

Chapter 1

*F*rom before the impact, even back to the dawn of creation, the difference between man and woman has existed.

Some say it's the one thing the impact didn't affect. Nevertheless, a wise man will put his needs second to his wife's. Bitterness is the one wedge that will break a marriage—I've seen it happen time and again. As for me, I have vowed to always have the last word in any argument with my wife: "Yes, my love."

*~Journal of Wendel Tronson, last survivor of the impact
Lochlann, Atsegena*

74 AI

Cahar, Muintir, Atsegena

6126 AI

Something was missing. Hest knew it but couldn't put his finger on it. A rock was trying to integrate itself into his spine, and he tried to move off of it, but to no avail. Above him, the Atsegena sky peeked through tree branches thick with green leaves. There was a heavy pressure weighing on his chest, but he couldn't see what caused it. The sound of battle raged around him; reaching for his sword, his fingers came away empty.

His heart beat an irregular rhythm as his chest tightened. He tried to keep it contained, but the scream was building up within him. Wouldn't it be better to let it loose, to give in to the rage—the roar? Opening his mouth, he yelled, then frowned. That was nothing like what he'd expected; why? What was wrong?

A dark face entered his line of sight, a familiar face—his enemy. Nwa laughed, a sound bordering on crazy.

"We meet again, at last," he proclaimed, the Aeguskeian words harsh, yet intelligible. "Where is your strength now?"

Hest struggled to move.

“That won’t work. You’ll lie there, powerless to save the ones you love, just as I was powerless to protect my father.”

Sweat dribbled down Hest’s face. Where was his helmet, his breastplate? Usheen? Usheen! *That’s* what he had missed; he couldn’t feel the connection with his dragon.

Where are you? I need you!

No answer came.

Nwa stepped closer, dragging a slender woman with him. Siobhan? What was she doing on the battlefield? She should be home in Cahar! Her grey eyes flashed, but Nwa was impervious to her anger.

“Come join us, *Kailah*.” Nwa smiled, revealing teeth as white and bright as Handi in the Skymnan sky.

When Siobhan didn’t comply, he jerked her up against his chest. She twisted in his grasp and slapped him. His other hand snaked out and grabbed her by her arm, shaking her. Long black hair fell loose of its tie at the nape of her neck.

“A fighter? I’ll tame that out of you.”

Hest found his voice. “How *dare* you?” He swallowed, trying to control the ice racing

through his veins. “When did the Watu grow so weak that they don’t fight man to man?”

Nwa yanked a spear out of the ground and plunged the tip through Hest’s chest.

* * *

HEST SAT UP WITH a start, his heart pounding. It was only a dream. Siobhan was safe in her own room, just as he was safe in his. Still the adrenaline surged through him, seeking an outlet. A roar would release it, banishing his fear, helplessness, and ineptitude, but he clamped his mouth shut over the primal sound that flared up from his belly. A king’s yelling—let alone feral bellowing—would be overheard; his attendants would gossip. So instead, he brushed his long hair out of his face and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Heart of my hearts, ‘twas only a dream.

Aye, a dream.

A dream that had been plaguing his sleep for the last two cycles. Deep down, Hest knew there was more to it than just a nightmare. Liam had promised that Nwa would come for vengeance.

“*Moregot?*” Finn called through the door before opening it. “’Tis time to get ready. Oh, you’re awake. I’ve prepared a bath for you, and the *cannosea* wishes to break his fast with you before the ceremony.”

Hest swung his feet to the floor and ripped open a curtain, letting the panicked feeling of helplessness dissipate beneath Graen’s light. Nwa might come for him one moonstep, but it would not be this one.

With trembling hands, he lifted his mother’s mirror. This moonstep, of all steps, he couldn’t let Lugh see him sinking into the *laubrachs*—and if his irises had turned silver, the *jiddee’adar* would know he’d done just that. But as he examined his reflection, he saw only the usual silver lining around his bright blue eyes. He gripped the dresser for support as the relief weakened his knees for a moment. Steadying himself with a deep breath, he splashed water on his face and paced to the wardrobe where a resplendent silver-threaded tunic hung waiting alongside an absurdly ruffled white shirt starched until it could practically stand up on its own. On the floor were striking black boots that had been

carefully brushed, their silver buckles polished to a mirror finish. And beside the outfit, on its cushion on the shelf, the crown—the silver circlet of the dragon king.

