



# SWEET BLACK WAVES

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{Imprint}  
MAKING YOUR MARK

NEW YORK

## {Imprint}

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An té a dhéanfadh cóip den leabhar seo, gan chead, gan chomhairle,  
dhíbreodh é go Teach Dhuinn.

For Jack

*Ne vus sanz meí, ne meí sanz vus*

—Marie de France, “Chevrefoil”

PART I



THE  
OLD WAYS



# KISS OF LIFE



**S**MOKE AND SCREAMS AND LOVE.

Fractured images swirled in the back of Branwen's mind, transporting her a thousand leagues away from Castle Rigani. She dug her fingernails into the armrests of her chair as her heartbeat accelerated. The dreams always grew worse this time of year. Snatches of color like stained glass that collided together and burst apart.

"Really, Branny," said Essy, interrupting her thoughts. "You're such a mopey drunk."

Branwen inhaled. Her cousin had forgotten what day it was. She spared an extra second's glance at the sea, preparing herself to meet Essy's gaze. The waves were rough through the small, circular windows of the princess's drawing room: indigo capped with white. She never liked to lose sight of them for long. A wildness stirred inside her as they broke against the shore. She did her best to smother it.

"Elderberries loosen your tongue altogether too much," Branwen said as she turned to her cousin.

The princess giggled and touched another thimbleful of elderberry wine to her lips.

Branwen kept her voice light. “What would dashing Lord Diarmuid say if he could see your cheeks so flushed?” Diarmuid was the son of Lord and Lady Parthalán from the province of Uladztir, whom King Óengus had invited to the castle for a feast this evening. Essy couldn’t stop talking about him.

The princess responded by brandishing her bright pink tongue. “Diarmuid does make my cheeks flush all on his own.” Another giggle and a hiccup. “But if we’re going to be subjected to Lord Rónán recounting all of his youthful victories against the Kernyveu—again—then I think you’d do well to have another thimbleful yourself, Branny.”

An anchor dropped in Branwen’s chest simply thinking about the people who terrorized her kingdom. Thieves and pirates all of them. Their assaults on the coast of Iveriu were relentless. She didn’t need any further reminders. Especially not today. Faceless raiders already lay in wait for Branwen whenever she closed her eyes.

Perhaps a hazy glow was just what she needed to make the anniversary pass more quickly. Although no drink would ever be strong enough to completely dull the memories.

Had it really been thirteen years?

Essy measured another pour of the sweet and tart wine into her thimble, declaring, “Delicious,” while sighing in satisfaction. The princess had pilfered the wine from the personal supply of Treva, the head cook, which inspired a flicker of guilt in Branwen, but, then, there were certainly worse things Essy could do.

“Delicious,” Branwen agreed as she swiped the wine-filled water-skin from her cousin, forging the thimble, and savored the taste of

elderberries on her tongue. Essy clapped excitedly, giving her a conspiratorial wink.

The princess adored making mischief and pulling pranks around the castle. One time she convinced Dubthach, the spinner's son, that a bowl of hard-boiled eggs was blind men's milky eyeballs and, as his future queen, commanded him to eat one. Poor Dubthach still couldn't stand the sight of eggs. Or chickens, for that matter.

Getting tipsy in Essy's chambers when they were supposed to be studying one of the great Ivernic love stories for their lessons with the royal tutor seemed a small crime by comparison.

Branwen pulled the waterskin away from her mouth, and her eyes flicked once more to the tumultuous waves below.

They called to her. Strange how much she could love the dark depths that carried destruction to her kingdom. In ancient times, so the bards sang, the island of Iveriu was invaded five times, and now the kingdom of Kernyv threatened to do it again.

Fire and sea and fighting men.

Branwen suspected peace was a dream as broken and elusive as her own, a puzzle from which key pieces had been stolen. She gave her head a small shake, the wine burning her throat nicely.

At the center of her fragmented dreams was love. Always love. A pair of lovers intertwined until they shared the same heart; their faces blackened, ashen. The tide pulled them out into the Ivernic Sea. They loved while they burned and they burned while they loved. And always, always their arms reached for Branwen.

It was her parents, she was sure of it.

"Share and share alike," said Essy, reaching for the waterskin. Branwen's gaze flitted back to her baby cousin, whose seventeenth birthday had just gone. With no male heirs, the peace and pros-



perity of Iveriu rested squarely on Essy's marriage. Ivernic law prohibited a woman from ruling in her own right—she needed a husband—and Branwen had heard rumblings that a foreign ally was crucial to protecting the waters that surrounded their small island. The difference in their stations had never been important, but Branwen sensed that one day it would be. Maybe one day soon.

Essy would, after all, become her queen.

A firm knock came at the heavy wooden door, and Branwen immediately stiffened in her seat.

Queen Eseult entered, her gait graceful, her spine straight. Surreptitiously, Branwen hid the waterskin beneath her thick brocade skirts. She spied Keane, the princess's bodyguard, make a face from the archway, but he said nothing. Keane was starkly attractive and he'd asked Branwen to dance twice at the last Imbolgos festival. Too bad he didn't cause her cheeks to flush. That was entirely due to the wine.

Scanning their rosy complexions, Queen Eseult lowered an eyebrow. "I see." She cleared her throat. "It must be a highly amusing lesson that Master Bécc assigned you both today. I could hear your laughter from halfway across the castle."

Branwen's eyes snagged on the queen's and she ducked her head. Technically, as a lady's maid, she was charged with keeping the princess safe—even from herself. Her aunt had never made her feel like a servant, however. She'd always treated her more like another daughter.

Queen Eseult dropped a comforting hand on Branwen's shoulder. She had an uncanny knack for reading other people's emotions. Whispers abounded that the Old Ones had gifted her with the ability

to see into the Otherworld, but Branwen was undecided regarding things she couldn't hold in her hand and examine.

If the Old Ones truly existed and were protecting the kingdom of Iveriu, then why did they permit the Kernyveu to continue their slaughter?

Why hadn't they saved Branwen's parents?

Essy remained happily ignorant of the silent exchange between Branwen and her mother. "We're reading the most *marvelous* story, mother," she slurred.

"And what is this marvelous story?" the queen asked.

"'The Wooing of Étaín.' It's terribly romantic."

Branwen snorted. "Terrible is right. She gets turned into a purple fly!"

Essy twitched her nose and stuck her tongue out at her cousin, no longer pretending to hide her intoxicated state.

"I don't fancy being turned into an insect, but Étaín *did* live for thousands of years. Everyone in Iveriu still knows her name. And to be fought over by two supernatural men . . ." The princess clutched melodramatically at her heart.

Branwen and the queen couldn't stop themselves from laughing. Essy's charm was nothing if not infectious, and she always drew Branwen back from the dark places in her head. Although Branwen didn't understand why Essy loved the story of Étaín so much. It never ended well. In one version she was cursed by her lover's jealous wife to be an insect. In another she was spirited away to the Otherworld forever. Maybe Branwen just wasn't a romantic.

Her aunt caught her eye, almost as if she knew precisely what Branwen was thinking. The corner of the queen's mouth arced upward and she winked.

Branwen would always be indebted to her aunt not only for raising her but also for taking her on as an apprentice healer. Queen Eseult was renowned throughout the kingdom for her skills with herbs. Branwen may not have believed in the Old Ones, but medicine was something she understood.

She often worked by candlelight long after Essy had fallen asleep, grinding and mixing new remedies to test or practicing her stitches on cushions. Branwen wanted to be able to save somebody else's parents, somebody else's children.

If her parents had reached a healer in time, could they have been saved? The queen made sure Branwen never learned the precise details of their deaths, but the question haunted her. Something had broken inside Branwen the day her parents died and never fully mended; something had ignited, too—a fiery hatred that she knew would consume her if she didn't keep it carefully controlled.

With a sly sideways glance at her daughter, Queen Eseult said to Branwen, "Once the princess has recovered her . . . wits, could I impose upon you to gather some mermaid's hair?"

Branwen nodded. Mermaid's hair was luminous turquoise seaweed that made the surface of the water glow like a lantern on moonless nights. Fresh air and a walk would do her good.

"Thank you, dear heart," the queen continued. "I'm making a balm for the king. Óengus is suffering from gout again. The weather has been so temperamental lately."

"Gout? *Gross*, mother." The princess curled her top lip in disgust. "Gentlewomen do *not* discuss gout."

