

Succubus Ascendant
An Urban Fantasy
Book 4 - The Telepathic Clans Saga

BR Kingsolver

Published by B.R. Kingsolver

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<http://brkingsolver.com/>

Cover art by Mia Darien

<http://www.miadarien.com/>

Previous books in this series

The Succubus Gift
Succubus Unleashed
Succubus Rising

Also look for ***Broken Dolls***, a paranormal mystery with RB Kendrick, private investigator, set in the world of the Telepathic Clans

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Praise for ***The Succubus Gift***, Book 1 of the Telepathic Clans:

The novel itself is expertly written and an utter joy to read. The characters are all delightful. There were times while I was reading this that I laughed out loud, and other times when I held my breath in anticipation of what might occur. 4.5/5 stars – Night Owl Reviews

Let me just start by saying WOW, because this book completely blew my expectations out of the water and then some. The initial synopsis plot struck me as interesting, but it didn't prepare me for the utterly heart stopping onslaught of sex, violence and paranormal abilities ... a great unique addition to the paranormal/urban fantasy genre and I'd definitely recommend this to fans of the genre! It had everything I could ask for, love, sex, violence, witty banter, supernatural abilities. I am so excited to see what Kingsolver does next! 5/5 HOT steaming cups - Tea and Text

Praise for **Succubus Unleashed**, Book 2 of the Telepathic Clans:

Succubus Unleashed is a wildly entertaining novel, full of the same dynamic and enchanting characters from The Succubus Gift. The story begins at a very rapid pace and never slows down. 4.5/5 stars – Night Owl Reviews

Fabulous, fabulous, fabulous! BR Kingsolver's second book is everything I would have hoped from reading the first book in the series, The Succubus Gift. 5/5 stars – Wren Doloro

Praise for **Succubus Rising**, Book 3 of the Telepathic Clans:

Must Read - "Succubus Rising" is the third book in the "Telepathic Clans Saga". The author pens the plot unique, original and picks up from where the first book left off. Filled with action, romance, suspense, emotions, and a touch of humor, this book will hook you in and not let you go. ... Highly recommended for all fantasy, romance fans. – 5/5 My Cozie Corner {Book Reviews}

A story of the heart and the soul in many ways which I enjoyed immensely. Quite simply five out of five pitchforks. The characters make the story, not the story making the characters. The promise of the series continues and that's so very satisfying. – Tera S. @ Succubus.net

Praise for **Broken Dolls**:

I think everyone who enjoys paranormal thrillers will love Broken Dolls. I can't wait to read The Telepathic Clans Saga. If they are anything like this book then I will love them. 5 stars - Reading It All {Book Reviews}

I loved being surprised, I loved this world, and the characters were fantastic even if some of them suck as people. Check this book out, it's a great paranormal read with mystery and humor! It's perfect. 5 Stars - Sunshine & Mountains Book Reviews

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## Pronunciation Guide to Names

Some of the names in this book have been Anglicized, for others:

Aine: aw-nya – delight or pleasure

Aislinn: awsh-leen – dream or vision

Aoife: eef-ya – beautiful or radiant

Beltane: bel-tane – May Day, the beginning of the summer season, a springtime festival of optimism

Brenna: bran-na – raven, often referring to hair

Caylin: kay-lin – slender, fair

Irina: ee-ree-na – Russian form of Irene

Mairead: mah-rayd – Gaelic form of Margaret

Morrighan: mor-ri-gan – Celtic goddess

Rhiannon: ree-an-on – Welsh for maiden

Samhain: so-ween – The harvest festival, now called Halloween

Seamus: shay-mus – the supplanter

Sean: shawn – Gaelic form of John

Shidhe: shee—An Irish word for the elves, another word for Clan

Sinead: shi-nayd – Irish version of Jeanne

Siobhan: shee-vawn – Variation of Jeanne

Slainte: slayn-cheh – ‘Health’ in Gaelic, a toast

Tuatha De Danann: - tu-a-tha de dan-an – The people of the Goddess Danu - The original pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland

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A full list and description of the Telepathic Gifts appears at the end of the book

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## **Forward**

This is the fourth book and end of the story about how Brenna O'Donnell and her friends joined the Telepathic Clans. The action begins about two years after the end of *Succubus Rising*. After some internal debate, I decided not to make this book stand alone. It is the culmination of the previous three books in the series (actually, four books if you include RB Kendrick's story in *Broken Dolls*), and I've tried to tie all the plot lines and open questions into a final ending. There are so many of them that to provide back story on all the plot lines and characters would make the book boring for those who read the first books in the series.

