

Prologue—Cyrene

821 AD

“**W**e canna win.”

Cyrene froze at his words, any semblance of a smile fading from her lips. Her racing heart would have leapt free from its place in her chest had her throat not tightened so that it barely allowed a breath.

Duncan braced himself on strong arms, a map on yellowed parchment unrolled over the table before him. Thin, inked lines represented the borders of their lands. A simple jagged edge between moors and woods, tower and trees. Borders she once thought unbreachable, now seemed so fragile when stretched across the page. He lifted his eyes to meet hers, their deep blue now a dull gray. They'd been that colorless before, just days ago, when he'd laid bleeding and near death on the cot in her healer's tent.

She'd only come to the hut to bid him farewell. To offer a blessing for the battle he'd face and see him off, allowing her quiet sanctuary, hidden deep in the woods, to remain untouched by the world outside. That's what she'd rehearsed anyway on the short walk through neatly placed huts, with their identically thatched roofs and walls of wattle and

daub, built in a perfect spiral around a ceremonial clearing in the center. It was a place of order. A place where she knew each face, where she knew what to expect, where they were safe.

She'd been friendly when she'd stepped through the curtain, humorous almost. Now the tense line of his bearded jaw and near-green shade of his skin made her regret letting him see a side of her she kept hidden from nearly everyone, even those close to her.

"What's happened?" Her words sounded rough as she turned to call for her captain who was engaged in a battle of wills and swords with Duncan's captain just outside.

"I...nay...nothing happened." Duncan waved his hand, calming her panic. Barely.

As she waited for the rest of his explanation, her mouth turned as dry as sand and eyes remained glued to the man who'd interrupted the dependable ebb and flow of her people's lives. The man she had allowed in. The son of her sworn enemy. What had she done?

Sliding a hand to his injured side, Duncan straightened, and Cyrene took an unnoticed step toward the doorway.

"I've just realized that I canna win." His hand pressed against the lines of worry that carved deep tracks across his forehead before he swept it over the map still before him on the table. "No matter how I play it, where I position my men, I lose. The kingdom of Tràigh loses. My people..."

His voice broke and his hand moved across his mouth. Cyrene lowered her eyes to the packed earth floor, keeping her own hands busy by brushing back a strand of flame red hair that had escaped from her complex but loose braid. She knew that feeling all too well. Had walked the same path,

only she had been a child with the desperate eyes of her people looking to her for life. She knew about impossible choices.

“They’ll destroy what’s left of my army, if they havna’ already. They’ll take my kingdom and when they’ve decimated my villages and stolen away our children,” he paused, watching her as the gravity of his words sank in. “They’ll march for the woods. For yers.”

Ice snaked up her spine, every muscle tense and ready. He moved as if to approach and she took a warning step back, stilling him. A sharp sting against her palm as she tightened her fist reminded her of the gift she’d planned to offer and she slipped it in the pockets sewn into the folds of her skirts, humiliated that all it took was a handsome face for her to nearly forget the suffering Tràigh had poured out on her people.

“Are ye threatening me?”

Every decision she’d made in the last five days played in her mind. All the motives and implications of his arrival. Every word they’d exchanged, every look, every touch. He’d been broken but had also broken down her defenses—but why? Had he been planning to give them over as... as what? A bribe, a bargain?

“Nay.” He lowered his chin, eyes flaming with sincerity and holding hers hostage. A kingly authority driving them into her head. “M’lady, nay.”

His answer was direct, but incomplete.

She watched his throat move as he swallowed hard. A bead of sweat slowly made its way from his temple to his jaw and Cyrene was on instant alert. Working hard to keep

her expression impassive, she reached subtly behind her back to grip the hilt of the dagger she kept tucked in the leather of her belt. There was danger, but she couldn't determine the source.

Her chest grew tight with shallow breaths she struggled to control. Her ears pricked at the sounds of clashing swords from outside. They followed the usual rhythm of training battles. There were no shouts of alarm, no unusual silence. If this were a trap, there were no signs.

"What do ye want?" Cyrene glanced at the curtained opening of the hut. It only moved at the breath of a gentle breeze.

"Fight wi' me."

She swung her gaze back to Duncan, nearly laughing. "What?"

"Fight wi' me," he repeated, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"We only fight to defend ourselves." Cyrene matched his pose. "We dunna seek war."

And they certainly didn't join their enemies in losing battles. *My people...* the way his voice had broken. Something in her heart ached. This was wrong, everything inside of her felt torn to shreds.

"War is already at yer borders."

She knew it wasn't a threat, but her eyes narrowed on him anyway, and she spoke with her own queenly authority.

