

## *The Chalice War: Sword*

©David B. Coe, 2023

### **Chapter 1**

Baelor's displeasure suffused the Underrealm as might a poisonous fog. It soured every drawn breath, settled like a noxious seasoning on every bite of food, clotted every sip of onyx wine. None could escape it. And even the God's most trusted servants could not improve the Great One's spirits.

For Brilk, who was neither a member of Baelor's inner circle, nor a power among Fomorian elite in his own right, the weight of the Great One's wrath was another burden to be borne, a hardship to be endured. It had been such for some time now, fortnight upon fortnight. Information did not flow freely in the Underrealm, not unless the God willed it. But even Baelor Himself could not quash every rumor. And most among the Fomorian people, Brilk knew, believed the whispers claiming this latest surge of fury had been prompted by the failure of His minions to retrieve one of the Four Treasures from the Sidhe world. Again.

Among Brilk's colleagues and underlings in the Ministry of Agriculture it was said—in hushed tones, *always* in hushed tones—that the Above had its weather, and the Underrealm had His moods. The one was no less a factor than the other in the lives of all within their respective realms. Brilk, though, in his years working for the government of the Below, had suffered through worse. The Great One was powerful beyond measure, wise beyond compare, shrewd beyond any contrivance the Sidhe might imagine. His every quality was extravagant in the

extreme. Was it any wonder his temper should be a match for his talents and his moods should shape the very fabric of the Underrealm?

As it happened, Brilk had long since grown accustomed to navigating rough spells, be they of the God's making or of more mundane origin. As Senior Deputy Minister In Charge of Irrigation Sectors, Distribution of Permits, and Dispute Resolution—the youngest Fomorian in the history of the ministry to attain such a position—he excelled at crisis management. He was, he liked to think, the cooler head that prevailed in all circumstances. Nearly all. There was that unfortunate incident after the Aille Dearg Dam failure in 3614, but he was barely more than a boy then, new to his position. He would handle things differently now, obviously. The proof was in his performance. In the fourteen years since that occurrence, he had guided his division through more than a few potential catastrophes. He had earned his title and the perquisites that came with it.

History, as he would happily tell anyone who cared to listen, taught his people that the Fomorians were farmers before all else, even before they were warriors. During their earliest wars with the Sidhe, when both Fomorians and Tuatha Dé Danann still occupied the Above, the Fomorians controlled the land, and wielded famine and crop failure and pestilence as if they were great swords. Upon their relegation to the Underrealm, his people were compelled to transform a sunless, featureless, landscape into an agricultural paradise. The Sidhe couldn't have done it. None but the Fomorians could. According to Brilk's father, Cichol guard his soul, many of their ancient ancestors played a role in that early miracle. Brilk's work for the Ministry continued a long line of familial expertise in matters of the land. Some might dismiss his work as

bureaucratic, but he took pride in all he did, and often asked those skeptics where they thought the Fomorians might be today without the Ministry and all its accomplishments.

The truth was—and this he couldn't say to anyone, not even in whispers, not even in the most intimate of settings—he feared what would become of him if the God realized His greatest ambition. What kind of life could a deputy minister who specialized in maintaining the Underrealm's agricultural productivity expect to lead in the Above?

He'd never been there, of course. Few Fomorians had. He had heard others speak of it, however, and he gathered it was a virtual hell-scape of sunshine, fertile soil, abundant rain, and predictable seasons. Where was the challenge in farming such a place? What possible role could he play in building this new home for his people? Who really wanted to go there anyway?

On this final thought, Brilk glanced around and peered over his shoulder, half expecting to see the Great One directly behind him, the one huge eye boring into his skull, reading his every thought. He shuddered and almost lost his footing on the riverbank.

He liked to visit the irrigation sectors whenever he could, and this morning, with the first glow of the day fires, he had come to unit 237 in the northwest, to inspect a new canal that had been built off a tributary to the Thúr Rí River. The local administrator, a Cuachag who was unusually solicitous for one of his kind, wished to accompany Brilk on his inspection. Brilk refused his offer. Administrators invariably tried to show only what they wanted him to see, thinking him too callow to recognize their efforts for what they were. He knew his way around an irrigation system; the last thing he needed was some obsequious toady distracting him from his job. The Cuachag, white hair tangled by the hot wind, sweat beading on his brow ridges,

looked as forlorn as a hungry Sluagh when Brilk put him off and walked away.

