

CHAPTER 30: LEGEND

“Ours is a tale *steeped* in magic and *shrouded* in mystery,” Brigid continued dramatically. She had obviously told this story before. “Legends of the Fae are as old as civilization itself. Stories from every culture across the entire world include Faerie peoples with access to magic beyond the grasp of men. But it was in the green lands of Ireland, nearly four thousand years ago, that the fates of a powerful Faerie princess and a kind human fisherman were intertwined, and the first line of human shapeshifters began with one secret child. Before *that* story, however, we must go back to the very beginning.

“Millions of years ago, human men were born of the earth. They crawled up from the mud and were, for a long while, in quite a sorry state. But over time they overcame their wretchedness and began to harness the earthly magics. Men had powers over the soil and the elements and the water, and they grew as a race and spread out over the whole world.

“But even before men took their first bipedal steps, the Fae were already here, for they were born of the sun and had been brought to the earth by the great comet, Danu. The Fae had potent life magic, which they called The Light. They could heal themselves and others, and they had the power to change form. Because of this, the Fae were nearly immortal.

“For many years, the Fae watched the humans from afar, staying hidden themselves as trees and animals. Both races thrived, but as the Fae grew closer to nature and increased their power, men began to lose their connection to the earth. Humans became destructive, taking more from nature than they returned. Their magic faded, and, after many generations, it was forgotten completely.

“The Fae began to take pity on the human people, and they were also concerned that man’s tendency toward war and destruction would eventually bring about the demise of all

earthly creatures. So the Faerie Kings and Queens of the world came together and decided to reveal their race to the humans. And it was, as we say, all downhill from there.

“The Fae offered to help the humans reclaim their connection to the land and to heal them of their disparaging insanity, but they had greatly underestimated man’s insatiable desire for power. No sooner had the Faerie magic been revealed than the Kings of Men were devising ways with which to take it.

“For a millennium, nearly every war was waged in an effort to gain access to Faerie secrets. The goal of every conquest was to seize Faerie lands. And when the Kings of Men realized that they were not able to exploit the Faerie magic for themselves, they set out to extinguish the entire Faerie nation.

“The Fae were strong, and their sun-given healing and shapeshifting powers helped to hide and protect them, but they were far outnumbered, and men had developed weapons of iron and other heavy earth metals that weakened the Faerie magic. Some of the Fae were captured and chained in iron and tortured into revealing the locations of Faerie villages. Entire forests were burnt to the ground, and the Faerie numbers were greatly diminished.

“Those who survived scattered and went deep into hiding, many choosing to remain as animals, thereby losing their Faerie faculties and their magic and becoming savage and short-lived. Others sprouted wings and flew to islands not yet discovered by man. Six generations passed, and memories of the Fae faded into folklore.

“By the 18th century BC, however, the island Faeries were becoming restless. Their numbers had grown to several hundred, and they came together on a mountaintop to pray to Danu for guidance. The goddess appeared again as a comet in the sky, and as she passed overhead, she dropped a large stone. The stone, which was called *Liá Fail*, spoke to the Faerie

people. It named them the *Tuatha Dé Dannon* and selected a new king from among them. King Nuada and the *Tuath Dé* then followed the comet across the sea to the island of *Oileán Glas*, which we now know as Ireland.

“Once on the Green Isle, the *Tuath Dé* placed *Liá Fail* at Tara, and Nuada sat on The Hill as High King over all the island. The *Tuath Dé* were victorious in two battles against the native humans, and they prospered for 150 years. By the time the next group of humans, the Gaels, arrived on the island, *Oileán Glas* was under the rule of three Faerie sisters and three Faerie brothers, Nuada’s great-granddaughters: Banba, Fodla, and Ériu, and their husbands: MacCuill, MacCecht, and MacGréine. And it’s the daughter of Ériu and MacGréine who is the true heroine of this tale.”

Here Brigid paused to take a swig from a soda bottle, and Frances released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She was leaning so far forward on her log, that she almost fell off when Kiera sneezed beside her. Fletcher had been right to choose Brigid to tell the story. Even the campers who had heard it before were hanging on her every word. Even little Ben was sitting attentively on the ground in front of Mary Ellen. Brigid sensed the anticipation in the air, and she stalled a few seconds longer by clearing her throat, stretching out her arms, and cracking her knuckles. She was truly in her element as a storyteller.

“Shall I continue?” she asked playfully.

The uproar from the group had slightly murderous undertones, and Brigid quickly waived her hands in front of her and said, “Okay, okay, sorry! The heroine!”

