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Chapter 1

JAHNA 82 AD November

I will die when I choose to die.

And as I die, my thoughts will be of Lovern, the Fox, a man who taught me to live, to talk to the gods, and to love. We failed to change the future, and now I beg the goddess Morrigna to allow my daughter a safe journey. I have only time for one more passage dream to tell our story.

Then, I shall die.

72 AD October

Peat smoke darkened the room and firelight struggled to glint off the weapons behind Uncle Beathan, our clan chieftain. I kept my eyes on the weapons so I did not have to look at him. A bronze shield, two spears and two swords -- one short, and one long -- were balanced against the wall. The sword hilts showed our smith's interpretations of animals, trees and the spirals of life. If I squinted just right, the bear, Uncle Beathan's name sign, shrugged its shoulders as if alive. When he was in a better mood than today, he let me touch them. I wished I had worked with my cousin to create this art.

We stood in front of my uncle's table like thieves as he ate goat cheese and bread, crumbs falling into his beard. My hands were sweating. I held them behind me. I jumped when he spoke. "Jahna, you will marry Harailt."

He had sent Braden to summon my mother and Harailt, as well as me. Harailt's father, Cerdic, was there, too. No good ever came from being summoned. Beathan would usually send the girl who did his cooking, Drista, to ask us to join him for family discussions. Drista, a farmer's daughter honored to be chosen by Beathan to serve at his table, was almost at the marrying age and would leave Beathan's home soon. He would pick another and another to come to him, until he married.

When our chieftain sent his warrior, Braden, we knew he wanted to discuss important clan matters.

I did not want to be in his lodge that afternoon. Uncle Beathan's dogs chewed on old pork bones under his table. The smell made my stomach churn.

Mother did not look upset when she glanced down at me. I wondered how we could be mother and daughter. As a small girl, I held up our polished bronze and compared our faces. She told me I was vain. I told her she was beautiful. I felt like a young goat next to her. Mother's hair

was long and straight, the colors of autumn, amber laced with gold and red. Her brother Beathan's hair was similar. Hers smelled of herbs when she washed it. She wore it loose. Mine was black as a raven's-wing and never where I wanted it. I wore mine tied back. Her eyes were blue as clear snow water, mine the color of mistletoe leaves with oak splinters. She reached Beathan's chin, and my head came to his lower chest. Smiles were rare on her solemn face, and I seemed not to know how to be serious. She blended into our family, the village, the clan. I was like none of them. She told me I was like my father, a trader from the south. I wished I had known my father.

Beathan sliced another large piece of cheese and stuffed it into his mouth. My stomach groaned. Chewing, he continued. "However, Cerdic. You do have a rich farm. You will be able to provide your son with sheep and pigs to start his own family. And he will inherit your land one day, goddess willing." He drank long from his cup of mead.

Cerdic was a small man with arms strong enough to lift one of his sheep out of a ravine and shoulders broad enough to carry lambs. Harailt, like his mother, grew tall, thin and quiet. His shorter father looked up to him but Harailt heeded his father's wishes.

Blankets and pieces of clothing were strewn all over my uncle's home. Bridles and parts of his chariot lay on the table in the midst of repair. His hunting dogs laid asleep on his bed, or at his feet, gnawing on the remnants of last night's dinner. In the gloom of the room, we had to be careful not to trip over whatever was on the floor. My aunt used to straighten after him, but she died two planting seasons ago.

"And Jahna."

I looked straight at him. Shards of light reflected in his sky blue eyes. I shivered.

"You have seen sixteen harvests," he said.

I knew I was past the age of marrying. Most girls younger than me were married and had several children hanging onto their skirts. I had foolishly thought Uncle and Mother would let me choose my mate.

"It is time for you to start having babies of your own. You will marry. I will hand-fast you to Harailt at Samhainn, to be blessed by the gods. Now go! I am still hungry. Girl! Mead!" He belched. Drista dashed in, balancing an overflowing mug and more cheese.

Stunned, I hung on to my mother's arm. As we left his lodge, Uncle Beathan's words rang in my ears.

"But Mother," I said. "I have watched Braden for a long time. It was him I hoped to marry. I was waiting for him to ask Uncle for our hand-fasting. Now, I have to marry that—that—farmer."

