

VOYAGER 15 SNEAK PEEK

THE UNDIVIDED RIFT RUNNERS BOOK 1

JENNIFER FALLON

Prologue

‘It shouldn't be so easy to take an innocent life.’ Amergin cast back his mind, trying to pinpoint the moment in time when taking a life had moved from being a moral dilemma to a political necessity.

‘We're not going to kill them. We're going to divide them,’ Marcroy Tarth said. ‘Send one of them away. Somewhere he'll never be found. Or at least, not found until the Undivided can be replaced with something less dangerous.’ Then he added with a thoughtful frown. ‘We'll need to do it somewhere there are no witnesses.’

The Druid stared at the *sídhe* for a long moment. His sharp features were inhumanly pretty; so familiar and yet so alien, his long, straight blond hair, tucked behind his sharply pointed ears, tinged blue by the cave's magical light. Despite his apparent youth, he seemed even more sinister than usual in the flickering Faerie glow illuminating the icy grotto where this perilous rendezvous was taking place.

Amergin shook his head. ‘I don't know, Marcroy ...’

‘Very well,’ the *sídhe* lord said with a shrug. ‘I will report back to the Brethren with your answer. I'm sure when I tell them I was unable to find a bloodless way to remove the threat of the Undivided twins destined to destroy our kind, they'll understand. I mean,’ he added with a sardonic smile, ‘you know how forgiving and understanding the *sídhe* elders can be.’

‘I'm not trying to anger the Brethren,’ Amergin said, feeling trapped. ‘And you know I would never do anything to endanger your people. But you must understand ... I am a Druid. I am sworn to protect *my* people. If anyone should discover ...’

Marcroy smiled patronisingly, a smile made worse by the fact the *sídhe* lord looked like a lad and

not a creature who'd lived longer than Amergin cared to contemplate. 'The whole purpose of opening the rift without witnesses, brother, would be to *prevent* discovery, would it not?'

'You're asking me to betray my own race.'

'On the contrary. I am offering you a chance to *save* your race. The Brethren have spoken. They have seen what will happen in other realms, where RónánDarragh have grown to manhood, united. They will not permit it to happen in our reality.'

Amergin was shocked by what Marcroy seemed to be suggesting. 'Are you telling me the Brethren would kill the boys, themselves?'

'They can't,' Marcroy said. 'You know that. Orlagh's treaty with your kind protecting the Undivided binds all the *sídhe* races. But there are ways around such oaths.'

It was still too much for Amergin to take in. And he was tired; so very, very tired. He shook his head again. 'Even if I agreed to this, Sybille will never permit me to step into a stone circle with one of her sons. Especially now.'

Marcroy nodded in agreement. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment than then smiled brightly. 'You must take the boy north. Far from here. Enlist the help of the *Marra-Warra*. Do it on the water. They have rafts capable of sustaining a reality rift.'

'Just like that? You think I can ride out of *Sí an Bhrú* with one of the Undivided in my care, return without him and it not be remarked upon?'

'You are a trusted member of the court, Lord Amergin. You are the Vate of all Eire. A bard of great renown. The French woman is still an outsider in *Sí an Bhrú*. She relies on your counsel. I'm sure you'll think of something to convince Sybille you can be trusted with one of her sons.'

'She'll know ...'

'What will she know?' Marcroy asked. 'What possible reason could she have for suspecting you of anything?'

'But there is no reason to separate the boys, even temporarily.'

Marcroy seemed to be growing impatient. 'You have Druid magic to call on. Make one of them appear ill and then offer to remove the other while he recovers, in case the illness is contagious. It happens all the time.'

‘Not when the reigning Undivided are about to expire,’ Amergin pointed out unhappily.

‘I disagree, brother. You offering to remove one of the boys from *Sí an Bhrú* at such a time is exactly what any good Vate would do. There can be no risk that the heirs die or the Treaty of *Tír Na nÓg* is void and your Druid magic is lost forever.’

Amergin was feeling nauseous. And cornered. Marcroy was right. If one of the boys fell ill, his separation from his twin until he recovered was guaranteed. He didn't know what to say.

Marcroy saw his silence for what it was: doubt.

