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The First Foretelling

Cynthia M. Davidson
University of New Orleans, cyda13@gmail.com

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The First Foretelling

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts
Concentration in Creative Writing - Fiction

by

Cynthia M Davidson

B.G.S. Southeastern Louisiana University 2011

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Acknowledgements

Dedicated to...

James, for tolerating my time away and loving me though all of it.

Mom, who always listened even when she didn't understand.

Dad, who knew when not to say no.

I will, of necessity of being human, forget someone. The people who have influenced or blessed my life, and by default my writing, include far too numerous beings to mention here. Please know that I carry you in my heart and thoughts, always.

To the elders: I ask your forgiveness, if I spoke in a way that was not appropriate; that was not my intention. Thank you for your guidance and your lessons, especially those to come.

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Words cannot express...

Hawkwalker

Thank you

Pilamaya

Wado

Miigwech

Merci

For all the small joys in my life, especially for Emily and Andrea:

The decisions you make from here forward are some of the most important in your life. Choose wisely. And by all means, choose for you, not for me, not for your friends, not for your parents, not for your favorite teacher or anybody else. Choose because it is what you really want or because it leads to what you really want. I made many decisions based on what I thought other people wanted me to do. I never even remember taking time to sit down and say, "No, I don't want to do those things, I want to do this." I wish I had taken a minute to look at the other real options I had. I wish I had realized that deciding not to choose was also a choice.

My wish for you is that every decision, every choice you make is one that leads you to the most incredible version of you that is possible. That you recognize how incredibly lucky you are that you get to choose. That the woman you are to become in the future makes the woman of today proud. That she makes every choice, every mistake, every celebration, and every loss worth who she is. My hope is you don't have to make as many side trips or climb out of as many holes as I had to. I do want you to know though that I will be here, cheering you on, hoping and wishing for the best as you get to choose your destiny. I will be praying for those around you, who can help or hinder you, to also make good choices. And I will be praying for you every step of the way. Not only because you are important and beautiful and creative, but because I love you and am very grateful to have you in my life. You are now and have been since the day I met you, joy and light to my heart. Thank you for being part of my life.

Cynthia Marie

Quotes

I am enthusiastic over humanity's extraordinary and sometimes very timely ingenuities. If you are in a shipwreck and all the boats are gone, a piano top buoyant enough to keep you afloat may come along and make a fortuitous life preserver. This is not to say, though, that the best way to design a life preserver is in the form of a piano top. I think we are clinging to a great many piano tops in accepting yesterday's fortuitous contrivings as constituting the only means for solving a given problem.

R. Buckminster Fuller

If quantum mechanics hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it yet.

Niels Bohr

There is nothing on earth that could ever make me want to relive certain years of my life when I was young.

Johnny Depp

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PROLOGUE: CHOICES

“What do you mean I get to choose?” Zeso said. She didn’t understand what was happening.

“Having a prophecy about your life doesn’t mean you have to accept it. You can choose to say you don’t want to pursue this,” Ida said.

“And if I choose that, what happens?” Zeso said.

“I don’t know,” Grey said. “My best guess is that someone else will have to step up. Either that or we’ll have to deal with the consequences.”

“What consequences?” Zeso couldn’t begin to imagine what might happen if she said no. The prophecy about her and the stone had been unfolding for generations. Surely waiting a few more years wouldn’t matter.

“I don’t know the answer to that either,” Grey said. “Most prophecies are about key players or pivotal situations. If you choose not to accept what you’re being called to then I’m pretty sure someone or somewhere will be affected.”

“Somewhere?” Zeso said.

“Yes, honey,” Ida said. “Most of the prophecies connected to the Greylin family are about protecting the land, so if you choose not to then it is probably some land, somewhere will be effected.”

“Not just the land,” Grey said, “but the people, animals and resources there as well.”

CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS

Barely a leaf stirred as LonBreda moved swiftly and quietly through her beloved Irish fields. She was so connected to the land that she moved through like a gentle fog. Dawn was quickly approaching, and LonBreda needed to be in the ancient circle before it was fully light. She'd taken to wearing a hood all the time now. In her ceremonial robe of the palest blue, the hood helped keep the moisture in and guard against her urge to stretch towards the sun. Her fingers were already taking on a more twig-like appearance. The days weren't long before she'd join her relatives in The Grove.

As an elder and the protector of this community of Dabandin, it was LonBreda's job to make the preparations. She'd been training most of her life to help the young ones who would protect and heal the water. Time had come to also prepare others involved. LonBreda could begin to fortify the key players against some of the opposition they'd face. Zeso, the woman whose coming had been foretold, would soon be there from across the sea. She and her family would need support and guidance. Though the Greylins had been preparing for this for almost three hundred years, there were still things to be accomplished. The changes about to happen would unfold quickly.

The long hidden stone of the prophecy would soon be revealed, and in a few months it, and its partner, would be awakened. But there was other magic to call forth, and a dragon mage to summon as well. The mage, now living as Toby, had been without his memories for almost twenty years because he'd chosen to go and protect her. When his healer, Zocard, summoned him with her passing, he'd become fully aware, but then he'd have to leave too. Zeso and Ida Greylin needed to be in Ireland before that happened.

As LonBreda walked along, she thought about her meeting with Cadeyrn. He'd better knowledge than most of the enemy's desire for power and wealth. He knew, as she did, that Steele and his ilk were willing to kill for it. Cadeyrn would do all he could in the time he had left. He'd already sent for Eldroi. Cadeyrn's ancient home would be the meeting place for the young ones and eventually their practice grounds. For as talented and athletic as Zeso was, she wasn't yet prepared for the battles that were coming.

LonBreda must now prepare those who'd take up the cause, those who'd help Zeso and Eldroi. They'd need people around them who understood the ancient ways. The things her grandmother taught her, passed down for generations, had gotten mixed up and forgotten in the modern realms of quick searches and electronic impulses. Zeso's mother had many abilities, but she was still afraid. Ida's family stepped away from these traditions many generations back. The historical knowledge was there, waiting for her to realize that through her bloodline she had the authority. These histories were part of her DNA, and would soon push their way through. When LonBreda reconnected Zeso and Ida with Ida's ancestors, then they'd both learn and remember quickly, if they chose. For it was still a choice. These ways didn't force themselves.

When LonBreda reached the circle, she was aware the time had come to reveal more to Grey. He'd need to finish rebuilding his relationship with Ida. He'd been in love with her from the first moment he met her, but they'd a falling out in the early years. There'd been much healing, but it was time for them to completely reconnect. It was time for Ida to choose so they could be one again, united physically and spiritually.

Arriving at the circle, LonBreda began her preparations to say goodbye to the summer and welcome the fall and the harvest. For those who'd been part of these ancient ways for many years, the ceremony flowed with the simple ease of taking a step or taking a breath.

As she stepped forward, she had a vision of the first time she stepped into the circle wearing the bright blue robe of a new initiate. The changes time had wrought rolled before her eyes like water flowing down a stream. One thing LonBreda had learned in her almost two hundred winters was time and tide proceeded whether she moved with them or not.

As the ceremony began, movements and words came easily. They were a comfort to her bones. When she stepped forward and prepared to recite that which she'd said many times, her voice caught in her throat. No, the spirit said, that prophecy wouldn't be told again. Today there was another.

LonBreda bowed her head to allow the new prophecy to fill her. She'd done this enough times that it felt like being wrapped in her mother's arms and told a story from long ago. Only today, the long ago had not yet come to be. When the story she's to tell filled her completely, she lifted her face to the sky and spoke.

As her favorite Tesla and Poison songs pounded from the docking station, Zeso went through some of her fight dance moves. The morning workout usually helped her to focus on the things she loved, not the fact that she was an outsider. When he could be there, Toby made a good sparring partner for her strange kickboxing and martial arts type dance. Maybe if he didn't have to work this afternoon, they could get some time in. Lunge, jab, step, kick. She found it easy to move in time with the bass and drums. Unfortunately, this morning it wasn't helping.

Zeso had an affinity with nature and the elements, though she didn't fully understand why. She even impressed Toby when they first met. He said he never knew a girl who was outdoors as often as she was. She officially volunteered four days a month at the animal shelter, but she was

there more often than that. They'd taken to calling her if they had a particularly unfriendly or unruly dog, because she could often make headway where others couldn't. When one of the other kids from school had seen her calm an aggressive fighting dog, the teasing about her being a freak got worse.

It'd been hard enough over the years trying to explain why her parents lived in separate countries. She'd long ago given up even talking about the pagan rituals that her father was involved in. She tried for a while to explain the things they did as being similar to what Native Americans did, but that got her even stranger looks. Long auburn hair and vivid green eyes didn't exactly equal Shawnee.

If her mother enjoyed the outdoors, she didn't show it. Her father, Grey, enjoyed being outdoors, particularly in Ireland. His participation in Celtic ceremonies connected him to the land, but Zeso didn't get that either. Though she couldn't participate in the actual ceremonies until she was of age, they'd never fully explained his family's connection. Her mother didn't seem to think she'd understand, especially when she was younger.

But Zeso wasn't a little kid, in fact in her father's traditions she was now an adult. Coming-of-age at seventeen was just one of the few things she'd been told. She'd done enough research on the internet to know the pagan rites involved concepts she wouldn't have understood before. Maybe she'd ask again.

Her father had been the first one to get her on a horse, which she dearly loved. He'd also made her promise that she'd never attempt to ride bareback. They'd attempt that after she was of age, and only in Ireland. At least Zeso's connection with the horses was a family trait. Her father had it as well. After all, the Greylin business was Alastar Stables.

Toby had never minded that she had some freakish abilities. He enjoyed having a friend who liked to climb trees with him. He also didn't mind the jagged scar that ran down her left arm. He thought it made her look cool. Still, she wasn't even a tomboy. She liked skirts and her long hair. Unfortunately, that was part of the problem. She'd been teased about looking like a girl and acting like a boy for years. Lunge, jab. Even her love of dragons had been used against her. When she told a girl in second grade about her dragons and then started listing their names, Zeso had been asked if she was really a boy.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

"Coming," Zeso hollered.

She grabbed her sweater, swung over the railing, and slid down the pole. The greatest thing about living in the old firehouse in Avon Lake, Ohio was that her mother had convinced them to leave the pole.

Ida was sitting at the table, pouring over her usual assortment of cookbooks, when Zeso came in to grab a quick breakfast before heading off to school. Zeso was wondering what crazy new concoction they'd be having for dinner when her mother spoke.

"Remember to stop in and see your guidance counselor today," Ida said. "You need to get things done if you're going to graduate early."

"I will," Zeso said.

Zeso was ready to be gone. Even with Toby sticking up for her on a regular basis, the teasing still hurt. She hoped the college she chose would be beyond this petty crap. Luckily her counselor was working on getting her out. If all went as planned, she'd finish in mid-January.

Toby was trying to get permission to go half days, so he could work half days. He still needed a couple of classes, so he couldn't graduate early.

"Zeso Greylin."

"Here." Zeso jerked herself back to reality.

"I'm not taking attendance Miss Greylin, I'm returning papers." Mr. Peterson looked over the top of his glasses at her as he held out her report. When Zeso walked up to retrieve her paper, he called, "Tobias Gregor."

Toby smiled at Zeso as he passed her on his way to get his paper. When he got back to his desk, he leaned toward her and said, "Nice. Were you asleep or something?"

Zeso shook her head. "Just thinking about kicking your butt in darts."

A few minutes later, as they were walking home from school, Toby said, "I can't believe you zoned out in Peterson's class. I know you like beating me at darts, but come on."

Zeso said, "I love beating you at darts. I was thinking about what else I could use, maybe tomahawks or knives."

"Those wouldn't be a challenge for you, not for long anyway."

Zeso backhanded him on the arm.

"Jeez, I was only speaking the truth," Toby said.

When they got closer to the woods, Zeso said, "Up or down?"

Toby shook his head. "I'm at Zebadiah's today." He pulled his ball cap from his backpack and put it on his head, covering most of his wild, blond curls. The longer ones were peeking out from under the bill in the back.

Zeso tried not to show her disappointment. Toby liked working at his uncle's garage, but she missed him when he couldn't come over for dinner. "Text me later, if you aren't busy."

Toby nodded as he headed off towards Avon Lake's business district.

Zeso turned left into the woods and after passing a few smaller trees, jumped up to grab a branch. She swung and climbed her way toward home without touching the ground. As she worked along, she realized what Toby had said was true. She also realized it bothered her. Not that she minded being good at throwing darts or tree climbing, but that it was part of what made her weird. She already felt enough like a misfit. Her abilities seemed to add to that feeling, not help her feel better about it.

Zeso dropped to the ground in her own back yard and landed without a sound. It'd be a quiet Friday evening with just Mom. Zeso hung her backpack on one of the hooks near the stairs and then went into the large kitchen. When she noticed the lack of spices and ingredients on the counter she asked, "What's up?"

Ida continued chopping the cooked chicken and nodded toward the desk where they kept the calendar and dropped the mail. "You got a package."

It must be something from her father, Grey. Nothing else could distract her mother, Ida, especially from her experimental cooking. The one time they had hamburgers, Zeso thought someone had died until she bit into one stuffed with apple slivers and walnuts.

Zeso said, "So what is it?" Her father rarely sent anything that her mother didn't know about.

When Ida didn't reply, Zeso figured it was more serious than she'd thought. She took the package to her usual seat at the table and started to open it. Ida set aside the food and, wiping her hands on a paper towel, sat down at the table, too. As Zeso lifted the box out, a layer of bubble wrap fell away to reveal cherry wood with ebony inlay in a design of Celtic knots. The hinged box had a small, silver clasp on the front. She looked at her mother.

"Your father told me he'd be sending you some things," Ida said with a shrug.

Zeso gave her mother the same look Mr. Peterson had given her.

Ida continued, “He said he’d be sending some special things to honor your coming-of-age.”

Ida held up her hands in what Zeso interpreted as, “What else do you want from me. Open the box, already.”

Zeso turned back to the box and lifted the lid. Inside were a linen envelope, a leather-bound book, and a pouch containing a stone. Zeso picked up the envelope first. Her name was written in fancy script on the front, “Zeso Eliza Greylin.” Inside was a card containing her father’s familiar handwriting, yet this time it felt formal with his crest on the front. It had been years since she’d see anything with his official title, Alexander Roby Greylin the Eighth, stamped on it. She opened the card and read:

My dearest daughter,

I’ve known for longer than seventeen years that this day would come. It’s time you had more information about the Greylin family. I’ve enclosed a book that contains the historical details back to the first Alexander, known as Alastar, for whom the estate and stables are named. Your mother knows much of this information. I’m certain you’ll also share it with Toby, which is fine. Beyond that, the fewer people who know, the better. This is to keep both future generations and past secure.

Greyllins are committed to healing and protecting the land. We’ve always strived to do no harm. Unfortunately, not everyone feels the same way about the land, or us. I once wished you could’ve grown-up in Ireland, but I’m certain that your upbringing has been exactly what it needed to be. I’ve come to realize very little happens without purpose. I’m grateful that you’ve had Toby as a helper and

protector. I'm positive any struggles you've had will give you an advantage that may be vital in the times to come.

The stone is special. It has been passed down through generations to be given to you at this time. Its full meaning will be something for you to hear when you are next in Ireland and we can visit The Grove. LonBreda knows the stories of the Dabandin better than anyone alive. It'll be best to hear them from her.

Until I see you again, you've now, as always, my love.

Dad

Zeso handed the note to her mother and lifted a leather-bound book from the box. She glanced through the pages. It obviously contained centuries of information. Zeso was looking forward to exploring its contents. Next, she pulled out the pouch and removed the stone, wrapped in a dark cloth. She peeled back the cloth to reveal a beautiful, purple gemstone. She knew from her geology studies that it was an amethyst. It had an image on it. She turned it over to get a better look, but the image was inside the stone. She held the amethyst up to let more light shine through and gasped. It was a dragon, a meticulously detailed one.

Zeso's love of dragons was common knowledge. She had toy ones, books about them, and a pewter statue as well. She told Toby back when they were seven years old that she was going to have a dragon when she grew up and had her own home in the mountains. Around that same time, she'd asked her father for a pet dragon. His initial response had been to laugh until he saw she was serious.

"Dragons aren't exactly household animals," Grey had said. "Even if I could find a real one for you, where would you keep him?"

He said the best he could do for her was a statue. Since then, he'd sent her so many different dragons that she finally had to tell him she was running out of room. Of all the dragons she'd ever seen, none had been as fine or as detailed as this one. The surface of the stone reflected the gleam in Zeso's eyes. She was glad the stone was small. Rarely would she be without it from this moment forward.

When she handed the stone to her mother, Ida gasped too. "It's lovely," she said. "Your father does find some interesting dragons for you."

As Ida handed the stone back to her, Zeso's phone buzzed. "It's Toby. He wants to know what amazing crazy dish he's missing for supper tonight." Zeso laughed as her thumbs texted back the boring menu.

By the time Zeso put her phone down, her mother had gone back to the last preparations for dinner. Ida mixed the chicken with some brown rice and a can of cream of mushroom soup.

As Ida set a bowl in front of her, Zeso said, "Toby says you have to save him some. He's never had anything so plain from you. Oh, and he'll be here after he gets off work to see the box."

"I'm sure there'll be plenty," Ida said. "I still haven't mastered cooking for three."

Zeso and her mother spent the time between dinner and Toby's arrival looking through the book on the Greylin family. For Zeso, it was mostly information she already had, but details were included that connected the dots better than before. She'd heard both of her parents speak about The Grove, but she'd never been there. It was obvious it was an important place. When Zeso pointed this out, Ida responded.

"The Grove is where your father goes for ceremonies," Ida said. "It's also a place some of the Dabandin choose to live. The Grove itself is a large section of reforested land with an area

that is used specifically for ceremonies. I've only been there a few times. I believe your father intends to take you there to participate in the ceremonies, if you choose."

"I'm really looking forward to it," Zeso said. "What do I need to know ahead of time?"

"You can't exactly prepare for ceremony. There are some logistics, the right dress to wear, that kind of thing. It's a bit like the celebrations that you've participated in before, like corn dance in the summer."

Zeso smiled as she remembered some of the projects they'd done. "I remember making Yule logs to give out one year in Ireland. Dad had somebody pick them up in a horse-drawn cart. He said the elders would appreciate it."

"Most of those elders probably lived in The Grove," Ida said. "Horses are the best way to get around there. In fact, I think the only place cars come to in The Grove is to Rook House."

Before Zeso could say anything else, the sounds of Toby's voice and footfalls preceded him down the hall, "Did you save me any?"

Ida got up to reheat the leftovers. While they were warming, Toby joined Zeso at the table to look at the box and its contents. Zeso saw him nod as he read the note from Grey. She was sure he was agreeing with her father about Toby being her protector, like she needed one. Zeso was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Even at six years old, when the trampoline broke, she'd known to wrap her jacket around her arm to help control the bleeding.

When Zeso handed Toby the stone, he said one word, "Wicked." He'd begun glancing through the book when Ida put the warmed up chicken and rice in front of him. "This is the plainest looking meal I've ever been served in this house," he said. After a few bites he added, "And one of the most delicious." Then he had to duck because Ida threw the dishtowel at him.

Zeso asked, "Mom, have you met LonBreda?"

Ida joined them at the table and took a sip of her tea before answering. “Yes,” she said. “I met her when I was first in Ireland. She is sort of everybody’s great aunt.”

“Why does Dad want me to hear the story of the stone from her?”

Ida took a slow sip of tea, before she responded. Zeso got the feeling she was purposefully pausing and deciding what to say.

“Probably because she’s the keeper of the Dabandin stories,” Ida said. “I’ve heard a few stories, one about the Greylins, but never one that had a dragon in it. Maybe I’ll go with you and hear the story myself.”

Zeso glanced at Toby and then looked back at her mother. “I thought you didn’t like going to Ireland?”

“I love going to Ireland,” Ida said. “I just thought you needed time alone with your father. I lived in Ireland for a year, before you were even a thought.”

Zeso looked again at Toby and then back at her mother. “What? With Dad?”

Ida looked shocked and said, “No, with the boogiemán. Of course with your father. I didn’t compare him to the devil until he got stuck in Ireland for a year because of the epidemic. When he showed up on my doorstep in Cleveland, I told him he’d be welcome when hell freezes over.”

Toby laughed and said, “I love that. Zeso’s name comes from the freeZES Over saying.”

Zeso shook her head. Her name’s origin was cool though, unlike Toby’s. His family all had biblical names.

Zeso said, “Was that when you met LonBreda? Did you go to The Grove then? What ceremony did Dad take you to?”

“Slow down child,” Ida said. “Yes, that was the first time I met LonBreda. That’s also when I first went to The Grove. I’ve been to a few ceremonies. That doesn’t mean I can discuss them. Even if I could explain what happened, I’ve no authority or right to do so.”

The puzzled looks on both Zeso’s and Toby’s faces compelled her to continue. “In many indigenous traditions including those of the Dabandin, if you participate in ceremony, you aren’t supposed to speak in detail about it. If you do speak, it should only be with others who were also there. The exception to this general rule is for those who’ve been given authority to teach or share knowledge, which I haven’t yet been given.”

Toby nodded, but Zeso caught a word. “Yet?”

Ida paused and then spoke. “Yes, yet. I think there may come a time when I’ll be participating in ways that allow me to have that ability, but I don’t know yet how that’ll unfold.”

Zeso wasn’t sure she was hearing things correctly. “You think you’ll be participating in ceremonies again?”

“Certainly,” Ida said. “I hope with you now getting directly involved, I may be able to participate more often than I did.”

“But you and Dad hardly do anything together.” Zeso was sure she’d missed something.

Ida laughed and then smiled when she said, “You need to pay better attention.”

Zeso looked back and forth between her mother and Toby several times and then gave up. “On that note, I’m going to bed.” She looked at Toby, “See you in the morning for our usual Saturday practice?”

Toby laughed as he put his empty bowl in the kitchen sink. “Not that you need any,” he said. Then he looked at Ida as he headed toward the door, “Thanks for a lovely meal, much better than usual.”

Zeso heard him as she was climbing the stairs to her room and wondered if he'd pay for that comment with sardines and marshmallows in his after practice oatmeal.

Saturday morning, Ida was up early, waiting for Zeso to head out with Toby. She'd already heard Zeso up and getting ready. Toby would be out of his house as soon as he could. With two sets of triplets still at home and two sets of twins that dropped in whenever they were on leave from the military, Toby was as much the odd man out in his own house as Zeso felt she was in society as a whole.

As soon as she heard the door close behind Zeso, Ida put on the water for her tea. Once it was ready, she picked up the phone and called Grey in Ireland. He must have been at his desk, which was unusual for Saturday afternoon, because he answered on the first ring.

"Alastar Stables, this is Grey."

"Hello, Grey, it's Ida. The package arrived yesterday and," Ida paused. She wasn't sure how to say everything she needed to. She'd been thinking about Grey for a while but wasn't sure how to start this conversation. How did she tell the man she'd refused years ago that she'd made a mistake? Ida took a breath and said, "My dreams and thoughts have been extremely vivid lately. You and Ireland. The Grove and LonBreda. I keep seeing you all, asleep or awake. I've had, I don't know what to call them." Ida paused not knowing how to continue.

Grey spoke from what seemed like a million miles away. "You've been having visions," he said. "I've had quite a few as well. With Zeso coming of age, things will begin to unfold that couldn't before. Those of us who'll be a help to her are now being prepared."

Ida was nodding as some understanding was beginning for her. She and Grey had grown close again, but she'd never actually chosen to let him back in. Though she'd always known it'd be important for Zeso to have the ability to choose, Ida had never considered how important it'd be for her as well. "I need to make arrangements to see LonBreda, don't I?"

Grey sounded as if he was standing next to her when he spoke. "You've always been one of the most perceptive individuals I've ever known. That's one of the many reasons I've always loved you."

Ida spoke from her heart. "Grey, I'm grateful you've been patient with me. I'm realizing that I've always loved you, too."

The emotion was obvious to Ida, when Grey spoke again. "I've waited years to hear those words. I feel like I've been holding my breath. There's never been anyone else. It's always been you." He paused. "We've work to do."

Ida laughed. She, too, felt like she could breathe again. "We've a lot of explaining to do with our daughter and I've some stories to learn from LonBreda."

Grey said, "We'll start with what we can until Zeso finishes school. Is she still trying to graduate early?"

Ida spent the next half an hour talking with Grey, arranging possible dates for him to be in the States, and assuming Zeso did graduate early, dates they could come to Ireland. By the time Ida got off the phone, she'd penciled Grey into her calendar at least once every month for the rest of the year.

When Zeso and Toby came in to see what was for breakfast, Ida surprised them with the feast she'd been working on while listening to her favorite Bon Jovi album. She danced to the table with three different nut breads, and they all laughed when Toby voiced his fears.

“This looks much better than oatmeal with a side of sardines.”

Grey had ridden out to see LonBreda. The call from Ida had prompted many thoughts he needed to get clear. LonBreda had been waiting for him when he arrived. They talked for hours about all that had and would unfold. As he thought over their conversation, during his ride back to Alastar Stables, he was reminded how mistaken he'd been about some things.

Grey thought, after his first year with Ida, that she'd understood about The Grove. When she went to the States to plan for their life in Ohio, he'd gone to help with some preparations in The Grove. While he was there, an epidemic started, one they hadn't seen in a long time. Though LonBreda hadn't mentioned it at the time, she believed it had been part of an attack. The elders didn't want to risk it spreading, so they made the decision to close the borders. No one in or out, include Grey.

He did what he could at the time to get a few letters out to Ida. He'd always been grateful that he'd only been stuck in The Grove a short while. He'd forgotten how quickly a short time there adds up to a long time in the rest of the world.

When Grey showed up at Ida's place in Cleveland, she didn't want to see him. He'd tried to explain and offer an apology, but some mysteries are hard to understand even after experiencing them. Somehow, he'd found a way to convince her that their relationship was worth trying again. But after Ida wound up pregnant, it fell apart. He now understood that Ida had been scared of the things that had happened, and she'd no one to help her understand. If he'd known at the time, he might have explained things better, or at least offered more comfort.

Now it was eighteen years later, but they'd grown close again, over that time, raising their daughter. He'd put in a lot of effort trying to rebuild the connection they'd had. He spent as much time with both of them as he could. He'd taken particular pains to talk to Ida every week and share as much as he could about the Dabandin. Grey always asked how she was, not just about Zeso. He was glad that the effort he'd been making was finally paying off. Ida was interested in being fully involved again, even in coming back to Ireland and The Grove. He hoped it would continue. More than anything, he wanted them to be husband and wife again.

Zeso had been the center of his life, but as she was now of age his focus could shift. Though she'd always be important to him, his influence would now begin to take a back seat. He'd been there for her at every moment he could. He paid for every dance and martial arts class she'd ever taken. He'd gladly paid for Toby to take some of them with her. There were benefits to having special abilities, but for Zeso her abilities mainly seemed to make her feel out of place. Certainly, Grey understood how hard it could be to have some special talents, and having a friend who'd try to understand could make a huge difference. He'd also come to learn more about Toby through the years. He, too, played a special role in the events that had unfolded, and were to unfold, in Zeso's life. The request Grey made years ago, for help and protection from the dragon's clan, had been honored long before he'd asked.

Grey had taught Zeso to ride. He had her on horseback with him from the time she was an infant. As soon as she could manage on her own, he had her out riding every time she was in Ireland. Later, he took time to make sure they rode whenever they were together. He wouldn't yet risk her riding bareback and making the connections he was sure she would. Though the Greyllins had built up some nice investments and properties over the generations, it was no coincidence that they still raised horses.

Grey had also been there when the trampoline frame broke. Those days of stitches and doctor visits still came to mind every time he saw the scar on her arm. He'd worked hard to not let his fears become hers. That was part of why he'd bought her first set of darts and got her reading all those action adventure books he loved. He'd been thinking about getting her a bow when she next came to Ireland. After talking with LonBreda, he was sure it'd be appropriate.

He also got some clarification about the revelations that he'd become aware of at Mabon, the ceremony celebrating of the autumnal equinox. Grey hadn't comprehended the actual words spoken by LonBreda. He simply understood what they meant, that Ida had abilities and challenges that were going to unfold for her now as well. He hadn't been able to stop his knees from giving out as the truth registered. The thought of his beloved becoming fully connected to these old ways brought him great joy. And then it brought the realization that she too would be in danger. Though Grey had no authority to share what he now knew within, it motivated him like nothing else had.

Several other things were clear to him as well. First, Zeso needed to learn all she could about the family history and the Dabandin. There were historic details that would be important in the future, but LonBreda had pointedly refused to explain how or why. Zeso also needed to hear the old prophecy. She'd begin to understand what it would mean for her to step into the future and the past.

Second, Ida was beginning to realize that she had a crucial part to play in this unfolding future as well. Her presence was important, not only to Grey, but also to LonBreda. The problem was how to explain it all, without scaring either of them, especially Zeso. Ida had developed some understanding over the years, and would take it all in, even if it didn't make sense. Explaining these mysteries to Zeso, though, was another matter. She had the family history in her

DNA and some talents clearly showing up, but now he had to begin explaining hundreds of years of timing and prophecies.

Then there was Toby. Grey would be forever grateful that the Mage had chosen to come for a while and help. Grey was sure the day would come that something would trigger Toby's stored memories of his past life. When that happened, Toby would become aware of his other responsibilities and it would then be time for him to leave. Grey couldn't protect his daughter from the pain that would accompany losing her best friend, but he could help her stay focused on the possibility of seeing him again. The problem now was how to begin explaining these ideas to Zeso. She was raised with some information on the old ways, but believing in things like reincarnated magic-wielders wasn't one of the topics they'd covered when discussing the Dabandin.

It was also time to build additional protection around both Zeso and Ida. There were those who opposed things they didn't understand, especially ancient healing arts and weaponry skills. As Zeso's and Ida's purposes began to unfold, and the opposition became aware of them, it could get dangerous. Grey knew all too well what the likes of Éireann Steele was capable of. He had lost his mother to them.

Zeso's life in seemingly normal suburban Avon Lake, Ohio had surely not prepared her for all that was to come. Living in the twenty-first century, she was probably more focused on a technology-filled future than a mystery and magic-filled past. Grey took a steadying breath as he thought to himself; it's time that the past and the future begin to meet.

He'd also determined that the only way to be certain he could take care of both Ida and Zeso was to get all the legal details out of the way and marry Ida again. The Hand-fasting ceremony they'd had years ago in The Grove had bound him more completely than any other

ceremony would, but Ida had chosen to step away. It was time to change that. In order for her to be part of all that would unfold for them, she had to choose again. When he reached his home at Alastar Stables, Grey was focused on what he had to do.

As he rode across the fields, the four dogs came out to meet him. Even the newest member, the young Korthals Griffon pup named Rigel, tried to keep up with the others. Rigel hadn't begun to learn the fine arts of hunting or working with the animals yet, but he'd be a good dog once Grey finished training him. After turning over his mount to one of the stable hands, he headed into the Alastar offices to get his assistant's help. If anyone could figure out how to organize the details it was Doireann. She was a tiny woman who had the energy of three, and she'd handled everything he'd ever thrown at her.

As Grey outlined the dates he'd chosen with Ida for him to be in Ohio, as well as a possible side trip, Doireann made notes. Grey asked her to come up with any ideas she could for Samhain, or All Hallows Eve. If Grey could work things out, he was going to make the costume contest in Cleveland. He would go incognito, in case he couldn't get there in time. He hated saying he would be at something for Zeso and then not being able to keep his word. Occasionally, transatlantic flights didn't cooperate.

"It looks like I've some research to do," Doireann said.

Grey said, "If you would, let's not schedule anything else that isn't a necessity. I need to make this reconciliation with Ida my top priority."

"Of course," Doireann said. "I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," Grey said.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out the small box LonBreda had given him. He opened it to look again at the ring that had been his mother's. It was a stunning antique diamond

set in a unique metal. LonBreda had it sized to fit Ida. All Grey had to do was get it on her finger.

Monday, as Zeso and Toby were walking to school, she was thinking about naming the dragon in the amethyst. She'd named every dragon she'd ever owned. As they discussed the possibility, Toby laughed and pointed at a passing car's bumper sticker. "Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and taste good with ketchup."

Zeso laughed herself and said, "Okay, no name, we'll have to wait until he introduces himself." She was sure it was a male.

School in Ohio had never been fun for Zeso, but she managed to do well. Having Toby for a friend helped. They'd been doing things together ever since he moved to town.

Toby's family was the largest and strangest she'd ever met. Toby was the fifth child in a long line of eleven kids. He was also the only single birth.

Zeso and Toby had run into each other after his first day of school. They'd both been trekking through the woods, heading home. When Zeso realized he was there, she climbed a tree and then spoke to him from above as he came past. She figured if she challenged him from there he'd either be scared or impressed, then she'd know how to deal with him. "What are you doing in my woods?"

