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The White Mare

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Prologue
LINNET



She was the child of my heart, though not of my body.

I remember her as a girl, running up the mountain path towards me with amber hair flying, face twisted with weeping.

I worried about her then, and how the jealous taunts of the other children could draw such tears. I feared she was weak, and would not survive what was coming. For it was both my gift and my curse to see some of her future.

Blood spattering wet sand.

A green-eyed man in the prow of a boat.

The sea closing over her head.

And last, the cries of women on a battlefield, picking their way among the dead.

I knew she had a greater destiny to fulfil, but how would it unfold? That I did not know. As priestesses, we trumpet our powers of sight, but the truth is that it comes rarely, and never clearly.

I watched the girl closely from the day my elder sister birthed her and died. I remember her grasping my finger, milky eyes seeking my face, the tuft of red-gold hair still damp from the womb . . . ah, but these are a mother's musings.

What I did realize that day, was that she was one of the Many-born, who come back to live again and again. And that because of this, her gifts would be as great as her pains.

For this reason I could not help her. She had to grow into her strength. And so she did. Like the fierce salmon, she fought against the currents of people's jealousy, ambition, and awe. As her legs lengthened, so her face came into its form, losing the softness that had troubled me once. I saw also that she no longer cried – and in my priestess heart I felt relief.

But in my mother's heart, I wept for her.

I could not speak about her future – the blood, the man in the boat, the battle. My role was not to guide her course, but to build her courage and insight so that she could steer her own way through what would come.

For while we are caught like threads in the Mother's loom, we still have choice. I loved her more than my life – and so I wanted her to choose her path. Perhaps I would have done differently if I had known how it would hurt.

One thing only I clung to: although my sight hinted that many dark years were coming for the people of Alba, somehow, I knew she was a link to our freedom.

History can turn on many things.

On a word.

On a sword blade.

On a girl, running up a mountain path, amber hair flying in the wind.

Chapter 1

LEAF FALL, AD 79



The babe fell into Rhiann's hands in a gush of blood.

The mother let loose one final scream of triumph and agony, and slid down the roof-post against which she squatted. Rhiann, leaning in on her knees, wriggled to get a better grip on the slippery body. Fire from the hearth glowed on waxy skin and smeared blood, and under the wisps of dark hair, tiny bones throbbed against her fingers.

'To the Mother's arms you sink. The kin bids you welcome, the tribe bids you welcome, the world bids you welcome. Come in safety.' Rhiann murmured the ritual words breathlessly; the woman's heel was digging into her ribs.

Still holding the child, she nodded to the old aunt, who eased the mother to a pallet of bracken by the hut's fire. Now mercifully upright, Rhiann brushed her hair back with one shoulder, her hands still full of the squalling baby.

The mother pushed herself up on her elbows, panting. 'What is it?'

'A boy.'

'Goddess be thanked.' She sank back down.

When the cord stopped pulsing Rhiann rested the baby on the pallet, taking her priestess knife from her waist-pouch. 'Great Mother, as the child has fed from this body, now let him feed from You. Let his blood be Your blood. Let his breath be Your breath. So shall it be.' She cut the cord and deftly tied it off with flax, then wrapped a scrap of linen around the tiny shoulders to turn the baby's face to the fire.

'Oh, lady, what do you see?'

All new mothers asked this of priestesses. And what were they to reply? *This boy is not of the warrior class, so at least he will not die by the sword.*

'What will he be?' the old aunt wheezed.

Rhiann turned back, smiling. 'I see him hauling in nets full of fat fish with his da, for many years to come.' She nestled the baby on his mother's breast, leaving a last caress on his soft head.

'You'll have one of your own soon,' the aunt croaked, handing her a rag. 'They won't be picky over your suitor, our man says. Not with the King so ill.'

'Hush!' the other woman hissed from her pallet.

Rhiann forced a tight smile, wiping her fingers. 'Now,' she said to the new mother, 'brew up the woodruff twice a day, as I told you, and it will bring in your milk.'

'Thank you, lady.'

'I must go. Blessings be on you and the babe.'

The woman drew her child closer. 'And you, lady.'

Outside, the tiny hut's reek of fish and dung smoke was washed away by the dawn air. Taking a deep breath of it, Rhiann forced the old aunt's words away too, draping herself over the cow-pen to stretch her back. The bony cow lowed and scraped its flank against her fingers, and she smiled.

Many nobles at Dunadd would look down their noses at this steading: the turf roof, the driftwood fence, and crusted fishing nets. To Rhiann, though, it seemed content in its little bracken glen. The scent of brine and lilt of fisher songs drifted over the bay. The rhythm of the day was well begun for everyone, and it would be much the same as any other day. She thought about how fine a future that would be. Calm. Uneventful. Predictable.

