

## PROLOGUE

The craggy landscape of home greeted Niamh as she trudged up the hill after the man she would have to betray. The horses had been left behind at Hadrian's Wall, as it was too risky to bring them across the border into Caledonia. The path forward was on foot, something Niamh knew would weaken her companion the longer they had to walk. She had some misgivings about physically tiring the man out, but her loyalties could not be in question.

A part of her wanted to suggest that they steal another pair of horses despite the risk, to keep Hytham from losing speed on the recovery that he had clawed for. But two strangers riding through these parts of Caledonia would be more suspicious than two travelers on foot, and Hytham had driven the horses too hard on the way up, regardless. Niamh didn't know precisely what had happened to him to leave his body in such a weakened state, but it had been enough to keep him bound to Ravensthorpe for a long time even before she'd

met him. Because of this, Niamh had tried to convince him to let her go on this journey alone. It would have been easier without his watchful eyes on her, after all, analyzing every action she took, every motion of her head, every thought that he could see cross her face. It hadn't been an easy ride north, and she'd been cautious, had slept as far away from him as she dared, just in case she spoke in her sleep.

Why he'd insisted on going with her this far north with his injuries baffled her. Being rain-soaked and without much in the way of comfort wasn't helpful to healing. There had been wolf attacks, bandits to dodge, and that was just the violence. The chill of the moors had been enough to make *her* knuckles ache when she gripped a sword, and whatever was happening within his knees couldn't have been much better. But he had insisted nonetheless. And now, the cost to her meant being careful, and just a little bit more suspicious of what he could observe than she would have liked. It also meant she would destroy what comradery had built between them.

But if he was tired... if he was distracted... if he wasn't at his best, she might be able to get what she needed out of this trip without notice. At least, not until she had gotten far enough away to hide in the fens, or maybe convince some of the locals to conceal her. If she was lucky and those same locals didn't notice she wasn't quite who they expected or wanted to see, either. This was not going to be an easy trick. But she'd trained for adventures like these, not just with the people she answered to, but as a matter of course in the kind of village she was from. They had always needed people to be stealthy for them, to sneak into rival villages for supplies, or to steal back their weapons.

They continued to scramble across mossy rocks, viewed by red fluffy cows with large horns, the only witnesses to their entrance into her homeland. The cows didn't seem very concerned by their appearance, not like the foxes and wolves that lived further south. The cows simply stared and chewed on grass. They didn't even move.

Niamh wished she could actually go home – to her village, her people. She wished she hadn't gotten in this deep. She wished she could have the kind of peace that the cows had, to just stand and eat and be left to their own devices. The adventures she'd had were wonderful, of course. The chance to see more of the world beyond the shores of her own village, but she had learnt that with adventure came costs. Costs to safety, costs to friendships, and costs to her sanity.

She watched Hytham walk ahead. He'd insisted on taking point for a little while, even though she knew these lands better than anyone.

"Are you quite sure you don't want me to guide us now that we're here?" she called out again, for what had to be the hundredth time.

"No. I know where we're headed now, and I would rather be the one that showed their face first," Hytham responded.

It was then that she saw him make a mistake. One she couldn't let him make because of course it would risk her neck as much as his.

"I wouldn't step there, were I you," she called out across the wilderness, picking up her pace and chasing after him.

Hytham barely paused in his stride. "It's fine, it's just more of this moss we keep walking over."

She internally sighed. People who weren't from these parts

of the islands always said that. It was how they ended up mummified in the middle of the moors, their corpses making for excellent fire fodder later on.

“That’s a bog, Hytham. You’re looking at peat.”

The scent told her what she was looking at. Not the ground itself, but the smell of loam and rotting vegetation that she knew heralded spots where one shouldn’t put their feet.

Hytham paused, stepping backwards slightly and glancing back at her. “A bog? But there’s no water here. Just moss.”

She nodded, picking up her pace to get close, just in case he didn’t listen to her. She thought he might die as a result of her betrayal, but no one deserved to die because they accidentally stepped into a peat bog that they’d been warned about. That was the kind of death no one, but especially not people she liked, deserved. Maybe Old Mae back at the village deserved it, but she was mean to children, and she drank too much ale to be either sensible or useful. Those people deserved to be in bogs.

