Divine

I

The Legacy

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Origins

Close to the Thomond Kingdom, Province of Munster

Southern Ireland, 1320

That night the rain drummed holes into the earth. Magnificent oaks and ferns obscured the entrance known to few, only those most loyal to her. High walls of moss-covered stone towered frozen by her side and the place oozed with damp, cold seeping into her bones. However, she needed nothing more: the thing for which she had fought so long was finally within her grasp.

The rain had impregnated every fibre of her black cloak so that it weighed heavily on her shoulders. With one hand she lifted back the hood, which was dripping onto the tip of her nose, revealing her white skin and green eyes. A ball of fire floated just above the palm of the other to illuminate the narrow path that led to the centre of the cave. Although she visited often, the mud and stone provided the perfect conditions to fall flat on one's face, so she took every step as slowly as if it were her first time in there. After a few minutes of navigating the cramped, icy tunnel, it led into the heart of a cavern, where an incessant dripping filled the egg-shaped hollow with its echo. She launched the ball of flame upwards where it hung suspended at the highest point of the cave. The light was weak, but even so she could make out a circle of small candles laid out in the centre of the grotto. With the tip of her index

finger she lit one, then followed with the rest. And so, as the fire burst into life, she recited slowly: "*Dóiteáin dorcha, mo dorcha m'anam, draíocht dorcha chosnaíonn anseo dom*[1]".

'My apologies for the delay' said a girl appearing from the passage. She bore no torch or cloak of any kind, so heavy droplets of water fell from her long, black hair.

'Have you done what I asked?' the woman enquired as she finished lighting the final candle.

The girl nodded with a wide smile and began to hunt among the pockets of her dress. After a few seconds, she produced a small bottle, which contained within it a red liquid.

'It was not easy to make the mixture,' she added, still panting from the rushed journey, 'one of the ingredients is almost extinct in these forests, but I did it, Lady Ciara.'

The woman's eyes shone with happiness.

'Do you know what this means?' she asked.

The girl nodded again with the same triumphant smile as before.

'Then there is no time to lose. Take my horse, ride swiftly and do everything just as planned.'

She took the girl's hand and turned it palm upwards. Then, she ran her fingers over it and said:

'*Spiorad an tine a bheith in éineacht leat*[2].'

A ball of fire appeared hovering just above the palm of a shocked Cayla:

'I would be honoured to possess this skill one day, my lady.'

'You will be able to do this and much more, my love. Now, go!'

Obedient, the girl disappeared again amidst the shadows of the night.

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A crowd had gathered in the heart of the forest. As was the custom at every full moon, the four clans met together around the fire. However, they sensed misfortune approaching, as

[1] Dark is the fire, dark is my soul, dark is the magic that protects me here
[2] 'May the spirit of fire be with you.'

though a dark portent hung in the air. The moon was hidden by thick, black clouds; the dampness of the earth, the fierce, icy wind and the constant rain prevented the fire from staying alight. Something was causing its strength to diminish.

Facing the four clans from behind the fire were three female figures: the first wore a long green cloak, the second a white cloak, and the third another in shades of blue. Slowly, the woman in green addressed the others:

‘Where is Ciara?’

‘I don’t know, Aïne’ replied the white-cloaked one.

‘We can’t begin the ritual without her,’ the green woman observed. ‘We need the creator fire.’

‘We do, and soon’ the woman in the blue cloak agreed. “The fire’s strength has almost been extinguished.’

Suddenly from among the trees there appeared a horse and rider. The crowd looked on astonished as the unexpected guest passed through them at a gallop, eventually coming to a stop before the three women. Once there, she removed the hood to reveal youthful eyes:

‘We have a problem,’ declared Cayla, without dismounting the horse.

‘Ciara is calling us,’ the woman in the blue cloak announced, her gaze fixed on some point invisible to all eyes but hers. ‘Ciara needs us.’

‘That is very true, lady Maira,’ the girl spoke again. ‘It is urgent that you come with me.’

‘What do we do about the ritual?’ asked Síle, the white-cloaked woman.

‘We must leave now,’ Cayla ordered. ‘Ciara demands your presence.’

Aïne, the woman in the green cloak, took a step forward and spoke to the crowd clearly and calmy:

‘Beloved family, we will soon be back with you. The mistress of Fire will return with us to celebrate the rite of the full moon.’

A blast of icy wind blew towards them from the depths of the forest and a thunder clap resounded in the ears of all those present. Cayla gave a cry as she shook her horse's reins. The other women mounted their own steeds and disappeared into the darkness.

The sound of the hooves was drowned by the rain. The women had been climbing uphill for some time and the animals' warm sweat was soaking through to their riders. The branches of the trees swayed back and forth and gusts of icy wind seeped through their cloaks. Then, when they were beginning to feel pain in their legs, Cayla stopped and climbed down from her horse in front of the entrance to the cave.

'Follow me,' she instructed the three women.