He had grown fond of this area. Someday, when he no longer wished to work, he might settle here. The caverns were particularly deep, the *spéir charraig*—the rock sky—was as high as he had seen anywhere, and the blue gleam of the cliffs was unique among all the farming landscapes he had found in decades of travel. A fine place indeed.

Or it would be until it was abandoned.

Brilk's mood curdled on the thought. He peered around again, making certain he was alone, and halted beside the sluggish dark waters of the river.

He hated the Tuatha Dé Danann. Of course he did. He wasn't much of a warrior, despite being Fachan. But were he to encounter a Sidhe, he would gladly kill the creature and dance a jig on its entrails. Like any black-blooded Fomorian, he wanted to see the Sidhe wiped from the earth. Thousands of years ago, his people were defeated, robbed of their rightful homeland, relegated to this prison of stone. Yes, they had turned it into a paradise—a testament to Fomorian strength, intelligence, resilience, and determination. But for all their awesome achievements, they remained a people in exile. Naturally, Brilk shared the God's desire to avenge the loss of the Above. Who wouldn't? He understood the Great One's single-minded pursuit—dare he say, obsession—with destroying every living Sidhe and punishing the Milesians for allying themselves with the Fomorians' enemy. How could he not?

But regardless of how they'd come to be here in the Below, this was their world now. Did revenge require that he and his fellow Fomorians leave their homes, their careers, their dreams of marriage, family, and, eventually, a quiet retirement? Did it mean they had to give up their

canyon whisky and their gardens? He surveyed the river valley, the cliffs towering over him. Why would he—why would anyone—wish to leave such a place? Why, after toiling for thousands of years to transform the Underrealm into their new homeland, would the Fomorians be so eager to move their society to the Above? It made no sense to him.

“Minister!”

He wheeled, frowned to see the administrator had come after all. The Cuachag rode a boar—the only mode of transit, other than foot travel, suitable for the irrigation regions. He steered to where Brilk waited, his animal, a handsome gray, kicking up pebbles and mud. The administrator dismounted and sketched a bow.

“I thought I made myself clear, Administrator. I wish to conduct my inspection—”

“Yes, Minister, I know. And please forgive me for intruding, but this is . . .” He cringed, more sweat dripping from his ridges. “This is an emergency.”

“What sort of emergency?”

“One of the irrigation pumps has stopped working. We don’t know why. And now, as we were trying to maintain water levels in sectors downstream from the broken pump, one of our gates has jammed. We can’t close it, and we can’t open it further. It’s just stuck.”

“I see.” Brilk drew himself up to his full height. “Then this is a most fortunate day for you, Administrator.”

The Cuachag couldn’t have looked more perplexed. “It— It is?”

“I have been underwhelmed by what I have seen today. Don’t misunderstand. This is a lovely region, but your irrigation system is . . . disappointing, to say the least. Your equipment

has been neglected, your gauges appear to be, let us say, less than accurate, your canals are silted to the point where their flow has been diminished—”

“Our water comes from the Northern Caves. Of course it’s silted.”

“I don’t care if the *water* is silted, Administrator. But the canals should be kept clear. Or did you expect them to de-silt themselves?”

The administrator dropped his gaze.

“I would imagine the jamming of the gate and the malfunction in your pump can both be traced to silting. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I don’t know.”

Brilk thinned a smile. “No, of course not. But as I was saying, you are fortunate because I am here with you today. Crises of this sort occur without warning, with potentially crippling consequences. That it happened now, while I am present, is fortuitous beyond measure.” He clapped the Cuachag on the back. “We’ll have you up and running again in no time.”

“Thank you, Minister,” the Administrator said, the words wrung from him.

“Which pump has failed?”

“Pump Eada, in Sector 4.”

Brilk hadn’t yet visited that sector, but he knew where it was. “Very well. I will take your boar. You will join me there as quickly as you can. I assume a crew is already on the scene.”

“Well . . . yes, but . . . that’s a walk of two leagues.”

“Indeed it is.” He narrowed his eye. “*You* sought *me* out, Administrator. Surely you don’t expect *me* to walk that distance.”

