

A large, stylized number '2' is centered within a decorative, light gray floral or Celtic knotwork pattern. The pattern consists of interlocking loops and leaf-like shapes that form a square frame around the number.

ONE WEEK EARLIER

Behind Ailm's keep, oak forest rises in an almost unbroken line up into the foothills of the Blackstairs, known as the Steps. But just where the forest starts to thin and the bones of the earth shoulder their way to the surface, there's a small, grassy plateau. It sits sheltered in the lee of the Steps so that even in late winter, the grass still has growth on it, and the frost doesn't linger long, even on the coldest mornings.

So it was that early one morning, a week before Ionáin's Reckoning, with freezing mist still clinging to the trees, Éadha was to be found guiding the Keep's small flock down the avenue from the Keep before diverting off onto a forest trail and on up to graze on the plateau. Cú, a half-grown wolfhound, loped alongside her, puffs of breath billowing out ahead of the

two of them. The sheep were skittish in the fog, but she and Cú were canny herders, and soon enough they'd cajoled them up onto the grass.

Éadha was dressed for the cold in an old gray tunic, worn trews, her battered leather boots, and fingerless gloves, with a leather satchel slung across her body under her cloak. All hand-me-downs from her uncle; it was one advantage of being tall for her age, even if it did mean people always thought her older than she was. Seventeen now, just. Old enough to be expected to be of use, she chose herding like her uncle rather than work in the Keep like her aunt. She chose the sky, with Cú and the sheep for company.

On their scramble up onto the plateau, Cú sniffed out some wolf droppings, but they were old, and Éadha wasn't worried; the ground up here was open enough to spot any predator from a good distance out. At the eastern end there was a steep drop down into a disused quarry. Centuries ago, men had quarried granite there, but stone-working by hand was forbidden after the Channellers came to power, with their ability to raise whole buildings from the earth. The quarry had lain empty since then. Éadha made sure none of the animals were grazing too close to the drop—there was no accounting for how stupid sheep could be—then clambered up onto a rocky outcrop so's to have a good view over them all.

As she climbed, a falcon broke with a screech from a hidden perch on the overhang above, swooping directly above their

heads. Éadha gripped her staff, ready to swing, while Cú let out a deep growl of warning; in lambing season the creatures could be a menace. This time, though, it flew straight on, out over the forest in the direction of the Keep.

Something in the swoop of the falcon's flight reminded Éadha of the dragons she saw from time to time when she was out here herding on the Steps. Flying so far above her they seemed to be little more than bright sparks blown on the wind, their wings reflecting the sunlight as they flew. In her lifetime they'd done no more than that, for all the Channeller tales of fiery monsters liable to burn everyone out of their beds. Flying on over her head, past Ailm's Keep, mostly headed for the high peaks of the Blackstairs.

Sometimes, after she'd seen one etched against the blue sky and the black hills, it'd follow her into her dreams that night. Dreams where she flew up alongside it into the bright air of morning to arrow across the icy peaks of the Blackstairs and away. Away from the herding, and the sheep, and her uncle's cottage, and the *smallness* of the life that lay ahead of her already at just seventeen. Dreams so real that when she awoke, they ached like memories.

She told no one of these dreams, not even Ionáin.

She sat down cross-legged on the ledge and dug into her satchel to see what Béithe had given her. She could feel two—no, three—apples, small, wrinkly, and tasting of summer, and underneath—oh joy—a small bannock of bread still warm

from the Keep's oven. With no Channeller to channel grain crops like wheat, bread was a scarce, precious thing in the Keep. *Béithe must've been in a good mood this morning*, she thought.

Leaving her hands wrapped around the little loaf for the last of its warmth, Éadha kept watch until, just as the sun climbed to its highest point and the mists below finally cleared, a familiar tousle-haired figure appeared at the edge of the plateau. Even from a distance Éadha could see Ionáin was grinning widely. Which meant that someone somewhere was annoyed with him.

She rolled her eyes even as Cú loped over to greet him, leaping up on two legs to lick his face. Ionáin grabbed the huge dog in a bear hug so the two of them staggered and almost fell over, Cú yipping in excitement as if he were still a puppy. Éadha, on the other hand, didn't move, only calling down to him from her rocky perch when he was close enough to hear—"Ionáin!"—putting as much exasperation as she could into that one word. Béithe would be proud of her.

"What?" he said innocently, shielding his eyes from the sun overhead and grinning up at her.

"So who've you pissed off now?"

"Only Cousin Jarlath."

"You know this is the bit where I'm supposed to chase you back down the mountain. Before Béithe realizes you've mitched off your lessons *again*."

Ionáin laughed out loud. “With what? Will you flap your cloak at me like you’re shooing a goose? Shoo, Ionáin, go learn the history of the Channeller wars even though you already know it off by heart. Shoo.”