"Then we will face it when it comes. I willna' ask my people to run again. We spent too many years hiding, scraping by, dying alone and scared. This is our home. And this is where we will stay." Even as she said it, she knew they'd face the same fate as Tràigh, but what else could she

do? Cyrene turned, as if the answer to everything was hidden in the shadowy places that remained untouched by blocks of sunlight pouring through raised patches of the thatched roof.

She heard him sigh, releasing a sadness as if he knew her answer already. “Ye canna win either.”

She wanted to deny his allegations. To say that they would defeat any enemy, they would remain hidden and safe. To call him a liar and drive him out.

“But...” Her fingers moved to her lips, as if to catch her words before they escaped. She drew in a deep breath and folded her hands together at her waist. She’d not ignored all that he’d revealed about his enemy. She’d counted and mapped and planned just as he had. He’d come to the point of honesty with himself, mayhap it was time for her to do the same. Even if the outcome remained the same. “Yer right.”

She turned to find him staring, as if he’d expected her response and was surprised by it at the same time. She lifted a shoulder and looked toward the patches of light peeking in through the roof.

“Stories and legends will only hold the enemy’s greed at bay for so long. If they take Tràigh, they’ll come fer us - fer this land—and even if we defeat them, my people will suffer, and I... I canna find a way to stop it.”

“Then fight wi’ me.” He presented empty, open palms, urgency in his request. “Together, we stand a chance.”

The torn-up shreds inside her became tangled and knotted, a painful tight mess that shot spears of near panic through her veins. She was no prophetess, but she could look into the future and see what it held for her people. Either decision opened their sanctuary to the pain and death they’d been sheltered from for so long.

Eyes squeezed shut, she clutched the folds of her skirts, her knuckles protesting the force of her grip. She chastised herself for ignoring her initial instinct to leave him where she'd found him in the first place. It had been an impossible choice. Just one of the many she'd made in her life.

A queen's first duty was to her people. Mercy and benevolence weren't risks she could allow to those outside her kingdom. Not when her people had suffered so much. He would have surely died but they could have remained unseen, unknown, but now he knew about them. Now they were exposed and at risk. Saving him had been the right thing, but the cost was great. So very great.

"Cyrene." Her name was soft on his lips. As if they were friends. As if he knew her.

Dunna trust the tower king. Her mother's warning, issued with her final breath, released a torrent of emotions which stirred that tangled mess into a bubbling, rolling boil that threatened to spill over. If it wasn't enough that his father had driven her people to near extinction. If it wasn't enough he'd banished them, starved them, sold them. Now his son was asking her to send those very people into war alongside the kingdom that abandoned and betrayed them.

"'Tis the only way." He sounded as breathless as she felt.

How dare he have the nerve to share in her torment? No matter how right he was about the coming war, he was the intruder. He was the trespassing spy, come to infiltrate her village, calm their fears and then...and then...

Bribes. Bargains. She whirled on him, her narrowed eyes targeting his.

“Thief,” she hissed. When his eyes grew wide, she stormed toward him, aiming a finger at his face, teeth bared. “Ye came to steal what yer father left behind.”

Despite his weakened state, he remained an immovable wall as she drove her finger into his chest, bone meeting bone.

“We fight and then yer men will turn against us, taking the rest of our lives and land.” She pushed harder, wishing her finger was a blade. “I’d rather yer enemies have it. Fool!”

Fool? He’s not the fool, ye are. He took her prodding without response.

“Or maybe that ‘tis yer plan. Turn us over as yer way out. Give my people to save yers.”

She finally struck a nerve.

“I am *not* that king.” The muscle in his jaw feathered as he snatched her hand away.

She raised her other hand, prepared to fight, but he captured it too, his fingers wrapping fully around her slender wrist. He held her still, chest to chest, so close, they nearly shared a breath, but she refused to cower, to shrink away. She met his gaze, fire for fire, even as the truth of his defense sunk in.

“I give ye my word. Yer people willna be harmed by my men.” His nostrils flared as the words snuck out through his clenched teeth.

Dunna trust the tower king. It echoed in her mind, her ears, her heart.

She jerked against his hold, but his grip was firm. He stood nearly a head taller, and she tilted her chin, her face inches from his. Defiance fueled her courage. “What is yer word to me?”

He waited three long breaths before opening his fingers to release her. She remained rooted in place, forcing him to be the first to step away, both of them fuming.

There was no compromise, no middle ground on which they could meet. To ask her warriors to fight was to send them into battle on two fronts. The war before and the threat beside. Duncan paced, hands on his hips except for when he reached up to rub the place on his side where a bandage still covered his wound.

Cyrene had her own scars that ached with memories of betrayal, and she laced her fingers together to keep from touching that tender place across her ribs.

