

I SEE IT, THE HOME I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO, THE PEOPLE
AND THE EARTH THAT I KNOW BELONG TO ME AND
ME TO THEM. I SEE EACH TINY, SHIMMERING MALEVOLENCE
AS WE CONTINUE OUR PERVERSE DANCE. I SEE IT NOW.
I SEE THEM AND I KNOW THEY ALREADY SEE ME.

Blood War

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Witch Boy*

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CHAPTER

1

I am running, hard, as hard as my body will go, but that is not fast enough. I'm running down the road between my house and the Spences'. Sweat and dust are in my eyes, as are fleeting, maddening visions of my dog. My poor dead dog, lying in my kitchen moments ago. As are visions of my mother.

They have Eleanor. I run faster, if that is possible, my feet pounding deep indents in the dirt. *They have my mother.* The coven, the witches, who first showed me what I was. Whom up to now I have been unsure of—whom I have been unable to pin down on one side or the other—good or evil, friend or foe. They have made themselves known at last.

And I can't help but think of the things they could do to her, easily. They are capable of everything.

I shake the images, and the knowledge that it is all

somehow my fault, and push the last yards down the road, through the heat, to the house. The sleepy, enchanting house that was so full, the last time I was here, of tinkling crystal dinnerware and charming conversation and then the unspeakable secrets I found upstairs. I should have known then. I should have.

I don't slow down as I approach. I fly through the gate, hit the porch stairs, and pound on the front door like I am going to kill it.

"Get out here!" I scream like a madman, still smashing my fist on the door. "Get out here, Spence. Eartha! Eartha, get out here." My voice is cracking with the fear that I've missed something. That I'm too late.

I wait. I stop pounding and try to listen for whatever I can hear inside the house. My breathing. That is all I can hear, and it sounds like a diesel train.

I resume pounding on the door. "This is your only chance," I scream. "You hear me? This is the only time I will offer. I want my mother, right now. You will bring her to me right this minute. If I do not get her back now . . ."

Really, I have no finish to that. I have no plan, I have no great ideas about what I can or will do.

But I do know this: I can, and will, do something unspeakable. If they dare harm Eleanor in any way . . . I *sense* what is possible.

Mercy will not be possible.

"Goddammit," I shout as I go back to it and hit the door a monstrous blow with both fists at once. I let out a roar and feel the ground rumble slightly.

I don't know if it is my great princely power, but the

door surrenders completely, popping right off its hinges and crashing down into the front foyer of the house.

And then I see.

I am powerless. I am so completely without power.

The house is in ruins. As I stand in the doorway, hands still up defensively in front of me, I see there is no one here to fight. There is no Eleanor, as far as I can see. No Dr. Spence or his daughter, Eartha, who I now believe are the worst of the lot. No horde of screaming witches coming to overwhelm me. And worse—if there can be a worse—is that the house appears to have been deserted for a long time. Years, maybe.

This is stunning. It is all but impossible. This house was alive a day or two ago, a handsome house, a plush house. I'm tempted to believe I have lost my mind. But if the past few months have taught me anything, it is that insanity is a privilege I haven't yet earned. No, I'm not insane. It's just that it appears immediate history has been erased. I shudder.

I walk in, shaking, apprehensive, still poised for battle. The house smells of years of mildew and closed windows. Thick layers of dust rest on just about everything. I creep from the front hallway to the dining room, where I myself, and Eleanor too, sat one night not so long ago—with the powerful Dr. Spence, with lovely, scary, lovely Eartha. Everything in the room is covered with drop cloths, heavy canvas things protecting the furniture from the decay seeping in from all directions, falling down from above. I take a peek under the cloth that is thrown over the table and chairs.

They are completely different. Unlike the Spences' light, bright, and new-looking furnishings, everything here is dark, old, soaked through with creeping rot. I put my hand on the back rest of a chair, maybe the one where I would have been sitting that night, and a chunk of wood comes off in my hand like I am breaking off a piece of cake.

I leave the dining room and head up the stairs, looking to see, I guess, if this is just one more elaborate sleight of hand, if the coven and my mother are really holed up upstairs.

But upstairs is more of the same. The elaborate and pristine bathroom is now a husk. Rust stains the cracked enamel of the ancient tub and sink. The floorboards of the hallway groan as I make my way from one deserted bedroom to another, poking my head into each to see blinds closed, dust dancing in the air shot through with slats of light. I take a pause and an extra gulp of air as I push open the door to the final bedroom, the one where I found all the evidence of the blackness of the Spences' magic—what should have told me all I needed to know, and which I ultimately ignored. The filth-covered walls, the painting of me, my mother, and father—like a shrine.

My father. He tried to tell me. He may be dead. Again, because of me.

The door squeaks loudly. It opens onto a scene of utter nothing. There is an old thin mattress on the floor. Wallpaper with designs of steam trains crossing trestle bridges rolling down in great cracked sheets from the walls.

A pale yellow rug that looks like it was made fifty years ago.

I'm grasping the futility of this, and my insides run hot and cold. I want to punish them, and I also want to punish myself. I have spent so much time accepting the bizarre and crazy and ridiculous, yes—but obvious—truth: that I am a witch. That in fact I am the born leader, or Prince or whatever, of a whole race of them. That there are two sides, and that I have had to choose. Now that the choice is clear, it doesn't do me a shred of good. Because the ones I should have recognized as my true enemies have disappeared and taken everything that matters with them.

I tear out of the room, go to the end of the hall. I yank open the door to the attic and pound up the short flight of stairs leading to a room that once contained more secrets. An endlessness: this room once stretched on and on forever—magically, inexplicably—without walls or boundaries.

I don't even manage to get to the light switch before cracking my head. I find the string, pull it, and find an ordinary, tiny, pitch-ceilinged attic. Light comes through the ceiling in places where the roof is falling away to bits.

I think I may cry or be sick. But instead when I open my mouth, my voice rumbles out in a scream, such a scream, a scream to every ear within fifty miles, a scream to everyone I have ever known. A scream to wake up my ancestors—father's and mother's sides, witch and human alike. Dust begins falling like snow from the rafters as I scream, new cracks opening up in the ceiling, new light spilling into the attic.

And then I run. I am running after Eleanor, wherever I might find her. Hot-and-cold guilt drives the force of my footfalls almost as much as anything else. It is my fault she is with them—my back-and-forth with allegiances between my father and the coven, my confusion over my father's warnings to protect her—and I will get her back. There is no safe house for them to hide in. They will be at Arj's mansion. He's a leader of sorts, Spence's right hand, perhaps, and his home a meeting place. They will have to be there.

I pound the ground along the trail that leads through the woods to Arj's, running too fast in the heat but not fast enough. Finally, the trail stops. My heart actually speeds up, if that's possible. I reach the bend in the river road where a small hillock leads up to the grand, impossible house that is Arj's palace.

Or, anyway, *was*.

I slow down to a trot but keep moving forward, despite what my eyes are telling me. I continue on, through the growing realization.

Eventually, I walk—up the road, up the incline that would have been Arj's driveway. I reach the top, panting, my legs tired and rubbery, and I stand. I stand as if I am standing before an actual house. I feel my fists, clenched and banging together.

Where the house once was, there is now a dense little thicket of old-growth trees. Conifers mix with broadleaf, spruce with birch and beech. . . . It could be calming almost, the age of it, the familiar smells.

But calming is what it is not, dammit. Old-growth

trees do not just spring up like crocuses where houses used to be. Where is my mother?

I stand still now, still panting, hands on my hips as I search my head for ideas, solutions. But over several precious minutes, I can't think of *one*. The pressure of it makes it even more impossible: I am gripped by fear that they may kill her, though I am logically telling myself they would not. Or rather, they would, but not now. Not before they get at me first, through her—at me and my father.

My father. I need my father. He is the only possible solution that I can see.

Where is he? Where, after all, is he? When I last saw him, he was lying in the woods, half-dead. But I feel that he is not where I left him.

I walk now, through this small but lush bit of forest, reaching out, touching the smooth bark of one birch and then the scratchy surface of a pine. And I am aware of something new but not unfamiliar. In my desperation and need, it is coming to me, communicating to me: *an obair*, the fabric that holds all of us witches together, that by all accounts gives us our magic, keeps us aware of one another, and enables us to sense one another at all times—even read one another's thoughts. That is, those of us who know how to use it.

I hear no words, inside my head or out. But I hear just the same. I hear clearly, but it is not sound. I hear something more akin to scent than to sound. Like the smell of a bakery when you take it all in at once, scones and cannoli and rye bread, honey doughnuts and blueberry

muffins and poppy-seed rolls, all of them blended into that one-of-a-kind bakery smell rather than their individual scents.

I hear the audible version of that. I hear it now, as I search these dwarf woods, this miniature forest, like I am returning to my most familiar place.

An obair is reaching out toward my father like a pair of antennae and telling me he is not where I left him—bleeding on the ground after his great sacrifice, after doing what it took to prove himself to me. But it tells me nothing more.

Suddenly my heart sinks right down into my belly and lies there as if I have swallowed a great massive hunk of raw meat.

What if he is dead? What if he actually, finally is no more and I am left alone to face these monsters, to try to get Eleanor back, unharmed, all on my own?

I am profoundly saddened now at the thought. But is it truth?

The coven, that bunch of bastards, clearly has the advantage over me here, as elsewhere. They know *an obair* backwards and forwards. They have been at it forever, and I've been at it for months. I don't know anything. I may be the Prince, but that doesn't change the fact that I do not know what the hell I am doing without my dad to show me.

So where is he?

Where are you?

Not that I believe he is in any way perfect, or solidly *good*. It may be that for him, just as for the coven, this is

all about blood and power. The coven wants the impurity of human/witch blood like mine obliterated or at least somehow absorbed into the fold. My father wants a new, mixed breed of witch. And they both want absolute power and control.

Me? I want my mother. And I'll spill every kind of blood to get her.

And I need his help. I can hate him sometimes, I can question and resent him, but he knows all that I do not. He at least claims to care about my mother, and I need him.

“Where are you?” I say, as if he is standing just next to me. It could, should be enough. But there is no answer.

I walk on. I do not run anymore because it is exhausting to run when you have to run everywhere, and when you are looking for everyone.

I am looking for Eleanor. And I am looking for Spence. I am looking for Eartha, and I am looking for my father. I am looking for each and every one of the members of that coven, who—I at least know this for sure now—are as vile and evil as any nightmare ever conceived.

It is building in me now, anger and outrage and more. Bloodlust. I can taste it, on the air, on my tongue, as I march forward. It does not represent the better part of me. But I also recognize that I am not very bothered by it.

They have Eleanor. They killed Chuck. Every time my hate needs a recharge, I replay in my mind the picture of my dog, lying in his own blood on the floor. I look down

now and I see the great burgundy stain of him spread wide across my chest from where I was holding him.

I bunch up the front of my shirt in my fist, and I hold it to my nose. I breathe in Chuck.

My poor Chuck. I am missing him now with a physical ache. I have lived long enough without my father, lived, in fact, without knowing he still existed. But I have never lived without Chuck at my side. He was my familiar, my guardian, like Eartha's snake or Spence's hawk. Each witch has one, and he was mine—though for most of my life, I didn't know it: he was always just *there*. I have not a single memory of a time without him.

I stop. I am almost heartened. Because here it is, my first true reminder. Of hope. Of foul, hate-fueled hope.

It is still here. The ring of standing stones. The coven's seat of power, in the bold midst of my power, where I last saw my father. They are gone—which is not a surprise. My father is gone too, and again, I am not at all shocked, even considering that no one,—not even he—could have walked away with such wounds as riddled his body last time I looked. But *it* is here.

They can cover their tracks, they can erase history, they can cower and pretend that they never existed. But maybe there are some things they cannot move, cannot hide, cannot erase. Maybe there are certain things bigger than them. I hope.

I hope I am one of those things.

The sound, the amorphous sound that I now know is *an obair*, drives me on. It talks to me now and guides me, even though I do not fully understand it.

I follow. The urgency is there still, but it's useless to run. And so I follow at a walk, as it seems no one is to be found anywhere along this journey through old places. It is as if a battleground, fought over and fought over by two celestial armies, has now been abandoned utterly.

I don't know where else to go.

I am left with only one possible choice. The choice I do not want. The choice, I think, I have been avoiding.

I go home.

The day has disappeared, and by the time I come up—ever so slowly—on my own house, it is thoroughly dark outside. I am being led on by a bright, shiny blue moon, and by the faint inarticulate sound in my ears.

I stand at the door for a minute. Then two, then five. Sadness pours through me like I have lead in my veins. I have lost as much as a person can lose, and when I walk through that door I will lose it all over again.

The words left by the coven, of threat, of war—left there when they knew I had finally chosen my father—are still there in blood on the front door.

We were afraid that you were not going to be up to it.

Shame we were not able to trust you.

We will keep Eleanor until you are feeling more able.

I push the door open weakly, go inside reluctantly.

The scene is precisely what I left when I exploded outside in my murderous, impotent rage hours ago. The

floor, walls, windows, everything splattered with the blood. The table, eerier still, is set as it was when I left the house *two* times ago, when I left Eleanor to her breakfast, and Chuck to watch her.

And Chuck. There is my Chuck. Lying still on the floor, where I had been holding him, where he was killed.

Impulse does what impulse does, and I immediately take up my position with him again, sitting right down on the floor and collecting him in my arms. I hold on to him and stroke him for as long as I can bear it.

Finally—it must be midnight, but I don't know—I realize I must do it. I get up from the floor, stiff to nearly paralyzed, and I carry my Chuck out to the side yard, just below the back porch, overlooking the babbling water of the stream. I get a spade out from under the porch, and I take my time methodically digging a spacious, comfortable, Chuck-sized grave. It is not lost on me that not too long ago I dug a similar grave with Chuck by my side.

Again, my fault. Jules. That was when the nightmare began—when I had a kind of witch freak-out and woke from it to find that Jules, my love, my almost-girlfriend, was dead, and that I was some kind of monster. It took so long to believe it. And when I finally did, when my father finally convinced me, I buried a lock of her hair because it was all I had. And I thought that the worst had already happened.

Now I get to the bottom of this new grave, after a long sweaty time of no-stop, no-think steam-shovel

action that feels good to my body and soul, or as close to good as is possible. The bright shiny moon is still beaming down and lighting up, doing a good job of trying to be a sun for me. I am standing in the earth up to my chest, puffing.

I am face-to-face with him. Practically nose-to-nose. I am so sorry.

“I should have stopped this, Chuck,” I say, choking on the words as emotion wells up. “I should have somehow known, known what would happen, known what to do. . . . I owed you better, boy.”

I lean my head against Chuck’s and hold it there for a few seconds, hold on for a few seconds more.

Then I reach up, haul my old friend into my arms, and pull him down into the hole with me. I lay him there gently.

And, I swear, I want to be able to stretch out next to Chuck and make my last move by pulling all that dirt right in on top of us, bringing us equal bits of quiet, of calm, of rest.

But I know I cannot. I know that no matter how tired I get, how sick of it all I get, how scared, I know there is Eleanor.

And then it has also gone further than her. And much further than the hope I had once of getting all the witch bullshit out of my life and reverting to the peaceful nothingness I had before.

Because I know now, I *feel* it. I feel a desire, a need, a passion for annihilation. I know that when the time comes I am not going to be rational. I want people hurt

and suffering greatly. I want revenge, I want overkill.

I am in this war. My father may have different reasons, but we now share a goal. The coven cannot be dead enough.

I want to make sure that the people who have taken so much away from me will lose far more than they ever could have imagined. For taking my life and my loved ones away from me . . . I cannot even conceive of appropriate compensation for all of that. And when I do conceive of it, I am going to top it. By a long way.

And that is *if* I get Eleanor back okay.

There is one more place that holds out a possibility, but I can't go there now. Right now all I can do is put my friend away properly. I pat him once more, pat his head, his shoulder, his stiffening legs.

“Bye, Chuck,” I say.

I climb out, and I pour the dirt, one spadeful at a time, over him until he is not there anymore.

I pat the last bits of earth down hard over him, stamping them down with my feet, dropping to my knees again and smoothing it all over him again and again until every grain is in place.

And I flash on them: all the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of times Chuck watched over me when there was no father to do it. As a kid. As no longer a kid. How many times did I wake up with him on my bed? How many times did I emerge from the virtual-reality stupor of Brainwave to find him guarding my bedroom door while I played, like a sentinel. Guarding me from what?

I wonder now how many times, in how many ways, did he save me without my knowing it? Ageless Chuck, tree-climbing Chuck, covering my whole life like a warm blanket wherever, whenever he was needed.

Exhausted, I lower myself down, right there over him, on his perfectly formed burial mound. I close my eyes.

I will seed over him tomorrow. I will plant. This will be a very special place.

It is chilly when I wake up. Summer seems to have left during the night, September turning to October as if it were Sunday turning to Monday. And in fact, Sunday *has* turned to Monday. It's time to go.

I sit up in the cloud-covered Blackwater morning, and I hug myself. The sky is one smooth wipe of gray-white frosting, not threatening, not full of enough moisture to rain, but thick enough to completely shield this world from whatever is above.

Then I realize I am also cold from below. When I put my palms flat on the ground for balance, I feel it: thick, lush, cool turf. I gaze downward and see the finest, densest grass. Soft and aromatic, almost like moss, it is gorgeous and inviting, and it has grown over Chuck and under me in the few short hours I have slept.

Then I look up and around. God. There is more.

All around us—around me and Chuck, exclusively—an honor guard has sprung in the tight little oblong of land rimming Chuck's grave, of ancient, tall, thin, but invincible trees.

All I can do for the moment is look straight up at them. A couple of them seem to have no end, shooting as they do into the opaque whiteness of the cloud cover, like Jack's beanstalk. I look ahead, behind me, from side to side, and I grow dizzy from staring, but I keep at it for as long as I can.

Until I have to blink it away, rub my eyes, get to all fours, and finally stand.

I walk to the tree directly ahead. I put both hands on it, like I'm putting hands on a waist. Checking for realness.

It is real, it is substantial. They all are.

They stand there in their circle, arranged, I now notice, not unlike the standing stones that make up the coven's seat of power. Like the gods, watching.

It is fair and fitting, right and wonderful. Chuck and I and the woods have been as one for so long that perhaps we still are. So much of my strength, of whatever magic I possess, I've learned, has come from the woods. I do not know if it is me who has done it, for I still don't know the extent of my power, but now the trees stand guard over Chuck as he once did over me, and it is a comfort.

It makes me feel less alone—that the forest is on my side. It settles me, helps me to let go, to get on. I reach into my pocket.

