

## *Chapter One*

### *Ancient Ireland Late Bronze Age*

Cool and crisp, the autumn air signaled the change of the seasons. Rushing water broke the silence of the night as the River Boyne swirled around the bend. Tendrils of mist reached across the land as if to ensnare the unsuspecting and drag them into the Otherworld. Fallen leaves lie around the base of their near skeletal trees, remnants of their summer magnificence. The last of the day's rain drops gently fell upon them, their soft patter drowned by the sound of the river.

Illuminated in the glow of the full moon, the Irish countryside appeared serene—a deceptive ruse to hide the danger that was not seen until it was too late. A wise man would not have been found out on this night, when the veil that separated the inhabitants of this world from those of the Otherworld was at its thinnest. He would have been huddled in his home, the fire stoked against the terrors of the night as he waited the safety that comes with the rising sun. For the Blood Moon will rise on this night of Samhain. An ancient evil was seething in the Otherworld. A scorned Battle Goddess has been seeking vengeance, and desires to leave the mortal world in a deluge of blood in her search for retribution.

“Are ye sure we will see a specter tonight?”

The younger of the two boys asked as he bundled his cloak tighter. Hidden behind the large sycamore tree that had toppled in the last storm gave them a perfect view of the area around the stone circle, but did little to protect them from the wet ground and chilly air.

“Finn told me the specters rise up out of the stone circle every Samhain. Ye not be turning into a scaredy wee babe is ye? Di ye need youse ma to change youse nappie?”

Teased the older boy as he pretended to suck his thumb.

“No...I just wanna be sure we're gonna see something since we missed out on all the great treats for guising. I had a great trick I been workin' on all year. I am not scaredy...and I di not wear nappies.”

The mist had started to spread in eerie thickness low across the countryside, enhanced by the clearly visible Blood Moon above. Suddenly, a spectral figure moved, over the hillside and through the swirling mist, toward the stone circle that lay shrouded in the darkness below the ancient oak. The two boys paused only long enough to look in each other's terror-stricken faces before they ran screaming into the darkness.

Greagoir chuckled as he watched the fleeing figures disappear into the mist. Tall and lean in stature, his blond hair and pale skin appeared a ghostly white in the moonlight. Draped in the tattered linen cloak he had gotten from the old hermit; he was certain his appearance would strike fear in even the bravest of men—especially on this night.

His memory sparked at the thought of the old hermit in the woods. He had gone to see him because dreams had told him that within this village he would find the way to summon goddesses from the Otherworld to serve him. Once there, the villagers told rumors of the old hermit in the woods that had strong magical power. It was said that he would help him for a fee. Having been born to peasants was not his choice; he was certain he was more suited to the life of a noble. He would summon the power of the Otherworld as enough of his life had been wasted in the service of others.

“Success will be granted—if ye follow the ritual,” the old fool had told him as he placed the two magic stones in his hand.

“I have given ye all I own, including my pants and ye give me rocks?”

“These be magic stones boyo. Are ye suddenly a great sorcerer that ye can know the workings of magic? I think not, besides I have much more for ye than those stones—I have the knowledge of the summoning ritual...in that lies the greatest expense.”

“If ye have been false with me old man, know that I will return to crush youse skull with these very stones.”

He looked down at the bare flesh of his legs that his long tunic could not cover; stung from the cold and covered in scratches. Soon he would have all that he ever needed or wanted, and with the power of the Otherworld to serve him, all others would kneel at his feet.

His mind drifted as he continued on toward the stone circle. Genovefa’s beautiful face marred by revulsion filled his vision. Though an entire season had passed since Beltane, the wound to his heart was as if it were only inflicted yesterday. She had loved him...he had felt certain of it. After all the times they passed each other in the village market; her smile had been *only* for him—*hadn’t it?* When they had chanced to meet at the edge of the woods where she had allowed him to take her hand—of course, it was after he had frightened her horse and she had been thrown—but still she had taken the hand he had offered. Her touch was like a fire that burned all the way to his soul; which he thought she saw as their eyes had met for a moment before she turned away. She haunted his every thought; he desired no other. It was then that he had decided to ask her father, the High King, for her hand. What he could not give her in riches he could more than make up for in love; it was their fate to be together. Even though the lads in his village had said he was a fool, and it most certainly meant his death; he dismissed their warnings. After all, once the High King had seen the love Greagoir held for his daughter and her love for him; he had thought he would have approved their marriage.