"Wait until you've been married a few years."

"I'd rather be transformed into a fly like Étaín than be married

to a man with gout!” With that, Essy liberated the elderberry wine from beneath Branwen’s skirts and took an indelicate gulp.

The queen sighed. “Keep this up and *I’ll* be the one who needs a drink,” she said, wresting away the waterskin.

“Good. Maybe that would loosen you up, Mother.”

Branwen held her breath. Any other queen would have struck her daughter for being so insolent and behaving with such impropriety. A lady’s maid could also expect to be punished if her charge made such a remark.

Queen Eseult simply recorked the elderberry wine. Then she stooped down, kissing the princess on the forehead. Essy made a noise of complaint.

Branwen’s aunt turned toward her and kissed her temple, too. As warmth from the kiss radiated outward, she was choked by shame for failing in her duties.

“Today is hard for me as well, my darling Branny,” the queen murmured before sweeping out silently.

She remembered. A solitary tear slid down Branwen’s cheek, frozen in the afternoon light.

“Come on.” Essy pushed to her feet, catching hold of Branwen’s hand. “The Queen of Iveriu commands us to catch a mermaid by the hair, and so it shall be.” She glowered in the direction her mother had vanished.

“It wasn’t a command, Essy. It was a request.”

“A queen’s request is always a command.”

Branwen shrugged, letting her cousin tug her from the chair. Request or command, she would do anything to repay the queen’s love. Gladly.

Essy stumbled along beside her as they wended their way from the castle to the beach below. When they were children, Branwen had resented her younger cousin's following her everywhere, constantly pestering her, but the gap in their ages eventually meant less and less, and Branwen could no longer imagine her own portrait without Essy painted by her side.

Keane kept a respectful but watchful distance from the princess and her lady's maid. Branwen was glad she didn't have a bodyguard of her own. It would get tiresome.

She usually spent her spare time on the rocks below the ramparts. They seemed fierce and protective to her, like Queen Eseult; in the fading sunlight, the stone of the four rounded towers shone like emeralds. Branwen always knew she was safe within the castle walls. Its bastions jutting out toward the sea were lined with archers to fend off any invaders, like the Kernyvak pirates who killed her parents. And yet she couldn't resist the urge to be free of them.

Most people would avoid the spot where they'd learned their parents had been murdered. But, for Branwen, this was also the last place she had known they were alive.

She felt closest to them here.

Sometimes she could almost make herself believe they were merely at Fort Áine, the destination of their final journey. That they would be coming back for her soon. Her pulse spiked as the breakers crashed in her ears.

"Did you even hear what I *said*, Branny?" Essy nudged her gently with her shoulder.

"What was that?"

Essy had the same eyes as Branwen's mother, Lady Alana—green like Rigani stones. It made her love her cousin that much more.

She, on the other hand, had inherited coppery brown eyes from her father, Lord Caedmon.

The princess twisted a straw-colored lock around her finger and pulled, scowling at her cousin. “I said, do you think any man will ever love me as much as Étaín? Do you think Lord Diarmuid could?”

Real sadness underscored her words and Branwen’s heart ached. Her cousin spent too much time losing herself in old, romantic ballads. It wouldn’t help prepare her for a political marriage. “I thought you didn’t want a husband?” she said breezily.

“I don’t want a husband. I want a *lover*. I want a man who loves me—not my kingdom or my titles.”

“Don’t let your mother catch you talking like that, Essy,” Branwen said, chastising her with a swing of the small wicker basket that she’d brought to collect the mermaid’s hair.

“Why not? I don’t care who knows. I don’t care if *everyone* knows!” the princess said, raising her voice. Sidelong, Branwen glimpsed Keane frowning his brow. “Why shouldn’t I choose whom I love?” Essy demanded.

They both knew why.

Essy *was* the kingdom. One day she’d be queen and her first duty would be to the Land. To Iveriu. When the time came, Essy would do the right thing for her people. Branwen only wished it wouldn’t make her so miserable.

The princess blew out a shaky breath. “No one ever asked me what I wanted.”

Branwen’s gaze skated over the waves, darkening as the sun set, and thought of her parents. There was an Otherworld that supposedly lay beyond the waves. Were they there? Were they happy? The only thing Branwen knew for certain lay beyond the waves was the

island of Albion and their enemy, the kingdom of Kernyv, on its western peninsula.

“We seldom get what we want, dear cousin,” she said.

Essy followed her gaze to the beach. “I didn’t forget what today is . . .” She nodded toward the water. “Are you all right, Branny?”

There was a pinch in Branwen’s chest. She shouldn’t have doubted her cousin. Essy knew her better than anyone. Branwen sighed. “This day happens every year.”

“That’s not an answer.” A line appeared on the bridge of Essy’s nose. “Just because we seldom get what we want doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try,” said the princess, raising her chin.

Nothing would ever bring Branwen’s parents back, and nothing would ever change the fact that Essy was born to royalty. Her blood dictated her future. Branwen squeezed her cousin’s elbow. She’d try to be more understanding.

“If you don’t feel like entertaining tonight,” said Essy, “I’ll make your excuses at the feast. You don’t always have to be so stoic.”

A small smile parted Branwen’s lips. The princess might be self-centered at times, but she loved deeply in her own way. For months after Branwen’s parents died, Essy would crawl into her bed so Branwen wouldn’t have to face the dark alone. Branwen had been so angry—at the world, at Essy for still having a mother—that she wouldn’t share her covers. But Essy still came, night after night, and slept in the cold.

“Thank you,” said Branwen. The last thing she wanted to do was play hostess for pleased-with-himself Lord Diarmuid, but she was part of the royal household and she would perform her duty. Stoic was the only way she knew how to be. “I’ll be fine, Essy. Truly.”

“If you’re certain.”

“I’m certain.”

“In that case . . . Will you fix my hair?”

Branwen laughed. “Never fear,” she assured her. Essy always pushed her luck.

“You’re the best, Branny!” the princess sing-songed as if she hadn’t been on the verge of tears moments ago. Her cousin’s moods came as fast and feverish as a tempest but broke just as quickly.

Branwen shoved Essy toward the castle. “Off with you!” She flicked a glance in Keane’s direction. He inclined his head.

“Promise you won’t stay too long by the waves,” said Essy. “The coast isn’t safe at night.” She was right. The Kernyvak raids on Iveriu had begun when the Aquilan Empire retreated from the island of Albion to the southern continent, and they had intensified with each passing year.

Nevertheless, Branwen waved her hands, unperturbed.

“Perhaps I should leave Keane with you,” said Essy.

“Nice try.” The princess was forever trying to evade the vigilant eyes of her bodyguard.

Stubbornly, Essy complained, “I’d give all my jewels for a tenth of your freedom, Branny.”

“Ah, yes, the freedom to collect seaweed and fungus from the forest floor. You would just *love* that.” Her cousin’s study of herbal remedies had ended precipitously after she forced Dubthach to drink one of her concoctions and he lay in bed with a stomachache for two weeks. Branwen stroked Essy’s brow in a tender motion. “Jewels for mushrooms!” she teased. “Bards will sing my ballad far and wide: *Branwen of the Briars!*”

“Fine.” With the speed of a falcon, Essy’s pout dissolved into a mischievous grin. “Don’t let the mermaids get you!”



Branwen watched Essy walk in the direction of the main gate, still a bit unsteady from the wine. Keane filed closely behind her. Just before the princess disappeared from view, she called back, “Love you, Branny!”

A laugh followed, which was echoed by the surf.

“Love you, too,” Branwen whispered, but the sea beckoned to her.

Dying sunlight swirled around her. Some of her countrymen believed it was filled with invisible sprites. They believed you could cross the Veil into the realm of the Old Ones through hills like Whitethorn Mound, a short distance from the castle.

Branwen believed in what she could see. She believed the existence of sprites or Old Ones was about as likely as having one true love. The only true love she felt was for her aunt and her cousin. And for Iveriu.

Mermaid’s hair was strewn across the wet sand. Branwen liked the feel of the slick granules as she picked up the seaweed and placed it in the basket. She had been on the beach the day her parents died, building them a sandcastle.

She remembered how she’d hollowed out the sand into a circular moat with the earnest concentration of a master builder. The first line of defense. Her people had been at war with the kingdom of Kernyv since before Branwen was born. At six years old, she’d already understood the importance of protecting what you loved.

