

## Prologue

Brandubh struggled to get his wits about him. His thoughts were scattered and diffused and he couldn't seem to remember most of the recent past. For instance, where was he? The terrain surrounding him seemed encased in a milky fog, indistinct and soft around the edges. He knew he had been in a terrible battle, one that he had orchestrated, but somehow that didn't seem as important as his last clear memory of the woman coming toward him dressed in a long blue shift. Even now the thought of her sent a delighted shiver through him. Her large belly strained against the muslin fabric—she carried his child. Her smiling face and dark eyes locked on his when she held out her hand...but that's when things became confusing. Water, he remembered water, a wave had washed over him. What had happened to her? Fear gripped him and he coughed as the sensation of drowning surfaced. He put his hand out noticing that his fingers were also fuzzy around the edges. And walking seemed oddly easy, as though he was floating rather than putting his feet down on solid ground. He had to get out of this fog.

Rest, he needed rest. He found a rock and sat down, trying to make sense of things. He knew he was a priest. He looked down at his clothes to corroborate this but his body seemed almost transparent—and going in and out of focus. A very disturbing thought niggled at his consciousness but he pushed it away. Better to think about the woman and his life with her. But there was something wrong with that particular memory as though it had been planted in his mind. He frowned, puzzling over the predicament he was in.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed there. It could have been a few minutes a couple of hours or a day, but the next thing he was aware of was gliding along a wide dirt path that seemed to appear as he moved forward. A familiar female voice echoed inside his mind, but this was not the woman he had been thinking of earlier. "Brandubh, pay attention," he heard clearly as though the woman was speaking into his ear. "Who is this?" he asked, looking around at the swirling mists. Was he in a dream?

"Brandubh, you have to find your way to me. I'm your mother, Adair."

"I can't see anything. Where are you?" Brandubh peered into the fog, squinting and moving his hands to push away the curtain that separated him from the rest of the world.

Adair. That name did seem familiar. He nodded once and then recalled some more of the past. He had a twin sister, Catriona. They had fought in the water before...or was it after the wave? He had plunged a knife into her chest—killed her without a moments hesitation. He recalled the feeling of satisfaction it gave him. Why would he kill his own twin? He shook his head, trying to clear the mustiness from his thoughts.

"Mother," he called. "If you're around here please help me. I'm stuck in fog."

"I can only help you if you find your way to me. Try and recall yourself before you disappear forever."

"Disappear forever?" A shiver went through him as the realization finally burst its way into his mind. He was dead.

## *The Otherworld--2010*

*“Where do you think Gertrude is?” Maeve turned toward Harold, a worried frown moving across her forehead. “We’ve located nearly everyone. Even Rea and the other Crion are heading into the valley.” She pointed ahead to a group of bright-haired people wending their way down the hill.*

*The battle to save the mystical land known as the Otherworld had ended and Maeve and Harold had been instrumental in the struggle to bring back the balance. Now they were engaged in locating all the loyal people who had helped in one way or another. Gertrude was only one of several who had gone missing after a torrent of water rushed through the valley, washing the people in its wake out to the sea.*

*“We saw her at the end of the battle, she’ll show up.” Harold grabbed Maeve’s hand to help her down the steep hill.*

*“Please don’t treat me like an invalid because I’m pregnant. I made it through a race to have you resurrected, months of near starvation and a major battle—I think I can handle this hill.” Maeve smiled to soften her words but the worry lines remained. It had been a long and trying time and especially since the prophecy written so long ago referred to her as the one to orchestrate it all. Despite it being over, the heaviness remained, Maeve’s feeling of responsibility almost greater now that peace had returned.*

*“Gertrude is a strong woman—you saw what she did at the end there. I’m sure she’s fine. But to put your mind at ease we can visit Arianrhod and see what she has to say.” MacCuill gestured toward an icy spire lifting into the clear blue sky--the castle of*

*the moon goddess. "We're in the Caer Sidi now. But once we reach the castle I cannot stay long. I am called to my Queen who needs my presence on the newly formed council. The druids are preparing for the next disruption, although I doubt this will come for many years. And after the meeting it will be Imbolc, Brigid's day. By then everyone will have made their way back from the sea to celebrate what's been accomplished here."*

*Maeve didn't hear what he said, her thoughts on the moment during the battle that Gertrude appeared out of the dark, running like a madwoman to attack Brandubh. "I've never seen her like that," Maeve muttered to herself. "It was like she turned into a Valkyrie or something."*

*"The Valkyries are further north, but I take your meaning. With that kind of determination I don't see a flood being the end of her."*

*Maeve put her hand on the wolf walking beside her who had been her constant companion and her savior on more than one occasion. On the other side of Harold, Argyll, the piebald horse given him by Mikdal, walked placidly, stopping every now and then to nibble on a blade of new grass. Duncan, her grandmother's old and dear friend, had gone ahead, his six-foot frame easy to see among the diminutive Crion.*

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*"She may have been washed out to sea," Arianrhod told them when they reached the castle. "There are many islands to the north where she could have ended up. If she is not here for the feast we will send out a search party."*

## Chapter One

### Far Isle--2450

When I turned for one last look at the temple, the sun had risen, bathing the sandstone in dazzling color, the sky behind a contrast of vivid blue, but once the light had passed those formidable walls, the structure faded into the landscape, belying its existence. I wondered if this effect was intentional since the ascetic monks who practiced there did not encourage visitors.