He had planned it all so well in his mind and arrived in Tara during the celebration of Beltane. What better time for a wedding? All the Kings of Ireland had gathered, with their retinues, to pay fealty to the High King. The feasting hall was filled with tables. Enough for all the provincial kings, lesser kings, and ruling nobles, plus all their retinues; thousands had gathered within the hall.

The noise had been deafening as Greagoir made his way through the throng of guests, servers and entertainers. Seated high on a dais, the High King's table had a large open area in front of it, where the entertainers performed. Those Kings currently in favor were seated at the table closest to the activity. Clan banners hung over the tables and were repositioned before every feast, which depended on the High King's mood.

Greagoir had walked straight for the High King's table and led the two goats into the open area. His gaze locked on Genovefa; she smiled at something that had been said at her table. So intent was his focus that he failed to notice the table to the right of the entertainers' area. Seated there was the King from his home lands; among the retinue was the overseer of the peasants in his village.

"I am interested to see what he does with the goats," the High King remarked. "Well lad, do you juggle them or perhaps milk them with your feet?"

Greagoir blinked, the sound of the High King's voice brought his focus away from his heart's desire.

"I fear you have misunderstood my intentions my King. I have come to ask for your daughter's hand, the goats have been brought to pay fealty."

After many whispers had spread throughout the hall, a hush fell over the feasters; all waited to hear how the High King handled this insult.

"My King, this man is from the village I oversee; his parents were peasants until their passing—not very good peasants."

Howls and laughter followed that would forever ring in Greagoir's ears. As the High King rose from his chair, the laughter died down. Turning toward Genovefa, he shouted so all could hear.

"What say you daughter, do you wish for me to accept this suitor? Two goats *are* quite a bargain, and I dare say a little goat's milk might settle my stomach after such a rich meal."

He tried to maintain some semblance of seriousness in the reddening face of his youngest daughter, but alas, he could not contain his amusement and the great hall erupted in laughter once again.

"My love..." Greagoir whispered.

He reached to accept her hand, but her beautiful face no longer smiled. Cheeks crimson with anger and embarrassment; she hurled her plate of food, which had hit him in the chest. Without hesitation, all the guests at the surrounding tables had begun to throw food while Greagoir's beloved Genovefa laughed. He could not move, he only stood there silently as they pelted him. Then the overseer from his village was upon him and grabbed the scruff of his tunic.

“My King, allow me the privilege of disemboweling the fool that has dishonored your daughter and insulted you.”

The High King waved his hand dismissively.

“He must be a simpleton to have acted in such a manner that shows no self-preservation what-so-ever. Take his goats as a tribute and escort him from our sight. Never let it be said that your High King is not a merciful man.”

With the High King's “indulgence,” the overseer tossed Greagoir out of the feasting hall with a kick to the seat of his pants.

He shook his head in order to clear away the flood of humiliation that threatened to consume him as he quickened his pace to the stone circle.

“This night will change my life forever,” he said out loud as if he needed the words heard. “Never again to be laughed at or spat upon. I will crush the High King and his warriors and take his daughter from him by force. Then she would look upon me with respect.”

A smile crept across his face at the vision that now darkened his mind.

Greagoir had glanced up at the moon before he placed the satchel on the ground near the circle of stones. He had much to do; the ritual had to be preformed precisely when the Blood Moon reached its apex. Druid priests had once used this site as a place of worship and ritual. Many of their sacred trees used for these ritual fires grew in abundance around the area; they stood as statuesque sentinels around the ancient oak. Greagoir went to the base of these trees to gather the fallen branches he needed for his own fire.

Wiping the musty smelling leaves away while he stacked the wood in the center of the stone circle, he worried that the wood might be too wet. It had rained earlier in the day, and there had not been enough sunlight that followed to dry anything out. Damp coldness had settled into his bones; this night could not be over soon enough. Pulling a small flask from his belt, he wished it still held its original contents. He poured the liquid over much of the wood—lamp oil—as wet as the wood was he needed it to start the fire.