The sandcastle was to have been a gift, an apology to her parents. She’d been very cross with them for leaving her behind, and she had refused to say good-bye. While they were away, she had longed for her mother’s embrace, to bury her face in dark mahogany curls—Lady Alana always smelled of rosemary. She longed for it still.

Right as Branwen was packing the final sand wall of the intri-

cate terraced structure, a tiny blond projectile had catapulted herself into Branwen's arms. She had lost her balance and they both collapsed on top of the castle.

*You've ruined everything!* Branwen had shrieked. Essy took no notice, rolling in the glistening grains merrily—completely oblivious to the destruction she had wrought. To her, it was just a game.

A rustle in the undergrowth surrounding the beach jolted Branwen back to the present. She gasped as her gaze caught a familiar shape.

The basket of mermaid's hair fell to the sand.

It was a fox, poised and curious. The same fox she'd seen the day her parents died. Thirteen years ago today. *Impossible*.

The fox barked as if it sensed her skepticism. Branwen had never told anyone how the creature appeared on the beach, its eyes intent, a story behind them, moments before Queen Eseult came bearing tidings of her parents' deaths. At the time, she'd wondered if it was a messenger sent by the Old Ones, like in the legends of her people. When she was older, she'd dismissed the memory as childish whimsy—a foolish hope that anyone in the Otherworld cared about her.

Regardless, Branwen would recognize the fox's gleaming red-currant coat anywhere. And its white ears. So beautiful, so unnatural. Dusk shimmered around the creature, making it seem more illusion than flesh and bone.

The fox stared out to sea, indicating something with its nose and barking again. What was it doing here? What was it looking at?

She sucked in another sharp breath as she spotted it: a raft. She could just make out the form of a man sprawled across it.

Turning toward her, the creature regarded Branwen with Otherworldly grace. *Save the man*, it implored with ebony eyes. She shook her head. That was a *ridiculous* notion.

The fox swished its bushy tail in annoyance.

Her chest tightened with the urge to obey. *Move*, the beast seemed to say. Exhaling, Branwen ran toward the water, still apprehensive, and waded into the chilly depths.

When she was submerged halfway up to her chest, Branwen managed to seize one corner of the makeshift raft. She couldn't see the man's face but he wasn't moving.

She kicked as hard as she could, guiding the large plank of driftwood toward the shore. It took all of Branwen's strength to haul the raft onto the beach. As she felt the sand once more beneath her feet, she dropped down beside the stranger, shivering from exertion and the freezing waters. Scanning his body, she looked for injuries the way that Queen Eseult had trained her to do.

Hurriedly, she turned the man over. His tunic was in shreds, stained with blood. A gash started at his shoulder and sliced diagonally across his heart to his abdomen. It didn't seem too deep, but, unfortunately, his chest wasn't heaving. He wasn't taking in any air.

Branwen didn't know how long the stranger had been unconscious. There was a chance she could still save him if it hadn't been long enough for his soul to depart. The kiss of life, her father had called it.

She'd been on the beach with her father one afternoon when the villagers brought a drowned fisherman to him for help. Branwen watched in awe as her father revived the man. All of the peasants had

loved Lord Caedmon. As a little girl, Branwen had understood that although he ruled over them, he never placed himself above them.

Trying to remember that distant day, Branwen began pounding on the stranger's chest. His wounds wept blood all over her hands. Nothing was happening. Fighting her panic, she raised her face above the man's.

She had not yet allowed herself to take in his features. But when she did, her own breath buckled in her throat. He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen, even with his cuts and bruises. A foreigner, certainly. Dark curls, wet and bloody, framed elegant cheekbones and a mouth that was almost too perfectly formed.

*Collect yourself.* Branwen's training was intended for a moment like this.

Without further delay, she felt the stranger's neck for a pulse. His brown skin was flaky like a snakeskin from the sun. Could he have been aboard a trading vessel from the southern continent?

Summoning all of her courage, she pressed her lips to his. They were salt-stained and irresistibly sweet. She pinched his nose with her fingertips and breathed life into him.

More than Branwen had wanted anything since her parents died, she wanted to save this stranger. She beat his chest again, shuddering as he took in her breath. Instantaneously, he coughed hard and sprayed her with seawater. Despite the cold seeping into her body, her cheeks burned hot. The stranger wheezed and spat so much water out onto the sand that it seemed as if he'd swallowed the entire Ivernic Sea.

After an eternity, the stranger opened his eyes. Hazel flecked a darker brown, matching the last glimmer of evening light on the

waves. He regarded his savior as he rasped for air and gurgled saltwater.

Branwen stepped back because for the first time in her life, she felt a pull she couldn't control.

And then he smiled. "That was *some* kiss."

She touched her flaming lips as the words reverberated in her mind. The stranger's voice had an odd lilt to it. He spoke her language but he wasn't Ivernic.

Her eyes widened in disbelief. The beautiful stranger was a Kernyvman.

Branwen had just saved the life of her enemy.

# ODAI ETI AMA



“**W**HY ARE YOU STARING AT me like that?” the Kernyvman asked, still struggling for air. She turned on her heel, heart pounding, and prepared to make a break for the castle. “Wait. Wait, lady—*wait*,” he pleaded.

Branwen hesitated and she hated herself a little for it. She wouldn’t be ensnared by the wiles of some striking Kernyvak pirate. She would *not*. She owed her parents’ memory more honor than that.

“Please, dear lady,” he said, voice low and grainy. “By my troth, no harm will come to you.”

She whipped around to face him. “What good are the promises of Kernyvmen?” she demanded, and he flinched as if she’d slapped him.

“On the graves of my parents, I swear it.”

His declaration gave Branwen pause. The day Lord Caedmon had restored the fisherman to life, her father explained he was now

responsible for the man until he returned the favor. If her father failed to protect him, he would lose his own honor. It was the way of the Old Ones.

Branwen could help her enemy or leave him bleeding on the beach. Either would mean dishonor. Curling her hands into fists, she hissed, “If anything untoward should befall me—it will be the last thing you do.”

The half-drowned man chuckled. “I’d rather lose a limb than let anything happen to you.”

“That could be arranged.”

“If you were injured on my account, I would deserve it.” He wasn’t laughing now.

“Very well,” she said shortly. Branwen knew which choice her father would make in her position. “It seems a shame to have saved you from the waves only to let you die on the shore.” She thrust out a hand.

“A shame, indeed,” he said, accepting her hand, the callused pads of his palms startlingly soft. She began to lift him up when the Kernyvman flashed her a half smile. “One day, I hope to be able to repay you for saving me. If not with a life, then with another kiss.”

*Of all the nerve!* Branwen relinquished her grasp and he tumbled back into the sand.

“Death is preferable to kissing a Kernyvman,” she told him.

He arched an eyebrow. “Are you saying that if you’d known who I was that you would have let me drown?”

Branwen didn’t answer. She honestly didn’t know. When she saw him on the raft, she’d wanted to save him the way no one had been able to save her parents. But if an Iverman washed up on the coast of Kernyv, would anyone help him?

At the back of her mind, Branwen could practically hear her father's reproach that it didn't matter what the Kernyveu would do—only she was responsible for her own honor.

*Curse them all!*

Getting to his feet with great difficulty, the bedraggled stranger said, "What is your name, my lady? I should like to know to whom I owe my life."

She bit her lip, afraid to trust him with her name. If he knew she was the niece of King Óengus, he might kidnap her to gain concessions for the kingdom of Kernyv.

"Emer," Branwen said at last. That was her favorite heroine, the wife of the most famous Ivernic hero. "Just plain Emer. I'm not a *lady*."

The Kernyvman studied her face intently. Could he see through her lies? She turned quickly, feeling exposed.

"Follow me," she called over her shoulder.

If Branwen left him on the beach and he was discovered by the Royal Guard, it would mean a hasty end for the Kernyvman. She might as well toss him back into the murky depths. Against her better judgment, she led him to a cave concealed within the cliff face.

At high tide, it became inaccessible from the beach. She'd discovered the cave when she was a little girl. She used to come here to hide herself. Especially after her parents died. Essy could never find her here when they played hide-and-seek, and it used to drive the princess mad.

Branwen didn't look back at the stranger as they walked, but she listened to his labored breaths. Each of his footfalls seemed weightier, less assured than the last. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the fox monitoring their progress toward the cave.