Then a tiny figure came hurtling around the side of the house and barrelled into her legs. 'Ah!' she cried, and bent to swing the little boy into the air. 'Who is this great, fierce boar trying to run me down?'

The child could hardly be seen for dirt; she didn't know where his ragged fringe ended and his face began. He battered grubby feet on Rhiann's thighs, and she held fast and tickled until he squealed.

Then the boy's sister was there, clucking in embarrassment as she took him from Rhiann's arms and set him down. 'Ronan, you scamp! Oh, forgive us, lady . . . your robe . . .'

'Eithne,' Rhiann glanced down at her stained dress, 'I was hardly clean – your new brother saw to that. Goddess knows what I look like!'

'A brother!' Eithne hid a shy smile with one hand. 'Da will be pleased. And you look as fine as you always do, lady,' she added, remembering her manners.

'Pretty,' the boy piped. 'She says you're pretty.'

Eithne looked at her feet, giving his hand a sharp tug. She was dark like her brother, with black eyes and bird-like bones. The two of them were strong in the blood of the Old Ones; the people who lived in Alba

before Rhiann's tall, red-haired ancestors arrived. Common blood, as it was known.

Right now, Rhiann ached to be small and dark and common. Life would be much simpler for her then.

'Thank you for bringing the babe safe, lady. And for coming so far.' Eithne dared a quick glance at Rhiann. 'Especially with the King so sick and all.'

Rhiann's belly turned over at this, but again, she forced it away. 'When your mother knew she was bearing, I promised to come, Eithne. And I left my uncle in good hands. My aunt attends him.'

'Pray to the Goddess he gets well!' Eithne pulled something from the recesses of her patched dress and proffered it to Rhiann: a crude and dented stag-head brooch. 'Da asked me to give you this. It's good copper – he found it on the beach.'

Rhiann touched the brooch to her forehead and stowed it away reluctantly. It was tradition to pay for the services of a priestess, no matter how poor the family. Yet, by the Goddess, she had enough brooches.

There was a loud nicker from a horse tethered to the end of the fence, a light-boned mare the colour of winter mist. Rhiann smiled at Eithne. 'Ah! My Liath calls. Give my blessings to your father, and thank him for the fine brooch.'

She drew on her sheepskin cloak, pulling the fleece close about her neck. Then she squared her shoulders and took up her pack. It was time to seek her own home.

The path inland was wreathed with mist that crept over the water meadows, choking the River Add in its bed, clinging to Rhiann's face and throat. Liath's hooves were muffled on fallen alder leaves, and all was silent and dripping.

Such a fog hid many doorways to the Otherworld. Perhaps fey spirits were floating beside her right now, just beyond her fingertips. Perhaps they would draw her through, and she would leave the dankness of Thisworld behind. Rhiann spread her hand, hoping that the air between her fingers would conjure the spirits she sought, to take her away . . .

But she caught a branch instead, and icy dew spattered down her neck. She rubbed it away, sighing. Doorways and spirits! Here, there were just rotting leaves, mist and damp, and long nights to come.

The track wound up on to a spur, and when she emerged into milky daylight she reined in. Stretching away before her, the blanket of mist hid a wide marsh, which lapped at the flanks of a lone rock crag. And rearing from the crag into the light was Dunadd – the *dun*, the fort, on the Add. On its crest, the King's Hall, where her sick uncle lay, squatted

against the sun, and the pillars of the druid shrine clawed the sky with black fingers. She shivered and nudged Liath along.

Dunadd's nobles lived high on the rock above the sprawling village at its feet, surrounded by an oak palisade. As Rhiann reached the village gate, the guard came down from his tower to loosen the cross-bars, blowing on his hands, and then helped her dismount with a wary nod.

They were all looking at her warily now.

The village was just stirring, the first dog barks and curses and children's cries drifting out from under hide doorcovers. Rhiann led Liath through the jumble of thatched roundhouses, sheds and granaries to the stables. There, she threw the reins to a yawning horse-boy and hurried up the path to the Moon Gate, the entrance to the crag, leaving the village and the mist behind.

'My lady! My lady!'

It was Brica, Rhiann's maid. In the weak sun, the carvings of the moon goddess on the gate shadowed her lean, sharp face. She flew forward to take Rhiann's cloak, chittering at the mud that had splashed up from Liath's hooves. 'I've heard nothing about the King, mistress – the Lady Linnet was not back when I left. Are you well? Are you feared? You look pale . . .'