Glowing eerily, the moon created dark shadows beneath the trees. It seemed as if all the demons of the Underworld were waiting in the obscure to witness what he was

about to do. A twig snapped as if stepped on. *Was that a silhouette in the gloom?* Shivering involuntarily, he searched the darkness at the edge of the ancient grove. Bounding out of the underbrush leapt a hare; it sniffed the brisk night air for a hint of the danger that thickened it.

“Steady lad,” he sighed aloud as he pounded his chest above his heart.  
“You are about to summon the Otherworld, you will need stronger nerves than that.”

But he cast a glance, once more, to the grove before he grabbed the satchel off the ground.

Stomach grumbling with a pang of hunger; Greagoir would like to have had a crust of bread to nibble on and perhaps a bladder of wine to have chased the cold away. Sadly he had given all he owned—including his fur leggings—to the old hermit for this satchel of magical items and knowledge of the ritual. Staring at the contents he had spread on the ground before him; he was hit with a twinge of angst.

“Have I been a fool,” he murmured, “to wager it all on this?”

But he was here on Samhain, a night for sacrifices—this is all he had left.

Grasping the dagger firmly he drew two large circles, their diameters equal to the height of a man, in the ground next to the circle of stone. The circles were separated by the width of two hands with openings on the facing sides of each circle; once closed these would be the gateways to each realm. Greagoir gathered all his ritual items together, placing them within the circle nearest the stones. The moon overhead was reaching its apex, so with everything in place he was ready to begin. Kneeling on the damp earth at the edge of the circle he had stood within, Greagoir struck the stones the hermit had given him together in the direction of his stacked branches. Once...twice...three times, the sparks flew forth and ignited the pile of wood. Pop! Sizzle! Fire blazed forth filling the air with the smell of burning oak, ash and thorn.

He paused to absorb a little of the warmth before he moved to where the two circles were open toward each other. Taking a breath to settle his nerves, he held the dagger in front of him with the tip pointed toward the Blood Moon. Standing within his own circle he faced the opposing one.

“Earth, Air, Fire, Water hear me and obey my command. Let this circle be of the Otherworld and let this fire be the beacon that guides those summoned forth.”

Using the dagger, he closed the circle; the fire flared as thunder rumbled in the distance. The wind gusted through the trees; they swayed as if dancing to a melody—only they could hear—that beckoned the spirits of the elements. Bursting through the brush, the hare ran swiftly from the flames. Startled by the interruption, he let the dagger

fall to the ground with a soft thud. Overly anxious, Greagoir took a deep breath to settle his nerves as the thrill of anticipation rushed through him. *I am truly invoking the magic of the Sí in Bhrú*, he thought.

Taking care not to step out of his own circle of magic he retrieved the dagger. “Earth, Air, Fire, Water hear me and obey my command. Let this circle be of this world and let this fire protect my soul within it.”

Closing the circle with the line he traced in the earth; light from the fire seemed to surround the circle he stood within flooding it with a protective feeling. Confidently—almost arrogantly—he continued on with the ritual.

Taking the earthen bowl he drained the corked bottle’s contents in it; lamb’s blood—the blood of an innocent.

Moving to stand before the gateway to the Otherworld, he raised the bowl up in front of him.

“On this night of sacrifice—with the spilled blood of the innocent—I summon forth Amadan of the Sidhe to aid me in my quest,” he declared as he carefully spilled a small amount of blood into the gateway.

Flames leapt into the night as the thunder grew ever louder. A dark haze swirled within the circle. Staring into the swirling mist he felt his skin prickle as a feeling of power washed over him. Ignoring the foreboding sign, he continued on with his task.

“On this night of sacrifice—with the spilled blood of the innocent—I summon forth Badhe, Crow Goddess and ancient War Fury—to aid me in my quest.”

Once more he poured a small amount of blood into the gateway. Rolling dark clouds had begun to choke the clear night sky. Greagoir’s breath caught in this throat as two separate forms took shape in the Otherworldly haze. The smell of death and decaying flesh thickened the air. Fueled by the desire to see those that he had been forced to serve over the years bowing at his feet, he continued the ritual—his heart pounded in a primal rhythm.