Toby, in his now familiar noncompliance hadn't been either. He'd simply asked, "What makes them yours?"

Two hours later, they were both in trouble for coming home dirty and late. They'd commiserated about it the next day at school and were buddies from then on. Zeso mother had

accepted Toby from that moment, and he'd been welcome at the old firehouse any time. Zeso was sure it was a year or more before Toby's parents figured out their son's best friend was a girl.

Toby's family didn't have any extra money so when Zeso signed up for her first martial arts class Ida said there was a scholarship available if Toby wanted to go, too. Zeso and Toby eventually figured out that the "scholarships" were all from Grey, but they kept up the charade so Toby could keep going.

Though Zeso spent time with her mother visiting museums and expanding her education in ways she enjoyed, the time she valued most was outdoors. Doing the things she loved like throwing darts or hiking through the woods, whether Toby was with her or not. There were other times spent traveling with her father. She'd been many times to the Greylin home in Ireland, where she was born. Her father had insisted she have the rights of an Irish born citizen. And though she loved going to Ireland, she hadn't been to Alastar in the last two years.

For one who hadn't yet graduated high school, her passport was full. She did like to travel. In fact, she and Toby had recently been talking about a trip for spring break. They'd been saving money for quite a while. Toby had managed to get his passport over the summer so now all they had to do was convince their respective parents they were old enough to travel alone, and choose where to go.

After school Toby was in a hurry. Zeso asked, "You're at the garage today?"

"For a couple hours," Toby said. "Hopefully I'll still make dinner. I'll text you." He was sprinting down the street while tucking his hair into his ball cap before he finished his sentence.

When Zeso came in the door, her mom called from the kitchen, "Zeso?"

“Be there in a minute.” She stopped to hang her jacket and backpack on one of the many hooks.

“What’s up?” Zeso asked, spotting a bowl of fresh fruit on the table. Her mother must’ve gone shopping.

Ida was working on peeling sweet potatoes while glancing over three cookbooks at once. “I got through to your counselor at school today,” she said.

“What?” Zeso said. She’d been wondering about what new concoction her mother was working on not contemplating school, so the statement about her counselor surprised her.

“I talked to your school counselor today,” Ida repeated. “She finally got all the paperwork processed for you to graduate early and needs to see you tomorrow to finalize it.”

Zeso hesitated before she spoke. “I’ve been thinking about what I might do with the free time before college. I’d like to go spend some time with Dad.”

“I’m sure he’d love to have you visit as long as you want,” Ida said. “Toby is going to miss you though, especially if he gets permission to go to school part time and work part time.”

Zeso said, “I’ll have to come back for graduation. Toby would kill me if I made him walk up on stage alone.” She paused before adding, “Toby and I’ve been planning on going somewhere for spring break, too. He never gets to go anywhere and we thought...” Zeso stopped. She didn’t have to convince her mother. It was Toby’s mother who’d need convincing.

As her mother went back to her potatoes, Zeso went upstairs to her room. She needed to process her thoughts. Time to crank up the tunes.

After making her way through two Sammy Hagar albums, she could smell something good and assumed dinner was close to being ready. She took the quick way down, via the pole.

Dinner turned out to be a tasty concoction Ida called turkey potato surprise, the surprise being the curry hidden under the melted cheese. Toby had texted, “Flooded at the shop” earlier, so he didn’t make it. When Zeso and Ida were enjoying their usual cup of after-dinner tea, Zeso outlined her decisions for her mother. “I’m emailing Dad to tell him I’d like to spend time after early graduation with him in Ireland, assuming we can work out the details.”

Ida said, “Are you planning on this being a holiday or do you think you’ll further your education? Maybe you could find an advanced dance class or a darts competition to get into?”

“I was thinking,” Zeso said, “I’d use the time to learn about the Greylin family and maybe find a course on local history. But I do want to stay active. Do you really think they’ve a darts competition?”

Ida laughed. “If they do, Grey will know. He’s been throwing hawks and knives for years. He only took up darts because he wanted you to throw something less dangerous. I’m sure your father will gladly clear his schedule for you, but why the email? You could call him.”

“I want him to understand why I’m coming and my timeframe,” Zeso said. “If I call him he’ll just interrupt me and say yes.”

Zeso typed her email to her father as soon as she returned to her room. She wanted to be clear about when she’d be coming, January twenty-fifth, and when she’d be leaving more than three months later. Plus there was a trip away for spring break in April. She’d be staying away from home longer than she ever had. Her parents had seen to it that she could travel, yet in all those travels, she’d never been away for more than a few weeks at a time. Zeso was actually feeling excited. She hoped Toby would be, too.

The next day at school, Zeso finished the arrangements to graduate early and filled Toby in on her request to her father.

CHAPTER TWO: HALLOWEEN

Ida spent most of the day reflecting on how she felt about Grey. He'd gone to great lengths to make sure she'd everything she needed. Once, when he had Zeso for a couple weeks, he'd paid for Ida to go museum-hopping in Europe. As Ida let the truth of the situation fill her, she had a waking dream. As clearly as she saw the chairs across from her desk in the office, she now saw the chairs in Grey's office. She was sitting in one before a dim fire sipping a cup of tea. Grey was sitting in the other, patiently waiting for her to tell him what they'd do next. She was seeing the future. Ida shook her head and refocused on her own office in the firehouse.

As unusual as her relationship with Grey had been over the years, she was well cared for, and yes, well loved. She'd determined long ago that she still loved him, she just hadn't figured out what to do about that. Partly because there were still things in Grey's life that scared her. Maybe it was time to step beyond her fears.

That evening at dinner, Zeso filled Ida and Toby in on the response to her email. "Dad said 'Of course,' like we expected. He also said he'd check on some possible classes and send the information when he had it." Then Zeso said to Toby, "He also said we'd figure out the spring break thing."

"Good," Toby said. "Otherwise, we were going to have a problem."

It was during their usual cup of tea that Ida said, "Have you thought about the Museum? The annual Halloween party is less than three weeks away."

Zeso practically lit up with excitement. "I've been working on my costume."

Ida was aware Zeso had been working on something. Zeso's love of music made this event, The Masquerade Ball at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, one of her favorite things to do. Grey's support of the charities that benefitted from this event got them involved years ago.

"Planning on winning this year, are you?" Ida said as she winked at Toby. Zeso had received an honorable mention, if not an actual placement prize, every year since she began attending. Yet one prize, Best Costume of the Ball, still eluded her. "So do I get to know who?"

"I need your help with part of it," Zeso said. "I'm going as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark."

"That should be good," Ida said raising her eyebrows, and glancing at Toby. "What do you need my help with?"

"Hair dye," Zeso said.

Ida's face must've conveyed her thoughts.

"Temporary," Zeso said, "Washes out in a few shampoos."

Ida recovered and smiled. Her daughter loved her long auburn locks as much as she did. "So is this a Friday afternoon thing or a few days early to make sure it looks good?"

"I think on Thursday," Zeso said, "to make sure, since we've Friday off."

Ida said. "Then Friday night you two can hand out candy while I finish getting my costume ready."

"What or who are you going as?" Zeso asked.

"Betty Crocker," Ida replied, as if the answer was obvious.

Zeso and Toby both burst out laughing. It was only a second later that Ida's giggles joined theirs.

"I'll have to make sure I get a few pictures to send to Dad," Zeso said. "I'm sure he'll enjoy the picture of you looking all prim and proper in an apron."

Ida said, “Your father has seen a lot of things in his lifetime that have given him pause. I’m pretty sure that me as Betty Crocker would require a double take at least. The apron alone might send him into shock.”

By the time Toby headed home and Zeso headed up to her room, they’d made a shopping list for treats and discussed whether Toby could get away with being an army guy in his uncle’s old fatigues.

Ida took some time to pull out a mostly empty journal Grey had given her years before. She hadn’t been good at keeping a diary previously, but with the strange thoughts that had come up it was a good time to start. Grey had called her waking dreams visions. She wanted to keep track of them, so when she did see LonBreda she’d have a place to start. She’d the feeling there were more coming. The glimpse of the future she’d experienced earlier today was so clear she couldn’t ignore them anymore. Afraid or not, it was time to learn the way of Dabandin.

Grey had his plane ticket for Friday. He was going to the Masquerade Ball. The only piece left was to find him a costume that covered his face. The concierge at the Ritz-Carlton in Cleveland was often helpful, and Doireann had booked Grey there for Samhain and the days following. She’d also made a reservation for Sunday afternoon at his favorite restaurant in the Flats - Ponte Vecchio.

Grey had business he needed to take care of after Halloween in New York and in New Orleans. Doireann also gave him a project to start on. If his daughter was coming to stay for a few months or longer, her room needed an update.

The playful flowery linens and small desk of a young girl needed to go. She was a woman now in the traditions of his family, and it was time her suite reflected that. Grey would start with his mother's full sized writing desk that had been moved to storage after she passed away. It was time to pull it out and polish it up. He'd look to see if any other of his mother's things needed to come out for either Zeso or Ida. He'd decided Ida would have a suite redone for her as well; at the very least she'd need an office.

Grey found himself smiling more over the next few days as he planned for Samhain and for the changes in the house. He'd also spent some time working with Rigel. The young Korthals Griffon pup was coming along nicely but still a little independent. He'd be mischievous enough to follow Zeso everywhere she went. Since Zeso wouldn't have her protector Toby with her, Rigel would have to fill in. It was never a bad thing to have a companion at Alastar. The grounds were well protected but still full of wildlife, much of which a dog could scare off.

Grey made a note to himself to have his barn manager, Liam, check the fences before Zeso arrived. Though the estate was well kept, the windy and wet winters could always change things. He'd also have to make time to check the trails as well. As curious as his daughter was, he was sure she'd find time to go exploring on her own. She enjoyed being out in the natural world as much as he did.

He smiled as he remembered that Ida had enjoyed it too. When they'd been together before Zeso, they'd spent many hours out on the trails. Maybe he'd make time to do that again.

Zeso's Thursday night dye job turned out well. She was glad they'd purchased as much temporary dye as they did. Friday morning Zeso and Ida took a moment to enjoy the quiet and

relax before the weekend kicked in full tilt. After breakfast, Ida helped Zeso go through her long hair and make sure they hadn't missed any spots. Then it was time to double-check their costumes. Ida's needed a small adjustment with the apron, and they had to choose the right spoon, a new wooden one.

Zeso's outfit was impressive. She'd meticulously reproduced the long, slinky, black dress and dark red fingernails of the original Elvira. Her mother was especially glad she'd added a decorative safety strap across the deep V-neck of the seductively cut dress. "Remind me to warn your father before he opens these pictures," Ida said after the third flash.

Zeso then went back upstairs to put on her jeans and a sweatshirt. She put the dragonstone into her pocket, and then slid back downstairs via the pole to help with the rest of the decorations at home.

She'd just gathered all she needed for the scarecrow when the phone rang. "Happy Halloween!" Zeso said.

"Hello, and a blessed All Hallows Eve to you as well," her father said. "How are the preparations going?"

"Good," she said. "I'm decorating here for beggar's night. How are things in Ireland?"

"I'm getting ready to head off for some festivities now. It is almost sundown here," Grey said. "I just wanted to say have a great time at the Museum tomorrow."

"Thanks," Zeso said. "Hey, why isn't the stone mentioned in the book you sent?"

Grey said, "Because the stone won't be written in to the histories unless the prophecy connected to it is fulfilled."

"Wait a minute, what?" Zeso had never heard him mention a prophecy.

“Sorry honey, it’d take a lot longer than the few minutes I have to give you the family history on prophecies. I’ll call you on Sunday, so you can fill me in about the Ball, okay? Got to go, I love you.”

"I love you, too, Dad, talk to you Sunday," Zeso said. The call got her thinking again about how to get answers out of him this spring, no matter how much time it took. Zeso came out onto the porch grumbling. Her mother took one look at her and went back to stringing up the skeleton.

Ida mumbled to herself, “Now you get part of why I said when hell freezes over.”

"What?" Zeso asked. She’d been lost in her own thoughts.

"How's your father?" Ida said.

"How did you know it was Dad?"

"Just a lucky guess, and you're wearing the same look on your face I used to wear on mine when he’d call with some cryptic message," Ida said. "Got to love him, honey, he's your father. Incidentally, you do the same thing occasionally."

Zeso glared at her Mom for a moment and then laughed. "Fine," she said, “what's next?"

The rest of the day passed in a blur of decorating, though they did get some help from Toby after he’d put in a few hours at Zebadiah’s garage. After a quick dinner, Zeso and Toby handed out candy while Ida finished getting things ready for the next day’s festivities.

Two hours later, beggar’s night over, Zeso and her mother said goodnight to Toby as he headed home with the leftover candy for his siblings. Then they double-checked things for the next day and headed to bed.

As Zeso went upstairs, she pulled out the dragonstone. There were some prophecies mentioned in the histories, but she didn’t remember seeing any about stones or dragons. I’ll look

again, she thought, and then I'll corner Dad. She set the dragonstone on her nightstand and got ready for bed.

The next morning Zeso carried the bags of supplies out to the car and then came back in for their costumes. Ida grabbed their snacks and her keys to lock the door behind her as they left.

The day flew by with lots of finishing touches on decorations, going through two tanks of helium for all the balloons, and running back and forth to let more volunteers and caterers in through the dock doors.

Finally, it was time to grab a quick bite and then go get dressed. Zeso appeared at the refreshment stand a couple minutes before seven to get a quick approval from Betty Crocker on her costume and then headed to the main doors.

Zeso settled in. She was working with a ghost and an M&M, Ms. Green to be exact. Everything was in order and the doors opened on time. Zeso got lots of compliments on her costume and a few of the regulars didn't recognize her.

By nine o'clock, things were in full swing and Ms. Green and Elvira were released from front door duty so they could be part of the costume contest. This year, like last, Zeso was in the sixteen and over group. The kids' costumes had always been judged separately and only once had Zeso ever seen an under sixteen win the Best Costume of the Ball. She was hoping her dragonstone would bring her luck.

Zeso made her way up onto the stage when it was her turn. If the crowd's reaction was any indication, she'd a good chance. The whoops and applause had her laughing. As she walked

past the five judges though, it was obvious they were trying not to give anything away by their expressions.

After the judging, there was a break for refreshments and then time to dance before the announcement of the winners at ten thirty. Zeso grabbed a pretzel and went to see how Betty Crocker was doing in the kitchen.

"I just served water to Iron Man," Ida said.

As they called for people to gather for the announcement of the winners, Ida went out with Zeso to hear the results.

The under sixteen competition had several honorable mentions, a third-place mummy, a second-place giraffe, and a first-place Raggedy Ann. In the over sixteen there was a third-place Frankenstein, and a second-place Mr. Monopoly.

"First-place and the Best Costume of the Ball go to Elvira!"

Zeso jumped several times before she bounded up the steps to the stage. She giggled through all the presentations and photos. While she was accepting her awards, Betty Crocker was doing some mad dance in an alcove. Zeso's giggles turned to outright laughter when she saw the celebratory jig.

Piling into the car for the ride home, Zeso was still so excited she didn't think she'd be able to sleep. Ida had already said she was ready for the night to end. After getting inside and congratulating her daughter one more time, Ida said goodnight and headed to bed.

Zeso was so keyed up she could hardly think of sitting still, but she climbed the stairs to her bedroom and began the process of preparing for bed. Her dress was a little tricky, mainly because of her security tape. What made her think tape on sensitive skin was going to be a good idea? She didn't even like pulling bandages off her knees. She was glad the directions mentioned

baby oil, it did help. After a nice, hot shower, Zeso sat combing out her hair and trying to wind down while the night's events rolled through her mind.

There were a couple of cute guys who'd asked for her number, but she declined. She'd fun this evening being flirty, but she had school and two trips to plan, and she wasn't ready to be distracted at the moment by a pair of tight jeans and a cool T-shirt. Besides, if they didn't have her passion for rock-n-roll or at least long hair, she didn't think she'd look twice. She'd allow that circumstances might change in the future, but for now she preferred hair that touched their shoulders, preferably longer. Toby's shoulder length curls had always been a point of contention with his mother. He kept them because Zeso had said they looked good.

With thoughts of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Bob Seger kicking around her brain, she loosely braided her damp hair so it wouldn't tangle overnight. Then she set about working on a list of things to pack for Ireland. She'd take her favorite jeans plus a few of her rock-n-roll shirts. She also wanted to make sure she had some good hiking shoes with her too, though it might be time to purchase some new ones. Well, Dad had said they'd go shopping so she started that list, too.

When the first yawn escaped around three, Zeso had wound down enough to be able to sleep. She'd made good progress. Most importantly she didn't want to go without her favorite music. She had outlined a whole list of songs she needed to load on her MP3. She had emailed Toby about finally winning the costume contest, though she was sure he wouldn't see it until at least noon. She said goodnight to the dragonstone as she set the amethyst next to her first-place medal and Best Costume of the Ball ribbon and plaque, and fell asleep as her head hit the pillow.

Grey reflected on how well Samhain had gone. He hoped his next endeavor would too. He was on his way to Ohio. When Grey arrived at the Ritz-Carlton the concierge had his costume waiting for him at the desk. A cab was arranged to get him to the Masquerade Ball and a rental car for the next day for dinner at the restaurant in the Flats.

The short nap and quick shower did wonders to revive him for the evening ahead. The Iron Man costume completely hid his identity. The ghost that accepted his ticket mentioned the contest was about to begin.

At Grey's first sight of his daughter, he had to suppress the urge to go throw a coat around "Elvira." Though it was a risqué outfit, she certainly did look enough like the original one to win. As he turned around to go get something to drink, he had to catch his breath. He was sure it'd be a few minutes before he could go anywhere near "Betty Crocker." He'd never seen Ida in an apron in all the time he'd known her.

Later, when Zeso had won her cherished prize, Grey snapped several pictures of her before he turned to see what she was looking at. Good thing Doireann had thought of the digital camera, "Betty Crocker" dancing was priceless. He'd have to have these printed for their dinner celebration. Grey headed out after that, not wanting to risk getting caught. He also thought if he had to talk to "Betty Crocker" again he wouldn't be able to keep himself from proposing to her right then and there.

Back at the hotel, Grey made arrangements for the photos to be printed and then head up for a good night's sleep. Jet lag had finally caught up with him. He fell asleep thinking of Ida as "Betty Crocker" with a small grin across his face.

The next morning Ida was up before ten. She figured her daughter had probably been up late and she'd let her sleep awhile longer. She went out to print the digital photos and to pick up the paper. She wanted to see if the party pictures and details made it in, or if she'd have to wait for the society pages, as they used to call it, on Monday.

As she walked along she thought about the last two days. Friday had gone smoothly enough, but her dreams Friday night had been strange. The dream of being in The Grove had been so real she was still wondering if she hadn't somehow transported herself. She had written as much as she could remember in her journal. She'd been by herself, she was certain, but the very trees seemed to be alive with voices and messages. Ida still wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

Then Saturday at the Museum, that guy dressed as Iron Man. She still couldn't quite shake the feeling she knew him. But they'd been so busy she hadn't had time to talk. At least Zeso had finally won.

When she got back home, it was close to noon. Grey would be calling at some point for a full report. The easiest way to make sure Zeso was up was with the usual alarm clock. She walked over to the desk, picked up the piece of half-inch wooden dowel than hung there, and rapped it on the pole.

Clank. Clank. Clank.

Zeso was debating crawling out from under her warm covers, and now the decision had been made for her. "Yeah, I'm up, be down in little while," she hollered as she rolled out of bed and pulled on her sweats. She tucked the dragonstone in her pocket, and then did a few of her

morning stretches to wake up. She took some time to look over her lists to make sure they still made sense after a good night's sleep. She also moved her plaque, ribbon and medal to the bookshelf for a more permanent display. When she headed downstairs, it took an extra minute to appear in the kitchen. She thought the stairs were a better idea than the rush of a pole slide.

Fresh pumpkin bread and tea were waiting on the table next to *The Plain Dealer*, whose Metro section was lying on top, open to an article about the Masquerade Ball.

"The annual Masquerade Ball and costume contest at the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame on Saturday night was once again the place to be this Halloween Weekend." The article went on to talk about the charities that benefited and a few names of important contributors. There was also a mention of the volunteers and their hard work and then, at the bottom with a list of the winners, a picture of the Best Costume of the Ball winner, Elvira. "For more photos and details check out the complete story on-line."

"Cool," Zeso said as she put the paper down and went back to her bread.

Ida, who'd come back into the kitchen said, "I hope your father calls before he decides to download the paper online. That costume looks a little more risqué in print than in person."

"Mom, please. Are you sure he'll know it's me?" Zeso said jokingly.

As Ida raised an eyebrow over her teacup in response, the phone rang. "Well, I guess you'll get your answer shortly," she said.

Zeso hopped up and grabbed the phone off the desk.

"Hello, Elvira, congratulations. Best Costume of the Ball. You did it!" Grey said.

"Thanks, Dad," Zeso said. "I guess you saw the paper. Well, the good news is your Internet connection is working well."

"I haven't got a clue how it's working," Grey said.

"What?" Zeso said, glancing at her mother. "You're not at home? Where are you?"

"I'm at the Ritz-Carlton." Grey said.

"The one in Cleveland?" Zeso noticed her mother was no longer flipping pages in a cookbook.

Grey said, "Where else would I be? We need to celebrate. How's dinner at five o'clock sound?"

"Great," Zeso said.

"And tell Betty Crocker I'd like her to come along as well. If Toby would like to join us, he's welcome, too. Can I pick you up at four?"

Zeso paused for a moment to process what her father had said and then calmly answered, "That'd be fine. Just one question, whom should I say is inviting Mom?" Her father mentioning Betty Crocker meant something else had happened; the paper didn't say anything about Betty.

Her father laughed and said. "Tell her Iron Man requests her presence."

"Bye Dad, see you soon." As Zeso hung up the phone she turned to her mother and said, "Iron Man requests the pleasure of Betty Crocker's company at a celebratory dinner at five."

Ida stared at her daughter. "He, he's not only here, he, he was at the ball?!"

Zeso glanced at the clock. "Yep," she answered. "And unless you're planning on going in your jeans and a Capital University sweatshirt, you might want to change. Dad will be here at four o'clock." As she said the last words, she was already bounding up the stairs two at a time and releasing her braid. She also had to call Toby. She was sure if he wasn't working with his crazy uncle at the garage he'd be glad to come.

Ida was grateful her daughter had taken off quickly because as she thought about Grey she actually blushed. She'd been thinking a lot about him lately, and the dreams of the last few nights had brought the reality of her love for him crashing through. She'd always cared for Grey, more than she'd ever admitted to Zeso. Well, Ida had little more than ninety minutes to get presentable. If she wanted to make a statement, now was the time.

When Zeso came down, Ida hadn't only recovered, but she'd gone out of her way to look her best. Grey hadn't said where they were going but if he was celebrating, it'd be a place that required a jacket, if not a tie. Ida had chosen a backless navy blue dress and a cashmere wrap. Zeso was in a dark green skirt and pink sweater she loved.

When Toby arrived in a nice crisp suit Zeso said, "I'm sorry; we're waiting for my friend Toby. Did you happen to pass him?"

Toby laughed. "Really? I came to join my friend and her parents for dinner, but you must be a cousin I haven't met yet. I'm Tobias Gregor, by the way."

When Grey knocked at four o'clock, Zeso opened the door. He kissed her cheek and then picked her up in their customary hug.

"I like this outfit much better," Grey said as he set her back on her feet. "I think that neckline last night was a bit lower than I'd normally approve."

As Toby gave Zeso a puzzled look, she laughed and said, "You look great, Dad." Grey, as usual, had on a dark suit, this time with a cream colored shirt and a charcoal tie.

Grey turned to Ida, and the two simply held each other's gaze for several moments. It was Ida who looked away first. Grey reached out and gently touched her cheek. Ida looked back at him with a smile and felt the blush rise in her face.

Grey tilted his head slightly as he smiled at her reaction and asked, “Everyone ready to go?” as he opened the front door and stepped out toward the car.

Ida pushed her daughter and Toby out the door and checked her own hair in the mirror. After locking the front door, she turned to see Grey still waiting, holding the passenger door open for her. She smiled as she walked toward him and kissed his cheek before she ducked inside.

During dinner, the conversation centered on events of the Masquerade Ball and Grey's sneaking in as Iron Man.

“Doireann made the arrangements,” Grey said, “and then coordinated with the concierge about the costume. They wanted something that would hide my identity.” He looked at Ida. “I thought my request for water might’ve given me away, but you were so busy it didn’t raise an eyebrow.” Then he mentioned the finest part of the evening was watching Zeso win her coveted prize. Grey handed Toby a stack of pictures. “I also managed to snap several pictures of Ida’s celebration dance.”

Toby and Zeso focused on the photos, with Zeso explaining things about the Museum.

Ida took the moment to reach out and place her hand on Grey’s. When he looked at her she said, “It is good to see you again. I’m glad you came.”

Grey smiled like she hadn’t seen in a while and said, “For you, anytime.” He lifted their hands and kissed hers before turning back to accept the photos from Toby.

Once they were back at the house after dropping Toby off, Zeso said, "How long are you staying in town?"

"I leave tomorrow afternoon for New York, business meetings. Then I'll be in New Orleans for a week," Grey said.

If they were going to have the conversation they needed to have, Ida figured sooner would be better. "Can you stay for a bit?" she asked. "We've a few things to talk about." Ida had prepared as best she could in the short time before dinner. She'd just have to let her heart take over. She was finally ready to trust, even though she was still scared.

Grey said, "Certainly, I'm happy to stay as long as you need."

"I have some homework to do," Zeso said as she headed toward the stairs.

Ida said, "That's fine, Zeso. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Sweetie. Congratulations," Grey said

Good night," Zeso said.

Ida invited Grey into the office with the comfortable chairs. "We need to talk about a lot of things," she said. "And I don't know where to begin."

Grey reached over and placed his hand on top of hers. "I'll explain anything I can. I'm sorry I didn't do such a good job of that in the beginning. I'm glad we've both gotten better at communicating since then."

Ida spoke quietly. "I realized a while back you're still patiently waiting for me to choose to let you back in. I guess what I need to say is I never stopped loving you, I just had to get past being angry with you for disappearing and being scared about what joining your family could mean. Letters are nice, but you were gone for so long, and I didn't ..." Ida stopped. She wasn't quite sure how to say everything that needed to be said. They had years of ignoring the things that had initially come between them.

Grey seemed to understand. He moved so he was holding both her hands. “I didn’t fully understand the pain and frustration I caused getting stuck in The Grove. I should’ve found a way to explain the epidemic better. I’m sorry I took things for granted when you did let me back in for a while. I’m also sorry it took me so long to figure out how badly I’d screwed up.” He could hardly bare to look at her any longer. The pain he had caused was evident in her eyes, but so was the love. Grey simply hung his head and waited for her to speak.

Ida wanted to be sure he understood how it had torn her up not to see or hear from the man she’d pledged herself to for months. She had wanted to shake him and yell about how unfair it had been to her. But when he hung his head, waiting patiently for her to do that, the fight was gone. She could see it had been hard on him as well. She was sorry they’d missed those years. She was grateful they weren’t going to miss any more. She gently placed her hand under his chin and lifted his face to meet her eyes.

“You made me part of your family without giving me the information necessary to survive in it. I forgive you for that. I’m going to seek that information now. It’s time. I also think we need to decide that the past is over. It’s time for us to be what we need to be for each other and ourselves. Please forgive me for thinking the worst of you all those years ago. I’m sorry I ever let it affect my behavior toward you. I love you. I did then, I do now and I always will. I just let my stubborn brain get in the way of my heart.” Ida forced herself not to look away as the tears escaped her lashes and raced down her cheeks.

Grey was grateful for his years of practice of not reacting. He calmly reached up to wipe away her tears. “I’ve always loved you since the first moment I saw you in the museum. I’m sorry I ever let a single day go by that I didn’t say those words to you. I love you. I love you, and I won’t let another day go by without telling you.”

CHAPTER THREE: LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Grey had been thinking about this for a long time. He was nervous but also pretty sure Ida would be okay with what was about to happen. He wouldn't begin to guess what Zeso's initial reaction would be, but he felt sure it would eventually be joy. He sat back in his chair and took a calming breath. "I'd like for us to get married. Now don't jump here," he said, as Ida opened her mouth to protest.

When she had settled back into listening again, Grey continued. "I love you. Ida you're the only woman I've ever loved, and none other have ever been in my heart except our daughter who stole it the day she arrived. I want us, all of us, to have time together as a family. I want to spend the rest of my days being a husband and a father, not the guy who flies in occasionally."

Ida took a breath before she spoke. "I've been thinking about the pieces of my life, too. If our daughter decides to stay in Ireland or travel the world, I want to be able to make sure she is safe. I also want to be certain she has a home, a single place where her family will always be. It may have taken me a while to realize I still love you, and we haven't exactly had a normal relationship. We still have some things to work out, but I think, since we've managed to be in love for more than two decades, we can figure out the next thirty or forty years."

Grey had already slipped slowly off his chair and on to one knee.

"Ida Madeline, will you marry me?" Grey had her by the hand and was slipping a beautiful antique diamond ring on her finger.

"Yes, Alexander Roby, I'll marry you."

Grey stood and pulled her up as well. Though his face gave nothing away, Ida was certain he'd never step an inch closer without her permission. If they were going to be the lovers they

once were, she'd have to make the first step. She'd have to choose. In his arms was where she not only belonged, but where she wanted to be. It had simply taken her a while to get past her fears and admit the truth.

As Grey stood there facing Ida, he was glad he'd waited for her. He belonged to her, he always had. As he searched her eyes, he realized she understood that now. Actually, she'd always known, though she was just now admitting it to herself.

Ida was done waiting and done being afraid. She stepped forward into her past and her future. She'd wasted years without him. She had to step into the life she was meant to be living.

Force of habit and years of training had slowed time down for Grey. In the fraction of measurable time it took Ida to step into his arms, the past had been reborn and the future was exactly as it should be. She was in his arms, and her kiss was as sweet and passionate as he'd remembered. With that kiss she gave him all the permission he'd ever need. He answered her back offering in his the keys to his soul, for she already had his heart.

Grey could almost hear the crash of the sea against the coast and feel the wind across his face as surely as if she was back with him all those years ago in Ireland, in The Grove, amongst the tall trees near the sacred clearing.

His scent was as she'd always remembered it, some combination of the deep woods, the eastern coast and a hint of smoke from a wood fire. Ida would never choose to be without that smell again.

Monday morning, when Zeso appeared in the kitchen for breakfast, she was surprised to find her father there as well.

“Did you stay up too late talking and couldn’t drive back?” Zeso said.

Grey just smiled as Ida said, “Something like that,” and stuck her hand in front of Zeso’s oatmeal.

It took a few seconds for the diamond and its significance to register, but then Zeso was hollering and laughing all at the same time. “What! Are you kidding?” When Zeso finally calmed back down she look at her dad and shook her head. “I never thought it’d be possible. When’s the happy day?”

Now Ida laughed and then said, “I hadn’t even thought that far. Think you’re ready to help your parents plan a wedding?”

Zeso said, as she pulled out her journal, “What’s first?”

Over breakfast, they managed to agree the ceremony would be in Ireland at Alastar Stables, and it would consist mainly of the three of them, LonBreda if she could come, and a few close friends. There’d also be an official reception at the meeting house in The Grove, known as Rook House. Grey was expected to hold an official introduction for the elders of the community and their guests. This could happen on a different day than the ceremony and it didn’t need to be formal. Zeso didn’t completely understand all of this, but she made the notes.

By the time Zeso was heading out to school, most of the major decisions had been made. Ida and Zeso could figure out any additional details over the next few months.

The wedding itself would be on the thirteenth of March, and the reception at The Grove would be on the fifteenth. Everything would be wrapped up for before the seventeenth, for those who wanted to participate in St. Paddy’s Day festivities. It’d also be close to Ostara, the Spring Equinox, so those in town could have an excuse to take a break from preparations to celebrate a wedding.

Ida would fly over on the seventh or before, as soon as everything was ready for the move. They'd also decided if they were going to be together as a family, then it would be at the family home in Ireland. Even Zeso thought that was the best choice.

Zeso was bursting at the seams when she saw Toby, and exploded the new information on him. "My parents," she said, "got engaged last night!"

Toby looked at her like she'd gone a bit loopy at first. When she confirmed the information by showing him the picture on her phone of her parents and the ring on her mother's hand, Toby grinned. "Cool."

Every conversation they had that morning, between classes, was about this new development and the plans for the wedding. But at lunch, Toby cornered Zeso and flashed the picture of her as "Elvira" that he'd clipped from the paper.

"I didn't get to see you dressed as Elvira. You weren't in costume when we handed out candy."