She blinked. The creature was really there. And he was no



common fox. What interest did he—or the Old Ones—have in this shipwrecked stranger?

The Kernyvman suddenly staggered beside her, knocking into Branwen's shoulder. On instinct, she reached out to steady him. The stranger wore a brave face but his pupils were dilated. He was becoming woozy from so much blood loss. Queen Eseult had taught her the signs when she let her assist in tending to the Royal Guard. The Kernyvman might pose a danger to her—but not in his current condition.

Tentatively, hoping she wouldn't live to regret it, Branwen looped an arm around his shoulders and took his weight.

"Come along, Sir—?"

"No *sír*." His tone was teasing as he wheezed. "Just plain Tantris. I'm a minstrel."

She gave her head a little shake. "Right. Keep up, *just plain* Tantris." Branwen gripped him harder as they walked, and he winced. She'd never been wedged so closely against a man before. He shivered with cold and she shivered with . . . because he shivered.

"Tell me," she said, an edge to her voice. "How does a minstrel come to be floating half dead in the middle of the Ivernic Sea?"

"Pirates." His jaw clenched. "I'd caught passage on a merchant ship. We were attacked." A few strained breaths whistled through his teeth.

His story was plausible. Kernyvak pirates menaced all of the northern seas, including their own kingdom's ships.

"Your countrymen do you proud," she said.

Tantris stopped short. Branwen lurched forward, then rocked back against him. "Not all Kernyvmen love bloodshed, Emer," he said.

Icy-hot prickles of mortification spread across Branwen's chest

before she remembered she shouldn't care if she'd offended her mortal enemy.

"What do they love, then, Kernyvmen?" she wanted to know.

"Poetry." He gave her a shameless wink.

*Ugh.* Tantris could barely stand, yet his attempts at charm didn't flag. "Poetry?" Branwen repeated.

"I suppose I can't speak for *all* Kernyvmen, but I, myself, have a weakness for verses."

She cast him a withering look. "Is that so? Recite me one of your favorite poems."

"You ask a lot of a man with a sword wound who's just returned from the dead."

"If you can't even recite a single verse, how am I to know you aren't a pirate rather than a poet?"

They neared the entrance to the cave and fresh fear gnawed at her gut. Was Branwen foolhardy enough to trap herself alone with him? Surely the fox wouldn't have wanted her to save a pirate. But then, why was she following the advice of a fox? A fox!

Breathing raggedly, Tantris said, "I suppose it's the least I can do for the selfless maiden who rescued me from the sea."

"Indeed." Although, to be fair, he was slurring slightly and looked increasingly poorly.

"*Odaí etí ama,*" he began, his voice rich and rolling like the waves, and Branwen became inordinately grateful for her lessons in the language of the Aquilan Empire.

"I hate and I love," she whispered, almost to herself.

Tantris glanced at her, taken aback. "You speak Aquilan?"

Branwen froze. Aquilan was spoken by the nobility across the southern continent, the Western Isles of Albion and Iveriu, and as

far north as the Skáney Lands. If Tantris entertained at royal courts, he would have a reason to study it. A commoner, such as she claimed herself to be, would not.

“Only a little,” Branwen said, preparing to bolt. What a useless spy she would make!

He nodded. “*I hate and I love,*” Tantris began again in Ivernian, appearing to believe her deception. She loosed a breath. “*Dark as dawn, light as midnight,*” he continued, first in Aquilan—which Branwen pretended not to understand—then in her language.

“*Fire that numbs, rain that burns.*” The poet glanced at her for an unbroken moment. “*This love that I hate and hate that I love.*”

Tantris leaned his forehead against hers, his lips dangerously close. Her chest swelled, panic and excitement infusing her. She should push him away—she really, really should. The poet tottered beside her.

“Emer . . .” Instead of brushing her mouth with his, Tantris collapsed on top of her.

Branwen let out a sigh and, with enormous effort, lugged the Kernyman into her hiding spot. Her secret place. The place she’d never shared with anyone.

Crimson light splayed across the walls of the cave. The dwindling rays made the unconscious poet even more alluring, warming his bronze skin. Most of the Kernyvok raiders who pillaged Ivernian shores were pale like Branwen. Tantris’s family must have immigrated to Kernyv from elsewhere in the now diminished Aquilan Empire, which had ruled Albion until a few generations ago. Perhaps that was how he’d learned their poetry?

She noticed he had a tiny scar across his right eyebrow, and she found it disconcertingly endearing.

*My enemy*, she told herself. It didn't matter what color his skin was. *He's my enemy*.

He might be a poet not a pirate, but his people had still murdered her parents. Even if his ancestors came from beyond the Aquilan Sea, the poet was a Kernyvman. His charm alone proved it. As Branwen debated with herself, Tantris's thick eyelashes fluttered. He focused on her face and gave her a smile.

Refusing to reciprocate, she told him, "You should count yourself lucky, Tantris—lucky that I didn't know you were Kernyvak."

Queen Eseult always said that healers couldn't choose their patients. The Old Ones expected them to heal whoever crossed their paths, whether they were thieves or princes. Would the queen extend that mandate to Kernyvmen?

"It was more than luck, Emer, that brought me to you." His voice brimmed with a confidence Branwen wished she shared.

*The fox*, she wanted to say. *It was the fox that brought me to you*.

Until today, she'd convinced herself that the fox was simply the figment of a grief-stricken child's imagination. Until today, Branwen had thought the Otherworld was a bedtime story and the Old Ones nothing but false promises. After today . . .

Flattening her lips together, she tore a strip of cloth from one of the underskirts of her gown. This wasn't a subject she wanted to discuss—and definitely not with Tantris.

"What are you doing, my lady?" he asked.

She laughed at the hint of scandal in his tone. "I'm going to bandage your wound," she replied matter-of-factly. The ripping sound filled the space between them. It was good to have something practical to concentrate on rather than his eyes. Honor compelled Branwen to help him, but she would not *like* a Kernyvman.

“I’m sorry it’s wet,” she told him. “It’s only temporary. I’ll be back later with my salves.” High tide wouldn’t come till midnight, and she’d return before then.

He touched her hand, sending tingles all through her body. She fought the sensation. “You’re a healer?” Wonder filled his voice.

“More like an apprentice.” Queen Eseult was the true medicine woman; Branwen had much yet to learn.

Tantris tried to support himself with his elbows but he was too weak.

“Emer, my Otherworld savior.”

Branwen rolled her eyes. “I’m not from the Otherworld.” But it begged the question: Why did the Otherworld care about this Kernyvman and not her parents?

He reached toward Branwen and twined a stray lock of her hair around his forefinger. She pulled back, although part of her wanted to be pulled closer.

“You’re Otherworld-sent,” Tantris pronounced, “and I won’t hear otherwise.” His smile transformed into a grimace as he laughed.

A few seconds later, he heard nothing at all. Branwen sighed as Tantris succumbed to exhaustion. She finished bandaging his chest and lit a small fire to keep him warm. Before she set off toward Castle Rigani, Branwen skimmed her finger along the scar on his brow.

He didn’t stir.

Somehow she knew the fox was still watching without being seen.

“*Odaí etí ama,*” she breathed.

# HE LOVES ME, HE LOVES ME NOT



“**W**HERE HAVE YOU BEEN, BRANNY?” the princess complained, seated at her vanity. “Look at the state of my hair!” A crown of lopsided plaits adorned Essy’s head.

Where had she been? Saving a sworn enemy of Iveriu, that was where. Branwen’s breaths still came in pants from retrieving the basket of mermaid’s hair on her dash back to the castle, dropping it off for the queen, and running up the stairs to Essy’s chambers.

“I’m here now,” she said, trying to steady her nerves. As usual, the princess was too preoccupied to notice that Branwen’s dress was damp and sea-stained. She was thankful that Keane wasn’t on duty. He would have noticed.

Essy caught her eye in the vanity mirror.

“Lord Diarmuid should be here any minute.” She beamed an excited smile. Branwen hardly thought the northern lord deserved it.

Striding toward the princess, she wiped her grimy hands on her

already dirty dress. “Then I’d better get to work,” she said, and pulled the horsehair brush from Essy’s grip.

As she began detangling the bird’s nest her cousin had made of her hair, she noticed a few tufts missing from the base of Essy’s skull. A few years ago, the princess began pulling at it whenever she was anxious. She’d begged Branwen not to tell the queen. Branwen gnashed her teeth but decided not to bring it up tonight. They both had enough on their minds.