That is not to say that this is the end of Brenna or Rebecca, just the end of this part of their story.

In the two years between books, Rebecca got married. Callie, Cindy and Morrighan had babies. Noel and Teresa married, had a baby, and moved to Washington. Siobhan underwent a life change, married, had a baby, and moved to London. Irina lives in New York, filling the role vacated by Siobhan.

~~~ B.R. Kingsolver

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## Chapter 1

*A man can sleep around, no questions asked, but if a woman makes nineteen or twenty mistakes, she's a tramp. - Joan Rivers*

It was that time of year again, for the April O'Donnell Group annual meeting held in London. Brenna and her closest friends flew in a week early. Four years earlier, at her first annual meeting, Brenna hadn't known what to expect. She arrived in London expecting a week of excruciating boredom, interminable presentations of reports, and having to act like an adult and a lady the entire time.

Since then, Brenna always planned her stay in London to include some holiday time. She, Collin, Rebecca and Irina were looking forward to a week of sightseeing, dining and partying.

After stowing their luggage in their suite at the O'Donnell-owned hotel next to their London regional headquarters, the group went back down to the lounge where Nigel Richardson was awaiting them.

Savoring a good British porter poured from the tap, Brenna looked up and saw her Aunt Morrighan. Her aunt was often confused with being Brenna's older sister. Morrighan walked over to their table, gave Nigel a quick kiss, and then hugged each of the Americans in turn.

"I arrived last night," she said, a slight grin quirked the corners of her mouth. Her eyes went to Collin and then to Nigel. "I was wondering if you have plans tonight," she said hesitantly.

Collin chuckled. "If you're curious as to whether I'll get upset if you take my lady out hunting, then you aren't very familiar with the kind of man who falls in love with a succubus. Do you know the term 'pussy whipped'?"

Morrighan and Nigel laughed. "Yes, we know the term," Nigel said.

Brenna and Irina, sitting on either side of Collin, both punched him in the shoulder.

"See what I mean?" he laughed.

"Normally, I might decline just to be nice, but after a remark like that? Sure. Where are we going?" Brenna said with a wink. She gave Collin a look out of the corner of her eye. "Of course, he's being so magnanimous because he thinks he may have a shot at an old girlfriend. Her husband's out of town."

To her surprise, Collin colored.

"Oh, my God," Irina exclaimed. "You dog. Does Pia's husband know he's going to get cuckolded?"

"He knows we're going to see each other, yes," said Collin.

"Wear your bulletproof vest, boyo," Rebecca smirked.

"Well, on that note, where and when?" Brenna asked Morrighan. "I'd like to take a quick shower, but it won't take us long to change."

"Where's the baby?" Irina asked.

"Lady O'Byrne is taking care of her," Morrighan answered. "And although I love her to death, I need some time away. She's just starting to walk, and I'm going crazy trying to keep up with her."

The women excused themselves to go change.

After donning a black bra and panties, Brenna wriggled into her black lace dress and pulled on the knee-high stiletto-heeled boots. To complete the outfit, she put on a black and white cameo that Collin had given her for Christmas one year.

Rebecca wore a shining silver sleeveless micro dress with a V-neck down to her naval, an enameled collar necklace and strappy stilettos. Her legs looked about six feet long.

Irina put on a white, low-cut halter sheath that hit her about mid-thigh. She added a choker of small freshwater pearls and six-inch platform heels. Brenna shook her head, not understanding how the tiny blonde could walk in those shoes.

Collin and Nigel were still sitting in the bar when the women came downstairs. They sat down and ordered drinks, smiling and preening at the compliments they received. The bar was about half full, and although it wasn't very noisy, Brenna noticed when the background conversations quieted and then died completely. She and everyone else at the table turned to see what was going on.

Striding toward them was a tall woman with copper-colored hair that reflected the lights as she moved. She wore a skin-tight green one-shoulder minidress, and the only thing more spectacular than her beauty was her bust. Her only jewelry was a short strand of large red beads with matching earrings, almost the same shade as her lipstick.

"Goddess," Irina breathed. She shot a look at Brenna. "Is that the Goddess?"

"Huh?" Brenna said. "Oh, no. Of course not. The Goddess's hair is more of a strawberry blonde."