The Cuachag stared at the ground again. “Of course not, Minister. But she’s a fine boar. She could carry both of us.”

“Not at speed. And we haven’t time to waste.” He strode to the boar and swung himself onto its back. To Brilk’s surprise, the administrator had an Oilliphéist-skin saddle. Given their cost, he didn’t know whether to be impressed or suspicious. “I will be expecting you in Sector 4, Administrator. Don’t dawdle.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. Wheeling the boar, he trotted back the way he had come and cut northward at the first opportunity.

By the time he reached the pump house, repairs were well under way. Whatever the administrator’s shortcomings, he had dispatched his crews with, well, dispatch. Brilk laughed at his own wordplay.

After checking that repairs of the pump were headed in the right direction, he continued on to the damaged gate. Here matters were a good deal less satisfactory. Two workers, Urisks both, stood thigh deep in mucky water, trying to clear the canal floor with shovels. Like so many of their kind, they appeared fit but far from sharp-witted.

“Shovels won’t get the job done,” Brilk called to them, reining the boar to a halt along the canal road. “One of you will need to go under and clear the silt by hand. Once you can close the gate, and all this water has a chance to drain away, then you can shovel.”

The Urisks eyed him, shared a glance, and regarded him again.

“Who in Cichol’s name are you, boy?” one of them asked.

“Someone who knows how to fix a jammed irrigation gate.” When they didn’t respond to

this, he said, “I happen to be Senior Deputy Minister In Charge of Irrigation Sectors, Distribution of Permits, and Dispute Resolution.”

“Wonder if he needs a nap after saying all that,” the first Urisk muttered.

His co-worker smirked.

“I need neither a nap, nor the satisfaction of withholding your purchase credits for the next two months. But I would be happy to have both if that’s what it takes to get you to do as I say.”

Their demeanor changed with satisfying swiftness.

“Yes, Minister.”

“Right away, Minister.”

Brilk dismounted and over the next two hours watched while the two workers followed his instructions to the letter. Before long, they had the gate closed. Once the water receded, they were able to assess the extent of the siltation. Seeing how bad it was, Brilk wondered how the sector had avoided this sort of emergency for so long.

The administrator arrived while the Urisks were shoveling. Perspiration glazed his pallid face, and he approached with leaden steps. He peered into the canal and winced at what he saw.

“Silt, Administrator,” Brilk said. “As I suspected.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is the pump working again?”

“Soon. It’s clear now. It just needs priming.”

“Very well.” He fixed the Cuachag with his flintiest expression. “This once, I will refrain



from filing an incident report. But next week, I intend to return for another inspection. If conditions have not improved, I will have no choice but to put your entire sector on conditional notice and place an admonition in your personal file. Understood?"

What little color was left in his cheeks sluiced away. "Yes, Minister. Thank you, Minister."

"I'm leaving now. You will remain on duty until the sector is back online."

The administrator lifted his chin, a hint of pride sparking in his eyes. "That had been my intention."

"Good." Brilk patted the boar's shoulder. "She's a good beast. But how did you ever afford that saddle on your salary?"

The Cuachag was still stammering as Brilk walked away, chuckling to himself.

#

Brilk's home stood on a headland overlooking the river. It wasn't a large structure, but it was more than he needed. As the day fires began their long dimming, he paused on the walkway to his front door, savoring the view, the colors in his garden, the flutter of bats around his chimney. He liked having so much space. Another reason to dread the impending takeover of the Sidhe world. With the diminution of his influence would come a reduction in his pay. How could he hope to find such a fine home in the Above?

He had skills, talents; he had authority and he knew how to wield it, as he had proven again today. All of this would be worthless in the Above. There was talk of leaving some behind, of maintaining the Fomorian realm even after the Sidhe were defeated and the God had his

vengeance, but that was no more enticing than life Above. He didn't wish to be relegated to a lesser world. Why couldn't everything simply stay as it was? Why did Baelor have to pursue this foolish fixation with the Sidhe world?

Brilk gave a small gasp and turned a complete circle, abruptly uncertain as to whether he had merely thought that last or spoken it aloud. He saw no one nearby, though his neighbor, Mrs. Clatch slanted a glance his way as she watered her dahlias. He smiled weakly, raised a hand in greeting, and hurried into the house.