Duncan finally shoved his hand through his mop of wild blond curls and turned to face her.

They were enemies.

There was no treaty that could be drawn that would ease the fear in the hearts of her people or calm the suspicion in his. There was no trust to be found between she the queen of the woods and he the king of the tower.

“We have to fight our own battles.” Cyrene felt the thickness of regret coating her throat and her words nearly choked her. “There’s no other way.”

She wanted to ask him to keep what he knew of their village secret, but there could be no requests made between them. Not now. Duncan’s chin dropped to his chest, hands at his hips. Her fingers found the small gift still hiding in her pockets and turned it over in her palm, wondering if he would receive it after how she’d accused him. Deciding against the offer, she turned to go, whispering under her breath, “I’m sorry.”

“M’lady wait.”

Cyrene stopped, her hand on the curtain, ready to draw it back and let their paths be forever separated.

“There is one way.” Duncan’s voice was raspy. He waited until she looked over her shoulder.

He’d moved closer but was still a full step away. Another bead of sweat chased the same path down his face and her eyes darted to the spot on his throat where she could see his pulse pounding.

Whatever he suggested would be only a desperate attempt to avoid the inevitable. There was no accord or agreement that could be struck to unite their kingdoms, none that she’d ever agree to. Nothing short of...Cyrene found his eyes searching hers and as his lips parted to speak, her breath caught, and she turned away, suddenly acutely aware of what he was about to say.

Nay. Dunna aske it of me. ‘Tis too sacred.

Time slowed then stilled. It seemed an eternity as he drew in a breath and exhaled a request that sent a boiling tear streaking down her cheek.

“Marry me.”

Chapter 1—Cyrene

806 AD - 15 Years Earlier

Tiny embers from twin circles of fire lazily, happily, drifted up until they joined the scattered stars winking across an onyx sky. Pipe and drum, verse and song, dancing and twirling, and joy above it all, Cyrene and Beli ran toward the celebration. Even though he was younger, Beli was faster and crested the hill far ahead of Cyrene. He'd always been quick.

Quick to run, quick to plan, quick to act.

Cyrene took a much slower pace. She let her arms swing out at her sides as she spun in her own private ceremony on their way to the clearing. There were two new lives born to the neighboring kingdom of Tràigh. They were princesses, just like her, and Queen Fiona of the Firth was Pictish, just like her. They were the first bairns sharing blood equally with both nations.

She dared not say it aloud for fear Beli would roll his bright blue eyes and call her silly, even if he was her younger brother, but she almost felt as though she'd gained sisters herself.

“Hurry, or we are sure to miss all the good food.” Beli tugged on her arm, jerking her out of her twirl.

“Is that all ye can think of?” Cyrene stumbled behind him, laughing as he slapped his biceps where muscles would have been had he any.

“I am the man of our house. A man needs meat and ale!”

“Aye, a man of seven winters.” Cyrene nudged his shoulder with hers, but he ignored her chiding.

The clink of mugs and bursts of laughter kept rhythm for the musicians who played and played until the dancers collapsed from joyous exhaustion on woven blankets only to rest a song then rise again.

Cyrene and Beli clapped along with the songs; their throats raw from shouting the chants of celebration. Beli’s stomach growled over the sound of the music, and he flashed a crooked smile before he moved toward the edge of the crowd promising to return with food.

“Dunna get lost! I promised mother I’d watch after ye!” Cyrene grabbed at the sleeve of his tunic, but he was too fast.

“Yer only older by one winter, Cyrene. Besides, as yer future king, I dunna need coddling.”

Cyrene tossed a mocking look after her brother as he disappeared into the fray of villagers from both the Pictish lands and Tràigh. She was secretly glad he went to fetch food as her stomach rumbled too and her feet ached inside her small leather boots, but the music called to her, drew her from the shadowed edges of the clearing toward the spiraling circle of dancers. She bounced on her tiptoes, searching for Beli’s thin frame and mop of bright red hair, the same color as hers. Surely, she had time for one dance before he returned.

She yelped when a lad with soft blond curls piled atop his bobbing head spotted her wiggling with anticipation and snatched her hand as he skipped past, flinging her into the spiral of laughter. His woven brat flapped behind him like crimson wings as he threaded his fingers through hers and they were enveloped in a sea of song. Its melody was a perfect blend of her people and his, the Picts and the villagers from the city of Tràigh.

Strung between smoothed poles, the rich, green silk flags of the Picts and the bold red flags of Tràigh were touched by the gentle breeze whisked inland from the gray waters of the Firth of Clut and moved in their own silent dance.