"Shush, girl," my mother said.

I did not care if Harailt heard me. I had known him all my life; we played as children, but I had never thought of marrying him.

I did not know if the tears in my eyes were caused by the sun or disappointment.

I overheard Cerdic as Harailt and his father walked away.

"It is too bad you could not have married Sileas. Her hands are callused from hard work. Her father taught her well. Jahna does not know how to work the land. She has lived with her mother, weaving, and her hands are soft. She will not like to work outside in the fields."

Yes, I thought, *I weave cloth*. My hands did not have the grime of the fields on them, but they were still strong hands. Would Harailt only want to marry someone with dirty hands?

"We must do what Beathan decrees," my mother said. "He is the *ceann-cinnidh*." I glanced over and saw Harailt's shoulders slump.

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The moon, full then, was now a sliver. I stayed angry and sullen most days. I spilled water and half swept the floor. My mother finally lost her patience with me one day and grasped me by my shoulders.

Turning me to face her, she said, "You will be married to Harailt. And you will be happy. Beathan has said you will marry so you—will—marry. Stop behaving as if you were a lost puppy."

My dream of Braden faded and I accepted my fate. I supposed I liked Harailt. His earlength, rust colored hair, swept back with lime-wash, looked comely. His face though not as handsome as the warrior's face I had admired for so long, was not ugly. He kept his red beard trim, and his hands were large enough to catch a baby lamb being born. He was a good farmer who smelled of harvest grain. I could marry worse.

The day before Samhainn, the day our hand-fasting would be officially announced, Mother asked me to go to the drying rack in our yard and bring in the last of our blue yarn. I stood in the sun, thinking of the upcoming ceremony. Would Harailt kiss me after the announcement? Only my uncle and cousins had ever kissed me, and then only on my cheek. I touched my lips and wondered if I would know what to do.

"Jahna!"

I sighed, not wanting to go back to the loom. The sun was high and white clouds floated in the bright sky. I had been cold in these days of rain, and felt the golden warmth as a gift from the goddess. I hoped for the same weather tomorrow. It would be nice to be warm and dry on the day of my hand-fasting.

I waved my hand to show I heard. "One moment, Mother." I saw Harailt coming from our smithy. He walked toward our house from Finlay's work-hut, carrying a repaired plow on one shoulder. "Harailt is coming. I wish to speak to him about the giving fires."

He passed me and did not stop, though I thought I had seen him look my way.

"Harailt," I called.

He stopped walking but did not look at me.

"Come with us to the ceremony," I said. "Come early so we may talk. I would like to arrive at the fires with you."

He sighed and looked at me as if speaking to his little sister.

"I will ask my father," he said. "He may need help with the animals. Maybe my sisters will be enough help. If he says I may come, I will be here in time to walk with you and your mother." He started down the hill.

"May the gods protect you from evil tonight," I called.

He answered, "And you," without looking back.

I hoped he would come to take me to the festival. He had been busy with the harvest, and I, making cloth for winter cloaks, so our visits had been few and hurried. We would need to learn to live together quickly, and I was ready to try. We would not have the usual full season to live together before marriage. My uncle had shortened our hand-fasting time. Maybe he worried one of us would protest the marriage.

I wrenched the bitter-smelling blue wool off the rack and ran to my mother, my hair flying free from its tie again.

"Jahna, do not run," she scolded. "You are old enough to be respectable. We still have good sunlight so we can weave more before we go to Beathan's."

I added the wool to the overflowing baskets next to our loom, which stood on the other side of the room. A window cut into the stone and mud wall just above it let in the afternoon light. It would be hard to leave Mother and this home I had known all my life.

Taking a deep breath, I inhaled the scent of the wool and dyes, a mixture of herbs and trees, bitter and sweet. A smell I grew up with. I learned to weave and spin with these smells as I learned to walk. My fingers were soft from the wool grease and stained from the dye. We had finished dyeing until next spring and my hands would soon lose their blue tint. I did not mind.

I loved the color and patterns we designed with the dyed yarn. I had created the clan plaid we wove by using woad blue to represent our sky and red from the alder tree to portray the blood of our clan. Uncle Beathan had declared it the colors of his warriors.

