

Prologue

Valley of the Fey

Mists, shimmering silver fingers, rose over the pale green water of the lake. They twined and twisted toward a sky quietly gray, while in the east, over the hills, a pink blush waited, like a held breath, to waken.

In the chill of dawn, Keegan O'Broin stood by the lake and watched the day become. A day, he knew, of change and choice, of hope and power.

He waited, like that held breath, to do his duty, and his hope was he'd be back at the farm before noon. Chores to do, he thought, and more training, of course.

But at the homeplace.

At the signal, he stripped off his boots and his tunic. His brother, Harken, did the same, as did near to six hundred others. They came not just from the valley, the young and the not-so-young, but from every corner of Talamh.

They came from the south where the Pious prayed their secret prayers, from the north where the fiercest of warriors guarded the Sea of Storms, from the Capital in the east, and from here in the west.

For their chieftain, their taoiseach, was dead, his life given to save the world. And as it was written, as it was told, as it was sung, a new one would rise, like those mists, on this day, in this place, in this way.

He didn't want to be taoiseach any more than Harken did. Harken, a cheerful boy of twelve years—the youngest allowed to participate in the ritual—was a farmer, blood and bone. Keegan knew his little brother thought of the day, of the crowds, of the leap into the lake as great fun.

For Keegan, today he would keep an oath given to a man dying, a man who'd stood as his father since his own went to the gods, a man who'd led Talamh to victory over those who would enslave them, though it cost him his life.

He had no desire to lift up the staff of the taoiseach, to take up the sword of the leader of the *clann*. But he'd given his word, and so he'd dive into the water with all the other boys and girls, men and women.

“Come on then, Keegan!” Harken cajoled, his raven-wing mop of hair blowing in the spring breeze. “Think of the fun of it. If I find the sword, I’ll declare a week of feasting and dancing.”

“If you find the sword, who’ll tend the sheep and milk the cows?”

“If I rise up as taoiseach, I’ll do all of that and more. The battle’s done and won, brother. I grieve for him as well.” And with his innate kindness, Harken wrapped an arm around Keegan’s shoulders. “He was a hero, and never to be forgotten. And today, as he would want, as must be done, a new leader comes.”

With his blue eyes bright as the day, Harken looked around at the crowd on the shores of the lake. “We honor him, and all who came before him, all who will come after.”

Now Harken jabbed an elbow in Keegan’s side. “Leave off the brooding, it’s not as if either of us will come out of the water with Cosantoir in our hand. More like to be Cara, as she’s as clever in the water as a mermaid, or Cullen, who I know’s been practicing holding his breath under the water these past two weeks.”

“So he would,” Keegan muttered. Cullen, as fine a soldier as was born, wouldn’t make a good chief. He’d rather fight than think.

Keegan, a soldier himself at fourteen, one who’d seen blood, spilled it, knew power, felt it, understood that thinking mattered as much as the sword, the spear, the powers.

More, come to that.

Hadn’t he been taught just that by his father, and by the one who’d treated him like a son?

As he stood with Harken, with so many others, all chattering like magpies, his mother moved through the crowd.

He wished she would dive today. He knew no one who could settle a dispute as handily, who could deal with a dozen tasks at one time. Harken had her kindness, their sister, Aisling, her beauty, and he liked to think he had at least some of her canniness.

Tarryn paused by Aisling—who chose to wait with her friends rather than the brothers she currently disdained. Keegan watched her tip up Aisling’s chin, kiss her cheeks, say words that made her daughter smile before she moved on to her sons.

“And here I have a scowl and a grin.” Tarryn ruffled Harken’s mop, gave the warrior’s braid on the left side of Keegan’s head a light tug. “Remember the purpose of this day, as it unites us, and speaks to who and what we are. What you do here has been done by those before for a thousand years and more. And all who took the sword from the lake, their names were written before ever they were born.”

“If the fates deem who rises, why can’t we see? Why can’t you,” Keegan insisted, “who sees the before and the yet to come?”

“If I could see, if you could, or any, it would take the choice away.” As a mother would, she put an arm around Keegan’s shoulders, but her eyes—bright and blue like Harken’s—looked out over the lake and through the mists.

“You choose to go into the water, do you not? And who lifts the sword must choose to rise with it.”

“Who wouldn’t choose to rise with it?” Harken wondered. “They would be taoiseach.”

“A leader will be honored, but a leader carries the burden for us all. So they must choose to lift that as well as the sword. Quiet now.” She kissed both her sons. “Here is Mairghread.”

Mairghread O’Ceallaigh, once a taoiseach herself, and mother to the one now buried, had shed her mourning black. She wore white, a simple gown with no adornments but a pendant with a stone as red as her hair.