‘I came to you for help, Amergin.’ The Faerie's eye brimmed with concern as he put his arm around the human's bony shoulders. ‘And *I* am helping you, brother. After all, you're family now.’

Marcroy's words chilled the Vate even more than their icy meeting place. For a fleeting moment, he wondered how different his life might have been if he'd turned away the first time he caught sight of Elimyer instead of falling helplessly in love with her. On reflection, he supposed he wouldn't have chosen differently. He'd been utterly smitten from the first sight of Marcroy's sister and nothing in the intervening year since their first kiss had dimmed his passion for her. Even now, when she was heavy with his child and cranky in the way only an unhappy Faerie could be, he still loved her more than life itself.

That was the cost, he knew, of accepting the love of a *leanan sídhe*. He had his beautiful muse and had never lacked for inspiration, fame or glory, since he'd met her. His love for her came with a price, however. Elimyer required his life force to sustain her, a demand all the more urgent now she was nurturing a new life inside her.

But her pregnancy meant more than being exhausted all the time by the energy she drained from him. He was bound to the Faerie now, in a way that really wasn't appropriate for a Druid lord who was also a member of the Druid Council and a trusted friend and advisor of the Undivided.

Still, the news Marcroy brought him was dire. The Brethren — the ruling council of all the *Sídhe* races on Earth — wanted the Undivided heirs destroyed. If that happened, the Druids would lose everything. If he prevented their destruction by helping Marcroy find a safer way to remove the threat ... did that make him a hero or a traitor?

‘It's too risky, Marcroy. There must be another way.’

‘You're afraid.’ The Faerie lord squeezed his shoulder comfortingly.

‘I don't object out of cowardice. Even if we discount Sybille's wrath at the loss of one of her sons, if we accidentally kill the child throwing him through a rift, we will have achieved nothing except that which we are trying to prevent,’ he reminded his brother-in-law, shaking off his arm. He began to pace, burning off energy he could ill afford to spare. ‘*That* would certainly break the treaty ...’ His voice trailed off and he stared at the Faerie lord as he began to understand. ‘But it would have been broken by my hand, not yours ...’

Marcroy treated him to a sly little smile. ‘I as said, brother, there are ways around such oaths.’

Pacing the low-ceilinged cave like a caged panther, the bearded Druid turned to look at the tall, slender Faerie, his violet eyes turned almost black by the shadows, his pointed ears giving his flickering silhouette on the cave's wall, an entirely sinister cast. ‘How long do we have?’

‘Before the Brethren decide to take matters into their own hands?’ Marcroy shrugged. ‘I doubt they'll permit the power transfer to happen if both boys are still here when LonHarrian expire. If one of them is removed, however ...’

‘Then they'll stay their hand until replacements can be found?’

Marcroy nodded, frowning slightly. ‘Of course ... assuming they can be found — something that keeps happening with remarkable frequency, although I'm not sure how.’

Amergin knew how, but he was not so far lost to his Faerie lover that he would betray that secret, or the *Matrarchaí*. ‘How can we be certain the link between the boys will remain once the rift is closed?’

‘There have been other Undivided who have travelled through reality rifts before now with no ill effect on the power sharing.’

‘And what's to stop the lost child returning to our realm as soon as he realises where he belongs?’

Marcroy seemed unconcerned by that eventuality. ‘We will send him somewhere his magical gifts will be dulled, if not completely nullified. Somewhere not even the *sídhe* or the Undivided themselves can find him.’ Marcroy's smile suddenly faded to a scowl, making the chilly cave seem warm by comparison. ‘Now Harian is dead, Lon can't possibly hang on for longer than a day or two. Time is of the essence.’ He took a step closer to Amergin. ‘You must stop dillydallying, brother.’

Marcroy was right. Amergin knew that, but it didn't make what he was about to do seem any less like treason.

He swallowed hard, reminding himself why he was doing this. Wishing he had the gift of Sight. But he couldn't see into the future, which meant he had to judge things on what seemed most likely now.

'And what of Sybille?' he asked. 'She'll not stand idly by with one of her sons missing.'

'I will take care of the French Druid,' Marcroy promised. 'We'll have to leave it a few months, of course. One of the boys disappearing and their mother dying too close together would raise questions. But a year or so from now ... when people have gotten used to the notion of a Regent in charge and one of the Undivided lost, and before Sybille can do much damage, we can take care of her and you, as Vate, can step in and take charge.'