He raised the bowl high over his head—the heavy smell of blood and death forced him to swallow the rising bile that threatened.

“On this night of sacrifice—with the spilled blood of the innocent—I summon forth the Phantom Queen Morrigan—Goddess of War and Fury—Supreme Bringer of Fear and Panic—to aid me in my quest.”

An explosive clap of thunder erupted overhead. A visceral feeling of terror seized him as he fought to continue. Hands trembling, he displaced some of the crimson liquid on the ground as he brought it down to pour the remainder into the gateway. The night sky,

which had been darkened by the ominous storm clouds, crackled with lightening. He spilled a little of the blood between the circles as he dropped the bowl. Quickly he retreated to the center of the circle he stood within wiping the spilled blood from his hands on the front of his cloak; nauseated by the sight of it. Within the gateway before him three dark figures took solid form from out of the haze.

Amadan of the Sidhe, whose touch would cause his victim to have a stroke so devastatingly severe that it resisted all manner of healing, took the form of a great crow. Head and arms of a man, he was a hideous abomination to behold. As his form became solid, he stretched his arms to the sky releasing a blood-chilling battle cry. It took all Greagoir's courage not to cover his ears and cower on the ground.

Badhe, Crow Goddess of War, a harbinger of doom she terrified and intimidated her enemies. She appeared before him with the body of a warrior woman, but the grotesque head of an enormous crow with blood dripping from its razor-sharp beak. An involuntary shudder caused him to take a small step back as she fixed him in her glowing red gaze.

Finally, Morrigan—Phantom Queen—coalesced from the black haze. As deadly as she is beautiful, she is the Goddess of the Killing Rage and Uncontrollable Lust. Her shapely, naked body draped loosely with a cloak of raven black feathers, and her flowing black hair shimmered in the firelight. Greagoir thought himself blessed to have a beauty such as her to serve his needs. Scarcely able to take his eyes from her, she wielded lust like a finely honed weapon. Bile threatening to return squelched his aching loin as he noticed her hands dripping with blood.

Choking his fear back, Greagoir stepped toward the trio and commanded their attention.

“I, Greagoir the Dark,” he thought that sounded more intimidating, “have summoned you here to be in my service. I desire the staff of life and death splintered from the club of the God, Dagda and gifted to his daughter, the Goddess Brighid. I will use it, and the three of you, to be High King. I command you to deliver the staff to me.”

Although the words were meant to instill awe and respect, the declaration could scarcely be heard over the crashing of thunder that sounded at the use of the word “command.”

“Who are *you* to command anything of us?”

Morrigan's voice was both sultry and sinister. Her hair floated eerily about her as her soulless, black eyes fixed intently on him. Swallowing against the dryness that threatened to close his throat he did his best to draw upon the courage that was rapidly recoiling from her gaze.

“*I* am the one who has summoned you to this sacred circle with blood sacrifice. *I* am the one who holds power over you and *I* command you to deliver the staff of Brighid to me as it resides in the Otherworld with her.”

The laughter that resonated was as frightening as it was melodious.

“You call this a blood sacrifice,” Morrigan motioned disgustingly at the earthen bowl at his feet. “We are deliverers of death. Nothing less than human sacrifice will appease us. Since you have brought none, yet summoned us here, we shall take your blood to satisfy our need.”

“You have no power outside that circle crone. I shall close the gateway and be done with you. Then I shall summon a goddess to do what you obviously cannot.”

Lightening struck the ground so close to Greagoir that his skin tingled. An eruption of fire roared into the night air leaving the smell of burning hair as it singed him. Morrigan laughed again, this time joined by her companions, the sound being like the cawing of crows. Greagoir fisted his hands to hold his resolve together.

“Foolish mortal, let me show you what happens to those who attempt to command me.”

Morrigan stepped forward crossing from the Otherworld’s circle into the circle of the mortal world—his circle. He staggered back from her as far as he could without stepping outside the circle; somehow he knew to do that would have deadly consequences.