Essy hissed as Branwen pulled loose the golden and ruby balls the princess had inexpertly attached to the ends of her flaxen braids. “*Ouch*, cousin,” she cried.

Ignoring her protests, Branwen unraveled the knots with agile fingers. The princess closed her eyes. Branwen stroked the brush through her cousin’s tresses in a soothing, rhythmic motion, like she’d been doing since they were children. It reminded Branwen of the ebb and flow of the tide. She found it comforting, too—she liked consistency. She did *not* like strangely pleasing Kernyvmen turning up on her beach.

Eyes still closed, the princess said, “Branny, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“Oh?” she replied as she selected vibrant red ribbons from a pile the princess had haphazardly discarded on the tabletop. Whenever her cousin began a conversation in this vein, it most often meant she’d borrowed something of Branwen’s without permission and lost it. She didn’t know how Essy would survive without a castle full of servants to look after her and, fortunately, the princess would never have to find out.

Branwen swept her cousin’s hair into two loops on either side of her face. She threaded the winter cherry-colored ribbons through

the braids, securing them with an intricate pattern called a sweetheart plait. The princess was blessed with a high forehead, which the plaits accentuated. Branwen's wasn't quite as high, but her heart-shaped face was pleasant enough. At least, she hoped it was.

She found herself wondering whether a certain Kernyvak poet would think so, too. *My enemy*, she repeated in her mind. *My enemy*.

"What did you want to tell me, Essy?" Branwen asked to distract herself.

Her cousin tapped her lower lip, drawing her eyebrows together the way she always did before confessing she'd eaten the last of the lavender candies or let the inkwells dry out.

"It's about Lord Diarmuid," she said, unable to meet Branwen's eyes.

Branwen tensed. "What about him?"

"He . . . he writes me letters." Scarlet splotches appeared on her cheeks. This was more serious than candies or inkwells.

"What kind of letters?" When the princess didn't answer, Branwen bent down to her eye level. "What *kind* of letters, Essy?" she said again.

"Love letters," her cousin admitted as she exhaled. "Wonderful love letters." A shy smile slipped across her face. "It's so romantic."

"It's not romantic, Essy! Your father could have his head." Quite literally. "It's reckless. What if someone finds them?"

"Who would find them? You?" She stabbed a finger in the air. "See—this is why I didn't tell you sooner," she said, a whine creeping into her voice. "I knew you'd react like this. But you really don't have to worry, Branny. Diarmuid is a descendant of High King Eógan Mugmedón. And, as eldest son he'll inherit Talamu Castle. It's a fine match. Father will approve."



The princess fixed her with a glare, daring her to disagree.

Branwen opened and closed her mouth.

“Besides,” Essy said, eyes bright. “I think tonight’s the night that Diarmuid proposes!” She laughed and it held a trace of both exuberance and desperation. “His parents have accompanied him all the way from Uladztir. That must be why. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” said Branwen.

In order to combat the increasing Kernyvak raids, Iveriu might be forced to seek military help from abroad and the most expedient way to secure that help would be to marry the princess to a foreign ruler. No matter his lineage, Diarmuid couldn’t supply an army.

Branwen regarded her cousin seriously. Weaving a string of freshwater pearls through the white-blond wisps of her hairline, she entreated, “But Essy, you hardly even know Lord Diarmuid.”

“And how well am I likely to know any of the men my father chooses for me?”

She couldn’t disagree. Still, she challenged, “What about Lord Conla? He was your favorite at the Imbolgos festival. You wouldn’t stop babbling about him for months.”

“Who?”

“Lord Conla of Mumhantir,” she said, tying off either end of the pearl strand.

“Oh *him*. He’s such a boy. Diarmuid is a man. He’s gorgeous and he said that the first time he laid eyes on me was like seeing the sun after years of night . . . he has the best turns of phrase. Practically a poet.”

Branwen’s heart tripped over itself. “Men will sugar you with sweet words until they get what they want.” *Especially poets*, she reminded herself.

“How would you know, Branny?” Essy gave her a hawkish glance. “You’ve never been courted.”

She swallowed. Opening her heart didn’t come naturally to Branwen. She envied Essy’s ability to throw her entire being into everything in her life—not that she would tell her so. Branwen dropped her eyes to the floor.

“Oh, Branny, I didn’t mean it like that. I—”

“It’s fine. You’re right. I’ve never been courted.” Flirtatious, half-dead Kernymen in caves definitely didn’t count. *I hate and I love.*

Essy clasped her hand, tracing her forefinger in a familiar pattern against Branwen’s palm. Her cousin’s nail scratched into her skin. Branwen bit her tongue.

When Master Bécc taught the royal cousins the alphabet of the ancient language of trees—the first Ivernic writing, he’d pointed to an enormous hazel tree in the castle gardens and the honeysuckle vine wrapped around it. Neither could survive being separated from the other, he’d explained.

The girls had coupled the letter for hazel, which resembled a four-pronged comb, with the spiral that represented honeysuckle. It became their code, their secret language. To them, and only them, it meant *I love you, I understand, you’re not alone*—and everything in between.

“Not you without me,” said the princess as she finished tracing the symbol.

Branwen lifted her gaze. “Not me without you.” She quieted Essy’s finger, taking her cousin’s hand in her own, and traced their emblem in return.

The sting of Essy’s remark was gone. She kissed her cousin on the temple. Forgiving the princess her thoughtlessness had become second nature, and it was a small price to pay for her love.

One side of Essy's mouth tilted upward. "We'll find you a kind and swoon-worthy nobleman of your own, Branny," she insisted. "Don't be sad."

"I'm not."

Finding a swoon-worthy nobleman was the furthest thing from her mind.

"Here." Essy plucked a wilted blossom from her vanity. "I picked this for you on the way back from the beach."

Branwen smiled. As she closed her hand around the honeysuckle, she felt the pollen dissolve, staining her palm. They were the honeysuckle and the hazel tree, and they always would be.

"Thank you, cousin," she said.

Essy stole a glance at herself in the weathered looking glass. "Oh, Branny!" Her lips curved slightly, satisfied. "You have magic hands." She touched the pearls beaded along her brow. "Thank *you!*"

"I'm glad you like it."

Suddenly, the piercing blare of horns at the gatehouse rent the night. The glass in the narrow windows of Essy's bedchamber practically shook.

"They're here!" the princess exclaimed. "Tonight I'll find out if he loves me, or he loves me not!"

Branwen saw in her cousin's glinting eyes how much she wanted to rush to Lord Diarmuid's side. She wanted her to be happy, but she also wanted to protect her cousin's too-eager heart. Admiring her plaits once more, Essy said, "You really *are* a lifesaver, Branny!"

Her stomach cramped. There was someone whose life actually was depending on her this very moment. Branwen resolved to slip away from the feast as soon as she wouldn't be missed. She didn't

want Tantris to catch a chill or go hungry or get a blood infection. Even if he *was* a Kernyvman.

Her honor required it. That was all.

“Go,” she whispered in Essy’s ear. “Go see Lord Diarmuid. I’ll be along shortly. Just be careful with your heart.”

“You’re careful enough for the both of us, Branny.” Essy giggled, regarded herself in the mirror one last time, and headed for the door. “Don’t dally, cousin,” she said, vanishing down the corridor in a ball of energy.

Branwen brushed off the petals of the broken flower as she took in her own appearance. Her gown was etched with sea salt, ruined, and her hair was a mess of black tendrils. It was a good thing the princess was so obsessed with Lord Diarmuid that she didn’t ask too many questions.

She touched her lips, which tingled with the memory of the Kernyvman.

Spying the waterskin of elderberry wine that lurked beneath the bed skirts, she grabbed it and swigged a healthy gulp. A little buzz took hold.

It was nothing compared to the kiss of life.



Branwen heard Essy’s shriek of delight before she could see her.

She squinted. The princess and Lord Diarmuid lingered at the back of the feasting hall, illuminated by guttering candles. In the dim light, she glimpsed her cousin coquettishly tap him on the nose.

Branwen mustered all of her patience and walked toward them.

As the northern lord turned around to greet her, his smile seemed forced.

“Good evening, Lady Branwen.” He dipped his head, raising her hand formally to his lips. Branwen knew the Parthalán clan was an important ally of King Óengus, controlling much of the northern Uladztir province and, for that reason alone, she gave him a curtsy in return.