I hadn't forgotten about it. How could you ever forget about a thing like this, if there even ever was a thing like this?

My father's ring. The King's ring. The match to the one on my finger now—the Prince ring, which, back

before I knew or understood any of this, he left behind for me to find. Back when I slipped *that* ring on, I had no idea what it meant. I didn't know it was a sacred symbol, and a powerful tool, of our bloodline. That it would *grow into* me—taking root in my very bones.

This time, I know. I know the sacrifice it took for my father to give this to me—tearing it off of his finger and thereby tearing it out of himself—maybe, I fear, killing himself in the process.

I know the ring can never be removed. I know it is like committing for good.

I roll this second ring around in my hand, admiring the intricate, muscular, bony beauty of it. I bump it up against the one I already wear, and they look so right together, so magical, like they are about to fuse together right here before me into something greater.

I think no more. I jam the ring on my finger.

Back when I put the first ring on, all I felt was a curious thrill. Now it is as if I have been hit with a sledgehammer or lightning. My head screams with that indefinable magical noise of *an obair*, only amplified ten thousand times. My knees buckle, I'm weak all over . . . but that is nothing compared to the cruel, relentless beast of pain snaking up my finger, through the bones of my arm, my shoulder, chest. There is a charge, a powerful electrical current, meeting in the dead center of me, as the two rings seem to attack me from either flank.

I am down on my knees, then hands and knees. I am spitting blood, and I think I must look just like my father did when he gave up this very ring, pulled it right

up out of the very heart of himself to prove our alliance, to win my trust, to empower me. (And, for all I know, he has died because of it.)

And then it is over.

I remain there, hunched, coughing, panting, spitting, spluttering.

Then it's like a charge of an entirely different kind. Everything that was just pulled out of me, extracted like the guts being stripped out of a fish, feels like it's been replaced with something times and times and many times better. Stronger, clearer.

Unambiguous. I feel mighty, magical, somehow flush, with *an obair*.

I jump to my feet. I look all around me, my fists clenched and banging off my own thighs as I search all over for somewhere to go with this, something to burn this off before the fire consumes me.

I start walking, fast, aware that Eleanor is out there somewhere and that she is enduring God knows what.

I don't go into the house to change, despite the foul and well-traveled clothes I have been wearing for days, for what seems like centuries. My hands opening and closing, opening, closing, clenching, trying to crush themselves as I watch them, as if I have never seen them before.

I feel like a giant.

I am pounding along the road to my school, to the only remaining place where I have previously encountered the coven. I am taking steps that seem to eat up a hundred yards at a time. Power, anger, and revenge surge through

me the whole time, some chemical amalgam forming like I'm an endurance athlete discovering new chemical balances in the brain at extreme levels of demand.

I am aware, also, that this Blackwater seems nothing at all like the one I have known. There is a vacuum feel, like even more has been drained out of the place than Chuck and possibly Eleanor and the coven. A whole essence is missing—even though the appearance of life goes on.

I stomp through the school gate, across the parking lot, and into the school like I am Armageddon itself, smashing through the big double doors and making them crash fantastically off the concrete walls. The echo in the halls lasts for ages. Clearly I am late, and everyone is already in class.

In the quiet, I attract the attention of some teacher-administrator type, who comes rushing out of an office and charges toward me.

“Just what exactly do you think you are doing?” she says in that urgent, scolding stage whisper of teacher-administrator types when class is in session.

“Looking for some folks,” I say without giving her a second glance.

“Oh my,” she says, and covers her mouth with her hand. “Who are you? What do you want here?”

I look at her now, as she is still walking with me but has fallen off the pace. She looks like she is going to puke or cry or both. She is staring at me, somewhere around the chest area.

I look down. Right. Blood, sweat, and what have you.

“Sorry about that,” I say, my manners making a fleeting but genuine reappearance. But I keep walking. I have no time to be nice for long. I need to see. I need to find witches, to get my hands on someone, to get to the ones who can get me to Eleanor, if they are still here.

“You cannot be in here,” she says urgently.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m a student. I go to class here.” But as I hear the words come out of me, rushed, charged, desperate, I realize they wouldn’t reassure anyone.

“I *don’t* think you do,” she says incredulously. “And if you did, I don’t think you would be here looking like this.” She makes a very accusatory gesture at me.

“Tell you what,” I say as we pass the bathrooms, “I’ll wash up.”

I double back and shove the bathroom door open.

“Stop. Stop this right now,” she says to my back.

There is a girl just finishing up at the sink as I stride in.

“Ahhh!” she screams and grabs up her stuff quickly, dropping half the contents of her bag on the floor and leaving them there. I wonder if the screaming isn’t a little bit unnecessary and overdramatic. I don’t bother worrying about stumbling into the girls’ room.

Then I take over the mirror.

Damn.

They have a point. As I stare into the harsh light of the white-tiled bathroom’s mirror, I see staring back at me some kind of cruel phantasm of myself. I look older. I look, in many ways—in many of the worst, most unpleasant ways—like my father. My eyes, the damnable

mismatched gray-green eyes that are his most prominent visible gift to me, are there, as bright and piercing and dizzying as ever. Only now they sit in pools of deep, advanced bloodshot. There is little white showing in the eyes but plenty in the skin. My hair, always long and lank, hangs down either side of my face from the straight middle part like slabs of glistening seaweed.

I try to smile at myself, joke with myself, whistle past the graveyard that is myself, and it only gets worse. I raise my hands to my face, and complete the picture. There is little flesh to speak of on my hands, but lots of sinew and muscle. The fingers look longer than they ever did before, the effect accentuated by the enormity of the rings and the garish length of my nails. These hands look like they could snap tree trunks.

I am transfixed by what I see.

I look like hate. I look like I am withering.

And yet.

The contrast could not be more stark. For inside I feel more powerful, more focused and purposeful and mighty than I have ever dreamed possible.

Right and righteous is what I see.

Heroic hate is what I see.

“All right now,” a man’s voice calls from outside the bathroom door. “You. Come out here now. Right now.”

“All right,” I say. “I will.”

I come out of the girls’ bathroom to a greeting committee of what must be all the available burly male staff members and that administration lady behind them.

“What can I do for you?” I say.

“I was going to ask you that,” says the lead man. Has to be a gym teacher, with his casual clothes, sandy hair, big neck.

“I’m just here to go to school,” I say. I feel nervous, even though I feel sure I could do whatever I want to the bunch of them. I feel like they are standing in the way, slowing me down, allowing the coven, Eleanor, everything important to slip further out of my reach.

“You don’t go to school here.”

“Excuse me, but I believe I do.” I find myself looking past them, looking around, bouncing anxiously from foot to foot.

“What is your name, then?”

“Listen,” I say, growing rapidly weary and irritated with these people and whatever it is they are up to. “I just want to go into class, see my friends.” I half want to tell them I agree with them, that I don’t like the way I look either, that I understand. But I can’t. There is no time to be understanding. I brush past them, toward a classroom door—any classroom door.

“Wait,” the gym teacher says, grabbing my upper arm. I turn to stare at him and notice his posse gathering behind him, the whole group forming a spearhead. “Who are you looking for?” Apparently he doesn’t recognize me.

I sigh. “Arj, Eartha, Winston, Baron, you know, *that* group.” I give him a bit of a conspiratorial wink, as if we are all in on it now.

“I know every kid in this school, and there is no such group.”

“Ask Mr. Sedaris, the guidance counselor. . . .”

“No such person,” he says with finality. He gives my arm a bit of a tighter squeeze.

Fury rises in me, mixed with an equal measure of panic. This was the last resort. What if they don’t want me to find them, ever? What if it’s not a lure? Maybe they have killed Eleanor already, maybe as punishment.

How can I even begin to find out, if the entire trail has been obliterated? If I could hit something now, break something, kill something in order to get what I need, that would be a good start, that would be just the thing.

I stare at the guy’s hand, then at his eyes.

I see, in his flinch. I see he sees.

But he doesn’t know what he sees.

“What is your name?” he insists.

“Marcus Aurelius,” I say forcefully.

“Oh, the Roman emperor?” cracks a big head teacher from the pack somewhere.

“No,” I say, yanking my arm out of the gym teacher’s hand with enough force to send him stumbling. “The Witch Boy Prince.”

That must be it. They must be in on it. They must be involved, and the others must really be here. There is no other solution.

There is no other hope.

I leave them all flatfooted and make for the classroom door.

There is a great commotion behind me. They want me to stop, to get out of here. They are calling the cops. They are going to use force if necessary.

I throw open the door and stand there, at the head of some unsuspecting English teacher's class, with my hands on my hips and my mad eyes all over the place.

I fall back against the door, huffing. None of them is here. No Council of Youngers. No Arj, no Marthe, none of them.

But more than that. Nobody is shimmering. Nobody in this class is giving off the shimmering, humming, glowing, unmistakable energy of the witch, the telltale sign of magic that once filled half of every classroom in this place. Everyone here is a mortal.

Trying to piece myself back together, I burst out of the class and bump my way like a linebacker through the crowd of useless teachers, ripping open the next door.

Nothing. Nobody.

I repeat the procedure all through the school, first floor and second, panic growing like a mushroom cloud inside my chest, and I can see not a single witch.

It is almost as if I have come to the completely wrong school. But I am still determined to open every single door when I come to an abrupt halt. I hear a siren in the distance. They have done it. They have brought the cops. The thought that I could be locked up brings me a whole new level of terror since, though my power is clearly real and could probably free me, I haven't much idea how to control it.

It is mere animal logic that spurs me on, since I have no idea what else there possibly is that I can do. The power of panic—the primal need to go on, to get away—drives me down the back stairs, sliding around the corners on

the landing, sliding again when I hit the shady, shadowy bottom floor of the school and sprint for the emergency exit at the far end of the long, empty hall.

Until. *Flash*.

Could not be. Could not possibly be.

Far at the other end of the darkly lit, deserted basement corridor—I swear it is her.

Eartha. Bitch. Humming, hopping, magic-sparking witch Eartha.

She makes a sweeping, waving gesture at me, then disappears into a room.

I tear after her, and I don't care if the cops get me right now, as long as I get to Eartha first.

I am sliding as I crash into the door where she ducked out.

Photography club. Right. Secret home of the witches' Council of Youngers.

This is good. This is great.

I throw open the photo-club door, throw myself through.

Into darkness. Cold, icy nothingness. I am frozen by it, frozen inside it, until I pull up all my strength and haul myself back out through the doorway again.

I am standing on the brink, looking into the photo club's darkroom. It is illuminated only by a low red safe-light. Eartha stands at arm's length before me. Gathering myself, ignoring the strangeness of what I see, I lunge toward her. But she is not there. My hand passes through her, as if she is a hologram. She smiles knowingly. She looks down, and so do I.

It is unmistakable. There is an ocean between us. Somehow, a whole ocean. A shore at her feet, powerful waves crashing around her. Behind her is a green and rolling landscape, somehow barren and rich at the same time. I recognize this landscape as ancient, Celtic. It is deeply familiar, though I have never been there. It is somehow homelike.

She holds her hands out, palms open, and she waves me toward her. Fierce wind blows in her face, whipping her hair like a flag. She looks gorgeous. She looks lethal.

And then she is gone. I am left looking at the red light of the darkroom, the image of Eartha across an angry ocean burning into my memory.

I slam the door closed again and stand there listening to the sirens outside and all the voices upstairs, and now an accumulation of feet snapping down the marble stairs, and some pounding on the pavement outside.

I think I can do this.

They are pouring down the stairs now, teachers and cops and whoever else.

I can do this.

I make two fists. I think about it, about what I have to do, what must be done.

Everything and everyone, a fabric containing everything, flashes before me, a roulette wheel of all I have done, everywhere I have been, until my mind's eye locks in on it. I feel the rings, both of them pulling toward each other like magnets and heating up so intensely I have to scream.

And then.

I am standing in my yard. Overlooking the stream as it burbles coolly, soothingly before me. My buddy Chuck is lying peacefully under the earth, guarded, at my back.

For the first time in God knows how long, I smile.

I can control it, this ability to move things—cows, boulders, trees—that has been with me since I came into my power as a witch. Back then it terrified me—it was the first indication that I was not who I thought I was.

Now it has delivered me to safety. I have moved myself. I can control it.

It is part of my birthright, as is *an obair*. And so is this: the knowledge of what the vision in the darkroom meant. The knowledge of the place I saw—where and what it is—though it is so completely foreign to me. The knowledge of what I must do next.

CHAPTER

2

I can do a lot of stuff now, but apparently I cannot fly across oceans. At least not in the way that everybody else can.

Problem there is money.

I have no job, no savings. No Mom. I have no relatives that I know of. No friends.

I also have no time for bullshit.

I am standing in front of the biggest liquor store in Blackwater. I wait, searching my conscience, and my guts, for about a minute as I debate for the last time whether I think this is the way to go about raising cash. As I do, I watch poor suckers enter and exit on an almost ceaseless conveyer belt, going in empty-handed, coming out loaded down and loaded up.

There are three types, really. The kind who look like they could be doing any kind of shopping, for a new

track suit or some nice baking potatoes for supper. Then there is the euphoric kind, clearly supplying themselves for some kind of festivity. And then there is what seems to be the dominant type. On a mission. Determined to get at what's on the inside.

I watch all the same types come out—loaded up with beer, wine, Jack Daniels, and Absolut, cigarettes and cigars and loads and loads of lottery tickets, every opiate available over the counter. Suckers. Poor suckers.

I have no problem taking money from the operators of this business, I think. Then I tell myself to shut up.

I'm no damn Robin Hood. Right now I could probably rob a pet store, an old folks' home, a day care center if I had to, because whatever I have to do to get to Eleanor seems worth it.

Bang, like that, I am in the store, in the sweet liquors aisle, as my power moves me smoothly and swiftly where I want to go. It has taken less than a fraction of an instant for me to bypass the doors and land in this spot. Now that I'm learning how to control it, the magic moving of myself has become more and more doable, and I am doing it with precision.

I grab a bottle of Irish Mist for myself and chuckle.

Bang, I am behind the counter, behind the cashier. Avoiding the security cameras as much as possible, though I am half tempted to dance and wave at them.

There is nobody waiting to be served at this instant, so now is the time.

I reach right over the cashier's shoulder, shocking

holy hell out of her. She is a girl my age—Marissa, I read on her name tag.

She lets out a short crisp scream that immediately sets motion in motion all over the place.

“I am sorry, Marissa,” I say as I bang a couple of keys and relieve the cash register of a monstrous wad of tens and twenties and fifties and hundreds.

People are rushing toward the register, including one armed guard person who is drawing his weapon.

“Really,” I say to the gasping Marissa, “I am sorry.”

And bang, I am gone. Just like that.

I do a magical hopscotch across town, moving myself from phone booth to public toilet to parking lot, then over to the next town, then the next. It’s exhilarating, to tell the truth, to be doing this. Only I am feeling some guilt about Marissa. I didn’t expect a Marissa. I mean, I expected a someone, a body, a placeholder. But I didn’t expect a person, exactly, to get involved.

Then I think about Eleanor and forget to feel guilty.

In minutes I find a place where I can hire a car to the international airport about two hours away. I have one medium-small bag full of clothes that will probably be of no use. Did I pack socks and underwear? Possibly. A sweater? I don’t think so. Shoes?

I haven’t planned very well, but none of that matters much. I have enough for now, and I have my passport, which I have never had the need to use.

I crack the passport open in the car as we hit the highway and things start to feel more settled.

“What do you think of that weather, huh?” the driver

says. “First hot as a mother, then not. That’s just the way it can be around here. You here on business, or—”

“Listen,” I say, feeling irritable but trying to sound merely tired, “we don’t have to talk. Could we not talk?”

He answers me by not answering. Offended, I guess. Not too long ago, that would have bothered me tremendously. I wish I had the energy, the strength, and the time to still be bothered.

I miss my humanity and hope to see it again soon, though I realize that is all but impossible.

I go back to my passport and get choked up almost immediately.

Eleanor got me my passport four years ago, when we were planning, hoping, trying to make a trip overseas. She so badly wanted to do this. Just the two of us. We were going to see places. European capitals, do it on the cheap but cheerful. It was so exciting, it was so beyond exciting, beyond the life we lived.

But it petered out, the way things always did. No mystery. No money. Try and try and work though she did, the tank just never seemed to get any fuller, and her dreams always ended up just that, just dreams.

So sad, it makes me. It is a good thing the driver and I aren’t speaking to each other because I couldn’t manage it anyhow. She was always trying, Eleanor. Always trying.

I envision her at points throughout the last seventeen years. Her face, contracted with drink, so often lonely as I have always been, maybe even lonelier, but still there and strong. Her face, shattered into a million tortured

fragments, full of uncommon hate when I told her the awful truth about the witch that I'd discovered myself to be—the hate that was, more than anything, aimed at my father and his leaving and his witch “bullshit,” and of course at all the torment the news brought with it.

I let my hand fall on top of my bag, crammed with cash. The possibilities of my power. Jeez, the possibilities, El. Somebody owes you. Everybody owes you. I owe you.

When you come back. Oh, when I get you back, you're getting yours. You are getting paid back.

I flip backwards through the passport and land on my picture. No. Not my picture.

I flip down the little visor provided here in the plush backseat of this not-too-shabby ride.

I look at myself now, in the small vanity mirror.

I look at Marcus, four years ago. I look at fourteen-year-old, clean, alive Marcus. Unblemished, unsullied, largely untroubled Marcus. Lonely, maybe, sort of invisible, but still so human.

I look back up. At today Marcus. At tomorrow Marcus. At hard and haunted, murderous Marcus, pallid, vicious, and vengeful.

I flip up the visor with a snap that causes the driver to check me out in his rearview.

I take a last look at young Marcus.

I feel a powerful wave of something I never used to feel. Now it is so familiar.

Mourning. I feel like I am mourning for all the loved ones who are not around me right now, who should be. But even more, for Marcus. I miss Marcus.

I pull out the bottle of Irish Mist from my bag, and I start drinking it.

Maybe it is the drink or the exhaustion or just the simple helplessness of riding in the cab, but I sleep. The driver wakes me at the airport, at the curb of the international departures terminal. I pay him, in cash of course, and throw in a hefty tip for the guilt factor.

I can tell he is pleased, but that's not going to make him my friend. He nods.

"You want a receipt for your expenses?" he asks.

That sounds so funny. Like maybe I will submit my expense report to the boss and get the money back. Get the liquor store's money back.

"No, thanks," I say. "That won't be necessary."