The men turned and gaped at her, as well as at Rebecca, who was nodding.

"The Goddess also isn't as well endowed," Morrighan said, with a mischievous grin.

"Rhiannon!" Rebecca squealed, jumping up and dashing toward the woman. Morrighan rose as well with a huge smile on her face.

Rhiannon hugged both women, then walked to the bar and the barman pulled her a pint. She came to their table and scooted into the booth next to Nigel, giving him a hip bump to move him over.

Rhiannon Bronwyn Kendrick, or RB as she preferred professionally, was a private investigator with fifteen Gifts, including the Rare Gift of Telekinesis and the Gift of Distance Communication, which enhanced and strengthened a telepath's other Gifts. As a result, she was one of the most powerful telepaths in the world.

Her family included her great-aunt, Lady O'Byrne, and she was the unacknowledged daughter of Hugh O'Neill and granddaughter of Lord Corwin of Clan O'Neill. On her mother's side, she was descended from ancient Welsh Clan Chiefs. Growing up in Wales, outside of any Clan, she nonetheless had been trained at Clan O'Byrne as a teenager, and Lord O'Byrne had paid for her education at Oxford.

Morrighan and Rebecca had first met Rhiannon three years before when she helped them break a human trafficking operation that was selling telepathic women. Brenna had met her briefly a few times, and found her to be impressive. Highly intelligent, Rhiannon had a facility with languages, and was totally down to earth. She acknowledged her beauty, but wasn't impressed or obsessed with it. Normally, she tended toward wearing jeans and formless sweaters, not the devastatingly sexy outfit she wore that night.

Nigel shook his head. "Collin, with this crew I could have stormed Normandy Beach and

captured it without a shot fired.”

Rhiannon leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You’re sweet. Are you staying in tonight?”

“Oh, hell yes. I don’t even want to be out with your lot on the prowl. If I were a patriot, I’d call out the Home Guard to prepare for casualties.”

“Do you want me to come back?” she asked, her voice dropping into a seductive purr.

He handed her the key to his flat.

She kissed his cheek again and then turned to the women. “What are you hungry for? Fish and chips like all the rest of the tourists?”

“How about that Russian restaurant we went to one time?” Brenna asked Irina. “I liked it.”

Irina perked up immediately. “That’s a great idea.”

So off to the Russian restaurant they went.

The patrons included a number of spectacular Russian beauties, most with older wealthy men. At least three were succubi. But the O’Donnell party attracted every eye in the place as they were led to their table, even though, with the exception of Brenna’s outfit, their dresses weren’t unusually revealing by the standards of the other women. In fact, Brenna was avidly observing some of their outfits, evaluating how they might look on her, and in some cases thinking how she might adapt them to her physique.

“Down, girl,” Rebecca smirked. “If you stare at that blonde any harder, you’ll bore holes through her.”

Looking sheepish, Brenna tried to explain, “I was just trying to imagine how that would look on me.”

“I know what you were doing, but try being more discreet or she’ll think you’re hot for her.”

Brenna felt her face flame.

“Is anyone averse to a real Russian dinner?” Irina asked. Seeing no objections, she said, “You need to pay attention to the alcohol. I’m going to order a carafe of vodka. Speak now or forever hold yourselves. Does anyone have foods you find objectionable or have an allergy to? Okay, put your menus away.”

The waiter came and Irina spent some time ordering in Russian. A couple of times, Rhiannon interjected a comment, also in Russian. The waiter returned with a large bottle of mineral water, a carafe of vodka with five tiny crystal glasses, and a platter of cold meats, salted fish, pickled vegetables, pickled mushrooms and black caviar. Another waiter poured wine and placed a second bottle on ice.

Irina poured vodka into the small glasses, put a small amount of several appetizer items on her plate, then took a bite of salted fish, raised her glass, and toasted, “Good hunting.”

Laughing at her toast, everyone followed her lead and tossed back the vodka.

After they had done serious damage to the appetizer plate, they were served soup and five entrées that they shared. At various times, one or the other of the participants would propose a toast, usually after a particularly good story or a pithy comment. Dessert consisted of pastries with sweet farmer’s cheese and a hot apple tart served with strong hot tea.

“Irina, there’s only one problem with this dinner,” Rebecca said, leaning back in her chair and surveying the wreckage. “All I want to do now is take a nap, not go out hunting.”

