

BIRTHRIGHT

by

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HONORS THESIS

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ABSTRACT

My research deals with Anglo-Saxon, and Norse, but more specifically Icelandic mythology. The focus is on different types of monsters, or other types of fantasy creatures, and how they function or perform in Icelandic mythology or legends. Through this I did extensive reading on creatures like Trolls and Draugur, who are both popular and important to Icelandic sagas. Through my research into monsters and other fantasy creatures in Icelandic mythology, I found a trope in their sagas which I identified and titled, “hero contamination,” where, heroic figures would become contaminated from experiences with monsters like the Draugur. This would either happen from combat wounds, and act like a vampire bite, or from extensive time spent fighting the monsters. The monsters behavior would essentially “rub off” on the hero, and they would lose a sense of their humanity from the experience.

Through a creative project, namely, a young adult novel I am working on titled *Birthright*, I plan on bringing my research to light in the form of a fantasy novel. The plot revolves around the main character, Princess Gwyneth, saving her brother when he fails his birthright mission to become King. Through her journey she experiences the different kinds of monsters I found in my research, while also having a run-in with hero contamination when her close-friend and journey companion, Fen, is wounded fighting to defend them from Draugur. My thesis presents two chapters, one which showcases my research on monsters, and the other exemplifying my creative ideas on hero-contamination and the religious anxiety prevalent in Anglo-Saxon literature.

I. THE DRAUGUR

All Gwyneth could see was ice. It stretched around her, and she felt as if at any moment, it would swallow her whole. The wind wrapped its cold arms around her, playing with her hair, embracing her like a lover. She wondered if there was anything beyond the ice or if they had finally reached the end of the world. She imagined peaking over the edge of the world. If she journeyed too far, would she step off it and fall? Would the abyss welcome her? If Fen was correct, they had at least reached the end of the world as she knew it. Beyond this ice, everything would be a mystery, a great unknown. She doubted they would ever find their way out of this frigid landscape; she was so sure of its endlessness. Gwyneth attempted to take in a deep breath to steady herself, but the sky was too thick with freezing air. It was like swallowing knives. She bundled deeper into her luscious furs, pulling her chin down into the blanket that Fen had tossed over her earlier.

Aurora pressed against her side, grumbling something that she assumed was a complaint. Nonetheless, Gwyneth reveled in the warmth the wolf provided. She stroked Aurora absently and turned her eyes forward once more. She was looking for something over the edge of her furs but had no idea what she was looking for. Part of her fantasized about her brother appearing at the center of the horizon, running towards her. Perfectly safe, unharmed, he had only become lost between their home and the witch's territory. She would laugh, agree with him that the ice seemed to stretch out farther than the sea. She may tease him but would concede that him getting lost was more than understandable, and then she would take him home. Safe and sound. The second half of her journey they would champion together. He may have been her older brother, but she

had always been the one to take care of him. Gwyneth pressed the cold furs against her face. Nothing would ever be that easy again.

Ari, her messenger hawk, carefully pecked her ear and pulled on her red hair, waiting for some sort of treat or burden. Gwyneth turned and scrunched her nose at Ari affectionately, and Aurora released a whine and humphed with feigned jealousy.

Gwyneth lifted her hands from beneath her furs reluctantly and scratched out a message to Eawynn quickly with freezing, trembling hands.

“You should eat,” Fen grunted, breaking her stupor while also shoving a stale bit of bread in his mouth. Admittedly, it was a tad kinder than his previous grumbles, but she would never give him that satisfaction of acknowledging it. Gwyneth bit her lip in consternation, attempting to act as if he didn’t exist behind a façade of aloofness, and reviewed her shaking note. She sighed. There was so much more to say. So much was hidden and awkward in the letter Eawynn had sent that if it wasn’t for Gwyneth’s memorization of Eawynn’s handwriting, she would question whether her best friend had written it at all.

Logic told her that Eawynn’s guardedness was in case their letters were intercepted by those that meant to hurt her, but something in her gut was murmuring and nagging her repeatedly that it was something else. Was she trying to protect her from something truly sinister? A lifetime of devotion had given her a knack for interpretation with Eawynn, but she didn’t know how to ask her what was wrong without sounding accusatory. They shared everything; there were no secrets between them. What had changed, except everything? Eawynn was the only one she had left, especially if Astreus had died on his mission. Did Eawynn feel abandoned, neglected, or abused? Left behind

in the chaos that had erupted in *Wygaard*, left as a spy for the runaway princess, her only companion the charming prince of the kingdom that had invaded when it had smelled the weakness of a missing heir?