I enter the building and move with purpose. I have known since seeing Eartha reaching out to me across the ocean. I have known where I am headed, though it means leaving all of my connections, possibly also my father if he is still alive, behind. I am going back to the Celtic land, back to the origins of the people, to the source of the supposed great god of Celtic forests, Cernunnos. A few months ago I would not have believed in this, in him. Now I accept it as a matter of fact.

The coven has abandoned Blackwater, and America, for Ireland.

Don't get me wrong. I realize Eartha could just have been throwing me off the scent. More likely, though, the coven is waiting for me there in Ireland, setting a trap. So be it. I have no other choice but to deal in the

unfortunate mysteries of faith. I am going to have to follow along, follow my nose, follow *an obair*, and hope for the best.

At the Aer Lingus desk, I find there are several seats left on the flight to Shannon in the west of Ireland. It hadn't occurred to me that I might be going anyplace else, but it hadn't occurred to me that I would be going exactly there either. I hear, even as I am discussing it with a sharp-eyed, blue-eyed, fairy-featured lady in a silly hat, the internal noise of *an obair* growing more insistent, like a Geiger counter ticking madly at the approach of uranium. It tells me I am on the right track.

The lady is staring intensely, however, at my picture. And at me. And at my picture.

"It was from four years ago, as you can see," I say.

"Yes," she says very slowly, unsatisfied.

"I was just a kid then," I say, leaning a little closer so we can assess the damage together, and probably breathing Irish Mist all over her.

"Mmmm," she says.

I sigh. I understand her difficulty with the innocence of my picture and the diabolical reality standing before her sparkling clean Aer Lingus counter.

I will help her. I will help both of us and the people behind me in line.

"Heroin," I say, whispery-secret.

Her elfin eyes go wide. "Yes?"

"Heroin. I had a heroin . . . thing." And here I lay it on thick with the embarrassment, the horror of my own

degradation, and the shame of having to recount it here. “That’s why I look like I look and not like I should.”

She pulls her lips tight, bravely.

“But I’m better now,” I say earnestly.

She nods, assigns me a window seat, gives me a talk about packing my own bag and not carrying anything for strangers, and hands me my boarding card.

I imagine the customs guys going thoroughly through my bag. And I try and remember again whether there is any clean underwear in there.

I have three hours to shop in duty-free before takeoff. The latest in a long, long line of sick, cruel jokes. I don’t know anybody where I’m going. I don’t know who I’m going to find there or what. And for damn sure there’s not going to be anyone meeting me at the airport, holding up a big MARCUS sign. So shopping for gifts would seem to be a bit of nonsense at best, a psychotic delusion at worst.

But I’m going to get something nice for my mom. That’s what I’m going to do. Because, goddammit, I am finding her.

It’s an overnight flight, and that is just as well, for I pass out before the plane is even off the ground. I wake briefly when they come around with the complimentary beverages and I have myself a complimentary can of Guinness. Which does nothing for my alertness, and I am promptly gone again, thinking as I fade that maybe mixing alcohol and supreme magical power might not be prudent, but not caring much.

I wake up again when a meal is put in front of me, but I haven't got the strength to eat it. I stare, eyes half-open, at the little plastic tray, plastic plates and utensils and cup, but I don't even get as far as lifting the plastic cover to see what's underneath. I sleep. I sleep in an impossibly awkward position with my left temple bouncing off the Plexiglas window, my knees tucked up and pressed to the wall while the large man next to me takes up far more than his ticket should allow.

But I sleep. The sleep of the dead.

Almost. It is deep, but it is dreamy. I dream of Ireland, lush and wet, smelling of moss and peat and yeast. I have never been there, never had any impressions of the place beyond the pop images of leprechauns and red hair, whiskey, horses, and rain. But I see people as I sleep, see them as they come to me, greet me, burly red-faced men in wool caps pulled low, smiling gap-toothed grins as they pump me handshakes designed to loosen my bones. And I see shadows, faceless shadows playing in the short distance behind every smiling face, every warm greeting, every generously offered pint of stout or plate of food, so that I cannot focus for long on what is going on in front of me. *Watch the shadows*, I think. *Watch and watch them*.

And then . . . there, who is that? And that? I know them, disappearing into the hills, or the surf, or the stone ruins. My eyes dart, my head spins as I try to keep up with them.

I am twitching like I am having a seizure when I come to. I look to my right and see the large man staring at me angrily.

Fully awake now, I turn the other way, toward the window. And there it is.

I see it as we approach, as we sweep in low, beneath the rising red sun and above the unnatural green patchwork quilt of this old land. I see it, the home I have never been to, the people and the land that I know belong to me and me to them. I feel the rings on my hands warming, and I stare down at them with interest—the rings handed to me by my father. Handed, I suppose, all the way down through our line of princes, through generations and centuries tracing all the way back to this place and to the god Cernunnos himself. They are truly magic. It still surprises me.

I turn back to the window and then I blink. I see . . . I swear I can see them all flickering below, each tiny, shimmering malevolence, each member of the coven. I see us involved in a long, perverse dance, from Port Caledonia to Blackwater and now on to Shannon below us. I see it now: I see them. I feel them, as they must feel *me*. I hear them, like a loud, screaming welcome in my ears.

An obair hears them, and I hear *an obair*.

I have been all over in the past couple of days: in my head, around the clock, across the ocean, in and out of intoxication. It is hard to get my legs and my bearings as I watch the luggage carousel spin around and around and finally present my bag.

I walk without purpose, following the bulk of travelers out of the baggage claim area and through the blue doors to have my passport stamped. I emerge into the modest

expanse of Shannon International Airport, shielding my eyes, for I have forgotten that it is high morning.

I stop briefly, looking out over the sea of anxious, happy faces waiting to pick up friends and family and lovers.

And my heart drops. It is a combination of things, I know. The overnight flight and the total strangeness of the place; strangeness of the whole journey and all, I know.

But it hurts. Just the same, it hurts.

Friends and family and lovers.

All gone. At this moment, I am further than I could ever imagine from friends, family, lovers.

Christ, where am I?

“County Clare just now. But you’ll be headed to Galway.”

I scan the faces before me and immediately see the man who is talking to me. He is all I can hear. Everyone around me is moving here and there, mouths working, waving at folks, bumping into one another. But I can hear none of it. It is as if this man, middle-aged, sweet smile, dressed in a neat tan suit, has got a private line direct into my ears: his words come across digital clear, like I’m wearing an earpiece.

And he is doing exactly what I said nobody here would be doing. He is holding up a sign that says MARCUS.

I walk up to him, eventually.

“Who are you?” I ask.

He lowers his sign and takes my bag.

“I’m Mr. Blake,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say, staring at him holding my bag in his hand. “But who are you? *Why* are you?”

“I am your driver. I am one of your father’s subjects. I am one of *your* subjects.”

Ever so slightly, he bows. I get a chill.

“Please,” I say, reaching out to straighten him up. “Oh god, please don’t do that. Can you just tell me why you are here? How you knew I would be here? How this is . . . happening?”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t,” he says, shrugging. “I just knew to be here. I listened, you see. And I came. *An obair*, you see. I am your ferryman for this next short leg of your journey, then I will be gone again.”

He gestures for me to come, then starts to walk. “Right this way,” he says.

I follow him, scared to ask my next question.

“You mentioned my father. Where is my father?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“Is he all right?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

He exits the building and we emerge into the gray-white, moisture-dense light of the parking lot around Shannon Airport. Mr. Blake walks with some bounce and looks up to the sky as he goes, like he has just stepped into glorious sunshine. An almost imperceptible rain starts.

“Soft day,” Mr. Blake says happily.

I’m thinking Mr. Blake has lots of soft days. Whatever. “If you don’t know where or how my father is . . . how do you know where to take me from here?”

He turns halfway toward me while still bouncing merrily along in the opposite direction.

“You traveled a fair few miles farther than myself,” he says. “How did *you* know to be here?”

Right.

Sitting in the back—he insists I sit in the back—of Mr. Blake’s comfortable brown Mercedes, I try to get a little more grounded.

“Galway?”

“Yes, sir, Galway. You will like it. Lovely medieval port, but bang up-to-the-minute modern and cosmopolitan as well. Sure, it’s bags of fun.”

“Great,” I say, thinking that what I was looking for was more explanation and less tourist bureau. “But, Mr. Blake, *why* Galway? What is there for me?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

Of course he doesn’t. I sit back and watch Ireland go by.

It does not go by at a particularly fast pace, partly because I am so anxious to get to Galway and whatever it holds that any speed would be too agonizingly slow, and partly because the road, which is the primary route between one of the country’s major airports and one of its largest cities—

“Third largest,” Mr. Blake says helpfully.

“Sorry,” I say, “was I thinking out loud?”

“No,” he says.

“Ah. Right,” I say, realizing I am back in the company of the unprivate thought. It is as unsettling now as it has always been—with my father, with the coven—that my fellow witches can read my mind.

“Would you like me to not be doing that?”

“Reading my thoughts, you mean?”

“Well, ’tisin’t exactly reading. But I could stop listening, if you prefer.”

“If you don’t mind, for the time being anyway.”

“Not a’tall,” he says, and apparently checks back out.

The road weaves in and out of seemingly every little gray village between the two points. And every time we slow down—in front of the shops featuring mostly chocolate and cigarettes and the *Irish Times*, and the pubs that pop up unbelievably often, and the fish-and-chips establishments—people gawk at us. Not every person, mind, but maybe one in three. They stop, especially the young ones, as if there is a passing dignitary or sportsman in the car. In the *backseat* of the car, precisely.

All the gawking people, with their expectant, apprehensive faces. Their shimmery, magical, witch faces.

I am relieved, oddly enough, to see them. I am shaken also to see them. I feel somewhat out of my depth. If they are my people, this is still their place.

“Mr. Blake—”

“Yes, sir, I can drive faster if you prefer.”

“I prefer.”

I cannot believe what I see. If it is true, then this must be the witch capital of the world. I see them now, even more clearly than I ever saw the witches at my school. I see them when we whiz through the small towns—although at this speed everyone looks a little shimmery—and I see them by the side of the road in the hinterlands, among the people driving herds of black-faced sheep alongside speeding traffic. I see them in the distance, putting stones back in place here and there,

along the many miles of dry stone walls that zig and zag to separate each sloping little green field from the next.

I see them now, as if I have been fitted with some powerful new glasses that also allow me, unfortunately, to be seen. I have to admit it worries the hell out of me—the way you get worried in a strange city when you feel like you are surrounded by unfriendly native people. I wouldn't half mind having Mr. Blake step back into my head and reassure me somehow.

"It's to do with the smaller towns and countryside, Marcus," he says. "You won't have all that staring up in the big town. They're much too sophisticated for that sort of carrying-on. They'll notice you all right. But they won't let you notice that they notice."

"Really?" I say, "Well, I'll look forward to their sophistication. This stuff is giving me the creeps."

Mr. Blake tilts his head slightly toward the back. "Right. Well, it is the sophistication, and the fact that a lot of people . . . well, you'll find that a lot of *our* people—especially the younger, hipper, who tend to want to reject the old ways . . ."

"Please, Mr. Blake, can you get to the point?"

"Well, a lot of folks will think this is a load of bollocks. Frankly."

"What is?"

"The Blood War."

"Well, is it?"

"Of course it's not. It is all. It is everything. But you already know this. You understand the seriousness of your quest, or you wouldn't be here."

Mr. Blake somehow manages to say all these things with a kind of elevation, a chipperness, that makes you almost forget the gravity of the situation. I think of the younger lot of witches I know—Eartha, Arj, Marthe. Clearly and unfortunately, they do not take their generation's attitude.

Maybe what sets them apart is their relationship with Spence himself. He is supposed to be some kind of leader, though he is so bookish, so geeky and unintimidating, he doesn't seem the type. Still, I am the first to understand that looks can be deceiving. Even when you know to be on your guard—as has been the case with his daughter, Eartha.

Even now I feel the blood rush to my face at the thought of Eartha, and I do not know whether it is all hatred that causes it. Time and again, she has drawn me close to her, though I have known better. Time and again, she's slithered into my dreams, my nightmares, my bedroom. . . .

Luckily, Mr. Blake manages to zip us along at a nice enough pace that we are soon pulling into the town of Galway, in the county of Galway.

I look all around as we tool our way through what turns out to be not a very large place. There is a mix of familiar American fast-food joints, record and clothes shops, slapped right up against buildings that are older than my whole country. As expected, I see people shimmering, loads and loads of people, radioactive compared to how the witches seemed in Blackwater.

But for the most part, they pay us no attention.

We pull up in front of a grand old joint, the Great Southern Hotel, banged right up against the train station. It's a big stone square, five stories high (which around here makes it a skyscraper) and covering most of the block.

"This is it, then?"

"'Tis."

"Looks pretty nice."

"You can afford it."

"Yes, I guess I can. For a couple of nights anyway."

Mr. Blake takes my bag again and sees me into the lobby and to the registration desk. I feel awkward and start fumbling for some of the many dirty dollars in my pocket.

"Sorry," I say. "I haven't had a chance to exchange my money yet, but—"

"Out of the question," he says, backing away from me, smiling just the way he has smiled all along.

"I must owe you something. . . ."

"Not a'tall," he insists, and finally the smile subsides, a look of fatherly worry replacing it. "Just take care, Marcus Aurelius. Welcome, *fáilte*. But remember, this is not the place you left behind. Don't be confused."

I wish I could say I won't be. But I am sure I will be very confused. I am, however, forewarned.

He somehow manages to smoothly walk backwards through the hotel's revolving front door, his warm smile returning at the last moment and giving my spine a snapping like a bullwhip.

Don't be confused, he tells me. Not bloody likely.

After checking in, I decline any help with my one measly bag and trundle myself up to the top-floor room they've assigned me. By the time I am standing, weaving, in front of my door, I realize that I am again, or still, totally exhausted. I feel I will be this way forever.

I open the door, walk through, and fall straight over on the bed.

Maybe I am on my own. Maybe I am not. Maybe I am already trapped, or on my way there. Maybe I am fated by Cernunnos to win. Or to lose.

Maybe time is running thin. But for now, I lie here on the bed and wait for a sign.

What else can I do?

CHAPTER

3

When I wake I am still facedown on the bed, and I can feel that the spread has dug a pattern of wrinkles into my weary face.

I go slowly to the window and look out over the now darkening town of Galway.

Out to my left, I see a maze of streets, medieval in their twisty layout the way they curve and then pike and then turn back on themselves. There is the thin rocket of a spire of an ancient church rising above the tangle, and the slightly smaller peak of another, both in dark, nearly burnt stone. Farther out in the same direction, the streets open up to a waterfront, a working harbor, a beach, and a great wide bay. In the distance a good-sized island clutches the last of the evening light.

Off to my right there is a lot less of note. It is flat, for the most part, with the occasional bump of a hillock,

and section after section of big housing developments, but nothing else much.

Finally, right down the dead-center heart of the town, splitting it almost perfectly in half, is one of the fastest-moving rivers I have ever seen. It's brown and busy, and it has tiny little whitecaps hopping up like salmon all over it. Mr. Blake mentioned it in the car, I remember. The River Corrib.

Now I search the view for something else and, not believing I do not see it, I search again and again.

I get a chill.

There are no woods in sight. Barely a tree, even. This, this place is supposed to be the source and origin of my power, my father's power, our god Cernunnos's power. The woods in Port Caledonia are where I got my first stirrings of magic and where that magic grew. Come to think of it, I don't believe I have ever been more than a few miles from any woods.

A thought occurs to me too, as I take this all in. I don't even hear *an obair* now, and I believe this is why. I am lost, untethered without the woods.

With a movement that's pure reflex, I take my half bottle of Irish Mist out of my bag. Then I plunk back down on the bed, and switch on the television to a soccer game.

I take one sip, one long, long, long sip.

And suddenly I have a vision.

It is a very clear vision of myself, right now.

"I have come all this way," I say, standing, checking myself in the mirror, "to sit in an Irish hotel, to sleep, drink straight from the bottle, and watch *soccer*?" I glance

toward the TV again, then back to the mirror. “Soccer,” I say. I drop the bottle on the floor.

But what the hell am I supposed to do? Somebody, something, should be guiding me here. I am waiting for clues, but waiting feels like a luxury.

I grab my bag, check to see what I have packed to protect me from the Irish October evening.

A denim jacket.

I throw it on and get out.

I am taken completely by surprise by the bone-depth of the raw Galway chill, and I wish I still had my bottle. It isn't frigid the way some winters are back home, but it is a different, insidious, relentless thing that doesn't announce itself until you are outside for a while and trapped in its gnarly fingers.

I think of recent days in Blackwater. Sweating. Again, I cannot believe how far away I am. How far, how quick.

So I march steadily, with a chilly sense of purpose but without any direction to speak of. I cross the green of the square, Eyre Square it is called, right in front of my hotel, past the plaque that tells me this is one of the last spots John F. Kennedy visited before dying. I continue on through, down the center of town through Shop Street, onto Quay Street, and I realize that, as sure as salmon make their way upriver, I am making my way to the water that I saw from my window.

I realize one other notable thing. I see not one single other person. Not a mortal. Not a witch. Not even a dog. I am chilled further, a dangerous air of anticipation sweeping over me.

I push on. Until I am at a place, a thing called the Spanish Arch. It is a small arch as arches go, and I have no idea what makes it Spanish, but it does reside hard by the water, which, at some point I guess, flows into the Atlantic.

Which stretches to the shores, I realize, where I came from.

I walk out to the edge, the very edge of the stone pier, and I face home.

I am tiny. The water, the world, everything is flowing right past me, out of Ireland, and toward North America, it seems. I actually catch myself straining, squinting, trying to catch a glimpse of whoever is watching me out there. It feels like somebody is, but maybe I am only hoping.

“So,” I say to whoever I hope it is and isn’t, holding myself against the creeping cold. “What now, huh? What the hell now? What? Where? Why?”

I know I have to be here, in this city, for a reason. Mr. Blake knew it too, and that goes some way in reassuring me. I am following the vaguest of diagrams—but surely I am following something. Still, it is maddening. “There is nothing here. This place is no place.”

I want to go home.

The wind now kicks up fiercely. It is blowing right through me, and as my hands try to warm my arms, I wonder what will warm my hands. They are stiff as coat hangers. I look at them. They are thin as coat hangers, twisted into horror-show approximations of hands.

I edge ever closer to the lip of the quay. I stare now, straight down into the water. I stare and I stare and I stare, and I want my father; I want my mother.

I want my liquor, is what I want.

Next thing I know, my hand, my fist, my frozen claw is locked around the neck of a bottle.