The deep emerald color always drew up a swelling pride in Cyrene's heart, though she was only a lass of eight. The Picts were a mix of peoples, come together under time of hardship to defend their lands against the invaders from a place called "Rome" hundreds of years before. Together they'd remained since. As one.

And because her mother, Derelei, queen of the Picts, had wed her true love, Bercilak, captain of the king's army, the Picts were once again mixed and blended. Armies united. Lands expanded. Allies. Friends.

King William even took the lovely Fiona, daughter of the Pictish harbor master as his wife. It was for her twin daughters, just a week old, that they now danced and sang and feasted. The celebration would last three days, until the princess' naming ceremony.

Cyrene grinned until her cheeks hurt. She was surrounded by such joy after so long of mourning their heavy losses from the attacks from the west, including her fearless father. Both kingdoms had suffered. King William and

Fiona's wedding had ensured the friendship between the two nations would continue, and Cyrene prayed this happy event would ignite the healing they all needed.

She was young and didn't understand much of the talk in her mother's meetings her and Beli were forced to join, but she recognized the strain across Derelei's brow was from more than a widow's grief. It had been a long year, but not so long that she'd forgotten her father's face, his emerald green eyes that matched hers, his smile, the feel of his arms as he gathered her up and peppered her cheeks with kisses. *Look, he'd said, rubbing his calloused thumb over her freckles, I've left my mark on ye, lass.*

The sudden memory gave Cyrene such a shock, her feet tangled together and she tumbled from the ring of dancers, landing hard on her backside in the trampled grass.

"Are ye hurt?" The lad who'd pulled her into the dance stood above her, hands on his hips and chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

"Nay." Her voice was wobbly, eyes stinging from the tears that pooled behind her lids.

He offered his hand, which she was about to accept when another lad slammed into him from behind. He had similar features except his hair was as red as Beli's.

"Where have ye been? We arna even supposed to be here. We must go, now!" The second lad, older and much taller, barely acknowledged Cyrene before hauling who she thought to be his brother through the crowd, giving him only enough time to mouth an apology before they disappeared.

Cyrene pushed herself up and slapped her palms against the dark green and gold fabric of her skirts before wiping the backs of her hands across her tear-moistened cheeks. She

dragged in a fortifying breath, determined to be brave for her father, despite the gaping hole in her heart carved by his absence.

Beli spotted her from across the clearing and waved, a roasted leg of pheasant in each hand. Cyrene smoothed her skirts again before weaving her way through the snaking line of dancers to join him.

Cyrene and Beli ate until their stomachs bulged, danced until they could no longer keep their eyes open, and finally collapsed in a heap by one of the fires.

Cyrene was awoken the next morning by the thundering of hooves on dirt and Beli's hands pushing her shoulder.

"Get up," he urged, his blue eyes wide and wild. "Mother's warriors are riding to the tower."

Beli beat her to the top of the hill overlooking the farmland that bordered Tràigh's and when she arrived, he was standing as still and stiff as a hemlock. Cathala and Ailbhe, two of her mother's maiden warriors, stood behind him, Aibhe's hands on his shoulders. Below, the queen and her guard were a shrinking black cloud as they rode on horseback along the winding dirt road that snaked through the village of Tràigh toward the tower.

Beli made to race down the hill, but Aibhe's grip was strong. "Ye both are to remain wi' us until yer mother returns."

"Is she going to the tower?" Something turned in Cyrene's stomach and it wasn't because of all the sweets she'd stuffed in her mouth the night before.

"Aye," Cathala said, her words clipped. "'Tis custom to bring gifts for the bairns on the second day of celebration."

She caught Beli's wide blue eyes. He'd only been six, but she knew he remembered. The last time their mother had gone to the tower, it was to learn of their father's death and the King's wedding to Fiona. Derelei had remained there until after the wedding but when she returned, she began fortifying her army.

Cathala guided Cyrene and Beli down the hill toward the distant sounds of villagers waking to continue the celebration. "She'll return before nightfall. All is well."

But she didn't. And it wasn't.

At dawn the next morning, Cathala, stone-faced and silent, woke Cyrene. When Cyrene reached to wake Beli, she found space on the mat where he'd been sleeping empty.

"He's already wi' yer mother," Cathala said.

Rubbing her eyes free of sleep, she followed Cathala, her eyes drifting across the great swath of Pictish land that separated Tràigh on one side from the dark woods at the foot of the mountains and from the firths leading out to the sea on the other. They followed the winding path from the hill toward the firth where the roundhouse Cyrene and Beli shared with their mother was perched on sturdy stilts near the shore. With each step, the joyful sounds of celebration were replaced with dreadful whispered rumors she didn't understand.

Prepare for battle.

So few of the guard have returned.