'And if the missing Undivided twin is never found?'

'Then until he dies, our Divided twin can never truly be a threat. The Brethren are appeased. Your wisdom will guide this land for as long as it needs to.'

'I'll do what I have to,' Amergin said, his resolve firming. 'The twins are identical in looks, not temperament. Perhaps young Rónán would be the better choice.'

Marcroy's irritation was quickly replaced by a cheerful smile. 'There you go, brother! See! That wasn't so hard.'

'Where do you want to meet?'

'I don't want to meet at all,' Marcroy said, scoffing at the very idea he would allow himself to be implicated in this plot to dethrone the Undivided. 'I've no intention of being anywhere near you while you have custody of one of the Undivided heirs at a time like this. You must arrange for Darragh to take ill as soon as you return, so you can remove Rónán from *Sí an Bhrú* at first light.' Marcroy dug into a pocket in his cloak, produced a deep red jewel, and handed it to Amergin. He took the ruby and examined it for a moment, noting the symbol etched into its depths. 'Once you're out of sight of land, the *mara-warra* will open the rift if you give them this. When it's done, you can stagger back to *Sí an Bhrú*, wailing and moaning the way you humans are fond of doing in times of crisis, lamenting the loss of the poor child at sea.'

Amergin nodded. It was a cruel plan, but a sound one. ‘But on the water ... suppose the child drowns on the other side?’

‘Well then, you’ll need to send him somewhere he’s guaranteed to be found, and preferably by someone who might care for the lad in the other realm.’ Marcroy gripped Amergin’s shoulders and shook them impatiently. ‘You *must* see to it that he survives, brother. I cannot be responsible, even indirectly, for breaking the Treaty.’

Amergin nodded reluctantly. A world without the Undivided was too horrible to contemplate. Without them, there would be no Druid magic.

He discovered he was wringing his hands like an old woman. He shook Marcroy off and plunged his hands into the pockets of his long brown robe to stop himself, the jewel cutting into his palm. ‘You know they’ll spare no effort looking for him.’

‘At which point, until the child is found or they finally decide to rid themselves of his twin — assuming at some point your people find another set of gifted twins to replace RónánDarragh — you will assume the leadership of your people.’

‘But the Druid Council ...’

‘Need know nothing,’ Marcroy pointed out soothingly. ‘Neither does the Brethren. *Especially*, not the Brethren. Once the twin’s mother is dead, you are quite within your rights as Vate of all Eire to assume leadership on their behalf until they become men ... or in this case, until Darragh becomes a man and his missing brother is located.’ Marcroy put his arm around Amergin’s shoulder again, but this time he squeezed. Hard. The gesture seemed more threatening than friendly. ‘This is our chance to set the world to rights, brother. Think of the possibilities! Not only will the Brethren be appeased, and you will have averted the disaster they have seen unfolding in alternate realms, but we can repair the damage done by those fools, LonHarian. We can end the growing discord between our peoples. Humans and the *Tuatha* will be at peace once more. We can build what the Treaty of *Tír Na nÓg* always intended: a world where your child — my niece — can grow up accepted as a child of two worlds, not mocked and reviled, for being a mongrel.’

Amergin flinched at the word ‘mongrel’, certain Marcroy used the human insult for half-*sídhe*, half-human offspring for precisely that reason. It was small comfort to realise he was right about the

fate of his yet-to-be-born half-Faerie child.

‘What will happen to Darragh with his brother on the other side of the rift? He’s not even three years old and the boys are inseparable.’

‘He’ll get by.’ Marcroy smiled even wider. ‘Just think, brother, you will be responsible for saving mankind from the wrath of the Brethren. There is no greater sacrifice a human can make for his people.’

That hope kept Amergin going. He just wished it didn’t involve having to rely on his *Daoine sídhe* brother-in-law to achieve it.

Stifling a yawn, Amergin glanced outside, frowning. ‘I should be going. If I’m not back before Lon dies, it will be too late to do anything.’

Marcroy stepped forward to embrace him. ‘Then be gone, brother. And try to get some rest. You look tired and you have an early start in the morning.’