Irish Mist. My bottle, my half-empty bottle that I left on the hotel room floor, that I took with me across the ocean, that I took with me from . . . the liquor store, from unfortunate Marissa.

I hold it up, stare at it.

I drain it.

I feel the liquor spread through me, down my gullet, expanding in my chest, spreading further through my grateful belly. It is as if I have drunk a quart of warm molasses, and it is clinging to the walls of me like a protective coating.

I am immediately warmer, more settled. My senses now tune in to the world around me: now that I am not consumed with cold, I hear things, distant sounds, the faintest hint of *an obair*, I think. And I scent.

I turn my nose upriver, away from the bay. And now I can hear it more clearly—even without the woods to orient and ground me—like it is calling my name, and I can smell it too. I follow.

Walking right along the edge of the river, I head up through the deserted town—past the arch again, the big, ugly, modern hotel, and up to a bridge, the sound and spray of the spectacular, grungy river getting more intense with every step.

I walk out to the middle of the bridge and I stare over the side, watching the angry brown water charge my way. It looks like it's coming down just for me,

rushing to me, under me, into me. The river thunders, shakes the bridge under my feet, and I close my eyes and spread my arms to take it in.

I feel I know this place—if not this country, then this spot.

The moisture-soaked wind is blowing mightily, right into me now. I am baptized. And frozen to the bone.

I open my eyes.

They're there. On the next bridge spanning the Corrib farther upriver. All of them. At least, all of them who matter, aside from Spence himself.

Arj, Baron, Winston, Marthe. For real, in the flesh. And in the center, at the curved crest of the bridge, is Eartha. Eartha, so nearly physically identical to my love, my dead Jules. Eartha, whom I cannot seem to stay away from, whom I cannot seem to purge myself of, no matter how much horror she brings to my existence. She smiles. I ignore her.

Eleanor. Where the hell is Eleanor?

“*Fáilte,*” Arj calls out in a mock-friendly tone. The river roars, but I hear his voice as if we are chest-to-chest. “Welcome. How was your flight?”

I say nothing. Blood is surging hot through me every which way, thawing my ears and eyes, my legs and hands. I am ready. I am so ready for this.

Then, just like that, they begin filing away, off to the left, where the bridge empties into a tangle of narrow cobbled streets. *Shit.*

Instantly I move myself and am on their bridge, but they are gone and vanished.

And someone is behind me. I whip around, elbows pulled back with my fingers facing forward, witch-style. And, seeing, I stop, stand still, lower my hands, but only slightly.

It is Marthe. Of course. If there were one I would trust, it would be Marthe. That is why she is here. They left her behind.

I do not trust. Must not trust.

“It is good to see you, Marcus,” she says.

“No it isn’t,” I growl. “And if it is, I will fix that.”

“You will not win, Marcus. Please accept that. You do not know this place. Everything will be different here. Different in ways that will not be good for you.”

Her manner is all gentle, understanding, and warm to me in the way that Marthe has always been warm to me, ever since the coven and I found each other. As if she cares. As if she has a genuine concern for me. All the more precious it is, here and now, with me in this cold foreign land. And so alone. All the more precious.

All the more hateful.

I slap her face, hard.

“Stop it,” I shout.

She whimpers. “Please, Marcus . . .”

I seize her by the hair. I point in the direction in which they all just took off.

“Tell you what. Bring me *your* mother, and then we can talk.”

She looks down.

“Haven’t got one,” she says sadly.

“That’s a shame,” I say.

“If you’ll just ever listen . . . ,” Marthe says, and I am stunned by a new realization.

“Hey,” I shout. “What the hell is that?”

“What?”

I am pointing at her mouth, down her throat, actually. “That,” I say. “That *accent*. That Irish crap.”

“It’s no crap, Marcus. It’s what I am. It’s what we all are, our coven. It was the other that was the act. I’m telling you, you are a long way from home now. But we are not. You are in trouble.”

All of a sudden I go all twitchy, looking over my shoulder for the aforementioned trouble, then straight back to Marthe again.

“’Twas your father brought everything over the ocean, Marcus. Yet again one of his great mistakes. We’re bringing *an obair* home again where it belongs.”

If I could, I would be melting her here with my eyes, I am so fixed on her face. She notices, pauses, but goes on. “And you won’t find your trees to be hiding in here. Your forest is far away, your center is far away. We have adapted beyond the forests of our origins. All that is far away and—”

“And,” I say, carried along by growing rage, helping *her* along to where she was not going to go, “my dog is far away? Is that what you mean? And my father is far away?”

She pauses, out of respect for Chuck, perhaps.

“Your father is not far away.”

I swallow, hard. I feel my look of surprise and hope and fight it down.

“But—”

“What?” I demand, my jaw clenching, unclenching.

“He’ll be of little use to you now, I’m afraid.”

I clutch at her. I have had enough.

“You’re afraid?” I spit. “Are you really, Marthe?”

“That’s not what I meant, Marcus. But yes, as a matter of fact, I am afraid. Now I am.”

She is looking into my eyes with a new-blossomed fear and is backing away from me, toward the far side of the bridge and the knot of old narrow streets.

“That’s good,” I say. “That’s a start.”

“Leave me be, Marcus. Please. I have been trying to help you. I didn’t have to stay behind. I could have gone on with the rest, but I wanted one more chance. I know it is hard for you to believe at this point, but it is possible for someone like me to have real feelings. I have real feelings for you.”

The words of friendship and concern make me madder than anything now. My hand flies up and seizes Marthe’s hair. I pull upward. She screams. I continue, until she is high up on her toes.

“Where is my mother?” I ask evenly.

“I can’t tell you, Marcus.”

I lift her, with one hand, off her feet.

“Where is my father?”

“Don’t begin a war you won’t finish, Marcus.” She is crying now. “Your father . . . If you wind up alone in this place, you’ll be destroyed. You’ll be quite out in the open here. There’ll be nowhere to hide. And there will be everywhere to hide for them. You’ll never catch them unless they want to be caught, and when they want to be caught you certainly don’t want to catch them. Please

think again about joining together with us instead . . . for everyone's sake."

I sling her, head over heels, over the side of the bridge. She hits the stone siding with a thump, hangs there, crying.

I can almost see bolts of electric rage flying off my skin. I can do this. I can do this. One by one, they will fall, and it will be good for me. I will feed on the evil sons of bitches, take them into myself until I am—

To hell with it. No more. No more caring. About anyone. About anything. Me and mine. It is a very small circle, a very select group. Me and mine. That's as far as trust or care will ever go again.

She is looking up at me as I am looking down at her, the river running past like the ground under a speeding bus.

I am sure I can do this. I am sure I can. She has earned it, they have all earned it. At some point there are no rules. At some point everybody deserves what they get and it is no shame on whoever gives it to them.

She is not fighting now. Not struggling or squirming or screaming. She just looks up at me, eyes growing wider, focusing fully on mine.

"Goddammit," I breathe. I brace myself and haul her back up onto the bridge.

I don't want to destroy Marthe. I'm disgusted that I have come so close.

I'm also disgusted I can't go further.

I stomp away from her.

Unbelievably, she rushes to catch up with me. She

grabs my arm. I can feel her shaking through the sleeve of my jacket. She hesitates as I meet her gaze. Looks indecisive for a moment. Then, slowly, with one weak hand, she points off in the distance, to the opposite rough, rocky, steep bank of the river.

And there, lying, sitting, perched, staring straight at me, is a seal. It is waiting, like a sleek black limousine parked at a watery curb.

I look back at Marthe.

“And what is that?” I say.

“She is here for you.”

“I don’t remember ordering a seal.”

“She will take you to your father,” Marthe says with some sadness.

I do a double take, looking back and forth between them, disbelieving on so many levels.

“How do you know that?” I demand.

She pauses, sighs. “Because that is why I was left behind. I am supposed to be keeping you from going with her.” She nudges me. “Go with her.”

This has always been the damnable thing about Marthe. You could almost swear there is a human in there.

“So why, Marthe . . . ?”

“Because. I still think you should be with us. I still desperately wish you could be with us. . . . But you will never be with us, will you, Marcus?”

I shake my head emphatically.

“And if you are not with us, then . . . I guess I just don’t want to see you here alone. Your father is too

weakened to come to you. If you do not go to him now . . . I am afraid you will soon be alone.”

I realize all at once what she is doing for me. Damn Marthe. Damn damnable Marthe. After I have just been holding her by the hair over a rushing river.

“Thanks,” I say, and start backing away.

Her face takes on a fractured look, while she smiles a small smile. Then she vanishes.

I walk down to the riverbank, the rain pounding down on me now like needles from an angry sky. I reach the spot on the rocks. The seal has jumped into the river now but hovers there, bobbing on the water as she fights the powerful current.

She waits. Blinks.

I hear it then. I smell it, feel it prickling my skin. *An obair* all around me and inside me, like a pervasive vapor. Telling me to push on ahead.

I look into those huge eyes. Those huge, soft, understanding, sad eyes.

She begins to let herself drift along with the current, but slower and hanging close to the shore.

I walk along the bank behind her.

CHAPTER

4

What the seal leads me to minutes later is not my father but a boat. It's sitting there at the edge of the city, at the point where the river becomes the sea, untethered and bobbing but staying put. It is an odd, low, red-sailed vessel made, it seems, from some kind of canvas stretched tight over a wood frame. The sails, burnt red like leather, flap and snap loudly in the wind.

She sits there for a moment, the seal does, waiting. I am disappointed, but I take the hint well enough and get down in the water, stumbling and splashing over the rocks until I can flop onto the boat. I sit up on the small bit of a bench seat as the seal slowly casts off once again and the boat does likewise, all of its own accord. She floats on her back, keeping an eye on the boat as we sail off into the bay.

A flotilla of swans catches my eye, iridescent against

the light gray of the fading night and the oil-dark, rain-battered sea. I get a sudden shock, because I'd thought it was late in the evening, or close to it. I don't know if the time has gone fuzzy or if I have, if I have lost my bearings.

I am not, however unfortunately, losing my feeling for cold. I am bone-rattling, I am shivering so much from the wind and wet. My ineffectual denim jacket is the perfect symbol, I think, of how unprepared I am to be here doing this.

Doing what?

"Hey," I shout at the seal, futile as I know it probably is. "Where are we going, seal?"

She ignores me. She flips over onto her belly, disappears under the water, then reappears, breaking the surface as smoothly as the sun breaking the sky. Above us the sky is lightening as the night gives way.

I am freezing. My god, it is cold. The sea begins to rise and fall a little in small swells, just enough to shake the boat. The wind blows. But the rain stops, at least. Good.

Damn. The rain starts again. And now something hard bounces off my forehead. Large chunks of *something* are landing everywhere as I watch, mouth agape. Hailstones.

The hail stops now, and I am about to believe that the strange weather has subsided when the break is followed immediately—*immediately*—by the rising of the sun. It is beautiful. It is warm, not summer warm but warm enough to be paradise compared to what

came before. I don't care how it has happened, I just soak it in. I feel my clothes drying, my bone chill easing.

And then I see it subsiding again. *No.*

"No," I call in vain. The sun sets as quickly as it came, and my spirit goes down with it. I brace for more.

And it happens again. Maybe five minutes later. Maybe twelve hours later. I am still wet when the sun returns, still chilled. I am warming again.

It is gone again.

This—the strangeness and unpredictability of it all—eventually stops having the effect it should have. I am down in the boat now, on my back, facing the sky, as every wrinkle in my clothes, every hollowed-out bit of my shattered body, fills and unfills with pools of rain and seawater.

Until somewhere between day and night, following who knows how many minutes or hours or days, the boat comes banging to a halt.

I crash and stumble and flail, completely upended, as I try and get a look at where I am.

We have come ashore on a beach, a bare and desolate beach settled in at the foot, I see, of a sheer, five-hundred-foot cliff. It is an island in the middle of a vast, vast expanse of nothing else but sea and sky.

The boat is still banging around and shaking me, trying to eject me as the incoming tide insists we get out and onto the island. I climb out and pull the boat behind me as I make my way up the beach, hauling it onto the dry rocks. I am shivering with cold and dread;

I turn back toward the seal, waiting for her to lead me. But she is no longer in sight.

I am still standing there, absorbing the absence of the seal and wondering what I am supposed to do, when it comes. The biggest, biggest mother of a wolf-beast that ever walked is headed toward me across the beach. Instinctively, I lift my hands to warn him off, palms down and fingers facing forward. He keeps walking. Occasionally he snuffles the ground, scenting something. Casual. Like I cannot worry him in the least.

He comes to a full stop directly in front of me, only two feet away. His head hangs slightly lower than his shoulders, and, unbelievably, it is almost even with mine. His eyes are yellow but intelligent, somehow. I can smell his breath as it wafts toward me and warms my chest and drifts upward—carrying the distinct odor of fresh meat.

If it is true that every familiar is somehow an extension of its owner—as seems to be the case—this mighty thing belongs to a leader, king, lord, whatever . . . of a great magical people.

This is my father's familiar.

The great creature opens his mouth and leans toward me. I am petrified stone.

He opens his jaws around my right hand, closing them just exactly enough for the teeth to dig but not break the skin. He tugs, then lets go.

I blink, because I am almost crying with relief. He is not going to maul me.

He just turns and walks and I follow . . . as if I had a choice.

What we do, me and the boss, is walk counterclockwise around the front face of the apparently deserted island. The sand under our feet is a blanket of minuscule seashells and coral bits. The sound it makes when the tide comes in and withdraws is just like milk over Rice Krispies.

We turn the big sweep of a corner of rocky outcropping, and suddenly it is like I'm slammed in the chest. *An obair* thuds in my head and my lungs and my legs. Both of us, the wolf and I, pick up the pace.

The tide on this side is almost completely up to the base of the cliff, up far enough that the beach disappears entirely, and we are scrabbling over higher and higher rocks. My feet and calves are slapped by a wave, and I lose my footing, gain it again. And when I do, I see it.

The mouth of the cave opens out to the sea, practically inviting it inside. The wolf stops, and I do too for a moment. But now he turns his yellow eyes on me, and I take the hint, making my way past him at a crawl.

The cave is, first of all, stunningly warm. It is wet but not uncomfortable. There is light coming obliquely from cracks in the walls here and there, though it is impossible to tell the source. I follow as the cave twists deeper into the cliff, into what I imagine is the heart of the island.

I follow and follow until the light increases and the tunnel narrows, then opens wide and sudden.

And there, I see, he is.

He is lying flat out on a raised platform of stone lined with animal furs and blankets and pillows of goose down. It looks very much like a funeral.

I go slowly to him. I step up the one small step to his side. I may well be sick.

He is as dead as dead can be without being truly gone. There is almost no flesh to speak of on his face. You can see his cheekbones, the striated muscle of his jaw. The pits at his temples are as deep as egg cups. His eyes are closed, but the circular rim of space around each eye is so well defined you cannot see how the eyes could actually still be connected to the man.

I put my hand on my father's chest, and there is barely a chest there. He is completely covered in blankets, maybe to keep in whatever heat and life he's got. If so, it is working, because when I put two fingers to his neck I get both the pulse that I am looking for and a surprising wave of heat.

There is also a dripping sound. I look around, then follow the sound to the rock floor just below me. More accurately, just below *him*. I lift the overflow of blanket right in front of me and look below to where drops of blood are hitting the stone floor.

Blood still seeping from the wound that happened . . . was it days ago? The hole he tore *out* of himself in giving me the ring—as a gift, as proof. The hole that proved to be a pipeline down into his very center.

“How can this be?” I say, pulling my face down close to his face. I feel his breath on me, and it is almost comforting. “How can you still be bleeding?”

I don’t get a response, as I don’t expect one.

I get up. I put good distance between us—like I want to put distance between me and grief, me and thoughts of Eleanor and how hopeless this could be without him—and I pace. But I never take my eyes off him.

“You probably deserve it, you know,” I say to him. “God knows what you’ve done over time. What I do know I don’t like very much, so what I don’t know is probably awful, so probably, you know, you deserve it. You left me. You left Eleanor. You caused this war. You are probably capable of all manner of serious crap.”

I pause. I look away, back toward the cave entrance, with the chilling feeling that something is coming. But I see nothing.

“You know what,” I say, more forcefully. “You know what? I don’t even care much. That’s not why I’m here. I just want my mother. *She* matters, not you.”

I get the chill for sure now, and I rush to the entrance of the cave-room. Nothing. Still nothing.

“Do you hear me?” I say, swinging back to him with yet more vigor but maybe less conviction. Because I feel it more surely, minute-by-minute, tick-by-tick . . . something. It’s not something coming, though, after all. It is something getting away from me.

No. I grab at my face with my hands, raking my nails across my cheeks. And I know it now—I cannot *not* know it. My father is not in control. He is in fact far less

effective than I am now. I have been wasting time, hoping for a grand plan, for someone or something to take over, but it is not going to happen. I am alone.

I feel it. I feel I'm a speck on the universe. And my father is dying. And I hate him for it.

I rush back up to him. "Did you hear me?" I say.

And then I flinch and stare. Tears, like thick, jellied slugs, are crawling out of his rotted, closed eyes, one after one after one, out and down the sides of his corroded old head.

I feel his breath a little quicker, warmer.

Then I feel, in a rush, the pain of searing heat in my ring fingers, as if the two rings are somehow being held to fire and then applied to my flesh. I am throbbing with it. I look at my hands. *An obair* is ringing, singing, stinging in my ears.

I look from my hands to the man, to my hands again. This is all I can do. What he once did for me.

I pull his withered wasting hand up to me, and the pumping blood comes over me, over my hand, my wrist. The heat from the rings increases, increases as they near each other, as they near him. I hold his dying right hand in my left, and I take my right, extend my index finger, point.

I touch lightly the surface of his bottomless hurt, his missing ring finger.

It feels like nothing is there. Like jelly but nothing more.

His body twitches slightly.

I push my finger a little further in.

He twitches. Goes rigid. I see his eyes under thin lids bulge and shift.

I breathe deeply, bite my lip hard.

And shove my finger into the wound, hard, all the way in to the hilt.

His body shudders and bucks like he's been zapped with defibrillator paddles. I scream with the pain that seems to be shooting straight out of him and up into me. It burns, it sears, it shocks with bolts of electricity working up and through my entire body.

I hold it as long as I can, as long as my father's body seems able to withstand it. I hold my position, with my finger jammed deep in his bony old hand, feeling gristle and bone and tissue—the everything of the physical him.

And when it is time, an estimation based on I don't know what, I withdraw. There is a small sucking noise; then, finally, I am out.