They say it 'twas the king's own blade.

Those poor bairns.

She stopped outside the roundhouse and Cathala's hard expression softened slightly as she held back the curtain, nodding for Cyrene to enter.

“Mama is in there?” Cyrene asked.

Cathala nodded again.

“And Beli?”

Cathala shook her head. “He is with Aibhe.”

“Come, dear one.” From inside, a voice beckoned her, familiar but weak and raspy.

Cyrene took only one step, timid at the shocking sight of her mother’s condition. Queen Derelei’s usually pearl skin resembled grayish lichen that grew on the seaward side of stones overlooking the Firth of Clut. Her hair, which had always reminded Cyrene of the dancing flames of evening fires, now lay matted around her face like the ash that remained in the mornings, doused and darkened by dew.

Brigid, the healer, hurried between her mother’s bed and a table cluttered with pots and jars of fragrant herbs.

Cyrene’s eyes darted from wall to wall, searching for some sense of familiarity. She was certain she’d been led into her mother’s chamber, separated from the rest of the roundhouse by merely a thin curtain, but nothing looked as it had before.

Darkened rags spilling out of half-filled wooden bowls spotted the floor around her mother’s bed. The metallic smell of blood overpowered even the herbs Brigid fervently mixed in a bowl. The Pictish queen’s deep green cloak lay draped over a stool in the corner, not across her powerful sure shoulders.

Now the great Derelei, the Battling Queen, lay still, covered by skins and strips of cloth. But it was the reddened eyes of the two warrior women who stood guard near the wooden posts of her mother’s bed that frightened Cyrene and deepened a pit of dread in her stomach.

“‘Tis not just the wound that grieves our queen.” Cyrene glanced back toward the roundhouse entrance, her ears pricking at the voices of two village ladies delivering fresh water. They deposited the buckets at the entrance but didn’t dare enter. “‘Tis the betrayal that has injured most. And our dear Fiona...the bairns...’tis too much to bear.”

All murmurs fell silent when a shadow darkened the opening of the roundhouse.

“Eden?” Derelei’s eyes flashed something between relief and anger.

Her mother’s warrior captain, who Cyrene hadn’t seen since her mother had returned from Tràigh after Fiona’s wedding, was silhouetted by the rising sun and filled the space of the doorway, sending the chattering ladies in search of some other place to be.

Cyrene was instantly in Brigid’s arms, hauled into the shadows and shoved behind a small trunk while the warrior maidens moved to shield the queen.

“Stay,” Brigid ordered before moving back to the queen’s side in a motion so fluid it was almost as if she’d never left.

“It canna be true.” Derelei groaned as she tried to sit up but grasped her side and fell back against her bedding. Brigid was in motion again, replacing dressings and fussing over the queen.

“What has he done?” Eden rushed forward, stopped by the maidens who hissed curses that sent waves of chills across Cyrene’s skin. Eden wasn’t dressed in fighting leathers as the others, but a tunic and long skirts like the village women.

“Let me be! I must speak wi’ the queen.” Eden whipped her arms free from the maiden’s grasps, stumbling backwards and facing off against them with a murderous look in her eye. Her golden hair was wild, mussed and loose from her braids. Cyrene noticed her skirts were torn and ringed with dirt at the bottom as if she’d been running along the shore.

“Let her come.” Derelei breathed through the pain that drew her features tight.

When they reluctantly parted, Eden stepped through the wall of closely paired maidens, meeting their warning glares with defiance. She sank to her knees at Derelei’s bedside, lowering her head in reverence.

“Where were ye, Eden?” Derelei gripped Eden’s hand, her pleas so desperate they drew the air from the room and left Cyrene’s chest tight.

Eden glanced over her shoulder, eying the warriors at her back, an expression Cyrene had never seen on any maiden turning the captain’s skin as white as snow. It looked a lot like fear.

“I had to... there’s something I need to tell ye, but...” Her eyes slid even to Brigid who braced herself on fisted hands on the bed opposite Eden. “I dunna ken who to trust, m’lady.”

Derelei dragged in a broken breath, then motioned to her warriors to leave. Even in her weakened state, the sharp look she fired when they resisted was enough to urge them into obedience.

Brigid glanced at Cyrene as she too, was dismissed. As she turned to leave, a pointed look warned Cyrene to stay hidden. And ready.

Once alone, Eden lowered her head again, her shoulders sagging from exhaustion. When she finally lifted her head though, her eyes burned. Eden leaned so closely and whispered so softly, Cyrene couldn't hear the news she delivered. She nearly burst from her hiding spot when Derelei released a cry and covered her mouth with a shaking hand.