Maybe Marcella deserved to be in a bog, if she couldn’t find a way to be cooperative. But Hytham? Hytham was funny, and sensible enough to deserve a death that the Morrigan could respect, not one that he’d be made fun of for in the afterlife.

She stepped around him and toed the brown and green substance she knew wasn’t safe to bear weight. It was squishy under her foot, not hard. “You can’t put your full weight on it, but you can test it out. See?” she said, gesturing for him to try.

He did, and his face paled as he realized what he had almost done. “I see your lands are more complicated than I gave them credit for, and that I was wise to bring you with me instead of coming alone.”

He smiled when he spoke, and Niamh felt the guilt welling up inside of her. It was hard to breathe for a moment, or even look at him, though holding his gaze was the most important thing that she could do. Liars did not look away when they spoke.

“I am glad that you allowed me to come, though I wish you had stayed back to spare your body the hardship. These are difficult lands with little sympathy.” Niamh found a stick on the ground and used it to poke at the edge of the bog, uncovering its boundary. “If you follow me, I can get us past this to a safer path forward,” she said, turning her back to him. She hoped her hunched shoulders wouldn’t give away her true intentions, and the doubts that plagued her.

Pulling her hood up over her head, she fought the urge to turn around, to tell him to go back, back to Lunden. To tell him of her plans. To confess. She couldn’t, she shouldn’t. Instead, she stabbed at the earth, making sure that neither of them fell victim to the bog they had stumbled across, because if there was one thing she wouldn’t allow to happen, it was the death of both of them in the most ridiculous way possible.

“You’ve been a good travel companion,” Hytham murmured, after they finally reached the other side of the bog. He leaned against the stick he had gathered, having learned the trick of safety. “But you’re quiet. I don’t think you were this quiet before.”

She sighed. Of course, he had noticed that she found words more difficult as they neared their goal.

“It is strange being back home,” she said slowly. “I thought that when I came back this way again, it would be to head to

my village to rest, that I might be old and feeble then. Or that perhaps my bones would be carried back to be buried here. I didn't think I'd be ...”

How could she find a way to speak the truth without speaking it?

“... on a quest, not with anyone. I didn't think I'd have a purpose here again. Home is complicated. It is the place I most want to be and the place I least want to be at the same time.”

Hytham nodded in agreement. He had his own secrets, she could tell. He didn't speak of his past, or where he had come from. Nor did Marcella or anyone else she had met with the Hidden Ones. They all shrouded their origins in mystery, preferring to speak of the present, of their purpose. They lived in a world where what mattered was their mission, and nothing else.

They crested another hill, and far in the distance she spotted smoke rising up out of a valley. A camp. Perhaps the one they were headed to? Even with the trust Hytham had put in her, allowing her to sleep by him, allowing her to lead the way, when it came to their actual destination, Hytham had been cagey. He had not wanted to be precise in what he shared with her.

“Hytham, you're going to need to tell me where we're headed eventually,” she told him now, exasperated.

“Just there, over that hill toward the smoke. That's where we're headed.” He confirmed her suspicions, and stepped around her, insisting bodily that he be the one to lead them forward, at least for now.

Niamh saw her destiny coming. The choice she had made

months ago was now here, and all she could do was be loyal to those she had made promises to, and she had made no promises to Hytham.

## ONE

The waves crashed onshore, slamming against the stone-studded beach in the very northern reaches of Caledonia.

Niamh sat on a rock overlooking the surf, surveying the cold water as she meditated, her hands resting gently on her knees and tapping out the rhythm to the song playing in the back of her mind. Beside her sat a sword, battered and battle worn, not too far out of her reach. Her eyes were half closed, focused gently on the horizon, but also on nothing at all as she wandered through the parts of her mind that needed to be set free to connect with the energy of the ocean.

The sun slowly crept up toward the sky, lighting the beach with the golden and orange colors of dawn. Her dark auburn hair, plaited back with ribbon as orange as a fox's tail, stayed well out of her face. A practical solution for a swordfighter. In the back of her mind, even while she focused on the meditation she had set herself, she knew that raiders had been spotted not too far away from her village. If they came

upon her, she would have to defend not just herself, but the whole village on her own. Such was her purpose as the witch-warrior of this town.