I had other pictures in my head filled with color and wished I could bring them to life, but mother did not approve of spending my sunlight hours doing anything other than weaving after the shearing of the sheep. We traded cloth for food, and pictures had never fed anyone in her family. So I wove, both cloth and dreams.

"Mother. Will you miss me when I am married?"

"That is a silly question. You have lived here longer than I had hoped. Beathan was good to me and let you stay longer than I expected. Now it is your time to become an adult. I am proud that you are going. You will give up your childish ways and act as a young woman. Now hand me that yarn and ask no more questions."

The shuttle flew in my mother's fingers like a bird through the leaves of an oak tree as she lifted the yarn and created the pattern. As I watched, my life memories played through my mind, especially my travels into other bodies -- my passage dreams. I had visited two other people in my mind and prayed to the goddesses daily to allow me to continue to have those dreams after my marriage. I hoped they were not one of the childish things my mother told me I would have to give up.

I was much younger, about ten harvests, when I had my first passage dream. At dusk, the peat smoke lay harsh in our lodge and I longed for fresh air. I sat on a stool, watching the spindle and whorl twist my wool. In no more than a blink and a small dizzy spell, my heart told me that I looked out of another person's eyes. My mind said it was impossible.

I glanced around, afraid and breathless. I was in a small enclosure with strange things around me. Something looked like our polished bronze, but much more reflective. I did not understand what was happening, but I heard the goddess whispering, telling me not to be afraid.

A hand that belonged to the body lifted the bronze-like thing, and the face of a girl my age was reflected back at me. *Us.* Her large eyes, color same as my own, looked frightened. She wore her black hair like mine, but her face was not mine. The Goddess Morrigna whispered into her ear, too, that all was well. I felt her shoulders lose their tension. Questioning brows raised over our eyes.

I heard wind blowing and we turned to a hole in a wall to watch trees bend and sway. A skin did not cover the opening, yet the cold wind did not blow in.

The Goddess Morrigna said, "You are together, yet separate. You are connected through the wisps of time. This is a gift of life. Accept and learn."

I whispered my name, "Jahna."

She said, "Aine."

The picture was gone. I was still balanced on the stool, watching the spindle, and surprised that I was not on the floor asleep. Morrigna whispered the name in my ear again. "Aine."

When I asked if others had passage dreams, Uncle Beathan shook his head. "No. But if I could travel unseen, I would spy on other clans to make sure they had peaceful thoughts about us. Imagine, being able to listen to war plans, unknown to others!" He laughed. "Let me know if you hear about horses faster than ours. We need to look for new stock, and I want to know where it is best to go." He pushed me out of his way and continued on to his lodge.

Mother did not laugh but looked at me with suspicion, so I kept my dreams secret from everyone except Ogilhinn, our druid priest. Just before he died, he had assured me my dreams were god given.

The noise of mother's shuttle brought me out of my reverie. "Girl, the work will not get done on its own. There is much wool to spin and you stand with your mouth open like a chick waiting to be fed. Now we must go to Beathan's. Get our cloaks. I will take my light one but you should wear your hooded one. You may need to go outside and bring in firewood." She stood and stretched her hands. "I wish Beathan would marry again," she said as her fingers popped. "He has mourned enough since Gavina died. I hope he finds a woman that pleases him soon. I tire of serving his evening meals."

Our empty yard was quiet, and the sky clear, as mother and I stepped outside. The moon began showing its full body over the mountains.

"We will hear many stories about the spirits of last year," said Mother. "This evening meal is always one filled with tales. Remember, many of the stories are not real. Men try to impress each other with stories bigger than the man's sitting next to him."

Beathan's yard noisily filled with the warriors and others who followed him like puppies. My mother and I worked our way through them and went inside where a spitted hog dripped fat that popped in the fire. Root vegetables and onions boiled in a pot and heat filled the room like a blanket. We set out the mead buckets and mugs, eating as we worked.

A commotion outside told us Beathan had arrived. We placed the pork in front of his trencher. He was the honored man tonight and all nights in his lodge. He would carve the joint.

"Let me through! I smell meat, and my hunger is enough to eat a full stag!" With a laugh like a wild boar's roar, Beathan pushed his way into the room. The noise grew as hungry men followed, all expecting to sing and eat with the chieftain. He clumsily dropped something from his shoulders to the floor.