My arm is covered somehow, up to the elbow in blood, as if I have been performing open-heart surgery rather than fixing a hole. And I watch with something like pride and hope as before my eyes the wound completes its healing, sealing over. Still nasty, angry, and deformed, but not hemorrhaging, at least.

Other than that, little has changed to the naked eye. There is not much more than death in that face as I look down into it. I place the hand now, more properly, on his bony chest.

I guess you could call it a vigil. I sit there at the entrance to the cave in the side of the cliff above the

angry sea. I sit there all day, all night, all day again, and all night, anxious to leave, unable to leave.

This has not been for nothing. This will not be for nothing. I know I was not brought to my father's island to watch him die. I say I have been brought here for a purpose. I say he is not ready to die, even if he feels like he is. I say I know better. But truly, I do not.

I sleep sometimes but not for any great stretches. I wake one time to find myself enveloped, all wrapped up in the protective curl of the great wolf, like a cub. It makes me nearly choke with longing for my mother. I burrow deeper into his protection as I wait helplessly to know what to do.

From time to time, I go in to check on my father, but there is no change. Never any change.

Until finally I wake one morning to a violent red sunrise, a madly crashing sea in my ears. My guide the seal is back—I can hear her barking outside. And I wonder if it—her being here again—is my father's doing. If he is sending me away.

I go back to him, check on him, and can see little or nothing different.

I place a hand on his cool forehead. Rest my hand, hold it there, try to warm him. I will not cry. And I do not say good-bye. I will be back, if only to bury him.

In minutes I am in my boat, crossing the choppy waters again, the boat knowing what to do as it follows the seal that knows what to do.

It is the same journey in reverse, or at least it seems to be—the same crazy weather, the same timelessness.

Galway, deserted and desolate though it was when I left it, is now inviting to me, and I am eager to arrive.

Only our destination is not, apparently, Galway. The shore where the boat finally comes to rest looks more like the surface of the moon.

“What is this?” I say. Receiving a verbal answer from the seal seems as likely as not at this point. She is, however, unhelpful now. She lets out a series of short, intense barks, ducks out under the waves, then pops up to give me a last parting shout before swimming away.

Here. Why here? It is almost literally a great bald mountain of rock, limestone. I can see nothing else on the horizon. Not a green hill. Not a tree, not a pasture.

Above all, not a forest. It is as if I am being shown emphatically that I will not find my forest anywhere around here.

I feel utterly exposed as I start trekking over the forbidding landscape, and wish for the millionth time that I had Chuck to comfort and protect me. I walk, encountering no other life but the occasional sprouting of wildflowers from this or that fissure in the stone, for over an hour.

It is dusk and darkening fast, and I am wondering if it may not be the coven that has steered me here, and not my father, not *an obair*. I feel aimless again. And lost. And overlapping all of this, I feel the grief I have carried since leaving the cave.

When it seems too dark to walk any farther, I come to a halt and scan what is left of the horizon. And I see

something out in the distance. It looks like a stone rocket. It seems to confirm my growing suspicion that I am not on Earth at all anymore.

I reach it within minutes, overwhelmed by relief.

It is an ancient derelict round tower, plunked like a lighthouse in the middle of Mount Barren. I have to circle it to find the entrance, and when I do I find it to be nine feet off the ground. I guess this was to keep the bad guys out, but since I am not a bad guy and since there is a decrepit wooden ladder lying on the ground below, I feel invited.

I manage to get from ground to door by stepping lightly and balancing precariously. Once inside, I do what people do. I step in through the open doorway and call out, "*Hello?*"

Which is right away so silly I allow myself my first real laugh in a long old time. And I relax, as much as I can.

It's a stone pencil of a building. There is an empty room on the bottom level, which is only about ten feet in diameter. I follow through a cut doorway and on up the curlicue stairway to the second level, which is the same as below, only with a rough oak sort of bed deal. The bed is covered with a mattress that is about two inches thick and has something like horse-hair spilling out of its many worn patches. At four different spots the walls are cut with thin keyhole window openings.

I follow to the third and top story to find again a stone circular emptiness. But there is one additional

feature here: a wooden ladder, a bit sturdier than the one outside, leading to a square wood panel in the ceiling just about wide enough for me to squeeze through.

I climb and, after a few hard shoves, manage to get the heavy, waterlogged panel out of the way, and then I'm up.

I would say the view is spectacular, if it were not for the numbingly unspectacular nature of the land all around me. Bare, hard, cold, nearly white, the limestone stretches, barely undulating, for as far as I can see. It is as if the earth of Ireland—if this is still Ireland—exhausted from pumping up all that greenery everywhere else, just gave up and came to this spot to die.

Maybe I did too. But what I feel is that I came—or was led—here to sleep. I am finding at this point that every opportunity for rest is welcome, as events have left me more drained than I have ever been in my life. One would think that acquiring magical powers would leave a person feeling energized all the time. But one would be wrong.

I barely make it back down to the second floor. My head has barely landed on the smelly horsehair before I go under.

Jules.

I can't believe it. I cannot bear it.

Jules. I have found Jules. She has found me.

I knew, somewhere in me, somewhere, I knew this was not the end, that Jules was not at an end.

Jules. I have traveled half the globe, would gladly travel the other half, for this as a result.

My god.

“Jules.”

“Marcus.”

“How is this possible, Jules?” I say, grabbing her so hard I hurt her, and she groans.

Truth is I do not care how this is possible; I almost don't even care that I am hurting her. Because it is love, I am loving her, and I will hold her just as mightily as I possibly can. I kiss her hard, aggressively hard.

“I don't know,” she says, her eyes wide with the mystery of it all. But then she pushes, to get distance between us. To look at me.

I feel conspicuous, ashamed somehow, though I haven't done anything.

“Marcus,” she says. “What is this? What is wrong with you? You've changed.”

I frown deeply. I can feel she is right. I can feel it now in a way I could not before this moment.

“Everything has changed, Jules . . . since you've been gone. Everything . . .” I can't even begin. I shake my head.

She seizes my face in her two hands. “It's all right, Marcus,” she says. And she kisses me mightily.

Passionately. It is wild now, unlike anything, unlike ever before. Jules feels stronger than me, and she presses her advantage. She rolls me over on the stiff, damp bed, and she presses her mouth deeper into mine. She tears open my shirt. I manage to free a hand and grab madly

at the long, flowing, lacy top she is wearing. I am yanking at it and pulling her down on top of me.

We are making love angrily, and sweetly.

It is wonderful, the most wonderful moment ever.

And it is wrong.

As soon as I think it, it all comes undone.

I scream in pain. “No, Jules,” I scream, as I feel her slipping away from me.

“Marcus?” she says, questioning, crying, scared.

“Marcus? Marcus? Marcus!”

I am sitting up in the bed in the tower, awake. My heart is fluttering like a hummingbird on speed—from the power of the dream, I think. Only . . .

“Marcus!”

It is Eleanor.

She is not here with me, but it is her I hear out there, calling.

I rush to one of the keyhole windows.

“Eleanor,” I call.

“Marcus!” she calls back, sounding scared, worried, sad.

I bang into the wall, and my shoulder is wracked with pain as I carom my way off of one stone surface after another, trying to feel my way down the stairs.

I get to the bottom floor and rush out the door.

And am nearly killed. I have forgotten about the protective elevated entrance. I thrust my foot down, catching it on the second highest rung of the ladder. It snaps in half. I continue downward, snapping another rung

and then another, finally catching for good on one about halfway down. Then the whole thing lurches forward, and I am vaulted several feet into the distance and sent crashing across the ground.

I feel as if I've been in a car wreck as I climb back to my feet and run through the pain to where I think I heard Eleanor's voice.

It is pitch-black, but I think I can sense where I'm going. I run, limp, hobbling fast as I can, and I can definitely sense something, closer and closer, before I even hear anything again. But then I do hear something.

"Marcus?"

"Eleanor," I scream. "Eleanor! Where are you?"

I follow the sound, running full out, not caring what happens, what danger there may be, if only I can reach her. I am squinting to see anything and running full speed, knowing that the landscape itself will throw up nothing more than the odd bump and thatch of wildflowers.

And once again I am proven wrong.

I am lucky that I stumble over one of the bumps, because as I am regaining my balance, hands outstretched before me to brace for a fall, I run right into it.

A tree.

I put both hands on it, then bring my nose right up to it and breathe in its familiar piney essence.

Then I reach out and find another, then another, and I realize I have found the forest. I am shocked. Pleasantly, brilliantly shocked. I am also now perfectly fearless.

“Marcus,” Eleanor calls from farther ahead.

“I’m coming,” I say, and plow forward with the renewed confidence of a warrior hooking up with his army.

I weave my way deeper and deeper into this forest like I have known it forever—this ancient Celtic woodland that is mine because I am the Prince. I am certain that it is coming now: vengeance. Sweet, blood-soaked retribution.

I can feel it. I can hear it.

I can smell them. I am unstoppable.

“Eleanor,” I call once more.

I get no response. I continue straight ahead.

“Eleanor.”

Nothing.

I slow down. Then I stop.

Dead, dead silence.

“El—,” I start.

From all directions at once.

They have me. Someone has my right leg, someone else my left. Acting on human instincts I ball a fist, and I drop a thunderous right hand down on somebody’s skull, but it does little. He sways, buckles, but remains standing. Then someone has my right arm, someone else my left.

I am thrashing, kicking and bucking like a mule with eight legs, and I don’t know where the powerfulness I felt has gone. I manage to splay my fingers, to throw someone to the ground with my magic, but someone else comes up behind my back, locks a

choke hold on me, and I cannot break it. My arms are completely immobilized now, as are my legs. Someone grabs me around the middle from behind and heaves.

I go over like a felled elk.

I can't see anyone. I can smell them, though.

"Cowards," I say. "Mice. Evil, evil, spineless vermin. God help you," I say.

The head closest to my ear laughs. An unmistakable, vile laugh.

"You'd better hope I die quickly," I say. "Because if there is any life at all in me . . . *Baron* . . ."

I hear him gulp loudly, and despite all, this gives me a small fiendish delight. Baron, of all people, knows what my wrath can mean. The last time he confronted me, he almost lost his tongue.

"What's it going to be, Arj?" I say to his shadowy figure out there somewhere.

"Eartha? Hello, Eartha. Nice to see you again, Eartha." I sound choked, hysterical, but I continue. "This is lovely. You should be very proud. Are you very proud? Say something. Tell me something."

Eartha doesn't answer.

"Marthe?" I call finally. "Back in line now, Marthe? What side are you on now, Marthe?"

Arj's overcalm voice cuts the night air like a scythe.

"Marthe is not on any side anymore."

I lose feeling all over momentarily. I lose strength. Bastards. Bastards.

Marthe. I am so sorry. Marthe was real.

Now there's nothing. There is not a sound. There is in fact a vacuum of sound and of scent, the woodsiness of only a few minutes earlier strangely silent. If it were not for the legion of bodies pinning me facedown to the ground, I would think I was completely, absolutely alone.

Except just, just then, there is a something.

Somebody takes my left hand, flattens it out, spreads the fingers. Quickly then, I feel the sharp metal edge of something, heavy metal pressed, then pressed hard against my ring finger.

My Prince ring finger.

It is a chisel.

Christ.

It takes an instant. I hear the small economical *whoosh* of the heavy hammer being swung through the damp air.

“Aaaahhhh . . . !”

I hear it, can nearly see it, my scream, my voice traveling in its own small body into the sky above me, over this ancient land, out and away from what is happening here, backwards and forwards to every corner of my lineage, my mystical rage.

Then, before I can either sink into my obscene, exquisite misery or pass out from it all, someone takes my right hand, presses it to the hard ground. Someone else helps spread the fingers.

This will be it. They will have gained too much. I can't let it happen.

“Nooo,” I scream.

I feel the chisel pressed hard against the finger.

Then another scream. Louder than mine, louder than anyone's anywhere, ever. A sound, a squall and a roar at once, like something between the cry of a gigantic falcon and the growl of a leopard. It tears the air, blows everything around us.

Chaos. People are falling over me, releasing me, shouting and wailing as whatever it is—a bird, but bigger than any bird that ever existed—comes cutting. Tearing, grabbing, shrieking.

And finally grabs me, lifts me right off the ground. Then, with three powerful strokes, we are up, out, gone. It is terrible and breathtaking and thrilling: my heart is racing so fast, I feel like I may be the one doing the flying and flapping. I am filled with joy and boundless gratitude as I am carried away. Amazingly, there is no fear. My witch sense, *an obair*—if it is capable of telling me anything—tells me I am safe.

As we are rising through the air, I look up. A bright white moon is emerging from the clouds, and everything is coming to light. I can see the great feathered breast of the creature that has got me. He lowers his head, curves his neck. And my life-breath catches in my throat as he meets my gaze. With his mismatched gray-green eyes.

My senses have not prepared me for this. I am so shocked and full of wonder that I feel I have *become* both of these emotions. It is overwhelming, and I turn away, disbelieving, believing.

I look down and watch as the fat drops of ruby

blood drip from my throbbing hand down to the wide, pale, rocky expanse of the land we have left—me and the great bird that, I know now, is somehow my father. I see the stone tower where I stayed, and I see the small bodies of my enemies sprawling like moles across the ground. I see no sign of any woodland whatsoever.

CHAPTER

5

“They have one ring,” he says sadly, wearily. “Everything is different now.”

“I am sorry,” I say, but at this moment I can hardly grasp it—am too busy grasping my father’s aliveness and the shifting shapes of his features, his transformation from near-death shell to beast, to man. He has somehow transformed before my eyes, in the last minutes, from the creature that saved me to the man standing before me, without visibly changing at all—as if it is completely natural to be each one, both.

He steps up to me now and grasps my ruined hand. He begins to burn life back into it—as if we are merely reversing the positions of healer and patient, of strong and weak, once again.

But not quite. As he repairs me this time, I see his hands shaking; I feel them, sinewy, but without the former power.

And something else. As his magic flows into me, as the burning sets in and penetrates, I am stoical.

It hurts, indeed. But pain is so relative. I have learned pain, and this burning of my flesh hardly measures up.

He is finished. I remain seated, bring the newly fixed hand up to my face. I turn it around and around, trying to come to grips with the absence, with the incompleteness of it now.

In solidarity, my father holds up his damaged hand, his right. He extends it and offers it to me, up high. I press my sorry hand to his, and they are a perfect imperfect match.

When we press them together, I somehow feel stronger still, healthier, warmer, fuller, more complete.

“It was not your fault,” he says.

I get up and walk away from him. We are in another ruin of a stone tower. There are sheep and cows grazing all over the land outside as I stare down over the parapet.

“How did you do that?” I ask. “How did you become that beast?”

He walks up to where I am leaning out. I can hear him shuffling like an old man behind me, his feet scraping the ground.

“To be honest, I do not know,” he says. “That, transfiguration, is a gift from the gods, rather than a skill of the individual; it comes at times of supreme need. It is a rarer-than-rare gift. It comes only to a leader—to the wearer of one of these.” He makes a fist, showing his Prince ring to me.

Then it hits me. I become aware of the absence and consider what that third ring will mean.

“What will it mean, now that they have the ring?”

“That is an excellent question, Marcus. I wish I knew for certain. There is always the leader of our people, and the successor. The leader wears his Prince ring, and his King ring. The successor has the second Prince ring. That’s the way it works, but of course it’s different here. The rings are separated. Because of that there’s a scattering—of rule, power, and the magnitude of that power. The rings aren’t *all*, but it is a great misfortune that we have lost one.”

I let my head drop heavily onto the stone wall. “And I gave it up to them.”

He grabs my hair from the back of my head and pulls firmly.

“Do not hang your head. Ever.”

He is an old man and severely damaged. But as I look now into his famous and famously powerful mismatched eyes, I know there is more than enough reason to respect him. And to fear him still.

“All right,” I say. “I won’t.”

He gives my hair a small extra tug and a shove.

“And get a haircut,” he says, like a dad.

We walk around the top of this tower as if it were a conference room, a war room, and we were planning a corporate takeover rather than possibly the end of a centuries-old magical dynasty. Mostly he leads, walking the perimeter of the tower, taking in the air, which happens to be almost unearthly beautiful air, cool and

light and just sprinkled with moisture. He walks very slowly, though, and he is visibly dragging one side of his body along.

“I am glad, by the way,” I say. “To see you, you know.”

“To see me not dead, you mean. Well, thank you. That is a fine sentiment toward one’s father.”

“I mean, I didn’t know if I would . . . see you. . . .”

He waves away the subject.

“That is past,” he says. “Your concerns are now very much present and future.”

I know he is right. I knew it already. And now what I also fear is that *he* doesn’t have much of a future to be concerned with.

“Um, well, about the future . . . I’d really rather, now, that you wouldn’t die.”

“Again, I am touched. But are you saying that before, it would have been all right if I’d died?”

I wait a polite couple of seconds.

“Yes, once it would have been okay. But it isn’t now.”

As if to establish his vitality, he walks a little faster.

“At any rate, son, we have work to do, and we have to do it at a rapid pace. They have a ring. They have already grown in strength. We are very much playing on their grounds now. So you must pay attention. You must listen, you must learn, you must master your strength, your magic, *an obair*, because I will not always be here to help you.”

Foreign land. Power. Strength. Alone. Jules.

“Jules,” I blurt, as if I am redeeming something here, as if I am holding back the dam of what he is saying, of

what is so obviously true, by waving this one nonfact.
“Jules, father. I saw—”

“Nothing. You saw nothing, Marcus. Or nothing more than they wanted you to see.”

“What do you mean?”

“Marcus, you *know*. They can enter your thoughts, your dreams, your daydreams—it has happened before and will keep happening if you let it. You can do likewise to them, once you learn. Soul-wandering is among the most potent magics we have. If you think you experienced Jules—”

“I did.”

“You did not. Jules is dead, Marcus, or did you forget that?”

“You don’t have to be a bastard,” I say.

“Yes I do. Time, son. Time itself—time running out, Eleanor’s, perhaps mine—is the bastard. And I will venture to guess that your experience of Jules was of a sexual nature—”

“Hey—”

He waves me off again.

“And if it was, you can be certain that it is due to that phantasm called Eartha walking into your subconscious. Marcus, you have to be aware. You cannot be an adolescent male any longer. . . .”

“What the hell else can I be?”

“You are much more than that, and you know it. You are possessed of powers far beyond the strength of whatever young man’s urges you suffer.”

“Obviously,” I say, “you don’t have a very good memory of a young man’s urges.”