Nwa and his threats would have to wait. Hest resolved to leave the nightmare behind; its power was already fading under his nervousness and excitement. He would carry no fear to his wedding.

“I’m up, Finn. A bath sounds good.”

“I’ll bring you your tea as well. Here’s your robe.” Finn held it out for Hest to slip into.

“Thank you, *boiwith*.”

“My pleasure, *Moregot*.” With a bow, Finn scurried out the door, but not before Hest caught the corner of a smile on his mouth.

Where the lad had gotten the idea that a *scubhear* to the king shouldn’t smile, he didn’t know, but the fact that it was present at all pleased Hest to see. The *boiwith* had changed profoundly over the last six cycles, from self-proclaimed *fanka*—indistinguishable from any other street urchin—to *scubhear* and personal attendant to the king.

King. Hest still was getting used to that idea as well. And now, too, he would have a queen by his side. Their names would be written together in the history books.

His fingers slowed on the ties of the robe. Siobhan. His heart raced at the thought of her; her grey eyes mesmerized him. They changed from laughter to fury to worry, all within moments. He only hoped he'd be able to make her happy; she grounded him, inspired him, made him wish to be all that he could become. And this moonstep, she would become his bride!

He tugged a comb through his sleep-tousled hair. Siobhan had insisted he leave it down, much as he might have preferred to tie it back. He scanned her carefully penned list of instructions laid out on his dresser—her writing was immaculate. And dense. The list of do's and don'ts was more than a little daunting; what if he forgot one?

Her list made him think of his own, and he looked over at the bedside table where he kept the parchment. He ought to read over it, as well. Lugh had insisted he go over it every moonstep to keep himself grounded in his

own identity, preserving it against being lost in the *laubrach* with Usheen. He shook his head; he had the list all but memorized. One moonstep missed wouldn't hurt, or even better, he could rehearse it in the bath.

As he slid into the water, all residual tension of the dream drained away, and he found it difficult to focus. Still he made an effort to picture the words he'd chosen to remind him of the things that distinguished him from Usheen, his *arc lukesure*.

Horses.

His mind drifted to Beskallare, his horse, whom he'd not ridden in over a lunar phase. With all the preparation for the wedding, and the termination of the regency, Hest had barely had any time to himself, let alone enough to ride.

Skymna.

The word itself called to mind the darker skies ruled by Handi and Tsiki, the two moons. It'd been almost one whole synod since he'd been to his home. He'd sent a letter to Malene inviting her, Maya, and Torrin to the wedding, but unfortunately, the innkeeper had written back that she couldn't

close down the business for a journey that'd take half a cycle. Hest had received the news without much surprise, but couldn't help also feeling disappointed. He'd hoped to at least see Torrin and show the boy around. His mouth twisted into a thin, forlorn line, and he went back to the list.

Silver-blue eyes.

Over the time he'd spent bonded to Usheen his original blue irises had become rimmed with silver, a feature that asserted itself more prominently when the *laubrach* deepened or took him over; others had told him that the blue utterly disappeared at times. He had to take their word for it, as he struggled to remember any details about those moments. Lugh had hotly contested his decision to change the designation away from its original form—after all, the blue was his own; the silver was Usheen, and the point was to keep them separate. But Hest was nothing if not stubborn, and the *jiddee'adar* had finally relented, or at least resigned from the argument.

Tall.

He was taller than any Muintirian he'd met. Even Sydur was shorter than him, but that didn't make the warrior any less intimidating. When they'd first met, Sydur had lifted Hest right off his feet.

Usheen.

"Are you ready for your tea, *Moregot?*" Finn handed him the mug. "Lugh wishes to see you before the ceremony. I scheduled him after your visit with the *cannonsea.*"

"Thank you, that should work." Hest sipped the tea and rehearsed the list to find his place again.

Horses; Skymna; silver-blue eyes; tall; Usheen.

He closed his eyes and pictured the *arc lukesure*. When he'd first met the dragon Usheen had been a baby, no bigger than a large dog. By the time they'd sealed the bond, he'd grown to the size of a war horse. Now, Usheen stood half of Hest's height taller than him. All thirty-three hands of his length shone—a brilliant reflector of polished silver.

Trying to stay focused, Hest washed his hair and got dressed, working the few remaining tangles out with his comb.

"The *cannonsea's* ready for you, now, *Moregot*." Finn led the way down the hall and back to the quarters Hest shared with Sydur.