"You're so funny," Zeso tossed back at him. "Like me dressed like that would turn your head. You'd have just asked if I needed a jacket so I wasn't cold."

Toby shrugged. "It reminds me that we better go someplace cold for spring break because I won't be held accountable for my actions if you think you're going to wear a bikini or something."

Zeso laughed to cover her surprise. Toby had never expressed an interest in her, not in that way. Of all the time she and Toby had spent together, they'd never talked about a date. "Well, since I'll be coming from Ireland I don't think I'll have a bikini with me. Come to think of it, I don't own one."

Toby seemed to light up. “Why don’t I come to Ireland?” he said. “We could stay at your place there to save money and you could show me around. We could take the train to Dublin, perhaps.” He finished with the best Irish accent he could muster.

Zeso said, “Well, if that’s what you want to do, then why didn’t you say so ‘stead of wasting time?” Her accent was much better, and they were both laughing as they headed down the hall to their next class.

Grey’s flight to New York was short but choppy. His business dealings, which included checking on and consolidating some investments, went better than he hoped. The partners in his investment company were thinking of selling out to a younger group. Grey took this as a sign to get out as well. He already wanted to tie up some of his overseas investments in preparation for the day Zeso would inherit. He didn’t want her to have to travel as much as he had.

He wouldn’t let go of the properties in New Orleans though. Aside from being connected to the land and water there, he’d also become a huge fan of American football, especially the Saints. He’d always enjoyed going to the Crescent City and the power he felt there was similar to the power near The Grove. LonBreda had a theory about power points and their connections that she wanted him to check out. Maybe Ida would come with him and help him test those.

After Zeso and Toby came in from their usual Saturday morning practice and were a few bites into breakfast, Ida came down the hall pulling her suitcase.

“Finally getting rid of that old thing and getting a new one?” Zeso said.

“I’m going to meet your father in New Orleans,” Ida said. “He wants me to meet some colleagues and visit a place that’s special to him.”

As what her mother was saying registered, a slight grin appeared on Zeso’s face. “You mean I get a few days home alone? What is this world coming to? First my parents are getting married and now…” She couldn’t keep it up and burst out laughing. “I take it you’re leaving today?”

“There are plenty of leftovers in the freezer,” Ida said, “but I also got a few of those frozen pocket things you and Toby like. There’s also some extra cash in the desk in case you need it for anything. I’ll be home on Friday before you’re out of school.”

That week unfolded much like a normal week with two exceptions: Ida wasn’t present and Toby was constantly. Ida did call every day to check on her daughter, but things were going fine. Toby had managed to get the week off from the garage and was at the firehouse every day after school until he’d take off for home around ten o’clock. Though Zeso enjoyed having so much time with him again, she did eventually ask, “What’s up?”

Toby shrugged. “I don’t like the idea of you being here alone and well, I’m going to miss you, so I figured I’d save up some more memories to replay.”

“Some more memories?” Zeso said.

“I got the idea from my uncle. He said he made a journal before he left for his military service of all the good things he wanted to be able to remember if things got nasty. I figured it’d be helpful to have when you’re gone, and for when I wind up in the military, which is likely. My family expects it. Besides, I’d been keeping pictures and articles anyway, so I put it all into a journal and I keep adding to it.”

Zeso understood. “Can I see this journal, or is it private?”

Toby said, “Of course you can see it. You’ve lived most of it with me.” He dug in his backpack and pulled out a small, leather bound journal, similar to the ones she used, but smaller.

As Zeso flipped through it, she was astonished. Toby had made notes about everything they’d done together, from their first meeting with her perched high above him in a tree all the way through the last meal they ate together the day before. In between there were pictures Toby had obviously gotten from her mother as well as all of her school pictures.

Zeso sat back, turned to the beginning and read. Toby had been there through everything she’d done. He even wrote about debating taking ballet classes with her to be able to protect her there, too. Her dad’s words echoed back to her. Toby had appointed himself as her knight in shining armor. He’d stood up for her against classmates who suggested how weird she was.

As Zeso read, her life was unfolding in front of her. It was interesting to see it through the eyes of another. Toby talked about her abilities as if she had magic, like some king in a distant land had blessed her with powers and abilities to do the things she was born to do. It was as if all the things she was learning about her family, Toby had known or sensed from the beginning.

Then she saw it, the first moment he admitted to himself that he loved her. There had never been anyone else for either of them. They did everything together. Why wouldn’t it eventually mean love? Zeso wasn’t sure what to think. They’d never talked about this. She’d never even talked to her mom about Toby being anything other than a friend.

Toby couldn’t seem to focus on his homework. As he started to get up, Zeso reached out her hand and covered his. He seemed to settle back down and sat there holding her hand while she read the pages of their life.

Zeso didn't know what to do, or say at first. After a moment, she let go of his hand and grabbed her pen. Then she wrote herself into his book of memories. When she finished, she closed the book and stood up. She gave it to him, and said, "Read." Then she left the room to go make a quick phone call.

Toby read what she wrote.

"There once was a scarred princess who was tougher than all the boys in her class and because she was tough she had no friends, until the day the knight moved to town. He was from a long line of knights who'd bravely defended the dragons of old, for dragons were good. The princess, who also loved dragons, called to him from her tower, "What are you doing in my forest?" The knight begged her pardon: he didn't know it was her forest and asked if he could have her permission to stay. Because he didn't turn away from her in fear, she granted him permission to stay and explore the forest with her.

And he did stay, every day he could from that day on. He came to visit and learn and help her refine her skills. All the while he let her think she was teaching him. As the years went by, she grew past the ugliness of her scar and didn't mind the stares of the others. She also came to realize he'd been teaching her all along. He'd been teaching her the most valuable things she'd ever need to know, how to love and how to be loved. Now all she had to do was figure out how to tell him she finally understood."

Zeso was glad it was an hour earlier in New Orleans. When her mother answered her phone, Zeso explained quickly and quietly what was unfolding at home.

Ida was concerned for both Zeso and Toby. Toby had confided in her often. He'd told her a while back that he was falling for Zeso. Ida was pretty sure that Zeso didn't think Toby was the one, but Ida also didn't think now was the moment to say that. She simply chose to give her daughter the best advice she could. "I jumped with both feet with your father," Ida said. "I don't recommend that. I do think you'd better tell him how you feel, including about how you're not sure what to do next. Communication is the most important thing. It took me more than twenty years to figure that out. Don't wait twenty years to have the talk you need to have tonight. I love you, and I've grown to love Toby, too. Be careful with his heart, and call me tomorrow, or before if you need to. I'll have my phone with me and on all night."

"Thanks, Mom. I love you, too." As Zeso hung up she'd no idea what came next, but it was time to find out.

After Toby read what Zeso wrote for the third time, he stood up and began to pace. As he turned, Zeso came back into the room. He froze for a second and then walked directly to her and wrapped her in his arms.

Zeso's breath caught. He was about three inches taller than her and solid muscle. But she was pretty solid, too. Now it was her move. She slid her hands, which had been pinned between them on his chest, up and around his neck. She pulled herself up, kissed him gently on the lips, and then sank back down to her feet.

Zeso said, "I think we need to talk."

Toby nodded and guided her back to their seats at the table. Then he spoke first. "I don't quite know how to have this conversation. I imagine my parents would say things like, 'You're too young for this.' I can see your mother saying what she always does, 'Trust your heart and don't forget to talk, even if it's hard.' I like your Mom's advice best. You're going to Ireland, for

a lot longer than a few months. And I'm going who knows where for a few years with the Army. I don't know where we'll wind up when you're done with college and I'm done with the service, but I know where we are, and I know I love you." He almost sounded defeated.

Zeso listened and waited to be sure he'd said all he needed to before she spoke. "I like my Mom's advice, too. We haven't been through this before. The only thing I can compare it to is what my parents have been through. We've only and always had each other, and I'm grateful for that. I love who we are and how we are without trying to play some roles we think society expects. So, I ask myself, what do I want to do? What's next for us? And I answer, we keep being us, only now we bring the love to the top instead of tucked away because we were afraid to talk about it."

Toby said, "If I answer those questions honestly the guy in me wants to do other things we haven't talked about. But the friend in me, that you've known and trusted for years, wants to hold you for a while and still be talking in the morning."

Zeso said, "And if I respond honestly, I choose option two for tonight, but I also say we eventually need to have the discussion about option one."

She got up from the table and took his hand to lead him to the big couch. They sat in the quiet, talking about all he'd written and her silly story. Zeso eventually drifted off to sleep in his arms. He kissed the top of her head and then let his own eyes close as he fell asleep listening to her breathe.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMPLICATIONS

Grey's trip to New Orleans had gone better than he hoped and having Ida with him had been more than he expected. They spent their free time wandering the city and enjoying each other's company. They'd spent their nights wrapped in each other's arms and getting to know each other all over again.

Now back in Ireland, one of his first orders of business, after filling Doireann in on the details for the wedding, was to go visit LonBreda in The Grove. LonBreda was ecstatic about the news of the forthcoming wedding. She apologized that she herself wouldn't be able to attend the wedding, but she'd be at the reception at Rook House.

Grey mentioned he was sorry she wouldn't get a chance to meet with Ida and Zeso before the wedding, but hoped they'd get to spend some time together at the reception.

"I intend to do both," LonBreda's said.

At Grey's look of confusion she continued, "I'd like to host a small gathering here at Rook House before the wedding, call it an engagement party if you need an excuse. It is time I was introduced to Zeso. It is also time for Ida and me to talk about a few things, and I believe it'd be better if that were to happen sooner rather than later. If I still travelled away from The Grove, I'd go see her now."

Grey raised his eyebrows. "What exactly do you need to speak to Ida about that can't wait until after the ceremony?" LonBreda seldom requested to see someone as soon as possible. When she did there was often an important, even life-threatening reason.

"There is nothing specifically wrong. I want to make sure she gets as much information as I can give her. I've always known I'd live to see Zeso come of age and for a time beyond. But

I won't be in this flesh to see the prophecy fulfilled, the past and future united in her. There are things she'll need and they should come from her mother. Ida also needs to begin to understand her role in the events that will unfold. If there ever comes a time she needs to come and stay at The Grove, she must know she is welcome. That there will always be a place for her here, as there is for you."

LonBreda paused for a moment. "Grey, I know this is hard for you in some ways just as it is a great celebration of joy in others. It'll probably be hardest on you when I leave, and I'm glad you'll have your bride and your daughter to comfort you." She looked at him with all the love a mother could have for her child. Though he wasn't her son, he might as well have been. They'd loved each other for all of his life, and she'd been his comfort after his mother's untimely death.

Grey wasn't sure if anything she said had helped. He'd known for many years that she who had always been the Elder for him would pass to the next world before he did. He told himself he was glad she wouldn't have to bury another Greylin, but the truth was he wished they both could live another hundred years. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. "I'll make the arrangements," he said and then kissed her on the cheek and left.

By the time he'd returned to Alastar, he was prepared to make arrangements for Ida to come over as early as possible. He had a feeling the conversation the two women needed to have would take a lot longer than an afternoon engagement party. Zeso had learned much over the years about the Dabandin, now it was time she had a beginner's understanding about The Grove. There'd be opportunity for more questions after she'd been there a few times, but she didn't need to go into it blind, as Ida had done. He didn't want it to scare his daughter the way it had scared his bride.

This next phone call to Ida was going to be complicated. It was a good thing he'd been talking to her every day. He hoped she was ready to explain things to Zeso.

Seimene Hawley had seen firsthand what lack of power could get. She was thirteen when her cousin Billy had committed suicide. His parents had been abusing him for years. His father had even begun to share him with some others. When Billy finally told Seimene what was happening, she tried to get him out. She begged for Billy to come live with her family. But her father hadn't believed her. Her own father had said no. When they found Billy two days later, Seimene quit speaking to her father.

Within a month she'd bleached her hair, platinum blonde. It was as if overnight she went from looking like a scared teenager to looking like she'd stepped out of a fashion magazine. She learned what she could get in trade for her body. She also learned how manipulation could get her almost as much. By the time she was eighteen she had spent hours learning to not only defend herself, but to be the aggressor when necessary. She was a proficient fighter, good with a gun, better with a knife.

She had a reputation for getting what she wanted, either for herself or for those who could afford to hire her. Security was what she told people she did for a living. Threaten and manipulate was a more accurate description.

She met T.D. late one night, both of them heading home from different security jobs. Seimene was in four inch heels and a short dress, her platinum hair almost as long as her outfit.

"Mmm, mm. What I could do with you," T.D. said with a grin as she was walking towards him.

“Mmn, mm. What you won’t be allowed,” Seimene replied as she pulled a knife and had it just above his knee cap when they came to a stop facing each other.

T.D. laughed, and then he quickly lifted his knee, effectively burying the knife in his own leg, still smiling.

Seimene wasn’t shocked by much. The sound and the feel were wrong though. When she pulled the knife back there was no blood.

T.D. took a step backwards and lifted his pant leg. “Carbon fiber,” he said, “compliments of the service. So if you’re not interested in one thing, maybe another?”

Seimene was intrigued but didn’t respond.

“Quiet, beautiful, doesn’t spook easily. I could use a girl like you. The company I do security for needs some female muscle. You interested in that?”

Seimene began working for Éireann Steele the next day. It was several years before she got to meet any of the upper management. When she did, they all wanted her, but she wanted none of them. She used them all to get the best jobs possible for herself and T.D. As they both moved up, they soon came to the attention of Mr. Lance Steele, the Éireann Steele CEO.

Seimene began working directly for him the week she met him. She began sleeping with him two months later, but only occasionally. They both understood discretion.

To get what she wanted she’d have to prove herself completely capable of anything they’d ask. It started with small things, getting bits of information here and there. Sleeping with some security guard to get keys to a building. Befriending a secretary to get the dirt on her boss. Throwing small parties so the right people could interact. She even began to use her brother, Raef, and his position at their father’s cattle auction company as a cover to bring in security workers.

Raef, of course, thought this meant he now had some status with Éireann Steele. He might someday get a chance to be of help, but he was simply a means to an end for Seimene. The day would come Éireann Steele would ask something big of her, something that would prove her willingness and abilities. When that day came and they asked, they couldn't have known how happy she was to comply. She'd been waiting years for the opportunity to do exactly what they requested, eliminate her father, Thom Hawley.

She spent several weeks planning the deed and actually created two different iron clad alibis for herself, in case she needed them. In the end she simply had someone tell him his daughter was ready to talk if he would meet her at the docks that evening. He showed up, hoping for a long awaited reunion, and she hugged him with a knife in both hands.

When it was finished, they began to bring her in on other things. The main focus of Éireann Steele was to forward their power and eliminate any threats to it. Power usually came in the form of knowing the right people, or having dirt on the ones that wouldn't join you. There was one group they were anxious to make some inroads with. Every time this group was connected to a company they wanted to deal with, Éireann Steele seemed to get shut out. It was time to up the ante. Time to see if they could gain any ground on the Dabandin.

Zeso had taken the time to make appointments for herself and her mother with their naturopathic doctor and their dentist. When her mother arrived home Friday afternoon she found the appointments on the calendar, her mail neatly stacked on the desk, and some fresh fruit in the bowl on the table. By the time Zeso got home from school, Ida had a new dish in the oven. She'd found some spices she liked in New Orleans, so the scents wafting through the house were

definitely different than usual. When Toby came in the door behind Zeso, Ida was pleased to see him and gave him a hug and kiss as she'd done with her daughter.

Over the weekend, Zeso and her mother worked on sorting out possessions at the firehouse. They had way too many items to move overseas and the furniture wouldn't be needed. Ida made arrangements for most of what they wouldn't be taking with them to be donated.

Zeso, who'd already been going through her clothes to pack for what she thought was a three-month trip, now shifted to sorting and packing for a permanent move. She'd already gotten rid of some stuff. Her music was now stored digitally. The only thing she was struggling with was her dragon collection. Over the years she'd amassed quite a few. She chose to keep her two favorites and packed the others in a box for donation.

Tuesday afternoon Grey called with a small change to the plans. Zeso tried to ask questions, but her father said he needed to speak to her mother.

Ida got off the phone about twenty minutes later, lost in her own thoughts. Zeso asked if everything was okay and Ida said, "Well, we need to adjust our plans a little, and I've some explaining to do."

"Explaining about what?" Zeso said. "And what change in plans?"

"The change is that I'll be flying over on February first, so I'll have time to meet with LonBreda several times before the wedding. Also, there will be an engagement party on February thirteenth, at Rook House."

While Zeso jotted down the new information on the calendar, Ida thought for a few minutes and sipped her tea. She pulled a sheet of paper toward her and picked up a pen.

"There are several layers to the situation I need to explain, and you'll have questions," Ida said. "So we're going to cover this in stages. You also need to know there are pieces I can't

explain because I don't fully understand them either." Ida paused for a moment. "I don't think it'll be good to interrupt me at first. I've a plan to get through it, like a recipe. So give me a minute and then let me explain what I can. I promise I'll answer any question I understand, and the others will save for your father. Okay?"

Zeso was at a loss for words as she watched her mother make a list on a sheet of paper:

- 1 who - LonBreda
- 2 what - aunt and protector
- 2 when - before and now
- 2 where - The Grove and here
- 1 why - so you could choose
- ? how -

Zeso was looking at this strange list when her mother said, "LonBreda is like a relative to your father, similar to an aunt or a godmother. She is also the family watcher or protector. She was the elder before your father was born."

Ida paused to let this sink in and gave Zeso a minute to write down a quick question before she continued. "She was an integral part of our lives, and she knew you were coming before we did. LonBreda understood your arrival would create a situation that required certain decisions be made. She explained these would have to be made twice, because they involved two locations so to speak."

Ida paused while Zeso wrote more questions.

"The first time and place for those decisions was in The Grove, before you were born. The second is here, now, and will continue until we return to see LonBreda in The Grove. It'll be like coming full circle." Ida stopped. In her mind she could see the simple Celtic knot LonBreda

had drawn for her that day and how her eyes had followed the path round and round looking for the beginning or the end and finding neither. As a reminder of this Ida wrote the word “knot” on the edge of the paper. She then took a deep breath and looked up at Zeso. "These decisions, both then and now, this conversation that is the beginning of those to come, were and are so you could choose your own destiny in your own life."

At this Zeso jotted down another question, and her mother waited before continuing. "I know you have questions Zeso, I still have questions. The biggest question for me is how. I've some guesses and a possible answer. I figured eventually we'd come to this discussion. I thought about it the day you were born, and I've pondered it every birthday. It has influenced every decision I've made in how to live, how to raise you, how to interact with your father and yes, even in the decision to marry him here after all these years."

Ida kept going though Zeso had begun writing another question. "I believe the simplest answer is the one I least understand, but it seems to add up the best: time travel." As Ida said the last two words, she wrote them next to the word “how” and Zeso dropped her pen.

“What?” Zeso said.

Ida said “You heard me correctly, time travel.”

“I don't understand,” Zeso said.

“Neither do I,” Ida said, “and I don't know that I ever will. Things have unfolded and relatives have appeared that leave time travel as the only answer that makes any sense.

Remember you met your great uncle at Disney World, when you were there for your seventh birthday? He was actually your grandfather, Grey's father, but you wouldn't have understood how he could still be alive, so we told you he was your great uncle. You never asked about him

again, so we didn't worry about how to explain it. Whenever he saw you again, he came in disguise."

Ida had said all of this so matter-of-factly that Zeso had to blink a few times and work her jaw before she could get anything to come out. "Mine...my grandfather? But Alexander the seventh died before I was born. I...it said in that book Dad sent me."

"I know it is all a little hard to take in. And there is a lot to digest. Let me make some more tea, and then we'll start with the questions you wrote down." Ida got up and put more water in the kettle. Then she opened a loaf of banana nut bread and sliced it onto a plate. She didn't think dinner was going to happen tonight. When she sat back down at the table a few minutes later, Zeso was fingering a piece of bread, too distracted to eat, and looking over her questions.

Zeso said. "First you said this LonBreda was an elder when Dad was born. You mean she was like, a senior citizen right? So if she was a young 'elder,' like fifty-five, and Dad is almost fifty that would make LonBreda a hundred and five. That's not a usual thing."

"I understand, honey," Ida said. "LonBreda looked to be about seventy when I met her before you were thought of, and she'd been protector to your grandfather, which would've made her closer to ninety-five then, which would make her more like a hundred and fifteen now. Like I said, the only answer I can make fit is some sort of time travel. I thought, at first, maybe LonBreda was some kind of immortal, or related to the elves from your father's favorite book. When I realized it affected more than just her, I thought maybe they had some ability to slow down the aging process. In the end, with all the effects I eventually witnessed, I kept coming back to some sort of time manipulation." Ida shrugged. "Let's try some of your other questions and see if we do better."

"You said 'protector.' What do you mean by that?"

Ida thought for a moment. "The protector of the family, including the large community of Dabandin around the family, is the keeper of the information. She is usually someone who has been raised in the traditions, like your father, someone who has an understanding of the history, the land, the medicines, and the energies the family uses. She is responsible for protecting this knowledge and passing it on to others, in small bits, and to the next Protector in its entirety."

Zeso said, "You said decisions then and now, but you didn't say what decisions."

"The decisions were about you, and mainly where you'd be born."

"You mean about choosing for me to be born in Ireland instead of in the U.S.?" Zeso asked.

"Yes," Ida said, "where and when, the when being affected by the where, if you include The Grove as a possible location." Ida could see the frustration building. "Let me tell you this and see if it helps. I first went to meet LonBreda with your father. We journeyed there by horseback, because she was at her summer home in the hills, and it was easier to ride in. Your father had said the village didn't have a proper road, just one for horse-drawn carts. It took most of the day to get there. When we arrived, we were the guests of honor at a dinner party.

"The next day we hiked around a bit and had a lovely afternoon picnic that all manner of relatives attended. The next afternoon we rode back to the stables at Alastar, and it seemed a much shorter ride home, though I was more tired than I thought I'd be.

"I woke the next morning and wanted to go down to the market. We'd gone to LonBreda's on Wednesday, stayed Wednesday and Thursday nights, and left on Friday. I'd just woken up at home in the morning, so surely it was Saturday and the market would be open. I told Grey and he said he'd fetch the driver. I said I was going to the local sellers and could walk. He said, "Darling, it's Tuesday, and they're only open on Saturday," and walked off to fetch the

driver as if I must've been joking around with him. I thought we'd been gone for two nights and three days. If this was Tuesday, then we'd been gone for five nights and six days."

Zeso was looking at Ida surely wondering if she needed a brain scan. But Ida continued, "Time slowed at The Grove, at LonBreda's. This was my first experience, but not my last. Suffice it to say this effect has real consequences and was the primary reason for needing to choose both where and when you'd be born."

"So the two locations so to speak, referred to times as well, because of the time manipulation thing that happens in The Grove?" Zeso asked.

"Yes" replied Ida, hoping her daughter was beginning to understand.

Zeso then asked about the word "knot" she'd written and Ida explained about the Celtic knot.

"Like a circle, it has no beginning or end, but," Ida said, "it is late and our discussion does have an end. And you need time to process some of this. I've questions too. I promise we'll both get answers to all our questions. We have to be willing to accept, though, we may not get them as quickly as we want."

"But," Zeso said. It was of no use.

Ida had already cleared the table and was headed off to her bedroom. She had notes of her own to make and go over. She was planning on starting her own list of questions for both Grey and LonBreda while she was at it.

Over the next day, Zeso pondered the information her mother had given her about LonBreda and the notion of time travel. She managed to talk to Toby about it some, but he

wasn't sure what to think of it either. He'd always been accepting of her special abilities and this was just another thing to him.

"You do have some unusual talents," Toby said. "Maybe this is another family talent you haven't learned to tap into yet."

"Yeah," she said, "but that doesn't really explain this time travel stuff. The only reference I can come up with is something from a book I read years ago about King Arthur." It seemed she remembered a story about Morgaine, Arthur's sister, losing track of time when she was in the land of the fairies, but that was just fiction based on myth, right?

Toby reminded her most myths and legends have some basis in actual historical events. If you dig far enough there is often more truth than at first appears to be.

"I may in fact be an ancient friend of the dragons, not just a story you wrote in my memory book." He smiled and kissed her cheek.

Zeso laughed and leaned against him. "I'm glad I've you to talk to about this stuff. Boy, we're going to run up a phone bill when I move to Ireland."

When she and her mom sat down to discuss Zeso's questions again, she was as confused as ever and still thought this sounded like something out of a science fiction movie.

"This time travel thing," Zeso said, "how does it work?"

"Honey, I don't understand it, or even realize it's happening." Ida said. "I know this topic is frustrating. Your father should have more information about it. Let's save our questions on this for him."

"Speaking of Dad, if he lives like this, how old is he?"

“Your father has chosen to stay based in the same modern time frame you are, at least so far. He may wish to be centered in the slower time eventually. His father moved to The Grove in his eighties.”

Zeso reacted like something had clicked into place for her. “So does this only happen in The Grove? Where is The Grove exactly?”

Ida put her hands up. “You are back to questions for your father. I’m pretty sure there are other places like The Grove. When I was in New Orleans with Grey we may have found one. Will it work with time like The Grove? I’ve no idea. As to where The Grove is, the best I can tell you is somewhere in the southern half of Ireland.”

“So how many people are aware of this?” Zeso was certain not many, otherwise it would’ve been easier to research on the Internet.

Ida shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. “Honey, I promise you, if I could hand you information and documents I would.”

Zeso said. “You said the ‘why’ was so I could choose. Choose what?”

Ida paused a moment. “So you could choose your life and your destiny. I wanted your past and your future to be in your control. I didn’t want you to grow up with everything around you being focused on what you were to accomplish one day. It now comes to you to decide how much you want to know and then for you to make your own choices from here forward. I made what I felt were the best decisions I could with the information I had at the time. I stand by those decisions today.” Ida stopped. She took a deep breath and said, “I made my decisions because I didn’t want you growing up under the direct influence of a centuries old prophecy.”

“Dad mentioned a prophecy when I asked him about the stone, but what does a prophecy have to do with how I grew up?” Zeso said.

“There is a prophecy that specifically pertains to you and your father. I memorized the translation of it, but that doesn’t mean I understand it any more than you are going to, except for the obvious.” Ida took a deep breath as a sigh and continued as evenly as she could:

“The stone will go to the eighth, and he will gift it to her of his flesh who comes from across the sea, for she will be the one who unites the past and the future. She will ride the thunder and dance with the son of the storm by the peaceful house of the battle king until the time comes to travel north and circle the sea.”

Ida stopped. Zeso’s face had gone through so many emotions in the last minute she couldn’t keep up with the changes.

Zeso calmly, almost robot like, turned to a blank page then looked up at her mother and said, “Repeat that again, please.”

“I don’t think it’s supposed to be written--”

“I don’t care!” Zeso said. “You can repeat it as many times as necessary for me to get it or you can write it down yourself, either way it is going in ink in this book.” Zeso was on the verge of yelling at her mother. She was frustrated she didn’t understand, mad this had been kept from her all these years, infuriated that in all her time with her father she’d never met this LonBreda or been to The Grove, and sad that her life was changed forever all at the same time. Her father had better hope her mother had some answers, or he wasn’t going to like the middle of the night phone call he was about to get demanding years of information that had been withheld from her. She forced herself to focus and write as smoothly as possible, as her mother spoke the words Zeso had never known, but that had and would influence her life.

Ida slowly repeated the prophecy three times to make sure Zeso had it written as she understood it. Putting it down in ink had helped somewhat. Zeso no longer looked as if she was ready to pounce.

Zeso stared at her writing. “The stone is obviously the amethyst, the eighth is obviously Dad, her of his flesh from across the sea would then have to be me, but what about the rest of this? Unite the past and the future? Ride the thunder? Dance with the son of the storm? How is the house of a battle king peaceful? Travel north and circle the sea, how do you circle a sea?” Zeso stopped; she’d been thinking aloud. She looked up at her mother. “So what does this mean?”

“I told you,” Ida said, “I only understand what you understand. Some of the words may have slightly different meanings in the original language, but I don’t know that language. Your father may have a better understanding, but LonBreda is the one who’ll best be able to explain if it can be explained.” Ida paused shaking her head, “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help. I need to spend some time with LonBreda myself to try and better understand all of this, the prophecy and the how these ways work. Maybe we can spend that time with her together.”

Zeso sat for a few moments trying to make things fit, but her brain couldn’t grasp it all. She looked back down at the prophecy then at the other pages of questions from their nights of discussion. Did this really all unfold in the last two days? One of the questions caught her eye. Maybe she’d get a clear answer for this one at least. “What did you mean marry him ‘here’? Did you marry Dad before?”

Ida had spoken one word, “here” and that had changed the entire meaning of the sentence. “I married your father in The Grove, a traditional ceremony several years before you

were born. It was about a year later that I didn't see him for a long time, just those letters. You know the story from there." Ida drifted into her own thoughts.

Zeso's list of questions for her father was getting longer. She wasn't sure where to begin. She needed time to process her feelings before she could continue this conversation with either of her parents, or with this LonBreda if that's who she had to go to for the real answers.

Ida spoke quietly, to herself as much as to Zeso. "I made the decisions I made because I wanted you to know you get to choose. Prophecies are powerful influences, but they are still choices. I had to give you the opportunity to choose not to participate. I'm sorry if I chose wrong."

Zeso got up and gave her mother a hug. "I'm sorry I've been making this so hard on you. You've always had my best interest at heart. I don't want to have to wait until February when we're in Ireland, so we'll just have to tie Dad to the chair next time he's here and demand answers."

Ida said. "I think it'd be as easier to swim across Lake Erie, but you're welcome to try."

Zeso laughed when her mother used their standard line for seemingly impossible things. Then she gathered her notes and headed up stairs. Back in her room, Zeso turned on her favorite classic rock and sat down with her journal. She started writing down everything she could remember from the conversations with her mother and then began the process of trying to list questions. The first one, "why?" became a page full of her trying to reason it out, to make sense of it for herself.

"Why? If the prophecy is something that has been known for years, like the stone, which has been passed down through the generations, then why wasn't there a better interpretation of

it? And why had this been kept from her all these years? Obviously, Mom has had this information for a long time. And Dad, he has had it all his life.”

On and on it went, the anger and frustration pouring out on the page. By the time she got to the bottom of the second page, the writing was helping. Even if it didn't make sense, at least it transformed it in such a way that made it not so unmanageable. The information mixed with the pain was easier to look at in black and white, than floating around in the gray matter of her head.

CHAPTER FIVE: THANKSGIVING

By the weekend, Zeso felt like she'd written a book, but her brain didn't seem to be whirling as much. She'd also decided her questions for her father would all be face to face. Not only did she think she wouldn't get full answers over the phone, but she wanted to see the truth of his answers, or lack of, in his eyes.

Saturday morning her mother was working on a shopping list.

"Did you figure out a new recipe to try?" Zeso said.

Ida looked at her daughter in wonder. "Thursday is Thanksgiving, and if your father can swing his schedule around he is going to be here with us also. So aside from the usual pies we make for Toby's house, we've a complete meal to make as well."

Zeso had been so absorbed in her writing and in trying to adjust to what was happening she'd forgotten it was going to be a short week at school because of the holiday. "I'm sorry. I've completely spaced," Zeso said. "What do you need me to do?"

Ida said, "We need to clean this place, and then there's prep work to be done, especially for the pies. The dressing can be made ahead of time. I'm not sure what else at the moment. After the holiday though, we need to get back to preparing to move."

"No problem, Mom, I'm sorry I've been distracted. Where do you want me to start?"

Zeso spent most of the day doing a quick but thorough once over of the place. One of the nicest things about living in an old firehouse was there were plenty of places to stash things, though this might be problematic come time for the move.

The next few days passed in a flurry of activity. Between school, cooking, baking, and a last minute trip to the store, there didn't seem to be a free minute. Toby was coming by every

chance he got since he'd cut back on hours at the garage. He was glad to be out of his house, and happy to help with whatever needed to be done. His place was getting crowded with family coming in from out of town. Apparently, there'd be twenty-seven of them for dinner, which would be Saturday to accommodate all the travelers and shoppers.

"Well, you're always welcome here," Ida said as she handed him another bowl to wash.

Zeso said, "We'll be happy to have help packing and sorting if you need to ditch out early on Saturday."

"Thanks, I probably will." Toby said.

Wednesday afternoon, Zeso took some time to listen to her music while she worked on organizing questions for her father. The hardest thing, at this point, was she didn't have enough information to form intelligent questions. In the end, it was a short list.

She and her mother turned in around nine o'clock. Their day would start early. They had to finish cooking the pies and then put the turkey in the oven. Toby said he'd come by if he could, but now there was similar work to do at his house.

Grey arrived on Thanksgiving with a flower arrangement for the table and several bottles of mead. "Happy Turkey Day," he said as he slipped off his coat.