Amergin returned the embrace briefly, uncomfortable with the Faerie tendency toward overt shows of physical affection.

‘You’ll see I am right, brother.’

Wishing he were as sure as Marcroy, Amergin stepped outside into the icy night and called to his horse. The animal had found a patch of dogged brown grass poking through the snow and was chewing on it with grim determination. At Amergin’s call, she raised her head and then trotted over to him, waiting patiently as Amergin asked permission to mount her. As soon as the familiar words were spoken, the beast knelt, making it easier for the Druid to climb aboard. As the mare stood up, Amergin turned to Marcroy.

‘Don’t let me down, Marcroy.’

‘You have my word, Amergin,’ the *Tuatha* envoy said.

That didn’t do much to assuage Amergin’s fears. Everybody knew the word of the *Tuatha* was as unreliable as the weather.

He raised his hand in farewell and turned the mare with his knees toward *Sí an Bhrú* and home where an old man was dying and Elimyer waited for him. Weary beyond words, Amergin’s thoughts swirled like a maelstrom as he thought of her, contemplating what he must do, the prize if they

succeeded and the cost if they failed, torn between the rightness of the outcome and the wrongness of the method he must use to achieve it.

And then something else pierced the fog of his conflicting emotions.

The *Tuatha* could tell the gender of a child in the womb at a glance. Elimyer had refused to tell him if she was having a boy or a girl and had sworn all her kind to secrecy to prevent her husband from finding out.

But Marcroy had let it slip.

He'd spoken of saving his *niece* the shame of being branded a mongrel in a world that despised and mistrusted Faeries.

Amergin smiled and sat a little straighter.

He was going to have a daughter.

Part One

Chapter 1

It shouldn't be so easy to take a life.

The assassin pondered that thought as he approached the cradle rocking gently in the centre of the warm, candle-lit chamber. Their mother would have set the cradle rocking to soothe the twins before she left the room, trusting their visitor so profoundly that it would never occur to her the children might be in danger.

He reached the cradle and stopped to study it for a moment. The oak crib was carved with elaborate Celtic knotwork, inlaid with softly glowing mother-of-pearl brought up from the very depths of the ocean by the magical Walrus People, the *mara-warra*. It had been a gift from Queen Orlagh, centuries ago and had rocked generations of twins to sleep since then.

Generations that would end now. Tonight. By his hand.

He glanced down at the blade he carried. The *airgead sídhe* caught the candlelight in odd places, illuminating the engraving on the blade. He hefted the razor-sharp weapon in his hand. Faerie silver was useless in battle, but for this task, no other would suffice.

Warmed by the fire crackling in the fire-pit in the centre of the large round chamber, the twins slept peacefully, curled together like soft, precious petals, the left one sucking her thumb, the other making soft suckling motions with her mouth, unconsciously mirroring her sister. The girls were sated and content, blissfully ignorant of their approaching death. Even if they had been awake, it was unlikely they would recognise the danger that hovered over them. The man wielding the blade above their cradle — the man come to take their lives — was a friend, a dependable presence they trusted to keep them safe.

‘You can't seriously mean to do this.’

He glanced over his shoulder. A figure stood in the shadows by the door, a presence that was both alien and familiar. A presence so like him it may have been nothing more than a corporeal manifestation of his own conscience.

‘It has to be done. You know that.’

The figure by the door shook his head and took a step further into the room. He found himself

staring at a mirror image of himself, except his reflection's face was filled with doubt and anguish, while his was calm and resigned to what must be done.

‘They are innocent,’ the anguished manifestation of his guilt announced.

‘They are death.’

‘If preventing our death requires the death of innocent children, then perhaps we deserve to die.’

He didn't answer, turning back to stare down at the twin girls he had come to murder. It wasn't *who* they were, but *what*, that made their deaths so necessary.

Why am I the only one who sees that clearly?

His conscience took another step closer. ‘I won't let you do it.’

‘How will you stop me?’ he asked as he raised the blade. One of the girls was stirring — they were too alike to tell which was which. She opened her eyes to smile up at him, her face framed by soft dark curls. Her sister remained asleep, still peacefully sucking her thumb.

Which will be harder? he wondered idly. Killing the one who is asleep and ignorant of her fate, or the one staring up at me with that sleepy, contended smile?