Startled, my eyes traced the shape of a man. A captured prisoner? Was he alive? One of Beathan's pony-like, black hunting dogs lay down next to the stranger's body and licked his face. The man flinched. He was not dead.

The fire burned high, and with the torches there was enough light to study him.

"I warn all of you," said my uncle. "Let him sleep. He will be busy tomorrow. If he wakes, we will feed him."

The man laid still, even though the noise grew behind us. The tables filled with men. Mother and Drista passed overflowing buckets for them to dip their mugs into.

I crept closer and crouched next to his chest. His odor slipped through the smell of the other men and the fire smoke. He was not unwashed, but had spent many nights outdoors. His red hair splashed loose over the brushed dirt floor. His worn shoes were stuffed with straw. He wore a sorrel brown weave I had seen on traders from the south: a shirt with long pants, his body wrapped in a short cloak of the same color and tied with a thin cord. An empty dirk sheath was tied to his belt. He looked thin, hungry thin, but had strong shoulders. A leather pouch lay on the floor near his feet, painted with a design I had never seen before. I picked it up, stared at it for a moment, and dropped it when the stranger groaned.

Beathan laughed, walked over to the stranger, and took the man by the arms, easily lifting him onto a stool next to him. "Come, priest. Come up to my table and have some meat and bread. Drink my mead. We have much to discuss about the giving fires tomorrow."

I picked up a tray of bread and stood next to Beathan, studying the man's face as it became visible through the smoke-filled room. I guessed him to be about twenty seasons. He had an intelligent, broad forehead. His gently sloped nose was not large. A beard, the color of an iron pot left outdoors, covered his cheeks and chin. His sharp eyes were a curious blue, not of the daytime sky, nor of flowers, but midnight blue. He seemed tired, yet wary.

The stranger stole a look around the lodge, then reached down and picked up his pouch. The crowd fell instantly quiet.

Beathan reached behind him and clapped him on his back, almost pushing the stranger off the stool.

"I have his dirk," my uncle said. "He is no threat."

The talking and shouting began again. The man laid his arms and head on the table and did not move except to breathe.

"Women!" Beathan said. "Bring us more to drink and eat! This day has been difficult and long. I have a story to tell. Where are my sons?"

Finlay, tall like his father, with arms and shoulders strong from working as our smith, and the oldest, Kenric, a hand shorter but also well muscled, came into the lodge together, sat by the fire, and ate with the men as we listened to their father's story.

"Yesterday, Cerdic told me of raiders by the river. He had watched them for two days. I decided there was not time to go for my warriors when I came across them by our river, so I charged into the group and fought like a demon."

The stranger lifted his head, looked at Beathan, and smiled. I lost my breath. He was more handsome than the warrior Braden.

"They ran as fast as they could. All except this one. He did not run. I asked why, and he said the gods and goddesses were protecting him. Only a druid would stand like that in a battle with me. I found a priest on Samhainn eve! It is a sign that we will be blessed for the giving fires on the morrow. More mead!" He pounded on the table.

Beathan's sons and other warriors gathered around Beathan, slapped him on the back, and poured out praises. I knew he would not go into battle alone when so many warriors were at his call. I glanced at my mother who shook her head but wore a smile. We knew his tale was bigger than the truth, but we enjoyed listening. My uncle's stories were often more exciting than the storyteller's.

The druid's quick hands began stuffing bread into his mouth. He reached for his dirk but when his hand touched the empty sheath, he looked at Beathan.

"Here is your dirk, priest." Beathan stabbed it into the table in front of the druid. The druid pulled the short weapon out of the table and sliced some meat from the joint, eating as if it had been a long time since his last food.

As the meal ebbed, Kenric brought out his alder whistle and played notes that trilled like birds in the trees at dusk and the rapids of the river. I loved his fast music. He often played it to please his father. Fingers and hands began to drum the tables in time with the tune. I started to hum.

The druid untied the strings of his pouch and took out a longer whistle. His playing brought in the sounds of the ponies and the wind in the trees. I began to sway, spin and fling my

hair. My eyes were open but not seeing the smoke-filled room. I was in the forest, riding the ponies. Then I noticed the music had stopped.