“Eat,” Fen said again, this time with more insistence. She wondered if he had heard her thoughts and was perturbed that she hadn’t included him in those that remained her friends. Flustered, Gwyneth flashed him a scowl, full of red resentment that he didn’t seem to notice. He only stared back at her until she dismissed him with a flick of her chin and a raising of her eyebrows. He wouldn’t get a rise out of her; he wasn’t worth it. Gwyneth’s mind was already somewhere else as she began tying the fragmented note to Ari’s leg, her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth in anxiety. A gentle lift of her forearm and Gwyneth watched Ari fly with a deep ache in her chest before turning to glower at Fen again. He threw his hands up with a sigh and a sense of exasperation. “I promised Sara that I would keep you alive. That means occasionally reminding you to eat.”

The mention of her nursemaid caused a deep ripping in her heart, and she gasped for a pained breath. Fen scrutinized her hurt expression for a moment with furrowed brows. Nodding to no one in particular, he stood, walking around the fire with a loaf of bread. He towered over her, especially from her place on the ground. He wore a drawn expression that she was confident was from the pressure of having to be kind to her. She was sure he believed that he owed her no kindness but did so for his mother’s sake. Gwyneth reached out to tear a piece off the makeshift peace-offering, but Fen snatched the bread back. Gwyneth glanced up at him, sending him a look that asked him whether he *really* wanted to do this. He shrugged and offered the bread once more. Gwyneth

quickly tore a piece off and shoved it into her grimacing mouth, mimicking Fen's eating habits. He smirked, and Gwyneth deliberated whether that meant he had won as her heart skipped a beat.

A thought ran through her mind that she would always feel this way, no matter how hard she tried to quash the feeling. No matter how deeply he had shattered her before, all those years ago. Did he ever mourn their loss? Was he still grieving, as she was? She didn't notice that she was still staring at him until she realized that he was staring right back. Pride moved her to hold the stare as a show of strength, but it became too painful. She returned to eating and promised herself that that conversation would only be inevitable if she allowed it to be. She wouldn't. It was a scabbing wound that he was tearing at, but she would keep herself safe. Their soft, silent exchange did not mean the same thing to him as it did to her. She forced herself to focus on her breathing which had become uneven.

Suddenly, a piercing cry came from above, and both of them turned their eyes to follow the sound. Ari was tearing through the sky, back from where they came, towards *Wygaard*. Shrieking out in warning, she narrowly dodged an oncoming assault. Aurora began snarling from her place at Gwyneth's side. Something black flew through the air with such force neither Gwyneth nor Fen had a chance to see what it was or take the time to react to it before the raven flew straight between them. It screeched and flapped and tore with its talons between them. Gwyneth instinctively threw up her arms and screamed as Fen dropped to his knees to protect her, throwing himself around her and between herself and the raven. Aurora snapped her jaws at the assailing bird, but as quickly as it arrived, the raven bolted back into the sky and fled towards the mountains. Fen didn't

move just yet, following the raven intensely with his eyes. Gwyneth turned her head to follow it as well, then looked up at him.

“What was—” Gwyneth muttered the same moment Fen tersely murmured, “Dark omen.”

Fear tickled at Gwyneth’s chest and rose to her throat, but she feigned a dismissal. “You can’t actually believe that—”

Fen did not seem to pick up on her dread as he stood up. She immediately missed his closeness and his warmth. “And how can you not?” His eyes were full of fierce, ice blue rage, “You saw with your own eyes what we just faced in the mountains.” He pointed back to them as if she was refusing to remember. She hadn’t forgotten the trolls, no matter how much she had longed to. Aurora growled quietly at Fen, her eyes never leaving him, reading into his aggressive stance. Fen continued, brusquely. “I have seen enough darkness in my life for the both of us, and if a raven has all but taken our eyes out—”

A roar traveled across the ice, and all the hairs on the back of Gwyneth’s neck stood straight. The quiet that followed was deafening. She opened her mouth to ask Fen what the sound was, when a sharp squawk broke the silence. The raven was barreling back toward them. Yet, Gwyneth almost didn’t believe it could be the same one. The raven continued squawking in obvious distress, shaking, and abruptly losing control of its wings for moments before pulling itself back to the sky. It looked demented. A guttural growl crept across the ice from the direction that the raven was flying from. Instinctively, Fen dropped into a crouch in front of Gwyneth, his hands reaching out in either direction. The growls grew louder, and a deep, dark fog began creeping across the ice. A blue flame

sparked, forming a line across the ice somewhere deep in the mist. Fen pulled his sword out of his scabbard as Gwyneth hastily threw her pack onto her back, frantically grabbing one of the sticks from the fire and thrusting it forward over his shoulder.