Éadha snorted at the ridiculous image but sobered almost at once. “Come on, Ionáin, they just want to see you taking things seriously now . . .” She paused as she realized, too late, where that sentence was going. Ionáin finished it for her.

“Now Dara’s dead and I’m my Family’s last hope, you mean.”

Éadha didn’t say anything. There wasn’t anything to say to that unless she was prepared to lie.

Strictly speaking, of course, he wasn’t the only one facing a Reckoning in a few days’ time. Everyone else who’d turned seventeen in the Keep or the village, including Éadha, had to be reckoned, too, while the Masters were there for Ionáin’s big Reckoning ceremony. But almost no one outside the Families was gifted these days. Or, as Béithe liked to say, “That’s what centuries of Families only marrying each other gets you. A shrinking pool of gifted ones and every one of them afraid to stick a toe outside it.”

Ionáin, meanwhile, was clambering up beside her, his long fingers finding handholds, and pulling himself up with ease until he reached the stony ledge where she sat. “Anyway, Mother’s so busy getting ready for the Reckoning she won’t even notice I’m gone, while Father’s too busy having flash-backs to his own failure to say anything.”

He scrunched down, nudging her over with his hip to make room for him to squeeze in alongside her. They were, Éadha realized with a small start, finally the same height. His head was level with her own, which, after a lifetime of her being the taller one, felt unsettling.

Beside her, Ionáin finished on a quieter note. “I just needed to get out for a bit. To breathe.”

Éadha glanced sideways at him, her heart softening. She’d get in trouble for this later, she knew. Béithe would come to the cottage tonight and lecture her about letting the young master waste his time out herding with her again. But that was tonight, and this was now, and he was here, and this was, after all, how it’d always been, all their lives until now. The two of them together, and how could she give up on having just one more day like this?

So instead she butted Ionáin’s shoulder and held out her satchel toward him. “Be honest: This is what you came for, isn’t it?”

Immediately Ionáin began rummaging about inside until he pulled out the little loaf and brandished it in the air.

“Aha! So this is why you were so keen to get rid of me. Hmm. I always knew you were Béithe’s favorite.”

Éadha’s eyes flew open. “You must be joking,” she sputtered. He only laughed and tore off a small piece of bread before lying down with one hand over his eyes. Beside him, she drew up her legs, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees.

"They haven't been the same, anyway," he said.

"What?"

"The stupid lessons. They haven't been the same since you stopped coming. They were better then." Éadha gave him a small nudge. In truth, most things were better then, back when Dara was still alive and his mother more inclined to indulge Ionáin, including when he insisted Éadha be allowed to start lessons with him when they were both nine.

"You make her sleep in my room," he'd said to Úra, his small face determined, "so you can look after Dara when he's sick at night and not have to worry about me. So it's only fair she can do the lessons too."

It meant she'd a basic grasp of reading, writing, and map-making, unlike most of the other Keep servants. Mapmaking had been her favorite lesson, her nose almost on the page as she painstakingly traced the delicate blue of the Anála Sea, stippled with the black of the dragon archipelago off Westport. But Ionáin's tutor, Jarlath (a pompous, ungifted cousin from Úra's Debruin Family), had shaken his head in disapproval when he saw she'd sketched in a tiny dragon, all claws and wings, to mark their island domain.

"Art is the preserve of the Channellers and rightly so, for nothing we ungifted could ever draw could match the wonders of a Channeller's illusions. Your place is to support their gift. It is most certainly not to be drawing"—he pulled the sheet away from her, crumpling it up—"those awful creatures."

She'd stopped going to the lessons at the same time she'd moved out of the Keep and into her uncle's cottage—after Dara died, his father powerless to help him and no Channeller near enough to be able to save him, and everything changed.

There was a short silence between them while Éadha watched Cú doing a lap of the plateau, going back again to sniff the wolf spoor. Beside her she felt Ionáin digging into his pockets as if he were looking for something. Then he poked her hip and, when she turned toward him, waggled his closed fist at her. "Put out your hand and close your eyes."

As she did, he dropped something hard and smooth into her hand. As soon as she held it, before she even saw it, she knew it for what it was. In the sunlight it glowed with veins of red and gold, too-bright colors for a winter-bleached hillside. It was an amber shard no bigger than her cupped palm, a model of the White Tower of Erisen. Tiny windows and arches all picked out on the smooth amber, as immaculate as it'd been the moment it was channeled by Ionáin's great-grandfather a century ago. He'd been a Master Architect, one of the greatest of his age, and had channeled this model as a toy for his grandchildren.

She stared at it for a moment then looked down at Ionáin. "Won't your parents mind?"

He shrugged. "You know Father—he won't care. And I doubt Mother would notice if I took an actual building as long as it wasn't needed for the ceremony."