Once inside, he breathed easier. He also double-bolted his door. After depositing his briefcase in his office, he poured himself a generous glass of whisky and retreated to his den, where he could enjoy the view and not think about what Mrs. Clatch might have heard.

He sat, put his feet up, closed his eyes. This had been a good day. Not the day he anticipated, but the best days never were. He had faced a challenge and prevailed, as was his wont. Whatever the future might hold—for the Great One, for the Fomorian people, for Brilk—he would face it with a firm belief in his own abilities and intellect. For now, that would have to be enough.

He sipped his whisky, tried to get comfortable in his chair.

A noise from the front of the house made Brilk open his eyes, sit up, listen.

He heard it again. A footstep. Perhaps several. He set his glass on the table beside him and stood, trying to keep silent. His heart hammered, which was ridiculous. He was a Fachan. His kind were fearsome in battle. He recalled the tales his father told of his great-uncle Uvar, whose heroism during the Sluagh Uprising of 3457 saved countless lives. Brilk would face down

this intruder, whoever it might be. Woe to those who dared to enter his home without his leave.

Or he could remain where he was, make not a sound, and hope the intruder kept to the other half of the house. Most of the good stuff was there anyway.

*What if they didn't come to steal? What if it's a minion of Baelor, here to mete out punishment for traitorous thoughts?*

Many Fomorians, he knew, displayed on their walls ancient swords and pikes and axes, mementos from the great wars fought by their forebears. Brilk had always preferred art. Right now, this struck him as a particularly poor choice.

“Hello?” A voice from the common room. A female voice. “Anyone at home?”

How threatening could a female be?

Quite, actually. He'd once seen a Fideal rip the arms off an Urisk to win a battle tournament.

He thought he heard a second voice, also female.

“I'm sure he's here.”

“Maybe he's hiding from us.”

“Maybe he's seen you dance. That would scare anyone.”

Curiosity got the better of him. If the arrival of these females presaged his doom, so be it. He would not hide.

“I'm here,” he said, raising his voice so it carried through the house. “Come in and do your worst, if that's your intent.”

More footsteps, now growing near. A moment later, three of them entered his den.

“Honey,” said the middle one, “if we wanted to do our worst, we wouldn’t need your permission.”

## Chapter 2

They were Fachan, like him, and yet nothing like him at all. These might have been the most exquisite creatures he had ever seen. The one who had spoken had fiery red hair and a large eye the color of dew-kissed grass. She was—there was no other way to put it—voluptuous, and her clothes accented her broad shoulders, the round perfection of her breast. The two who flanked her were stunning as well. Brown hair, eyes of sapphire. They were taller than their companion, but every bit as desirable.

“Who are you?” he managed to ask, his voice unsteady.

The redhead approached him, placing one foot before the other so her hips swayed. Brilk swallowed.

“We’re friends, honey.”

“We. Come. In. Peace,” one of the others said, enunciating each word.

The redhead glared back at her. “He understands you fine, Nellie. You don’t have to talk to him like he’s hard of hearing.”

“Well, I don’t know.” This second Fachan held out a hand in front of her eye. “I can’t get used to seeing this way. I can’t tell what’s where and which things are closer.” To Brilk she said, “How do you do it?”

“Um . . . .”

“Don’t worry about her,” said the redhead, commanding his attention again. “We want to talk to you. We need your help.”

“I still don’t know who you are.”

She looked back at the third one, who shrugged in response to whatever she saw on Red’s face. The more Brilk watched and listened to them, the more convinced he became that they were sisters. The two with brown hair could have been twins, and the redhead resembled them.

“Is there a place you can sit down, honey?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I want to invite you to sit until I understand why you’re here.”

“Not us. You. We prefer to stand.”

“I’ll say,” the third one added. “I can’t imagine sitting in this dress. I’d bend at the waist and *boom!* Out I’d pop.”

Brilk felt his cheeks warm.

“More fun for you than me, doll.”

The three of them stared and Brilk stared back.

“A chair?” Red prompted.

“Ah! Yes.” He grabbed the nearest chair from his dining table and sat.

Red began to orbit, tracing a finger across his shoulders as she passed. He nearly sighed aloud.

“Have you ever heard of the Morrigan?” she asked.