“Lord Diarmuid. I hope I’m not disturbing you.” Essy noticed the curtness of Branwen’s tone—although Diarmuid did not—and lanced her with a sidelong glare.

“Not at all,” he assured her. Again there was something about his civility that seemed contrived. “I was just informing our Lady Princess how we roused some Kernyvak raiders on our way here.”

Panic stabbed Branwen. Were those the same pirates who had attacked the vessel carrying Tantris?

“Oh really?” she said, feigning disinterest.

“We sent them back to their ships with their tails between their legs. Although, if you ask me, we should have pursued them all the way to Kernyv.”

During her shifts in the castle infirmary, Branwen had eavesdropped on guardsmen grumbling in a similar vein. Some of the provincial lords wanted to take matters more into their own hands. Anxiety was growing that King Óengus couldn’t protect Iveriu against Kernyvak attacks.

There hadn’t been a civil war in Iveriu for generations. How real was the threat? Branwen wondered. Could the king actually be planning on marrying Essy into the Parthalán clan to quell dissent among the lesser lords?

That outcome would undoubtedly please Essy in her current frame of mind. The princess laid a possessive hand on the young lord’s arm. She was besotted—for now. But Branwen didn’t believe

Lord Diarmuid was the lover her cousin dreamed of. No, she suspected he was a crown-chaser, like most other noblemen.

Branwen was saved from further small talk by the trumpet heralding the arrival of the King and Queen of Iveriu.

Under the cover of the horn blowing, Essy whispered in Branwen's ear, "What do you think?"

She glanced at Lord Diarmuid, who she presumed could hear them. "He has a pleasing face," Branwen whispered back, which wasn't a lie. The northern lord was possessed of silver-gray eyes and a square jaw. Although comparing him with the Kernyvok poet was like making a bit of sea glass compete with a star. She blushed at the thought, twisting the right sleeve of her gown.

"I know!" Essy said happily, giving Branwen a wink. The trumpeting stopped and the princess returned her attention to Diarmuid.

The queen sought out Branwen with her gaze. She was always utterly elegant and exuded a regal authority. Tonight, however, Queen Eseult resembled her sister, Lady Alana, so closely that it nearly broke Branwen's heart. It was as if her mother were standing before her.

Queen Eseult processed toward Branwen and Essy while King Óengus was waylaid near the entrance speaking with other guests, including Diarmuid's parents, Lord Rónán and Lady Fionnula. She also spotted Lord Morholt, the King's Champion. Morholt was Branwen's uncle, but his manner was so unlike that of the queen or of her mother that it was hard for her to see any relation.

The sea of courtiers parted for the queen, bowing their heads. The esteem in their eyes wasn't affected. Queen Eseult was beloved by the Iverni.

One day, Branwen fully expected Essy to inspire the same devotion.

“Good evening, Lady Queen.” She greeted her aunt with a deep curtsy.

“Good evening, Lady Branwen. I collected the mermaid’s hair from the infirmary. Thank you.” The queen squeezed her hand.

“My pleasure.” Branwen swallowed the reply. Mention of the infirmary sent a dart of fear straight through her. A wound like Tantris’s could take a turn for the worse at any moment. She needed to get back to the cave.

Essy gave her mother a much more perfunctory curtsy. Lord Diarmuid, on the other hand, practically scraped the stone floor with his chin as he bowed.

“Lady Queen, my family is honored that you have invited us to feast at Castle Rigani.”

“The honor is mine,” said the queen mildly as she appraised the nobleman standing so close to her daughter.

Unable to resist needling him, Branwen told her aunt, “Lord Diarmuid informs me that we have him to thank for fighting off some Kernyvak raiders.”

“Ah, yes?”

Lord Diarmuid licked his lips, cheeks growing ruddy. “I— I’m always proud to draw my sword for Iveriu,” he stammered. “But my family is, of course, obliged to the Royal Guard for their assistance.”

“As it is our duty and pleasure to provide it,” said Queen Eseult. “A united kingdom is a strong kingdom. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Essy linked her arm with Diarmuid’s. “I would, Mother.” She showed a briary smile. “Completely.” Unlike the ballads the princess adored singing, in real life, Branwen knew, a noblewoman rarely got to write the ending to her own story.

Lord Diarmuid coughed as if he'd swallowed his tongue. "One Iveriu forever," he mumbled as mother and daughter dueled with their eyes.

Branwen stifled a laugh at his discomfort as Lord and Lady Parthalán joined them. Further pleasantries were exchanged until the feast began, when polite conversation dwindled in favor of boar slathered with ambergris and sides of venison.

When the acrobats cartwheeled into the hall, Branwen made her escape. Essy was so absorbed with Lord Diarmuid that she wouldn't have noticed if boulders were being catapulted at the castle. Branwen skulked down to the kitchens, careful to avoid head cook Treva. Hands trembling, she filled a basket with freshly baked bread, tranches of cured rabbit, smoked haddock, and wild blueberries.

From the laundry, she filched a clean tunic and trousers. She'd already pocketed blood-stanching herbs from the queen's stores when she delivered the mermaid's hair. Her aunt wouldn't mind. She always encouraged Branwen to work on her healing arts; she didn't need to know her patient was a Kernyman. Still, Branwen's heart raced faster than any stallion.

Now she had everything she needed. All that remained was to gather the nerve to sneak out of the castle. At night. When raiders had been spotted marauding along the coast.

She cast one last look toward the safety of the feasting hall. Inside lay her family, her countrymen, everyone she loved, everyone who trusted her. Outside lay danger. The unknown.

Branwen pictured Tantris bleeding and suffering. Essy and the queen weren't the only ones who trusted her anymore. The Kernyman had put his faith in Branwen, too.



He was trusting her to return.

Just outside the east gate of the castle, in the shadow of the archway, a pair of vulpine eyes flashed in the darkness. Bright yellow like a hungry moon. The fox.

Branwen sensed that he would protect her, although she didn't understand why. She drew in a bracing breath. Was she really taking orders from a fox? He barked, hurrying her along. A quavery warmth spread from her heart throughout her body.

She followed the creature into the night.

# A WOMAN OF HONOR



**B**RANWEN HAD WALKED THE TRAIL from the castle to the shore thousands of times, but never alone in the dark. Shoulders tensed, she listened carefully for the snapping of branches or the low rumble of hooves on dirt. But she heard nothing. She moved as swiftly and quietly as she could. The fox followed her from a distance the whole time.

As she neared the cave, Branwen gazed back at the crenellated façade of Castle Rigani, radiant in the light of the watch fires. This was her home. It was beautiful. She would do anything to protect it.

So why was she sneaking out in the middle of the night to heal a wounded Kernyvman? Several times she almost stopped and turned on her heel, but the fox urged her onward. Branwen's thoughts returned to her father's rescue of the fisherman.

She'd asked him later why he would risk himself for one of his subjects. "Branny," Lord Caedmon had told her, "if you want your people to fight and die for you, then you must be prepared to do the

same. And if you want to rule in peace, it is better to turn enemies into friends.”

Branwen had felt the truth of his words in her bones, but the more time that elapsed without hearing her father’s hearty laughter, the more she doubted she could ever be so generous. Her heart wasn’t honorable enough to uphold her father’s legacy. Hers was brittle and more fragile than she liked to acknowledge.

Farther up the path, the fox made a plaintive noise, somewhere between a whine and a bark. It gave her the distinct impression it didn’t want Branwen to tarry any longer.

At the entrance to the cave, the fox barked again. There was no light coming from inside. The fire must have burned itself out. With apprehension, she tiptoed inside.

Quicker than an arrow, a hand was around her waist, and another clamped over her mouth. All the supplies she’d brought tumbled to the ground. Branwen struggled but her attacker held her firm. Fighting the panic that numbed her mind, she recalled Keane’s lessons on self-defense.

Physically, she was outmatched. Her only advantage was surprise.

She bit her attacker’s hand.

He snatched it back. Triumph swelled in Branwen for an instant before a foot hooked her ankle and she fell onto the rocky floor with a thud. The Kernyvman sprawled on top of her.

“Are all the Kernyveu this mad?” she rebuked him.

A startled intake of breath. “Emer?” The voice was full of alarm, and shame. Tantris’s voice.