The others greeted this assertion with jeering laughter.

Although Rebecca and Morrighan had become fast friends with Rhiannon, this was the first time Brenna had spent any real social time with the Welsh private detective. Over the past three years, Rhiannon had helped the O'Byrne and O'Donnell Clans break up several operations that were trafficking telepathic girls. Brenna had paid Rhiannon's fees for many of those cases, but Rebecca was the liaison between the two women.

Sitting next to Rhiannon at dinner, Brenna was taken by the pragmatic, down-to-earth quality of the woman, a complete contrast to the beautiful, glamorous exterior.

"It was rather strange," Brenna told her, "to discover that I have a large family. I grew up feeling completely alone. I mean, we're cousins, and I don't even know you."

Rhiannon chuckled. "Hell, I don't know any of my relatives on my father's side. Except for you, I guess, and Lady O'Byrne. I've never even been to the O'Neill estate."

"That must be hard," Brenna said, "not knowing your father. My dad died when I was young, but at least I always carried the knowledge that he loved me."

Rhiannon's mouth pursed as though she'd taken a bite of something sour. Raising her wine glass, she took a deep drink.

"I know Hugh O'Neill," she said. "I know that he thinks nothing of me, and I don't give a damn about him. The whole bloody O'Neill Clan can burn in hell as far as I'm concerned."

The table became very quiet. Looking around, Rhiannon blushed and said, "Sorry. I guess I need to detoxify a little." She excused herself and went to the washroom. When she came back a few minutes later, she wore a smile and steered the conversation toward the others at the table, asking questions about the Americans' lives.

Throughout dinner, Rebecca was conscious of the attention their table was receiving from the other patrons. While this was common for a party of succubi, there was an uncomfortable edge to the psychic atmosphere.

*\*Rhi, do you notice a bit too much attention being paid to our party?\** she sent on a spear thread to Rhiannon. The redhead cocked her head, as if listening.

*\*Now that you mention it, there is a buzz. A lot of telepaths in here. I wouldn't have expected so many Russian Clan members here in London.\**

Turning to look back, as their limo pulled away from the restaurant, Rebecca saw a small group of men standing on the sidewalk watching them. She exchanged a look with Rhiannon, who pursed her mouth and shrugged.

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Rhiannon took them to an upscale tourist hotel in the West End, not too far from O'Donnell headquarters. She told the succubi the hunting should be good since the hotel's guests were mostly businessmen and wealthy tourists. A bit of Influence and generous tips kept the bell captain and the barman from questioning their presence.

The three succubi quickly attracted men and went upstairs with them. Rebecca and Rhiannon watched them go, then signaled the barman for another round of drinks.

"Are you going to partake of the buffet?" Rhiannon asked.

"No, not really in the mood," Rebecca answered. "I have a date with one of Morrighan's Protectors when we get back to the hotel." Although Rebecca was married, the S-gene she carried caused her sexual energies to become unbalanced. She had to rebalance on a daily basis, using the sexual energy released by her partner when he reached climax. When apart from her

husband, she needed to arrange a rebalancing with someone else.

“Are you saving yourself for Nigel?” Rebecca asked Rhiannon.

The redhead laughed. “Something like that. You know my cousin is a succubus, right? I hunted with her at university, but I don’t get much pleasure from meaningless sex. I don’t have your problem, and I don’t get the Glow the succubi do.”

“How is it going with Nigel?”

“We’re chums. He takes me out to dinner, to the theatre, things like that. A friend of his has an estate with stables north of London, and we go riding sometimes.” Rhiannon smiled. “He’s an excellent lover.”

Rebecca cocked her head. “I don’t hear love in there anywhere.”

“No, not love,” Rhiannon said, shaking her head. “I think he would like the relationship to go farther, but I’m afraid he’s more enamored with the package than the contents.”

“You’re incredibly beautiful,” Rebecca said.

“Thank you,” Rhiannon said, twirling her glass in her hand and staring into it. “You know, sometimes I wonder what it would be like to date a blind man.”

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Irina was enjoying the husky Russian who was driving her toward orgasm when the bathroom door opened and two more men stepped into the room. They looked very determined and her Empathy picked up malice radiating from them.