"I don't need a birthday present, you know. Truly."

"We've been over this. I know you don't need a present. I want to give you a present." He poked her in the hip again. "You really are the worst person to try and be nice to, you know. Just so we're clear: your proud independence is in no way compromised by this spontaneous giving of a gift that will not incur a debt of any kind toward me. So go on, like we practiced. Just say thank you."

"But you'll get into trouble."

"Try it, go on, just for fun. Thank you, Ionáin. *Thaaaaank you.*"

She looked across at him, his tawny, tangled hair full of burrs, his blue eyes laughing up at her from under his hand. Accepted the sudden clench of happiness that pushed her up onto her feet, where she gave an exaggerated bow from the waist with a broad smile and said, "Thaaaaank you, kind sir."

Ionáin scrambled to his feet, too, laughing. Now he was standing in front of her on the ledge. He swirled his hand as Éadha began straightening up to face him, then said in his most pompous voice, "You're most welcome, my lady. And happy birthday," before leaning in to kiss her on the cheek, but in the same instant, Éadha lifted her head so that instead his lips dragged softly down the skin of her cheek and brushed her mouth. And on that frozen rocky outcrop high above the Keep, everything stopped as the two friends pulled back and stared at each other.

He hadn't planned to do it; Éadha could tell by the shock

on his face. He'd just been caught up in the joke. But when his lips touched hers it hadn't felt like a joke. It felt as though he'd just swung open her heart, and now the space inside her was five times greater than it'd been before. And he felt it too; she could see it in his eyes as the shock in them faded, replaced by a question. A question her heart already knew the answer to. For it was truth, that kiss. It made no sense, and she knew there was no room for it in his world. But it was truth, and her heart wouldn't let her deny it, not now he'd set it alight. So she looked him in the eye and kissed him back, another soft brush across his lips. And they were so warm and alive that she wanted only to be kissing him still. But Ionáin flushed bright red and stepped back a little.

"Happy birthday," he said again for there not to be a silence.

"Yes," she said, and it was her turn for her cheeks to burn red as her mind caught up with what her heart had just done.

They both sat down again, though closer now, their hips almost touching, facing outward as the heat on their faces slowly cooled, and never in her life had Éadha been more aware of another person than she was of Ionáin in that moment. And though she knew him better than she knew anyone else, it felt like she was seeing him for the first time. The line of his hip, inches away from her own. The warm flush on his cheeks. His slender fingers resting on his knees, drawn up against the chill. A shiver went through her suddenly at the thought of those same fingers touching her.

But even though reaching across that tiny space between them would've been the most normal thing in the world just seconds ago, now it felt like an impossibility. Because he'd kissed her but he'd also stepped back, and she didn't know what to do.

Between them, the silence began to stretch until, in the distance, a solitary rider appeared on the avenue leading toward the Keep. Behind him, a cart followed.

Beside her, Éadha sensed Ionáin stiffen. Glancing sideways, she saw he was glaring down at the rider. Quietly she said, "Red doublet, packages tied on the back. Spices for the feast?"

"Silk. More of the finest Erisen silk. Can't have enough silk for a Reckoning," said Ionáin, hunching his shoulders. "It's from the De Lane Family. Their son, Senan, passed two months ago, and they've been crowing about it ever since. He'll be one of the strongest apprentices this year, though one of the First Families have a son turning seventeen too. Gry. Their Channellers are always really powerful."

Beside him, Éadha took a deep breath, willing the new, unfamiliar tension out of her body, before going on. "How about the cart with the two big bundles getting stuck halfway up the lane?"

Ionáin rolled his eyes. "Feather beds for the Debruin cousins. We'd be shamed for all eternity if Lady Ferne sleeps on a lumpy mattress."

"Blue with a yellow stripe, single rider on a fast horse?"

Ionáin sat forward abruptly when Éadha said that, staring down at the new rider who'd just appeared on the lane. "Those are the Manon Family colors. His twins, Coll and Linn, passed their Reckonings when they turned seventeen last month. Linn's the first girl in five years to pass as a Channeller. That must be Lord Manon accepting Father's invitation. As if any of them would miss the show of the year. Come all, see the young lord bring glory or ruin to the once noble Ailms. If he fails, you can say you were there for the great fall of a Family."

Turning toward him, Éadha held out the amber tower on the flat of her palm. "But if you pass, you'll be able to do this. And go there," she said, gesturing toward the Blackstairs and all that lay beyond: the white city of Erisen with its marble towers and the islands of Lambay where the Masters had trained generations of young Chancellers for four hundred years.

Ionáin said nothing. It was the one thing he wouldn't talk about, even with her. What'd happen if he passed. Éadha understood. He couldn't let himself think it. It meant too much.