"It had to be done." Derelei's hand fell away from her mouth, then rested limp at her side as if she'd surrendered in a fight. "They canna be used now."

"Aye." Eden formed fists at her side, her jaw still tight and muscles twitching under her skin.

Cyrene's small fingers ached from her grip on the side of the trunk, but she remained crouched in the shadows. Waiting. Listening.

"I'm sorry to have asked it of ye. It will not go well now, Eden. There will be a reckoning." Derelei's eyes drifted closed as Eden nodded. When the queen opened them again, she found Cyrene's hiding spot and spoke as if directly to her instead of Eden. "I need ye to protect our people."

Eden nodded, drew herself upright and bowed to her queen before darting out of the roundhouse as swiftly as she'd entered. The warrior maidens did not return. Only Brigid rushed back to Derelei's side after a whispered conversation just beyond the entrance. Cyrene crept from her hiding place, lingering at the corner of her mother's bed.

Though a fire burned in the hearth, Cyrene shivered beneath her wrap, and Derelei stretched thin fingers, beckoning her daughter closer. Furs fell back from her arms, marked with the symbols of her people and fresh wounds from battle.

“Go on. Dunna be afeared.” Brigid’s gentle hands fell upon Cyrene’s small shoulders, ushering her across the smoothed wood of a planked floor. Lapping water against rocks beneath their roundhouse seemed to whisper a secret Cyrene didn’t wish to know. A song of farewell.

“Hush now, shush now,” it sang. “For not long now till she fly.”

Forced forward by Brigid’s urging, Cyrene dropped to her knees at the side of her mother’s bed as Eden had done, her small hands working free from under the skins that did little to keep her warm. Her mother’s body burned with fever, but her hands were as ice. Cyrene clung to them, winding her small fingers through her mother’s. Derelei’s once bright blue eyes were now barely the color of fog that hovered over the water in winter, and a sheen of sweat coated her skin.

“Who hurt ye, mama?”

“Never mind, my love.”

“I dunna understand. Why did this happen?”

If she could only find the reason, she could make it right and her mother would be well.

“The king wanted something I coulnda give.” Derelei’s words were soft, laden with sadness.

“But he was... wasna he our friend?”

“Nay, lass. Never our friend.”

Shocked, Cyrene looked at Brigid. The healer was silently filling a bowl with steaming water. She seemed not to be listening, but her shoulders stiffened at the queen’s reply, lifting and falling from a deep sigh.

“What does he want? I’ll find it. I’ll give it to him.” Cyrene pressed the back of her mother’s smooth hand

against her own rounded cheek, praying for something called a miracle. She didn't yet fully understand what it was, but her mother had told her it meant something greater than any man could do, making possible the impossible.

"'Tis too late." Derelei's answer carried a pain much deeper than her injuries, but her free hand touched her side where cloths had soaked through with her blood. "We canna undo what has been done. We can only try to stop what is to come."

Cyrene shook her head, lost to the workings of a world she didn't understand and couldn't control.

"Listen closely, my child." Derelei's voice sounded like chains dragged over the edges of their fishing boats. "I am not long for this world. But dunna ye cry for me, for I have assurance of a kingdom far greater than any we ever ken, and I will go there soon to be with *An T-aon Duine*."

"Can we go wi' ye, mama, Beli and me?" Cyrene squeezed her mother's hand, her voice a mere trembling whisper. If she could just hold tight enough, no matter where her mother went, they could follow, even to the great *An T-aon Duine* who her people worshiped.

"Nay, ye must remain. I need ye. Our people need ye. Both of ye." Derelei pressed her lips together, face pinched as she struggled to swallow. Derelei's next words shocked Cyrene as if she'd been tossed into the frozen sea in the dead of winter. "Ye must rule as queen, Cyrene."

"Nay." Cyrene choked on her tears, sobs breaking her words into short bursts. "Beli...Beli will be king. It's always been such."

Derelei squeezed Cyrene's hand, fading strength darkening her blue eyes. "In yer father's world, Beli would

have been king. But Bericlak is gone, and this is the land of the Picts. ‘Tis ye, Cyrene. The crown falls to ye.”

Cyrene couldn’t find words to reply, she only shook her head, tears flowing freely down her chilled cheeks. She didn’t want to be queen. Couldn’t be queen.

“The warriors will fight, they’ll protect ye, but ye must protect the people, teach them, care fer them as I have—even better than I. They need to ken the lionheart beats strong still, and it beats in ye.”

The stories of ancient fierce warriors had chased Cyrene into dreams since her first memory. But those were tales of mighty women called by *An T-aon Duine* for His purpose. They were blessed with gifts of strength, or bravery, or great faith. Cyrene was but a lass who trembled at the thought of a life without her mother.