‘I'll kill *you* if I have to, to stop this.’

The assassin smiled down at the twins, dismissing the empty threat. ‘Even if you could get across this room before the deed is done, you can't kill me without killing yourself, which would achieve precisely what I am here to prevent.’

He moved the blade a little, repositioning his grip. The candlelight danced across its engraved surface, mesmerising the baby. He was happy to entertain her with the pretty lights for a few moments. His mission was to kill her and her sister, after all, not to make her suffer.

There was a drawn out silence, as he played the light across the blade. Behind him, the presence that was both his conscience and his other half remained motionless. There was no point in him trying to attack. They were two sides of the same coin. Neither man could so much as form the intent to attack without the other knowing about it.

The girls would be dead before anybody could reach the cradle to stop him.

‘There must be another way.’ There was note of defeat in the statement; a glimmer of acceptance.

‘I wouldn't be here if there was,’ the assassin replied, still staring down at the baby he was destined

to kill. 'You know that,' he added, glancing over his shoulder. 'You're just not willing to accept the truth of it.'

The other man held out his hand, as if he expected the blade to be handed over, and for this night to be forgotten, somehow. Put behind them like a foolish disagreement they'd been wise enough to settle like men. 'They're just babies ...'

'They are our death and the death of much more besides.'

'But they're innocents ...'

The assassin shook his head. 'Only because they lack the capacity yet to act on what they were bred to manifest. Once they are grown ...'

'Dammit ... they're your own flesh and blood!'

The assassin gripped the blade tighter and turned back to the cradle, steeling his resolve with a conscious act of will. It didn't matter who they were. It's *what* they were. That was the important thing.

It was the reason they had to die.

'They are abominations, bred to cause chaos and strife.'

'You don't know that.'

'Of course I know it,' he said, growing impatient with an argument he considered long resolved. He turned to glare at his opponent. 'I see the future. So do you. And we've both seen other futures where they were permitted live. *I dare* you to deny the future you see isn't just as filled with chaos and strife, because of the women these girls will become, as the future I perceive.'

Silence greeted his agonised question, as he knew it would. They had both seen the destruction, the pain, the devastation. The act to prevent it may seem criminal now, but to allow the future to unfold in such a way when there was something they could do to prevent it was clearly the greater crime.

Turning back to the babies, he reached into the cradle with his left hand to pull back the furs covering the children. The twin who was awake grabbed his finger. Her blue eyes smiling, she squeezed it gently. Behind him, his other half watched, too appalled to allow this, too afraid to stop it.

'Help me or leave,' the assassin said, feeling the accusing eyes of his companion boring into his back. 'Just don't stand there feigning disgust, as if you had no part in bringing us to this pass.'

His nemesis wasn't ready to give up just yet. 'Perhaps the future we've see isn't ours ...'

'I'm not prepared to take that risk.'

'But you're prepared to have the blood of innocents on your hands?'

'Better the blood of two children, than the blood of twenty thousand who don't deserve to die.' The assassin was still a little amazed that he felt so calm. It was as if all the anguish, all the guilt, all the fear and remorse, all the normal human emotions a man should be battling at a time like this were a burden carried by someone else, leaving him free to act, unhindered by doubt.

If that wasn't a sign of the rightness of this deed, he couldn't think of anything else that might be.

He extracted his finger from the soft, determined grip of the baby girl, her skin so supple and warm, her gaze so trusting and serene, it was heartbreaking.

But not heartbreaking enough to stay his hand. He raised the blade, transfixed by the guileless blue eyes staring up at him. And then he brought it down sharply, slicing through the swaddling and her fragile ribs into her tiny heart without remorse or regret ...

He was quick and, he hoped, merciful, but the link between the sisters was quicker.

Before he could extract the blade from one tiny heart and plunge it into another, her twin sister jerked with pain and she began to scream ...

Chapter 2

'If we had to take our clothes off, couldn't we have done this indoors?'

Brydie glanced down around the circle of her sisters, cousins and friends, wondering who was brave enough to voice such a sacrilegious thought aloud. It might have been Anwen. Since her betrothal to the queen's only son, Torcán, last *Imbolc*, she'd become rather full of her own opinions, and with the security of her position of a soon-to-be princess, wasn't afraid of sharing them. Not that Brydie disagreed with her distant cousin, shivering as she stepped out of her shift, leaving it in a puddle of pale linen on the grass behind her, but she would never have dared to say so.