Thus, the sword, and the awareness of her surroundings, were something she wished she could entirely let go of. It would be easier to connect with the energies of the earth if she could pretend that there were no dangers to her in the world. Her fingers brushed on the deep green wool she wore, cut into a dress that had a slit on the left side for her sword to hang. Niamh of Argyll was the kind of woman who never came unprepared, even to make a morning meditation beside the sea.

As she finished her silent prayer, she inclined her head toward the path she had taken down to the water's edge, drawn by the swift noise of footsteps. Her apprentice ran down the path, her face flushed with exertion, a sight which left Niamh concerned – the girl was never going to make it through her first battle if she didn't work on her endurance. The sword in her left hand shook with every step she took. Her other hand was tightly fisted around some kind of paper missive. Niamh briefly imagined what would happen if the girl tripped, and made a note to work with her on proper speed with a sword. She should be waiting to draw until there was an enemy, after all.

After what felt like forever, the girl finally reached her, and took breaths deep and ragged.

“You can sheath your sword, girl,” Niamh said, voice stern as can be. “There are no enemies to fight, no wolves to catch us unawares. Unless you've come to kill me?”

The role of mentor was not one that Niamh was used to,

and her reprimand felt odd coming out of her mouth. But the apprentice needed her to be full of displeasure, it seemed. Being impractical with a sword would just get a number of people dead, Niamh herself included, if Birdie wasn't careful.

Lifting herself off the rock, Niamh hopped down, going to meet the girl amid the sea grasses. From the concerned look on her apprentice's face, Niamh could tell someone had read the letter Birdie held out in her off hand for her – the child couldn't read, which was another problem that Niamh would have to solve with education before her apprentice could be sent for further training. No one would leave her care without the ability to read a message.

"What is it?" She tried to sound bored. The girl was overexcited, perhaps thinking she might be included in whatever urgency the letter indicated, most likely envisioning her first quest. Perhaps that was true, if Niamh needed the help, but she was loath to take someone who couldn't think to sheathe her own sword when going at a dead run...

"The Lady seeks your counsel," the girl said formally, stilted the words out of her mouth like she had been practicing them the whole way down to the beach. Spoken with the kind of formal phrasing that might have been given to her by the letter sender, and whoever read it to her.

The Lady. Spoken with the kind of emphasis that meant it could only be one woman who sought Niamh's aid. The only woman who could summon her from anywhere, at any place, at any time, and successfully get her attention.

Except, though she was loath to admit it, Niamh was tired. She wanted to stay here, in her village, and not answer such summons. It felt like she'd been fighting her whole life against

those seeking to take, take, take – be it raiders or newcomers arriving on her shores from other lands. She'd rather get comfortable in her home village, do the work of guarding the town from the constant raiders and harm, maybe raise a child or two if the Goddess willed it.

Instead, it seemed the Goddess was calling her down a much less peaceful path. One Niamh had trained for, to be sure, but not a path she had really considered would come for her. And of course, this girl, Birdie, was not ready to go that far south to where the Lady resided or might send them.

Niamh glanced at the paper her apprentice handed her with a shaking hand. After a moment, she realized that Birdie had not one, but two pieces of paper in her grasp. The first was not in a hand that she recognized. A spidery scrawl in a language that was not completely unfamiliar to her, but was more challenging to decipher. She sat down again among the sea grasses and dunes, bringing the paper closer to her face.

Whoever had sent this first missive sought a skilled warrior who went by the name of Nimue. According to the letter, she was skilled with a sword, could creep with the stealth of the fox and the silence of the adder. Whoever wrote this letter was asking someone to meet this Nimue, because she was meant to join their order.

The feeling of exhaustion intensified, as she could see without even needing to read the next page what was going to be asked of her. The Lady was going to ask her to pose as this warrior, to take her place. Somehow, Avalon had intercepted this message. It would never reach Nimue, who would remain blissfully ignorant of this call to action. Niamh would take her place.