They seemed to flame—the stone and her hair—as if they burned away the mists as she walked through them. She wore her hair as short as that of the faeries who streamed in her wake.

And the crowd parted for her, the chattering ceased to silence that spoke of respect and of awe.

Keegan knew her as Marg, the woman who lived in the cottage in the woods not far from the farm. The woman who would give a hungry boy a honey cake and a story. A woman of great power and courage, who had fought for Talamh, brought peace at deep personal cost.

He’d held her as she’d wept for her son, as he kept his word again and brought her the news himself. Though she had known already.

He’d held her until the women came to comfort.

And then, though he was a soldier, though he was a man, he’d gone deeper into the woods to shed his own tears.

Now she looked magnificent, and he felt a shudder of that awe inside his belly.

She carried the staff, the ancient symbol of leadership. Its wood, dark as pitch, gleamed in the sun, through the mists that thinned and broke in pieces.

Its carvings seemed to pulse. Inside the dragon’s heart stone at its tip, power swirled.

When she spoke, even the wind fell silent.

“Once more we have brought peace to our world with blood and sacrifice. We have, through all ages, protected our world, and through it all the others. We chose to live as we live, from the land, from the sea, from the Fey, honoring all.

“Once more we have peace, once more we will prosper, until the time comes round again for blood and sacrifice. Today, as it was written, as it was told, as it was sung, a new leader will rise, and all here will swear their fealty to Talamh, to the taoiseach who will take the sword from the Lake of Truth and accept the Staff of Justice.”

She lifted her face to the sky, and Keegan thought her voice, so clear, so strong, must reach all the way to the Sea of Storms and beyond.

“In this place, in this hour, we call upon our source of power. Let the one chosen and choosing this day, honor, respect, and guard the Fey. Let the hand that lifts the sword be strong and wise and true. This, only this, your people ask of you.”

The water, pale and green with its power, began to swirl. The mists over it swayed.

“So it begins.” She lifted the staff high.

They raced toward the water. Some of the younger ones laughed or whooped as they dived, as they jumped. Those on shore cheered.

Keegan heard the din of it all as he hesitated, as his brother went into the water with a cheerful splash. He thought of his oath, thought of the hand that had gripped his in those last moments of life on this plane.

So he dived.

He'd have cursed at the cold slap of the water, but saw no point in it. He could hear others do so, or laugh, even kick their way back to the surface.

He shut off that part of him that could hear thoughts as too many of them crowded in.

He'd sworn he would take to the water this day and dive deep. That he would take up the sword if it came to his hand.

So he dived deep, deeper, remembering the times as a boy he'd done just this with his brother and sister. Children on a summer day hunting for smooth stones on the soft lake bottom.

He could see others through the water, swimming down or over or up. The lake would push them to the surface if the air ran out of their lungs, as it was promised this day no one who entered the lake would come to harm.

Still the lake moved around him, swirling, sometimes spinning. He could see the bottom now, and those smooth stones he'd gathered as a boy.

Then he saw the woman. She simply floated, so at first he thought her a mermaid. Historically the mers abstained from the ritual here. They already ruled the seas and were content with that.

Then he realized he only saw her face, her hair—red as Marg's, but longer and streaming back in the water. Her eyes, gray as shadows in smoke, struck some chord in him that was knowing. But he didn't know her. He knew every face in the valley, and hers wasn't of the valley.

And yet it was.

Then, though he'd blocked himself, he heard her as clearly as he'd heard Marg on shore. *He was mine, too. But this is yours. He knew it, and so do you.*

The sword all but leaped into his hand. He felt the weight of it, the power of it, the brilliance of it.

He could drop it, swim on, swim away. His choice, so the gods said, so the stories said.

He started to loosen his fingers and let that weight, that power, that brilliance slide away. He didn't know how to lead. He knew how to fight, how to train, how to ride, how to fly. But he didn't know how to lead others, not into battle or into peace.

The sword gleamed in his hand, a shine of silver with its carving pulsing, its single red stone flaming. As he eased his grip that shine dulled, the flame began to gutter.

And she watched him.

He believed in you.

A choice? he thought. What bollocks. Honor left no choice.

So he pointed the sword toward the surface where the sun danced in diamonds. He watched the vision—for she was nothing more than that—smile.

Who are you? he demanded.

We're both going to have to find out.

The sword carried him straight up, an arrow from a bow.

It cleaved through the water, then the air. The roar came up as the sun struck the blade, shot its light, its power across the water.

He rode it to the thick, damp grass, then did what he knew he must. He knelt at Mairghread's feet.

“I would give this and all it means to you,” he said, as her son had, “for there is none more worthy.”