Fen growled over his shoulder, “Stay behind me, Gwyneth.”

What emerged from the fog forced a scream to her lips. On impulse, she reached for Aurora and Aurora pressed up against her. Perhaps the raven *had* been a dark omen.

It had not come soon enough.

Countless figures scuffled through the mist; all dramatically changed shape and size with each step. They were hideous creatures, with flesh melting off their blueish skin in chunks as if it was losing all sense of itself. Some moved crookedly in ways that made little sense, and Gwyneth realized that some had their large toes tied to the toe next to it. Others had twigs busting from what small rags they had to cover them, while others had rusted, iron scissors stabbed into their chests. The most frightful dragged themselves across the ice as quickly as if they were walking, with long nails and needles hammered into the soles of their feet. They all gargled, growled, moaned, and made all manner of guttural noises. All manner of sounds combined with the wet sound of their flesh decaying and slipping onto the ice, or the low, forceful grunts of those that had to crawl on the ground to make their way. There was no manner of understandable communication between them, but they moved as one, and all of their eyes fixed on Fen and Gwyneth with glowing, hateful eyes.

Fen, silently thoughtful, put his sword back in its scabbard, and retrieved his ax from his back. “What are you doing?” Gwyneth’s voice broke with a strangled whisper as if being quiet would prevent their inevitable annihilation.

Fen's eyes were absorbing and counting the enemy before them. "Draugur."

Gwyneth stubbornly shook her head, face contorted as if she had a bitter taste in her mouth. "Impossible. It's just a story—"

"Does that look like a fairy tale to you, Gwyneth?" Fen spat. When Gwyneth only released a whimper, Fen turned back to her with a soft expression. He continued with a bit more sympathy. "I can't kill them. Not this many, and not by myself. I didn't even know they could form groups in this way. The witches must use them as some type of guard dog."

"What do I do?" Her voice warbled in her throat.

"You need to find their grave. I'm assuming a mass one. If the witches are using them, which is the only possible explanation for their numbers, it means that they excavated them from their original graves to bring them here. If they weren't destined to become Draugurs before, they certainly would be after that, no matter what had been done to stop them from returning... It shouldn't be too hard to find. The witches would have hastily done it. Many of these corpses still have their objects attached that should have prevented the change. The move would have inspired the corpse, forcing the evil spirit within them to awake. The only way we survive this is if we force all of them back to the grave they came from."

He forced a knife into her hand, "What you have won't do. You'll need iron. It won't kill them, but it will at least injure them. They aren't exactly intelligent creatures, not usually at least. If you hurt them, they should leave you alone as long as you keep moving. That dog of yours should be of some help."

Gwyneth accepted the weapon with a pained expression. This gift meant one less

weapon for Fen when the monsters were upon him. The Draugur were closing in on them, and the stench was almost overpowering. Gwyneth was certain that she would be sick. “Fine, what do I do when I find the grave? How do I get your attention?”

“I’m not too concerned. You’ve always found a way to get my attention before,” his words were teasing, but his eyes were earnest. He turned to the enemy. “I’m going to lure them in that direction while you take the other. Do not look back, no matter what. Find the grave, and open the doors.”

She couldn’t seem to move. Her heart hammered in her chest wildly. She felt like a doe, face to face with a killer, but too afraid to escape. She opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, but no sound would come out. Fen reached out to her, pushing a hand through her hair, and affectionately murmured, “You can do this. You have to.”

The kiss happened so quickly she didn’t comprehend what was happening until she broke away from him, refusing to take in whatever expression he had, and launched herself in the direction of the Draugur, Aurora on her heels. Her mind was on a story her brother had once told her when she was a child, and it had come back to her now. Such a small detail, but she remembered how her brother mimicked a roar that her people had bellowed when running into battle with the witches. It had been a source of joy and laughter at the time. She mimicked it now, and it tore through her body.

