

Prologue

In the long ago, the worlds of gods and men and Fey coexisted. Through times of peace, through times of war, in times of plenty, in times of loss, the worlds mingled freely.

As the wheel of time turned, there came those who pushed aside the old gods for the gods of greed, for the lust of dominion over the land and the sea, for the glory of what some deemed progress.

In the dung hill of greed and lust and glory, fear and hatred bloomed. Some gods grew angry at the lessening of respect and homage, and some turned anger into a craving to possess and to destroy. More, wiser and more temperate, saw the wheel turn as it must and cast out those who used their great powers to murder and enslave.

As the worlds of man turned the gods into things of myth, those who called themselves holy persecuted any who chose to worship in the old ways. Such acts, once as common as wildflowers in a meadow, brought torture and an ugly death.

Soon, the fear and hatred aimed its brittle fingers toward the Fey. The Wise, once revered for their powers, became twisted into creatures of evil, as were the Sidhe who no longer dared spread their wings for fear of a hunter's arrow. Weres became cursed monsters who devoured human flesh, and Mers the sirens who lured simple seafarers to their deaths.

With fear and hatred, persecutions raged over the worlds, pitting man against man, Fey against Fey, man against Fey in a bloody, brutal time fueled by those who claimed they stood on holy ground.

So in the world of Talamh, and others, there came a time of choice. The leader of Talamh offered the Fey, all of its tribes, this choice. To turn from the old ways and follow the rules and laws of man, or to preserve their laws, their magicks by closing off from other worlds.

The Fey chose magicks.

In the end, after the windy and righteous debates such matters demanded, the taoiseach and the council found compromise. New laws were written. All were encouraged to travel to other worlds, to learn of them, to sample them. Any who chose to make their home outside Talamh must follow the laws of that world, and but one unbreakable law of Talamh.

Magicks must never be used to harm another but to save a life. And even then, such action demanded a return to Talamh and judgment on the justice of their actions.

So, for generation upon generation, Talamh held peace within its borders. Some left for other worlds; others brought mates from those worlds to settle in Talamh. Crops grew in the green fields, trolls mined the deep caves, game roamed the thick woods, and the two moons shined over the hills and the seas.

But such peaceful worlds, such green and rich land, plants hunger in dark hearts. In time, with vengeful purpose, a cast-out god slid through the worlds into Talamh. He won the heart of the young taoiseach who saw him as he willed her to see him.

Handsome and good and loving.

They made a child, as it was the child he wanted. A child in whom ran the blood of the taoiseach, of the Wise with more than a dollop of the Sidhe, and with his, blood of a god.

Each night, as the mother slept an enchanted sleep, the dark god drank power from the babe, consuming what it was to add to his own. But the mother woke, saw the god for what he was. She saved her son, and led Talamh in a great battle to cast out the fallen god.

Once this was done, and portals charmed against him and any who followed him, she gave up her staff, threw the sword of the taoiseach back into the Lake of Truth for another to lift, for another to lead.

She raised her son, and when his time came round, as the wheel decreed, he raised the sword from the waters of the lake to take his place as leader of the Fey.

And, a wise leader, he held the peace season by season, year by year. On his travels he met a human woman, and they loved. He brought her to his world, to his people, to the farm that was his and his mother's and her family's before her, and theirs before.

They knew joy, a joy that grew when they made a child. For three years, the child knew nothing but love and wonder and the peace her father held as firmly as he held her hand.

Such a prize was she, this girl child, the only one known who carried the blood of the Wise, the Sidhe, the gods, and the human.

The dark god came for her, using the twisted powers of a turned witch to breach the portal. He caged her in glass, deep in the pale green waters of the river where he plotted to keep her, letting her powers grow a bit longer. No babe this time he would have to sip from, but one he could, when ripe, gulp whole.

Yet she already held more power than he knew. More than she knew. Her cries reached beyond the portal, into Talamh. Her anger broke through the conjured glass, drove the god back even as the Fey, led by her father, her grandmother, raged into battle.

Even with the child safe, the god's castle destroyed, and the portal protections reinforced, the girl's mother could not, would not rest.

She demanded they return to the world of man, without magick she now viewed as evil, and keep their daughter there without memory of the world of her birth.

Torn between love and duty, the taoiseach lived in both worlds, making a home as best he could for his daughter, returning to Talamh to lead, and in leading to keep his world and his child safe.

The marriage could not survive it, and as the wheel turned, neither did the taoiseach survive his next battle, as his father murdered him.

While the girl grew, believing her father had left her, never knowing what she had inside her, raised by a mother whose fear pushed her to demand the daughter think herself less and less, another young boy raised the sword from the lake.

So they grew in their worlds from girl to woman, from boy to man. She, unhappy, did as she was bid. He, determined, guarded the peace. In Talamh, they waited, knowing the god threatened all worlds. He would again seek the blood of his blood, and the wheel would turn so the time would come when the Talamhish could no longer stop him.