“Who else would it be?” Branwen’s chest heaved with an odd mixture of fear and relief. Their lips were once again close enough

for the kiss of life. A riot of anger—and something else—pulled taut every muscle in Branwen’s body. “Get off me!” She elbowed him in the ribs.

He yelped from the pain as he rolled to the side.

“You could have signaled your arrival,” he said, tilting his head so that a thin sliver of moonlight bathed his face. He was both appealing and exasperating.

“What a wonderful suggestion,” said Branwen. “I’ll run and signal your location to the Royal Guard as well!”

“The Royal Guard? We’re near Castle Rigani?”

*Curse the Kernnyvman!* She’d said too much. Who knew what his true purpose was in Iveriu?

Tantris looked at her thoughtfully. “Are you a servant at the castle?”

Lady’s maid wasn’t quite the same but Branwen nodded. Let him believe it.

“The king won’t pay a ransom for me,” she lied. “If that’s what you’re thinking.” How could she have played so easily into her enemy’s hands?

Outrage followed by anguish gripped Tantris’s features. “You think me a kidnapper, Emer?” he said, a roughness to his accusation. “If anyone’s done the kidnapping, it’s you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, *you*. Dragging a half-drowned man to your cave. Utterly helpless.”

“Helpless?” *What gall!* She gave Tantris another shove. “You should learn not to bite the hand that feeds you,” she spat. He groaned and a wave of guilt crashed over her. Fear for his life had given him the strength to attack her, but he was still gravely injured.

“I believe *you* did the biting, Emer.”

Branwen made an indignant noise. Just when she was feeling sympathy for him! “Fine then. You can suture yourself.” She scrambled to her feet.

Tantris caught the hem of her skirt. “No, wait. Emer, don’t go.” He gazed up at her. “Forgive my rash words.”

“Why should I?” she said, but she didn’t run. She stood very still as Tantris pushed to his feet.

“Because what I should have said is how brave you are to leave the shelter of the castle to help a stranger.” There was something so musical and enticing about his voice that he must have been a talented bard, indeed. “And to pull me from the sea.”

“I know how to swim,” Branwen told him, dismissive. Her father had taught her to swim as soon as she could walk. He didn’t care that noblewomen were never supposed to reveal enough of themselves to swim. Lord Caedmon used to say that they lived by the sea and he wouldn’t lose his daughter to the tide.

Tantris searched her face. “Regardless, I’m truly ashamed for attacking you. You caught me unawares.”

She felt a strange thrumming in her chest. “I said I’d return, and I keep my word.” Branwen was rattled by the authority in her own voice—she sounded like Queen Eseult herself.

Tantris dropped to one knee, the way a knight would before his lady. “You are truly a woman of honor, Emer. I will never doubt your word again. I’m in your service.”

Her cheeks blazed, and she hoped the moonlight wasn’t strong enough in the cave for him to notice. “Get up, Tantris. Only a knight can pledge his service—and you’re just a minstrel.”

“Of course,” he answered with a tight-lipped smile, rising with some pains back to standing.

“Your clothes are in tatters. Here, I brought you these.” Branwen held out fresh linens as a peace offering.

Tantris’s hands brushed hers as he accepted the clothing, and she felt heat right down to her toes.

“Thank you,” he said. His dark eyes seared her. She swallowed several times.

“You’re welcome.” A cough. “Now make yourself useful and kindle a fire,” Branwen commanded as imperiously as Essy would have.

She expected a smart remark but he simply inclined his head in deference. This Kernyvman was quite the enigma. He set about making the fire as Branwen scoured the cave floor for the supplies she’d dropped.

With a cluck of the tongue, she said, “Your supper is spoiled, and you have only yourself to blame.”

Stone struck stone and a spark glittered against the night. The twigs began to crackle. Firelight washed over them. For several suspended moments, it seemed like neither of them was breathing. Her eyes darted to the floor as she pointed at the strips of meat she’d recovered. “Come, you must be hungry. Eat.”

“Again, I thank you,” Tantris said from beside the fire. “Won’t you join me?” There was uncertainty in his question, and Branwen found it infinitely more enticing than his compliments.

From within her skirts, she pulled a salve of birch bark, to prevent infection, and arnica petals, to relieve pain. Tantris eyed the jar quizzically.

“It’s a balm for your wound. It might sting,” she cautioned.

Queen Eseult had taught her how to make the remedy. "I will tend to it, and then I must return home before I'm missed."

"I'll escort you."

Branwen's pulse quickened. "To Castle Rigani? Do you have a death wish?" With Lord Diarmuid's talk of Kernyvak raiding parties, Tantris would meet an unceremonious end within the castle walls.

"You've already risked yourself for me by coming here alone, Emer. I can't let you do it again."

"I didn't ask for your permission."

His eyes were trained on hers, unyielding. "It's not safe," he said.

"You can blame your countrymen for that."

"King Marc is a good king," said Tantris, defensive. He obviously believed it.

Branwen's nostrils flared. "As is King Óengus."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Let's not quarrel, Emer."

"No, let's not. You could barely make it to the cave without my help, Tantris. You won't be much protection tonight."

Shadows clung to his face as he admitted, "I suppose I wouldn't." He balled his hands into loose fists. She could tell his muscles ached.

Branwen crouched down beside him and tugged at the end of his blood-soaked tunic. "Here, let's see to your wounds." She began pulling it over his head, but Tantris stopped her.

"Won't your father mind you undressing a strange man?" He paused. "Or your husband?"

His reticence made her laugh. "If I did have a husband, would you prefer that I let your wound get infected?"

"I would rather die than dishonor a woman who has shown me such kindness," Tantris replied. His tone left Branwen in no doubt that he would.

She crinkled her nose. “Tantris, I am an apprentice healer and this is what my honor impels me to do.” Speaking the words, Branwen realized they were true. “You will only dishonor me if you don’t let me help you.” Lucky for him, *she* wasn’t a princess. The honor of Iveriu itself would be in jeopardy if Essy were ever discovered alone with a man who was neither a relative nor her husband.

Exhaling, Tantris nodded. Branwen began to remove his tunic and his body went completely still. He smelled of the sea. It was even more intoxicating than the elderberry wine. Worryingly, the makeshift bandage she’d torn from her underskirts this afternoon was bloody and, more critically, tinged with green and yellow puss. His ability to push through the pain was truly impressive, but it could also belie the danger.

Although his cuts might not be deep, they could still poison his blood. A blood infection could cause a fever and a fever could be lethal.

She ripped off the bandage. Tantris teetered forward, seizing her shoulders for balance. His forehead pressed to hers, his curls tickled.

“Sorry,” Branwen said in a hush.

“You didn’t answer my question about a husband,” he said. The hazel flecks in his eyes sparkled like gold in the firelight.

“No husband.” For a moment, she spared a thought for her cousin, wondering if Lord Diarmuid had, in fact, proposed at the feast. “No father, either,” she told him.

Concern filled his gaze. “I’m sorry, Emer.”

She replied by pushing him gently away from her so she could slather the balm into his wound. Tantris sealed his lips together as she worked the ointment around the puffy flesh. The only sound was the



spluttering of the fire. When she was done, Branwen wrapped the wound in muslin and sighed deeply.

“I shouldn’t like to ever make you sigh again.” Raising an eyebrow, Tantris asked, “What has the patient done to displease his healer?”

“I hope the salve will be enough to stave off a fever,” Branwen said, drumming her fingers across her chin. “I’ll be back tomorrow—when the water is low.”

Tantris put his palm to the fresh bandage over his heart. “Don’t fear, Emer,” he said, boldly sweeping his hand along her cheek to calm her agitated fingers, and then he took her hand with his own. “I will live to see you again.”

He locked his eyes on hers as he kissed her hand with reverence. Branwen had received many formal kisses in her life, but none of them felt like this. The softness of his sunburned lips made her want to laugh or scream—or maybe both.

Deep inside, Branwen quivered. With her whole heart, she wanted him to live.

She stood abruptly. “Good night, Tantris.”

# A BLEEDING HEART



**B**RANWEN ROSE AT DAWN, BARELY able to contain her unease. She'd spent the night tossing and turning, feeling as if she were still among the waves. Every time she closed her eyes, she pictured Tantris's lips on her hand.

*All this trouble for a Kernyvman,* she scolded herself.

