe."

That dagger was meant to keep me safe, but I was going to a holy place where it might not be carried. Beyond that, it was a memento. I would probably never again be permitted access to it, nor was I likely to see Marus again, and I had given her generous payment which—to her credit—she had not wanted to take.

"There ye are," she said softly, standing. "Ye must go along and let Edda do your hair. Good luck to ye today, Miss."

"I'll need it." I stiffened my backbone and, hopefully, my resolve. "Thank you for your help. I will always remember it."

"Ye're surely welcome." My servant opened the door for me one last time, not calling for a footman. She knew it was one walk I would wish to make alone. If I was permitted to return to the Keep to await a ship sailing from Alcinia, it would be under heavy guard to be sure I did not escape and no one who might aid me would be permitted to serve me. Alternatively, I would ride straight on to Andun's home at Valkeep. The trip to Mother's chambers was my last chance to bid farewell to the halls of my childhood and youth.

I stepped into a long corridor so silent that my boots made an audible tap-tap as I proceeded to my mother's quarters. Everyone was either attending Awakening Day or preparing someone who was, but the Queen would not be among them; I knew that the minute I heard her breathing.

The Queen of Alcinia lay propped on pillows, her face the color of white clay. Her breathing was audible through lips that were an unnatural shade of gray. She had been a very pretty woman with arresting eyes, cornflower blue etched about the iris in pure indigo. Those eyes were still alive, but the rest of her body was fading as her heart labored to maintain it. The long, lovely hands atop her quilt were skeletal and I could see a faint, rapid pulse in her throat—a beat which seemed never to reach the place it was trying to go. Like Marus, Mother had a nose which ran constantly. I knew the servant's was irritated by dust and flowers, but the Queen's seemed to be a desperate outlet for fluid her body tried to secrete through any avenue. It was never enough.

She smiled at me, though. "Oh, you look lovely," she managed to get out before starting to cough. My one-time nemesis, Edda, met my gaze across the chamber, somberly.

"Not as lovely as I will after Edda does my hair." I took one limp hand. "The weather is foul and you must not even think of trying to come. This day will be easier for me if I know you are safe in your bed."

I heard the maid slide a straight-backed chair in place so that I could sit down, still holding the Queen's hand. Without a word, Edda slipped a wooden comb into my hair and began lifting and sectioning, her nimble fingers forming braids.

"It's all right, Mother." My throat was tight with suppressed tears and I had the sudden, ignoble concern that it would be that way the entire day. It ached abominably, yet how much greater must my mother's suffering be. "I have made my vow and my plans, as well. I am ready for anything Father can do."

The Queen gave me a skeptical look. "So I always thought, too. But you must not hate him, Tia. He has served Alcinia every day of his life since he was a boy. Such a man often cannot do his own will."

"I know." Enough people hated my father. I would not join their ranks.

"It is surprising how much one overhears when everyone assumes you no longer care," Mother mused aloud. "I cannot leave this chamber, yet I think I know more now than when I could. Give me a bit of wine, will you?"

I held a ready goblet to her lips, wondering if she might yet surprise me with her determination. She had done it before, never more so than when she had released Sir Aremon—now Lord Asbern since his father's death—from his unspoken vows. Seeing her end in sight, Mother had urged him to marry and beget an heir and virtually arranged his marriage to one of her ladies, Erlessa, daughter of Lord Landsqueth. No one ever knew how the Queen obtained much of her knowledge with that source of information gone, but she had managed.

"Things will never be the same," she went on, "now that the arm of Omana has grown long enough to reach us. They cannot expand to their south. General Magistri is in Domidia, for the second time. The religious fervor there is so great that the Omanis will never be free of it. It constrains them and they must look north."

"Like a vulture scouting for its next meal," I agreed sourly. Omana was a constant threat, demanding more tin each year as the Council had

foreseen. There was a faction there which favored cutting tribute, saying we should use our money to build a fleet to reach Tumagia and end forays into our land. Those men had begun to coalesce around Andun and his father. We all knew that Uncle Estad orchestrated events from my aunt's home, attempting to overthrow her brother. Father held the man in contempt, but I feared my uncle's actions would doom any betrothal to Andun, and so did Mother.