'I'm fine!' Rhiann brushed off the invasive prods of those black eyes.

Brica was of the Old Blood, too, and grew up on the Sacred Isle out in the Western Sea, where Rhiann had trained to become a priestess. When Rhiann had stormed from the island the previous year after her initiation into the Sisterhood, the eldest priestess pressed Brica's services upon her. Rhiann didn't know why, for she and the little maid had never taken to each other.

'I need to wash properly.' Rhiann spread her hands. 'Is there water?'

'Ah! Your aunt emptied the water-pot with her draughts for the King. I'll go to the well right now!' Brica handed Rhiann's cloak back and darted away, lifting her skirts from the churned mud beneath the gate.

Rhiann slowed as she passed the houses of the King's kin. Here, the air of waiting was pungent, broken only by the steady drip of dew from carved doorposts. Servants crept to dairy and well on soft feet, their eyes cast down. Somewhere, a baby wailed and was hushed.

Rhiann's heart began to thump against her ribs.

And then the great arc of the Horse Gate was looming over her, leading to the crest of the dun. Peering between the carved stallion's legs, Rhiann could glimpse a curl of blue smoke rising from the small druid shrine, on the edge of the cliff. Between gate and shrine sat the King's Hall, a sprawling roundhouse topped by a thatch roof that swept to the ground. No one moved there.

From the roof-peak hung the royal emblem of her tribe, the Epidii –

the People of the Horse. It was embroidered with the divine White Mare of the horse goddess Rhiannon on a sea of crimson.

This morning, though, the breeze was as weak as the pale sun, and the pennant stirred forlornly on its post like a bloody rag.

Rhiann lived on the edge of the crag, her door facing out to the marsh. When the wind was in the south, the only sounds that carried to her were lonely bird-cries, and the beat of wings. Sometimes she could pretend she was Linnet, her aunt, who lived on a mountain with only goats and one loyal servant for company.

As Rhiann lifted her doorcover, a finger of sun outlined Linnet herself, seated on a stool before the hearth-fire. Her aunt was changed. Normally so tall and regal, now she was slumped in weariness. Her russet hair, untouched by grey, looked somehow faded, straggling from its braids, and when she raised her face, the pale, tranquil oval was lined with furrows of worry. The women of Rhiann's line bore strong bones and long, fine noses. But in pain this fineness became pinched, and Linnet looked so now. 'It is not good, child.'

Rhiann's legs gave out, and she sank on to the hearth-bench, her cloak in her lap. 'I thought you would heal him when I could not. I was sure. I was so sure!'

Linnet sighed, her grey eyes grown darker with shadows. 'I can give one more dose of mistletoe, and we will see if his heart slows.'

'Then I will go to him now . . . I'll try everything . . .'

'No.' Linnet shook her head. 'I will return to him. I just came to see if you were back.'

Rhiann leaped up, the cloak falling to the earth floor. 'I will come with you. If we both reach out to the Mother . . .'

'No,' Linnet said again, and rose, glancing at the bronze scales hanging from the rafter. Behind, glazed jars and baskets gleamed against the curved wall. 'Stay here and brew more meadowsweet for me.'

'You try to distract me.' Rhiann was breathing hard.

Linnet managed a tired smile. 'Then you have found me out. But nevertheless, I will go. I am the senior priestess.'

'But I am the Ban Cré! It is my duty to be by the King's side!'

'Brude is my brother.'

'And you loved him as little as I!' Rhiann bit her lip, for the words had flown from her heart before she could stop them. As they often did.

Linnet put a hand on Rhiann's cheek, and looked deep in her eyes. 'That is true, as the Goddess knows. But let me spare you this. Soon such choices will be in my hands no longer.'

The denial trembled on Rhiann's lips. Part of her wanted to run away from the King's sickbed; part yearned to fight for his life. And no, it was

not for love, the Goddess forgive her. It was to stave off what was coming. When, as Linnet said, all choices would be gone.

Eventually, in exhaustion, she gave in, for Linnet's soothing voice and measured speech hid a backbone of iron. This was something they shared, along with their fine bones, but one of them must always back down, and this time it would be Rhiann.

After Linnet had gone, Rhiann crept to the stool and sat before her fire, watching the throbbing of blood under the pale skin of her wrist. The same blood had run in those veins all her life. How could a single man's death make it greater, more valuable?

Special blood.

The words were bitter on her tongue. For in Alba, the king's line did not run from father to son. His female kin, his sisters and nieces, carried his blood. His heir was his nephew. But of the royal clan, which had ruled for six generations, no heirs now remained, leaving it vulnerable to those other clans who desired the kingship. And now only Rhiann could bear a male of the King's blood, for Linnet took her vow of retreat long ago, and was past her time.