The circle quieted again, and Brigid cleared her throat once more before resuming the story. “The only daughter of Ériu and MacGréine was named Eilidh, which means light, for the Light of the Fae was remarkably strong in the child from her first breath.

“Now the young Princess Eilidh had grown up to the tales of the evil men who had hunted the Faerie race to near extinction, and she knew all too well the laws of her great-great-grandfather, King Nuada, that forbade the *Tuath Dé* from interacting with humans. Yet, while Eilidh maintained a healthy fear of humans, she also suffered from a voracious curiosity.

“By the time the princess reached womanhood, she had become accustomed to leaving The Hill on her own. She restored her magic each day by walking in the morning sunlight along the river. One summer morning, Eilidh noticed a human fisherman on the shore. She watched the man for a long while from a hidden place, and she became curious to know more about him and his people. The next day, when Eilidh returned to the river and saw the man fishing again, she changed into a stunning white swan and swam within his view. He did not try to harm her, so every day Eilidh returned. She continued to appear as the swan before the fisherman, and each day she swam closer to him than the day before.

“On the seventh day, Eilidh swam within arm’s reach of the man. He gave her a fish and began to confide in her. The man was called Maon, and he was a Gael whose fishing boat had broken apart on the rocks on the eastern side of the island. For many months Eilidh met Maon on the shore of the river, and she listened to him speak for hours every day until she began to fall in love with his kind and gentle spirit.

“Eilidh longed to reveal her true self to the fisherman. So one day, when Maon said that he wished the swan could speak to him as well, Eilidh returned to her beautiful Faerie form. She professed her love for him, and, when he had recovered from the shock, Maon asked Eilidh to marry him.

“Because their union was forbidden, Eilidh and Maon fled north to marry in secret. But Eilidh’s parents, assuming the princess had been kidnapped by enemy humans, sent twelve

Faerie warriors to retrieve her. The warriors ran quickly as wolves and followed the scent of the princess to Teltown, a small Gael settlement. The Gaels had built a temple there, and that is where the young lovers hid.

“The wolf-warriors stormed the temple, and, despite Eilidh’s protests, they attacked Maon. The princess changed form three times in an effort to protect him. She first fought the wolves as a great bear, but they outnumbered and surrounded her. Next Eilidh shifted into an enormous bull, and she pierced three of the wolves to death with her sharp horns. The remaining warriors changed into eagles, and they flew overhead and clawed at her hide where her horns couldn’t reach them. Finally, the princess became a fierce dragon, and she blasted fire in every direction, killing eight more warriors and engulfing the temple in flames and smoke.

“Eilidh returned to trueform and found Maon, who was badly injured. She carried him outside the burning temple, but before she had a chance to heal him, the last living warrior, who was named Bain, appeared as a venomous snake and quickly bit the poor fisherman directly over his heart, killing him instantly. The princess became so enraged that she summoned a bolt of lightning from the night sky and sent the charge through her hands and into the snake, forcing him to return to his Faerie body and leaving him flailing on the ground and forever cursed.”

At this point, Brigid paused for another quick drink of her soda, and Frances chanced a glance toward Eric, who was staring right at her with eyebrows raised. His amused expression made Frances nervous. She wasn’t the only one who had noticed striking similarities between the last scene of the story and her interaction with the shifter-bear earlier this evening. Frances quickly looked away from Eric as Brigid took up the tale once more.

“Eilidh returned to the side of her precious Maon. She knew the only possible chance she had of bringing him back to life was to fully restore her magic near the Stone of Destiny, *Liá*

Fail, where The Light was strongest. The princess shifted into a sleek horse, placed Maon's body on her back, and ran as fast as she could back to Tara.

"Eilidh reached *Liá Fail* just as the morning sun emerged over The Hill. She placed Maon's body at the foot of the stone and stood in the sunlight, praying to Danu for the strength to heal her husband. And because the goddess knew the young lovers' hearts were pure, she filled Eilidh to overflowing with Light, and the princess kissed Maon and breathed life into him.

"Now if there was a worse crime than *marrying* a human, it was using Faerie magic to heal one, especially one who was already dead. When the Faerie kings and queens saw what Eilidh had done, they were outraged. Ériu and MacGréine denounced their daughter and banished her, and they commanded more warriors to kill Maon. Eilidh tried again to defend her husband, but the warriors trapped her in a net woven from gold and silver, which drained her magic.

"Eilidh cried out for Maon to run, but because Maon refused to leave his wife's side, he was captured. Despite the desperate screams of the princess, King MacGréine himself cut off the fisherman's head.