"Yes," she went on, her expression grim. I knew how greatly she chafed at her inability and squeezed her hand in gentle sympathy. "They are a great maw consuming lands to supply the ones they have already taken. They can consume us, too. Do not think badly of your father if he betroths you outside of Alcinia, Tia. He may be trying to save you."

Silence was my answer. "I know that you love Andun," the Queen continued, gently, "and I pray that you will have him and remain here. I do not know who else would sit the throne, yet if there is none to take, what will that profit any of us?"

It was a rhetorical question, but this time I answered. "Father has said he will not leave Alcinia without a Queen of the blood."

"I know." My mother closed her eyes. "That one thing gives me hope that he will pledge you here."

We knew he had been busy, traveling to Havacia and Armatica. Any alliance with the Tumagis was impossible. Though the history of the Holy Sisters indicated that we descended from them, they were the worst kind of embarrassing relatives, fratricidal and bloodthirsty. The Armaticans had a treaty with Omana, so it seemed unlikely they would risk friction with their erstwhile partners by partnering with King Vanus. The Havacians were barely out of their infancy, with their first King only just on his throne, but since he was an old man, no one thought that would last very long. He had a son who had worried Mother and me, but then Father had returned from meetings with King Maruk saying that he would not leave Alcinia without the Queen's blood. We concluded that he had met with no success.

"If he will not give you to Andun," Mother went on, "I think that leaves only the son of Lord Tinthel." Although I had never met the young man in question, I made a sound of derision. "By all accounts, he is very fine."

"I do not want him."

"No, and he may not want you, but it would bring back to the family what your uncle has frittered away." Andun's father had run through every bit of his wife's substantial inheritance, spending it on women, gaming debts, and investments no one else would touch. Men knew enough to corner him when he was drunk and that was easy to do. Uncle Estad was politically astute but financially vulnerable and Andun and I despaired of him.

My cousin and I had grown close over the years despite my realization that he wanted me for the crown. Everybody knew that, but Andun was the one person I could always depend upon to support me. He was tolerant of even my most outrageous behaviors and since the day I had learned of Father's plan to be rid of me (for that was my child's perception), I had turned to Andun. That dogged loyalty had withstood Father's disapproval and it did not hurt that the boy who was now a man had become handsome. I was besotted with him. He had taken up rooms in the village to which I escaped almost nightly via the goose platform, wending a treacherous way above three hundred foot cliffs to lie naked with a man who did everything but take my virginity. Technically, that was rape, because he did not have the blessing of the Holy Sisters and King's Council and I was their creature. And in Alcinia, where Sisters had always used their Powers to barter for political influence, that crime cost a man his head.

Our potential match was threatened by their influence. Once Mother was dead, it would have been customary for Father to step aside for me and my husband—a younger, presumably more able King in a land where almost no one lived to be old. It was a time-honored tradition that no one felt my father would follow. He was convinced that Andun and his supporters would bring down the wrath of Omana upon our people and if the Holy Sisters believed him, they could forbid our match.

All this my mother knew and she sighed deeply, motioning for more wine. "Well, we will know by the end of the day," she said once she had swallowed. "Have your Guides come to you?"

"No," I admitted, more troubled by the fact than I cared to let Mother see. Not since the previous winter had I heard the ghostly whispers of my spirit Guides and it puzzled and alarmed me not to receive their counsel at such a time. It was almost as if the Goddess was withholding assistance, but why would She do such a thing unless the Holy Sisters were imploring Her to an opposite effect? They had to give final approval for the

betrothal; that power was a part of their responsibility for preventing inbreeding among the High Born and I was not so naïve as to think they did not wield it for political purposes.

"Well," I said lightly, "I can always refuse to take my vows. If someone figures out a way to get me to take them, there's the bedding." Even in High Born marriages, a groom was required to ask the bride three times for her consent before bedding her and there had been occasional scandals when a lady refused. "Failing all else, I can just stab the son of a mother."