Ida took the mead to the kitchen to keep cold in an ice bucket while Zeso put the floral centerpiece on the table. Grey followed Ida to the kitchen and after another kiss said, "Is it safe to approach our daughter on all subjects, or is she planning on grilling me about something in particular?"

Ida said, "I'm sure it is safe to talk, but I suggest you don't delay. The inevitable discussion will only get harder the longer you wait."

Grey found Zeso in the main room flipping through a journal he'd sent her. "You've so many questions for me you put them into book form?"

Zeso was ready. "I did write questions for you, and then I started trying to answer them, so I could begin to get my mind around this." Zeso paused. "I think the best thing at this point is for you to read what I wrote about what Mom told me, and then my questions and answers. I'm hoping you'll let me know where I need more information and put me back on the right track if I'm going the wrong way."

Grey accepted the notebook from Zeso and sat down to read.

Ida had done a good job of covering a hard topic, given that she didn't completely understand it herself. She'd remembered the prophecy exactly as memorized, but Zeso had written it without the proper breaks. Not that it'd help clarify anything, but Grey thought she should have it correct.

"The stone will go to the eighth, and he will gift it
to her of his flesh who comes from across the sea,
for she will be the one who unites the past and the future.
She will ride the thunder and dance with the son of the storm
by the peaceful house of the battle king
until the time comes to travel north and circle the sea."

There was another prophecy that spoke of the stone being an echo, but Grey wasn't sure of the wording. There was little else Ida had failed to cover or Zeso had missed as they spoke. Grey could fill in the minor blank spots, but he'd have to keep things focused on Zeso. Ida hadn't

yet heard the new prophecy that included her role in the future, and he didn't have permission to fill her in. He also didn't want to scare either of the women by mentioning Toby, but he was glad the spring break trip meant Toby was coming to Ireland.

When he got to the end, Zeso had written "Questions for Dad." He saw far fewer than he expected, only three. After reading them, he crossed off "Dad" and wrote "LonBreda." He then answered the last question by writing "The stone is special because it was given to me to give to you before you were born. It's connected to the family and to an old story. The stone itself has its own prophecy, something about being an echo from the past that will help guide you on your journey. I don't remember all the words, so we'll have to get LonBreda to clarify it." As Grey put down the pen, Ida had just come from the kitchen to see if he'd carve the turkey.

While Grey was making quick work of carving the bird, Ida asked him, "Did you answer all her questions?"

"No," Grey said. "In the end she only asked three, and they're really for LonBreda. You did a great job by the way, covering the topic and raising our daughter."

"I hope you're ready to jump in with your part of that job because she isn't going to be happy with 'wait and talk to LonBreda' as an answer," Ida said.

Grey wiped his hands on the towel and then put his arms around Ida. He held her close as he spoke. "You've done a great job. I'll gladly take any and all of the fallout or blame for the lack of information on this topic. I'm sorry I let it go until now, and that LonBreda had to spur me into action. Please let me know if you've any suggestions that might make this an easier transition for all of us, especially you. I never meant for this to be your burden alone."

"Thank you. It is nice you noticed, even if you had to be spurred on by LonBreda. Help me to remember to get a set of those spurs from her." Ida ducked out of his arms, grabbed the

turkey platter, and then slipped out of the kitchen, so as to avoid Grey's reach when that last comment registered.

After a long and filling meal of traditional turkey and all the trimmings, Ida suggested it was time to talk about the dragon in the room.

Zeso picked up her notebook to see if her father had made any additions to her notes, and if he'd answered the questions. She saw where it used to read "Questions for Dad" it now read "Questions for LonBreda" then she glanced down the list

1. How did the family make this connection?
2. How do you do it then, bend time?
3. What is special about the stone?

Zeso read what her father had written below the third question about the stone, and realized even for that she'd have to wait to get the full story from LonBreda. She looked up at her father in despair. "You didn't make a note or correct anything, but the exact phrasing of a prophecy I don't understand. No explanations, no apologies?" Zeso could feel her voice rising and the tears beginning to surface.

"I've been different all my life. The only real friend I have is Toby who doesn't even fit in with his own family. I can't begin most of the time to explain why I feel out of place, and you tell me you've all this new information about me and it has to do with why I'm so weird, but no, I can't get a straight answer from anybody except LonBreda, whoever she is supposed to be. Well, I hope she doesn't up and die before I get my answers!" Zeso's tears began to slide down her cheeks.

Grey got up from his seat and squatted down next to Zeso's chair. He took one of her hands in his and waited for her to look at him. When she did he simply said, "I'm sorry." After a

moment's pause, he spoke again "I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you the security of people who already understood why you're different. I'm sorry I didn't sweep your mother up and drag her back to Ireland to have you both there for all of your lives. If I'd believed doing that would've made your life easier, I would've gladly done it. But I trusted your mother's choice, and I believed your challenges as a child and young lady would strengthen you for those that are to come.

"I'm sorry I didn't begin explaining this to you years ago, now that I see it might've helped. I was afraid it'd make things worse. I was afraid it would add complications you didn't need or deserve. I felt you already had enough to deal with trying to understand the Dabandin traditions and culture. I'll do all I can to help sort things out for you, to help you understand. If it's in my power to explain something I'll tell you. Much of what I understand is only from my point of view and how the prophecy affected me. LonBreda really will have the most pertinent information for you regarding the prophecies.

"In terms of feeling out of place, we all did at some point in our adolescence, but I know yours was more pronounced because I know some of why you feel so different. I was fortunate enough to grow up surrounded by a culture and cousins who understood some of the talents of our family. A small explanation now doesn't make up for the years of feeling out of place. Hopefully it'll make the future more comfortable and the past easier to remember."

Grey paused. Zeso no longer appeared ready to bolt, so he thought he'd risk going back to his seat. As he stood up, he handed her the pen. When he resumed his seat at the table, he continued. "Our family history includes many notable characters with talents and affinities that are fairly unique. I won't attempt to cover hundreds of years of details, but I want you to have the high points. You are skilled at throwing darts. Your ancestors have all been skilled at

different types of offensive protection, including throwing weapons and archery. In fact, you'll probably benefit from trying some of those other items like a throwing sling, a spear, and even knives. We'll see about getting you going with archery in Ireland, if you'd like.

“You also excel at climbing, hiking and your martial arts type dance. Your ancestors were capable of moving through most natural habitats soundlessly. Some were able to move through wooded areas barely touching the ground. Being able to move through and interact with the natural world without causing it any harm is something we pride ourselves on. As Dabandin, we take and use only what we need, or what is necessary to protect ourselves or others.

“You've always had an affinity with and a love of animals, especially dogs and horses. Your family has bred, broken, trained and loved both horses and dogs for most of their history. You're already a good rider and you only get to ride about five times a year. I think you'll find after a few weeks of consistent riding in Ireland you'll be more proficient than the average person who has been riding daily for years.”

“But why?” Zeso asked. “What is this protection about? Why do I need to know these skills or have these abilities?”

“Because it's likely you'll have to fight or defend yourself at some point,” Grey said, “if you choose to follow in the path of the Dabandin and accept your prophecy.”

“Did you have to?” Zeso said.

“I haven't had to fight, yet,” Grey said. “I've had to stand guard a few times, but the fight never came on my watch. Hopefully, you'll only have to do the same. The prophecy does say ‘by the peaceful house of the battle king.’ If that turns out not to be the case, well, I'd like you to be as prepared as possible.

“Look, the thing I’m trying to say is there are many abilities you possess because you are a Greylin, but the use you put them to is up to you. There are many choices in front of you. These talents can be valuable tools to help you determine the life you wish to live. I’ll tell you this, some of prophecies come true and some don’t. What I’ve learned from their existence was they helped me to pay attention to situations and to circumstances I might’ve otherwise overlooked, and to make the best decisions I could at the time.

“From this moment forward though, you’ll never have to feel out of place again. Your family will always welcome and support any choice you make. I’ll go to LonBreda when I return to Ireland and ask if you can see her before the engagement party. I’m sure we can make arrangements. I do think though that you should finish your schooling here and get things ready to go to Ireland as we’ve been planning. There is little else I can say that’ll help before you get to talk to LonBreda and begin to experience the qualities of The Grove for yourself.” Grey leaned back in his chair and took a long drink of mead. What he’d said wouldn’t help much, but hopefully it’d be enough to sustain Zeso until she got to meet with LonBreda.

Ida, who’d been listening to the exchange, stood and cleared the last of the dishes from the table. She returned and said, “I think we all need a break before we continue with our other discussions.” With that simple statement, she turned and went into her office. Grey had said things that would be helpful to her, though she didn’t understand why so much of this was resonating. Her dreams of late had been bringing more information and questions to the surface. Anything that helped sort that out was welcome. She was grateful she’d finally learned to keep a journal.

Grey took the time to pull out the information he’d brought for Zeso and some of his personal stationary. He wanted to write a letter to Toby since he couldn’t be with them today.

The trio sat down about thirty minutes later at the freshly cleared table, each with a mug of spice tea. Zeso asked, "Did you happen to find any information on classes?"

Grey picked up the pamphlets sitting with his books, and the three of them spent time discussing possible classes Zeso might take while in Ireland.

Ida said, "I think you should go with a fun, short class, maybe the one on castles."

Zeso agreed. "So how do I go about signing up for this?"

"That won't be any problem," Grey said. "I'll take care of that when I get back."

Zeso spent a few minutes going through the brochure and wondering what kinds of castles she'd be seeing. Though she hoped the class would be fun, she was looking forward to spending time with her parents. Zeso had been interested for a long time in her father's involvement with the old Celtic ways. He was fluent in Irish and he was a prominent figure within the Dabandin, but she didn't understand all that entailed.

She also wanted to understand more about The Grove. Her parents had taught her to be open to any and all possibilities, but time travel? It was a little hard to get her brain around. She hoped LonBreda had plenty of answers.

Grey told Ida about the letter he'd written to Toby and asked her to give it to him the next time he came over. Then it was time for her father to say goodbye.

"You're not staying?" Zeso asked.

"No, honey," Grey said. "I've been in New Orleans the past few days, and I've a meeting next week in Iceland that requires some preparation. I'll see you again as soon as I can free up some time." After hugs and kisses all around, Grey left for the airport.

Zeso helped her mother clean up the last of the dishes and then headed for the stairs. When she reached her room, she sat down at the desk and pulled out her journal. She wanted to

write about what had happened. But once she picked up the pen the words wouldn't come.

Maybe rest was the best option for now. After a warm shower and a quick loose braid of her hair, she said goodnight to the dragonstone and crawled into bed, promptly falling asleep.

The rest of the weekend seemed to fly by. Zeso had projects for school to work on, and Ida had begun the task of organizing her recipes and books for the overseas move. Their projects kept them well-occupied, and they rarely saw each other except at meals of leftovers. They didn't even get a visit from Toby. When Ida mentioned this, Zeso spoke up.

“That either means things are going really well or really bad. I guess I'll find out Monday.”

CHAPTER SIX: ELDERS INFLUENCE

Grey's flight back was bumpy, a bit like his visit had been. When he arrived at Alastar, LonBreda was waiting to see him. Tired as he was, he took a minute to freshen up and changed clothes. Then he went out to the barn where his horse was saddled and ready. The ride to LonBreda's did as much to refresh him as a long nap would've. It reminded him, too, of the conversation with Zeso. Even in a family that understood his talents, it had occasionally been difficult to explain his ability to do some things.

He learned long ago to ride with a saddle if he wanted to stay focused. If it was just him on the horse, he'd become one with the horse and their movements would be as natural as breathing. He'd never allowed Zeso to ride bareback for that reason. It was something they'd have to try at some point though. He was determined to teach her and share with her all he could. His mother had been much more helpful than his father, but when she died his father shut down from him, and his education was taken over by LonBreda and O.C. It wasn't until Zeso's birth that Grey's father, Alexander the seventh, found an interest in living again.

Grey wasn't a complainer. He'd experienced a greater education than most. He'd worked hard and long to understand all he could, but there'd be things revealed to Ida and Zeso he might never understand.

LonBreda was waiting for him with a home cooked meal and a cup of strong tea. He brought her up to date in between bites. He told LonBreda about his apology to Zeso, and the explanation he'd attempted to give about the talents of the family.

“Good,” LonBreda said, “Zeso needs to understand that although she is special, she isn’t alone. Nor is she alone in being special. That realization will come for her probably the same time it does for her mother.”

Had Grey believed it’d get him anywhere, he’d have begged LonBreda for answers to the questions he had about Ida’s role in the future of both Zeso’s prophecy and her own. LonBreda was cautious about revealing what she called future history. He’d simply have to be patient. The answers could be right in front of him, and he’d miss them if he wasn’t paying attention.

LonBreda smiled. Her perception was usually good, but with Grey it was exceptional. She might as well be able to hear his thoughts aloud. “You’ve much knowledge, Grey.” She spoke softly so he’d have to strain to pay attention. “You’ve also much wisdom you’re just beginning to put to use. Don’t hold back either from your bride or your child. I feel in the days to come they’ll need all you can give, especially Zeso, after she learns about the Mage.”

Grey nodded. It was rare if LonBreda paid a compliment like the one he’d just received. He immediately grasped the advice she gave him too. He’s sure he’d be grateful he didn’t have to hear her say at some point in the future, “Well, I suggested months ago you not withhold...” He could hear her voice in his mind. He’d heard similar statements before. Hopefully, this meant he was past them.

He returned home and began to make the preparations he could attend to. He’d go through Alastar library and make sure any books that might be helpful to Zeso or Ida were moved to the library in the main house. He’d pull books for Zeso that related to the skills of the family. For his lovely Ida, he’d have to go on intuition and listen the next time he was at LonBreda’s.

He'd also decided to go see his old friend and mentor. He was sure Zeso would love to explore the hills and woods of his property just as Grey had. There were also places there that may help both Zeso and Ida understand about the time shifts that can happen. O.C. would be glad to have company that'd be safe on his land. He was also sure, once she heard O.C.'s stories about dragons, Zeso would want to be there all the time.

The next morning back at Alastar Stables, after taking care of what he needed to for his business meeting in Iceland, Grey went to see O.C. He thought it best to drive over. He didn't want to go riding in on horseback through the pastures. Besides, the way things shifted at Cnoc Turas, also known as Journey Hill, he wasn't sure if he'd come out at the right spot or time. He grabbed a couple of bottles of mead to take as a gift and headed out.

As he pulled up the modern, paved drive, complete with a motion sensor alarm, he still couldn't help but be mesmerized by the place. When he first came here as a young lad, he'd thought LonBreda had sent him back in time. The castle with its simple orchard and wooden barn with fields could've been straight out of a medieval history book. He wouldn't have been surprised if he'd walked through the huge, ornately carved doors to see a throne in the great room and a round table in the dining hall. Grey laughed to himself at his memories and came to a stop in front of the entry. There, waiting for him, was the old man himself, hardly looking a day older.

"Well, it's about time. I was beginning to think I was going to have to send somebody over to drag you back." Cadeyrn was laughing as he spoke. "I figured scraping you up a little on your way over would remind you of where you were."

“I got scraped up enough the few times I tried coming over that ridge. The scars I have are reminder enough. Why do you think I drove over today?” Grey smiled as he gave the old man a hug, and walked in to the main hall carrying the mead. “You don’t change a bit, and this grand old place looks the same as the first day I slid in, like out of a fairytale or something.”

“I’ve had a little help keeping up with things around here,” Cadeyrn said, “and I’ll be getting some more in the not-to-distant future. It wasn’t something I ever thought about as a young military kid, but if you don’t ever get a wife, you’ve got to take care of everything on your own. That or you’ve to hire somebody to do it.”

Grey smiled thinking of all the old stories he’d heard about the gatherings and parties at this place. “You never had a shortage of pretty women around from what I’ve been told.”

“Yeah, just not the marrying kind, least not to a military brat.” Cadeyrn was smiling, too, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I wish I’d have taken the time to find a way to settle down and have a family. Now, it’s too late, and this place is as empty as a bear’s den in the middle of summer. I don’t even have any distant relative to invite round to teach them how to keep up the woodwork. But enough of me, what’ve you been doing, and how’s that young bride of yours?”

“She is about to become my bride again. She and my daughter will be moving here in the spring.” Grey waited as all of the words registered.

“So that’s the wedding LonBreda was dancing a jig about the other day. And a daughter... well, we expected that someday, didn’t we?” Cadeyrn was thinking back over his history with Grey. He’d known Grey would eventually have a daughter ever since he’d known about the prophecy. “Well, I hope you know you’re welcome to bring them by as often as you like. You might want to wait until it warms up a little if you’re going to take them out to the shift points.”

“Thanks, O.C.” Grey was glad he didn’t have to ask. “I think there are a few things they need to learn first. Of course, LonBreda has plans as well, I’m sure. We’ll be over, though, and I may come by, between now and then, to catch up.”

“You come anytime, and you’re welcome to ride over if it’s easier. Remind me before you leave, and we’ll go out by the back gates. I’ll show you the areas to avoid unless you want to shift.” Cadeyrn took the bottles of mead into the kitchen and came back with a couple glasses and a chilled bottle he’d opened. “We’ll enjoy this one while we let yours cool.”

Grey spent most of the day there with O.C. reminiscing about adventures and catching up with the changes that had taken place since Grey had last spent the day with him. They talked too about the things he’d taught Grey and how he’d helped him control his riding. Grey filled O.C. in on some of Zeso’s talents, as well as her frustrations with being different from her peers. Not having the support of the extended family around hadn’t helped either.

“Well, that’ll change when she gets here. The bigger community of Dabandin will be supportive, and if you want to do some training here, I’d be only too happy to help.” Cadeyrn had gotten a few years younger just thinking about a chance to train someone.

“That’d be fantastic.” Grey hadn’t expected such a generous offer, and there was no way he’d turn it down.

“I can’t pass up an opportunity to be out there again. That’s the main reason I don’t have a daughter of my own. I spent all my time training or fighting when I should have found time to settle down. Come on; let’s get out in the fields while we still have some daylight. I don’t want you getting lost if you ride over next time.” Cadeyrn stood up and headed out through the mudroom and on towards the pastures outside with Grey right on his heels. They were like a pair of young boys heading off to get into trouble.

For Zeso, the days and weeks after her father's visit zoomed by. It was as if now that she only had a limited amount of time, it had somehow sped up. Toby was still there on a regular basis, and he'd explained about not coming by over the holiday.

“One of my uncles decided the time was right to talk to me about the Army. I could hardly get a word in edgewise between him and the twins.” Toby's older siblings were two set of twins and were all in some type of military service, namely Air Force and Navy. Each had been pushing him to go their way. His uncles, on the other hand, had all been Army and were pushing for Toby to follow in their footsteps.

The Christmas holidays were fast approaching and Ida had been so proficient at sorting through their clutter and donating anything that wasn't going with them, she'd given away most of their Christmas stuff. She'd saved a few of the ornaments that were special to them, but everything else was gone. They didn't usually celebrate Christmas on their own. Most of what they'd done was with Ida's parents. After they passed away Ida didn't bother with much more than the tree and a few presents, so Zeso wouldn't feel terribly left out at school.

When Zeso became friends with Toby, whose family was Catholic, she and her mom had taken to baking cookies every year as well. They had often talked about having an open house to celebrate the winter solstice, but they never seemed to accomplish that. Many years they'd found places to travel, especially after Ida's parents were both gone.

This year things unfolded so fast, Zeso hadn't thought about going anywhere. She figured the holiday would be a chance to finish packing for Ireland. Coming home from school on the

last day before their two and a half week break, she was slightly surprised to find her father sitting at the kitchen table.

“Hi,” she said as she hugged him. “I didn’t know you were coming so early.”

“I thought it’d be easier for me to fly here, and then we’d all travel together,” Grey said.

“I..” Zeso hesitated. “Did I miss something?”

“You didn’t miss a thing,” Ida said. “I thought I might get a chance to surprise you.

We’re going to spend this holiday season in New Orleans. If that works for you then you ought to go pack. We’ve dinner plans this evening, and then we’re headed to the airport.”

Zeso looked at her father to verify what her mother had said. When he nodded, she turned and took off upstairs.

Packing was simple, since she’d given away half her clothes in preparation for the move. If anything, she was concerned she wouldn’t have something appropriate for a holiday party, if they went to one of those. She was also concerned about not getting to see Toby. She’d just have to call him after dinner and explain. Twenty minutes later, Zeso was back downstairs with her suitcase and carry-on bag in tow. She’d also managed to change clothes and run a brush through her hair.

“So when’s our flight?” Zeso asked.

“Our flight,” Grey said as he stood up and put on his coat, “is at ten twenty tonight out of Cleveland, though we’ve reservation in Avon first.”

“I hope casual is okay,” Zeso said looking down at her blue jean skirt.

“It’s fine. We just need to wait for a friend,” Grey looked at Ida and as if on cue, the doorbell rang. “Great, now we can go.”

Zeso looked even more unsure as Toby came in pulling his own suitcase.

“You can put that in the office, Toby, and then we’ll head out.” Ida was pleased to see, for once, she’d managed surprise her daughter. Ida handed Toby the extra keys to the car.

“Thanks for coming to stay while we’re gone. I don’t like leaving the place empty and I thought you might enjoy having a place to get away from the holiday crowd at your house. Besides, if Zeso calls you in the middle of the night she won’t wake a houseful.”

Zeso’s look went from amused to slightly pissed, as the facts were adding up. “You were in on this, too?” she asked Toby.

Toby had the good graces to smile politely and turn to Grey and ask, “So, where did you say we were going?”

“Hyde Park Prime Steak House,” Grey said, helping to move things toward the door, and rescue Toby from Zeso’s icy stare. “Are you ready?”

By the time they got to the restaurant, they were all laughing. Even Zeso had to admit she was impressed they’d managed to keep it from her, especially Toby.

“That was easy,” Toby said with a grin. “Your mother told me, if we pulled this off, I got to drive her car while you’re gone. If we didn’t, she’d leave me change for the bus.”

Dinner was nice and Toby filled them in on his decision about joining the army. “I think it’s what I’m supposed to do. I’ll be going in the week of graduation.”

Grey nodded and Ida said, “Please keep us posted about where you are stationed after boot camp. If you’re anywhere we can come, we’ll be happy to visit.”

Zeso had known since they were about ten years old that Toby would eventually be in the military. She’d never tried to talk him out of it, but she’d insisted he talk to some veterans, both happy and frustrated, so he’d go in with open eyes. She’d made him promise years ago to list her as next of kin, so if he was ever stationed nearby, they’d let her in without a hassle.

As if reading her mind, Toby handed her a sheet of paper and said, “It’s a copy of my paperwork. It’s the promise I made you.”

Zeso didn’t trust herself to speak, so she simply nodded as she tucked the paper into her pocket, next to the dragonstone.

The conversation stayed light for the rest of the evening. Zeso didn’t say much more, but she was glad they’d all gone to dinner together. On the ride home, she had one hand in her pocket around the dragonstone and the paper that Toby had given her. In the other hand she held Toby’s. She was sorry they wouldn’t get any time together over the long holiday but was grateful they still had a month after that, before she left for Ireland. And then they had a week when he’d be in Ireland, as well as a few days at graduation, before he left for basic training.

They dropped Toby off at the old firehouse and wished him Merry Christmas. Then they headed down the highway toward Cleveland and their waiting flight. They weren’t on the road for more than a few minutes before Zeso laid her head back and closed her eyes. The emotions she was trying to process were so mixed up. The thought of time with her parents and going to New Orleans was great. The fact that it meant more than two weeks away from Toby was tough, but they’d been apart often in their lives. There was more to it though, it was as if the finality of Toby joining the Army made the other approaching changes more real.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NEW ORLEANS REVELATIONS

The airport wasn't yet over crowded with holiday travelers, and everyone seemed to be in a good mood. Their flight was a little bumpy until they reached cruising altitude. Then it was smooth flying to New Orleans. The whole trip took less than four hours. Since they'd gained an hour, it was after one o'clock in the morning when they were in the rental car and headed toward the place that'd be home for two weeks.

Zeso was tired, but pulling up in front of what looked like an ancient manor, she thought she might've fallen asleep. Grey assured her that it was, in fact, an old estate and she wasn't dreaming. There was a young man coming down the steps to greet them.

"Hello, glad you made it all right." He shook hands with Grey and then grabbed the two biggest suitcases and carried them inside.

He was coming back down the main stairs after having deposited the two bags at the top. "Welcome to the Crescent City." He bowed to both of the women and turned to Grey. "I've seen to it that everything has been taken care of, according to your instructions. Here are the keys. If you need anything over the holidays, don't hesitate to call." And with that he was out the front door, closing it as he went through.

Ida took Zeso by the arm and led her up the stairs, "Come on. Let's go find our rooms. We can explore the rest of the house tomorrow." She looked back to make sure Grey was close behind.

Grey locked the front door and turned off most of the lights as he followed the women upstairs. He'd been here often, and he'd already made some decisions about rooms. The house had been converted to have what amounted to two master suites on the second floor. He'd given

Zeso the western side, so she could enjoy the sunsets. Ida, he thought, would enjoy the morning sun, so he'd chosen the eastern suite for them.

Zeso saw her name written on a post-it note on a door and opened it. After looking at the room, she looked back at the note and said, "I think they mixed these up, this is the master." She'd pulled the note down and was taking it over to her mother, who was opening the door with her name on it. Grey was watching from the top step, enjoying every minute.

As Ida stepped into the suite she'd share with Grey, she saw a bottle of iced champagne and two glasses. She said, "Oh, I don't think so."

Grey came in to the suite behind Ida carrying his bags and pulling her suitcase. "You can have your pick of rooms on the third floor if you prefer." He winked at Zeso, and turning her around to point her back to her own rooms he said, "See you in the morning."

"Good night, Honey," Ida said, as Grey was closing the door behind her.

"Good night," Zeso mumbled, as she headed back to the suite that'd be hers. There was an iced bottle in her room, too, but it was sparkling water. She found her bathroom, brushed her teeth, and then fell into bed.

The next morning it took her a few minutes to remember she was in New Orleans. With a grip on reality again, she got up to explore her suite. It was nice, though not specifically her tastes. The sitting room had a love seat and chair with a small table between them. There was a television on the far wall. The bedroom had a queen-sized bed with matching side tables, a fireplace, and a walk-in closet. The bathroom was huge with both a large tub and a double shower with a built-in bench. The sight of her image in the mirror made her realize how tired she'd been.

After a hot shower, Zeso dressed casually, put her clothes away in the closet, and set about detangling and loosely braiding her hair. While Zeso was pouring herself a glass of sparkling water, there was a knock at her door. “Yes” she said.

“Good morning,” Ida said coming into the room. “How did you sleep?”

“I slept great,” Zeso said. “Would you care to join me for a glass of sparkling water?” She handed the glass she’d poured to her mother and poured another for herself. “So, is this like a B and B?”

“Sort of, that’s your bed,” Ida gestured back toward the room in which Zeso had slept, “and if you want to cook the kitchen is all yours. We thought you might prefer to go out for brunch.”

Zeso wanted to be sure she understood. “So, we rented a house for the holidays?”

Grey, who’d appeared in the doorway, said, “I bought this place awhile back, and have had people getting it ready for us. So if you want to move the furniture around, we can do that.”

Zeso’s father traveled all over the world, but it never occurred to her that he would own another home. She just assumed he always stayed in hotels, like he did in Cleveland.

Grey, who was getting better at read his daughter, added to his explanation. “New Orleans has always held a special interest for me. Aside from coming to visit, and keep up with some family investments, I am interested in research here as well. Beside, you know I love the Saints.”

Zeso was completely familiar with her father’s love of the New Orleans NFL team. His interest in them and the city had only increased, especially after Hurricane Katrina. But he had said something else. Zeso had never heard him speak of anything academic, aside from her own schooling.

“What research?” Zeso asked.

“Water,” Grey said.

Zeso looked confused. “Water?”

“Part of honoring the old ways involves honoring and protecting the land. Included in that is protecting the water. The name Dabandin comes from an old connection to an Irish god who was considered to be the defender of the water. For me, there are several locations where understanding water is particularly vital, New Orleans being one of them.”

“Where are the others?” Zeso asked, though she thought she might be able to guess at a few, just from her father’s travels.

“Two other locations that I’m focused on are Iceland and the Great Lakes. Nearly every place on the planet is beginning to think about water, either from lack of it or pollution of what they have.”

“Oh,” Zeso said. “Does the part of the prophecy that talks about traveling north and circling the sea have to do with Iceland and the water?”

Grey laughed heartily and shook his head. “I don’t have any idea. You will have to figure that out as it unfolds. In the meantime, how do you feel about some food?”

“Good idea,” said Ida.

Grey figured he’d give Zeso the schedule up front. “I thought we’d have brunch somewhere, and then get some shopping in. Tomorrow evening, we’ll have a fire in the fireplaces and a small ceremony out back. It is Yule, the longest night of the year, and we need to honor it. Then we’ve a few days to do whatever we like, some sightseeing and shopping, or being lazy with our feet up. But Christmas Eve we’ve reservations for early dinner and then

Feast of Carols followed by Midnight Mass at Christ Church Cathedral. Afterward, we've a Reveillon to attend."

Zeso's head was spinning. "Wait, what's a Reveillon?"

"Reveillon is French for 'awakening' and it's a feast celebrated here on both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. You can learn more about it when we're there."

More than an hour later, slightly full and having gingerbread tea in comfortable chairs at the Intercontinental, Zeso asked a question. "Why do you like to go to church on Christmas?"

"Don't you want to go to Midnight Mass?" Grey said.

"No, I don't mind going," Zeso said. "I just wondered why. I mean, to the best of my understanding you celebrate things like Winter Solstice or Yule, and Spring Equinox or whatever the proper term is, not Christmas and Easter."

"You are correct, I do celebrate those events, and the name we use for Spring Equinox is Ostara, though you won't upset anyone by calling it the equinox."

Grey took a sip of his tea while gathering his thoughts. "I was taught to honor and respect the ways of my ancestors and I did what I was taught. I was also taught any expression of a community sharing good will and celebrating together is something you should participate in, if you can. And you should do so with a sense of respect and without prejudice. The ways I learned as a child and as a young man were important to me and to my family, but they aren't the only ways to honor the universe or its Creator.

“I was taught to explore, to ask questions and to observe, to participate where I can and politely excuse myself where outsiders aren’t welcome. And to that end, my favorite place on Christmas Eve is a church, preferably a cathedral, if I can find one.”

Grey looked at Ida to make sure she was following his reasoning. “The celebration at the birth of a child occurs every day in every hospital around the world, but only on rare occasion do you get to see a celebration in mass over a particular child. I truly enjoy those. Some of the last highly anticipated ones were Prince William’s and Prince Henry’s births in the U.K., and then, of course, there was yours. But the Christ Mass is a celebration you can join in every year at the same time in any place in the world. What better place than in the city that celebrates Mardi Gras? Did you know the season of Carnival actually starts on January sixth, the twelfth day of Christmas?” Grey had thought he’d covered everything, and would politely change the topic.

“I realize I’m important to you, Dad, but you didn’t need to add my birth in with a future king and a messiah.” Zeso hadn’t missed the compliment.

“You are important to more than me. When you were born, there were riders sent out with the news.” Grey paused. This information was new to Zeso, but he didn’t want her to think he was being a doting father. “It may seem strange to you at this point, but you’ll eventually understand being a Greylin is important. There are generations of Dabandin that have watched and waited for the next Greylin. But don’t get too big of an ego, there were riders sent out at my birth as well.” He tried to lighten the mood again, though he was sure his daughter had a whole new line of questioning to pursue with LonBreda.

“I’m ready to do some shopping and sightseeing, if you two are ready to get moving.” Ida got to her feet smiling. She was enjoying letting someone else be the brunt of her daughter’s inquisitions.

They spent the rest of the day meandering through shops and picking out a few small gifts for each other. The spirit of Papa Noel had gotten into them all. The women even purchased new dresses to wear to Midnight Mass. After a final stop for wrapping paper and supplies, they headed home to sort out what they had.

The next day, Ida and Zeso worked on going through the kitchen to see what they still needed. Grey was busy preparing the fires for the evening's Yule celebration. He also went out back to see if he could determine a safe place for ceremony. He wanted to connect with the others who would also be doing ceremony if they could, but he also wanted to keep the women safe. He didn't think Ida would appreciate shifting without forewarning and figured he'd better talk to her first. Then the two of them would talk to Zeso together.

He used the excuse of needing help with the fires upstairs to drag Ida away from the kitchen. After they were in agreement, they went in to see Zeso and lay the fire in her room as well. Ida spoke while Zeso helped Grey with the kindling. "The ceremony tonight will be simple, but there are a few things you should be aware of, namely some feelings you may have about what's going on around you."