"Druid," Kenric asked. "Why did you stop playing?"

Breathless, I ceased dancing and looked to see him staring at me. I dropped to my knees, my legs unable to hold me. What did he see? He tore his wise, night blue eyes from mine, and turned to Finlay.

"It is late and I must prepare for the early ceremony. Has the sacred wood been laid for the fires?"

I could not move. My body seemed to made of stone. I knew his voice.

"Yes, in two stacks beneath the hill," said Finlay.

The druid nodded.

I began to breathe again, and watched him. Suddenly, his eyes caught mine and he tipped his head to me as if in recognition, but his face was unreadable.

"The stables are secure and you are welcome to sleep there if you do not wish to stay and drink more," Beathan called over the noise. "Although, if the spirits come to visit, you may come back. We will be singing and drinking through the night. On the morrow, my sons and I will escort you to the fires."

"My daughter and I will bring water early," my mother offered, "so you may ready yourself for the ceremony."

"The stable will be good," said the druid. "I will sleep well there. The animals will keep me safe and warm."

My mother said, "We are going home. My daughter and I will take you."

He turned to my mother and me. "I am ready, if you will show me the way."

The men's songs and the smells of mead and meat slipped into the night as we stepped through the door. There were few others outside. All were wary of Samhainn's eve.

"I forgot, I must talk to Drista about tomorrow's meal. She must start some dishes before she leaves for the fires," said Mother. "You take the druid to the stable and wait for me."

The druid and I were alone.

I pointed to the stable door, and walked behind him. Filled with questions, I asked, "Where are you from? Why did you stop playing and look at me so?" He stopped and shivered as we arrived at the stable door.

"Take my cloak. It is hooded," I offered, slipping the heavy plaid off my shoulders. I held it out for him. "Here, it is lined with soft wool and will be warm for the night." When he reached for it, our fingers touched. My body felt as if it were pierced by sharp knives. My heart raced like a herd of running deer in my chest. We both pulled back, my cloak in his hands, his eyes surprised.

He said nothing, but looked at me as if he could see my soul.

I had to learn who he was. "What is your name? Where are you from? Why did you stop here?"

"Too many questions for a late night. Call me Lovern. My clan name is Fox. I wear the fur of the red fox on my arm." His shirt covered his arms and I could not see the band of fox fur, but my heart again stampeded.

"What is your name?"

"I—I am Jahna," I struggled, my voice almost gone, my body weak. In a passage dream, I had visited a boy who hunted a fox. This voice was the same.

"Jahna?" he whispered. Moonlight reflected off his piercing eyes, revealing confusion. "Jahna?" He stumbled as mother took my arm.

"Sleep well, druid," she said as she rushed me home. I stole a look over my shoulder to see him watching us. My mind roiled with thoughts. Was he the boy I had met in a dream?

My second passage dream was the first time I had visited the boy. I was eleven seasons old. Like the time before, I was sleepy in a room filled with peat smoke when dizziness crept over me. I blinked and saw through his eyes. His mind told me he was alone and hunting, hiding himself from his prey in a small shelter. Close to sunset, the clouds were turning hunter's pink, and he knew his prey would show soon. Startled by my coming into his mind, he lost sight of the path he had been watching. I felt his impatience. This hunt determined his adult name. The goddess touched his mind and his fear was gone.

His body tensed as a shadow crossed the path. A stunning red fox stepped out of the brush with a rabbit squirming in its mouth. The fox stood, watchful, for two breaths, and carried the rabbit into its burrow. The young man cursed. He wanted to capture the fox before it escaped underground. He crossed the path holding a small knife, reached into the hole, and grasped the snarling, biting fox. He pulled it from its burrow, sliced its neck and held its body above his head, warm blood running down his arm. I could not tell whose blood it was, his or the fox's. The bite wounds would leave scars but the feeling of triumph in the boy's heart overshadowed the pain. He was sixteen seasons old. I whispered my name and awoke. I tasted blood that morning.

I was thirteen, and he eighteen, the second time I visited. He sat on a rough log. The smell of sweet smoke and blood wafted around me, and I began to feel ill. An older man knelt beside a fire. He added leaves and small plants to its flames. A small goat, just sacrificed, lay on a rock. The young man's hand held his small bronze blade, covered with goat's blood. His mind told me he sacrificed the goat to ward off a threat to those he loved. I sent him calming thoughts of safety. I whispered my name as the goddess bade me and left.