One night spent in the temple had given me a chance to regain my strength but my request to remain longer was refused. Their vows did not allow women—they had already bent the rules. Not only was I a woman, an outsider with olive skin, but also I was pregnant and conspicuously alone. When the solid wooden doors closed behind me I felt more apprehensive than I had in all the weeks I'd been traveling. Kindly, they had given me some food and a heavy robe to keep out the cold wind and swirling fog--my constant companions in these higher elevations. A hard kick took my mind to my belly and I cupped my hands around the growing girth of my middle. It would only be month or two before this one would be born; I was determined to be in a warm and safe place by then.

As I walked, my thoughts careened from one dead end to the other, lost in the labyrinth of the past. How I had arrived in this alien world was still a mystery. My last coherent memory was landing at the Edinburgh Airport and then some hazy dream-like images. It was as though a filmy curtain had dropped over my mind. To these indistinct memories I added the information gleaned from the residents of Tolam, the tiny backward village where I'd been recovering for the past six months.

A low rumble had me crouching against the uphill side of the trail bringing to mind the monks' warning about earthquakes in this region. A shower of rocks and pebbles careened by, disappearing over the far edge. Below me a few larger boulders loosened, tumbling away to disappear into the deep crevasse that gaped threateningly below. As things quieted I stood and shifted my woven bag to my other shoulder. It was heavy with oat and barley cakes, the cheese the monks had given me, as well as my tarot cards, talismans, extra clothing, knife, wooden bowl and cup and other bits and pieces of my current life. My fingers traced the triple spiral around my neck. I was wearing it the day Dia and Lars found me unconscious on the sand close to their village. And although the necklace felt familiar I knew it was not something I owned before arriving in Scotland.

"You were battered to bits and nearly drowned," was how Dia explained it later, showing me my shredded clothing. I smiled thinking about how she must have viewed my down ski jacket with feathers escaping from the holes, and my ripped blue jeans. There was nothing of that sort here where clothes were handmade out of flax and wool or knitted. My feet had been bare of the waterproof boots I know I must have been wearing, lost forever in the cold ocean.

Once I regained my senses, Dia told me she and her man Lars had been walking the shore that day, searching for mollusks to put in the stew. "Twas a wonder you were alive," she told me, shaking her head. "That water would freeze a witch." I remember smiling at the saying, wondering if I qualified since I had once possessed psychic abilities. But my gifts seemed to have disappeared, leaving me bereft and unsure. Somehow my Tarot deck had survived the trip in the water, making me wonder if I had

fallen off a boat close to the shore. Whatever I had gone through had left me completely emaciated. It took months to put on weight and lose the strange pallor that lay under my skin.

I had traveled to Scotland because of a client of mine in Milltown, Massachusetts. The young woman, Maeve was her name, had come to me for a psychic reading and I had seen several disturbing events in her future. I remembered now the frightening creatures and darkness that appeared in her reading, the dangerous fate awaiting her. Whatever happened in between then and when Dia found me had been traumatic enough to give me a major case of amnesia. I had the sense that I'd been severely depressed for some time, in addition to near starvation. It was a wonder I hadn't miscarried.

The one thing I knew for sure was my name, Gertrude Besnik, and as the days went by I began to recall more of my former life. My psychic work in Milltown included the Tarot, crystals and palm reading and I had an extensive client list. I owned an apartment and had a cat named Lucifer. And yet I could not recall the father of the child I carried. Nor could I fathom what had brought me to this desolate and backward place. If I believed in time travel I might think I'd been transported to some earlier period in history.

My early months in Tolam were pleasant enough, despite the hard work and the villagers' superstitious ways. I lived in an extra bedroom in Dia and Lar's house, sharing meals with them. These people had no electricity, no plumbing, they cooked over wood fires in iron pots, milked the sheep and goats to make cheese. Work began before the sun rose and ended long after it went down. Gathering wood, searching for mushrooms and

greens to add to the one-pot meals took most of a day. Chickens ran loose and often ended up in the stewpot, but mostly it was their eggs that provided protein, that and fish the men caught in rope nets. Rudimentary bread was made from nuts ground into a fine powder, mixed with eggs and butter and cooked over the fire.

They had odd spiritual beliefs that I didn't recognize, despite my knowledge of pagan festivals and holidays. According to them there were trolls living underground who would appear periodically and take children. Everyone in the village was terrified of these creatures and had stories to tell. No abductions had happened in recent memory but still they fretted, keeping all the young ones under close guard and scaring the wits out of them. They had bonfires at certain times of the year, sacrificing animals to appease these underground dwellers.

When I showed them my Tarot deck they forked their fingers in the sign to ward off evil, refusing to even look at it. However I noticed that they used Runes for their own divination, which led me to believe I had traveled northward from Scotland into the realm of Norse mythology; when they spoke of deities it was of Odin, Frigga, Freyja and Eir, and they often referred to Asgard, the home of the gods as well as Utgard, where the monsters and giants lived.

After I recovered from my injuries I was constantly hungry. Dia laughingly referred to me as the bucket that was never filled. I helped with milking and cheesemaking in order to fill my belly with the leftovers. It was several months before I registered that I was going to have a baby. The initial shock of this had me reeling. I'd always been so careful to use birth control—I'd never wanted children. How in the world had this happened? I remembered being attracted to a priest I met in Milltown right

before I left for Edinburgh, but there was definitely no sex between us. I had a vague notion that things had ended badly—knowing me I could have tried to get the poor man into bed; I never had much respect for the priesthood.

As the pregnancy progressed, a certain amount of contentment and even joy filled my heart, no doubt brought on by the hormones coursing through my body. At night before sleep I forgot about my desire to get home as I registered a deep connection with the tiny being growing inside me. Despite my earlier feelings about motherhood, I could hardly wait to cradle this child in my arms.