They entered by the same narrow, dark passage the girl had traveled through earlier. At the end it was possible to make out a weak light in the gloom. Its walls were soaked from the damp and down them trickled droplets whose sound rang out like a lonely song. It was the only thing they could hear. They proceeded along the stone-lined path until they arrived at a grotto. Its centre was illuminated by a circle of candles. A tall, slim, dark-haired woman welcomed them.

'I was expecting you. *Rolladh*[3].'

'What are you doing here, Ciara?' said Aïne, without returning the greeting. 'Our family is waiting for us.'

'Blood sisters should come first at times like these. The rest will have to wait.'

Then, in a cold, deliberate voice, Ciara turned her attention to the girl:

'Cayla, would you be kind enough to watch the horses? We don't want them to wander off into the shadows. Tonight we have an important rite to celebrate with our people.'

'Of course, excuse me.'

Cayla's silhouette disappeared into the tunnel and the four women were left alone.

'I sensed that you were calling us, Ciara,' Máira annouced.

'Your visions are never wrong,' she replied and a strange glow flashed in her green eyes.

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[3] Welcome

Instinctively, Máira raised both hands to the middle of her chest.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Aïne.

‘Something inside me… a shadow,’ Máira gasped.

Then, she raised her eyes towards Ciara.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

Changes

Flying had always been a problem for Marina, youngest sister of the Azancot family. The first time she boarded a plane, at barely five years old, fear and anxiety at being unable to touch firm ground overwhelmed her, and it never went away. Today, after twelve years without flying, Marina was embarking on a new journey.

Desperation spread through her slowly but surely. Every three minutes she looked at the watch her parents had given her for her last birthday. Maybe that way she’d get to school on time. “Not that that matters now,” she thought. “I just need to get on that plane quickly so I can get this flight over with.” She began pacing from one corner to the other of the room full of grey seats. With her gaze pinned to the floor, she wondered whether maybe the red colour of the carpet was a bad omen. “I can’t keep thinking things like that. Nothing bad’s going to happen. We will all land in one piece.” Her thoughts were interrupted as a voice filledthe waiting room: “Passengers for flight 314 please make your way to gate number 12”. Her heartbeat sped up and she could feel her legs giving way with dread at the thought of approaching that winged monster. She walked gingerly along the jet bridge that led to the door of the plane and felt her muscles losing strength. No sooner had she set foot on the aircraft than she was nearly asphyxiated by an intense plasticky smell. Plus, it was hotter than was appropriate for a city like Santiago de Chile in the middle of winter. She took a deep breath and hurried to her seat. A stewardess, dressed in a blue suit and over made-up, welcomed her, wished her a good trip and said:

‘If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to let me know,’ she pointed to the golden badge on her chest. ‘My name is Susana.’

‘Thank you. Do you know how long it will be before the plane takes off?’ Marina asked, trying to resist the urge to run away.

‘Not long, about fifteen minutes.’

The stewardess winked at her and it was all Marina could do to twist her face into a smile. Not long. She didn’t understand how fifteen minutes could be “not long” .

She had no hand luggage, because she knew she’d barely be able to move during the flight and she felt she was enough of an impediment all by herself, without any added extras. Plus, she’d never been much of a reader, and if she couldn’t concentrate on a book sitting at her desk, she was hardly going to be able to do so now. She sat awkwardly in the aisle seat, not without first closing the blind of the adjoining seat. The last thing she needed was to watch the take-off or, worse still, see it crash and burn thanks to some mechanical fault or the pilot’s negligence. She remembered the sinking of the Titanic and how there weren’t enough lifeboats for all those people. At least they had boats. Here they’d be lucky if they got oxygen masks and she doubted they had parachutes. Anyway, even if they did have them, she had no idea how to use one. She had no chance.

She looked at the other passengers and saw men and women of all ages. None of them had a face deformed with fear like hers. A little red light came on and everyone began to secure their seatbelt. They were about to take-off. Suddenly, she was given a jolt of surprise by the intimidating sound of the turbines starting up. She could feel it ringing in her ears. Louder every second in exact proportion with her growing anxiety. Her heart beat even faster and she could feel a knot in her chest that wouldn’t let her breathe, as if a stone was blocking the passage of oxygen. The plane began to move and she felt the panic consume her. She was impressed by the sharpness of her senses, not just because of how close the turbines sounded, but also because she could feel the wheels grazing against the tarmac as the massive object began to move. She closed her eyes and tried to fill her lungs with as much air as possible to see if that helped to calm her down, but it was no good. Marina gripped the seat with her sweat-soaked hands as if that might help her stay on the ground. After a few seconds, she could feel the plane begin to turn around. To pick up speed. To lift into the air. This time, the terror overwhelmed her completely. She felt that her organs were staying behind while the rest of her body rose up, that her breathing had stopped as if she were under water. Probably, her heart would soon do the same. She didn’t want to die on an aeroplane.

‘It’s OK,’ Magdalena’s voice interrupted her thoughts. ‘Everything’s going to be fine.’