Gwyneth kept the knife an arms-length in front of her, slashing and stabbing at anything that dared come in her way. She attempted to go around the group as much as she could, but stragglers felt the need to charge at her anyway. Ice sharp air pierced her lungs, and tears ran down her cheeks, inevitably freezing to her skin. The cold caused her limbs to burn and stretch, but she couldn’t concentrate on her pain. She had no idea

where Aurora was or how she was fairing, but she could feel her presence behind her, and knew that if something happened to her she would feel that as well. Somewhere behind her, the Draugur were closing in on Fen. It pushed her forward.

The woods appeared on the horizon, and a part of Gwyneth was relieved that she had been wrong as she sprinted to it. The world had not ended, like a cliff that opened to endless air with no bottom. But the woods, they were almost so much worse. The earth here was different. It chilled Gwyneth deep into her bones and made her heart race as she tried to steady her breathing. Magic, or was it something worse, radiated from beneath the dirt floor. Aurora sensed it too, and began sniffing the ground in earnest, searching for something.

The woods before her were black—the trunks of the trees, to the leaves on their stems, were so dark they seemed to absorb all the color around them. They were so tall Gwyneth could not see the sky above them, nor the world beyond them. The more Gwyneth looked into the depths of the witch territory, the more the distinct shapes of the trees seemed to melt away until it was only such a deep darkness that Gwyneth's head began to spin. Nausea rolled through her, and her feet became so heavy she was sure that they began to sink into the defiled earth beneath her. A cry broke her detached consciousness, and in the broken stupor, a raw sense of burning purpose returned.

Running along the edge of the forest, Gwyneth finally found what she was looking for. Two grand doors, seemingly out of place, lay side-by-side on the incline's ground leading to the forest. It took all of Gwyneth's strength to lift them, and she screamed with the effort. Something watched her efforts from within the woods, and the pressure of its stare moved Gwyneth to tears. Aurora, unsure of what to do, and full of

anxiety, circled the perimeter around Gwyneth, her eyes full of apprehension. The growls from across the ice were conflicted—some were cries of pain, while others were deep growls of hunger bordering on gluttonous lust. They coveted Fen’s flesh, his strength, his life. A life force that had been taken from them so much sooner than they wanted.

Gwyneth was all that stood between their hunger and Fen’s soul, if she were to believe the stories. How could she not, when it was staring her straight in the face? The pressure of it was too much, and she began sobbing. All she could focus on was opening up these doors.

The first door opened and fell to the earth with a clang that reverberated around her and disturbed some form of life within the forest. There was a moment of sharp, pointed silence where hunger and pain once stood. Gwyneth took advantage of it and began screaming. She ran to the other door, but it seemed so far away, and it took so long for her to get there. She screamed in anguish. She screamed Fen’s name, she screamed to the gods, she shrieked until she felt her bones would snap from the stress. It was this great sound that allowed her to open the second door. She hoped Fen had heard her because she was certain any visual form of alert would be indiscernible in this fog. What felt like an answering cry burst from within the mist, and Gwyneth fell to her knees with the emotion that flooded her in response. The knife in her hands became hot, and she dropped it under the scorching pain. She screamed for Fen once more, her hands out in pleading, when fire flooded the area around her. No spark, no tinder, no reason for it. The fire seemed to take everything out of her, and Gwyneth descended into darkness.

II. THE HEALER

Gwyneth jerked awake from the memory. Her lungs screamed for air, and her body supplied it with such a force that it sounded as if she was resurfacing from death, and not sleep at all. Fear bloomed from her heart and expanded through her body, causing her to lurch from her laying position. The room was full of light smoke and burning incense, and the sudden inhalation of it all made Gwyneth cough and choke. A stranger crouched in front of her, concern touched with apprehension filling his golden eyes. His tan, olive skin was illustrated with black tattoos, and his head was completely shaved, but his thick eyebrows were a deep, black color. He was thin, and much older than she was, but with the emphatic energy of a lunatic. His thick, black brows were pulled together in an expression of curiosity and suspicion.

“How do you feel, princess?” The stranger whispered. His voice was rasped, and Gwyneth wondered if he had not spoken to another person in quite some time. Her heart jumped at the title, and she feared his intent.