Her arms sagged from the weight of Queen Eseult's breakfast tray as she crossed the cobblestoned courtyard of the inner ward. Delivering it wasn't part of Branwen's regular duties, but she needed to speak with the queen and she wanted an excuse. If Treva found Branwen's request odd, the castle kitchens were too busy for the head cook to mind as she happily handed over the tray piled high with pots of butter and wild fruit preserves, scrambled eggs, bacon, and freshly baked sweet buns.

Queen Eseult's apartments occupied the entire west tower, while King Óengus had the north to himself. Branwen and Essy lived together in the south tower, which overlooked the feasting

hall. When Branwen had returned from the cave, she found Essy still adhered to Lord Diarmuid. He didn't ask for her hand at the feast, but the princess had convinced herself that it was solely because he was waiting for Belotnia, the Festival of Lovers, in two moons' time.

Her cousin was not an early riser, especially after the wine and excitement of the previous evening, so Branwen knew she should have plenty of time with the queen—if she could work up the nerve to ask her what she wanted to know.

She flicked a glance toward the east tower, where the Crown Prince of Iveriu would have resided if the queen had given Óengus a son. When the princess was younger, Essy insisted she preferred being an only child but a brother would have made her life easier. Instead, Branwen's uncle Morholt called the east tower home—although there was nothing genial or homey about him.

Branwen glided under the pointed, green marble arch at the base of the west tower and began ascending the spiral staircase. The keystones at the center of all the arches in the queen's tower were engraved with the image of a harp, its body painted gold and its strings silver: the symbol of Laiginztir. Queen Eseult was a proud Laiginztir woman. Just as Branwen's mother had been.

She touched the harp with two fingers as she ducked her head in the low clearance of the hallway leading to the queen's bedchamber. It was both a tribute and a prayer.

Fintan, the head of the queen's bodyguards, threw his shoulders back when he saw Branwen. He was a bear of a man with a large nose and thinning hair. He'd survived many battles against the Kernyveu and he had the scars to prove it.

“Good morning, Lady Branwen,” he said gruffly, tipping his

head as he opened the door for her. The warrior's deepest scars, however, came from losing his wife in childbirth a decade ago. He had no interest in remarrying, he said, and Branwen occasionally wondered if his dedication to her aunt went beyond duty.

Queen Eseult stood beside her court cupboard, mixing herbs with a mortar and pestle, as Fintan announced Branwen's arrival. It looked like she'd been awake for some time. The queen dismissed Fintan with a nod and turned her attention to her niece.

"What a nice surprise," she said.

Performing a swift curtsy, Branwen asked, "Where would you like the tray?"

"Oh anywhere." She waved a hand toward the sideboard.

Branwen set down the tray and her gaze traveled to her aunt's furrowed brow. "Would you like some tea?"

A beat passed before Queen Eseult said, "Tea?" She ground the herbs with some force. "Oh yes." She lifted her eyes to Branwen. "Forgive me, I'm a little out of sorts today. Tea would be lovely."

"Not at all." Anticipation bubbled in Branwen's chest as she busied herself pouring the tea into a cup that was also branded with a golden harp.

"It's not an easy thing to be the mother of daughters," said the queen, mostly to herself, as she reduced the herbs to a fine powder. "You'll see yourself one day."

Branwen had never really considered having children. She simply assumed she would stay in the service of the princess when she became queen. At nineteen Branwen was more than eligible, but her own marriage didn't seem particularly important.

She brought over the tea as her aunt ensconced herself in a tapestry-covered armchair by the window. Down below, the waves

broke against the cliffside. In the morning light, they glinted aqua. Branwen's stomach churned.

"Thank you." The queen looked at her shrewdly and motioned for her niece to be seated. "Branny—is Essy happy?"

Branwen chewed the inside of her cheek, uncertain what to say. She thought of the newly torn clump of hair, but she wouldn't betray her cousin's confidence. "Essy seemed to be happy in the company of Lord Diarmuid," she answered, reluctant to share her qualms about his motives.

Queen Eseult put the cup to her lips and took a small sip. "Yes." Another sip. "And he in hers." There was an undercurrent to the queen's words.

"Lord Diarmuid would be a suitable match," her aunt continued. "But there are many things to consider." Branwen understood Queen Eseult's veiled message—don't let Essy set her heart on him.

"Of course," she said. "Will Lord and Lady Parthalán be staying at Castle Rigani long?"

"A fortnight, perhaps. Morholt has gone out with Lord Rónán this morning to gather reports from the villages about the sightings of Kernyvak raiders." The queen always spoke fondly of her brother.

Branwen didn't understand why. She found her uncle Morholt a hard-nosed and somewhat volatile man—cold, distant. Maybe it was just his warrior's heart. She swallowed, thinking of Tantris, and felt guilt stir within her.

The queen noticed her niece had gone quiet and touched a palm lovingly to Branwen's face. "I'm sorry we had news of Kernyvak raiders yesterday of all days."

"It's nothing."

"Come now, Branny. It's always hard for me to hear such

news as well. That is why the matter of Essy's marriage is of such importance."

"I know."

She scrutinized her niece. "Tell me, dear heart, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company so early in the morning?"

Branwen's shoulders rose as she took a breath, and said, "I wanted to ask you about the Old Ways."

The queen's eyes narrowed. All of her subjects knew Queen Euseult was a master of the Old Ways, but Branwen had never shown interest in them. She had rejected any part they might play in healing her aunt's patients.

"What is it you wish to know?" she asked.

Branwen sucked in air through the tiny gap between her two front teeth. After a moment, she dared, "Do you believe in the Otherworld? That you could cross over at Whitethorn Mound?"

"Do you?" she countered.

"I've never believed in things I can't see."

"Yet you believe in love."

She nodded and fidgeted uncomfortably with her plaits as the queen held her gaze. "The Otherworld is like love, Branny. You can't see it, but you can feel it. It's all around us, all of the time."

"But . . . but . . .," she began with trepidation. Branwen had never believed it was a real place any more than you could reach out and grab fate with your hands. Maybe she had been wrong. "Can it truly send us messages?"

Her aunt rested her elbows on her knees, leaning toward Branwen.

"What have you seen?"

"I—I'm not sure."

“*Branny*,” the queen said in a low voice.

“A fox,” Branwen confessed, praying she wouldn’t question her sanity. Was she really troubling the queen over a wild animal?

The queen’s expression didn’t change. “And what did the fox tell you?” she asked.

What had the fox told Branwen? To save Tantris. But she couldn’t admit that to the Queen of Iveriu, even though she’d hate herself for lying. Lying to the queen was treason, no less. She worked her jaw.

Finally, Branwen told her aunt, “To make a friend of an enemy.” That’s what Lord Caedmon would say, wasn’t it?

Queen Eseult’s lips formed a crescent. “Sound advice.”

“You really think the fox was sent from the Otherworld?” she said. “From the Old Ones?” Part of her wanted it to be true, and the other part of her was afraid of what that might mean. Everything she had believed until yesterday suddenly seemed so uncertain, everything she had believed until she met Tantris.

“It may very well be,” the queen acknowledged, that august clarity in her voice. “What I am certain of is that you’re a natural-born healer, just like Alana was. The Goddess Bríga has favored you both with her healing fire.” Bríga was the goddess of the hearth and the sunrise, healing and keening—the poetry of loss.

Branwen’s fingers tensed around the folds of her skirt, a deep sadness welling in her breast. She used to think healing fire was a metaphor. If the fox was real, however, maybe it was something more. Something she shared with her mother.

“A natural healer is not just a healer of men, *Branny*,” said the queen. “But a healer of kingdoms.” Her aunt stroked Branwen’s chin. “The Old Ways will reveal themselves as they’re required. As sure as I breathe, I know you will be instrumental in protecting Iveriu one day.”

“I will protect it with my whole heart.”

“I know you will, my niece. Iveriu is your first love—as it is mine. That is why the Otherworld has chosen to speak to you. Heed its messages.”

“Thank you, Lady Queen,” she said, feeling a knot grow in her stomach.

“Thank *you*, Lady Branwen. Now go see to Essy.”

Branwen curtsied and exited the queen’s chambers, lost in thoughts of the fox and of Tantris. The Otherworld had led her to the Kernyvak poet. It wanted her to save him, shelter him.

She would have to trust that the Old Ones wanted to protect her kingdom as much as she did. Even if Branwen remained skeptical as to their motives, Queen Eseult believed in them and Branwen believed in her queen above all else. She would do whatever was necessary to preserve the Land.

She would defend Iveriu until her dying breath.