“Ye must find yer courage. Ye are a lionheart and one day ye will find yer gift. Our people are counting on ye, Cyrene.” Derelei’s image blurred and Cyrene’s eyes burned. “Brigid will help ye, but ‘tis the way of our people and blessed we are for such a people. ‘Tis rare for a woman to lead and fer people to honor her rule.”

Another sob broke past her small lips, dry and cracked from the cooling winds that heralded the promise of winter. “Nay, mama. I canna. I want to be wi’ ye.”

Derelei pulled Cyrene’s hand to her own lips, just as dry as her daughter’s. The act forced Cyrene’s attention, and she blinked hard to clear her vision.

“Ye are the truth keeper now. I ken ye will be a good and kind queen, Cyrene. Be strong. May yer aim be true.” Derelei’s eyes squeezed closed and her face twisted in pain.

Cyrene buried her cries in the thick skins that covered the bed, her hands working their way around her mother. Her small head lay on the barely moving chest of the queen and she clung to her, as if she could anchor her mother to earth, to herself. If she could just hold tight enough, Derelei would have to stay, or at least, they would go together to wherever her mother journeyed next.

Derelei's shallow breaths warmed Cyrene's head, and she whispered a warning that seeped deep into Cyrene's bones, hardening something in her young heart. "Dunna turn yer back, daughter. Dunna trust the tower king."

Brigid's hands pried Cyrene away, and though she protested, Cyrene was no match for the woman's strength as she passed her along to Cathala's waiting hands.

"Mama!"

As she was forced from the chamber, she caught one last glimpse of Derelei before the curtain fell closed. The queen's body was still, eyes fixed and empty. Cyrene had seen such a look before and it was always followed by a sharply cut hole then a mound of dark dirt. That empty stare meant her mother was gone from the earth, like her father, Bercilak—and Cyrene and Beli were truly alone.

Her mother said *An T-aon Duine* would always be near, always listen when she prayed, but her voice made no sound as she screamed. There was no one to hear.

She'd been afraid before, of a shadow in the night or the sound of howling wolves at dusk, but never like this. Never grasped so tightly by terror that the breath was forced from her lungs. She wanted to run and run and run

until she found the life she'd known before the fighting—a world without the clashing of metal swords and buzzing of arrows. A place where sun warmed the earth, where color bloomed across the fields, where she was safe and loved.

One day. Just one day had passed to carry her from life to death. A beloved princess to an orphaned queen.

She had to flee from this...this cold, gray land where the only things that sprouted from the reeking, black soil were death and sorrow. She had to find Beli.

Twisting free from Cathala's grasp, Cyrene sprinted across the dock, her slipper-covered feet slapping against the wood. She clawed her way up slick grass coating the hill, sliding to her knees at the crest.

Word of the queen's injuries had reached the villagers and the clearing was a chaos of cries, of women snatching up their children and following the men to their homes.

Beli was nowhere among them. She screamed his name, but her voice was trampled beneath the pounding of hooves on earth.

Eden, atop a speckled gray mare, led a group of warriors toward the border of Tràigh. The rumors were true—there were so few of them.

The same rich red flags bearing the tower's crest that had been mixed with the Pictish green just the night before breached the horizon, moving to meet Eden. Somewhere a lonely horn bellowed as the skies darkened and gray clouds were drawn ashore by the rising tides.

Everything was changing. Even the air turned crisp, stinging Cyrene's pale skin. The sun was gone. Autumn had fled. Only the dreary, dull sky of winter remained.

Ignoring Cathala's calls, Cyrene tore through the fading day and plunged through the barrier of trees into the dark woods.

Mingled with her mother's heroic tales were warning stories of those woods. Hiding amongst the crags, dwelling beneath waterfalls, and feasting on the rich mossy growth of the gorges, fang-toothed fairies and goat-eyed sprites would carry away lasses who dared wander in, but Cyrene no longer feared those things as her heart was gripped by a horror much worse. She raced deeper into the trees, only stopping when her skirts caught the jagged, jutting claw of a fallen branch and she fell, face first, into the softened floor of the forest.

She moistened dry dead leaves with her tears, pounded soft black soil with her clenched fists and screamed into the emptiness that threatened to suffocate her.

A crunch from behind her sent her gasping and scurrying backwards until her back met with the rough bark of a birch tree.

"Beli?"

His face was swollen and tear-stained, his eyes as red as the dawn. He launched himself into her arms and they clung to each other as if breath and life depended on their embrace. He worked his small hand up and presented Cyrene with a clenched fist.

"I dinna really want to be king." His whisper was a confession that shattered Cyrene's already fragile heart. "I swear, I dinna mean for this to happen."