Sydur.

He was on the list. The most important item as far as Usheen was concerned, for Sydur was as a father to Hest. When the *arc lukesure* had lost his *bratnoor*, the wound had run deep. Seeing Hest's relationship with the warrior as one of parent to child had once allowed Usheen to release Hest from the all-consuming *laubrach* recognizing his responsibilities to his own surrogate *bratnoor*.

"*Boiwith*, come in." Sydur greeted him from a chair in front of the fireplace. "We have some of your favorite foods."

Hest saw the arrangement and nodded to Finn. "Go break your own fast. I'll probably need your help getting ready for the ceremony."

When the boy had gone, Hest took a seat and savored a pasty. The flaky crust melted in his mouth, and the meat was perfect.

"You've had cycles to prepare you for the role of king," Sydur sipped his juice, "but

you've not had near enough training for becoming a husband."

It was difficult to swallow past the sudden lump. "Aye."

"I'd hoped Athair would work with you and teach you, but I'm not so sure that happened." He paused, looking for Hest's acknowledgment. His *scubhear* shook his head. "Well, I know nothing of being a husband, and neither does Lugh."

Where was this conversation going? Hest fiddled with a napkin, avoiding eye contact.

"One thing I do know is that for a marriage to be successful, you must put your bride's needs before your own. Selfishness will kill any relationship, but especially that between husband and wife."

So far, Hest figured he didn't have to worry about that. He and Siobhan had worked out many of their differences, and as long as he let her have her way, all went well. The only area that harbored problems was his bond with Usheen. Despite maintaining his independence within the *laubrach* for the past six cycles, she still expressed fear of what would happen if he allowed the *arc lukesure* to

take control of his mind. He didn't blame her for the worry, but no amount of reassurance had worked to ease it.

Sydur's cheeks flushed, and he twirled his mug between his hands. "Remember how you drew Beskallare to you? You'll want that same patience and tenderness with Siobhan when you retire to your quarters—this rest period and every one after."

Hest gulped. He'd considered what that might be like, but had tried to not think much past kissing Siobhan, something that had been rare ever since Athair had insisted they include a chaperone whenever they were together.

A knock at the door broke the conversation. Never had Hest been happier for an interruption.

"Lugh to see you, *Moregot*." Goshkeah stuck his head in the door.

"See him in." Hest took another pasty and then offered one to the *jiddee'adar* as he pulled up a wooden chair.

"Thank you. How are you, *boiwith*?"

"Fine."

Lugh stared him down until Hest broke eye contact.

“As I thought. Another dream?”

“Aye.”

Syður sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me, *boiwith*?”

Hest shrugged. What could he say?

“The important thing is to remain in control of the *laubrach*. You *have* been reading through your list each step?”

“I’m staying on top of it. Even after the nightmare, my eyes hadn’t changed any.” Hest tried to reassure the *jiddee’adar* but knew it was the man’s place to worry.

“At least there’s that. Have you told Siobhan about the dreams?”

“Nay. I haven’t had a chance. The only times I’ve seen her lately have been to discuss the ceremony, who’ll be there, and what we’ll dance to.”

“She deserves to know before you awaken her in a cold sweat roaring like an *arc lukesure*.”

Lugh was right, but Hest needed to find an opportune time to tell her.

“Do you have the ring to give her?” Lugh took another pasty from the tray, while Hest

tried with middling success to conceal his growing exasperation, mostly rooted in a profound discomfort. Yet he owed much to these men; he would at least try to show them the respect they deserved.

“Aye, do you wish to see it?” he asked in a measured tone.

“’Tisn’t necessary. Make sure ‘tis in your possession when we go down to the throne room. Any last-minute questions?”

Hest controlled the urge to roll his eyes. “We’ve gone over everything multiple times. I can quote my lines in my sleep.”

Sydur laughed. “I believe the *boiwith* is tired of our interference, Lugh. Why don’t we let him have some time away from us old meddlers? Goshkeah will keep him company, and he has Finn.”

“Very well. You won’t see the princess until she walks in. From then on, she’ll be your responsibility. Take care of her, Hest.”

Was that a tear in Lugh’s eye? Hest hadn’t thought about it before, but perhaps Lugh’s relationship with Siobhan mirrored Sydur’s with him.

“I will. You don’t have to worry about her.”

Hest watched the *jiddee'adar* walk from the room, knowing that it was only the first of this moonstep's many vows.