Brilk didn’t move. Obviously he knew of the Morrigan. How could anyone not? But he sensed that any answer to her question invited peril. Her implication was both clear and incomprehensible.

These three were the Morrigan? The Battle Furies? Impossible. Though it would explain

their ability to enter his home as they had, through locked doors and bolted windows. And the Furies were said to be a trinity: Macha, the eldest and most powerful, Bodbh and Nemain, her twin sisters. They were also said to be hags, ancient and withered, hideous and terrifying. These three were none of those things. Nor had they appeared to him in their true forms, Macha as a great horse, the twins as ravens.

“Honey?” Red said, setting her fist on a cocked hip. She seemed to be losing patience with him. Not good, if these three were truly the Morrigan.

“Maybe he doesn’t hear so well,” said the second Fachan. “You should try talking loud and slow like I did before.”

“He heard us just fine.”

“You claim to be the Morrigan?” Brilk said. “I would see proof.”

“Really?” the third demanded, steel in her tone. “We tell you we’re the Furies, and your response is to suggest we’re lying? Not smart, demon.”

Brilk wet his lips and stared at the floor. Perhaps she was right.

“Calm down,” the first one said to her fellow Fury. “Think like a Fachan for a minute. Would you believe us? Wouldn’t you want proof?”

“I squeezed into this damn dress for him. I’m not going full-on raven for him, too.”

“We don’t have to. Look at me, honey.”

Reluctantly, he lifted his gaze to Red, and his mouth fell open. She wasn’t Fachan anymore. She was human, or maybe Sidhe. Two eyes, two . . . bosoms. He could only assume she would be considered as glorious in the Above now as she had appeared to him seconds

before. He understood that for her purposes, and his, the transformation itself was what mattered.

He flung himself out of his chair and prostrated himself before her, before them.

“That’s more like it,” said the third.

“No, it’s not. Get up.”

Brilk wasn’t sure he ought to.

“It’s okay. Get up. Sit in that . . . that comfortable-looking chair, and tell me about yourself.”

He pushed himself up to his knees. At her nod of encouragement, he climbed back onto the chair. The other two appeared bored.

“What’s your name?” Red asked.

“Brilk, Your Highness . . . Great One . . . I don’t know what to call you.”

“If he’d seen our act, he wouldn’t call you ‘Great One,’” said the third sister.

Red glowered, the expression even more intimidating in her Above form. She turned to Brilk again and favored him with a smile. “You can call me ‘Goddess.’ Would you like me to go back to being Fachan?”

“Y-yes, Goddess. Thank you.”

With a sweep of her hand and a ripple in her appearance, she assumed again her earlier, more pleasing form.

“Better?”

He nodded.

“I’m Macha.” She indicated the second and third sisters. “This is Nemain, and this is



Badbh. My sisters and I are here for a reason. We believe you can help us and, by doing so, help yourself. You'd like to help us, wouldn't you?"

"Can we move this along, please?" Badbh asked. "We have a rehearsal, and it's going to take me a least half an hour to shower off the Fachan stink."

Macha closed her eye briefly, then focused on Brilk again. "Would you like to help us, Brilk?"

"I'll do anything I can, Goddess. But I'm hardly in a position—"

"No false modesty now. You have influence, authority, skills. You're more important than you would have us believe."

His cheeks burned again, and he fought to keep a smile from his lips. He couldn't deny that her words swelled his heart. The Morrigan knew of him. They thought him important, a significant figure in Fomorian society. The Goddesses had come to him for help.

"I suppose I have some small influence among my peers."

Badbh rolled her eye. Nemain examined her nails. Macha, though, brightened at his response.

"Of course you do. Now, I want you to answer a question for me, and I want you to be honest. What do you think of Baelor's attempts to take over the Sidhe world?"

The heat in his face vanished, leaving him chilled and terrified. He felt as though his soul had been laid bare, as if the Great One himself had flayed the skin from his body, leaving only muscle and bone, blood and viscera. He couldn't hide. He couldn't answer. He could hardly breathe.

“I think you broke him,” Badbh said, leaning closer, studying his face. “Seriously. He’s totally wiggling out.”

“Brilk—”

“Please, Goddess,” he whispered, dropping off the chair to his knees. “Don’t make me answer. I beg you.”