“‘Tis not yer fault, Beli.” Cyrene kissed his sweat-soaked brow.

“Mama gave me this.” Beli uncurled his fingers, and Cyrene gasped at what lay in his palm.

“The ring father made fer her?” Cyrene dared not touch it, though she didn’t know why.

“Aye.” Beli sniffed, slid the back of his hand under his nose then rubbed his thumb over the faded design etched into the silver. “She said I am to protect the queen. I am the fearless son of the warrior Bercilak. She said ye are a lionheart and I am a lion sent to guard ye.”

Cyrene tightened her arms around her brother. Beli held the ring between his thumb and forefinger, lifting it so Cyrene could see. Carved on its surface was a lion, reared and ready for battle.

“I dunna feel like a lion, Cyrene,” he whispered.

“Nay. Neither do I.”

Shouts from the edge of the woods brought them both to their feet. Beli positioned himself in front of Cyrene, his hands reaching behind to hold hers.

They rushed to the clearing and watched in horror as a nightmare in the daylight unfolded. Waves of red silk coated the fields, leaving a dark crimson stain across the ground as it moved.

Cyrene screamed as she was grabbed from behind. Cathala’s arms were a vice around her middle and Aibhe had hold of Beli’s arm, as they were dragged back toward the hidden safety of the woods.

With a sword dropped at their feet and an order to “Keep them safe,” Cathala and Aibhe shoved them behind a tangled thicket where a group of crying children were already

huddled. Some were but toddlers and others, the same age as she.

The maiden warriors disappeared through the trees in the direction of the battle. Cyrene and Beli watched, terrified, as two tower soldiers breached the tree line and started for their hiding spot. Cyrene drew two of the younger ones in her lap, clamping her hand over their mouths as they trembled in her arms.

Beli turned to Cyrene, something passing over his expression that sent her heart racing to a near stop. He began to inch to the edge of the thicket and Cyrene grabbed for him but, as always, he was too quick, and she had to quickly regain control of a squirming child.

“Beli, nay.” Her gasped plea was lost in the panic of breathlessness.

The soldiers crept closer, another ten steps and they were sure to hear the muffled whimpering of the children. Heartbeat thundering in her ears, Cyrene searched the ground around her for something...anything.

Her eyes fell upon the jagged end of a broken branch. She whispered a “shh” to one of the children and the second the soldiers looked away, she lobbed the branch as far as she could to distract them.

The relief she felt as they turned disappeared when she realized Beli had darted from the thicket to a wide hemlock

nearby. Panic seized her again and her eyes began to sting with tears.

“Beli!” she mouthed his name, not willing to risk the soldier’s attention again.

He zipped from one tree to the next, putting more and more distance between himself and the thicket.

No Beli...stay with me. Stay with me! Please.

Terrified, Cyrene’s throat became too dry and tight to swallow. Beli was still moving but so were the children and she struggled to keep them from snapping a twig or rustling the bushes.

Beli pointed toward the clearing, just another few sprints away and Cyrene nodded as she realized he was going for help. But just as he readied himself to slip from one hiding spot to another, a little lass tried to crawl toward Cyrene. Her knee snapped a dry twig hidden beneath a blanket of dried leaves and she gasped in fear. The soldiers both turned, aiming straight for the thicket again.

Cyrene gathered the children closer, pushing up onto her heels. They’d have to run. She glanced back at Beli.

Go Beli. Cyrene silently pleaded with her brother. *Run!* But he didn’t. A small brave smile lifted the corner of his lips as he raised the sword that was nearly as long as he was tall and burst from behind the tree, sword swinging in wide arcs around his small body.

Cyrene slapped a hand over her own mouth which gaped with terror as Beli led the soldiers away. They closed in, towering over him, their laughter a disgusting taunt that made Cyrene tremble with the desire to help him. *Beli!*

If she stepped out of the thicket, she'd expose the children. If she didn't help him, he'd be captured...or worse. She was trapped.

What do I do? What do I do? Tears blurred her vision. Chest aching with shallow breaths, she tried to think through the panic. *What do I do?*

Then she heard the whisper of her mother's words as if she were there beside her. *Protect them. Find yer courage.*

Beli had found his courage. He was following their mother's instructions. He was protecting her, and she had to protect them. He kept luring the soldiers away and Cyrene pushed herself to her feet, urging the children to do the same. A boy about her age that she'd seen a few times in the villages grabbed her hand, determination in his eyes. He nodded before releasing her and gathering one of the youngest in his arms.

As she ushered them further into the woods, a giant roar ripped from Beli's little lungs and Cyrene sobbed at the sound of his blade meeting that of the soldiers.