“Where is Fen?” she coughed out.

“Ah, yes,” the stranger continued in a hushed voice. His voice carried a musical quality, like a musician who played each separate note with intention and certainty. Staying on the balls of his feet and low to the ground, he turned toward the fire behind him, both hands outstretched as if he meant to present Fen to her as a visitor. “Your guardian has been gravely injured, I’m afraid.”

Fen laid by the fire, his head propped up on one of their packs, with his eyes closed and his arms at his side. Sweat was beading on his forehead, and his face pinched in pain. In the firelight, she could see he was trembling. She reached out to him, “Fen!”

This abrupt movement ripped through her body as pain's hand extended through her limbs. She fell back against the bed again, all energy wiped out of her with a single blow. "Fen," she croaked again, clenching her arms to her body.

The stranger shushed her with the intonation of a concerned nurse. "You mustn't move, princess. Your body has been through quite a shock."

A lightning storm felt like it was brewing in her body, and she groaned. "What are you talking about? Who are you? What is wrong with Fen?"

He lifted a saucer from the ground, and it was full of a steaming white liquid.

"Here," he breathed. "Drink this, it will help, and then I will answer your questions in the order that suits me best."

Gwyneth eyed the drink with distrust. The stranger grinned with only one side of his mouth. "I have no reason to desire for your death. I believe it would upset the universe in grave proportions."

The statement was ominous, but Gwyneth accepted his defense with little opposition. The drink was warm and sweet, and it filled her with a soothing heat. She took the moment to take in her surroundings. The room they were in was round, and had dirt floors with mud walls. The hut was filled with a honey, orange light from the fire that burned in the center. Although the space was remarkably plain, every nook and cranny seemed to be occupied with books. On the opposite side of the room, closer to Fen, was what looked like a makeshift kitchen where bundles of herbs, sticks, and a plucked bird hung from the ceiling. The wall to the left of her led to what she could only assume was a privy, and further out was a door. Whatever lay beyond was concealed by a dark red curtain. It wasn't the bedroom, for Gwyneth laid on what she assumed was the stranger's

only bed. What could be beyond the red curtain that surpassed a bedroom in terms of need for privacy?

“You’re a healer,” Gwyneth decided between long drinks.

“How do you figure this?” The lopsided smile crept across his face.

“It’s more of a hope than a truth at the moment,” Gwyneth grimaced. There were very few reasons for a man, living in a hut by himself, to have a mysterious, closed-off room. She was praying he was a healer, because the other options were frightening, and healer was the option that would help. She tipped her chin towards Fen. “Will he live?”

The healer considered the question for a moment, his stare lingering on Fen. “A wound from a Draugur is never pleasant, but the boy seems to be made of thick dust. If he lives...” He pondered the statement for a moment. His gold stare turned to Gwyneth with a painful intensity. “I cannot promise he will be the man he was that brought you here.”

“You must do whatever you can, healer.” Gwyneth’s strained voice was almost a bark. Anxiety was creeping up her neck like an unwanted hand. He didn’t seem to notice, just nodded and murmured, “Yes. Yes, you’re right. I think I must.”

Gwyneth finished the saucer of liquid and wiped her mouth with the arm of her shirt. He was right, it helped. “I drank your drink, now you must answer my questions.”

“My name is Arason,” his voice was barely above a rasped whisper now, and Gwyneth strained to hear him. “I was driven off the mainland for my practices, and am now banished here. The island of Málmey.”

Gwyneth moved to interrupt him about what practices had ostracized him, but he continued without notice. “I am a healer, as you correctly assessed. I also hold control

over certain elements of the universes... You may know me as a *lyblāca*.”

Sorcerer.

“Do you deal with the Devil?” Gwyneth asked, more strength in her voice than she actually felt. She glanced around, searching for her or any other available weapons nearby and praying he didn’t notice.

“What do you know of the Devil, girl?” Arason growled. Gwyneth forced back a whimper. Arason shook his head, “No, princess. I’ve made no deals with any sort of devil. There have been magics here that lived before your martyr died. This ignorance is what pushed me out of *Holmforstlic*, and it is the same that has prevented you from knowing the extent of your own power.”