While her uncle stayed hale, Rhiann kept at bay the dread that one day she would be forced to mate. But as the King's death drew closer, so did her own day of reckoning. There was no heir left alive. There was only her womb.

Her special blood.

Linnet returned with the dusk. 'Another draught, and still his heart skips. I dare not give him more.' She rubbed her eyes wearily. 'I have done all I can, daughter.'

Rhiann pressed trembling fingers into her cheeks. 'But surely he can fight this, aunt. He is strong – Goddess! Fighting, eating, drinking! They were his *life*!'

Linnet shrugged in defeat. 'Perhaps all that eating and fighting harmed his heart. Sometimes the soul blazes too bright for the body, and burns it from within. I've seen it before.'

The birch fire snapped and sent up a spray of sparks, which drifted to ash against the thatch roof. Rhiann turned to face it, wrapping her arms around her thin chest. Did death follow her? Was she one of those unfortunates who were stalked by marsh-sprites, which sucked human life dry? Her own birth took her mother into the Otherworld; her father followed only five years later. And then . . . and then came that other loss, those other deaths, a year ago on the Sacred Isle . . .

The force of Linnet's gaze drew her back into the room. In the way it was between priestesses, Rhiann sensed the weight of her aunt's concern on her skin. She knew why. She knew what Linnet saw.

Once, Rhiann took after her mother's beauty, so the bards sang.

They shared the same hair and eyes: amber and violet to the bards, auburn and blue to Rhiann. But now her mother's bronze mirror was buried deep in her carved trunk. Rhiann's fingers had found the deep hollows in her own cheeks, and traced the prominent bones in wrist and neck. She did not need a mirror to tell her she no longer favoured her mother. That wide mouth would be a gash across her fine bones; the long nose a sharp prow. Linnet's features were showing the strain of days; her own showed the strain of moons. Shame and grief could consume flesh, as all healers knew. So it was with her.

There was a rustle of linen skirts, and then Linnet's warm hands were smoothing back her hair. An ache sprung to Rhiann's throat, an ache that she could not give in to, for fear the tears would never stop. She hunched her shoulders, struggling to swallow it. After a moment, Linnet sighed and dropped her hand.

'There must be something we can do, aunt!' Rhiann turned to her, fists by her sides. 'Cold slows the blood . . . there will be ice on the peaks now . . .'

Linnet shook her head, fingering the moonstone pendant at her throat. 'I've considered everything. We must entrust him to the Goddess now, daughter. Only She knows the warp and weft of the loom.'

Even though Linnet must know the fate that reached for Rhiann with those words, no other comfort came, as it had not since the King's illness struck. The familiar hurt gave one great throb in Rhiann's chest.

It was then that they heard it. One piercing wail rose from the pinnacle of the crag; a soaring, lonely sound, plaintive as a curlew-call. It came from the King's Hall. It was Brude's wife. And as the rest of his women broke into their ululations, cry after cry arced down from the crest, sharp enough to pierce Rhiann's breast.

She met Linnet's eyes. The King was dead.

The hours passed in a blur of ritual wailing, and the pale, shocked faces of people crowding the King's Hall, and the tears of his daughters wet on Rhiann's neck. Eventually, Linnet ordered her to seek her bed. Under pale starlight she could barely put one foot in front of the other, and once in her house she warded off Brica's attentions and crawled on to her bed pallet.

There, face buried deep in deerskin, she sought the oblivion of sleep.

Her mind would not rest, though. All eyes would be on her now. She bit her lip to stop herself from cursing the womb she carried. Without it, she would be no more than a man. Without it, the elders would not care who she was. If only she'd been born to a tribe in the south, in what the Roman invaders called Britannia. There, kings craved

sons, and looked to their wives to breed. No one cared much about royal sisters or nieces there.

She sighed and rolled on to her side, watching the sparks of the hearth through the wicker screen around her bedplace. If only she'd been born into a fisher family, or to farmers . . .

Stop thinking, she told herself. *Just sleep.*

Sleep would not bring peace, though, not on this night. As a healer, she should have known that this new grief would conjure the old; the pain that had stalked her this past year, wasting her flesh. She should have given herself a special draught to take away the visions in the night.

But she forgot.

And so, in the darkest hour before dawn, she began to dream. First came swirling visions of her uncle on his horse. She was hanging on his bridle, pleading with him to take her up before him. But his cold helm was over his eyes, and he kicked up his steed and raced away, the horse becoming a gull as it ran.