She, the bridge between worlds, must return and awaken, must become, and must choose to give all, risk all to help destroy the god.

When she came to Talamh, innocent of all that had come before, she had only begun a journey into herself. Led there by a grandmother's open heart, she learned, she grieved, she embraced.

And awakened.

Like her father, she had love and duty in two worlds. That love and duty drew her back to the world where she'd been raised, but with a promise to return.

With her heart torn, she prepared to leave what she had known and risk all she was. On the knife's edge, with the taoiseach and Talamh waiting, she shared all with the brother of her heart, a friend like no other.

As she stepped into the portal, he, as true as ever was, leaped with her.

Caught between worlds, between loves, between duties, she began her journey into becoming.

Chapter One

With the wind whipping a gale in the portal, Breen felt her grip on Marco's hand start to slip. She couldn't see, as the light had gone bright and blinding. She couldn't hear through the roar of that wind.

As if tossed by the gale, she tumbled, with Keegan's hand a vise grip on hers, and her desperate fingers barely clinging to Marco's.

Then, like a switch flipped, she fell. The air went cool and damp, the light snapped off, and the wind died.

She landed hard enough to rattle bones. On a dirt road, she realized, wet from the soft rain still falling. And in the rain, she smelled Talamh.

Breathless, she rolled to hunker over Marco. He sprawled, limp and still, with eyes wide and shocked.

"Are you okay? Let me see. Marco, you idiot!" Searching, she ran her hands over him. "Nothing's broken."

Now she stroked her hand over Marco's face as she whipped her head around to snarl at Keegan.

"What the hell was that? Even the first time I came through, it wasn't like that."

He shoved his hand through his hair. "I didn't account for the extra passenger. Or all your bloody luggage. And still I got us back, didn't I?"

"What the actual fuck?"

As Marco stirred, she turned back to him. "Don't try to get up yet. You're going to be dizzy and shaky, but you're okay."

He just stared at her, his brown eyes huge and glassy with shock. "Did all this crazy make you a doctor, too?"

"Not exactly. Just catch your breath. What the hell do we do now?" she shot at Keegan.

"Get out of the fecking rain to start." He pushed to his feet, a tall, irritated man with dark hair curling in the damp. "I aimed to bring us back in the dooryard of the farmhouse." He gestured. "And wasn't far off considering what came with us."

She could see the stone house now, the silhouette of it a few yards away and across the road.

"Marco isn't a what."

Keegan just strode over, crouched down. "All right now, brother, sit yourself up. Take it slow."

"My laptop!" When Breen spotted it on the road, she scrambled up, sprinted over to grab the case.

"Well now, she will have her priorities."

In the road, in the rain, she clutched it to her. "This is as important to me as your sword is to you."

"If it got banged up, you'll fix it. That's the way," he said to Marco, "slow and easy."

The way he spoke to Marco—slow and easy—reminded Breen that Keegan could be kind. When he wanted to be.

She strapped on the laptop case cross-body, hurried back to them.

"You're going to feel dizzy and weird. The first time I came through I fainted."

"Guys don't faint." But Marco dropped his spinning head to his updrawn knees. "We can pass out, we can get knocked out, but we don't faint."

"That's the way," Keegan said cheerfully. "Let's get you on your feet. We could use a hand here, Breen."

"Just let me get my suitcase."

"Women, by the gods!" Keegan whipped out a hand, and the suitcase vanished.

"Where did it go?" Marco's voice hitched, this time his eyes rolled. "Where'd it go?"

"Not to worry, it's all fine. Up you come now. Lean on me, and we'll get you there."

"I can't feel my knees. Are they here?"

"Right where they should be."

Breen hurried over to wrap an arm around Marco from the other side. "It's okay. You're okay. It's not far, see? We're going right there."

He managed a few shaky steps. "Men don't faint, but they do puke. I might."

Breen pressed a hand to his stomach, pulled out some of the churning. It made her feel a little queasy, but she told herself she'd handle it. "Better?"

"Yeah, I guess. I think I'm having a really weird dream. Breen has weird dreams," he told Keegan in a voice that sounded a little drunk. "Scary weird sometimes. This one's just weird."

Keegan flicked a hand, and the gate of the dooryard swung open.

"Like that kind of weird. Smells good anyway. Like Ireland. Right, Breen?"

"Yes, but it's not."

"That would be way weird if we're standing in our apartment in Philly one minute and going splat on a road in Ireland the next. 'Beam me up, Scotty' time."

"Those are good stories." Keegan flicked the door open. "Here we are now. You'll have a lie down on the divan here."

"Lying down's good. Hey, Breen, there's your suitcase. It's real homey in here. Old-timey homey. It's nice. Oh, thank Christ," he said when they laid him down on the couch.

"I didn't faint, see. Didn't puke either. Yet."