Grey looked up at Ida and then sat back at her feet. Zeso was still laying small pieces of wood on the hearth. "Part of the reason we chose this house is the power points nearby," Grey said. "I'm not familiar enough with the land to know exactly where they shift. I do know where we'll be for the ceremony tonight, and there'll be others doing similar things at the same time."

He paused, wanting Zeso's full attention. "I don't know how to describe this, and I don't want it to scare you, but I also don't want you to go into it unaware of what can happen. The

ceremony tonight will be informal. Yule is really a big party. Well, it's more than that, but it's a party, too. The point is, you're allowed to ask questions always, and I'll do my best to answer them as honestly as I can. You might want to know though, if you ask during ceremony, someone else might answer, too."

"What do you mean someone else?" Zeso wanted to be certain what her father was saying.

"Connecting, across time and space, is an important thing that happens in the ceremonies we do. Part of that connection is to allow for communication to take place. It may seem improbable to you at the moment, but hearing from an ancestor or someone in another location is not unusual."

Zeso laughed. "So Grandma might drop in to say hi?"

Grey nodded. "Maybe even Alastar."

Ida smiled at Zeso and added, "Some of this may seem unreal, even impossible. Just try to keep an open mind. A lot of this is new for me as well. I went to several ceremonies with your father, but that doesn't mean I'm comfortable with all I've seen happen. I wasn't raised in these ways, so I've questions that I'll ask as I learn, too."

Zeso was quiet for a moment, then she spoke as clearly as she could. "I appreciate you're both trying so hard to help me understand, but it's so new." She wasn't sure how to explain her feelings. "It was all just what Dad did. Now it's like, 'Step up to your turn, you'll get the hang of it.' I don't even know what 'it' is." For the third time in as many days, tears were threatening at the rim of her lashes again.

Ida sat down next to Grey and took one Zeso's hands in hers. "I know this is all new, and I'm sorry I was too afraid to try and explain things sooner. What I can promise is we'll learn

together. I know it seems like our lives have changed overnight. On top of graduating, your parents getting married, and moving to another country, you were handed some pretty unique information. I can't begin to imagine how it is to be told you've a prophecy about your life and to try and grasp that idea. I don't think..." Ida stopped short. She sank back and looked at Grey. "But I'm about to." The words were out of her mouth before she even realized it.

Grey nodded. He didn't know the prophecy, so he simply told her what he could. "LonBreda spoke it for the first time at Mabon, Fall Equinox. I didn't hear the actual words, the message just registered within. It dropped me. I was on my knees gasping for air when it was over. That is part of why LonBreda wants to see you, sooner rather than later." He took one of Ida's hands and one of Zeso's. "I don't understand the rest of it well enough to tell you more than that. I know what I understand within me, that we'll walk through this together, as a family, no matter what lies on the road ahead."

Grey stood and pulled the women to their feet. "We'll start tonight, as a family with the hearths in this house, and no matter where we are, from this day forward, we're always connected, through our hearts and through the fires." He pulled an old Zippo lighter from his pocket. "It's appropriate to use the traditional flint and steel when lighting a ceremonial fire. Luckily this counts in a pinch." Grey knelt at the hearth and softly spoke a few words in Irish. Then he turned and looked at the women, "We begin here with the fire Zeso helped prepare, because from here forward it's about helping to prepare her and connecting her back to all she'll need." He turned then and lit the small stack Zeso had helped construct and watched it flame to life.

Zeso looked back on this night as the real beginning of her journey to understanding the prophecy that would fill her life for many years to come.

Ida looked back on this night as the beginning of her journey to be connected to her ancestors and the heritage in her blood that called her to step forward and all it would come to mean.

Grey looked back on this night as the first night his soul was complete, because his bride and his daughter were now protected by his heritage, as well as their own. He was also certain that somewhere his mother was smiling and dancing the jig she'd been denied by her early death.

The brief ceremony that followed outside was a crowded event. It was as if the whole clan knew what had happened, and every leaf on the bushes out back whispered, 'Hello. Welcome. We've been waiting for you.'

Zeso did make time to write about all she'd been through the last few days, and she also made her late night call to home, where Toby was waiting to hear her voice. "I'm sorry we won't get to spend the holidays together. Christmas you'll be with your family, but we've spent the last ten New Year's Days together and a few New Year's Eves."

Toby tried to cheer her up, "Well, maybe I'll check with my rich uncle and see if I can borrow the jet to fly down for the party."

It worked, Zeso was laughing.

Christmas Eve arrived with a beautiful sunrise, and the three Greyllins spent the day prepping things in the house. Ida had purchased everyday dishes that needed to be washed and put away. In addition, the new linens and towels for the guest rooms on the third floor needed laundering. When they'd settled all those things, the happy crew headed out to dinner at Redfish Grill.

Returning home, Grey said, as they walked in the door, “I think we all have a few things to deal with and we’ll be up late, so if you want a nap feel free to grab one. We need to leave here about nine o’clock to be at the Cathedral in time for the carols.”

“No problem,” Zeso said as she headed up the stairs.

Ida had already disappeared to their suite, so Grey took a moment to get into the hall closet under the stairs. He’d purchased some things a few weeks ago and had them wrapped and delivered before they arrived. He laid the packages on the hearth. He hadn’t gone overboard, but he did want the women to remember this holiday season.

They met in the hall shortly before nine, looking like the typical family headed off to Christmas services. Ida had a beautiful navy dress with a silver wrap across her shoulders and Zeso had a dark green velvet dress with long sleeves. Grey donned one of his basic suits, but he’d found a blue tie with white snowflakes to jazz it up.

At the cathedral, Zeso found herself intrigued by the people. She watched the joy on the faces of young and old alike. She marveled at a young woman so moved by the singing, there were tears running down her cheeks. By the end of the service, she thought she was beginning to understand. There was something sacred in the joy at the birth of a child, the celebration of new life, whether for a family or for a world.

Their next stop was the well-lit, over-decorated home of Grey’s friends, Jean Henri Batiste and his bride of thirty years Nina Jacqueline. This Reveillon was as much an anniversary party as anything else. There was rich food, as well as plenty of cake and champagne. Zeso found it just as interesting to continue her study of the people here.

Nina came to sit by her. “I see you like to watch what is happening before you jump in, yes?” Nina’s thick French accent was still strong. “You’re like your father. He wouldn’t play

with us as a child until he was sure he understood the rules. Then he'd beat us at whatever it was." Nina was smiling fondly at Grey, who smiled and bowed in return. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Zeso. I had the pleasure of meeting your mother again last month. It had been a long time, but I'm glad to see them both so happy. And you, are you happy?" Nina turned and looked at Zeso.

Zeso said, "Yes, I guess... you knew my father as a child?" Zeso was just grasping what Nina had said.

Nina said, "Yes dear, we grew up visiting each other's families. I'm his second cousin. He's one of the few family members I get to see on a regular basis, since I moved here with my Henri all those years ago. But I'm happy. Now I get to welcome you to our home. Please know you're always welcome here, dear cousin. Do come and visit sometime when we can sit and tell stories, without all these extra people." Nina was being beckoned from across the room.

Ida filled the seat Nina had vacated. "So she asked you if you're happy too, hmm? Well, she's happy, and she wants everyone around her to be as well. Wait until we come back for a quiet lunch next week. She'll still ask the same question, but you'll be better prepared."

Zeso nodded and then let a yawn escape. Her mother took that as the cue to find Grey and head home.

Zeso finally stirred after ten the next morning. It took her a few minutes to register the smells of freshly baked bread and coffee floating through the house, and then she was wide-awake. Her mother only made coffee on Christmas. Ida loved mocha but didn't want to have it so often it wasn't special anymore, so it became their Christmas tradition, mochas and fresh rolls. It only took Zeso a few more minutes to slip into her jeans and a comfortable sweatshirt and then appear in the kitchen.

“I told you she’d be down as soon as she smelled the coffee I brew to make the mochas,” Ida said grinning at Grey as Zeso came sliding into the room. “Merry Christmas,” Ida said as she handed her a cup of steaming homemade mocha.

“Merry Christmas to you both,” Zeso said. Then she sipped the chocolaty coffee she’d grown to love.

With mugs in hand, and Grey carrying a tray of fresh rolls, the trio adjourned to the living room. Ida had already brought in an insulated carafe of mocha to refill their cups. Zeso sat down in the chair facing the fireplace, whose hearth was now covered with gifts. She looked at her father and asked, “So are we changing your name to Papa Noel officially, or just for today?”

Ida laughed into her mocha, but Grey replied smoothly, “Just today. I’m rather partial to being Alexander the eighth.”

The next hour passed by in a mix of laughter and surprise, as the women opened their presents. The most exciting were the long skirts, made out of a beautiful plaid of emerald green and indigo blue that the Greylins used as their family tartan.

Ida and Zeso had conspired to get Grey an LSU jersey and football. He loved American football, and since he owned a house where the LSU Tigers were as popular as the local NFL team, they figured it was only appropriate. He already owned all the New Orleans Saints gear. He’d been following them for years. Besides, the team was doing so well, maybe they’d get to buy him playoff souvenirs next. Though the Saints had lost their last game, they’d already clinched home field advantage for the postseason.

By the time the mocha was gone and the wrapping paper cleaned up they were all hungry for real food. Grey, who wasn’t finished scheming, shooed the women out of the kitchen, “Go put your stuff away and read the paper or something.” He was smiling as he pushed them out.

Zeso took the opportunity to call Toby to wish him a Merry Christmas, too. He'd just returned from his family's house. Celebrating there was still an early morning event. The youngest set of triplets was still too young and excited to think about sleeping in.

Grey called them in to a full buffet. From sliced ham to roast beef, potato salad, a relish tray, and fresh fruit on little skewers, Grey had thought of everything.

A few bites into her plate of food, Zeso said, "It's not as interesting as some of Mom's dishes, but I'll let you cook any time."

Ida said, "As long as you take out the recycling, too." She nodded at the kitchen counter littered with carry out containers.

While they were eating, Zeso told them Toby said hello, and wished them a Merry Christmas. She also told them his joke about the rich uncle that had made her laugh the other day.

They took a day to do a driving tour that included the Degas House. They also spent several evenings touring around to see the lights and decorations outside the city. They had a nice quiet lunch with Nina and Henri at which Zeso learned a little more about the family, though mostly about Henri's side. As they were headed out from that lunch on the thirtieth, Zeso asked where they were going next because it wasn't home. She'd learned the area well enough to know they were headed in the wrong direction.

Grey said, "I just need to pick up something."

Zeso shrugged and turned back to watch the scenery go past the window. She was beginning to enjoy the look and feel of New Orleans. After she saw the second set of signs for the airport, she sat up straight to look for her father's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"You didn't," was all she could get out, before he laughed.

Toby had carried everything on the plane with him, so he wouldn't have to wait at baggage claim. He scooped Zeso up in a hug, then shook Grey's hand and said, "Thanks."

They went by the house to give everyone a chance to freshen up and then headed out for dinner at New Orleans' Hamburger and Seafood. Toby caught them up on life in Avon Lake and then asked, "So how was Christmas without snow and cold?"

Grey laughed as Ida said, "It was cold enough. We went to Midnight Mass and then to a Reveillon anniversary party."

Toby looked at Zeso in disbelief, "You went to church?"

Zeso laughed and used her father's explanation about celebrating with the community. "It was interesting to watch how people reacted to the songs."

Toby shook his head. "You would notice the music."

By the time they'd returned to the house it was late, and they'd be up later the next night. Ida had made up one of the guest rooms on the third floor. Zeso and Toby sat for an hour talking, but when Toby's eyes drooped, Zeso said goodnight.

The next morning, Toby, the early riser, was in the kitchen with tea and coffee made and breakfast ready. Zeso was the only one who'd slept in. Both her parents were at the table enjoying omelets and Cajun-style hash browns. Toby had picked up a few of Ida's kitchen tricks over the years.

After everyone was fed, they headed out to show Toby some of New Orleans and to ride a streetcar just to say they had. It was while they were meandering through some of the shops in the French Quarter that Ida had her first clear vision flash.

They were looking at dragons in a shop off Bourbon Street. Toby pointed to one that had a trio of figures: a dragon sitting like the one in Zeso's amethyst, a young woman kneeling, and a young man in a long robe with a sword at her shoulder as if he was about to knight her.

Toby said, "That's backwards. She always blesses him."

Ida saw, more clearly than the statues in front of her, Toby kneeling in a long robe with his head up, staring in to the face of the healer. As the images moved, the healer did indeed bless Toby. Ida heard the healer speak, "Rise my dragon Mage, we've work to do."

It was Grey who reacted first. He'd moved to Ida's side as soon as Toby had spoken. He guessed that the words Toby spoke would trigger something for Ida. As she collapsed, Grey had her in his arms and was moving to the small bench he'd seen outside the shop.

As the image faded from Ida's view, and she realized she was sitting on a cool bench with Grey squatting in front of her, she pulled herself back to reality. Zeso and Toby were both there, concerned. She spoke quietly. "I'm okay." Her voice was steadier than she thought it might be. "It was a knowledge flash, like at Yule." She said the last words looking at Grey, willing him to understand.

Grey said, "I'll be right back with the car."

When they got back to the house, Toby put the teakettle on.

Grey had gone upstairs after escorting Ida to a sofa in the living room. He returned with a journal which he handed to Ida.

Zeso understood. Her mother had begun writing about the things that were happening, as Zeso had been doing for several months. Ida probably wanted to talk to her father alone, so Zeso went to find Toby.

She walked into the kitchen as the teakettle had begun to whistle, so she shut it off. She turned to get the mugs off the counter, and she saw Toby sitting on the floor. Zeso shook her head and sat down facing him.

“The crazy stuff that happens around this family,” she said.

Grey came in to get the tea, and saw them sitting on the floor. He said, “I’ll be right back.”

Grey made tea and took it in for Ida. Then he came back and helped Toby to the table while Zeso made tea for the rest of them. She sat a cup in front of Toby and then turned to hand one to her father.

Grey said, “Just let him tell you what happened. I’ll be back with your Mom, and we can put this together.”

Zeso sat down at the table with Toby. He shook his head and said, “I never had anything like that happen before. The way that statue was set up was wrong, but I can’t fathom how or why I’d know that.”

Zeso shrugged. “Maybe it’s from too much time hanging out with my family.”

While Zeso sat with Toby, Grey was listening to Ida.

“But how could that be? Toby can’t be the Mage. LonBreda knows the healer is still here, in this world. She hasn’t crossed over yet to rejoin her Mage who left years ago.” Ida stopped, the Mage left twenty years ago. When she looked up at Grey, she was putting it all together. It wasn’t really a question she spoke next, “So he’ll have to leave again.”

Grey simply nodded. He'd known since Mabon about the Mage, but he wasn't at liberty to speak of it.

Grey said, "I don't believe Toby is aware yet, and I don't think he'll come to full knowledge until the healer leaves, and he is being called from the other side. It isn't our job to tell him. I think that is part of the reason spring break will be in Ireland."

Ida asked the only question she could, "Does Zeso know?"

Grey said, "I don't think so, but she'll know as soon as Toby does. He'll want to work through it with her. I think it spooked him that he had some ancient knowledge, and then you reacted."

"So, how do we explain this?" Ida asked, glancing toward the kitchen, where Toby and Zeso were talking.

Grey said, "The best way to explain any knowledge flash, which is also the truth, that they're inherited memories." He stood and helped Ida to her feet.

Toby looked up as Grey and Ida came in and said, "Well, that was a little strange."

Ida sat down next to him and said, "It sure was. I guess we kicked up some old memories stored somewhere in our DNA."

Toby laughed and said. "I inherited my grandpa's nose and my great aunt's curls. I didn't know my great great somebody left me their dragon memories."

Toby's laughter had them all relaxing and after a few minutes, the topics of food and fun were back up for discussion. It was, after all, New Year's Eve.

They chose to eat in and ordered pizza. After the day's strange occurrences, they all wanted a calm evening. They found two good movies to watch until it was time for the festivities

in New York. They had a lively New Year's Eve together in the big house, and everybody laughed when Grey yelled "Happy New Year!" at six o'clock.

"Well, it is at our place in Ireland." He smiled as he plopped back down next to Ida.

At the New Year in New York and Ohio, they broke out the champagne and noisemakers, party hats and confetti. Ida wished them Happy New Year and kissed them both good night. Grey didn't trust himself to speak, so he simply shook Toby's hand, kissed Zeso's cheek and then led Ida upstairs to their suite.

Toby and Zeso spent the next hour quietly talking downstairs and waiting for it to be midnight in New Orleans so they could say Happy New Year again. Though they both had thought a lot about what could happen between them and talked about it too, tonight was just for kissing and being together.

The next morning, Toby and Zeso were up making breakfast when Grey and Ida came in, and Ida laughed. Zeso and Toby did this crazy casserole dish with eggs, meat and veggies. The rest of the day would be spent in front of the television. They had a parade and then football to watch. It was even more fun than usual with Ohio State and LSU both playing. Toby's family tradition had become Zeso and Ida's. Grey thought it was a fine way to start the year.

They spent the next morning preparing to close the house. Their flights back to Cleveland were as quiet as the ones coming down. Then three of them drove Ida's car back to what would be home for two of them, for little more than a month.

CHAPTER EIGHT: IRISH MEETINGS

Though January was cold and there wasn't too much snow, Ida thought the gray and gloomy days called for some sunshine. Zeso thought Ida was trying to avoid the last of the packing but it was her way of introducing the bright yellow boxes she'd found. With the stereo turned up, markers and tape in hand, they began the final packing. They did take a break, so that Zeso and Toby could study for their finals.

There were only two things Zeso would really miss, the old firehouse and Toby. The firehouse had been home since she was two, not that she hadn't traveled but it was always the place she came back to.

Now that place would be Alastar Stables, which wasn't a bad place to call home either. And Toby, well she'd see him several times in the next few months, and she wouldn't allow herself to think beyond that. They'd always been good communicators via email, though she typed the longer letters.

Zeso's things were in the front hall, ready for the airport limo to pick her up on Sunday afternoon.

When the moment arrived, Zeso and Ida hugged goodbye with smiles, but they were both fighting back tears. "I'll see you soon," Ida said. "Enjoy your week with your father."

Toby had written her a letter to take with her and promised to email on a regular basis. He already had his tickets for the flight in April, and he was marking off the days until they'd see each other again. In the end, he kissed her and closed the limo door. After the limo was out of sight, the tears they'd both been fighting spilled over.

Ida led him back into the firehouse, "I think we need a cup of tea."

Zeso's flights were smooth, and she was grateful to travel first class. It made sleeping much easier, and the flight felt shorter. After the obligatory phone calls, one to her mother from Grey and one to Toby from Zeso, Grey and Zeso collected her luggage and headed to Alastar.

It had been two years since Zeso had been at the Alastar Stables, but its beauty and grandeur still filled her with awe. She'd read enough of the family history to know things always changed, though some changes weren't seen in one lifetime. As they drove up the tree-lined driveway, she wondered how much had changed since she'd last been here.

One thing that hadn't, Doireann was waiting on the steps to welcome Zeso back. Doireann had been part of her father's staff at Alastar for as long as Zeso could remember. More than that though, Doireann had always made time for Zeso's questions and curiosities, even as a small child.

"Hello beautiful! Look at you, all grown up. Oh, it is great to have you here!" Doireann was bursting with excitement as she hugged Zeso and led her into the main foyer while several others went out to grab her luggage and update Grey on a situation in the barn.

"Doireann shifted into an excited whisper, as they headed up the main staircase. "A wedding." It was obvious she was excited about the upcoming nuptials. "We'll talk later, time to get you settled in and let you refresh yourself before tea. I'll see you downstairs," she said waving herself out of Zeso's suite and hurrying off to some important schedule or call.

Zeso laughed to herself, Doireann's energy had always been a joy to watch though it sometimes made her dizzy.

As she glanced around, Zeso noticed her father had gone to some lengths to have her rooms updated. Her treasured items were still there, but the toys and things of a younger girl were gone. In their place were items of elegance and grace. There was now a full size secretary

with a leather desk set and personalized stationary. Her bed covers had matured from playful flowers to a rich blue with purple accents. Standing in this place, that had been updated to reflect her coming of age, she was keenly aware of all the transformations taking place in her life.

Zeso changed into some clean jeans and a warm sweater. She was glad today would be just them. Her father had thought it better not to plan anything for her first day or two, to give her a chance to settle in and adjust to the time change and the weather.

Tea included a quick reintroduction to some of the staff she'd known for years and a confirmation of schedules for the next few days. Her father had Estate business to deal with the next couple of mornings, but afternoons and evenings would be free to spend exploring and answering questions. Then there was a fundraiser to attend on Saturday, and if Zeso wished to come, she was welcome, but they'd need to go shopping for a formal gown.

As they finished tea, Grey said, "Would you like to come along to the barn with me, I need to check on one of the mares."

"I'd love to," Zeso said. She was pleased to go be reintroduced to the horses. It was also good to get out and stretch her legs. They weren't more than ten feet from the house when the dogs came bounding up to join them. By the time they reach the barn and Zeso was reacquainted with the dogs, she'd also been reminded there was a bog cat that liked to appear out of thin air.

"There is a mare, Lucy, about ready to foal, and I thought you'd like to be here to see that and maybe help if we need it." Grey wanted her to be as involved as she wished to be. Besides, there was no better way to kick-start an interest in raising horses than being there for a birth. Though it was earlier in the season than usual for a foaling, all was going well.

Several hours later, Zeso and her father returned to the house having helped a new colt arrive at Alastar Stables. Doireann was glad to hear the good news and wondered if the name had been chosen.

“I thought, we’d allow Zeso to choose,” Grey said, “since they both arrived on the same day.” He was pleased to see the joy on his daughter’s face as he made this announcement.

Dinner was a quiet meal of hearty stew and brown bread. Zeso stifling her third yawn was enough for her father to shoo her off to bed. He told her to sleep late if she wished. They’d go gown shopping in the afternoon.

Zeso awoke and it took her a moment to remember she was an ocean away from her firehouse. As she dressed in a work skirt and sweater, she was thinking about the new colt. She still hadn’t settled on the right name. Breakfast was waiting for her in the dining room, eggs, sausage, potatoes, and tea. After finishing, Zeso went out to visit the mare and her new colt. She’d only gone a few steps along the path when her father’s dogs came to join her. Zeso was glad to have the company and greeted each of them with the obligatory scratch behind the ears.

As she entered the barn, Lucy looked up and then went back to her oats. The colt was more curious and approached the bars of the double stall where his mother’s name plaque hung. Zeso walked slowly towards him and stooped down to be at eye level.

“You’re beautiful,” she said in a quiet whisper. She slid her hand through the bars for him to smell. “I’m supposed to give you your name. I’ve thought of a few, would you like to hear them?” She paused wondering how silly she’d sound listing names to a baby horse. “I wonder

what your mother would call you.” As she sat there wondering what name to start with she had her other hand on the dragonstone in her pocket.

She pulled out the amethyst and said to the colt, “This is my dragonstone.” The colt took little interest in the stone but looked at Zeso instead. It was at that moment a different name came to her, “Taran.” She spoke the name unconsciously.

The colt’s mother looked up at the name and nudged her little one then went back to her oats. Zeso looked at the colt and spoke the name again, “Taran.” He stepped forward and nudged her hand that was still holding the dragonstone and then turned back to his mother to nurse.

Zeso headed out of the barn smiling as she slipped the dragonstone back into her pocket. She was sure her father would be pleased that she’d chosen a name.

Doireann had seen Zeso come in and asked if she’d been to see the horses. By the time Zeso had finished saying she had a name for the colt, they’d reached the library where her father was waiting for her.

“I finished a little early so I thought we’d have lunch in town before we shop.” Grey was pleased she’d been out. This place was her home now. “Did you go see the colt?”

“Yes,” Zeso said, “and I’ve his name, Taran.”

“Taran,” her father said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, even his mother seemed to approve.” Zeso said. “Am I dressed all right for our shopping trip? I’m not sure if there is an appropriate outfit for formal gown hunting.”

“You look fine.” Grey turned to Doireann as they headed toward the door, “Would you please have Liam make a plaque for Taran?”

“Certainly,” Doireann said.

“This should be interesting,” Zeso said, as she went to climb into the front seat of the car and then stopped. Her father was on the other side, holding a door open for her. The side she’d opened had a steering wheel.

“You might want to wait until you’ve a license here before you try that, though I’ll be happy to start teaching you.” Her father said with a smile as he continued to hold her door open.

“Thanks,” she said as she came around and slipped into the passenger seat.

“What did you mean, ‘this should be interesting’?” Grey asked after he started the engine and headed down the drive.

Zeso said, “I’ve never been gown shopping, but I think it is usually something girls do with their mothers. I…” she hesitated, “Have you done this before?”

“I have,” Grey said. “Though it was a long time ago and I was young. I did check with Doireann, and she gave me the name of a fashionable dress shop in town, so I think we’ll do all right.”

As it turned out, the wedding dresses were coming from the same shop. While Zeso was there, they went ahead and fitted that dress as well. She came home with two gowns and a new pair of simple, gray, dress shoes. The gown for the wedding would wait for her mother’s final okay, before the adjustments were made.

The rest of the week Zeso spent as much time as the weather permitted outdoors. If it didn’t, she was either in the stables with the horses or at her desk reviewing her questions for LonBreda. Zeso wanted to be as prepared as she could.

Saturday afternoon arrived and Zeso was getting ready for her first formal event. When Grey called from the stairs to see if she was ready to go, she stepped out in a stunning gown of bright blue. For a moment, Grey thought he was seeing things. She looked so much like the images LonBreda had painted in his mind of the young priestess initiate stepping up for her rites of passage that he almost took a knee. He turned his reaction into a polite bow to which she gracefully replied with a curtsy, and then they were out the door to the waiting car.

“I’m going to have to keep an eye on you tonight.” He said to Zeso as they were heading down the drive. “Your mother won’t be pleased with me if she arrives Monday to find a line of young men waiting to ask permission to court her daughter. And I dare say Toby would be none too pleased either.”

Zeso laughed. She was too excited to have a good response.

Her father gave her his arm and escorted her in to the main hall. He handed a small card to a young woman standing there who nodded politely, checked her list, and then passed the card to a gentleman in a green kilt and bright red vest with a long cape hanging from his shoulders. As they stepped through the doorway, the man announced in a loud voice, “Alexander Greylin the eighth and Miss Zeso Greylin.”

Zeso tried hard not to let the announcement rattle her while she kept pace with her father. She smiled at those who turned to nod and smile at them, but she didn’t let go of her father’s arm.

“Sorry about that,” Grey said in a quiet whisper, “guess I should’ve warned you.” He turned to smile at her and had another one of those images from LonBreda, escorting an initiate up to meet the high priestess of the ancient Dabandin.

Zeso smiled at him and went back to glancing around the room. Never had she seen so many elegantly dressed people. Her only reference for it was a scene from the movie *My Fair Lady*.

Her father introduced her to a few people, mostly colleagues or friends of the family. He also seamlessly steered her away from most of the younger men. Zeso wasn't going to complain. She didn't see anyone to fit her tastes. Apparently long hair wasn't as popular with this crowd as it was with the general population. She caught herself wondering how Toby was going to look when his nearly shoulder-length curls went to a buzz cut for the army.

By the time they returned home, Zeso was exhausted from a delightful evening. She'd danced with her father numerous times. She fell asleep that night and dreamed of dancing with a young man dressed like her father but whose face she couldn't see.

Zeso awoke Sunday morning to a cold, gray sky. She quickly dressed and went downstairs looking for a cup of warm tea. Her father was already dressed and finished with breakfast. He was reading the paper and waiting for her to come down.

"How did you sleep after your night out at a formal ball?" he asked. She stretched lazily and then dropped into her seat at the table. "That well," he said.

Zeso grinned sleepily and snuggled her hands around her cup. "I slept well, I dreamt I was dancing." After a few sips of tea and a bite of muffin, she said, "Anything you need me to take care of before mom arrives tomorrow?"

"Not that I can think of," Grey said. "Unless there's some strange spice we need for the kitchen?"

Zeso said, "I'm sure she'll want to find her own, if she isn't bringing twenty with her already." Zeso enjoyed the rest of her breakfast with her father. Grey then excused himself to go take care of some paperwork. Zeso went out to the barn. She wanted to see Taran.

The colt was quickly growing active. Taran was rambunctious and healthy and looked up at her when she called his name. The plaque Liam had made for him was hanging on the stall door next to his mother's.

Zeso had also been thinking about her short course on castles that was about to begin. She wondered if they'd go on any field trips to see the nearby ones. She was looking forward to the opportunity to learn more about the history of the land around her. She also found herself looking forward to her mother's arrival tomorrow and then getting to meet LonBreda the next day. It was that final thought that spurred her back toward the house.

As Zeso left the barn, the sky had gone from gray to black and looked like it might pour at any minute. Her father's dogs, which had escorted her earlier, were all gone except Rigel. He was still curious enough to get in trouble, and hadn't learned to take cover from the rain yet either. By the time they reached the main house they were both soaked through. Zeso grab an old towel out of the mudroom and dried Rigel before she kicked off her soaked shoes and ran upstairs to get dry herself.

Zeso appeared downstairs in the hall again an hour later in dry clothes with her hair loosely braided while it finished drying. She found her father working at his desk and, not wanting to interrupt him, she perused the shelves of books in his office.

There was one whole section that looked like it contained all hand-bound, leather books. When she glanced back at her father who was watching, he said, "Those are the records of Alastar. They track who lived and worked here, the horses that were bought, sold, foaled or put

down. Eventually, they kept track of the dogs too.” Grey had risen from his desk and was standing behind her. “Most of the books in here relate in one form or another to the business of Alastar, or to the other interests I’ve gotten involved in. You are welcome to read anything in here. Someday it’ll all belong to you anyway.” Grey was running his hand over some old books, and Zeso could tell by the look on his face he was thinking of ancestors now long gone who’d also handled these books. Then he said, “Ready for some lunch?”

After a bowl of hearty stew, Grey went back to finish a few things in the Alastar office and Zeso went to check out the books in the library.

She was pleased there were so many volumes. She chose what looked to be an interesting hand-bound book that had a single word stenciled on the cover, *Travels*. It turned out to be the personal journal of a young man, namely Alexander the third. He wrote well and included interesting details. Zeso paused for a moment and tried to picture her journals on the shelves here. Hers would be boring compared to this one.

She was little more than half way through when the writing unceremoniously ended. It stopped in the middle of a page. There was nothing else, not even a note in the book. He’d been preparing to go see some relative and his young wife was staying behind because she’d just given birth to their third child. Zeso went back to the shelves to see if there was another book though her hopes weren’t high; there was plenty of blank paper left in this one. As she was looking, her father came in.

“I see you picked the same one to start with that I did.” Grey had picked up the book she’d been reading and was slowly flipping through the pages to the first blank page. His face was holding an odd mix of expressions, both sadness and relief.

“Why does it end abruptly?” Zeso asked.

Grey placed the volume back on the shelf and said, “Those were the last words he ever wrote. He never returned.”

“I don’t understand,” Zeso said. “Did he die?”

“We aren’t sure. He simply disappeared.” Grey had to try and explain this at some point. He might as well start today. Zeso needed to understand the basic properties of The Grove. “He attempted to make a journey alone that shouldn’t be made alone because of the shift it requires. Others went to try and catch up with him, when they learned where he’d gone, but they never found him.”

“That must’ve been hard on his wife and children,” Zeso said. She couldn’t imagine not knowing. She herself would have to search if anything happened to her family.

“It was,” Grey said. “That is why no one attempts that journey alone. No one has ever been given permission, since that day, to journey to that place and time alone.” He hoped this would eventually sense to Zeso.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean place and time?” Zeso’s frustration was pushing to the surface again.

Grey, sensing the tension, said what he could. “He was attempting to journey to an ancient well where the Greyllins had always offered thanks, especially at the birth of a child. Access to the well was destroyed shortly after Alastar’s birth. Alexander the third had traveled extensively, as you read, so he undoubtedly thought he could make the journey.”

“He tried to go back in time, to before Alastar?” Zeso said, hardly believing it.

Grey nodded. “I’ve been back a few times myself, but never alone.”

Zeso just stared at her father. “You’ve... What?”

Grey tried not to laugh. He's grown up in these ways and he'd reacted the same way. "The time shifting that happens also provides some of us with the ability, in the right places, to travel through time. It provides many more with the ability to travel through space, to another location, quickly. But that happens best at certain locations."

"You mean places like The Grove?"

"Yes," Grey said. "Places like The Grove enhance one's ability to move through the flow. Part of the reason many of the Dabandin live where they do is to protect that."

Zeso shook her head. "Am I ever going to get this? I feel like I'm just learning my multiplication tables and I'm supposed to understand calculus."

Grey smiled and said the only thing he knew to be true. "LonBreda is good at knowing what people need, on all levels. She'll be able to give you more help than you currently think is possible. The other thing I can tell you is I myself am still learning. I was raised in these ways and have been working with LonBreda all my life, and I still get surprised."