Home, I listened to rain and the god's wrath, thunder, outside. Unease filled my heart for the rest of that day. I feared for the young man in my dream.

After leaving the stable with Mother, I did not sleep, thinking of the druid in the stable, the boy he had been in my passage dreams. I tried to determine why the gods had given me my dreams and why they brought the boy, now a man, here.

I arose before sunrise. Wrapped in a blanket, I ran to our fire and blew on its coals. It came to life and spread light and warmth throughout our home.

"Thank you, Goddess Morrigna, for protecting our fire and home," I said, uttering our daily prayer. I dressed quickly. On tiptoes, to get as far from the cold floor as possible, I dipped a jar deep into our water urn. I shivered as I poured icy water into our boiling pot and fed a small block of peat to the glowing embers.

"Do not waste the fuel," mother protested. "We must quench the fire soon to relight it from the giving fire."

"Yes, Mother. I wished to start the grain cooking before I carried wash water to the druid."

"Oh, yes. The druid. There was a feeling in my bones last night that he might harbor trouble. I do not know whether we should ask him to stay in our village. I must discuss this with Beathan."

Mother's feelings were often right and even Beathan listened and took counsel from her. "Do not be long with him. I will need you to carry the offering to the goddess today. Are you not meeting Harailt to walk to the ceremony?"

Oh, Harailt! Beathan would announce our hand-fasting today. How could I have forgotten? I poured warm water into a jug to take to the priest and measured barley and Mother's favorite herbs into the now boiling pot.

"That smells good. Thank you for starting it." I heard her groan as she got out of bed and started dressing. "Today you will be looked upon by the whole clan when hand-fasted to Harailt. You should wear your yellow dress."

"Yes, Mother." I smiled. She still thought of me as a child at times. I would be married next week! I wondered if she would then think of me as a woman.

My light cloak belted, shoe laces loose in my hurry, I pulled open our door to leave. Not quite dawn, fog hid sun as it started its long climb from behind our mountain. An iron gray sky harbored small touches of moss-flower pink reflected in the haze. The animals were still snug in stables or homes, protected from wolves, and the cooking fires were small. Bumps on my arms from the coolness of the air made me glad I carried the jug of warm water.

At the first rays of light, birds started their possessive chirps. Listening carefully, I heard no owls; they must be in from their hunts. Mother said a day started with an owl song was a favorable day. I prayed the gods looked in on me today even though no owls sang.

I hesitated at the stable door, unable to go in. What should I say? Would I ask, *Priest, have you ever had anyone visit you in your mind?* He would think me a fool.

I jumped when he cleared his throat. He stood in the darker shadows of the already dark stable. My eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light and his hands rested on the pony. Its ears reached forward as if listening. Lovern straightened to his full height, almost touching the roof of the structure, and slowly nodded to me.

"Come in." He hesitated, then said my name as if forgotten then remembered. "Jahna."

His straw-filled, tousled hair looked as if he had wrestled a demon all night. My cloak lay in a crumpled ball on the stacked hay in the corner. Caution edged his familiar voice. "I am thanking this animal for bringing me here and protecting me last night. I have come a long way. I feel I may have found the end of my journey. I trust the gods to tell me today."

"I have warmed water for your washing. Are you finished with my cloak or will you use it today?" I asked.

"I did not use it last night and will not need it today. You may take it." He nodded to it, his hands still on the pony.

"If you would like some milk to break your fast, I can milk a goat. Beathan would not mind."

"No, I will not break my fast until after the ceremony."

I hesitated, not ready to leave. I needed to know more about this man. What journey? What will the gods tell him today? "You may use my light cape today if you wish. I can give it to you now. If you wear it, the members of our clan will recognize you as a friend and welcome you more easily. You should wear our colors -- if you think you will stay in our village for a time."

"I will not need your cape today," he said gruffly.

Was the fog affecting his voice or was he uncomfortable with me here, alone?

He stepped closer, his face a mystery, his sinewy, muscled arms bare. It was then his scars and armband became visible. I had been in his mind when he received the wounds that

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