“How?” he stammered; a cold sweat beaded on his forehead from the fear that threatened to consume him.

“The next time you meddle in magic of which you know naught, be certain that the old man you seek council from is truly the wizard he claims to be...otherwise he may be unable to fully divulge to you, all the consequences of your actions. When you spilled the blood offering from one circle to the next, you opened the gateway from the Otherworld to this world allowing me to cross over,” for emphasis she took another step toward him, “a *true* wizard would have warned you against such a thing. When you so foolishly wiped the blood across your cloak, you made yourself available to be my sacrifice. A *true* wizard would have very much warned you against doing such a thing, seems to me that the old hermit you visited in the woods was just that...an old hermit.”

Greagoir’s heart sank as he realized—with fatal consequences—that he had been tricked.

“Would you like...*once again*...to speak of your commands or perhaps you would like to...*again*...tell me what a useless crone I am to you?”

Dumb struck; visions of all possible outcomes swirled through his mind. He knew for certain his death was eminent in all cases if he could not gather his wits.

“Perhaps I was hasty in my demands, my Goddess. I beg you; blame it on my overly ambitious desires and ignorance in how one should act in the presence of such divine greatness. I pray that you will allow me to make amends,” he gushed in a sycophantic tone dropping to his knees in front of her.

Morrigan looked down on him with a smile—a smile that said she was not fooled by his sudden change in attitude.

“Perhaps,” she said softly as she gently stroked her hand over his cheek leaving a bloody smear, “you have regained your wits and...you are not without some measure of use.”

She stared at him a moment; he felt his lust for her growing again as his eyes traveled wantonly over her body.

“Just perhaps, you may be of some use to me—but you cannot go without punishment for your insolence. It would not do for the Goddess of Fury to appear soft.”

Like a splash of ice water, the word “punishment” laid waste to his evident desire for her and Greagoir’s head whipped up to stare into the frightening, soulless eyes of a war goddess.

Morrigan placed her hand over Greagoir’s heart digging her talon-like nails into his flesh. His whole body jerked upward; it felt as if she were trying to rip his very heart from his chest. Seized by fear he tried to beg for mercy, but found he could neither move nor speak.

“Greagoir the Dark, it is *I* that wants the staff of life and death. It should have been mine. I was Dagda’s greatest lover, but when I demanded it that fool only laughed...laughed...at me. No one laughs at the Goddess Morrigan that does not face retribution. Were it left to me, I would have killed his daughter at that time just so that I could have watched him suffer. But he has given her protection from the magic of others while she is in the Otherworld. That will not, however, stop me from what I desire. Once the staff is in my possession, I will hold power over life and death—the latter being more preferable. Mortals will once again worship me, both on the battlefields and throughout this earthly realm.”

Morrigan pulled him to his feet by the grip she had embedded in his chest.

Greagoir’s face was etched in pain, his mouth contorted with silent screams.

“I am the reason you are here. I visited your pathetic dreams if you could even call them that. I made you think this was your idea; that bringing us here would be the answer to all your imagined mistreatments. You will be the tool I use to kill the Leannan Sidhe and control Brighid’s bloodline. She will leave the Otherworld with the staff to protect them and then I will kill her. I brought *you* here to serve *me*.”

Morrigan looked at Greagoir’s face, pale from the loss of blood that now coated her hand.

“This could be a long bloody battle. In order to serve me properly you cannot be confined by the restrictions of your mortal life. I will gift you with immortality until you have completed service to me.”

Dark clouds had begun to rotate over the magic circles creating a whirling mass of evil. Lightning flashed like a jagged dagger slicing across the sky and struck the ancient oak tree in the sacred grove, cleaving it down the middle. Amadan and Badhe moved around behind Morrigan in agitated, erratic movements, their hideous cawing sounds echoed into the night.

Morrigan raised her free hand high above her head giving it a few quick twists, which caused the swirling clouds above her to move faster.

“Remember what I tell you boy, for if you fail me the pain you feel now will pale in comparison.”

She gave a slight squeeze to make him fully understand.