"Well, I hope she's ready with hours of stories to bring me up to speed," Zeso said. She was pushing the frustration down and allowing the excitement of her mother's arrival to take over again. "Anything else to do before Mom arrives tomorrow?"

Grey had been pondering over the last few days about an invitation he'd received. His presence was requested at another ball. He had assumed they'd have too much to do before Ida arrived but he now found himself wondering if it wouldn't be a good way to keep his mind off of the fact that she was already on her way to the airport. "There is an opportunity, if we want to be busy for the evening." Grey looked at his daughter, trying to gauge her response. She appeared interested, so he continued, "Feel like dancing with your old man again?"

Since this event was a dinner party, they'd be heading out earlier. Grey made a quick phone call to see if his late RSVP would be accepted, and it was, immediately. The Foundation was always glad to have him present at their functions. Certainly, the young Miss Greylin would be most welcome as well. Less than an hour later, he was watching his daughter, in an emerald green dress, practically float down the stairs. While on their way, he attempted to explain anything that might be out of the usual. Their experience with the proclamation of arrivals had taught him to prepare her as best he could.

The party was a large fundraising event of two hundred guests and, to Zeso's surprise, a few young children as well. They sat at tables scattered around the perimeter of a large dance floor. The others at the table with her and her father were all employees of companies Grey dealt with on a regular basis. They were honored to meet Zeso and glad she'd chosen to come. When dinner was over, the music began and Grey once again did a good job of steering Zeso away from would-be suitors.

There were a few young men who managed an introduction, but Grey wasn't allowing any dancing. There was one man though whose gaze Zeso couldn't seem to shake. Each time she looked in his direction, he was plainly watching her. He never looked away, not even to talk to others around him. Zeso found it a little unnerving and flattering all at the same time. He was exceedingly handsome, and his shoulder length, pale blond hair caught the light. He did come over for an introduction, but Zeso wasn't sure how to react. He brought an equally stunning woman with him, whose long, platinum hair stood out starkly against her black evening gown.

"Good evening, Mr. Greylin," he said to her father. "We met once, when I was working the cattle auction at Cork Marts. My name is Raef, Raef Hawley."

Grey smiled politely and extended his hand, "Of course, I knew your father Thom." He turned to gesture toward Zeso, but never took his eyes off Raef, "This is my daughter, Zeso Greylin. Zeso, this is Mr. Raef Hawley and..."

Raef stepped forward and bowed graciously to Zeso while taking her hand, "It is a pleasure." As he stepped back he continued, "This is my sister, Seimene."

Seimene curtsied with elegant grace to both Zeso and Grey but remained silent and didn't extend a hand. Zeso curtsied in return as her father bowed.

Grey said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Seimene."

In the fraction of the second that Grey had pronounced her name, Seimene's eyes had flared. Zeso, who'd looked back to her brother Raef, had missed it, but Grey hadn't.

Grey didn't give Raef a moment to say anything else. He was already guiding Zeso away to, "Meet an old colleague of mine."

As Zeso looked back Seimene had already turned her back and was walking away, but Raef who was still watching her, bowed again.

The rest of the evening was spent meeting other colleagues of her father's and catching Raef watching her every time he was in her line of sight. Shortly after nine o'clock, Grey took Zeso to say good evening to the hostess and thank her for including them at the last minute.

CHAPTER NINE: MORE CHANGES

Grey had already left for the airport when Zeso came down the next morning. She took some time to write a detailed email to Toby to fill him in on the formal event she attended the night before. She made sure to mention that her father had done a good job of steering her away from the young men who were there. She laughed as she thought about how Toby might react to that. She signed off with a promise to tell him all about LonBreda.

After lunch, she thought it'd be a good idea to stretch her legs a little, since she hadn't been keeping up with her daily frustration-relieving dance. She felt a little stiff, especially after two nights of dancing with her father.

Zeso was out walking, with the dogs, when Grey and Ida pulled in the driveway, so Ida got the full reception, daughter and dogs.

"It's so good to see you!" her mother said as she squeezed her tight.

"It's great to see you too, Mom. How was the flight?" Zeso asked.

Zeso and Grey spent the next couple of hours catching Ida up on all of the events that happened over the last week. Doireann also joined them for a short while to make sure that everything was lined up for the wedding, and Ida approved of all that had been arranged. They'd meet later next week with Father Declan to go over the ceremony and make certain things were to Ida's liking. They'd also take a trip into the dressmakers to see if the gowns were right and for Ida to have her fitting. Grey was trying hard to convince Ida he should come with them for this trip, but Zeso firmly cut him off.

"I told you," Zeso said, "You don't get to see her dress before the wedding."

"She's right," Ida chimed in, "bad luck according to the old wives' tales."

Grey said, "Since there is only one I need to listen to I guess I won't get to see the gown until she's my wife."

Ida kissed him on the cheek and said, "Good, earning points already."

Zeso shook her head and went to see if dinner was ready.

The next morning Ida looked refreshed. Zeso was nervously excited. She had her journal full of notes and questions and a handful of pens in her bag ready to go. She wasn't sure how this would work, and she wanted to be ready for anything. Breakfast was quiet until Ida asked about their transportation. "Will we be riding this morning, or are we meeting LonBreda at Rook House, so we can drive?"

Zeso looked back and forth between her parents; this was one of the oddest questions she'd ever heard.

"We're driving. I didn't think you'd want to hop right on a horse after a transatlantic flight."

"Thank you," Ida said. "I really wasn't up for a horse ride this morning. I guess we could always go by carriage if we had to."

"Yes, we could, but I thought we'd be more comfortable in the car." Grey's eyes were dancing with laughter as he conversed with Ida.

"Why, would it matter?" Zeso said.

"Isn't that on your list of questions for LonBreda?" Ida said.

"No," Zeso said. "I didn't think transportation made any difference."

"Well it does, especially if you are headed further in than Rook House." Grey said. "But today, we are going by car and we should get moving. I hope to be back here before it is too late. I've some things to do before tomorrow's meeting."

“So, I guess we aren’t time shifting, or whatever,” Zeso said.

“No, that wasn’t in the plans today,” Grey said. “I thought you might want to have some more information first.”

Less than forty minutes later, they were pulling up in front of Rook House. Zeso wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but the old stone building wasn’t it. It wasn’t a house. There was no second floor and no discernible bedrooms, from what she could see on the inside. There was a vast room with several dining tables and chairs. Hearths at either end of the room had sitting areas, and a galley kitchen ran along most of the back wall. There were restrooms off to each side, and a back door. Seeing the puzzled look on her face, Grey said, “It’s a meeting house, no one lives here.” After turning to hug an elderly woman who’d silently approached, he turned back to Zeso and said, “Daughter, this is LonBreda.”

“Hello,” was all Zeso could manage to say. The old woman in front of her appeared both ancient and youthful at the same time. She had long, gray hair that softly framed her heavily wrinkled face. Yet her bright, clear, pale green eyes shone with an energy Zeso wasn’t sure how to describe.

“Hello to you and welcome,” LonBreda said. She included all of them in the welcome and gave Ida a huge smile and a hug. “It is so good to see you again, my dear, and we’ve much to talk about.” She gestured to the small gathering of comfortable chairs near the hearth at one end where another man stood waiting. “This is Keegan, my assistant. He’ll be with us most of the time today. He also makes delicious tea.” She said the last statement to Zeso and directed her toward the seat closest to the table with the tea and small biscuits.

Grey took a minute to introduce Ida and Zeso to Keegan and then excused himself and disappeared out the back door.

LonBreda, noticing that Zeso was unsure about what was happening, leaned over and said, “Your father knows I may want to access some books, to reference our information today, and he has gone to fetch them for us. Now, I understand you have a few questions. Would you like to start with those, or would you prefer I talk awhile, and then we’ll see what questions remain.”

Zeso thought about this for a moment. “I think it’d be best for you to share with me what I need, and I’ll ask my questions later, if they’re still pertinent.”

LonBreda looked at Ida, as if checking to make sure this was okay with her. With a nod from Ida, LonBreda said, “I think the best way to start is with the story of your father. You can learn the older stories at your leisure. Most of them don’t directly affect you anyway. The few that do, we’ll get to later.” LonBreda took a sip of her tea and began, “The story of Alexander Roby Greylin the eighth.”

Grey, who’d just joined them, rolled his eyes and looked at Ida as if to say, please don’t listen to this. It was no use; Ida was completely attentive to LonBreda and the story she was going to tell.

LonBreda smiled and said, “When Grey was born there was much excitement, not only because there was a new baby, but because he was the eighth. The Dabandin have known for years about the prophecy. ‘The stone will go to the eighth, and he will gift it to her of his flesh.’ Naturally, there was a much-anticipated celebration. Grey grew up believing he’d have a daughter and, according to a prophecy, she’d be special. Then he met this beauty named Ida Madeline, and well, I thought he was going to explode. He wanted to know if she was the one, he came to me every few days with questions about what should he do. I finally told him,”

LonBreda paused. “Do you remember?” she asked Grey.

“Of course,” Grey said. “You told me I made my own choices. The prophecy was only there so I’d pay attention to the consequences of my actions. I needed to be true to myself first, and if it happened to fit with the prophecy, that was okay too. You also told me not to let the one who made my heart dance get away.” He leaned over and kissed Ida on the cheek. “I didn’t.”

LonBreda looked back at Zeso and said, “They were married here in The Grove in the old way and had several happy months together. As they talked about children, they came to me for council. Ida wanted to be near her family, back in America, and I thought it was a good idea. So Ida went back to prepare for life there.” LonBreda looked at Ida whose eyes were brimming with tears.

She hadn’t thought about those days in a long time. Grey took Ida’s hand as LonBreda continued. “Grey came to see me, at my place deep in The Grove and while he was there…” LonBreda’s voiced trailed off. After a sip of tea she said, “Well, let’s say an old sickness flared up again. It was a frightening and terrible time. We lost many elders and children. Eventually, it ran its course, and we could journey forth again. During that time, Grey managed to get a couple of letters out to your mother, through an ingenious plan.”

Zeso and Ida both looked at Grey for an explanation.

“I wrote simple letters and held them up to the window, there,” he said pointing to the back door. “And someone wrote them down on fresh paper for me and sent them.” He shrugged. It hadn’t been a big deal to him at the time. He had to get a letter out to Ida, and the method didn’t matter.

“I’m afraid I kept him busy while he was here. Helping with all the sick and keeping up with the medicine. When he could leave, so much time had passed in your way, he thought all was lost. He begged me for some talisman or anything that might help, but I wouldn’t. I’d

promised his mother not to interfere with his love life in any way. She was certain the woman who'd love him would do so because her own heart demanded it, not because something else had influenced it."

Ida was on the verge of tears again, and Grey was awestruck.

"I'd no idea," he said to LonBreda. "I wouldn't have pestered you if I'd understood. Thank you, for honoring my mother's wishes." Grey hung his head. He looked up several moments later, after the tears that had threatened to fall had passed. He smiled at LonBreda, and then at Ida, who leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

LonBreda said, "He obviously found some way to get in her good graces for a little while. Then, the announcement of the birth of a daughter. Those who put any stock in prophecies, thought they'd lived to see a miracle. Everybody wanted to meet you and where you were going to live. Would Ida keep you in or near The Grove, at Alastar Stables, or back in America? Oh, the questions abounded. Finally, I put a stop to it. I told them what I'd seen, that it'd be years before you came to The Grove, if you came back to visit Ireland. I also told them when you did come, you were to be treated with all respect like any guest and not pranced after like some queen or something. So, you caused quite a stir here for a little while.

"Even Grey's father risked leaving The Grove to go see you several times. I know you believed he was dead. What you should be aware of is that the modern world doesn't understand people living to be older than expected, so we hold quiet little funerals and move permanently to The Grove. For those of us who've always lived in The Grove, it's much easier. We show up in the outside world as someone's relative come to visit for a once in a lifetime trip."

LonBreda paused; she had sensed a question building in Zeso.

"So, is my grandfather still alive?" Zeso said.

“No dear, I’m afraid not.” LonBreda had a great look of sympathy in her eyes. “He passed about a week after he saw you for the final time. I believe you were about ten years old, and had been out horseback riding with your father. He said he knew you were a Greylin the first time he saw you on a horse.

“Enough reminiscing, and on to the important information. The Greylins are a family that can be traced for many generations, back to times when castles and thatched huts were the only choices of places to live and before. I won’t take up time today with tales you can read on your own. The Greylins have always been connected to the land and to protecting the land. Now what that means to you is you are connected to the land and not just land here in Ireland, but elsewhere as well, even to lost land like Atlantis or Mu. Being connected simply means you’ve what we call significance. And in this family if you’ve significance, it usually means you’ve prophecies. As a matter of fact, your father had one about his life that I don’t think I ever told him.” She looked at Grey to see if she had his interest.

“You never told me, but one of your cronies did.” He smiled at her as he said; “If I remember right it was something about four wives and a dozen children by the time I was forty.”

LonBreda was laughing, “That was one of my favorites. Of course I knew from the outset it wouldn’t be fulfilled, but I always enjoyed it just the same.”

Zeso looked at LonBreda wanting to ask, but also wanting to let her convey her knowledge the way she chose. LonBreda reached out and touched Zeso’s hand.

“Is it the time shift that throws you the most?” LonBreda said.

The relief registered plainly on her face. “Yes,” Zeso said. “I don’t even know how to ask about it.”

LonBreda said, “Well, it isn’t an easy subject to explain. You’ll grow to understand it more as you experience it and control it. There are places on the earth where time and energy work together in interesting ways. There are things that can enhance these mysteries. Certain stones or patterns can affect them. Certain energy manipulations or ceremonies can intensify or negate them. And certain beings have an innate ability to move through them. I believe that you, like many of your ancestors, have this ability. It may seem strange to you when you first experience it, but eventually it’ll become something you’re comfortable with. Every time we get together, you’ll begin to sense or register more of this energy. I think, after you’ve some opportunities to be in The Grove, it’ll come easily. Then, we can talk more precisely about it, for now I’m sorry I’ve to be so vague. I promise you, we will get to it eventually.”

Zeso nodded.

LonBreda said, “You wanted to know what all this has to do with you, these abilities and prophecies. You are part of several prophecies but only one that matters at the moment.” She reached for one of the books Grey had brought in earlier and opened it to a page near the back and read, “The stone will go to the eighth,” she looked up at Grey then continued, “and he will gift it to her of his flesh who comes from across the sea.” She looked at Zeso and continued, “For she will be the one who unites the past and the future.” She looked up at Zeso again, “I lost you right there, didn’t I?” she said.

Zeso shook her head in confusion. “How do I unite the past and the future? I don’t even understand it.”

LonBreda said. “Any one of us can unite the past and the future in some way. Your father is the uniting link between his mother and you, his past and his future. Some of us can unite them in other ways. Your mother’s heritage contains a line that goes back to the ancestors who were

part of the building of the stone circles like Drombeg and Stonehenge.” LonBreda looked at Ida to make sure this statement had registered. “And your father’s heritage includes a line that goes back to the festivals of the Sun god Ra. So I can see united in your future the blessings of both fire and earth from the past which will be added to the blessing of wind and water if you do circle the sea.

“What I’m trying to say is don’t get stuck on the ‘unite the past and the future’ line. It is an ambiguous way of saying you will have influence that extends both directions. It can mean many things, and in time, the true meaning will be revealed.”

“What do you mean, ‘extend both directions’? You can’t influence the past.” Zeso said.

“Of course you can,” LonBreda said. “Your past has already been influenced by what you’ve learned. And it’ll be influenced further as you learn more about the true nature of the events and people in your past. For instance, your grandfather Roby, your memories of your time at Disney World have already changed simply because ‘grandfather’ means something more than ‘great-uncle’ does.”

Zeso nodded. “It’s true. Ever since I learned about that it’s made those memories more vital and important.”

LonBreda smiled. “There are other lines in the prophecy,” she said, “that probably mean very specific things.” LonBreda picked the book up and continued to read, “She will ride the thunder and dance with the son of the storm by the peaceful house of the battle king until the time comes to travel north and circle the sea.” LonBreda set the book down and looked at Zeso, “Any ideas?”

“Not a one,” Zeso said. “I don’t understand how to do most of that. I mean how do I ride the thunder?”

“That one’ll be easy for you,” LonBreda said, winking at Grey. “You were given the privilege of naming a new colt, correct?”

“Yes,” Zeso said. “I named him Taran.”

“And do you think you may be allowed to ride Taran?” LonBreda said.

“I’m sure I will, when he’s big enough. I think I’ll be allowed to help train him.” Zeso looked at her father who smiled and nodded.

“And this name that you chose, Taran, do you know what it means?” LonBreda continued with her questions.

“No, it just came to me.” Zeso said.

“Taran is an old Celtic word for thunder.” LonBreda paused to let that register with Zeso, before she continued, “so that part of the prophecy will easily be fulfilled in the next few years. As to the rest, I’ve some ideas, but I think it’s best if you come to them in your own time. If you’d known Taran meant thunder, you mightn’t have chosen it for a name, but it’s his name and you see it’s good, because he’s a part of the prophecy too. As we spend time together and you learn things about your heritage, some of these words will come to mean other things. Some new words you learn will lead to moments of clarity, like the one you just had about Taran.” LonBreda paused for a moment and then said, “I think you’ve enough to process for the moment, so I’m going to shift gears, as they say.” LonBreda smiled at Zeso as if to say we’ll have more time later, and then looked at Ida. “Are you ready?” she asked.

Ida said, “Yes, LonBreda, I’m ready, and it’s time.”

Zeso and Grey had the same looks of confusion on their faces, but that didn’t stop LonBreda from continuing. “Good, good,” she said and sank back in her chair. “You don’t fully comprehend this, but the memories you carry within you are answering and reaching out. You’ll

learn quickly because you won't really be learning, just remembering. You'll probably teach me things I don't remember. Just be comfortable and try to let the images come as they wish. You might want to keep a sketch book or journal handy to jot down ideas you don't understand."

LonBreda hesitated.

Ida had pulled a small book out of pocket of her skirt. "I have been, ever since, well, since I let him back in." She glanced at Grey and then turned back to LonBreda.

"Of course!" LonBreda said. "I thought I heard someone in the circle after Samhain. Well, blessed be!" The excitement and glee were evident on her face. "It looks as if you and I'll be seeing a lot of each other. We'll try to get some time in every week, between now and the wedding. Then we'll talk about a time you can come and stay for a few days if you need to." That seemed to settle the matter for the time being. LonBreda slowly stood up and stretched. "Time I think, for a nice walk," she said to Keegan, who had risen and offered her his arm.

Grey stood as well, and kissed LonBreda lightly on the cheek. Then LonBreda pulled her hood up over her head and allowed Keegan to escort her out the back door.

Zeso looked at her father as if to ask if that was it, but he'd already turned back to Ida. Grey was on his knees in front of her holding both her hands. Zeso, not wanting to intrude, looked back out the window to watch LonBreda and Keegan walk away, but they were nowhere to be seen. They must've moved quickly into the shadows of the trees, she thought. She turned back to pick up her journal. Her mother and father hadn't moved, and unless Zeso had recently gone deaf, they hadn't said a word to each other. It took only a moment for it to register, they were communicating silently. Zeso picked up her journal and went to sit by the other hearth. She wanted to make some notes about all that had happened today. She didn't know if she'd ever fully understand it, but she was beginning to feel better about it.

By the time they sat down to dinner an hour later, back at Alastar Stables, Zeso could hear her stomach growling. All she'd had for lunch was a serving of tea and biscuits. "I'm starving," she said.

"Don't eat too fast," Ida said. "From the looks of the steam, you'll burn your tongue."

"Glad to have you home, Mom." Zeso said.

Grey said, "It's good to have you both home."

The next few days passed quickly, with routine life beginning to settle in. Zeso had her second class on Castles and found them to be intriguing. She was also looking forward to the last week of class, which would include a field trip to some local castle ruins. She made time to email all the details she could remember about the visit with LonBreda to Toby. He said he was glad she was getting some questions answered, and he was anxious to meet some of these people over spring break.

Ida had managed to get back out to see LonBreda on her own for a day, and Grey had spent time mending a section of fence that had been taken out after a branch fell on it. All in all the week passed quickly.

When Zeso came downstairs Saturday morning, Grey and Liam were carrying a large screen into the library.

"Is it movie night?" Zeso said.

Grey said, "Not this weekend, tomorrow is the Superbowl."

Zeso smiled as she headed down the hall to find her mother at breakfast. Grey had been wearing every piece of New Orleans Saints clothing he owned for the last three days.

After they won, Zeso thought he might spend the next three painting the place black and gold. Ida had ordered the official hat and shirt for him as a present, though she didn't know when it would arrive.

As the week of celebration wound into Saturday afternoon, the party continued as they headed back out to Rook House to celebrate.

Rook House felt festive, though Zeso couldn't see anything immediately different about it. There were quite a few people here, forty if she had to guess, but they were all around her parents' age or older. She wondered why. Surely, there were younger adults and children who were part of the community, too.

LonBreda stepped up next to Zeso. "You're quite right," she said, "but I requested this engagement party be for the elders and a few others. I didn't think you were ready for all the young stargazers. I thought you should have a chance to get comfortable with the older Dabandin first. Have fun, and don't take anything too personally. They're all glad you're here and excited to have a chance to get to meet you." With that final word, LonBreda patted Zeso on the arm and slipped off to chat with someone else.

Zeso spent most of the evening being introduced to people whose names she'd never remember, and some of which she didn't think she could pronounce. There was one elderly man following her around, but he didn't seem to have the courage to be introduced. She mentioned this to her father, and he motioned the old man over.

"Valko, this is my daughter, Zeso. Zeso honey, this is Valko. I've known him all of my life. He was a playmate of your grandfather's." Then Grey stepped away to say hello to someone else.

"Hello," Zeso said.

“Hello,” Valko said in a heavy Irish accent. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself but I had to be sure. My eyes play tricks on me sometimes, see.”

“Oh.” Zeso said.

“So, I say to myself, I’s got to go and ask, have you found the young lad with the other stone yet?” Valko looked at her with all intensity, waiting to hear her answer.

“I’m sorry,” Zeso said. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

Valko thought for a moment and said, “The other prophecy, you got a stone and there be a he out there whose got another like it. I’ve been looking most of my life for that one, and I haven’t found him yet. I wondered if you had.” With the slightly sad look of a child who didn’t get what he wanted for his birthday, Valko floated away into the people around her. Zeso watched for him the rest of the party, but she never saw Valko again.

Zeso spent the rest of the evening contemplating what she’d learned and the new mysteries that had been laid out in front of her. Either way, she had a few more questions for her parents and LonBreda the next chance she got. She was tired of half answers and new information being sprung on her. She wanted to know the truth, the whole truth.

At home, she spent some time writing about what Valko had said to her. She emailed Toby about the party but didn’t tell him what Valko had said. She first wanted to be sure herself what exactly was going on.

She didn’t sleep well. She had all sorts of strange dreams about Valko, a real dragon, a young man in a tuxedo on a horse, and Toby standing in front of her with a handful of stones asking her if he had the other one.

Zeso awoke the next morning and dressed, knowing she'd slept late. That didn't matter. She wanted answers more than food, at the moment.

"Well, the sleepy head has arisen," Grey said when Zeso arrived at the table.

"We were wondering if we should come wake you." Ida winked as she spoke.

"Good morning," Zeso said, as evenly as she could.

Grey said. "So, what did you think of the elders?"

"Interesting," Zeso said. "Valko in particular had an intriguing question." Zeso noticed her dad's slight flinch in reaction to her statement.

Ida said, "I'd like to know what that question was."

"He asked if I'd met the 'young lad' who has the other stone." Zeso said, looking back and forth between her parents. They'd obviously forgotten to give her some pertinent information.

"I think it is best if we let LonBreda answer that question." Grey said.

"What exactly aren't you telling me?" Zeso was tired of non-answers.

Ida leaned back with her cup of tea, waiting to see how this would unfold.

Grey looked as if his daughter had pinned him in a corner. "Okay," he said, "I'll try, but most of this'll have to be clarified by LonBreda. Prophecies can come in dreams, in ceremony, or even as a thought. Not all are deemed valid, but all are recorded. There is a prophecy that mentions another stone. However, no one, including Valko, has ever been able to verify that. We don't know for sure who originally spoke the prophecy, or if our translation of it's correct. Just because I heard of a prophecy doesn't mean I understand it. There have been others made that've never come true, like the one about me having four wives and a dozen children. LonBreda has a complete book of the prophecies that've been made. She'll also be able to tell you which ones

she believes pertain directly to you, or to us as a family, and if there is any credence to them.

Aside from that, you'll have to judge for yourself." Grey stopped.

Zeso's expression was completely unreadable. When he looked to Ida, she nodded toward Zeso, who was getting up from the table.

"Zeso," Grey said. "Are you okay?"

"No." It was a one-word statement. The only one she could force out of her mouth. She bolted through the mudroom, grabbing any coat her hand hit on her way out the door.

Zeso didn't look back. She didn't acknowledge the dogs as they came up to her. As she was walking with purpose and ignoring them, all but one fell back to the house. Rigel, who was now used to following Zeso wherever she went, wouldn't be left behind. Zeso didn't mind that he kept pace with her as she trudged through the fields. She was trying to process what had been said at the table. Moreover, she was trying to keep her frustration from bubbling over, though the tears already had.

Seventeen years of stories and ideas and plans, yet never once a mention of The Grove, of LonBreda, or of prophecies. Why had no one told her? She understood much more than they thought she did, and yet they didn't trust her with the information. Her parents had both seen to it that she was well educated. Yet her education had never centered on things that pertained to her family for hundreds of years, a family with extraordinary powers and supposedly significant influence. What else didn't she know? What else hadn't they bothered to tell her?

What was the reason for the stone? Somehow, it was connected to a 'young lad' she was supposed to meet. What did all this mean, and why couldn't anybody give her a straight answer? It was all so infuriating. Where was her rock-n-roll when she needed it?

She came to one of the larger streams on the property. She'd walked further than she'd planned. She sat down on a log near the bank. Some of her anger and frustration had dissipated with the walk, and she didn't feel like getting wet above her knees just to keep going. Rigel took this as a cue to come up for a good scratch, and Zeso absentmindedly obliged. She'd been thinking through all she'd heard so far about her family and the prophecy, 'prophecies' she reminded herself, when she heard a twig snap.

Rigel's ears perked up and his tail went motionless. Zeso looked toward the sound but only saw some low branches move. It must be a rabbit or something, she thought, but why didn't Rigel take off after it? He wasn't that well trained. It took a second for her to recognize the low growl emanating from Rigel, and he'd crouched back, ready to spring.

Zeso was at a total loss. She'd always been comfortable on her father's land, but she'd never ventured this far alone. She didn't know what could possibly be out there that would make Rigel want to growl. She glanced around for a sturdy stick or large rock to use as a weapon if she needed it.

There was a long branch within a few feet, and as she moved for it, Rigel sprung. His aim was good, but his judgment of appropriate targets wasn't. The wild boar he landed on tossed Rigel into the creek. Though Rigel got up with a whimper, he charged the boar again. Zeso had the stick in her hand. The best she thought she'd be able to do was keep away from the wild boar. She tried to call Rigel to her, hoping to keep him out of harm's way. She just gave the boar another target. The boar turned on her and charged.

In the fraction of a second that it took to react, time slowed down, as if it was giving her a chance to think and see the options open to her. She was grateful for all those years of sliding down a pole and releasing frustration with her crazy kick-dancing. She planted the branch and

swung up and around, out of the boar's path, landing in the stream. Rigel went barking and nipping behind the boar for a few feet then stopped, as if he'd finally learned better. Zeso called him back, hoping they'd be lucky and it'd move on. The boar had been a small one, from what little Zeso knew of them. She hoped it was big enough to be long away from its mother. She did know enough not to come between a sow and her piglets. She climbed out of the water, turned back in the direction of the house, and set off at a quick pace. When it appeared the boar wasn't coming back with a whole pack, she took off at a run with Rigel on her heels, until they got to the first benches in the garden. Zeso collapsed on the nearest one. Rigel turned back to her. She called him up, and hugged him while tears of relief raced down her cheeks into his still wet fur.

Grey and Ida had been keeping an eye out for their daughter. After she'd been gone for more than half an hour, Grey had gone to saddle a horse and go out to find her. He'd just led the horse out, when he saw her sitting on the bench. He handed the reins back to one of the stable hands and went directly to Zeso. As soon as he realized she was crying, he pushed Rigel down saying, "Good boy, go home."

He scooped up his daughter and carried her straight into the downstairs library. Ida followed, asking if everything was all right. Zeso couldn't bring herself to speak, and the tears didn't seem to want to end. Grey took her face in his hands and asked, "Are you hurt?"

All Zeso could do was shake her head no.

Grey pulled off the wet coat, wrapped a throw blanket from the sofa around her, dropped his damp coat to the floor, and then sat down to hold her while she cried.

Ida kissed the tops of their heads, picked up the coats and went out to get some warm tea and tissues. Whatever had happened, they'd eventually hear the whole story.

CHAPTER TEN: FINALLY

The next morning Zeso awoke to the longest email Toby had ever written. Zeso had scared him with her brief account of the boar incident. He now wanted all the details, including everything Grey had told her about animals on the estate. She explained as best she could about the land and the wildlife. Then she reiterated her father's promise to teach her all she needed to survive on the land, including defending herself against wild boars. Zeso didn't want to scare him further. Since he thought of himself as her protector, he might hop the next flight.

Apparently, she was the first one up for the tray of fruit hadn't been touched. As she sat down at the table, one of the kitchen staff brought tea and juice out for her and asked if she wanted anything in particular. Zeso asked if she could have a couple of eggs. Ten minutes later, her parents had bumped it up to a full-fledged meal adding ham and potatoes. After breakfast, they were each off to their standard Monday activities.

The next morning Zeso was surprised to find a full-fledged meal again.

"It might be late afternoon before we get back," Ida said, as she buttered her toast.

"Why?" Zeso said.

"You and I have our final fittings, and get to pick up our dresses today if everything is ready. I thought we might check out a few other stores while we're in town, maybe a girls' day."

"I forgot about the dresses. Yeah, I could use a few things while we're out," Zeso said. She only had a couple pairs of good hiking socks, and she wanted to see about some work pants. Her blue jeans weren't heavy enough for some of the bramble.

An hour later, they climbed into Grey's car and headed to town. Zeso was surprised at how well her mother was handling driving on the left side of the road. When they got to the dress

shop, both gowns were ready. Zeso's was a dark shade of blue. Ida's was the palest icy blue and looked stunning. While they were changing back into their street clothes, and the dresses were being packed for transport, Doireann came into the shop.

"Oh good, you're still here." Doireann was thrilled she'd caught them. "I wanted you to see my suit and make sure it's okay." She was back shortly in a skirt and suit jacket of emerald green. It went with her rosy complexion and strawberry blonde hair. "The jacket is the same style as Grey's." She was looking at Ida, and waiting for her reaction.

"Doireann, I think it's lovely." Ida said.

"I like it too," Zeso said. "I think it's going to be a beautiful wedding."

"I agree," Doireann said. "Do you want me to take your dresses back with me? Grey will be gone for at least another hour, so I can put them in the closet of your office and he won't know they're there."

"That'd be great." Ida said, "Thanks, for everything."

"No problem," Doireann said, and flipped her hand. "You guys being here is a whole lot easier than when you were in Ohio." Doireann went back to change, and Ida and Zeso were off to their next stop.

Ida wanted to find some small thank you gifts for Doireann and Zeso, and she needed a gift for Grey. After several stops at boutiques and one camping store, Ida had managed to procure all she needed. Zeso had scored her thick socks as well as new work pants. On the way home, Ida asked Zeso if she was doing okay.

"Yeah, Mom I'm fine." Zeso said, wondering where this conversation was going.

"I was just curious. We haven't had a chance to talk, girl to girl, since you've been here. A lot has changed in the last few months," Ida said, "and more changes to come, I think."

“I’m okay, Mom. It’s a lot to figure out. I think as I get more straight answers, from Dad and LonBreda, I’ll figure out some of this prophecy stuff. As for the rest, I like my class and I think I may have a lead on a good program to continue studying castles, or the history of Ireland in general. I’m trying not to get too far ahead of myself. I mean I can’t ride the thunder until he’s at least two years old, so I’ve got plenty of time to figure it out, right?” Zeso stifled her laugh, until her mother caught on and laughed herself.

“Honey, I’m glad you’re finding ways to deal with all of this. If you need to talk, you can still come to me.”

“I know, Mom. You’ve been busy, too. How go the studies with LonBreda?”