Nemain’s brow furrowed above the bright blue eye. “Awww! He’s kind of cute when he begs.”

“No one can hear you but us,” Macha said. “You have my word. You’re under our protection. Not even Baelor can reach you right now. He can’t hear or see or know what you’re thinking or saying. Now, answer the question.”

“I dare not.”

Badbh stepped closer so she was shoulder to shoulder with her sister. She gestured and Nemain hurried forward to stand with them.

“You need to ask yourself, doll,” the third fury said, “who is the greater threat: Baelor in his palace, leagues and leagues away, or the three of us, standing right here, holding your life in our hands.”

He looked to Macha, but she merely quirked her eyebrow, this once appearing in no mood to temper her sister’s remark.

“He hears all,” he said, breathing the words. “He knows all.”

“Oh, good lord, he does not,” Badbh said. “None of us do. We wouldn’t have known to come here if not for your stupid diary, which you left open, and which we found while

searching—”

Macha put a hand on her arm. “Enough. But she’s right, honey. He doesn’t know all. Omniscience is a convenient myth for beings like us. But really there’s no such thing. Now, I’ve shared a little secret with you, and I need you to return the favor. So, answer the question, or risk trying our patience.” Her tone hardened as she said this last.

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I . . . I am not as enthusiastic as some Fomorians I know.” He grimaced, expecting to be struck dead by a bolt of lightning or crushed by some giant unseen fist. When he wasn’t, he relaxed fractionally.

“Not as enthusiastic,” Macha repeated, her voice flat. “It goes a little deeper than that, doesn’t it?”

“I . . . I suppose. We’re quite comfortable now, aren’t we? And we have worked hard to become so. My family—we’ve helped to build an agricultural paradise in the Below.”

“I think maybe ‘paradise’ is a bit much, don’t you?”

Macha slapped Badbh’s arm, earning a scowl.

“And so you would rather live here?” Macha said.

“I don’t want to see this all go to waste. And . . . .” He dropped his gaze. “And, I don’t wish to see my influence diminished. I matter here. I’m a figure of some importance. Not a lot. I don’t deceive myself in that regard. But I have a fine home, a position of responsibility, a decent wage. In the Above, I would be . . . no one.”

“We understand, don’t we?”

Badbh nodded. Nemain looked doubtful, but when Macha scowled her way, she pasted a smile on her lips and said, "Sure we do."

"The question is, what can we do about it? All of us, working together."

He couldn't bring himself to speak. He didn't want to hear more, but neither did he wish to incur the wrath of these three. Somehow, through no fault of his own, he had drawn the attention of powers beyond his reckoning. What had he done to deserve such a fate?

Badbh had already answered this question. He had written—

"Wait, you read my diary?"

Badbh leered. "Welcome to the conversation."

"That sort of violation is . . . rude."

"He's kinda right," Nemain said.

"Water under the bridge," said her twin. "We might not be all-knowing, but we are conniving. We're the Furies after all. It's kind of our thing. And since there's nothing you can do about it now, you should focus on the present. We need your help, and in return we're willing to give you what you want—namely the continuation of your unbelievably boring but apparently satisfying existence. So, how about it?"

Macha regarded her, stark disbelief in her stare. "And you wonder why I insist on handling our contract negotiations."

"Just trying to move things along."

"There's nothing I can do," Brilk said. "I run irrigation systems. I'm a minister, not a god."

“With our help you can be more,” Macha said. “You can change the course of history. And all you need to do is retrieve an old sword. We’ll do the rest.”

“An old—”

He broke off, realization crashing over him like floodwaters, frigid, dank, frenzied. Speaking of the Great One had terrified him. Contemplating this was a thousand times worse.

“He doesn’t look so good,” Nemain said. She stooped, leaning close to him. “Do you have anxiety issues? I do. That’s how I know to ask.”

“You can’t be serious,” he said to Macha. “You can’t expect me to . . . . The Sword lies with Cichol. That’s what we have been told, and I have no reason to doubt it’s true. I can’t possibly take it from the Glorious One.”

“Do you think we’re fools?” the goddess asked, fixing him with an emerald glare.