She tried to follow him, for something was chasing her, bearing down on her . . . but her legs were caught as if in mud, and she stumbled, sobbing, in a marsh . . . Then there was Linnet before a fire, spinning, endlessly spinning, her wool a pool of scarlet at her feet . . . and the skein reached out tentacles to tangle around Rhiann's legs . . .

And then, with shocking suddenness, the confusion cleared. There was a doorway in the air, and the taste of a salt breeze blew through it. It was the air of the Sacred Isle. She was back there.

And part of her realized what lay on the other side of the door, and frantically tried to wake itself. Yet it was far too late. The memories took hold of her limbs and drew her through, eager to live again . . .

. . . *Her feet crunch on shells.*

Spray hangs thick on the shore, and through it swim red sails and sharp prows that are black against the sun. The acrid smell of smoke is on the wind.

Sounds drift closer. A clang as sword bites sword. The hissing whine of spears. The thud of iron points in warm flesh . . .

There stands her foster-father Kell, shield raised against a tide of north-men with fierce eyes. And there, his head rolls bloody in the spume, one eye cast back to its home.

There, little brother Talen stumbles, clutching his belly as pale guts spill between his fingers, his first sword fallen on the sands. And there, a screaming woman flings herself on the boy; her foster-mother Elavra, peal of anguish cut short by burly hands around her slim throat . . .

And there . . . right there . . . her gentle sister Marda is splayed beneath a grunting man, copper hair tangled in seaweed . . .

Then she sees no more, dear Goddess, no more. Nothing but her own hands, pale as dead fish on the dark rocks as she scrambles away,

sobbing. Run, Rhiann! Away from the iron-hot smell of blood, and the crackling of flames, away from the harsh shout behind . . .

In the bed, Rhiann's eyelids fluttered as she tried to wrench herself out of the dream. That shout! She groped for consciousness, a cry on her lips, until at last her eyes opened and she desperately blinked away sleep.

The dazzling brightness of the dream was gone, and in its place, shifting fire-shadows on a mud wall. She couldn't move her legs, the sheet held her down, stifling her . . . she would be sick. A burning rose in her gullet, like it did that day on the beach.

The day of the raid . . . yes . . . a year ago this night . . .

She clapped a hand to her mouth, gagging. The wave of nausea surged and peaked, and then subsided, until at last she lay, gasping for breath. Her family . . . her beloved foster-family . . . was torn from her heart one year ago. By day, it felt like a lifetime; in her dreams, only yesterday.

All noble children were fostered out young, to strengthen the kin bonds, and foster-kin were therefore held dearer than blood-kin. But as Rhiann only had Linnet, they had meant even more to her. Kell and Elavra had sheltered her as she began her Sacred Isle training, and taught her how to be a royal lady as well as priestess. But the entire family had died between the rising and sinking of one sun. Just one sun.

After a few gulps of air she eased her legs free and curled into a ball, hands in fists. Against the rush of blood in her ears, she could just hear the whisper of Linnet's breath from the next alcove: a tiny, innocent, ordinary sound.

So alive.

A tear trickled into Rhiann's ear, and she dashed it away. No, she must not do this. If Linnet heard one sob, she would stroke Rhiann's face and hold her hands and draw out the pain into the light. And as much as Rhiann yearned to bury herself in Linnet's arms, as she had when a child, she could not face that agony. She could never let it free.

Cold and numb was better. So she kept her silence. And Linnet kept hers.

It took a long time for the drumming of her heart to fade, and tortured images continued to sweep across her mind in lurid swirls of light. She pushed them away and fixed on her breathing. *In, out. In, out. Think slow. Think of nothing.*

She thought of nothing, for some time. But even so, the rushing was still there. Just at the edges of awareness. She raised her head.

Since the raid, Rhiann's abilities to see, to receive visions and feel the spirit world, had all but deserted her. The source of her power had ebbed away, along with her family's blood on the sands. For a year, she had stumbled blindly, dead inside.

But was she feeling something now? Some whisper from the Otherworld to comfort her?

The whisper around her grew to a murmur. And then there was a far-off, swelling, reedy cry, and out of nowhere a fist of wind slammed into the house. Rhiann sank back into her furs, heartsick. It was only a storm, not a vision to help her, then. Storms like this came often this season, swift and furious, sweeping in from the sea and across the marsh to break over the lone crag.

In three heartbeats it was skirling around the rock, beating its wings on Rhiann's roof like some great, dying bird. Keening gusts clawed madly at the thatch, until the door cover slapped and cracked and bucked on its thongs.

From a gap in her cocoon of furs, Rhiann stared at the roof. The sky could weep for the dead King Brude of the Epidii, for her people, for the land.

Not for her. No one would weep for her.