Ida glanced at her daughter, “They’re going fine. I’ve also been approaching it like a class, going several days a week, to learn what I can. The time has come for me to begin learning or remembering some of the ceremonies. Assisting LonBreda requires a lot of knowledge and understanding. I thought it’d be overwhelming at first, but it’s comfortable, like finding an old sweatshirt or your favorite jeans that already feel great. It’s hard to describe it beyond that. There are many pieces of it I still don’t understand. I’m hoping I don’t have to be in charge of anything too soon.”

“It sounds like we both have plenty of learning to do,” Zeso said as they pulled up to the house and unloaded their bags.

Grey had also been out doing some shopping of his own. When Zeso came back downstairs from putting away her purchases, he handed her a bow. “It’s a refurbished one, to get you started. Once we know your preferences and strength, I’ll take you in to get measured so we can have one made for you. We’ll take some time today to get you set up with a target.”

The next few weeks went by in pleasant rhythm of a well-working machine. Her mother went twice a week to work with LonBreda, the same two days a week that Zeso had her class on castles. Grey spent most mornings attending to the business of Alastar, helping with the horses and keeping up with correspondence and paperwork. He spent his afternoons outdoors working on projects, or working with Zeso on her riding and throwing skills. She was quickly becoming proficient with the bow as well.

LonBreda had offered to meet with Zeso anytime she wanted, but Zeso was feeling pretty good about things at the moment and thought it might be best to wait until after the wedding at least. She was writing a lot and was reading any Greylin history she could get her hands on. It was a surprise to her the night her father said, “Well, tomorrow’s the big day.”

The morning of the wedding dawned bright and clear. It looked as if luck and mother nature were on their side, and they’d be granted a lovely day for an outdoor wedding. Doireann and Zeso had arranged to sequester Ida in her office suite, so Grey wouldn’t see her before the wedding. After a quick hello to her father, Zeso went to help her mother get ready.

Grey and Doireann greeted the few guests, and when the time came for all to gather, even the dogs lined the edge of the garden as the workers and staff, past and present, joined the others for the ceremony.

Zeso looked elegant in her dark blue gown. Ida was stunning in her simple, shimmery gown of pale blue. Grey couldn’t take his eyes off of her. She’d stolen his heart the day he met her, and this day was just the public declaration. If anyone had ever doubted how he felt about her, the evidence was clear today.

Zeso was beaming with love for both of them. It was obvious to all present that this ceremony was a formality, for these two had been given to each other for years.

Father Declan's words were simply the statement of a well-known truth. "Friends and family, we are gathered here today to bless a union and celebrate a lifelong love."

The ceremony was as beautiful as the day, and after the obligatory photographs, they all adjourned to the ballroom for the reception and cake cutting. Shortly after the couple's first dance as husband and wife, Grey managed to sneak out, only to return a few minutes later, in his kilt and carrying two shawls made of the same family tartan. "For my bride," he said as he draped one around Ida's shoulders and kissed her tenderly. "And for our beautiful daughter," he said as he wrapped one around Zeso.

The small reception broke up quickly. There were still some daily chores to be done around Alastar, and most of the staff had dispersed after the ceremony and the cake cutting. Keegan had left after he'd seen the gifting of the shawls and said he'd see them all at Rook House. He was also transporting the other cake, so it could be ready when they arrived. It was a few minutes after Keegan left that Zeso noticed her parents had also disappeared. As she turned to ask Doireann where they'd gone, she caught a glimpse out the wall of windows at a couple on horseback headed out across the fields. "I guess he did take care of the honeymoon," Zeso said.

She emailed Toby how the wedding had gone and sent him a few of the digital pictures, then spent the rest of the evening going over her notes for LonBreda. She was hoping other questions would come as the explanations came.

The next morning, Zeso awoke later than she planned. She spent most of the day with the horses, grooming Taran and his mother. She was coming out of the barn when her father came

walking in with his mount. He quickly unsaddled him and turned him over to one of the stable hands, so he could escort Zeso back to the house.

Dinner was a mish mash of leftovers from the party and then some champagne to celebrate their first night in the house as an “official family.”

“We’ve always been a family,” Zeso said, “It just took you two a little while to figure it out.”

“You’re right, of course,” Grey said, “but we needed an excuse to uncork the champagne. We also have, so I’m told, presents to open.”

Ida looked at him and said, “I thought we weren’t expecting any wedding gifts.”

Grey said, “Apparently, some people had other ideas.”

Zeso took that as her cue to hop up and help Doireann bring in the presents. There were only a few but they were important.

Grey gave Ida the necklace and earrings that matched her engagement ring and wedding band. “Those all belonged to my mother.”

Ida gave Grey a pocket watch engraved with both wedding dates. “For the future and the past,” Ida said as she kissed his cheek.

Doireann and Zeso gave them a photo album they’d been working on for weeks. It was a combination of all the pictures they could find, from when Grey and Ida first met right up through the wedding.

LonBreda sent a plaque for the front hall. It was hand carved wood with the inscription, “This house is built on ancient bonds of love.”

There was also a bag that contained some lingerie, an apron and another bottle of champagne. Although no one would say where it came from, Grey said, "I know where it's going." He promptly scooped up the bag and his wife and headed upstairs.

Doireann looked at Zeso and said, "I guess that's our cue to clean up and go to bed ourselves. Good night, dear." And with that she gathered up the wrapping paper and carted it out to the recycle bins.

Zeso turned out the lights and headed up to her own bed.

The next morning Zeso was the first to rise. By the time her parents joined her, Zeso was sitting there reading the paper and drinking her tea. "Well, the sleepy heads are up," she said as they sat down to join her.

Grey snatched the paper from her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, "Good morning to you, too." He smiled as he poured his tea and then turned to the headlines.

Two hours later, they were pulling up in front of the now familiar Rook House. LonBreda was waiting to greet them all with smiles and kisses, and then she said to Zeso, "We've much to talk about. I've many questions to answer for you, some you haven't thought of yet." She winked at Zeso then turned back to Grey with a smile and said, "But we've other business first." With a wave of her hand the crowd parted and the second wedding cake stood waiting across the room. "You've a bride to introduce and a cake to cut."

Grey offered his arm to LonBreda and escorted her to a waiting chair, and then he stepped up by the cake and spoke:

“When I was a lad the story was told of the woman across the sea, I didn't understand then and I'm not sure I do today. But I do know she is here. Most of you present today have met my Ida. She is the most important part of my life and I hers. Some of you think the main reason we're here today is to celebrate a wedding that happened two days ago, but our marriage took place well before that. Our main reason for being here today, is to introduce you to Zeso. We want her to meet you, to feel welcome, and for you to receive her as part of the family.

“Some of you've met Zeso or seen her before, but she hasn't met most of you. We who grew up with the prophecies have known and attempted to understand them for a long time. Zeso first heard some of the prophecies about herself and the stone only recently. Whether that was the best decision or not, it was mine and I take responsibility for what she does and doesn't know. I'd ask you allow us the time to fill her in and help her understand. If she asks you questions, tell her the truth as best you can. She is the one born of the eighth, from across the sea. At least that much is true. Ida, would you join me, please.”

Ida stepped forward and took Grey by the hand. Then she turned and looked at the crowd gathered round. “I'm glad to be back. I don't fully understand, but I've begun working with LonBreda and the understanding is coming. I do know this is home. This is my family, and you've loved me even when I couldn't be here, and I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful you were patient with me while I came to appreciate the old ways, and I ask that you now do the same with our daughter. She's a quick learner, and she's an adept interrogator. We stand before you as her parents to say we want her to understand the truth.

“I also say to you as her mother, I don't want her to think she's no choices in her life, because she's many. That's the reason she was born and raised where she was, so she could

make her own choices. If the past and the future are to come together with her, then she needs to be able to make those choices and to live in both worlds.”

Zeso listened to all this not completely understanding, but watching the room around her and seeing the love and the joy in the faces. No matter what the future held, she'd be safe, and she was home.

LonBreda beckoned Zeso over and a seat was brought for her. Then family and friends filed past, greeting and congratulating Grey and Ida, then stopping to pay respects to LonBreda and to be introduced to Zeso. By the time she'd met everyone, she's sure the names would be a jumble in her brain. LonBreda raised her hand and a moment later they both had punch and cake in front of them. “Dessert first,” LonBreda said. “Life is short.”

Zeso stifled a laugh as she accepted the punch and cake from the young girl in front of her. “Thank you, Olivia,” as she said the name she couldn't believe she'd remembered it.

Cake being served was the cue for the music to start and the buffet tables to be filled with food. LonBreda and Zeso already had seats out of the main path and other chairs now appeared all around the room. There was much feasting, celebrating, and dancing. Zeso had a wonderful time enjoying the festivities and trying to catch the steps of the traditional dances, knowing at some point she'd need to be able to do them if she was going to be part of this community.

It was over an hour later and things had begun to settle down, when LonBreda spoke. “Did you want to ask some of your questions?”

Zeso pulled back to the reality of the moment. “Is it okay if I grab my notebook?”

LonBreda said, “I brought mine.” She pointed to the handmade journal next to her.

Zeso came back with her journal and pen. She paused for moment, “Thank you, LonBreda for taking the time to do this, to explain things to me.”

“It’s my privilege,” LonBreda said. “This must seem overwhelming. I didn’t realize by asking to see your mother it’d force her to try to explain to you what she didn’t understand herself.”

Zeso said, “I’m glad you did. I thought the other day that I wished I’d known this all along, but I think I’m glad I didn’t. It was a bit of a shock, but I’ve had a great upbringing and I’ve always known I was loved.”

“Time for some answers to those questions. Are you going to ask or would you like me to guess?” LonBreda looked at Zeso with a playful smile.

Zeso pulled out her book and turned to her page of questions. “Well, the first one is how did the family make the connection? I mean, how come everybody doesn’t do this shifting or whatever it is? And that leads to the second question, how do you bend time, or time travel or, well what is it exactly?”

LonBreda said, “Let me see if I can explain like this. Did you ever walk through a meadow on a spring day and notice everything around you, all the details of the flowers, the grasses, the bugs, the birds and even the weeds? As if it was all vibrant and alive for the first time and time stood still, like nothing else was happening anywhere in the world?”

“Of course,” Zeso said.

“And have you ever been out somewhere, in a field or down the street, and got called home, or had to get back for some reason, and running as fast as you could you blew past everything and didn’t see any of it?”

“Yes,” Zeso said, recalling her run to the house a couple weeks ago.

“Then you’ve experienced bending time. You see it’s not that we do anything special, anyone can do it. It’s just that most people choose not to, or they choose not to be aware they’re

doing it. The other factor here that you need is there are places on the earth that amplify this ability. We talked a little about these before. Some people may speak of them as power points or sacred places. Adding certain elements or creating healing grids can magnify areas. Names are often given to areas of energy flow that enhance the ability to do things connected with that flow. So in answer to your first question, how the family made the connection, the same way everyone who walks the earth can make the connection, because it exists. Why have we hung onto it? Because some of our ancestors truly understood what was happening and found a sacred power place. We call it The Grove.

“There are many others, but this is home to us. This that you asked about, bending time, however you want to call it, is easy to do when you're conscious of it. Your ancestors have been connecting with the energy for so long and so often, it'll be like breathing for you. And if you're near a place, like The Grove, that enhances it, it's straightforward. Some of the Dabandin choose to stay here and not go back and forth. And some have chosen to go to your time and stay there. Some of us choose to go back and forth, but that can be hard, because the body gets confused. There are natural remedies and energies that work well here, and not so well elsewhere. There are other things that can be done to enhance this ability, and there are those who are occasionally born with some traits that enhance their own ability with the shift as well.”

“You think I'm one of those, one who has some trait that will enhance this ability?”

“Yes,” LonBreda said. “In fact, I would be greatly surprised if you didn't have several traits that enhance your abilities to interact within the flow.”

Zeso was barely beginning to understand and figured it would become clearer as she experienced it. “My other questions,” she said, “tie together as well. What is special about the stone? And how many prophecies are there, about the stone and me?”

LonBreda took a sip of her tea to gather her thoughts before she answered. “As you know, there are many prophecies. As far as you and the stone are concerned, there are twenty-six prophecies of which I’m aware. I believe only four of them have any real credence. The one that specifically concerns you and the stone, you already have, and we’ve spoken about it some. As to the other three, more needs to happen before they can be fully revealed or explained.

“In terms of the stone itself, for many years it has been passed, from protector to protector, to be given at the right moment to the right person. I’ve held the stone for close to seventy years of your time. When your father was born, I waited and watched to see if the prophecy would be real. The stone was real, but that didn’t mean the prophecy would be.

“Then I met your mother. I knew by looking at your father, she was the only woman he’d ever love. It was also probable you’d arrive, and you did. Does that make the rest of the prophecy more likely? I’d say yes, but I’ve three books like this,” she said holding up the journal, “full of prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled. Most of them I doubt will ever be fulfilled and a good many of them have only been partially fulfilled. I must also say I believe your mother was right. You needed to learn all these pieces, and you needed to be raised in America, because you needed to have the choices you’ve had, and the ones that’ll be coming. You needed to have your Toby as a protector, too.

“Does the prophecy make the stone special? Maybe the stone make the prophecy special. The stone was created using some ancient ways. I’ll call it magic for lack of a better word, many years before I was born. I’ve looked at it. I’ve seen the secret it holds, though not many others have. I don’t think that your father has seen it. You’ll hear the prophecy speaks of the stone. There are few alive who know what kind of stone, or anything specific about it. And whether anyone knows the details will be your choice, the first of many yet to come.

“As to other prophecies, we’ll have to wait and see. Valko thought it was his duty to bring up the one he thinks is important. I think he hopes there is another stone, because he hopes to see it. He’s known of the stone and the prophecy all his life. He probably won’t live to see it come to fruition, so he pursued the possibility of another stone, hoping to see that one, or learn more about the prophecy. I hope he didn’t upset you. He’s a kind old man who wanted to be part of something special.”

Zeso thought for a moment, “Is it okay then if I show the stone to the people closest to me? My mother has seen it and I showed it to Toby in America. I always assumed my father had seen it too, but you said probably not.”

LonBreda gazed at Zeso with bright clear eyes, “You may show the stone to whomever you choose. I’d suggest though, that it only be a few, not passed around for all to see. I’d also say, if you wish to see an old man light up with a secret, Valko would leave this world a happy man having been allowed to see the stone.” LonBreda winked. “He might give you a gift in return. Now it’s time for me to take a walk. You young ones can stay up late, but it isn’t so easy for me anymore.” LonBreda stood up and Keegan was immediately at her side to escort her out the back door. Though no one turned to say good night, or make a fuss, they all moved out of the way for her to have a straight path to the door.

Zeso sat for a while thinking about what LonBreda had said. She was about to get up, when Valko filled the seat LonBreda had vacated.

Valko spoke quietly in his heavy Irish accent, “I wanted to take a moment and apologize, if I said anything out of line the last time we spoke.” He could hardly look at her.

“I should apologize to you,” Zeso said. “You were kind enough to help me understand part of another prophecy. Thank you for that.” She pulled the stone from her pocket. “I thought

you'd like to see what the fuss has been about all these years." Zeso reached over and placed the stone in his hand.

You might have thought Valko had been handed a huge gold nugget, the awe on his face was incredible. He looked at it tenderly and protected it from the view of others. When the firelight glinted right and he saw the details of the dragon, his face glowed like he'd seen an old friend.

He handed the stone gently back to Zeso and quietly said, "Thank you, you've given this old man the greatest memory of his life. I won't forget it, or you." He stood and gave her a little bow, and then slipped through the crowd and out the back door.

Zeso smiled down at her dragonstone and then slipped the amethyst back in her pocket. The old man had given her a memory she wouldn't soon forget either.

On the way back to Alastar Stables, Zeso told her parents as much as she could remember about her conversations with LonBreda and with Valko. Her mother was moved by the story, and Grey was pleased as well.

Though it was late, Zeso spent an hour or so writing as much as she could remember about the conversations. She even attempted to sketch a picture of Valko looking at the stone. She also took a minute to email Toby; he'd be waiting to hear all about the party at Rook House.

The next morning she came down with her notebook in her hand and the dragonstone in her pocket. Ida and Grey were both waiting for her at the table.

"Good morning," Zeso said. "I've been doing some thinking, but it looks like I'm not the only one who has things to talk about this morning."

“Good morning. You’re correct.” Grey said, “We do have several things to discuss, and your input is important.”

“Morning dear,” Ida said. “I think maybe you should go first, ours may take a minute.”

Zeso said. “I’ve made some decisions I wanted to get your opinions on, and I want to show you the stone.”

Grey and Ida gave each other a glance.

When neither of her parents spoke, Zeso continued. “What it basically comes down to is I need to learn all I can about the prophecies. I also want to learn all I can about the land and the family. The best way to do that is to go to a local college and live here. If I go to school nearby then I can spend holidays and free time learning about those things. I may be able to pursue a history degree that focuses on the history of our family, or the land. I’d also like to continue my study of the local castles. Anyway, I haven’t sorted it all out yet. Maybe you’ve some ideas?” She said the last looking at her father who nodded.

“Then there’s this,” and with that she pulled out the stone and handed it first to her mother. “I know you got a look at it when I received it, but I wanted you to have a chance to see it again.”

Her mother took the stone in her hands and held it up to the light. Yes, she’d seen it previously, but now she had a lot more information and understanding. Grey hadn’t spoken, or taken his eyes off the stone, since Zeso had handed it to her mother.

When Grey accepted the stone from Ida he said, “I’ve held this stone, all wrapped up many times, debating if I should look at it. I never did. I opened the pouch once, but I saw that it was wrapped again in another cloth. I took that as my sign to wait. If I was to see it, it’d be when my daughter showed it to me.” He held the stone up to see the exquisite dragon inside.

The look of astonishment on his face, and his hesitation before he spoke again, said more than any words could have communicated. Zeso had to bite her tongue not to blurt out, “What?”

Grey hesitated for a moment. “I knew,” he said, “that dragons would be connected to you in magical ways, but I had no idea they were also connected to the prophecy. Dragons have always been paired with the oldest of magic, and their presence is still felt today in some of the ceremonies we do. This is a powerful and well-protected stone. I’m glad you’re going to school here in Ireland. There’s much you can learn that’ll help you to understand the background of the prophecies.” Grey paused, looking at Ida, and said, “I think this makes our decision easier.” Ida nodded as Grey handed the dragonstone back to Zeso.

Ida said, “Your father and I’ve been doing a lot of talking, and there are some situations that you need to be aware of. There are a few medical things I need to see about, so I’m glad you are choosing to go to school nearby.”

Zeso didn’t understand. She took a minute to try to separate things out. “What are you talking about when you say ‘medical things’?”

Ida said, “In our check-ups before we came over, Dr. Sal got some results back showing an anomaly in my blood work. She was concerned so she ordered some other tests. I may have a type of degenerative bone disease, that’s the simplest way to explain it at the moment. I probably need to take more calcium, but I want to be sure it isn’t something more serious, so I plan to have a whole series of tests, as soon as we can schedule them in Dublin. It’s nothing to worry about at this point. We need more information to determine a course of treatment. I’ll also be working with LonBreda, to see if there are any traditional remedies that may help. That’s all we can do for now.”

Zeso wasn't quite sure she comprehended what was being said. "Most degenerative bone diseases are inherited, like osteoporosis. But nobody in your family ever had anything like that. I mean we compiled our medical history, as much as we could find, for the report I did in science. Do they think it is something you can catch? Do I need to go for some screenings too?"

"We don't have all the answers yet honey, that's why I need to have some more tests. And no, it isn't contagious. I checked with Dr. Sal and your blood work came back fine, no abnormalities. Once I have more information, then we'll have more choices about what to do." Ida looked at Grey and he chimed in.

"Zeso, we wanted you to know what was going on. It is nothing to be overly concerned about at this time. I'm glad we'll all be here together, as a family." As if this last statement settled the issue for the time being, Grey turned to Ida and said, "I went to school not far from here." He turned back to Zeso, "They offer specialized courses on the history of Ireland. It might be the perfect place for you to get the education you're looking for, and have you nearby. I'll get in touch with them today and see about getting you some information."

Zeso was grateful her father had artfully changed topics. Her mother was probably more concerned than she was letting on, but she was also correct; there was no point in getting worried until they had more information. So, following their lead she looked at her dad and said, "Great. I guess the only other thing to decide is when I get to start that target practice you mentioned?"

As Ida went back to her tea, Grey laughed and said, "Do we need to start immediately, or can I finish my breakfast?"

Later that morning, while Grey was showing Zeso the art of one of the more primitive weapons, a stone throwing sling, he also had a question for her. "We haven't talked much about it and you won't understand everything, but you are welcome to participate at Ostara."

Zeso looked at her father, "Participate in what?"

"Ostara," he said. "It is the traditional name for the Vernal or Spring Equinox."

"I thought you'd never ask!" Zeso said. All thought of target practice was gone from her head. "What should I know ahead of time? I mean everybody who'll be there knew more at the age of five than I know now. I don't want to show up looking like an idiot."

"Well, there are some things I can share with you," Grey said, "but the rest you'll have to experience. And only those who are of age attend the actual ceremony. There are celebrations throughout the day for all ages, and many activities specifically for the children. We always have colored eggs and lots of flowers and ribbons. There'll be many games to play and, of course, dancing. The ceremony is about the victory of Mother Nature over the death time of Old Man Winter."

"So what do I wear?" Zeso was already getting excited.

"Your mother can help with that but it is traditional for young women to wear pastel colored dresses with ribbons, and often wreaths for their heads, made of flowers and ribbons wound together." Grey gave the best descriptions he could. Ida would be able to explain better. She'd been working with LonBreda in preparing for the ceremony. "You also need to know that because this is a time of balance, day and night being equal, time will probably shift back and forth without you realizing it."

Zeso pondered that statement for a moment. She'd been absentmindedly swinging the stone-throwing sling back and forth while they'd been talking. "I'll know," she said with a matter of fact tone and swung the sling twice around and released it so quickly Grey barely had time to glimpse the can on the fence post 40 feet away before it disappeared into the tall grass with a resounding "ding."

“I’m sure you will,” he said.

The morning of Ostara dawned gray and cold, but Ida was smiling. “It is the Old Man trying to have his one last punch before the Mother says time to play.”

Zeso was excited, too. She and her mother had purchased new, plain dresses, and decorated them with matching ribbons on the sleeves, the hem and at the waist. Zeso’s was a pale violet and Ida’s a robin’s egg blue as she’d been instructed. They’d take the leftover ribbon with them to use in the making of the wreaths at Rook House. After a quick breakfast, they loaded the car and headed out. They brought along their wool shawls made of the family tartan since they’d be outside in the cool evening. Grey had his kilt on for the daytime activities, but he also had a robe for the ceremony. Though she’d asked as many questions as she could come up with, of both her mother and father, Zeso had little additional information to go on.

“You’ll have to wait and experience it,” her mother said, “like I do. Just because I’ve a specific role to play doesn’t mean I understand any more than you. I’ve never been to an Ostara.” Ida purposefully called the ceremony by name. She’d been to several ceremonies with Grey many years ago, including the next one on the calendar, Beltane. But she hadn’t yet attended or participated at Ostara.

Rook House looked as if a legion of fairies had come and decorated with every pastel color and bottle of glitter they could find or conjure up. The children were the stars of the day, and were happily dabbing glitter on the cheeks and noses of the adults and weaving together necklaces and wreaths of spring flowers and ribbons for all to wear.

It all passed quickly. Zeso soon found herself being ushered along a path through the woods. Then she felt it. If it had been described to her, she wouldn't have understood. If she had to describe it, she'd be hard-pressed to find the words. The closest thing she could compare it to was the feeling you get cresting the first big hill on a roller coaster combined with the peace you feel laying in a meadow watching the stars drift slowly by.

Though she was acutely aware of what was happening around her, she was also in a dream-like state. She could clearly see each movement and element as the ceremony unfolded, but the words being spoken sounded like musical raindrops. She couldn't have said what any particular part meant, or if there was an actual translation, but she understood in a way she couldn't explain. It was as if her bones knew when to step and where to turn. Her hands understood this was the motion that made the water flow, and this one was to bring the new seedlings up through the earth.

Her mother stepped forward with LonBreda and helped her with the mixing of the herbs that would allow her to share the prophecies about the time of balance. The flow of what they did reminded Zeso of trees swaying in the breeze. LonBreda stepped up to the place of prophecy and spoke. Zeso didn't hear actual words; she simply understood, the next step in her own journey was beginning, and at the right time, she'd meet him. He'd bring the echo. So pleasant to finally know how it would unfold.

Zeso's next coherent thought was that her father was supporting her, and she was no longer in The Grove itself, but behind Rook House.

"Well, she seems to be coming back around," Grey said.

Zeso was a little steadier on her feet.

“Good,” LonBreda said, from somewhere behind her. “We thought she might shift tonight, and I’m glad we prepared for it. I didn’t think it would’ve been that strong.” She turned and looked at Ida, “and you did beautifully.”

“I couldn’t have done so without your help and preparation.” Ida said. “You’ve been patient with me, and skilled at helping to bring the memories of my ancestors forward. I think it’s time we begin to help Zeso understand more of hers. After the revelations tonight, I’m sure there’ll be questions, and I don’t have the answers.”

LonBreda said, “You don’t have the answers yet.”

Zeso, who was grounded again, stopped and turned on the spot to face the women. “I,” she tried to speak, but couldn’t find the words. It had all flashed in front of her, but as a knowing, not as pictures. She couldn’t have described a single moment, but the awareness was there.

LonBreda, sensing what was happening, reached out and touch Zeso’s arm to help connect her. “Zeso Eliza Greylin,” she said “child of Alexander Roby and Ida Madeline.” As she spoke their names, she pulled each of her parent’s hands toward Zeso’s flesh as well. “Your ancestors are here. We’ve always been. We can and will help you through the unfolding of the mysteries. As you continue on your journey, we’ll surround you, as we always have.”

Grey’s reflexes were so tuned that Zeso had barely started to drop before he’d scooped her up. He carried her through Rook House and out to the car with Ida close on his heels. The best thing now was to get Zeso back to her own bed and let the dreams that were already starting do their work, to teach and guide her. LonBreda had explained what she believed might happen to Ida, and Ida had naturally shared it with Grey, so they’d prepared for this situation.

After putting Zeso on her bed, Grey went down to the kitchen to brew some tea. He'd a feeling Ida would need to talk. After helping Zeso out of her dress and under the covers, Ida kissed her child goodnight and went downstairs to find Grey.

He had a cup of chamomile tea waiting for her, and a blanket in her favorite chair by the fire in his office. She was grateful he understood her as well as he did. She'd need a few minutes to gather herself, before she'd be able to speak.

Grey waited in the chair opposite his wife by the dim fire. He was grateful for the heat but didn't want any overpowering light, or the distraction of dancing flames and the messages they held.

Ida spoke. Her voice was soft, but confident. "I know what Zeso understood this evening. I understood the same thing years ago. It's the knowledge of your future before you, but without clear vision. It's like walking through air and seeing in the mist, glimpses of your future, but not clearly knowing when or how, and then you look down to see where you are, and there's nothing beneath you." Ida paused and looked at Grey to see if he understood what she was trying to communicate.

It was as if he was watching a movie. Grey saw in front of him the beautiful young Ida he'd taken to The Grove, walking through the mists. Seeing his face come toward her and then go away and then a baby, Zeso, coming to her then traveling. Then a young Zeso running to her and then away from her to this man, back and forth and each time the child was getting older. Then Zeso came to her with a young man and away again. Grey had slid forward to kneel in front of Ida, holding her hands and searching past the misty movie in front of him for her eyes.

When he found them, and saw his own reflected back in hers, he spoke. "No wonder you were scared at first. Those images would've frightened any one, hell, they frighten me and most

of it's past. Is that what Zeso saw tonight, or something like it, but about her future?" The concern for his daughter was evident on his face. He'd have immediately done whatever was necessary to relieve all her fears and protect her, if only he knew what those things were.

Ida reached out and placed her hand against the side of his face. "Grey, she's a greater understanding than I ever had. I don't believe she's afraid. I believe she's learning. She's connecting in her dreams this night with our ancestors. The support and the love she needs are all around her. That plaque in the hall, the one from LonBreda, about ancient bounds of love, it speaks the truth. Zeso understands that truth better than you and I understand it."

Ida was doing her best to communicate to Grey that their daughter was ready for all the information she'd received tonight. "Zeso has always felt out of place, not sure of who she was. Tonight, for the first time, she felt connected to her world and to all those in it with her. She understands that she's a purpose and a reason to be here, that her talents and quirks will aid her on the path she'll walk. She now sees these things as gifts, not as hurdles to be overcome. I think we need to be prepared to be outpaced by her new learning curve." Ida relaxed; she'd seen the understanding register in Grey's eyes.

"She's going to need a better teacher for target practice, that's for sure." Grey understood how quickly Zeso was going to move beyond his expertise. He also needed to get her working with one of the barrel riders, too. She'd need to have opportunities to challenge herself on horseback, as well as on foot.

Grey stood up and reached for Ida. "Well, our baby is a full-grown woman with an exciting and miraculous life ahead of her. I guess the best thing we can do is to be here for her and hang on. It looks like it's going to be a bumpy ride."

“Extremely bumpy,” Ida mumbled as she stood and took Grey’s arm and let him lead her up to bed. She’d a feeling the ancestors would be teaching her a few things in her dream time as well.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: WHAT WAS THAT

The next morning Zeso awoke to a bright and peaceful day. She was getting dressed and musing to herself about the great time with the kids the day before. Suddenly, she'd the full flash of all that had transpired during the evening at The Grove. She stopped mid brush stroke with her hair and replayed all she remembered. The visions hadn't been clear, they had been like walking through a mist, but she'd seen him or rather felt his presence. She couldn't describe what he looked like, but she knew how he felt to her soul. Valko was right. The young man in the mist had an amethyst too. But how she'd find him or recognize him when she actually saw him she didn't know. She finished getting ready and headed downstairs.

Her mother was waiting for her at the table. Her father had eaten and left to help with a situation that had come up at Rook House.

"Good morning," Zeso said as she took her seat at the table.

"Good morning and Happy Spring." Ida said. "Did you rest well?"

"Yes," Zeso said. She felt at moments as if she'd had the best rest of her life and at others as if she'd spent the night in an intensive class. "I also think more was going on than my resting, but I'm not sure how to explain it. Frankly, there's a lot that's happened in the last twenty-four hours of this time that I don't know how to explain."

"Does it bother you, that you can't explain it?" Ida said.

"No," Zeso said. It was true she couldn't explain it, but her experience felt natural. "I'd be hard-pressed to attempt to describe it to anyone, and I understand why you couldn't explain any more than you did before we went. It's a uniquely personal event for everyone, isn't it?"

“Of course,” Ida said. “I saw much of what you did, all that had been revealed and possibly some of what it meant.”

Zeso was full of questions. “Was it like a mist-filled movie for you, too? What else did you see? Who is the young man? What happened after we got to Rook House?”

“Slow down,” Ida said. “Yes, it was mist-like for me as well, though clearer this time than the first one I saw years ago, before you were born. Your father experienced the mist movie, too. I shared the images with him,” Ida explained. “I saw many things that pertain to my path and my learning with LonBreda, things that aren’t important for you at this time. No, I don’t know who the young man is, but he’s aware of you. He’d have had his own sort of vision of you by now, and is probably asking someone he trusts similar questions to the ones you’re asking.”

Ida paused and took a sip of tea. “When we got to Rook House last night, before we went in, you had a flash of knowledge of sorts. Your conscious mind registered in one instant all you’d seen and processed in the hours in The Grove, like an instant download that sent your system into shock. LonBreda used her connections to link your father and I to you, to provide the balance and the history you needed to understand.”

Zeso looked at her mother and was ready to open her mouth to ask how, but then she felt LonBreda’s hand on her arm, and then her parents’ hands as well.

“Close your eyes and picture it,” Ida said.

Zeso did as instructed and in her mind’s eye, she saw LonBreda placing the hand of her father on Zeso’s arm and it felt like an invisible cord had joined them. Then LonBreda placed her mother’s hand on Zeso and it had the same feeling, like being permanently linked. As she looked up at LonBreda in her vision, she saw the crowd. Zeso was about to ask who, but then she

recognized her grandparents, and a couple of the great grandparents from photographs she'd seen. These were her ancestors.

Zeso opened her eyes again and looked at her mother. It was another second before her mother opened her eyes as well. "She connected us back," Zeso said.

Ida said, "She did. LonBreda's actions last night bonded us together to give you the foundation you needed. In doing so, she brought back into line the connections in my family that had been broken for a long time. She linked not only you, but me as well, back to our ancestors. She reconnected me with the memory and the authority that passes through families to step into the role for which she's begun to train me. She gave me the foundation for what I'm to do." Ida paused, wanting to make sure this was sinking in, and to give Zeso a chance to catch up. "She also awoke the connections in you from Grey's side of the family. You've had them all along, the memories that are stored with them and the information that's part of your DNA will be easier for you to access. It should also make things easier to comprehend, even if you can't find words to describe them."