He turns to lay one of his powerful truths on me, then is overtaken by a rare smile and a slightly faraway look. He has a long, bony finger pointed skyward already, about to make his point.

“Fair enough,” he says. “But all the more reason you have to be vigilant. It is strong stuff, that, and a witch like Eartha will weave spells of all kinds over you. Be aware. She is powerful, and she is clever, and she is not without her charms.”

He is intending to help me, but he is making me feel ever more outnumbered. By Eartha alone.

“You sound like you want to beat me to her,” I say.

A slow smile crosses his lips. He points at me, shaking his head. “I would be no match for her,” he says.

Then, as if he can sense my growing anxiety and need to stretch, he gestures for me to follow him down the uneven old stone stairs and outside.

We pass through a flock of dopey, benign beasts grazing on the decadent greenery surrounding and overwhelming the castle ruins. They do not seem to notice us as we pass them by and head down to the rocky seashore below.

“Right,” I say as we raise our voices over the aggression of the surf. “So since time is getting away from us, I had better find some things out.”

“Yes,” he says, “you had better.”

“Why are we here?”

“So it’ll be existential questions, then?”

“I can’t believe it. Now you’re going to start making jokes.”

Again, the unusual sight of him smiling, at me, at himself, is welcome.

“We are here in Ireland because this is where the coven is really based. This is their true seat of power and, in all honesty, it was once the seat of power for our whole people. That was one of my alleged crimes—that I moved away from the purely Celtic, ancestral world. That I tried to take us out into the wider world. That is why they took your mother here. To force you and me into coming. And, as you may have noticed, you will be hard-pressed to find the comfort and safety of your ancient forest here, Marcus.”

“Too right,” I say. “The place is bald.”

“Not entirely. But for your purposes, yes. You will not find a replacement for your Port Caledonia and Blackwater woods here. And the coven has long since adapted. They are in reality more a coven of the earth and the waters now.”

“Except,” I say, suddenly remembering, “that thicket I was in last night. It was dense and strongly scented just like—”

“No,” he says flatly. “That was invented. Marcus . . .” He is shaking his head, disappointed. “Marcus, I worry about your susceptibility this late in the game. You will be lured and enticed with images of everything dear. You must be more skeptical. You must carry doubt with you like a shield.”

I know this. I hate being told. Because it holds my stupidity and immaturity up to a bright white light.

“And perhaps try closing your eyes less,” he adds, without the least hint of a smile.

I am starting to notice, as we continue along the magnificent, deserted stretch of beach, that there is a distinct lack of living things around my father at most times.

“Don’t you ever get lonely?” I say, gesturing at the emptiness.

He doesn’t hesitate.

“I’m rarely *not* lonely,” he says, making me sorer for him than I thought I could be.

“I hope you understand now, Marcus, that leaving you and your mother was never what I wanted, and it was never permanent. My connection to Eleanor is sacred and enduring, and it will surely follow me into the next life. They know that. That is why she is so important to them.”

Two long creases appear on either side of his mouth as it tightens and turns downward. “They would have taken her sooner to achieve their aims; they would have taken her as soon as you came into *an obair* and they could sense where the two of you were. But they had hoped above all to enlist you in their cause. Once they sensed that you and I were truly together, they reverted to their traditional, vile, venal form, and took her. They killed Chuck. Nothing is beneath them.

“They know, Marcus, that neither of us can ever leave Eleanor to them. That is how they know that they will achieve the battle they desire. It is inevitable now.”

He holds up his fist, with the ring. He takes my ringed hand, balls it in a fist, and bumps the two rings together.

“They need both of us dead,” he says. “There is no

question of that—to consolidate their power and purge the ‘impurity’ that they perceive you to be, as the child of a witch and a human being. They will stop short of nothing.

“*Our* goals are simple. We have to get Eleanor back. And we must cut the head off the creature that is the coven. We have to destroy Spence.”

“Cut the head off?” I say, snorting a laugh. “Of Dr. Spence?” The witch professor? Eartha’s dad? “How hard could that be?”

“Harder than you may imagine, Marcus.”

He pauses, then pushes on. “Once our aim is achieved—*if* it is achieved—you will again have a people to lead.”

“And if I don’t *want* a people to lead?” I don’t dare say that it is not even an *if*. After this is done, I don’t even want to ever *see* my people.

He stops walking, looks out to sea, and I sense here the last remaining issue on which we definitely do not agree.

“Let us first just put you in a position to have to make that decision.”

I try not to get too excited over this seemingly open-minded response. In truth, I feel he has given me hope of a normal life someday.

“Fair enough,” I say.

“Fair enough,” he says. We grip hands firmly. The rings, as usual, throw a high heat when joined.

We are still clasping hands when his attention is seized by a small motion in the distant sky. I follow his line of vision until I see it, the solitary, soaring figure

disturbing the crystal peace of the sky as it circles.

“Ahh,” my father says with resignation. “Time for us to be moving on.”

“What?” I say, unable to make out anything specific at this range.

“Spence’s hawk,” he says, heading back in the direction of the ruins. “This is how it is going to go from now on. We will be constantly uncovered and harried. The coven is continually moving toward us. We have to keep moving away, until we are ready to fight.”

“But we *are*—”

“We are *not* ready,” he says. “There are lessons yet.”

Just as he has promised, that is how the days go.

We travel from spot to spot, region to region, cave to castle to humble thatch-roofed farmhouse, only to be found out within hours—*an obair* drawing us together like magnet and metal, the coven manifested in the form of Spence’s familiar. Sometimes we are only minutes ahead of our pursuers, who we can *hear*, sense, cresting the hills just a field or two away.

But all along, in every stolen minute, with every available square foot of farmyard or dungeon space, my intensive training hits maximum.

He makes me fight him.

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t do that,” I say as he stands before me, proud and defiant but stooped and clearly in pain.

“You can. . . .” This in a voice younger and surer than the face it comes out of. “And you will.”

Every fiber of me says no. I circle him from about three feet away, and I am painfully conscious of how ridiculous this must look. He can barely keep up the pace enough to follow my circle as I go around and around him, just out of striking distance.

“Marcus,” he says sternly.

I say nothing, just keep circling.

We are in a barn made mostly of stone, with a porous wooden roof. There are no animals, just a lot of space, so I can keep this up for some time.

Until at my back I hear a quick, loud squeak and turn just in time to see a bat the size of a bulldog zip toward me and take a quick snap at my neck.

I manage to whack him a quick backhanded chop, then watch to see him somersault away and land back up in the rafters.

I turn, pleased, back toward my father. Who is no longer where I left him.

“Hey,” I call. It comes out choked, because something is wrong.

“Hey,” comes the return. But I can’t see where it’s coming from. And it is not his voice. It is Arj’s voice.

It is a trick—my father is soul-wandering. It is a trick. I will not be easily fooled.

Still, every bit of me goes rigid. I feel my skin prickle like I’m being sprayed with electrified water droplets.

“Where are you?” I call, too nervously.

He says nothing. I listen, I smell. Nothing.

“Where are you?” I call again.

“Right behind you,” Arj’s voice says.

I whip around, arms raised.

To find nobody right behind me.

“I said, right behind you,” he says from right behind me, and before I can move again I am seized by a powerful, unbreakable grip around my neck, instantly and completely cutting off my air.

Shit. I struggle, struggle, trying to break the grip and breathe, but I make no gain whatsoever. I try and call out, but I panic further, make things worse, exhaust myself.

And then, blackness.

When I come to, I find my father.

He is on the ground just outside the entrance to the barn. *No.*

I drop to my knees and moan. They have gotten here and torn him out, completely eviscerated him and left him on display for me to see: my stupidity. My mistake.

I am hunched over him, grief-stricken. What do I do? He has not prepared me for this moment yet. He has not prepared me for so many things yet. I am fully sobbing now.

Until he sits up and begins slapping me senseless.

He is slapping me angrily, the way you do when you are trying to knock sense into someone but are at the same time trying to take their face off.

And suddenly we are inside the barn, where he has sat me up from my prone, unconscious position. He is slapping me awake.

“I told you about this, Marcus,” he says sternly but with a definite layer of warm worry in his voice.

“Doubt. You must maintain doubt at all times if you are not to be fooled so easily. Don’t even believe your own dreams. It was too easy for me to soul-wander inside you and confuse you. Where is your doubt, Marcus?”

“I had it at first,” I say dumbly as he helps me to my feet.

“We have to go now anyway,” he says, pointing out the barn door to where we can see the pinpoint of a hawk circling.

“I swear I am going to kill that bird,” I say, “if we accomplish nothing else.”

It becomes, I think, the very act of staying on the run all the time and watching my father weaken that teaches me my lessons of vigilance. I am learning what he teaches me, but I am learning further still from watching over him. My senses are getting crisper every minute, as my protective feelings for him grow more intense.

I am not caught off guard anymore by the arrival of the hawk or any other creature, and I know, almost but not quite as quickly as my father does, when a beast of any kind is close. They are always right at our heels, the pursuers, but in the chase I am becoming nimble, alert, strong, and intuitive.

And of course they must know this. That is why they killed Marthe, for helping me get to this point. That is why they are so intent, ever more intent it seems, on reaching us. They are afraid of what is happening here.

One morning I sit and watch over the old man as he lies sleeping. I do this now morning and night, as he is needing much more sleep than I. We are sitting in the

back of a long-neglected granite Anglican church, where we have caught our longest night's rest yet. I watch him now, watch his stony face struggle with the expressions and twitches of deep dream sleep as the first light spills in through broken windows, and I feel it.

I close my eyes. I think about my father. I think about what I know of him, what I have learned of him in the brief time of our acquaintance. I think of his goals, his burdens. I think of his achievements and his failures as I know them, and his enemies.

And there, then, I am inside. Inside his head, his spirit. I can hardly believe it. I am soul-wandering.

He is smiling, broadly, genuinely. He is healthy to look at, with more flesh to his face and more rigidity to his spine. He still doesn't have all of his fingers, however.

"Here you are," he says.

I feel like I am six years old. I feel like I have been riding and riding my bike around the cul-de-sac in Port Caledonia, crashing and falling as usual but now, now, now he has seen it; I am not falling, and my father has seen it.

"Here I am," I say, smiling too wide to form the words properly.

"They're here again," he says.

"Yes," I say at the same moment, knowing who he means even before he has said it. He smiles proudly, like a dad.

I open my eyes. He is still unconscious. He is in no rush to emerge. I am in no rush to wake him.

I jump to my feet because I know, *an obair* knows, that they're here. Or rather, I sense more specifically, that *it* is

here. And I do not need my father to help me with this.

I run up the stairs to the choir balcony, then on, up to where the stairs narrow and the ceiling lowers, and I push on, shooting up the final flight, up toward the empty bell tower just ahead. I can sense it through the walls—sweeping in, spying.

I blindly crash through the door, my arm extended ahead of me like the Statue of Liberty because I know, I know before I see it, goddammit, exactly where it will breach my line of vision.

I snag the son of a bitch by the neck, out of the air, just as he is passing through.

I grab him and I hold him and I stare at him, and I have such rage for Chuck and my mother that I cannot feel triumph at the growing power of mine that has enabled me to snare him. I cannot think of enough ways to hurt this creature, hurt him all the way back to his owner and his followers.

The hateful fink of a bird is raking me with sharp, mighty claws and trying to bite me to ribbons, but I feel nothing but satisfaction. I squeeze and squeeze his neck.

Then I take him in both hands. I take his rotten head in my right and his neck in my left, and I pull and I twist.

I jerk him, hear the crack, feel the body go slack.

I hear it loud now, on this beautiful Irish breeze.

I hear screams of rage, way over yonder, and the sound fills my stomach with butterflies.

I am going to show my dad.

“I already see,” he says from the doorway.

“It’s time to go, son. It’s time to go get your mother.”

CHAPTER

6

“There it is,” my father says as we stop on the crest of a luminous green hill overlooking several others.

“Where?” I ask, scanning. It doesn’t help that I’m not exactly sure what “it” is.

“There,” he says, without pointing or in any way indicating a spot. With a heavy sigh he resumes his march.

It still looks like nothing but open, rolling hillside, until we walk straight up the next modest hill, then come halfway down the other side. When we get there, my father stops, stops me, and turns me around by the shoulders. My stomach seems to do a few back flips when I finally see.

It looks almost like a face, a sleepy face, cut into the side of the hill. There are three holes leading straight into the earth, cut so subtly you could only see them

from precisely this angle. They are slanted, framed by stacks of flat, slate stones and covered on top entirely by thick turf, grass, and moss. Leading me around the side, my father shows me another hole, placed like an ear on the side of the hill's head.

There is a heavy, dense fog settling on us as we stand before the side entrance.

We say nothing, just look at each other and enter.

I follow him in and remain close at his heels. I have a sweeping, panicky feeling that this is all bigger than I am, that, no matter what I think I've learned, I am no match for what lies ahead. I try to take comfort in my father's knowledge, his certainty. I would cling to him like a bat if I could, but I make do by placing a hand on his back and keeping it there.

We walk down and down and down, descending through layers of earth, through stone tunnels where visibility is all but impossible. Surprisingly, there are stairs at first, but then there is just dirt underfoot, then mud, and then stone steps again. The walls—I run my free hand along them constantly—feel like coal. I smell earth. And, strangely, smoke. The path turns to the left over and over again, then the right, then straight ahead.

My father apparently knows this place, and knows it well. But I am scared out of my senses.

“Where are they?” I whisper. “When will they . . . ?”

He does not answer.

But I need no answer anyway, in a moment.

We emerge.

Into a wide-open area, full of low, diffuse light, and

the smells—God, the unmistakable glorious smells—of the verdant forest. It is exactly, in fact . . .

“Where are we?” I demand.

What it looks like is Blackwater. Exactly like the stone circle at the center of the coven’s power at the center of the woods. In Blackwater.

“We couldn’t be,” I say, sort of nudging him to answer.

He will not be nudged. These are the questions, I realize, that I cannot have answered for me anymore. These are the things I must either learn to figure out, or just miss.

And anyway, what does it matter? How could it matter? What matters is that it doesn’t matter, and I must not be distracted by what might be called facts.

“Precisely,” he says, while still looking all around the place.

I look straight up, into what would be the sky. But there is no sky—no roof either, no ceiling, no cave. We are neither indoors nor outdoors. We are both. What I am looking at, I finally realize, when I see small, dark spots moving up there far, far away, is a mirror. Or at least a mirror image of us here on the ground. There are my father and me, small figures, moving across the green field in the stone circle.

I snap my head downward when I realize he has begun walking again, and with a sense of purpose. I hurry to catch up.

And I see what has drawn him.

At the far edge of the grand stone circle, about one

hundred yards away, there is movement. In a thicket of trees, I make out horses—two white horses—facing in opposite directions.

I will doubt these trees, I will doubt these horses. But as we get ever closer, I see something I cannot doubt.

“Eleanor,” I scream and shoot past my father toward her.

I make it only two steps before he grabs me roughly from behind. I don’t even look back to question him—I just strain to get to her, to keep her figure—fuzzy and inanimate but definitely Eleanor—in my sight. And then, as my father walks us both slowly forward, I can see it all.

She is tied, hand and foot, to the horses. Her left hand and foot are bound to one white horse, her right to the other, so that anything that might cause the animals to get overexcited and gallop off would tear my mother in half. Her head is slumped on her chest—she’s unconscious, maybe. The horses seem to be the only things keeping her upright.

My doubt, my shield, comes right up again, but more out of need than mental strength.

“It’s not really her, right?” I say as we stop again, still thirty yards out. “It’s not really her. It’s a trap. It’s just to get us where they want us, right?”

“It is really her,” he says solemnly. “And it is a trap.”

We are so much in danger now, in this underground den, that the sound of *an obair* has risen from a buzzing to an indistinguishable din. But still, I sense a spike as my father speaks—some elevated danger—and snap my gaze to our right.

And there, twice as far from us as Eleanor is, is a group of *them*. Either we have missed them completely in our absorption, or they have just materialized. Either way, seeing them sends gooseflesh to every inch of skin I can feel anymore, blotting out for the moment the rage I should and would feel. There are many of them, of course, many more than I knew in Blackwater—too many to count.

They are gathered, sending not even a glance our way, in some quiet, intense, reflective ceremony, kneeling at the base of one of the biggest stones in the stone circle. The very type of thing, I think with a sad smile, that Eleanor would call “that witch bullshit.” Is it possible they don’t even know we’re here?

Whatever. Leave them to it, is what I say. I head straight for the unconscious Eleanor, daring them to come after, pulling out of my father’s grasp, pounding along at a pace halfway between march and trot. It would be a gallop if I weren’t worried about getting the horses to do the same.

I am nearly there, and my heart is about to explode in my chest. I throw a glance to the right and see that no one has moved. I can practically smell my mother’s skin: I am reaching out, ready to release her, nearly weeping. . . .

When my father grabs me again.

“They did not go to such great lengths to let the three of us ride away,” he says. He points to the horses, each of them beginning to snort and paw the ground. “You can’t touch her, Marcus. You must know this. We have to deal with them first.”

He pulls me away, and I am dying inside as my mother gets farther and farther from me. I am so close, and I know he is right, but to be so close, after coming so far . . .

“The only way to her,” he says, his voice thick with actual feeling, “is through these ones here.” He points at the coven as we near them. None of them appears to have taken notice of us, still. Even as we come within striking distance, and then as we are standing practically on top of them, they appear to be indifferent to our presence. Maybe they are in a group trance or something. Maybe we have caught them at the best possible time.

The only one facing us is Eartha. She has her back against the huge, altarlike stone, and she is pressed abnormally flat, as if she were etched into it or stuck there magnetically. Her eyes are cast down, as the bunch kneeling in front of her chant something indecipherable. There is no sign of Spence—no glimpse of his conspicuous silver hair anywhere in the crowd.

“They are addressing her as a princess. As a deity, almost,” my father says.

“What?” I snap.

He sounds academic. “That is what the words say. Her father has a ring now. They are planning on having two more very shortly. They already see her as royalty.”

Eartha’s eyes slowly turn up and meet mine, making me struggle not to flinch. She bows ever so slightly, smiling ever so slightly. I am amazed. She looks so extremely peaceful and beautiful.

And then, as if we have been at the back of a theater disturbing the show, Arj, at the head of the group, stands and turns on us. He looks like he is about to say something.

But I never hear it, because I am suddenly belted from the side. As I stumble, I see who it is that has knocked me over. Baron. Of course, Baron. He has been waiting forever for this, and now he leaps on top of me, pinning me to the ground.

