

Prologue

The Highlands of Scotland 1250 A.D

It was bitterly cold and the rain, which had been threatening to fall all day, had finally broken through soaking them thoroughly. Looking up, Fearghas watched the clouds cloak the looming cliffs above in darkness, goose bumps spread over his skin as an eerie, ominous feeling settled in around him. Shaking the feeling off, he took a deep breath and kicked his horse into movement. As he rode on, the mist that hung heavily in the air thickened, making the path in front of him treacherously difficult to see. *Och, this was all he needed!* Kicking his horse, a little harder he sped up as the rain picked up its intensity. As it thundered down, the already perilous path became slick with mud and his horse stumbled losing its footing. Despite the danger, he urged his horse onward, keeping up his brutal pace; he had no choice, there was no time to waste.

The cliff wound towards the waterfall which acted as the entrance to Allna Calda Mhar cave, their destination. His body ached all over, the arduous two-day trek through the Assynt hills from the MacDonnell keep was taking its toll and he was exhausted. They'd had little rest since they had started out for the mountain; just enough to nourish them and give them what little strength they needed to reach the cave. Although MacDonnell was used to the cold winters that stormed The Highlands, the rain that pelted him, along with the knowledge of what he was about to do, sent a numbness through him like none he had ever known. He could no longer feel the leather reins between his fingers and the stinging, needle-like rain no longer bothered him as he raced on, adrenaline and desperation keeping him going. Time was running out, not only for their journey, but for each and every clan member in The Highlands.

Trouble had been brewing for quite some time and recently the devastation and killings that had racked the countryside had intensified. A dark evil was rising up like a curse, wrapping its toxic magic around everything and everyone, threatening The Highlands he called home. This was worse than any human war ever forged, this was dark magic's quest for complete control over the human world and there was only one way to defeat it. His eyes involuntarily flicked up towards the heavens and he shuddered as flashes of light skittered in unnatural paths through the dark mass above them. Even the clouds themselves were tinged with strange hues of purple and green, hovering like an ominous omen, demonstrating the power that was growing daily. Giving one last shudder, he urged his horse to a faster pace.

They kept going along the winding path, making sure not to slow down, and then he heard it, the sound he had longed to hear. The unmistakable crashing force of water cascading down the cliff face soon grew to a deafening crescendo as they approached. The water fall roared around him, mimicking the anger that was rolling within his body, he desperately wished there was another way, his body tensed as he thought about everything that he was about to lose. The bundle in his arm stirred and let out a cry that was lost to the ferocity of the roaring water as it silenced the world around him. He would love nothing better than to stop and comfort the bundle in his arms, but not yet, he would not rest until he was at the entrance of the cave.

He continued on, following the path until it brought him to the meeting place behind the waterfall. Here he was able to stop under an outcropping not far from the entrance; dismounting wearily he looked down at his beloved daughter and sighed.

“Doona worry lass, ya Da is here, all will be fine.” He cooed trying to comfort her.

Now if only he could bring himself to believe that. Shaking the sober thoughts from his head, he slowly made his way over to a ledge nearby and gently placed her down; giving his tired arms a chance to regain feeling. He noticed that the druid wasn't here yet, that meant he had a few minutes to try and make her as comfortable as possible. He placed her on a ledge that jutted out from the wall, noting the reason for her restlessness; her plaid was coming undone and the rain had started to penetrate the inner folds, making her damp, cold and uncomfortable, poor lamb. Reaching down he tried to fix it clumsily, but he was so cold that his hands were shaking, making the task almost impossible. Eventually, despite his trembling fingers, he managed to rewrap the plaid so that the dryer parts could warm her cold shivering body. It was the best he could do. If only he could replace it with the dry blanket he had in his satchel, but he couldn't – she needed *this* particular plaid to go through with her; this plaid had her name stitched into its bright patterned textile next to her mother's brooch. Both would be her only tangible connection to her past, *to him*.

A noise coming from behind him gained his attention, and quickly he turned towards where the noise had emanated, sword drawn and ready to fight off whoever had found him. His eyes met with nothing. He couldn't just stand here waiting for them to ambush him. He picked up his daughter and made his way further up the path towards the entrance of the cave, staying close to the wall to avoid slipping in the oozing mud.

As he neared the entrance, he heard the distinct sound of a throat clearing, and renewed anxiety bubbled inside him. As he closed in on the entrance his eyes adjusted to the shadows that spilled out of the cave, it was then that he saw a figure. The man was six-foot-tall with jet-black hair. With mixed emotion, he recognised the dark plaid draped over his shoulder; it was the same plaid worn by all druids in The Highlands. The black was a symbol that that they belonged to no clan, yet controlled all. The druid stood there blocking the entrance to the cave; an imposing power emanated from him. MacDonnell prayed that this was 'Fer Doirich', the druid that was to help him with his mission.