



BRIGHT
BURNS
THE NIGHT

— BOOK TWO —

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ISLAND OF LACHALONIA





THE SWAN

SHE SLID THROUGH THE SILENT, STILL WATER, A GHOST in the darkness. As white and soundless as snow. She was alone for the moment, but the flock was close behind. She sensed their presence, across the lake they always returned to, no matter how far they flew.

A chill laced the breeze that ruffled her feathers with a hint of winter. She turned her face toward it, breathing in the telling scents it carried. Wood fire and decay, dying leaves, and the musk of Draíolon. A part of her remembered long legs that carried her through the forest much like her wings carried her across the wind now, and words that passed across lips that could speak, scold . . . kiss . . . But allowing herself to dredge up that part of who she had once been was fraught with pain. And so she retreated into the comfort of the swan.

As time continued its relentless march forward, slowly the burning, aching pain in her breast, the unsettling sense that part of her was gone, missing—she refused to let herself think of the blood, of the pain, of the terror—began to fade. There was the wild, untethered

call of the wind and water. The simplicity of hunting for food and staying alert, staying safe. Natural instincts that comforted and erased. There were predators to avoid and a flock to attend to. They looked to her, the newcomer in their midst, suddenly one of them . . . but not quite. Slightly apart, slightly different.

Because once she had been a Draíolon.

Once she had been a queen.

With more time perhaps those memories would fade completely, erased by this new form. Perhaps the love and loss and pain that had made up her other life would someday be replaced entirely by the beating of her wings. And the mournful trumpet she rarely used, the only voice to her despair, would become nothing more than an instrument to warn or call to others of her kind . . .

Perhaps that could have happened, if it weren't for the one week every year when he came and forced her back. Forced her to remember. Forced the pain and loss back into her heart. And every time she refused him, he sent her back into this body, this shape.

Keeping her trapped as a swan.



ONE

CEREN'S NIGHTMARES DIDN'T ALWAYS START THE SAME way, but they all ended with Evelayn kneeling on the dais before disappearing into the swirling smoke of Lorcan's power and reemerging as a swan. He'd somehow forced her to shift that terrible night—something Evelayn hadn't been able to do on her own yet—and then he'd torn the conduit stone from her breast, staining the white feathers crimson with her blood.

When Quinlen was there, he knew to wrap his arms around Ceren and hold her silently until the terror and grief subsided once more. But on the nights when he was gone, like this one, she lay in her bed, shivering, desperately trying to force the memories back down so she could claim a bit more sleep from the painfully long hours of darkness. The dawn would only bring another dreary day of pretending to enjoy being a part of the new court King Lorcan had created . . . and fear. Fear of what had truly happened to her dearest friend and the former queen. Fear of

how much longer before the power of the Draíolon of Éadrolan—diminished as it was—would disappear entirely. Fear of the gray, seeping cold that spread through their lands a little bit more every year that Lorcan ruled both Dorjhalon and Éadrolan. The murmurs grew louder every season. If they never found Evelayn—if she never regained her full power and position—would winter eventually rule the entire island, and then the world beyond, forever?

Ceren shuddered and rolled to her side, staring into the darkness, toward the wall that divided her and Quinlen's room from the nursery where their daughter slept. With Ceren's acute hearing, she was able to catch Saoirse's breathy sighs even through the stones and mortar. She was almost tempted to go in and pick up her youngling, to bury her face in Saoirse's downy-soft red curls and breathe in the infant scent that barely lingered and would soon be gone completely. But Ceren knew she risked waking Saoirse, and her daughter was sure to make enough noise to then wake up her older brother, Clive. And if *he* woke up . . .

Instead, Ceren closed her eyes and sent up a prayer to the Gods once again, pleading for help in finding and aiding Evelayn, for guidance given to Quinlen and all those who risked their lives trying to find the queen or another way to stop Lorcan, and selfishly for herself, to be able to go back to sleep and for once not be plagued by the blood-soaked dreams.

It was the same prayer she'd recited every night for ten years, since the day Evelayn had disappeared and Lorcan had made himself High King of all Lachalonia.

Though it had gone unanswered for all that time, still Ceren prayed. She prayed and she clung to what little hope remained in her that somehow, someday, her prayers would be answered.

The slight creak of the front door opening jerked Ceren back to complete alertness. Quinlen wasn't expected home until dawn . . . but she recognized his scent moments before he silently strode into their room, his normally perfectly groomed hair disheveled and his color high, as if he'd run home at full speed.

"What is it?" Ceren whispered, sitting up in bed.

Quinlen came to her and tucked a strand of stray hair behind her ear as he sat on the straw-and-feather mattress. "Something has happened at the castle. A message arrived late tonight that has thrown Lorcan's advisers into upheaval."

"Do you know what it is? Or who sent it?"

"No." Quinlen's disappointment was a bitter tang on the chilly night air. "But the rumor is that the message was brought by something . . . *other*."

"I don't understand." Ceren glanced down at Quinlen's hands, white-knuckled where he gripped his knees.

"It wasn't a Draíolon. They are saying that it was an Ancient's emissary."

Ceren's eyes widened. "An *Ancient*? How is that even possible?" She knew they still existed—Evelayn had bargained with one to get the silk that enabled her to defeat Bain, after all. But it was unheard of for an Ancient to reach out willingly to a Draíolon. Evelayn had risked her life when she'd gone to petition Máthair Damhán.

Rather than responding, Quinlen stood back up and began to pace. “If Lorcan is somehow involved with an Ancient . . .”

Their eyes met in the darkness. He didn’t have to finish the sentence. There were few Ancients left alive, and their power was diminished, it was true . . . but they were still capable of great and terrible things. Especially if aided by a king.

“I need eyes and ears in the castle right now.” This last line was spoken to the floor. Ceren knew Quinlen hated to even ask, and she quickly threw off the covers, even though exhaustion weighed her body down like lead in her bones.

“Of course I’ll go. Will you be able to stay with the younglings?”

“No. I have to get back. But Merryth is almost here to stay with them.”

Ceren nodded as she took off her nightdress and began to quickly pull on her clothes. She knew the castle better than almost anyone. Whenever they needed someone to essentially spy on Lorcan and his advisers, it often fell to her to try and sneak through the castle and gather what information she could.

After she wrapped her bright red hair under a dark scarf, Ceren turned to face Quinlen—the male she’d Bound herself to shortly after Evelayn disappeared—and took a deep breath.

“Someday, this will be over,” he murmured, the same words he had spoken for so long.

One way or another, she wanted to say. But instead, she nodded and flashed him what she hoped was a confident smile, though he could probably scent her true feelings regardless. “Yes, someday soon.”

He stepped toward her, drawing her in for a tight embrace, his entire body tense, the muscles in his back bunched beneath her hands. Ceren felt his kiss against her temple, but before she could lift her face to his, there was a soft knock at the door.

“That will be Merryth.” Quinlen stepped back, releasing her.

“I’d better go.”

“Be careful.” His voice was quiet.

“I always am.”

Ceren hoped he couldn’t scent her fear as easily as she could scent the heavy musk of his worry as she turned and strode to the door, passing Merryth with a silent nod, and then on into the darkness toward the castle.