Hugging her arms across her naked body against the chill, Brydie glanced up at the sun, barely visible through the trees. The sun lacked warmth, and what little there was, the tall trees stole with their shadows. She shivered again and turned to her companions, noting with concern that the queen seemed to have only called the unmarried women of her court to this gathering in the sacred grove. Looking around at the dozen or so girls undressing around her, Brydie wondered what it meant. Was there a treaty to be sealed with a wedding?

More importantly, would the bride be ordered to the altar by her queen or permitted to volunteer?

Brydie chewed her bottom lip with concern. Queen Álmhath had been talking with quite a few border lords of late, even a couple from across *Muir Éireann*. The man visiting from Albion wasn't anything to boast about, but he seemed a decent enough fellow, the few times Brydie was called to wait on his table these past few weeks. The other man, the Gaul ... he was pig. Brydie fervently hoped if this gathering had been called to select a treaty bride, it wasn't because the Queen of the Celts wanted something out of the French.

'Don't slouch!'

Brydie straightened her shoulders, dropped her arms and lifted her chin, despite the bitter wind. One didn't defy Lady Malvina unless one was feeling particularly in need of trouble.

The Druidess stopped beside Brydie, but fortunately, she fixed her attention on the girl beside her. Ethna was a year older than Brydie, but much thinner, her long brown hair tied back in a tight braid. At least Brydie had thought to let her own hair down as she undressed, figuring she might glean a

little warmth from the thickness of it. Poor Ethna seemed to be feeling the cold a great deal more than the other girls, and a thin line of blood was trickling down her inner thigh. It was her *mìosach* time. Brydie felt sorry for Ethna and relieved hers had finished a couple of weeks ago. Poor girl. Brydie might be teased constantly by the men of Álmhath's court about her child-bearing hips, but at least she didn't look as if she was going to snap in the first strong breeze like her companion did. The unfortunate girl was turning blue.

‘By *Danú*,’ the old Druidess sighed, shaking her head. ‘You're a sorry specimen, Ethna Ni'Connell. Did your father never feed you at home?’

Ethna eyes began to well with unshed tears. Brydie wasn't sure if that was because she was upset or just cold. Her pale, freckled skin was prickled with gooseflesh, and her teeth were actually chattering.

‘I ... I ...’

‘It's not her fault, *an Bhantiarna*,’ Brydie said, taking pity on the girl. They weren't exactly friends, but nobody deserved Malvina's heartless scorn for such an insignificant thing as not having enough meat on their bones. ‘Ethna's just naturally thin.’

Malvina turned her pale, watery eyes on Brydie, eyeing her up and down like a farmer calculating the net worth of a freshly slaughtered carcass. ‘And what's your excuse for the way you stand there, Brydie Ni'Seanan? You're just naturally built for sin, are you?’

A few of the other girls sniggered. Brydie refused to react to the taunt. It was an old one, coined a few months ago by some *Ráith* lord, who'd drunkenly tried to petition the Queen for a night with her, in honour of *Imbolc*. The Queen had refused, of course, loudly telling the lord — and the other three hundred or so inebriated guests in her hall — that her court maidens weren't put on this Earth to sate the drunken lust of a man with ten children and he'd be better served going home to his own wife to make number eleven.

It had all been a bit of good-natured fun, until then. Anwen and Torcán had just announced their betrothal, spirits were high, everyone was drunk and it was part of the sport to try coaxing a court maiden into your bed. It was just as much a part of the fun of being a court maiden to avoid a tryst until the Queen gave her permission, and even Álmhath had been laughing while she delivered her

rebuke. As Brydie walked away from the table, however, the lord had called out to the queen in a plaintive voice that reached every corner of the hall, 'Really? Not even a kiss, my lady? But look at her! She's built for naught *but* sin!'

That had set the revellers rolling in the aisles and Brydie had not been able to shake the description ever since.

Failing to get a rise out of Brydie, Malvina moved on. Ethna smiled timorously at her as the Druidess moved around the circle. 'Thanks, but you didn't have to say anything. It's not that cold.'