As the Manon rider disappeared into the Keep, the silence between them turned heavier, and Éadha could feel Ionáin slipping away from her, further away from that one shining moment they'd shared.

"I'd better go down," he said, not meeting her eyes as he climbed to his feet. "They'll be looking for me, to tell me about the Manon letter."

As he stood, she wanted to put out her hand to him, as if

she could somehow reach past all these things pulling him back into his world. But it was too new, too wordless, the feeling that'd swung open in her heart when their lips met. She didn't have the words yet to try to hold him, only the longing he wouldn't go. So she said nothing, just nodding as Ionáin jumped lightly to the ground.

Raising a hand behind him in farewell, he disappeared down the slope, Cú loping devotedly alongside him. Éadha hadn't the heart to call the wolfhound back. She'd get the sheep down on her own.

Instead of making a start on it, though, she sat on, staring at the spot where Ionáin and Cú had disappeared as the sun faded behind the hills and the mist reclaimed its old ground. It felt colder with them gone, the chill needling through her layers, but still she didn't move, her hand cupping her chin so her fingertips were touching the spot where Ionáin had kissed her. It'd only been a few seconds, but she could remember every curve and dip of his lips where they'd brushed against hers. The heat of it and the sense of something new coming alive.

It was almost dark when she finally roused herself to begin rounding up the flock for the long trudge back down the fell. But as she started a head count, she heard a panicked bleat from the far side of the hill by the drop down to the quarry. Breaking into a run, she raced toward the sound.

As she sprinted, ahead of her she heard the rushing sound of stones giving way, followed by the flat thump of a body hitting

rock. She skidded to a stop, only just keeping her own balance on the loose stones, and peered down. The yearling must've wandered too close to the edge and slid right off the shale, over the drop. It'd been saved only by a narrow outcrop that jutted out about six feet down. Now it was lying on the ledge, unmoving but still breathing, winded by its fall. Directly beneath it were the steep pits of the quarry. As soon as it tried to move, it would surely topple over the edge and fall to its death.

Throwing herself down flat on her stomach, Éadha strained downward toward the trapped animal, stretching her staff out as far as it went, trying to hook the creature's neck. But it was just out of reach. She needed to get closer. Cautiously she inched forward over the loose shale, but as soon as she did the stones began to gather speed beneath her. She only just managed to push herself out of the rush as a hail of pebbles went tumbling down, clattering off the ledge below.

Her heart thudding with the terror of almost going over the edge, she dropped her head. "Stupid, stupid, how could I be so stupid?"

Sitting there mooning over one impossible kiss while the animals she was supposed to be minding went wandering off. How could she lose one so cheaply with food always short? They'd all be so disappointed in her—her uncle, Ionáin's father, even Ionáin. No. She couldn't bear it. She wouldn't bear it.

Even as she thought that, she seemed to feel an echo of the sensation she'd felt earlier when she'd kissed Ionáin, of some-

thing within her coming to life. It was almost completely dark, winter's night coming on quickly as she lay there on the gravel, the first lights shining up from the village below. Jamming one hand under a tiny outcrop for a grip, her arm shaking with the effort of clinging on, she swung out over empty air, trying again to reach the yearling. The rush of the air beneath her brought her back to the silent swoop of the morning's falcon. Hanging there, half suspended in darkness, the world about her seemed to narrow to a falcon's flight. In that moment she became the hunter. A creature of instinct, hunting for the power she so desperately needed, and there, from one heartbeat to the next, there it was. A living silver thread, shining out in the darkness.

Even as she saw it, beyond thought she knew the way of it, reaching out with her awareness for that silver thread and pulling it hard into her. As she did, the world went white around her, then snapped back to black as inside her head a star exploded. Life filled her, shining, pulsating life pouring into every cell of her until she must surely burst with the effort of holding it in.

She let go of her handhold, dropping fast and hard through the winter night to land on the narrow ledge where the sheep lay. It was just starting to come around. She caught it up with one hand. Panic-stricken, it kicked every part of her, fighting to get free. But she gripped it easily, impossibly, and climbed with it back up the vertical cliff. Not until she'd reached the

HER HIDDEN FIRE

fell top once more did her knees buckle, the shining energy that'd poured into her suddenly spent. She collapsed onto the shale at the cliff edge, the sheep writhing out of her arms and scrambling, bleating, back to the herd.

For a moment she lay there, panting, staring up at the dark sky where the constellation of the Sídhé, the Old Ones, had appeared low on the horizon. Her mind was strangely calm, as if what she'd done had happened on a level below conscious thought, and she hadn't caught up yet with its simple impossibility. But the sheep were milling about anxiously. There was nothing for it but to haul herself carefully back up onto the grass and shepherd the flock on down the fell side, the dark path between the starlight and the firelight.