"Seeing her lover die twice in as many days was too much for the princess to bear. Eilidh fled Tara and went toward the sea, planning to hurl herself from the cliffs. But when she realized she was pregnant with Maon's child, she had reason to live, and she hid in a cave while the baby grew inside her.

"Meanwhile, back at Tara, the warrior Bain had returned from Teltown and told the kings and queens how Eilidh had transformed and cursed him. Long scars ran down his face and body and along his arms, and his magic had been distorted so that he could not heal the scars, even while he was in animal form. The *Tuath Dé* were afraid of this dangerous power, for to abuse

The Light to harm another Faerie was their worst crime of all. Once more they dispatched warriors to find and kill the princess so she would never again be able to use her magic against them.

“Now what the *Tuath Dé* did *not* know was that the small group of Gaels at Teltown, believing the Fae were attacking when the warriors invaded their temple, and especially when a dragon burnt it to the ground, had sent messengers to the mainland to ask for help. And while the warriors searched for Eilidh, large numbers of Gaels were beginning to invade the island from the sea. Faerie sentinels warned the kings and queens of the coming attack, and the *Tuath Dé* met the Gaels in battle at Teltown.

“By the time the Faerie warriors found Eilidh, the *Tuath Dé* had been defeated, the three Faerie kings had been killed, and *Oileán Glas* was under the rule of the Gaels. The Gaels and the *Tuath Dé* struck up a treaty, and the humans promised to leave the Fae in peace on the condition that all Faerie people stay hidden from the realm of earth men forever.

“Some of the Fae became as small as rodents or insects so they could live well-hidden in forests and rivers. Sightings of these Faeries over the years have inspired fables of pixies, sprites, and nymphs. Those who went underground have been called dwarves and gnomes. And the Faeries who grew fins and took to the oceans have encouraged legends of mermaids and selkies and sea serpents.

“The three Faerie queens, including Eilidh’s mother Ériu, asked the Gaels to name the island for them, and the Gaels agreed, changing *Oileán Glas* to *Érie*. The queens then flew high into the sky, and the goddess Danu returned as a comet and carried them to the sun.

“Now, after all of that, Princess Eilidh was brought before the cursed warrior, Bain, who would decide her fate. Bain sentenced the princess to three thousand years under the ground, and Eilidh was sealed in a large fissure where she could not use the sun to restore her magic.”

“What about the baby?” Frances blurted loudly before she could stop herself. A few laughs rose from the circle, and Frances went beet-red as she tried to slump out of site in her seat.

Brigid smiled. “Ah, you remembered,” she said with a wink. “Well, before Eilidh was caught by the warriors, she had given birth to a baby boy. She had named the child Bradán, which means fish, after the first gift Maon had given her. She’d then hidden him away with a human family who would raise him as their own son. And the child, though he had the appearance of a human, had inherited the powerful Light of the Fae from his mother.

“Bradán MacMaon was the first part-human, part-Faerie shapeshifter, and he lived for over one thousand years, marrying many times and fathering hundreds of children. And all modern shapeshifters, if they could trace their lineage far enough into the past, would discover a common ancestor in Bradán and in our true mother, the Faerie princess Eilidh, who by protecting her precious son, gave life to us all.”

Brigid’s final words hung in the air like a mist. For the second or two of silence following them, Frances stared into the now dwindling fire, feeling a palpable magic emanating from each glowing ember. Frances had always liked stories like this – epic tales of romance and sacrifice and tragedy. She read a lot of fiction, and she had a healthy enough imagination to at least believe in the *possibility* of fairytales. But how she felt now, this was different. This *Faerie Story* was no mere fairytale; she just knew it. And right now, as she revisited the Emerald Isle in her mind, she felt more connected to Eilidh and Maon than to her own parents.

She was jolted back to reality, however, when the circle around the fire pit erupted into applause. Brigid finished off her soda and bowed theatrically. Mary Ellen announced bedtime, and the group began to break up and scatter toward the tents.

“I just love that story, don’t you?” Kiera asked as she stood beside Frances and stretched out her arms.

“What?” said a dazed Frances. “Oh, yes, it was really good.” She stood slowly, feeling suddenly very heavy.

“Well, I’m wiped,” said Kiera with a yawn.

Frances followed Kiera to their tent where, still mesmerized practically into a stupor by the Faerie legend, she climbed into her sleeping bag without even changing or brushing her teeth. She was asleep within minutes.

Her dreams that night were tinted green and filled with beautiful, shimmering, winged creatures of all sizes. They had golden eyes and webbed feet and four slender fingers on each hand, and they spoke softly to Frances in a musical language she couldn’t understand. But in the morning, Frances didn’t remember any of them.