“Dagda created the Leannan Sidhe—all females, of course—to live in this realm among the mortals. They roam the land taking lovers that they inspire to become great poets and bards. In turn, their creativity keeps Brighid in the hearts of her beloved mortals through poetry and songs, allowing her to stay in the Otherworld with her father. As a special gift, Dagda took some of Brighid blood and placed it within one of the Leannan Sidhe as he created her, in essence creating Brighid’s daughter. She has been tasked with taking a mortal warrior as her mate with whom she will bear one child, a daughter. There by continuing Brighid’s bloodline and her existence in the mortal realm. Through them, she may see into this realm without ever leaving the Otherworld. It is said that Brighid made her daughter the keeper of her sacred flame and if it is extinguished Brighid, herself, will die. Your task is to find this heir, mate with her, and when the child is born kill the mother. In that way, you will control Brighid’s bloodline, and I will control you. We will then use the child to extinguish the flame. As you search, you are to kill all the other Leannan Sidhe you come across. That might also bring Brighid to this

realm; to save them. Either way, once here—she will die. You, dear Greagoir, will be the vessel which allows us to travel about this realm. You will serve *all* our needs.”

Blood loss had begun to take its toll. Greagoir saw spots appearing before his eyes as his vision had begun to fade.

“Oh my dear, do not fear that I have forgotten your punishment. Pay attention...,” She squeezed a little tighter. “Brighid’s heir must give herself to you of her own free will or else no child will be created—another of Dagda’s gifts—so for that you will need your beauty and youth to seduce her. As for the rest of your existence—unless you are pleasing *me* in some way—it shall be spent in a body that is old and withered, not unlike the body of the old crone you so recently professed me to be.”

Amadan and Badhe returned to their mist form and joined with the dark vortex that touched down within the gateway. After a moment, Morrigan reached into the gateway of the Otherworld drawing her companions’ essences into her own body. Pulling Greagoir to her, she placed a seductive kiss upon his lips.

“Remember what you are about to feel,” she whispered.

Digging her nails in deeper until the remainder of his blood flowed over her hand; she began her own transformation.

“So I declare it. So shall it be,” she cawed out as she faded into a black haze that disappeared into his body at the spot where she had clutched his chest.

Flames erupted into the blackness as if a rift opened and belched the fires of the Underworld forth. Greagoir had screamed out in terror and agony before he collapsed to the ground, his body convulsing violently.

Cold—a bone-deep cold—it was the first thing to breach the veil of darkness that had enveloped Greagoir’s mind. He had no knowledge of how long he had laid upon the ground, but the fire no longer burned within the circle and he—along with everything else in the landscape—was soaked with rain. A biting cold wind blew over him which made his bare legs feel numb.

Stiffly Greagoir got to his feet; he was so very thirsty. Trudging wearily, he made his way down to the river’s edge illuminated only by the brightness of the moon. Pulling his cloak off and stripping his torn blood-soaked tunic over his head, he tossed them on the bank. Greagoir waded toward the swifter moving water to sate his thirst; dousing his face with handfuls of the frigid liquid. Gorged on water, he moved back toward the bank to get out of the icy river. Stumbling over the river bottom as he neared the bank, he landed

on his knees. Too sore to get up, he shivered in the shallow water. His chest burned; instinctively he placed his hand over the ache.

Looking down into the stilled shallows, Greagoir caught the reflection of an old man behind him. Startled by the intruder he had not heard approach; he spun around to confront him, only to find the man gone. Memories flooded back. Lifting his hand to examine the wound Morrigan had gouged from his flesh he was surprised to find not a gaping wound, but three crows connected within a circle that appeared to be inked into his skin. Next to catch his notice was his hand covered with age spots. Remembering Morrigan's words he looked into the water; he waited most impatiently for it to still enough to cast his reflection. When it finally did the horror of what stared back was almost too much for his mind. There—in the water—the face of an old man, eyes wizened with wrinkles and hair pure white as if with age; but Greagoir knew...it was fear that had changed it. He had sought to force others into slavery by using a power he did not understand. Instead, it was used against him. Now he was not just a peasant he was a slave...and he was immortal.

“Immortality, in this haggard old body...I would rather be dead. To end this condemnation I must hasten to complete my tasks; only then will I be rid of this wretched Goddess and her cohorts,” he murmured.