Although his confession soothed her, his accusations clued her in to why he was banished to isolation. If he had as much as hinted at the idea in the safety of her home, he would have burned for it. Magic, although acknowledged as a real force, was forbidden in *Wygaard*. It was an element only controlled by pagans, and those that would be refused at the gates of Heaven... according to her father’s spiritual advisor. Despite their clear laws on magical practices, Gwyneth knew that a handful of her people kept the old religion. Innate and natural to the witches outside their walls, a true heir of the *Wygaard* throne would be ordained by God, and therefore completely pure and mortal.

“I’m no *scinnlāce*,” she spat.

Witch.

“How did you save him, then?” Arason lifted his hands towards Fen with upturned palms. Gwyneth opened her mouth to speak, but they both knew she had no explanation. “I saw you, princess. You were screaming so loudly I could hear you across

the waves. That pain, and anguish, I had never heard anything like it before..."

He turned toward her again. "You turned the air to fire. It spread around you, and above you. It engulfed you, but there isn't a burn on your skin. You have the blood of your ancestor in you... the second wife of your first King. Princess Aisling..."

Arason grinned when he read the confusion on her face. "You don't recognize the name? It doesn't come as a great surprise, and I wouldn't be shocked if the story was barred from being told any longer..." He paused again, and the space the silence left was hollow. He continued,

"King Axton, the first King of *Wygaard* and builder of the great mead hall Helvig, had just won his war with the witches. Though mighty and powerful, they retreated to the woods you now flee to. Lines were drawn, and Axton began the grueling journey of building his new... kingdom in God's image." The idea obviously seemed to annoy Arason, and a sneer warped his face. "He built his kingdom on their blood, over their unmarked graves. Grief made him vengeful... Out of the shadows, she came, with fiery red hair and eyes like green jewels..."

He glanced at Gwyneth wearily. "If I had ever met her, I am sure you would look just like her..." Arason shrugged, unaware of the horrified expression in her eyes.

"Aisling quickly inserted herself with the newly widowed and crowned King Axton and situated herself in his bedroom even faster. They were wed within a fortnight, and she was pregnant soon thereafter. A beautiful, bouncing baby boy was born to the two—your grandfather, I believe—and the kingdom rejoiced at their new leader.

"King Axton loved his new son with such fierce emotion. His new beginning was everything he had dreamed of. It was then that Aisling showed her... true colors. She was

a witch, sent to ruin him from those that had survived the war. She cursed their newly created bloodline and prophesied that the kingdom would eventually come to ruin... *A child of your blood will betray their own, and forsake the land you have built. This trespass will awake the creature that you have kept sleeping for too long, and all your people will be absolved in its flames.*”

“What happened to her?” Gwyneth asked with a quivering breath.

“I don’t know, and I’m not sure many do. The select few that knew the curse at all claimed she flew from their bed chambers the moment her last word was uttered. It was a surprise to all of his advisors when he did not murder his son and kill the prophecy in its tracks, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He claimed that it would only give her words more power, and he was certain that his God would protect him from *their* magic.” He released a long breath that hinted at a deep regret.

Gwyneth could barely focus on the man before her, and she covered her eyes with closed fists. “So what you mean to say, is that you believe I have her magic?”

Arason stood, locking eyes with her. “I believe that magic has been in your line for generations and that your King Axton would have surely done everything he could to rid *Wygaard* of any trace of Aisling. Any of his actions would have prevented your powers from growing, but your time outside the walls has pushed them to the surface. Your display at the forest line broke any sort of ties that were holding them in place.”

Fen groaned, and they both whipped their heads to look. Gwyneth moved to stand from the bed and fell to her knees on the hard dirt floor. She grimaced, but when Arason tried to help her up, she pushed him aside. She wouldn’t believe what the sorcerer had said. Hadn’t her father’s spiritual advisor instructed her how demons would whisper lies

to her? But this, she could control this. She could help Fen. She crawled around the fire to him and took his hand in hers. His skin was cold and covered in sweat, but she brought his hand to her lips.

“Fen,” she whispered. “Fen, you have to wake up. You must get better.”

She lifted a towel that sat in a bowl of water by his side and pressed it to his forehead. Fen ceased shaking, and for a bloated moment, there was no sound in the hut. The wind that had been howling outside the window fell silent, and the fire no longer crackled. Without reason, the fire blew out, and only moonlight crept into the sorcerer’s home. Fen’s hand, though Gwyneth realized it was no longer Fen, but something inside him, gripped her arm that held the towel. His other snatched her throat with a vice-like grip. “Fen,” she gasped.