'You look like a freshly hooked fish, Ethna,' Brydie said, smiling.

Ethna rubbed her arms for a moment and glanced toward the entrance to the grove. There was no sign of the queen yet. 'Do you think Álmhath is looking for a treaty bride?'

'Probably.'

'Will you stand forth?'

Brydie shook her head. 'Lord, no. With my luck she's done a deal with that French pig, and he'd beat me every day, feed me nothing but snails and expect me to bear him ten sons who all have manners just as bad as his.'

'I'd go if I was asked,' Ethna said, lowering her voice. 'I'm sick of this place. Sick of Temair.' She glanced down the line at Malvina's back. The Druidess had stopped to chastise another girl for taking too long to get undressed. 'Sick of the Druids.'

'Then I hope for your sake Álmhath asks for volunteers,' Brydie said. 'You can be sure I won't be fighting you for a seat on any boat crossing *Muir Éireann*.'

They fell silent after that, each girl wrapped in her own thoughts while they waited for the queen, all of them thinking much the same as she and Ethna were thinking, Brydie supposed. Álmhath needed a bride to seal a treaty, and, as was the custom, the bride would come from among her court maidens. She cast a furtive glance across the circle at Anwen, wondering what she was doing here. With her betrothal to Torcán, she should be off the market. Had she angered the queen in some way? Had Torcán wearied of her already?

'Kneel for your queen!'

Each of the twelve girls knelt on one knee as Álmhath swept into the grove, wearing a long white

cloak. A handsome woman in late middle age, she had an air of timelessness about her that Brydie envied. She hoped she would be as commanding some day.

‘You have been called to discharge your sacred duty,’ the queen announced, with very little preamble, as she pushed back the hood of her robe to reveal her thick, braided auburn hair, flecked with more and more silver each year. ‘As daughters of *Danú*, you are honoured to do her work, and there is no greater honour than to bring forth the next generation. We are women, blessed by *Danú* with the means to nurture our race and ensure its continuation. As court maidens, you are further blessed with the means to keep our borders safe. To that end, I will be selecting two of you ...’

Brydie bit her lip. The queen had said ‘selecting’. There was no chance of avoiding a marriage now, if she was one of the chosen.

It wasn't that Brydie was averse to the idea of an arranged marriage in principal. She just didn't like what was on offer. Brydie wasn't naive enough to believe in dashing princes and happy ever-afters, the way the bards told it their romances. She clung to the hope, however, that the accident of birth which gave her enough royal blood to secure her place as a Queen's Maiden also meant she'd eventually marry someone with a modicum of good manners, at the very least.

‘... to take up this blessed duty for your queen, your country and your race. Rise now, so that *Danú* and I may see you as you truly are.’

All of the girls stood a little taller as the queen approached them. Unlike Malvina, *Álmhath* seemed aware it was cold and knew the girls must be suffering. She made her rounds quickly, examining each girl critically for a moment, asking her when her most recent *mìosach* had finished, before smiling at them briefly and moving on. Every girl got the same attention and the same brief smile, unless like Ethna, there was clear evidence of their menstrual cycle, and the queen had no need to ask. It was impossible to tell what the queen was thinking. Malvina stood at the entrance to the grove, as if to block any girl foolish enough to attempt an escape.

Finally, she finished her circle and turned to face them. ‘Those blessed by *Danú* this day are Ethna and Morann.’

Beside her, Ethna let out a little squeak of glee. Sighing with relief, Brydie hoped the young woman still felt that way after six months in a Gaulish court. Whatever plans the queen was making,

apparently they didn't involve her. Perhaps she'd chosen girls with clear evidence of their fertility, which would make sense if the Queen of the Celts was promising these border lords fine healthy sons out of their new brides. Brydie waited, head down, for the queen to leave the grove so she and the others could get dressed and out of this persistent, bitter wind, relieved her cycle had apparently excluded her.

'Brydie Ni'Seanan?'

'*An Bhantiarna.*' She dropped to one knee, her heart in her mouth. *What have I done now?*

'Come with me,' the Queen commanded. '*Danú* has work for you, too, my dear.'

This extract is not final and should not be quoted for review purposes.

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