My father's hands are suddenly on me. He yanks me back up, out from under Baron, and pulls me around so that we are back-to-back, like gunfighters outnumbered. I get such strength from this, the physical contact, as we lean against each other. We are, through our connection, more than just two.

They are coming now—breaking up their ceremony, moving toward us in groups but not yet attacking. I spot a few familiar faces from Blackwater, but mostly they are swallowed in a sea of witches I have never seen. I can feel all of my father's movements as he faces one and then another. But our enemies, for now, give him, us, a wide berth.

All but Baron. Baron takes a step closer to me. "You're back," he says, stating the obvious.

We stare at each other, waiting. My free hand is extended toward him, palm down, fingers straight out. Baron opts for brute force, lunging toward me again.

I don't even think about it, but I don't flinch—my fingers, all on their own, simply start twitching, flicking, as if there is something awful stuck to them and I need to get it off.

As I do this, Baron halts in his tracks, twitching. Little jerking motions, jukes and jives and clear pain reactions. They are small, like he is being stuck by hundreds of tiny knives, but they are getting to him, distracting him, making him swat at himself all over. This is why we are being given a wide berth.

Baron almost doesn't notice when I step right up to him.

He looks at me. We have never been this close before. His skin is all pocked and burnt-looking. He has a deeply sour odor about him. He tries to grin at me, but it falls away quickly.

He raises a hand to try and zap me, move me, singe me, but it is a waste of one of his last moments on this earth.

I watch him expire. I watch as his life, past and future, passes before both of our eyes. I am stunned by what I am doing.

He withers, aging before my eyes into something old, shrunken—and keeps going, until he crumples like dust. He is lying there at my feet, a mere molehill of former life, and there is silence all around us.

And then they come. From all sides the battle rages into life as if a cue has been given. Instantly, there are coven bastard bodies flying at us from everywhere.

Too rushed to use the magic that just destroyed Baron, I start physically swinging out at them with this thing on the end of my arm, my fist that feels like Thor's hammer. I am knocking heads in. I feel it like a depth charge, like something with explosives built into it, but I realize quickly that it is not creating the damage it should.

Desperate, I glance whenever I can—between knocking each attacker back—at my father behind me. As each witch or group of witches approaches, he does something like a perverse, inverted, high-speed version of the last rites on somebody, extending his gnarled hand like a stop sign in front of them, dropping them to their knees without even touching them. And then he reaches toward their lips with his fingertips, reaches, then snaps his wrist. They fold before him and do not get up.

I pull my punches now and imitate him. And then we are both dropping them. Bodies begin piling up around us, and in the confusion, I stumble over them again and again but keep working, knocking down one attacker after another. It is exhilarating.

I watch what I am doing as if my mind is detached from it. I throw one witch up and through the sky-roof with a mere flick of my hand. I hold another witch's face in my other hand and clamp to it long enough to watch as it petrifies, turns to hardened clay, then to dust, in my grip.

It seems almost too easy now. They do not possess our power. They do not have the strength to stand and fight against my father and me. This is why they fear us. We are too much for them. Or at least, I believe so, for minutes.

But soon I am panting, tiring, and the stream of witches does not cease. It becomes clear that there are more here than were gathered around Eartha before, more than I can possibly imagine. For every witch we

drop, another appears from nowhere, out of the shadows. The stream is endless. And Spence—the “head”—is nowhere to be seen. If we must get through them all to get to Eleanor, we will never get to Eleanor. I don’t even have time to look in her direction, to confirm that she is still there, somewhere behind us.

The witches keep coming. In wave after wave they throw themselves at us, to their deaths. And none of them seems to care. Life is cheap, apparently, on their side of the divide, while my father and I clearly cannot afford the loss of one of us.

And in fact I am feeling we cannot afford these deaths, no matter which side.

“It is the fabric of *an obair* connecting all of us,” my father says to me. “Death, murder, weakens us all. We are killing ourselves in small increments.”

I don’t want to do this anymore. I want my mother, and I want the coven finished, I want all the things I have been striving for, but my heart for the battle is being bled out of me. I must fight this. Must fight my weakness. Must fight myself.

Perhaps it is this weakness that they detect, because suddenly—amidst the nameless, faceless witches that have been engulfing me—I am rushed by one that I recognize, one with more power and maybe more worth. Arj.

We were almost friends once, it seemed. It felt. But now we are circling each other, wordless. I cannot seem to want to kill him.

“Lost your taste for the fight, have you?” he spits.

“Fine by me. But I won’t be turned. I’m here to kill. I’m here to take that ring and that finger and that arm if I have to, and there will be no regrets on this side. That is what will make me a stronger prince than you would ever have been. When Eartha and I rule together . . .”

I reach for him, for his mouth to shut him up, but he slaps my hand.

Careful, Marcus, I hear my father say in my head. Focus. Don’t let him distract you from our purpose.

Weakly, I make a halfhearted attempt at attack. He grabs my wrist. He seizes my hand and promptly bites down on my ring finger with all the pressure of a bull-terrier. I panic at having the ring in jeopardy. But at the same time, I know I am too strong for Arj. That I can stop this.

I have no choice but to hit him with my free hand so hard on the side of the face that he goes flying several feet.

It is mad, the speed with which he goes scudding across the ground, away from us. He is down, and now my father is battling with somebody behind me.

I turn to look, to help, and freeze. He is battling Arj.

I look back to where Arj landed a moment ago, and in his place, crawling toward me and clearly stunned, is Eartha. She is in a pool of her own flowing robe, her princess robe, her hippie robe like Jules wore.

I am frozen. Shocked rigid. Frozen with indecision, confusion, stupidity. The vision—of Jules, of her—is killing me.

I shouldn’t care. I don’t care. Arj or Eartha, it doesn’t matter. They are both dangerous.

I raise my fist, look down at her. I should destroy her. But instead I turn away.

I turn to see Arj and my father locked in a mutual death grip. My father has his hand gripping Arj's throat, and Arj has both hands grabbing my father's face, his nails digging in, pulling the flesh from the bone.

I try to engage, to help, but I cannot. Whenever I lunge into the fray, Arj angles farther in the other direction, using my father as a shield between us even as he is trying to kill him.

My weakened father is trying to do to Arj the same thing he's done to so many others, to pull something up out of him, his spirit. But Arj, unbelievably, is proving to be too powerful for him, or at least too cagey. He keeps my father at all the wrong angles and punishes him at the same time.

"Marcus," my father says, composed. But his knees begin to buckle.

Arj manages a small grin as he presses his advantage. And now I am getting desperate, ducking and trying to get around my father's back and getting nowhere. I am losing the assurance that there is anything I can do.

The grin gets a little broader as he makes his final move. His long, strong fingers move, migrate up, just a little, then a little more, until they find my father's eyes.

There is a scream now, to unearth the dead of a thousand generations. The ground rumbles like an earthquake. At the far end of the circle, two giant stones, having stood for maybe thousands of years, topple over with a crash.

Only I am the one screaming. My father remains silent.

Even as the eyes burn in his head, I can see from my angle sparks leaping off the connection between those fingers and those eyes.

Unable to maneuver around him, I am now standing directly against my father, shoulder-to-shoulder, chest-to-back, head-to-head.

And I push. Forward. Enveloping, seeping, forward, until . . .

I am with my father. Inside him. One with him.

It is nothing but white light and pain like knives in the eyes. I can see nothing to strike at, cannot see Arj. I feel everything my father feels, all the pain of this instant—which is more pain than any being should ever have to bear. And I feel the earth shake even harder, as I scream louder than the fiery birth of Earth itself.

And I push. Further forward, further forward, further, further . . .

Until I hear the luscious sound of Arj's voice screaming, echoing all around me.

I am inside Arj.

I see through his eyes as he lets go of my father, who drops to his knees, covering his face with his hands. I am not even astonished at what is happening here, only purposeful.

I see the whole world spinning wildly as Arj thrashes and bucks and runs and claws at himself to get to me, which is a waste of his last breaths. He looks up to the sky, the roof, the ceiling, the mirror above us, and I catch

a glimpse of him, of us. It is the most incredible sight ever imagined.

I see the hatred and the terror in his face as he feels me burning him from inside. I hear his screams as though they were music, and I watch his tortured face as though it were art.

I see, briefly, my eyes through his, and I cannot believe the power and the anger they hold.

“This is what happens,” I am saying to Arj from the inside, “to whoever touches those I love.”

I finish him then; I feel him hit his knees. And I slither out like smoke, at the moment before his face smacks the cold, hard ground.

I don’t even gather myself, reorient myself to my own body, before I turn to attend to my father.

And am stopped cold by what I see.

“No,” I shout, but she doesn’t notice or care.

Eartha, standing like an executioner behind my kneeling, blind, disoriented father, has her long, retractable claws out and is poised.

“No,” I scream, and lunge in her direction.

But not before she has the chance to bury the claws deep in the back of his neck, on both sides.

He screams, reaches up behind him, and seizes her neck in his hands. He snaps it in one direction—I hear the crack as they are falling forward, hear a scream, the likes of which I have never heard, echo from far off, deep within the forest cave. And then I see him snap it once more as the two of them thud to the ground together.

It all stops. The movement, the attack. Everyone—the whole lot of them, still as numerous as when we began—is frozen and wide-eyed, watching. I can hear myself breathing. I am the only thing that moves.

Sick with rage and fear, I scabble over to my father. When I get there, I lift Eartha's lifeless body and I throw it far. My gaze follows it as she bounces to a halt at the feet of some of the others, and I feel, momentarily and despite all, a stabbing sense of loss.

Then I turn to where my father is lying, small sounds coming out of him. They are not groans of pain or complaint or lament. He is trying to talk and failing.

I pick him up and rise with him cradled in my arms like a child.

I look back across the field to where we saw Eleanor, but she and the horses are no longer there.

My heart is bleeding. For what I hold in my hands. For what I do not hold. For our defeat. My heart is bleeding.

I look all around me, to where more and more of them have come creeping out of the darkness, out of the atmosphere.

Still, nobody moves. I stand flat-footed and defiant, with my father draped across my arms, and I make sure that I make eye contact with as many of them as possible.

I must take my father away from here. That is what he needs, and that is what I do.

CHAPTER

7

The boat pulls up to the seashell-strewn beach that now feels like a sad sort of home.

We run aground, the tide nudging us right up onto dry land. He has made barely a move during the trip, drawn hardly a noticeable breath, but he is still with me as I lift him gently out of the boat and walk him up the beach, around the bend in the island.

I walk up to the mouth of the cave above the rocky, splashing shore, and I take him inside.

I lay him down, finally, on the raised platform where I first found him. His chest rises once, hugely, falling heavily as he settles.

I drop my head onto his chest.

“I am so sorry,” I say. “I never learn. I should not have spared her. I will never learn. There is no hope.”

“Please,” he says in a whisper that sounds almost

indistinguishable from the swishing sea outside, “stop apologizing. It won’t do to have the leader of a whole people keep saying he is sorry all the time.”

“I am no leader of anybody. I am a fool. I turned my back. Despite everything. Despite everything I have experienced, everything I have seen with my own eyes, despite all you have been telling me, I still allowed myself to feel something for Eartha, to see her as something other than the pure evil she’s been all along. And now *you* have to pay for it.”

He takes an extra long time to respond to me now, long enough that I have to raise my head to check to see that he is still with me. But it is only the weakness—and maybe the tiredness of having to teach me the same simple lessons over and over—that makes him so slow.

“What happened there was irrelevant. Today was my last day. Regardless of what happened, today was to be my last day.” I am shaking my head as he says this, as if I can stop him from dying by stopping his voice. “I knew this when I arose this morning. Cernunnos will have me back now. Do not worry about me.

“And as for Eartha, you were right. She is not pure evil. It does not exist. If you saw something else in her, son, then that something was there somewhere. There is no such force as pure evil, and if you lose your ability to know that, then not only will you be a failure as a leader, you will be a failure as a man.”

I look down again and allow my head to rest fully on his chest. I am bursting inside with sadness, and it is

compounded by the finality of almost every word he says.

He reaches a hand up and strokes my head with it, and that does it. Tears flow so freely that I am soaking him. His own eyes are white and weepy, burned away.

“The unfortunate thing is that it never becomes easy to sort out in what measure each individual possesses fineness and evil. That is why doubt will need to be your constant. And with your power and responsibility, it is more important for you than for anyone else in the world to be able to sort it all out. A leader must see—and do—many deeply distasteful things and yet return to compassion.

“You have had to go through all you have gone through, Marcus—from the time you were born, to the time I left you, to the time I came back, to the time I leave you again—in order that you become the man you are, to know the world as you now know it. You could not have merely been told these things.

“Now you are ready. I am at peace that you are ready. Spence is waiting for you, and it will not do to linger here. He is a man of vengeance. He has Eleanor, and his daughter is dead, and there is no telling what he will do. I am at peace here, and you must go.”

I cannot bear it. I don't want him at peace. *I* am not at peace. And I do not feel ready for the role he is leaving me.

I am not ready for him leaving me. This is not how it was supposed to be. There was supposed to be a payoff for all of it, a reassembly of my family—a father and a mother and a dog.

And now I have none of it. I have none of it. He cannot go. I am not prepared to let him go.

“You owe me, old man,” I say, raising my head and looking him up and down desperately, like I am looking for the switches, levers, gears that make his body work.

I look at his eyes, which are open and moving slightly from side to side. But it does not matter. He is blind, burnt out. His killer gray-green eyes, the eyes like mine, the irrefutable sign that I belong to him and he to me—they are gone.

No. I am not ready. If I can do anything, I can do this. If any of this is worth a goddamn, then I can do this.

I reach out and touch his eyeballs with the fingertips of one hand, one of his throat wounds with the other.

“Heal, damn you,” I say, and as I say it, small white kite tails of smoke float up from his sad, dead eyes. My fingertips are hot, scorching, even to me. He moves, slightly, from side to side in an almost pathetic attempt to get away from me, but he does not protest, does not speak at all.

Tears of pain roll out of his eyes, and I stop. I am doing nothing but hurting him.

I drop my head, my whole upper body over him, and I hold him, and I use all my strength to not repeat “I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry” enough times to enrage him back to his feet. I lie across him, let him dream his last dream.

“This is what I want,” I say, when I find the scene in all its rightness.

My father is looking strong and hearty and scary-happy, wearing his rings but otherwise looking like any ordinary, content man. He is on the back porch of our house in Blackwater, and the water is streaming by, making that “all’s well” water sound as he tips back a plain wooden chair. He rests his feet on the railing that in real life, in my life, was all the time spongy and ready to give and toss you into the drink. He is tanned. My father is tanned.

Eleanor is just stepping out onto the porch, coming up alongside him and taking the seat next to him. She hands him a can of A&W root beer and sips from one herself. A breeze comes up and blows her hair half across her face and into her mouth just as she removes the can, and she laughs.

Chuck lies spread like a mat on the floor between them.

“This is what I want,” I say again pleadingly.

I am standing beneath the porch on the slope, with the house in front of me and the stream at my back. I speak up to them like Romeo at Juliet’s balcony.

My father smiles down at me, my mother smiles down at me, my dog smiles down at me. My father kisses my mother on her cheek.

I am nearly knocked into the water with the force of it. I have *never* seen that, not once in my life.

She reaches a hand up to his cheek and holds him there for just a little bit longer before letting him go. But then she has to. Chuck raises his head for a pat and gets one. But he is required to stay too, to let him go.

“Stay with Eleanor, Chuck,” my father says.

Poor Chuck lays his sad head back on the floorboards.

My father walks around to the end of the porch, comes on down, and takes me by the arm.

I keep looking back at the incomplete scene behind us.

“But that is what I want,” I say to him again as we approach the burbling clear water. “That is all I want.”

“I know,” he says, and we walk into the water, up to our knees, and then walk downstream.

It is a powerful old trick that we have pulled off before. We are in the water but not in the water, walking knee-deep but not getting wet.

“Why can’t I just have you back?” I say, as if this is the most reasonable of requests. “If there is any magic to this magic, if boulders can fly and wounds can be healed with the touch of a finger, if I can step inside people’s dreams, if I can step inside someone’s *body* . . .” I turn and jab at him for emphasis, but my finger passes right through him. “If I can kill from within a person or without—”

“Because you cannot, son,” he says, getting there before I do. “I told you at the beginning. This power will make you feel like you control the entire universe at times. But you do not. With very few exceptions, what is done cannot be undone. So your decisions will always be your decisions, and your gift, your power above all your other powers, will be your wisdom. The pain of your mistakes, the frustration of what cannot be changed, will be your greatest teacher.”

There are birds of all descriptions flitting about above us and singing. The stream is filled to teeming with fish. They follow us, leaping and squiggling along through the rocks with the current.

My father stops me under a massive willow tree, its drippy green fingers sweeping the surface of the passing water. He takes me by the shoulders.

“I am not your task, Marcus Aurelius. You have other, more pressing, responsibilities. What you are capable of you have not yet begun to imagine—your power is as close as it is possible to get to the limitless power of the gods. Now you must concentrate on finding it and on saving the people you are here to save.”

He looks very fatherly and understanding and gives my shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “When you do, you will be rewarded. The gods are very forgiving and understanding. And you are Cernunnos’s favorite.”

He takes a breath here and gives me an extra hard, startling shake before speaking his last words to me.

“Once you have done what you must do, Marcus, you will be allowed one thing more. You will be allowed to do what you cannot do. You will be allowed to undo what your soul knows you must undo.”

I stare into his eyes, his once-more startling mismatched gray-green eyes, and I wait for the rest. I grab his shoulders the way he is grabbing mine.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

The words are not out of my mouth before I hear the screaming, a screaming to boil the blood, coming from downstream.

“Eleanor,” I say to him, but he does not move.

I cannot wait. I shake loose of him and tear back in the direction of the house. Another scream comes, louder, and it seems to me like every person, every creature within miles must hear this and should be running toward that sound—but I am the only one. Not even the birds are with me anymore.

I am not winded by the time I get back to the house. I don’t even feel like I’ve been running. I stand there in the same spot as before, looking up.

At the empty porch. No family. No father, no mother. No dog. The railing is rotted and ready to topple down the bank and into the water.

Far, far, far away, I hear Eleanor screaming still.

I wake up, still draped across my father’s chest. I look into his face without any illusions about what I might find.

He is gone. His eyes are closed, and I am thankful for that. There is no warmth in his body now, no beat in his chest, and his wounds do not weep any longer.

My head is massive with sadness, and I look down. There I see his hand lying at his side.

And the ring. It is sitting loosely around his finger, where it has already untangled from his bones.