Mother gave a wan smile. "Do not speak in jest."

"Who's jesting?" Every High Born girl was schooled by soldiers in the use of bow, short sword, and dagger. We were not often called upon to ride into battle and I certainly never had been, but there had been instances where Alcinis were so outnumbered that the addition of a thousand determined girls had turned the tide.

"Do not speak in such a manner." It was the Queen reprimanding me. "You will do as you must, even as I did."

Silence hung between us, heavy as lead. We had not often disagreed in such a manner and—by mutual if unspoken agreement—never mentioned the fact that Mother had been married against her will. Her preference would have been to lead the life of a Holy Sister, but she was the last of her blood and so was given like chattel to the man the Council and Holy Sisters selected, regardless of her wishes. And bedded by him, too, despite her reluctance. It mortified me to know I had been born of such a union and I had never remonstrated with her over the brief love she found with Sir Aremon. Tellingly, her people did not hold it against her, either.

"It's all right," I tried to placate my agitated mother. "I have prayed earnestly on the matter and I am sure the Goddess will guide me."

She probably didn't believe me. I had always had a man's impatience with religious matters and was often taken to task for it. No one discussed his beliefs with a King and so I did not know at that time that my father's went deeper than I supposed. The Sisters had read me very early, as Mother lay in coma, and their finding of an Old One in my soul had caused him real consternation. Old Ones had reincarnated before, but seldom in the body of a woman and never that of a Princess. To have one of the ancient guardians of the land appear in such wise portended dire things for Alcinia, bespeaking the need for a Queen of Battles.

But Mother and I were not fated to discuss it that day; she had exhausted herself. The agonized breathing which told everyone when the Queen was in residence eased as she fell into fitful slumber and Edda spoke for the first time. "She will wake in a little while."

"Does this happen often?"

"Yes. Sometimes, too, I see her eyes tracking things in the corners of the chamber. She will not say they are the shades of her people, but I think that they are gathering."

I felt the start of hot tears, for a girl who has hunted and hawked knows when a life is fleeing. I supposed it should comfort me that Mother saw the ghosts of her loved ones coming to attend her. She was beginning to take on a ghostly appearance herself, like half-seen beings some Gifted ones said they glimpsed in the fey places of Alcinia. It was as if I could see through her to another world if only I tried hard enough and I had never felt such reluctance to leave her, lingering so long that eventually Father sent a footman to fetch me. Edda had just reached for a tray holding embellishments for my hair when she was called away by the need to answer his knock at the door and I picked up the fragile little ornaments with a sense of wonder. They were fresh violets, blooming only in the lowlands.

"Where in the world...?" I asked Edda without further words as the maid returned, and she just smiled.

"They are a gift from Andun. He sent them this morning."

Again, my throat simply closed up and I shook my head in mixed annoyance and tenderness, causing a chuckle from Edda as she tried to thread them in amongst half a hundred braids.

"We must make haste," she told me. "The weather worsens and your father bids you come."

I hurried, but my heart was in flames knowing Andun had ridden for hours to the lowlands, where the threat of invasion was greatest, to pick those flowers.

Mother stirred among the last-minute rush sufficiently to remind me to take her amethyst necklace and ear rings for the day, and her silk-lined mantle and rabbit fur gloves. They were not the gifts she wished to give, I knew, but whatever else she might have wanted to say was lost in the

tumult as I smoothed crème on my face, donned her offerings and a warm cloak, and turned again to the bed to bid her farewell. But she was sleeping and I judged it better not to disturb her.

"Go now and do what you must do," Edda counseled in her stead, "and return to your mother. She will be wanting to know what happens this day."

Of course she will, I thought bitterly, and Father would have told her except that he knows it would be a channel of information to me and then to Andun. I was aware of the concern that I would bolt into the bogs as others had done, but I was the Queen's daughter, too. That was why I left that chamber smelling of her sweet sachets, powders and perfumes with my eyes down, so the footman would not see that I was weeping.

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