He rose from the floor in a slow, fluid motion, as if a string from the ceiling pulled him up from his chest. Turning to Gwyneth, he opened his eyes. From their usual ice blue, they had transformed into a color that was as dark as the night around them, and they burned with a foul hatred she had seen before. His skin, usually flushed with color from his extensive time outside, had turned pale, with tinges of blue. A growl began to grow, but Gwyneth couldn’t trace it back to Fen’s mouth. It was building from somewhere deep inside him, and it grew to fill the room. Gwyneth used her other hand to grip Fen’s arm that was choking her. “Fen, don’t do this.”

“His soul has been contaminated,” Arason said. “The Draugur wound has poisoned him entirely. He has transformed, from hero to monster...”

Gwyneth strained to remove Fen’s hand from around her throat. “Fen, Fen, I beg you, you must listen to me!”

“His spirit has left him,” Arason shouted. “He is no longer a man. Burn him, princess! You have the power in you.”

Fen paid no attention to her cries, and when his body stood, he hurled Gwyneth against the wall of the hut. He towered over her, yet she instinctively pushed her arms out to stop his progress. They grappled for a moment, but his deadly strength overpowered her and his hand closed around her throat again, pushing her against the wall.

“Fen,” she croaked, thrashing against him, “Fen, I know you’re in there. You’re better than this. You’re stronger than that thing inside you.”

“Princess!” Arason shouted at her from behind Fen.

Gwyneth couldn’t help but think that the wizard gave her more credence than she was due. Although she hated to do it, she closed her eyes and began frantically searching for what had burned inside of her before. Fen’s hand gripped her throat tighter, and she felt as if someone had pulled a soaking burlap sack over her head. He was ice, and water, and she needed to be fire. Fire.

It felt like falling. Not away, but into herself.

Her flame was instinctual, it had been there the entire time. She had very little control of the blaze, but once she found it she refused to hesitate. Eyes wide open, she reached out and grabbed Fen’s face with burning hands. The monster within Fen screeched, and Fen fell back. Smoke furled from him, but Gwyneth couldn’t spot the source. A solid thud erupted behind him, and then Fen was on the ground.

Arason stood, slightly crouched besides Fen with a large slab of wood that had previously served as firewood, but now had served him well as a weapon. Not wasting a moment, Arason dropped the wood. “Tie him up while I get my things.”

He gestured vaguely to a corner of the hut and began murmuring to himself as he crossed to the hidden room. Gwyneth didn't question him, and retrieved the length of rope and began her work. The wind had never picked up again, and the world around them had an eerie quiet. Every inch of Gwyneth's body ached, and restraining Fen was no easy feat. Her heart hammered in her chest, and there was a stabbing pain at the back of her head.

Arason hissed at her from the red curtain. "Come on, girl, he will wake soon."

Gwyneth shot him a cruel look that he dismissed quickly and instead motioned for her to enter. Apologizing to him under her breath, Gwyneth began dragging Fen to the room by his ropes. She felt the curtain touch her back so she turned around to look in. The room was without windows, so the only light came from an array of candles that formed a circle in the middle. Sigils had been painted on the ground in a deep, red color. On the outside of the circle, Arason cracked open a leather-bound book covered in a language she couldn't read. A small, granite mortar and pestle was at his side, and it was emitting the foul, putrid smell of rotten eggs.

"What is this, Arason?" Gwyneth let a shallow breath go.

A wicked smile broke his face. He tapped the book with his index finger. "This is my grimoire, Princess." He pointed to the middle of the candle-light circle with long fingers that had bony knuckles. "Lay him there."

Gwyneth adjusted the candles so she could drag Fen into the circle. Returning them to their original position, she risked a glance at his face. Although his skin still had a bluish sheen, he almost looked like he was sleeping. Gwyneth released a shaking breath and felt her chest slowly ease. She hadn't hurt him too badly, then. A clicking sound

grabbed her attention, and she turned to see Arason reaching deep into a small woven bag. He lifted his hand and brought out a handful of grey stones. Gwyneth could feel herself begin to tremble, and she looked up at Arason. “What are those?”

A fire lit up his golden eyes. “They’re runestones. You’re about to witness some real magic, Princess.”