“My time is past.” She laid a hand on his head. “And yours begins.” She took his hand, brought him to his feet.

He heard nothing, saw nothing but her. “This was my wish,” she murmured, only for him.

“Why? I don’t know how to—”

She cut him off, a kiss to his cheek. “You know more than you think.” She held out the staff. “Take what’s yours, Keegan O’Broin.”

When he took the staff, she stepped back. “And do what comes next.”

He turned. They watched him, so many faces, so many eyes watching him. He recognized what churned inside him as fear, and felt the shame of it.

The sword chose him, he thought, and he chose to rise with it. There would be no more fear.

He lifted the staff so its dragon’s heart pulsed with life.

“With this there will be justice on Talamh for all.” Now the sword. “With this, all will be protected. I am Keegan O’Broin. All that I am or ever will be pledges this to the valleys, the hills, the forests and ballys, to the far reaches, to every Fey. I will stand for the light. I will live for Talamh, and should the gods deem, I will die for Talamh.”

They cheered him, and through the roar of it, he heard Marg say, “Well done, lad. Well done indeed.”

So they raised him up, the young taoiseach. And a new story began.

Chapter One

Philadelphia

Sitting on a bus that seemed to have a bad case of the hiccups, Breen Kelly rubbed at the drumming ache in her temple.

She’d had a bad day that came at the end (thank God!) of a bad week that had spilled out from a bad month.

Or two.

She told herself to cheer up. It was Friday, and that meant two whole days before she’d be back in the classroom struggling to teach language arts to middle schoolers.

Of course, she’d spend a chunk of those two days grading papers, doing lesson plans, but she wouldn’t be in the classroom with all those eyes on her. Some bored, some manic, a few hopeful.

No, she wouldn’t stand there feeling as inadequate and out of place as any pubescent student who’d rather be anywhere else in the universe than the classroom.

She reminded herself teaching was the most honorable of professions. Rewarding, meaningful, vital.

Too bad she sucked at it.

The bus hiccupped to the next stop. A few people got off; a few people got on. She observed. She was good at observing because it was so much easier than participating.

The woman in the gray pantsuit, phone in hand, frazzled eyes. Single mother heading home after work, checking on her kids, Breen decided. She probably never imagined her life would be so hard.

Now, a couple of teenage boys—high-tops, knee-length Adidas shorts, earbuds. Going to meet some pals, play some H - O - R - S - E, grab some pizza, catch a flick. An age, Breen thought, an enviable age, when a weekend meant nothing but fun.

The man in black he . . . He looked right at her, looked deep, so she cut her eyes away. He looked familiar. Why did he look familiar? The silver hair, the mane of it, made her think: college professor.

But no, that wasn't it. A college professor getting on the bus wouldn't make her mouth go dry or her heart hammer. She had a terrible fear he'd walk back, sit next to her.

If he did, she'd never get off the bus. She'd just keep riding, riding, going nowhere, getting nowhere, a continual loop of nothing.

She knew it was crazy, didn't care. She surged to her feet, rushed toward the front of the bus with her briefcase slapping against her hip. She didn't look at him—didn't dare—but had to brush by him to make the doors. Though he stepped to the side, she felt that her arm bumped his as she passed.

Her lungs shut down; her legs went weak. Someone asked if she was all right as she stumbled toward the doors. But she heard him, inside her head: *Come home, Breen Siobhan. It's time you came home.*

She gripped the bar to keep her balance, nearly tripped on the steps. And ran.

She felt people look at her, turn their heads, stare, and wonder. That only made it worse. She hated to draw attention, tried so hard to blend, to just fade.

The bus hiccupped by.

Though her breath whistled in and out, the pressure on her chest eased. She ordered herself to slow down, just slow down and walk like a normal person.

It took her a minute to manage it, and another to orient herself.

She hadn't had an anxiety attack that severe since the night before her first day in the classroom at Grady Middle. Marco, her best friend since kindergarten, had gotten her through that, and through the one—not quite as bad—before her first parent/teacher conference.

Just a man catching the bus, she told herself. No threat, for God's sake. And she hadn't heard him inside her head. Believing you heard other people's thoughts equaled crazy.

Hadn't her mother drummed that into her head since . . . always?

And now, because she'd had a moment of crazy, she had a solid half-mile walk. But that was fine, that was all right. It was a pretty spring evening, and she was—naturally—dressed correctly. The light raincoat—there'd been a 30 percent chance of rain—over the spring sweater, the sensible shoes.

She liked to walk. And hey, think of all the extra steps on her Fitbit.

So it messed up her schedule a little, what did it matter?

She was a twenty-six-year-old single female, and had absolutely no plans for a Friday night in May.