Birdie had told her that the Lady was calling. That meant one thing: the Lady wanted her to go not just to the Tor, but to Lunden. The letter from the strangers who sought such stealthy warriors had been clear about their location, and while Avalon wrote in ciphers, the investigation of the provenance of that note was clear. Niamh had avoided visiting the city for every trip south that she had ever taken. The concept of a city made her bones ache. Too many people. Too much noise. Too many things she could never imagine because she had spent so much time in the bogs, and the fens, and the coast. She knew this land, these kinds of people, but to go all the way to Lunden meant she might never return. It was a far enough trip that many made it one way and never came back. So much danger resided in such a voyage that Niamh knew it would take all her skills to arrive there safely.

Staring at the long-suffering piece of parchment that had made that journey to her corner of the world, she folded it away and placed it in the leather pouch at her hip. Her suspicions were confirmed when she looked at the second page.

It was from the Lady herself, in her own hand, written on the lightest parchment Niamh had ever seen, in ink that shimmered from the magic of the isle.

The Lady was asking her to leave her home, to go to Lunden as Niamh predicted, and to find out who these people were. To do this, she would take the place of this Nimue. Who were these Hidden Ones that needed people for their stealth? Who needed people who could sneak and murder at the same time?

The Lady made it clear that no one should be operating any kind of group such as this without the knowledge or approval of the Women of the Mist. So, she was activating

one of their best witch-warriors, the only one she felt could meet the needs of this particular mission. Niamh of Argyll. It helped, the Lady noted, that their names were almost the same. Though Niamh knew she could have changed it for any mission. It was her skills that made her perfect to suit this calling, not her name.

Even through the tiredness, through the dread of the journey that Niamh knew faced her, she also felt the knowledge of her own skill. She was proud of what she could accomplish in the name of Avalon. What she knew she had been trained for, because they had put time, energy, and prayer into her. It had been the focus of her life, to find ways to serve the Goddess through the art of the sword and herb craft. It was what she had been meant to do. So, even though she was ambivalent about the long ride, she couldn't help but feel a spark of pride. She had done enough to be worthy of a quest for the Goddess' own voice.

And thus, she would obey the Lady, and take this perilous mission.

She wished she could take more time beside the water to say goodbye, but her apprentice seemed unable to wait patiently. Birdie's feet shuffled on the sand, digging further into the soft earth. Her fingers danced along the edge of the pommel of her blade, primed to strike though her skills weren't quite up to par. At least the girl was eager, that would take her a long way on this path.

Niamh nodded and stood, folding the second letter into her pouch, and then started up the path toward their small village. She didn't wait for her apprentice to follow, knowing that the girl would take her cue.

Birdie couldn't quite keep up. Niamh's steps were long and fast, and she made progress past the sea grasses and into the sparse woods that surrounded their home with ease. But nonetheless, the girl shouted after her, her words nearly unintelligible with the distance that Niamh had put between them.

The child repeated her request again, and Niamh could hear her steps speeding up. She paused to allow Birdie to step around her, to face her, and to speak to her. She was not entirely impressed with the girl, but she had the right to speak to her mentor and ask questions at any time.

"Are you going to need me to come with you?" Birdie asked, breathless.

Niamh looked at the dirty little girl, frail and scrawny, standing in front of her. She thought about the long ride from Argyll all the way to the southern edge of Mercia, the time spent alone on the road with nobody but a horse. She thought about how helpful it would be to have a second pair of eyes, and as she gazed out into the gloomy sky, she knew that even if she didn't want to bring the child, she needed her apprentice on the road ahead. Perhaps if Niamh were smart enough, quick enough, gifted enough, the child could be sent to Avalon instead of back to a long life of spinning wool. But Birdie hadn't shown that she had the good sense to be useful. It was a hard decision for Niamh because she knew she had Birdie's entire future in her hands.

Lives up here in the north were hard. They were often short, and girls didn't fare as well as boys. Niamh had done well for herself because she had escaped, found a purpose and a blade that served her well.

If the girl could serve a purpose and find her inner strength, perhaps the trip out of Argyll would be well worth it. If it could make Niamh's life a little easier, even if Birdie wasn't quite as smart or as quick as Niamh would hope... Well. She'd give her the chance.

"Saddle up two horses, get us enough food for two days ride south, and don't forget to find yourself a decent weapon. You can't be caught without one once we leave, and that one in your hand isn't sharp as I'd like. See to the blacksmith at once."