I take the ring, as I have no doubt I should. I slide it over my middle finger, right beside the space, the gaping absence where so much has been cut right out of me. There is no shock, no pain—at least none that I notice.

I kiss my father's cheek and walk out to the sea and my waiting boat.

When I am halfway across the bay, I turn back to look. I watch as the sea, the accelerated tide, rushes in, penetrates the great sheer cliff face of the island. I watch as the sea goes right inside, into the cave, all the way in to my father, to meet him, to embrace him, and to reclaim him.

CHAPTER

8

I am standing at the grass-capped, sleep-eyed entrance to the catacomb that is the coven's lair, and I am still stuck thinking on my father's words.

What was he telling me? I know I have a task, an obligation, a duty. I know I need to get Eleanor back. I know I need to put an end to this whole insane, wretched blood war business, and that means eliminating *them*, which means eliminating Spence.

But what beyond that? What more is there? What "one thing more"? I don't want one thing more. I want peace. I want to be left alone. I don't want anything beyond that. I don't want to be allowed to do what I cannot do. I wouldn't even be here now if I didn't *have* to do what I have to do.

I plunge through the entrance and feel things start to happen the instant I do. I stop, shuddering, frightened. I

feel it clearly now, that he—the leader, the head—feels my presence as I feel his. There are no secrets here. We are both coming to the inevitable.

I march on down, down through the night-black path from before, only this time it feels different. No one is leading me, but I feel I know these steps, these tunnels, these twists and switchbacks and straightaways like I was born to the knowledge. I know it as if I were my father.

Something else is happening as I sniff and listen and sense my way to the center of this wretched place.

I feel my strength building, emanating out from my father's ring—from both rings now. And I feel my protection grow on the outside of me as well.

I cannot see, but I feel a breastplate of organic armor actually growing around my front, covering my ribs, then my back. I reach to touch it with my hand and it is cool, strong, light, and fitted to me as if it were molded from my own body. I feel something also on my head, and I barely have to touch it to recognize it as the carved, horned helmet that I last saw thousands of miles away in the house in Blackwater. My father's armor.

I feel not only protected but ornamented by this warrior gear, this protective regalia that should tell the world—his world, our world—just who they are dealing with. Right up to the magnificent, twisted gold torque that once rested at my father's throat and now rests at mine.

And I feel it now. I cannot fail.

I am running at a gallop, brimming with invincibility as I enter the innermost, deepest region of the caverns. I burst out of the darkness into the relative glare of the stone circle.

And am caught by the throat, shaken like a doll, and thrown twenty feet onto my back.

I hit the ground with a smash that sends a shock in every direction from my spine.

From where I land on my back, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror above. It shows me how tiny I really am.

“What is *this*?” a voice roars at me.

I raise myself up on my elbows to look, and see Spence himself. He is different in a way I can't grasp at first. He is standing in front of a giant stone, in front of which is a raised platform, on which is lying the body of his daughter. There is no sign of Eleanor or the rest of the coven anywhere.

I get all the way to my feet, stumble backwards slightly. I scan the area madly, gaze toward the place where I last saw my mother—and see the horses are there. The ropes are there. But she is not.

“What,” Spence repeats, his voice coming out in a strange, strangled squeal, “is this?”

I have to look at him, though I do not want to.

And now it registers. Spence is huge. He is much larger than I have seen him before. His hair, always a remarkable shock of silver, is even more dramatic, long, high, mad, as if he has been riding in an open airplane. His features, somehow, have changed, become more angular, focused and pointed.

Hawklike.

He lets out what at first I think is going to be a rant, but it comes out as an inchoate screeching sound. He pounds his own thighs with his fists and walks a furious

and terrifying circle around the platform, Eartha, and the standing stone.

“What did you do?” he says finally.

He is totally, completely, seriously lost. He believes, I realize, that this was not to happen. That through all the torture and violence and hatred, his most beloved was not to be harmed.

“She was to be your queen,” he shouts. “Do you not understand? Did you not understand? Everything was going to come together, to be whole again, through you and my precious Eartha. Then everything, for everyone, would have been good again. Do you know, do you even know, how much damage you have done?”

Of course I know what damage has been done. But I don’t believe I have done it all.

“Yes,” I say. “But do you—”

It’s as if he doesn’t even hear me.

“My familiar, gone. How *dare* you harm my familiar?”

“And mine?”

“Arj. Like my very son.”

“My *father*.”

“And now . . . Eartha.” He walks to her, puts a hand on her dead hand, then turns to me, great puzzlement once again on his face.

“My mother,” I say, the first syllable coming out strong because I want to know, the second subdued because I don’t.

He is furious, his face reddening, highlighting the silver mane of his hair. It is as if he cannot contemplate how my facts have anything to do with his. And this—

his incoherent, unreasoning rage—frightens me more than anything yet. Because what has he done because of it? What has he done with *her*?

“My *mother*,” I repeat. I am nearly crying now. “Have you...killed my mother?”

“*Child*,” he says contemptuously. He stomps toward me, and with my heart in my throat I realize he has not just grown—he *is growing* as I watch. When he reaches me he towers over me. His chest is massive and broad, his body tapering toward the hips. He looks less than human. This Spence looks like he would eat the one I knew before. “You have no idea,” he says. He leans way over and down, until his face is almost to mine.

He opens his mouth. It is huge, and narrow, and I do not understand what in hell he is trying to do.

Until he opens wider. And wider. I can no longer see the features of his face, only the impossibly stretched and gaping hooked . . . yes, *beak* . . . as he reaches out and snags me before I can react.

He picks me up and squeezes, biting down as I struggle to get loose. I am almost hysterical. And then I realize he has not only grown but, Christ, he has shrunk me somehow. He has managed to work on me, belittle me, while speaking.

I squirm, useless. I am back so far from where I was, back in my place of defenseless, confused terror. I am like a rat in his powerful rock-shell beak. He bites down, bites down, piercing, squeezing—making short work of my father’s armor—the protective coating that made me feel so invincible moments ago.

The hooked tip of his beak makes contact just above my hip and punctures me deeply. And I realize this is how it goes. I will lose. I've already lost.

"Ahhhh," I hear myself scream as he throws me like a rocket, to smack against a standing stone.

I crumple to the ground and try to get up, but I crash right back down again. Blood is pooling quickly on the ground under me.

The wound is impossibly deep, mortal. I can feel my life seeping away. But I am certain he will come to finish me all the same, and when he does I will take him down with me.

I look up toward him. He is a man. He is a hawklike man, but he is clearly a man. He stands with one hand in the other as he looks down on me and twirls his one ring around his finger. He has got the ring, all right, but I see it is not rooting.

I wait for him. He goes blurry in my vision. I think he is coming my way. Or is he walking away? I am more than aware of the blood spreading beneath me and out, like a royal red carpet to greet the victor.

"Where is my mother?" I say, trying to be demanding, sounding weak.

My eyes are closing now. Closing. I am fighting them, but I am losing. I am dying, or I am dead.

My eyes are closed, but I still see, and I wonder if I am already gone. I can see everything—Eartha on her altar, Spence—but clearly now. Still, though I try to move, I cannot do anything. It is like I am nothing but disembodied vision.

I see Spence standing, his back to me.

I see him walking slowly toward the prone body of Eartha. I see him stand there and just look at her for the longest time.

It makes me tired. The whole scene makes me tired. The destruction, the hate, the loneliness, and I do not want to fight anymore. I have nothing left to fight for, or if I do, I have forgotten what it is.

I am tired. I am beaten. I do not wish to wake up. I will not wake up.

“Marcus,” Eleanor’s voice whispers to me. “Marcus.”

It’s the only thing I can hear, and it’s coming from where Spence is standing over Eartha. My vision floats toward him; he is doing something with his hands in the tight space between where he stands and where his dead daughter lies on the solid wood platform in front of the largest standing stone.

I cannot move, I cannot speak. I can only see, but I cannot see what he is doing.

“Marcus.” The voice is strong, and right where Spence is standing.

I watch my body flick slightly, and then I am inside of it again, if I have ever left it, and I know this because I am riddled with pain. With my living, blinking eyes I see that Spence is still there in front of the funeral platform.

I defy myself and what my body thinks I want. I go to stand.

And crumble immediately, head spinning, legs legless.

I fall into the ocean of my own blood. I try to roll over, but my side screams. I grab it in pain.

And it is nearly instantaneous.

I feel it, I see it. There is a glow, a high and beautiful lighted heat, radiating from the great gash above my hip.

Quick as light, quicker than my father ever healed me, quicker than I ever healed him, the bleeding stops. But more—it feels as if the blood has been replaced by something else, beyond. Something clicks impossibly deep inside of me. I feel so strong, so, so strong, beyond strong.

I stand and my head spins. With the wonder of it. With the possibilities. With boundless energy.

I have healed myself, *changed* myself. Gone beyond. It is so, so clear.

Fear and uncertainty are left in the dirt.

And I run. Float. Soar to where Spence is, so involved in what he is doing he does not even notice me. I am within range, and I realize that I don't know what he is doing, but whatever he is doing I will be stopping it.

I hit him so hard from behind I can actually hear the crunch of vertebrae in his neck jamming together. The two of us pitch forward, into the fire.

The funeral platform is on fire. He has set it on fire.

We crash right into the platform, right into the flames, and the size and weight of us topple the platform, send it breaking in half as it hits the great stone, sending wood this way and that, and sending the unfortunate Eartha sailing clear above us.

And revealing, under the platform, the bound and gagged and petrified form of Eleanor.

The monster—the evil, soulless monster—was setting my mother on fire.

Spence gets to his feet and hesitates. I see him look at my mother, then at me; I see the way he looks at me. I strike fear. I feel what is in his soul, and it is terror.

He flinches. He cowers. And, inexplicably, takes his first step toward Eleanor rather than me. As if he can still hold her over me, as if he has a chance.

Instead, with that step, he has finished a process begun by my father long ago.

I reach him when he is halfway to her, seize him in both of my hands, and I squeeze until I feel bones begin to crack. We are equal in size now, but I am stronger than him.

I am stronger in this moment than *anyone* has ever been. Mine is no longer a body as I have known the human body. There is no boundary that I can feel between where I begin and the natural world of fire and wind and rushing water and flight ends. I will kill him now.

I raise Spence over my head like a weightlifter and am about to drive him down into the hard earth.

But he is gone.

I look up, and he has changed fully, into this great hawk-beast, hanging there in the air above, beating powerful wings hard enough to push me backward. He has talons like banded meat hooks.

After a few more warning flaps of his mighty wings, he descends on me.

My first impulse is to make for cover. I turn and run, but after three strides I catch myself. I stop short and spin back, bracing for the attack.

But he has gone the other way. He is already halfway to Eleanor. His coward's heart still wants her, still wants vengeance, perhaps.

I run, faster than a land animal can, faster, obviously, than a creature of the sky can move, because I reach her before he does. I stop. Plant myself right there in front of her.

And wait for him.

As I stand, I feel it, my father's helmet, his torque, his rings, his body armor.

I feel it tighten around me, as if it is pulling in to guard me closer, to fit me properly, to protect me completely. Unless *I* am growing to fit *it*.

The wind fairly screeches with the force of Spence coming down out of the air.

I lean into it, into the wind he makes, into him.

I make sure his eyes catch my eyes, my father's eyes, before he strikes.

I reach my mighty hands out to grab him.

He pulls up at the very last instant. One claw grazes my forehead as he angles upward for escape, but escape won't do.

I grab hold before he can get away.

I hear Eleanor screaming for me through her gag, but I have to hold on. I point back at her, flick a finger, and her bonds melt away. She runs for the cover of the stone.

Spence himself is screaming, an unearthly, ear-shredding squall, trying to shake me. But I have him hard.

I twist the mighty talon in my hands and hear it crack; he throws all his weight against me in pain. No matter what he does now, he's going to be broken.

We hit the ground hard and separate. Spence lands about twenty yards away from me, near the entrance to a low, damp tunnel. He hobbles for a few steps, but then dives, hits the ground, and somehow changes—he is no longer a hawk but something low and long and dark. Reptilian, for sure. He shoots through the opening like an arrow.

I run hard, full out, after him, not knowing what I will do to get into that same space. I just accelerate when I get near it and then, *swoosh*.

I am in. And I am still chugging. I have no idea what form I have taken. I have no idea even how it has happened. All I know is that wherever Spence goes, I am there. The tunnel narrows and I am there; it goes all circular and I am there. It turns to a slit, it goes bright, it goes dark, and I am there with him and gaining.

Finally he begins to slow, and I realize now that the game is up for sure.

I begin slowing too as I see him in the opening ahead, a hunched and winded figure. He appears to me as unspeakably sad. I slow further.

I meet him there, where this last tunnel opens up into a near paradise of woods. Where the water is crystal and rushing past faster than a train.

I catch up to him as he stands on the edge of the water, looking down, once again his own witch self.

I keep my distance.

“It was all worth it,” he says, staring down as if he is trying to find one stationary speck at the bottom of the raging river. “Because it was right. We were right. What your father did to our people”—he spits into the

water with disgust—“was wrong, and he had no business doing it. It was not his place. He should have died. You should die.”

I don't care what Spence thinks. But I am still astonished by his ability to believe what he needs to believe.

That, to me, is more magic than his magical abilities. And I do not feel like killing him.

He takes a step closer to the water and collapses on his shattered leg.

He lies there looking pathetic, broken, scared. His eyes are wide with fear over what I will do to him.

I wait a few seconds. All I want to do is leave him here and never hear from him again.

But before I even try to figure out how to do just that, something occurs to me, and I go to him.

He is cowering as I stand over him.

“I need to know something, if you can tell me.”

He just continues looking up silently.

“My father spoke of something. A gift from the gods.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Spence asks.

“He said they would allow me to do what I could not do.”

“To undo,” Spence says, “what you must undo.”

It is my turn to stare silently.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asks, a bargain being struck.

I meet his gaze directly. “I will not kill you.”

I don't mention that I wouldn't have killed him anyway.

“Life . . . and . . . death,” he says. “To undo, one time . . .”

As if I am standing in front of a speeding train, I see

everything. I see it all, right from the beginning, and it is hurtling at me so hard it could kill me. All the events in deadly sequence right back to . . .

“Jules,” I say out loud, and I can only just keep from fainting from the rush of it all.

Jules. Life and death and undoing what must be undone.

Jules. I am ready to cry, and to thank my father and the gods and even every witch that brought me to this point, to the rightness of this: of bringing back my Jules. She never deserved it, never deserved any of what happened, always deserved so much better, and now, and finally now . . .

He is shaking his head, Spence is. He actually looks contrite when he does it, and more than a little frightened.

“No,” he says. “Not Jules.”

I feel like I am being dropped from a great height and dashed on the rocks of a rocky shore.

“You cannot bring back a life *you* have taken. The gods say no.”

I don’t move. I can’t move. I am stuck, staring at him. *But it wasn’t my fault, I want to say. I didn’t know.*

He looks at me looking at him, then his gaze slides down to the ground beneath him. I say nothing.

And then my spirit sinks, down beneath the ground, beneath the earth, to hell.

I almost had her. I almost had her back. For thirty seconds, I almost had my Jules back.

I wait, watching the water flow past. Wondering, if I jumped in, where it would take me.

I bend over, seize Spence's wrist in my hand. A look of horror crosses his face. "You said you wouldn't kill me," he says.

I take my other hand and pull the ring right off him. I shove it in his face.

"This," I say, "may be for my child. Or maybe the whole set will just go into the ground with me one day."

I drop his hand and walk away, leaving him on the ground by the water. Let him try to stop me. Let him ever try to come near me, ever again.

When I return to the clearing that is the former seat of the coven's power, my eyes travel immediately across the open space to find my mother, sitting on the ground. I rush to her.

I come to my knees to meet her, and we hug each other for what is probably three seconds but seems like a year. Because I do not, do not, *do not* have any inclination to ever let her go. I squeeze her with all my new-found strength.

"Ouch," she says, pushing me away and squeezing my upper arms as she does. "You feel good." She is looking at me strangely, like she is trying to reorient herself—to all of this and to me. "But you look like hell."

I just smile. Whatever she wants to say, I just want to smile. She looks as ragged as me, but I won't be saying that. She looks beautiful all the same.

She turns to where she has been kneeling.

Lying there, laid out properly, is Eartha. Eleanor has dragged her over from the spot where she went sprawling.

Now she is arranged, hands folded in front of her, her long hair pushed back from her face and straightened a bit. She lies at the foot of a standing stone like it is a giant headstone.

“It just didn’t seem right,” Eleanor says, “over there, the way she was . . .”

I put a hand on her shoulder. My mother’s greatness awes me.

“She’s lovely,” Eleanor says. Probably the first good word she’s knowingly said about a witch.

I nod. Even in death, Eartha is lovely.

“I can see it,” she says.

I already know.

She goes on in case I don’t. “What you were talking about. The resemblance. To Jules. I couldn’t see it then, but I can now. It’s beyond uncanny.”

“Yes it is,” I say, leaning closer now to Eartha’s dead face. And closer. “Beyond uncanny.”

And closer.

“Marcus?” Eleanor says. “What are you doing?”

I take both of my hands and the rings—which are heated up now like red coals—and place my fingers on either side of Eartha’s face. I leave them there, and I can feel it, feel it flowing through me, out of me. It is weakening me, as if the life is coming out of my own personal store.

I move my hands down, down the sides of her face, until I am holding her neck in my hands. I feel where it is broken.

I hold my hands there, hold the life there. I feel, with the tiniest cracking, bumping beneath the skin, the neck snap back, the disks realign.

I feel, finally, the gentle throb of the arteries as life courses again through the warming body of Eartha.

Color rises in her cheeks. She begins breathing. My mother seizes me from behind with a hug around my ribs every bit as strong and debilitating as the one I just gave her.

“My god,” Eleanor whispers in my ear.

“I *do* learn,” I say, to anyone who cares.

Eartha comes to consciousness. She is expressionless as she takes it in, focuses. Then, she sees me, sees Eleanor, absorbs it all. Her expression of astonishment tells the tale.

Her eyes go huge, wide and flooded. She opens her mouth.

I put a finger to her lips.

“Don’t say a word,” I say. I leave my finger across her lips as I speak.

“Know this, Eartha: I can kill you again. But I can’t bring you back again.”

I keep my finger there long enough to know she will not answer. Then I remove it, pull back, and get to my feet.

I take my mother’s hand, pull her up, hold on, and the two of us begin the long, long, long trip back home.

About the Author

The Witch Boy trilogy is Russell Moon's first contribution to the world of young adult fantasy literature. He lives in Britain and has a deep interest in Celtic magic and mythology.

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