Pulling his tunic on and gathering his cloak about him; he raised his pain wracked body up off the ground. Except for the split oak tree the countryside showed no evidence of the evil that had been released. Forced into servitude again; he had no choice but to gather his remaining possessions and journey back to Tara. Leaning heavily on the scorched branch he salvaged from the damaged oak, he used it as a walking stick. As he predicted—his life was now changed—forever.

*Five hundred years had passed...*

Horror-stricken at the sight before him; her beautiful face spattered with crimson droplets. Hazel eyes stared frozen in a sightless state of fear and disbelief; just as they were at the time of her death. Once again coming conscience surrounded by blood, Greagoir could remember nothing. As much as he tried not to look, he could not stop his gaze from traveling down the naked body he straddled; coming to rest upon the cavernous hole in her chest where her heart had once been. The knife handle protruded from between her breasts; the blade had been driven in with such force that it stuck into the floor planks beneath her.

Thrusting a trembling hand up to his mouth to hold back the vomit that rolled in his stomach was almost too much as it proved to be covered in her blood. It was then Greagoir heard them. In a darkened corner of the room, the three enormous crows were shredding something with their sharp, bloody beaks...it was her heart.

He scrambled from the grisly scene; violently he projected the contents of his stomach onto the floor. One of the giant crows had begun moving toward him. A black haze swirled around it, transforming it into a woman with raven black hair. Bare, in all her natural beauty, except for the cloak of black feathers and the crimson liquid smeared down the front of her. After all these centuries, the sight of her repulsed him.

“Who was she?” Greagoir demanded, scanning the room for a vessel of water.

“Get to your feet wretch.” Morrigan kicked at him with her bare foot. “It really is a pity you choose not to remember your actions when you are filled with my essence—I would enjoy *that* man. In fact, I might even consider taking one such as him as my lover, but I would never take a pathetic wretch like that which lies before me in a pool of his own vomit.”

Morrigan walked over to the body of the young woman; staring down upon the carnage, she made an almost mournful cooing.

“She was another maiden sent to watch over Brighid’s flame. If it has slipped your notice, we are back in Brighid’s temple. You would think after all the death we have delivered here over the centuries it would be hard for them to find maidens willing to be priestesses.” She poked the body with her toe, “This realm never lacks for fools I suppose.”

Morrigan walked around the body back toward Greagoir. Reaching down to stroke his face, she thought better of it and withdrew her hand.

“You convinced her that you would spare her life if she would give her innocence to you without a struggle. After you satisfied your nearly insatiable lust—although since it was my essence that drove you perhaps I

should say my nearly insatiable lust—it was then you discovered she was not the blood heir. Of course, I could have told you that she was not—but I must say, I do so love to watch when the rage possesses you. You almost delight in the killing. You did manage to get her to tell you about the special visitor and her daughter that stopped to worship before heading north. But...then you cut her heart out, and that was the last we heard from her. She said it had been many years, but it could still hold promise.”

She turned away from him.

“Why do you continue to deny what you are capable of becoming? If you would only embrace it—embrace me. I would take you as my lover, and you could stay forever young.”

Greagoir did not answer nor would he meet her gaze.

“At dawn we travel north to the coast, make yourself ready,” she managed to say before her voice rasped to a cawing.

Transforming, she joined her companions as they began to feast on the body before them.

Rising to his feet, he went to the fire where there sat a pail of clean water. As near as Greagoir was to the fire, it still felt as if his blood had turned to ice. For the last five centuries, it had been the same scenes over and over. War, killings, rapes, tortures...his life had been a long string of violence. It was a wonder he still had any sanity remaining. Only the fact that his mind suppressed any memory of his physical actions kept him from becoming raving mad. *Would he truly go mad? Or would he enjoy it as Morrigan claimed?* As he washed the evidence of his previous deeds away, he began a transformation of his own, back to the aged body that now sheltered his humanity.

As he tried to block the horrible sound of the crows feeding behind him, he searched his soul. If he gave in to Morrigan, he could be her lover and have eternal youth and vigor. *Could he murder his own humanity?*