"So, I get to go?"

"Yes, Birdie. You get to go."

The eager girl nodded and dashed off without another word. Niamh was left with the two letters, and her thoughts.

She was the hedge-witch of this community. Her goal was to keep watch over the people who had raised her, to heal their wounds, to birth their babies, and when danger was afoot, to protect them through whatever means necessary – whether it was by the blade or by herbal means. She taught children how to make poultices, and she meditated every morning on the beach to attune herself to the energy of the land, knowing who hunted there, who lurked, and who came in peace.

Niamh stared out at the forest and wondered if this time, unlike the last time she left her home, would be the time that she never came back. This forest knew her, and she didn't want to lose her connection to the land that had birthed and raised her. Her family was dead and the only things that remained which had known her for her whole life were these trees and this land.

She had regretted the lack of care she had taken in saying goodbye when she left for Avalon to train when she was young. While on that magical isle, she had missed her home fiercely, and she wanted to honor its impact on her soul more honestly this time around.

She wandered back toward the village and studied it as if with new eyes. The small huts had thatched roofs and the bushes were just starting to get berries hanging off them. Sheep bleated in the distance as the shepherds brought them back into the town. In the distance, the womenfolk were beating out the wool. The smell of cooking in someone's cottage wafted between the huts, and again, she regretted that she would be leaving the people she loved behind. She walked past it all. She had another location that required her attention.

At last, she made it to the spot that she knew she needed to spend the most time at: the cairn just outside town, built to house her mother's bones when she had passed.

Her mother had been the witch-warrior for their village before her, a title passed down. Niamh had thought perhaps one day she would have a daughter and pass the title down once again, but instead she was leaving, her future uncertain. That wasn't how she'd thought things would go. After all, her mother had been the one to send her away initially, insisting that the best thing Niamh could do to serve her people and herself was to learn everything she could from Avalon. To accept the role passed down to her. Like she had done.

Lines from the Lady's letter rang through Niamh's mind.

*You are the one with the best skills we have to assess the situation. The Goddess has spoken, and it is your fate*

*that you should walk this path. We choose you as our spy.*

A spy. She'd never really thought of herself as having those kinds of skills, skills of a warrior and a witch, but of a spy? She supposed the skills were transferable, but it would be a new challenge for her. She was ready for it.

She remembered her first raid. The Northmen had come to the coastal shore and they had tried to take everything that their village had ... not that there was much for them to take this far north. Niamh had crept through the chaos of the fight and made her way to the longship they had brought to their shore. She sank it, leaving them with no choice but to run through the moors back to their own Danish settlement, which was settled on stolen land to the west. It had left them without food or new furs.

But that hadn't been the only time Niamh had been clever. Her hands brushed over the rough stones of her mother's cairn, and she thought back even earlier, to her time at Avalon. Her mother had warned her, when she left, that it would take more than just stubbornness to become a priestess. It would take bravery.

One of the final tasks of the women who studied on the isle shrouded in mist was to take a walk. The walk was not a stroll through a meadow filled with sheep, nor was it a walk along a peaceful shore or a river's edge. The walk was in the dark on the coast, to the cave that was rumored to belong to Merlin. At the cave, every person who wished to serve the God and the Goddess must ask for the blessing to tread the path of the witch-warrior.

Niamh had walked in near darkness by the shore. Her feet were bare, her hair unbound. She used only her hearing to understand where she was in space, because the sky was so dark. Somehow, no stars shone, and the moon was at its darkest phase. Even now, as she stood in the forest of her home, she could feel the frozen waters that licked her ankles. She knew that one wrong step would mean her death then, and she had accepted the cost. She had accepted the consequences to follow this calling to the end.

When she had reached the cave, which was filled with round stones worn smooth by the ocean, she stripped off her robe and waded deep into the frozen waters that flooded it. She dipped beneath the salty water and came back up, asking for the blessing of the waters. The bravery it took to swim into that cave was significant, because she knew that at any moment, if the waters willed it, she would drown, or freeze, or be bashed against the rock wall by the surf and be lost.