"I guess that's part of why I feel like I had a crash course in history last night," Zeso said, recalling her rest.

"I'd a similar dream time, but I think the nights will get quieter. I think they all had to say hello last night, and now they'll take turns stepping up, as needed. At least I hope so. I don't think we can survive too many nights with a house full. Your father also had some of the same things going on, though he's been connected all along and has been working with his ancestors since he was born. That's part of the explanation for some of your talents." Ida stopped. It was obvious her daughter understood and was at peace, not only with what had transpired, but also with herself. Just as Ida recognized this, something in Zeso was changing. The peace was still

there underneath, but something else was happening on top of it, some urgency was coming through. “What is it, Zeso?”

Zeso was beginning to understand something she was sensing. “Dad’s on his way to get us, something has happened in The Grove.” Following her intuition, Zeso stood and headed to the hall to grab her shawl. Her mother’s hand came in right behind hers to grab the other shawl as well.

Grey pulled up to the door to find both women standing there waiting for him. As they climbed in, Grey said, “Your presence is needed in The Grove, both of you.” Without another word, they were headed back to Rook House. They went in the front door and then directly out the back. Grey was leading the way at a quick pace, and they shortly arrived at what Zeso would’ve described as a small hut. It looked as if a good wind would knock it down.

As they stepped inside, LonBreda stood up from her seat by the fire. Zeso went straight to her to ask what she was to do.

“He asked to see you once more before he leaves.” LonBreda made this simple statement and Zeso understood immediately the situation. This small home belonged to Valko and he was dying to this world. Zeso glanced toward the next room and LonBreda nodded.

Zeso stepped through the door quietly. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected to see. How does an old man look on his deathbed? What she saw was the old smiling man sitting up in his small bed waiting for her. She smiled at him, and went and sat on the edge of his bed. He handed her a small pouch. It was exactly like the pouch her dragonstone had been in, only this one was old and worn from years of use. She looked at Valko in puzzlement.

Valko spoke in his heavy Irish accent. “I made that pouch. It was brought back to me a few years ago and the man asked me to make another one. I said I would. When he came back to

pick it up he brought that book.” Valko pointed to a small leather bound journal lying on the table by the bed.

Zeso picked it up and turned it over in her hands. It was well worn and there was a small mark on the back cover. It was barely discernible but it was there, the outline of a flame.

“I make books like that. My mark is the ears of the wolf, that mark, that’s the mark of my father. He made that for the granddaughter of the old dragon Mage. She used it to keep track of her history. I read it. She’s part of the family that has the other one, the other stone. I want you to have it. You’re the only one it’d matter to.”

Zeso said and did the only things that came to mind. “Thank you for your kindness.” She stood and kissed his forehead. “Journey well, till I see you again.” She cupped his face with her free hand and smiled at him. Then she turned and left the room to give him his space and his peace. As she came out, LonBreda nodded to her and then went in to check on Valko.

In that small moment alone, he’d passed on to begin his next journey. LonBreda came back to the door and beckoned Ida. Ida followed LonBreda back in to the room and helped her to wrap Valko’s now empty shell of a body in preparation to move him for a ritual burial.

Zeso felt the need to be outside and her father followed her out. Zeso handed him the old worn bag. The man who’d carried and protected its twin for years would recognize it immediately.

As Grey held the bag, Zeso imagined he was wondering what had happened to it. The one he’d given her was in almost perfect condition not six months ago.

He looked at Zeso, “The other stone was in here.” Grey wasn’t quite sure if he was asking a question or making a statement.

Zeso nodded. She'd no words for what was forming in her mind, and she couldn't imagine the prophecies and conversations that were falling into place for her father.

Ida and LonBreda stepped from the house a moment later, as Grey was handing the bag back to Zeso. LonBreda smiled. Valko had waited today for Zeso. He'd given her the bag and the book, and that was as it should be. Now, she would watch the other pieces fall into place.

Zeso was looking to her, so LonBreda spoke. "Do you want to know?" She'd been holding a picture in her mind's eye, and some misty shadow of it had registered with Zeso.

"Yes," Zeso said, "I think I do."

LonBreda knew future history could be murky, and sometimes frightening, if you didn't have the right perspective. "I see two young ones listening intently to their grandmother telling the stories of the days she received the small tattered bag and the beautifully preserved identical one they're holding." Then she stepped past them and began the short walk back to Rook House.

Grey gave Zeso a loving brush on her cheek, then took Ida's hand, and followed LonBreda back toward Rook House as well.

Zeso stood there for a moment trying to wrap her thoughts around what had been said. She finally shrugged to herself, "At least I'll live to be an old lady." Tucking her new treasures away in her pocket, she set off following the others back. As she walked, she thought about the other item Valko had given her, the small book. She'd wait until she was home to go through the information there, but it would become one of those treasured family heirlooms, maybe one to tell stories from to her grandchildren.

The morning of Zeso's last class dawned bright and cheerily. Zeso was pleased; though rain or mist was typical in this part of the world, a clear morning was an unexpected and welcome start. The castle ruins they were going to see today were closer to her than the school, so she'd arranged to meet them there. Her father had some errands to run, so he agreed to drop her off, with the promise she'd call when they were done, or after she got home if someone from class gave her a ride.

They were meeting at a gravel pull off along one of the roads that led up into the northern parts of County Cork. There were some fabulous ruins to explore that were open to the public, and some great spots for viewing a few private castles that could be seen with binoculars from the surrounding hills, if you wanted to climb up. As Grey dropped her off, there were already two other classmates there, and the van from the college was meandering up the road.

"Have a good day," Grey said as he waved to her and then headed off to complete his errands.

Once the van emptied, their professor gave them all copies of a map of the grounds, highlighted a few must-sees, and then led the way down to the ruins.

Zeso was entranced. All she'd been learning was now more than a picture in her head. A wall that was six to eight feet thick was hard for her to imagine, until she walked around a few of them. The narrow and deep openings in the walls for the archers were barely wide enough to see through, let alone aim properly. After lunch, they pulled out the binoculars. Zeso was fascinated by the views of some of the private castles. She'd read about a castle that had been transformed into a hotel and was hoping to get a chance to stay in it someday. But to own one and live in it full time? That'd be something.

As they were packing up to leave, one of the girls said, “There is supposedly a neat old castle you can see from the ridge if there isn’t too much fog, but nobody climbs up to look anymore; it’s too rough.”

“Not for me,” Zeso thought. She waved her phone at the professor, saying her Dad was coming to pick her up. As soon as the van headed down the road, she was off to trek up the ridge. It was steep but her footing was sure. She’d learned a long time ago to test the ground in front of her, before putting her full weight on it. As she crested the top of the ridge and got her first glimpse into the valley beyond, her breath escaped her from the sheer beauty of it.

Areas that had long ago been reforested surrounded gently rolling hills and pastures. One of the pastures had a few horses in it. On the southwestern side of the castle, a beautiful wildflower garden led into a small but well-tended orchard. The drive that led up to the castle was a modern road but there were no other homes to be seen for miles in any direction. The creek that ran along the western border of the grounds, fed a pond. The eastern and northern sides were bordered by what appeared to be dense woods that led up over the next ridge.

Zeso lowered her binoculars to take in the complete picture and to try to get over a little farther to get a glimpse of the main gate. As she edged along the ridge, the rocks were getting looser and her journey would have to come to an end. To go any further wouldn’t be safe. She looked again through the binoculars to enjoy the view one last time then turned and tucked them in her pack to start the trek back along the ridge and down the side she’d come up.

As she took her first step, she felt the slide begin. It was a small one and would only carry her a few feet down the slope. She was sure she’d be unhurt. The question was going to be how to get back up the slope. She stopped about a yard from where she started. She waited for things to settle and then picked her way carefully using her hands as well as her feet and her knees.

When she was sliding for a second time, she remained unconcerned until she saw that slide was pulling the base out from underneath a large boulder. As she weighed her choices, time slowed down for her, so she could choose. As the boulder tipped, she saw that it was a large flat rock and she could land on top of, if she sprang up at the right moment. She was now going down the hill, like it or not.

As the boulder flattened out in front of her, she pushed against the loose rocks where she was crouched as best she could and scrambled on to the stone. As soon as she was on, she realized she'd have to jump off before it reached the bottom. It wouldn't be safe to come to a sudden stop with a large boulder under her feet. There were some small trees growing out of the hillside a yard or two from the bottom. That should mean more stable ground. As soon as she got close enough, she leapt off the boulder and landed near the trees, steadying herself by grabbing on to one of them. Then she turned to let her eyes follow the boulder down to make a splash in the creek.

As she looked up, she saw a rider on a fast horse coming toward her from across the field. "What a great way to meet somebody, trespassing on his or her property," she thought.

Zeso turned and crept her way down the last few feet of the ridge until she was sure she was on solid ground. She didn't think this would go too badly, but she wanted sturdy earth beneath her either way. As the rider approached, he swung down off the horse before it had stopped and was in front of her quickly, as if he was ready to catch her. She thought that was a strange way to react until she looked where he was staring and saw her jeans had been scuffed up and there was blood coming through by her right knee. "Oh great," she thought, as her body caught back up with real time, and her leg buckled underneath her. He caught her and steadied her, before she could attempt it herself.

“I keep telling him he’s got to let people visit before somebody gets hurt climbing over that ridge.” He put his arm around her and helped her to hobble towards the castle. By the time they arrived at what appeared to be a side entrance, there was an old man standing at the door, holding it open.

“Bring her in,” the old man said. “Put her on the bed in the guest room. I’ve already called for Doc.”

Before Zeso could register what was happening, the younger man lifted her up and carried her in through the kitchen of the castle, past the main hall into a small bedroom appointed for guests.

“You’re going to need to take those off, or Doc will cut them. Do you need any help?” He was pointing to her jeans as he spoke, after placing her on the edge of the bed.

“I don’t know your name and you already want to help me out of my jeans?” Zeso wasn’t quite sure where the remark had come from, but it had an interesting effect.

He blushed slightly, so it highlighted his golden eyes, and with a polite regal bow he said, “Eldroi, at your service, my lady.” As he straightened up, she was the one blushing. His long dark hair had swung loose from the collar of his coat when he bowed. She had to force herself to find her voice again.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, under the circumstances. My name is Zeso.” She nodded as politely as she could; a curtsy wasn’t an option. “And in answer to your question, I think I can manage on my own, but I don’t want to get blood on the covers.”

Eldroi smiled as he slid off his long riding coat, reached out and lifted her up to spread the coat on the bed and set her gently back down.

“Thank you, Eldroi.” As she said his name, there was a hot spot that flared on her thigh and she flinched.

He saw it and reacted immediately. He was poised to catch her again, but whatever it’d been had passed. He bowed again and said, “I’ll step out and see if Doc’s here yet.” And with that he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

There was no use waiting, Zeso had to get out of her jeans. She leaned back to unfasten them so she’d only have to balance on one leg long enough to push them down. She sat back down on his coat, and was glad it was made of worn smooth leather, not some oiled wool or anything else that would’ve made her more uncomfortable than she already was. She pulled her light jacket off and draped it across her legs like a short skirt. She tried to see what her leg looked like but then there was a knock on the door.

“Come on in,” she said, trying to sound cheerful. Her leg had begun to sting a little and she was hoping the doctor was good at his job.

The door opened to admit an older woman, but she’d a bright smile and a bag full of supplies. “Hello,” she said. “The name’s Summervok, but nobody remembers that, they all just call me Doc. Old Cadeyrn said you took a nasty slide down the rocky hillside, but it doesn’t look too bad. Let’s clean this up a little and see what’s going on.”

Doc pulled a bottle of liquid from her bag along with a hunk of what appeared to be cotton cloth and cleaned the wound on Zeso’s leg. Zeso had been prepared for the sting of alcohol, but there was none. There also wasn’t any of the smell that usually accompanied cleansing solutions. Doc pulled a pair of tweezers from her bag and picked some of the grit and one tiny rock out of the wound.

“It’s a superficial wound. I’m going to put some ointment on and bandage it, no need for stitches. You’ll be sore for a few days, and that’s going to be a nice bruise, but you’ll be fine. Leave the bandage on until tomorrow, then rinse it with clean water and use some more of this on it.” She handed Zeso a small jar of homemade ointment. Zeso gladly accepted it; her leg was already feeling better.

“Thank you,” Zeso said. “Do you need an address to send the bill to?” She wasn’t quite sure how all of this was unfolding, but she didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

Doc said, “I was paid a long time ago. I was taught by the Doc who patched me up the first few times I slid down ridges. He got tired of fixing me up and taught me how to do it myself.” With that, she turned and left.

Zeso wasn’t quite certain what to do next and figured she’d have to put her torn jeans back on and then, then what? Another knock at the door halted her thought process. She draped her light jacket back across her legs and said, “Come in,” one more time.

The face that came in wasn’t one she expected. It was the older man that she’d seen for only a moment. He had a pair of clean jeans in one hand and her pack in the other.

“The name’s Cadeyrn, Miss Greylin, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m sorry you had to do it sliding down the hillside. Doc said you’re going to be fine, so there’s nothing to worry about. Eldroi pulled these out of one of the closets. He said they’d be a little big, but loose might be good. He also said it was a pleasure making your acquaintance and he hoped to see you again, but he had to take off on an urgent errand, though I’m not quite sure what that’d be since he only just got here when you came sliding in.” Old Cadeyrn had been thinking aloud as he was walking back out of the room.

He turned and said, “Your pack there was ringing while Doc was here, so Eldroi answered it. Apparently, he couldn’t make himself understood, so he gave the phone to me. I spoke to your father and explained what had happened. He should be arriving shortly. After you’re ready, you come on out. I’ve got some tea and biscuits waiting in the dining room.” Cadeyrn pulled the door shut behind him as he left, and Zeso held up the clean old jeans. They looked like they’d do, so she eased herself into them.

They were a surprisingly good fit though a little baggy, which was good around her knee. When she stood up, she was a little stiff, but steady on her feet. She picked up Eldroi’s coat and wondered what he’d worn since she’d been lying on this. She hadn’t gotten any blood on it either. She was glad of that. She rolled up her torn jeans with the dragonstone still in the pocket and tucked them in her pack. Then she carried the coat along with her pack, out of the guest room and across the hall, down to where she could see the back of Cadeyrn at a table. As she walked in, he motioned for her to take the chair to the left of him. She set her pack on the floor and placed Eldroi’s coat over it.

“In Eldroi’s hurry to leave, he left his coat behind,” Zeso said as she accepted a cup of tea from old, but steady hands.

“He told me that was in there,” Cadeyrn said. “Eldroi said for you to wear that one home since you didn’t have anything warm enough for tonight. He took one of his others to wear.”

“He has--?” Zeso had wanted to ask why Eldroi had extra coats there, but stopped mid-sentence as it was none of her business. “I’m sorry,” she said “I was on a field trip with a class and they...” She wasn’t sure how to explain it all.

“Not to worry,” Cadeyrn said, “your father explained what you were doing, and I can tell you this, you’re in far better shape than he was the first time he slid down that ridge.” Cadeyrn’s

matter of fact telling of her father's exploits had Zeso shaking her head. "I guess you didn't know that did you? Well, I knew your grandfather, and he got a few skinned knees the same places I did. Your father spoke to me a few weeks ago about the class you were taking and wondered if I wouldn't mind if he brought you over for a visit sometime. I guess it had to be you who brought him for a visit. You're welcome to come back anytime, but use one of the easier entrances, okay?" He smiled and winked at her as she sat munching on a biscuit.

There was a quiet chime from a bell. Cadeyrn said, "That'll be your Dad pulling in. We'd better go out front and meet him, or he'll think we've sent you to the hospital."

Zeso laughed and said, "Cadeyrn, thank you for everything." She picked up Eldroi's coat and slipped it on. The sleeves were a little long, but it was warm and smelled like a salty fire, a scent she found she liked. She picked up her pack and headed out the front door with Cadeyrn. Her father was pulling up and was practically out of the car before it stopped.

"Are you okay?" Grey said as he was holding her face, searching her eyes for any signs of pain.

Zeso had a glint in her eye when she said, "I'm in better shape than you were the day you slid down the hill." Zeso winked at Cadeyrn and then gave her father a quick kiss on his cheek.

Grey relaxed and shook his head. Turning to extend his hand to Cadeyrn he said, "Thanks O.C. I should've known you'd find an excuse to tell my old tales. Maybe I'll get LonBreda to come with me next time and she can tell some about you." He laughed and clasped his old friend on the shoulder. "I'll call you tomorrow to schedule that visit, okay? Now that you've met the daughter, you might want to say hello to her mother again."

"That's fine, Grey, but you better drive them over until we can teach this one the other paths, okay?" Cadeyrn was laughing as he waved them away and went back into the castle.

“Wow,” Zeso said as the big ornately carved door closed behind him. Seeing that ancient entryway had been worth the injury she received getting there.

By the time they reached the house, Zeso had reported the day’s events, including the slide down the hill, and the gallant rescue by Eldroi. She skipped the part where she made him blush offering to help her out of her jeans. She also managed to get information out of her father about the little exchange between him and Cadeyrn. Zeso had ruined a surprise trip to meet a friend of Grey’s who owned a castle.

Grey helped her up the steps to the door and then her mother took over from there. On the way up to her room, her mother had to hear the whole story over again, in detail, and gave Zeso a slightly knowing look as she glossed over the blushing scene.

“Well, give me your jeans, and we’ll see if they aren’t too badly damaged,” Ida said as Zeso finished her story.

“They probably have a small rip,” Zeso said, “We just have to get the blood out of them.” She was hoping they’d come clean. They were some of her favorites, though the ones she had on were comfortable, too.

“The blood won’t be any problem, an overnight soak in cold water with a little hydrogen peroxide, and they’ll be good as new.” Ida held out her hand to take the rolled up jeans, but Zeso suddenly remembered the dragonstone in the pocket.

She unrolled the jeans and pulled the dragonstone out. It was still warm. Zeso froze. Why was the dragonstone warm? Her jeans were cold. She remembered the flash of hot pain she’d had talking to Eldroi. That pain had been up near her hip, near the amethyst, nowhere near her injury. Zeso wasn’t sure what had happened, but something was different.

Ida, aware too that something had changed, said “What is it honey?”

Zeso opened her hand to look at the stone, aware that she hadn't answered her mother who was watching her every move. She held the dragonstone up to see the dragon within. To her astonishment, he bowed his head as if to say, 'Pleased to meet you' and then lay down, curled around himself and, Zeso was quite sure, fell asleep.

Ida, who while watching all this unfold, had dropped the jeans, picked them back up and said, "I guess something triggered the old magic." As if that settled matters, she walked out of the room.

But that didn't settle matters as far as Zeso was concerned. What had happened? She began to think through all the possibilities. Maybe it was because she'd been hurt. Or maybe it was where the stone had been; maybe there was some old magic in the castle that had awoken the dragon.

Her mother came back fifteen minutes later, carrying a tray of hot soup and rolls. Zeso was still sitting there holding the stone with a vacant look on her face. Ida set the tray down on the table and went over to her daughter. She knew the symptoms of shock when she saw them. She placed the amethyst on the nightstand, where Zeso left it, and then she helped her daughter lie back into her bed. There'd be no harm in her leaving that heavy coat on tonight; the extra warmth would be good. She removed Zeso's hiking boots and pulled off her damp socks. She pulled the covers up around her feet and kissed her goodnight. She left the soup and rolls in case Zeso came round in the next little while and was hungry. Ida left the small lamp by the table on, turned out the other lights, and pulled the door closed behind her. Then she went to find Grey and fill him in on the new developments, and to ask a few questions of her own.

Zeso woke hours later. She took a few moments to verify her surroundings. The sight of the now cold soup and rolls on the table made her hungry. She got up, stepped into her slippers,

and took the tray downstairs. She could warm it up and find some good jam for the rolls in the kitchen. About halfway through her midnight meal, as she went to brush some crumbs off her sleeve, she was staring at the sleeve of a coat that wasn't hers.

It was a good thing she was sitting down, as the memories of the previous day's events tumbled through her mind. She saw again those golden eyes the faint blush had enhanced, and the long dark hair that had slipped loose when he'd bowed. She felt herself blushing again as she had then and she dropped her head down onto her arms. The smoky salty scent that filled her nostrils filled her mind with the picture of him. She remembered how he'd so easily picked her up and carried her in through the castle.

Good, bad or indifferent, she was interested in knowing more about Eldroi. She wondered too, if she'd get to see him again. As she made her way back up to bed, it didn't much matter; she now had a sleeping dragon to figure out.

LonBreda smiled as Cadeyrn came through the door at Rook House. She'd been waiting to see him and to talk of all that had passed. He smiled and accepted the seat across from her by the hearth. He took his time retelling all the events as best he could of the day before. He told of Zeso sliding down the ridge and Eldroi bringing her in. Of Eldroi's strange behavior, and of his having to leave, immediately after arriving.

LonBreda continued to smile and nod. She may know what caused Eldroi's sudden departure but it wasn't her place to say. She wanted to get Cadeyrn telling the old stories again. "I think it is time for you to tell again the tale of the dragon meeting, especially to Zeso, since she's such a fondness for them." LonBreda had a glint in her eye as she smiled.

Cadeyrn stopped with his tea inches away from his mouth and set it back down on the table. He spoke plainly to LonBreda; “You know something you’re not telling.” They’d known each other for far too long to mince words. His quiet stare held love as well as insistence, and he’d wait all day for her to answer.

LonBreda said, “The prophecy, as I’m sure you’ve surmised, relates in some way to dragons simply because of how it came to us. You and Valko have had many conversations as well, about the second stone and who may have it, though I believe you know more than you ever let on to Valko.” She paused to make sure Cadeyrn saw that she had all the pieces of the puzzle, except the one he could provide with certainty. “I wanted to tell you it’ll be important for Zeso to know you are one of the last living to have seen a dragon, and the story of it’ll be special to her in ways you could never imagine.”

LonBreda took a sip of her tea while debating the next sentence. “I know who one of the others is that has seen the dragon and his stories will be important in their own time, for now Zeso must begin to not only believe, but really understand. There are many twists to the path stretching out in front of her and the story will be important for her to hang on to.”

Cadeyrn said, “I know you must be careful about what you say. That you can’t tell me directly what you think I should do, but I can tell you what I believe, and you can stop me if I’m walking down an empty path.” He paused.

After LonBreda nodded, he continued. “Eldroi has a part to play in this tale, of that I’m sure, but to what extent I’m uncertain. His heritage will be important on Zeso’s path. If I can, I’ll provide the space and the opportunity for them to interact as often as possible. Zeso is interested in castles, as well as dragons, and I’m sure will gladly come visit as often as I allow. Since Eldroi is there on a regular basis to help out and keep me connected, it’ll be of no consequence for them

to have plenty of time to interact.” Cadeyrn paused to make sure LonBreda had a moment to interrupt him if necessary.

LonBreda continued to drink her tea, as if listening to a fascinating story, so Cadeyrn spoke again.

“I also know from walking too many winters on this plane, there’s never been a prophecy of this type come to pass that doesn’t also come with obstacles. I fear there may be some major ones in front of Zeso. There’s been talk circulating of power places becoming stronger. Those opposed to such thinking are turning to outside sources for help. Because Zeso and Eldroi are two of the key players, others will be looking to stop them. I believe the time’s come to add protection. It’ll only make them easier to spot and in some ways will verify the target, but it is time for the next layer. I think it is necessary, to change the energy around them and those who’ll help them on their journey.

“The dragons have stirred, but they can’t yet protect, and they’ll need protection until the echo can take over. That group of power hungry idiots at Éireann Steele is always watching. As soon as they realize who Zeso is and connect her to the prophecy, they’ll be looking to stop her any way they can.” There, he’d said it. All his cards were on the table. It was up to LonBreda to make the next decision.

LonBreda had set her tea down and was no longer smiling. She knew well the old rites of which he was speaking. As soon as it was done, all connected to the prophecy would have some awareness of their piece in it, whether they’d believed it up until now or not. She stood and extended a hand to Cadeyrn. He stood as well and, taking her hand, they went out the back of Rook House and headed for the heart of The Grove.

Zeso awoke, and spent a few minutes lying in bed trying to remember what exactly had happened. She smiled as she saw the face with the golden eyes and then sat up as she was thinking about more than his eyes. She noticed too, there was an intrigue about Eldroi she hadn't had with Toby. Before she dressed, she removed the bandage and rinsed the wound as Doc had instructed. It stung a little, but as she put the ointment on, it was soothed again. She wrapped it lightly in gauze and then got dressed and went downstairs.

Her mother was waiting for her at the table but her father had eaten and left to handle business. After she sat down and began buttering her muffin, her mother asked how she was doing and then, "Did you and the dragon sleep well?"

Zeso froze. In her short replay of events that morning, she'd forgotten about the dragonstone and the fact that the dragon had moved. She slipped her hand into her pocket. It was second nature for her to carry it with her and she was sure it was there. She pulled the amethyst from her pocket and held it up to see the dragon. He appeared to have just landed. He folded his wings and settled into the resting position she'd always seen him in, as if he'd never moved at all.

"He looks better rested than you do," Ida said and went back to her books and notes she'd been working on.

Zeso laughed; her mother looked so much like the Mom she'd always seen in Ohio, pouring over cookbooks for some new mixed up recipe. But this was the new Ida, pouring over history books and information from LonBreda, and taking notes about what she'd be doing in the years to come.

As she watched her mother study, Zeso remembered that she had things she needed to write about and study as well. It was with that thought in mind that she retrieved her notebook and went to make herself comfortable in the library to do her own research, though she wasn't sure where to begin.

By the time her father came to call her to lunch, she'd written a good deal about the previous day's events and had described, as best she could, what the dragon in the amethyst had done. She was sure her mother would tell her father what had transpired if she hadn't already, so Zeso started speaking of the dragon's moving as they walked down the hall to lunch. Zeso stopped when her father was no longer beside her, but a few paces back. "He reacted like I did," Zeso thought as she walked back to him, took his hand, and led him into the dining room.

Ida guessed what had taken place and chimed in on Zeso's behalf, "She's serious. I saw it with my own eyes last night. I wanted to mention it to you, but you sidetracked me. It put Zeso into a mild state of shock. She fell asleep with that heavy coat on, but I think she did get up in the middle of the night and changed, if I'm not mistaken." Ida looked at Zeso, who nodded in agreement.

Grey shook his head and laughed. "I guess it is safe to say there is never going to be another dull moment around this house again, not between the two of you."

After lunch, Zeso took some time to email Toby. She wrote him all of the details except the golden eyes and the blush. However, she made it a point to tell him every word they'd exchanged. Zeso knew there could be nothing between her and Toby if there were lies of omission. She laughed at the reaction she could picture Toby having at some other guy offering to help her out of her jeans. Well, Toby would have to take that up with Eldroi over spring break.

It was later the same day when Zeso and her parents were sitting around enjoying the relaxing sunshine coming through the windows of the library that Zeso first noticed the sensation. It wasn't as clear as the call from Grey to get her and Ida before Valko crossed over, but something was happening. Ida had registered it as well and was looking at Grey to see if he had also. It was only a few seconds before they were all seated in a circle, holding hands, and concentrating on the pull.

For the three of them it took on the mist movie consistency they'd all experienced in one form or another. LonBreda and Cadeyrn were the only voices and faces that they heard or saw clearly, but the presence of many others were felt. It was some kind of ceremony or ritual and the cadence of the voices rose and fell as if to an ancient drum. LonBreda's voice came through first, "Not a path devoid of clouds."

Then, after a moment, Cadeyrn's voice, "Not that you never feel pain or regret."

Then LonBreda again, "Be brave in times of trial."

And Cadeyrn, "May you have someone you trust."

And then both Cadeyrn's and LonBreda's voices mixed with other voices in a chant, floating in and out of clarity with a slow steady drumming: "The blood of the ancients that runs through our veins....times pass, but the circle of life remains." The group moved, taking small soft steps, circling round and through a grove of trees and then through a circle of stones and back to a grove of trees again. The dancing chanting group continued their circles and repeated the discernable phrases again and again. Eventually the image faded. After Zeso released the vision, she took a minute to reorient herself to her surroundings.

"What just happened?" Zeso was sure they'd all seen the same thing, but she'd no reference for it. "It looked like a ceremony of some sort, but why did we all get pulled in?"

Ida and Grey looked at each other. Ida nodded.

Grey said, "It was a ceremony of sorts. It'd more accurately be called a protection ritual. I've heard it spoken of a few times and have only seen it performed once." He paused wondering how much more he should say. "Shortly after I came of age and began participating in ceremony, there came a need to build protection around a group of travelers. We did a similar ritual. I asked about it later because I wanted to understand what we'd done. Apparently, it's an ancient way of calling a blessing and a protection on to an individual or group. All those who were connected to the travelers, or had a hand in helping them travel, were granted the blessing. They'd all realize in some fashion what was happening. For some it'd come as a dream, for others an intuition, and for a few, like us, a total awareness or vision of what was happening."

"So who are we involved in protecting?" Zeso said.

Grey answered as truthfully as he could. "I'm not sure who they all are, but we are part of those receiving protection. That is the only reason we saw it. Beyond that, if we want more information, we'll have to go to LonBreda or Cadeyrn. Understand though, they won't speak of it if they don't have permission. LonBreda especially has restrictions about affecting the future, and about what she can and can't say." Grey looked to Ida to see if she could shed any additional light on the situation.

"I'm sorry," Ida said. "I don't have anything to add. I too am under some of the same restrictions as LonBreda, but I don't have any more information than you. It seems to be connected to protecting Zeso and others involved with the prophecies, but I don't have any specifics about this yet."

Zeso was sure this had to do with her and her future. What she really wondered was who else had been protected? Was it something that registered? She said, “Is there a way others can tell if you’ve had protection placed on you?”

Grey looked to Ida. “Do you know how to answer that, because I don’t have a clue?” He’d recognized the presence of magic, for lack of a better word, around people at times. There were people who “read auras” but he didn’t understand how that worked.

Since LonBreda had reconnected Ida to her ancestors at the same time she linked Zeso to them through her, she’d been seeing much more than she ever thought possible. As Ida paused to consider her answer, it was evident to her that both Grey and Zeso had an ancient covering around them, but how to explain it.

“It is tough to describe,” Ida said. “I can tell you are both protected by an ancient source, but I can’t explain it. It isn’t like I see anything, it just sort of registers. I’d guess that for others who understand this, they could see it to some degree as well. I can only speak from what I’m experiencing, though. And as this is my first situation, and I know the protection is there, maybe it is just in this instance.”

“Who or what are we being protected from?” Zeso asked. She wanted specifics. “I think it’s time I know, especially if I’m supposed to choose if I’m up to doing this.”

Grey glanced up at the older journals and then he spoke as steadily as he could. “The Dabandin have been several steps ahead of different variations of a group, now calling themselves Éireann Steele, for generations. This group has been and will continue to battle against the Dabandin. We usually have the upper hand, but we’ve occasionally lost ground. Alexander the third was the first big loss in a long time. There have been others since then and probably more to come. We continue to choose to prepare as best we can and to defend. The

thing we understand, that Éireann Steele doesn't seem to, is that given enough time, nature always wins in the end, even if none of us are here to see it.

“We, the Dabandin, have chosen to step up as a community. You now get to choose to stand with us or to go a different way. That is your choice. As a Greylin with a prophecy, you've been given an opportunity for a greater calling, but that too is a choice. You need to know that whatever you decide it will affect others. There are those waiting to fight you, that's why the protection. This path is not easy. Those of us who've chosen it find it rewarding. For me, it's what I'm called to do. I couldn't be content or whole if I wasn't doing my best to protect what's important to me.”

The trio fell silent, each pondering his and her own role in the events to come.

Zeso was the first to move from the circle. She collected her notebook and excused herself to go upstairs. She had both observations and questions she wanted to write down while they were still fresh in her mind. And more to send to Toby in an email.

Grey and Ida spent a while in the library, talking and trying to discern what they could about the additional protection that had been placed on all of them.

Cadeyrn was back at Cnoc Turas. Eldroi would be there again soon. They both knew it was time to talk of dragons.

LonBreda was sitting in her home, listening to the wind move through the trees. The Elders of ancient days were speaking to each other. They always had stories to share, and LonBreda was ready to listen again. Her purpose in lingering had been fulfilled and she could simply enjoy teaching and being present until she could no longer resist the urge to reach toward the sun. It wouldn't be too many more winters, maybe only a few, before she'd join the ancients. The first foretelling was complete.

VITA

The author was born in Willoughby, Ohio. After pursuing some education in several places and much life experience, she obtained her Bachelor's degree in General Studies from Southeastern Louisiana University in 2011. She then joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop to pursue a Master's of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing with a concentration in Fiction.