Abruptly, he sensed that his life hung by the barest filament, by spider’s silk. A disdainful wave of Macha’s hand and he would cease to exist. Brilk didn’t understand how this had come to be so. He had been sipping whisky. Earlier this day he had fixed an irrigation gate. Now the Furies loomed over him, lovely and deadly and demanding that he help them with . . . with madness. How could this be? He lived a quiet life. He paid his tribute, worked hard at his job, followed Fomorian law, honored the God.

*Do you really? Is it honoring the God to hope He falls short of His greatest ambition? Is it honoring the God to question the wisdom of His aims, of the cause to which He has devoted His entire existence and that of His people?*

“Is this because of the diary?” he asked. “Because I can burn it. Start a new one. And in it

I'll only praise the Great One and all he does. I swear.”

Macha took a long, deep breath. “Brilk, I want you to listen to me. We don't want you to praise the Great One. And we have no intention of sending you to your doom. My point a moment ago is that we are *not* fools. We are wise and brilliant beyond your reckoning—”

Badbh snorted.

“—And we have a detailed plan for getting the Sword. Or at least, we will by the time you're ready to make the attempt.”

He blinked, eyeing each of the sisters in turn.

“Good job, Maddie,” Badbh said. “Really bucked him up there.”

“Why can't you take it yourselves—”

“We don't do that,” Macha told him, shaking her head. “We must maintain the appearance of neutrality.”

“Why?”

“Yeah, Maddie, why?”

“Shut up.” She smiled at Brilk. “Because it's what the Furies do. We shape events, we toy with mortals. Be glad we came to you. If you succeed—”

“—And you survive . . . .”

“Not helping. If you succeed you will be rewarded. And, more important, you'll have what you want: a continuation of this world, of this life you've worked so hard to build.”

“And if I fail?”

“We will do our best to protect you.”

“Forgive me, Goddess, but that’s not very reassuring.”

“We’re the Morrigan,” Bodb said. “We don’t do ‘reassuring.’”

“How do I know you’re not doing this to protect the Sidhe? How can I be sure you have the best interests of the Fomorian people in mind?”

“You can’t,” Bodb said.

“Bodb—”

She rounded on Macha. “No, I’ve had enough of this. We tried it your way, now we’re going to do it mine.” The look the goddess gave Brilk could have melted stone. “We don’t care about the Fomhoire. We don’t care about the Sidhe. You morons are free to fight your wars for another millennium as far as we’re concerned. Hell, that’s what we want! We’re the goddamn Furies! But when your wars endanger our existence, that’s another thing entirely. If Baelor finally has his revenge, we’ll be gone. Actually, that’s the best-case scenario. The worst is that Cichol spares our lives so that Baelor can make us his playthings, and I’d sooner off myself than live in that sort of hell. So, you’re going to do this for us, and—bonus for you—in the process, you’re going to save your pathetic status in this god-forsaken place. And if you refuse, I’m going to transform you into a pashk flea right here and right now. You got it?”

“Y-yes, Goddess.”

She peered over her shoulder at Macha and raised an eyebrow. Then she walked to where her twin stood, leaving Brilk to face the red-haired goddess.

“Good then,” Macha said, smoothing her dress with a brush of her graceful hand. “I guess we’re agreed. You’re going to help us, and my sister will refrain from turning you into a flea.”

“I still don’t understand—”

“You have to trust us. We will have a plan. We will see to it that you are protected, and we will reward you handsomely for helping us. Your task will actually be fairly simple. We need access to information that’s usually only available to those in the Fomhoire government, such as it is. You will gather that information, and help an associate of ours take possession of the sword. Our associate will know what to do with it next.” She opened her hands. “That’s it. Easy peasy.”

Brilk frowned. “Easy . . . .”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

The Morrigan, he decided, were not at all what he had imagined. “Who is this associate? With all due respect to the three of you, I have no intention of interacting with any Sidhe.”

“Our associate is Fomhoire.”

This he hadn’t expected.

“Truly?”

“You doubt my word? Would you like to see me in my equine form?”

“No, Goddess! Of course I believe you! I’m just surprised that there are other Fomorians who feel as I do about . . . about the Great One’s ambitions.”

“Yes, well, she is unusual for a Fomhoire. As you are.”

He didn’t know whether to be pleased or alarmed. “Might she be someone I know?”

This, of all things, made all three of them laugh. “No,” Macha said. “I’m quite sure you don’t know her.”