Yet, none of these memories made her a good spy. She was a good priestess, a good warrior. She had helped birth babies safely in conditions that raised the hair of many a midwife, but these were not the traits of someone who could lie and sneak and tell untruths to get what the Lady needed.

But if the Lady wanted her to, if the Goddess wanted her to, perhaps they both saw something in her that Niamh did not. If this was the calling that she was meant to heed, then perhaps she was truly who they thought she was. Sometimes, it was necessary to let the people who knew you best show you who you could be. She had trusted the Lady before, when she took her walk to the cave, and she had been told she was ready for it, even if she didn't quite believe it.

Following the path to Lunden would be just as dangerous as the path to Merlin's Cave.

Niamh pulled the two pieces of paper out of her leather pouch and examined them. The Lady had been clear and direct about what she needed from Niamh. The expectations were clear, and it didn't escape Niamh's notice that this was not a request. It was an order.

The other letter was odd. Worded more like a puzzle than anything else. She mouthed the strange words, trying to see what they sounded like out loud.

*We who hide in the shadows seek the trust of Nimue,  
who hails from the islands north of Caledonia. We know  
you are as cunning as the fox and as silent as the adder.  
That you have within you the fierceness of the wolf and  
the speed of the rabbit are of great assistance as well.*

*We know why you have those skills. If you would like  
to hone them further, to know who you are better, come  
to the Hawk's Nest by the Tamesis. Ascend our ladder  
and tell us what you know of the ways to walk with  
shadows and darkness.*

What did it mean to walk with shadows? Niamh wondered. She had certainly done her time studying the rites of the Morrigan and taking lives with respect. She was good at understanding the shadow world, but that was not quite the same thing as walking with shadows. She was curious what that could mean. She also wondered what kind of past could make someone more suited to it.

Reading the call was like reading her own traditions as

written by someone who only understood them on the surface. She could see that whoever wrote this knew her people believed in understanding the energy of the creatures around them, and that they respected them. But she didn't believe that she could take on the spirit of any creature, only to learn from them as she did from the other energies of the forest.

But this wasn't an ask of bad people, necessarily. They may work from the shadows to good purposes. She knew that she had been trained by people who believed that sometimes it was necessary to do difficult things in order to protect the people who looked to them for guidance and support. She knew that she had been educated well, that she could teach these strangers to understand her people better if she were able to form an alliance with them.

Glancing down at the Lady's letter once last time she read the final lines again.

Even as you give them your trust, you must still pretend to be this other woman and you should not yet tell them who you represent. Give them the tale of your origins, not that you are a Woman of the Mist. They may not know of us, or if they do, they may trust you less because you are one of us. Use your judgment, we trust it, but we believe they will want to keep you away if they know you are backed by our community.

She would have to pretend she was someone that she was not. She would have to deny her abilities, to some extent. It was clear that whoever these people in the Hawk's Nest were, they were not entirely friends. But they could be, if she had the sense to bring them around.

The cairn was small, about as long as her mother had been in life, barely taller than Niamh, and wide enough to keep her mother's body protected from the crows and other beasts that would come to feast.

Niamh's hands remembered building it, each rough-hewn stone had passed through her grip, even if briefly, as she had had help in constructing it. Now, the stones had been worn smooth over time, the years had made their edges softer than they had been when the cairn was built. It had been ages since she had come here to visit, not out of lack of want, but out of time. Her duties to the village had kept her busy these few years since she had returned from Avalon. There was always a pregnant woman to tend to, or a sick child. A pack of wolves that needed to be sent away, or a watch to help with. It had not been a quiet time to pass in these woods by the sea. Little time for mourning of her mother, who would have expected her to be attentive to her people since, after all, Niamh had taken on her role as witch-warrior of the village.

Niamh closed her eyes tight, remembering the final recollection she had of her mother.

While she had been preparing to leave for Avalon, her mother had been ill. Her body had run hot, and there had been nothing to cool her skin or stop the sweat from rolling down her brow, no matter what she tried. No herbal remedy, nothing had stuck. Niamh had fought with her about leaving, but her mother had instructed that Niamh could only wait until after her body was under a cairn. She would be expected to arrive at Avalon as soon as she was done burying her.

Niamh had sat vigil with the women of her community, her mother laid in a bed of reeds, under furs and blankets brought