She would have liked to thank her older sister, but nerves were eating her from the inside and she feared dissolving into sobs that would never end, as she had aged five. So, she had to make do with an attempt at a smile that left neither of them convinced. On a different occasion, Magdalena would have told her stories about the patients she cared for in the hospital, with the aim of calming and distracting her. However, the events they had lived through over the past few days had left marks that were difficult to overcome and, this time, Magdalena could do no more than say a few soothing words and take her hand as a sign of support. For this, and for everything else.

Prophecy

Marina stopped breathing for several seconds. “Elementals, Marina”. What did it mean to be an elemental? Her grandmother’s voice was an echo. A single echo roaming, running, storming through her mind. Her grandmother’s voice was a word she didn’t want to hear. A word she didn’t want to understand, to make sense of. Her grandmother’s voice kept whispering, like the wind outside. And she wanted to be out there too, whispering like the forest wind.

‘I understand you’re frightened, but you have to know the truth. You need to know who we really are.’

‘I don’t need to know anything, Meche’ she said, but she didn’t feel like herself, she felt like the whispering of the forest or a clouded lens. ‘I’m not what you say I am.’

‘An elemental.’

‘Don’t say it again,’ she repeated, more emphatically this time, but Mercedes ignored her request.

‘You’re an elemental Marina. If you weren’t, the talisman wouldn’t have come to you.’

‘Talisman… what talisman?’

‘I’m talking about the blue gemstone you slotted into the rock in the clearing this morning.’

It didn't make sense. It wasn't possible that this story with touches of magic could be true and their parents have told them nothing, not even a hint. It was simply impossible that their parents would have wanted to take a secret like that to the grave. And then, quick as a flash, she understood: They had it all planned out. If at any moment an accident befell them, if they died of old age, of illness or of who knows what, she and her sisters would find out. They'd go to Puerto Frío, to the mansion where their grandmother lived, Mercedes Plass, mistress of the forests. And they'd find out. They'd understand. Even so, she couldn't resign herself to the idea of the deception, the secrets.

'Our family is descended from the Water clan,' her grandmother continued, as if by giving her more details she'd be more likely to believe in her story. Somehow, she managed it. 'Originally, many years ago, there lived in Ireland four very powerful elementals: Aïne, who had command over the earth; Ciara, mistress of fire; Síle, lady of air and Máira…'

'Water elemental,' Marina interrupted. 'The first "M" in our family, no?'

'That's right, our first "M". They were the origin of all that we are. Together. they were the elemental clan: four beings in full connection with the cosmos and total command over the elements of nature. This clan possessed a knowledge that has never been fully revealed and which, for that very reason, has never been equalled.'

Mercedes went quiet as if to see whether she would receive any response from Marina, but the latter chose to keep listening.

'Each of them formed a clan, but this in turn led to discord, and a series of battles destroyed the clans almost entirely. Of those who are left, some of us are tucked away in secluded places, others are wandering aimlessly, fleeing or in hiding. We've lost each other through a lack of connection, Marina.'

'If they're so powerful, why are they in hiding?'

'We are surrounded by many dangers, my love. Sadly it always ends up being too late when we realise how close they are,' Mercedes appears blank faced, until she sees the panic in her granddaughter's eyes. 'But don't worry about that. We'll have plenty of time to resolve the problems.'

'We've got problems?'

'No,' Mercedes lied. 'For now, no.'

Awakening

Suddenly, Marina came to the realisation that what she was doing wasn't normal. Over the last few months she'd spent more time in the elemental world than the real one and she was beginning to see the consequences of that. Plus, all she was achieving was exposing her family's secrets in front of Littin or, even worse, getting him caught up in a world full of danger, deception and uncertainty.

'Sorry, I'd better go.'

Marina turned, but Littin caught her by the arm.

'Tell me, why did you want to know those things about Agustina?'

This was the moment to tell him: it was now or never.

'Because I don't trust her.'

She didn't get the chance to say more. Nor could Gabriel answer. A cloud of thick, black fog was entering the classroom from the corridor. Anyone else would have thought that, maybe, a fire had broken out at the school and the smoke was beginning to spread, but Marina knew exactly what those swirling tendrils meant: a Dark one was about to attack. And she didn't want her teacher nearby when it happened.

'We have to get out of here. Quickly.' Marina ordered, as the fog spread to every corner of the room.

Littin nodded, presumably thinking there was a fire, Marina thought. However, just as they made to leave the room, the floor began to shake. And the shaking intensified, like adding coal to a fire. And the ground convulsed beneath them without mercy. Beneath all of Puerto Frío, the earth cried out. And when the classroom windows shattered, Marina didn't know if it was caused by the earthquake under her feet or by the Dark one, powerful and sinister, that was reaching its tendrils of black smoke towards them. It was only when the hundreds of tiny pieces of glass gathered together and flew in their direction that she was sure they were under attack from dark magic, the worst she had witnessed yet.