*\*Brenna!* she shrieked, sending an image of the unfolding scene.

In a room on another floor of the hotel where the group was hunting, Brenna pushed at the man who was making love to her. “I have to go. Get off.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” he answered her in confusion.

She pushed him off using her Telekinesis. Jumping out of bed, she started grabbing her clothes off the floor.

*\*Rebecca, Irina’s in trouble,\** she sent the image from Irina to her sister.

Rebecca answered immediately. *\*Wait. Don’t you jump in there. I don’t need both of you in with a bunch of thugs.\**

Realizing Rebecca was right, Brenna sent a spear to Irina. *\*Where are your clothes? Look at them.\**

*\*What? Brenna, these guys are trying to kidnap me. They have me wrapped in an air shield.\**

*\*Do you want me to teleport you nude?\**

*\*Oh.\** Irina tore her eyes from the men surrounding her and located her clothes. As soon as she did, the world shifted abruptly, and she found herself lying on the floor of a different room. Her clothing was lying around her, except for one shoe.

“Are you okay?” Brenna asked, leaning over her.

“What the hell?” a male voice said from the other side of the room. Irina turned to see a naked man standing near the foot of the bed.

Brenna shot him a look, then took control of his mind. He walked to the bed, lay down and went to sleep.

Both women began to dress. *\*I have her,\** Brenna sent to Rebecca.

*\*I figured. Her Protectors are engaged with the men who tried to snatch her,\** Rebecca answered.

*\*Engaged?\**

*\*Yeah. They came boiling out of that room, and our guys were waiting for them. Watch yourself. They have guns. This is a mess. We've identified at least a dozen Russian telepaths in this hotel. I've notified Collin that we have a situation here.\**

"Who in Russia did you piss off?" Brenna asked, pulling her boots on.

Irina's reaction was unexpected. She seemed to be handling things well enough, but at Brenna's question, she froze. Her eyes grew big and she stared at Brenna. "Russia?" She stopped what she was doing and stood in the middle of the room, staring off into space.

"What is Rebecca telling you?" Irina finally said.

"She said there are at least a dozen Russian telepaths inside this hotel," Brenna told her.

"My mom," Irina said. "I wonder if this has something to do with her. That's the only thing I can think of besides going to that restaurant." She shook her head. "And that doesn't make sense. There were plenty of beautiful women at the restaurant. Russia exports whores, it doesn't import them."

"Well, we can worry about it later. Ready to go?" Brenna wondered again about Irina's mysterious mother. But Irina was correct about the other part. Brenna had done extensive research into the slave trade. The fall of communism had opened the door for thousands of beautiful women to flee depressed economic conditions in Eastern Europe. Many of them ended up being sold into forced prostitution.

Irina looked at her one shoe, then with a wry expression pitched it at the rubbish bin in the corner. "Yeah, I'm ready," she said.

Brenna sent a spear to her Protectors, and they came through the door.

"Let's go, ladies," Donny Doyle said. "This place is getting a little hot."

They stepped out into the hall and discovered Rebecca and Rhiannon with pistols in their hands. Morrighan stood to the side surrounded by four Protectors who Brenna didn't recognize.

"Where do you hide a gun in that outfit?" Irina asked Rhiannon.

"I'd think that was obvious," the redhead said. "I want to know where Rebecca hides hers."

"If you were male, I'd show you," Rebecca said with a smirk. "Everyone ready? Let's go."

Three Protectors opened the door to the stairwell and dived into it. Everyone waited for clearance to follow. Instead, a gunshot exploded and echoed from below, followed by a scream.

Donny shook his head, pursing his lips in displeasure. "I'm sure no one heard that on all twenty-five floors."

A spear thought came to the party from one of the Protectors in the stairwell, and Rebecca cautiously headed down the stairs. The rest followed her. Three floors down, they saw blood smeared on the landing, but no body was evident. All three O'Donnell Protectors looked okay. A Protector held the door open, and they followed him. Checking both ways, Brenna saw another man waving to them from the stairway door at the other end of the hall. Everyone hurried to him and again the party began to descend.

Brenna hesitated and glanced back at Donny and two other Protectors standing near the door

from which they had emerged. The door opened and a man stepped through. Immediately, he staggered back. One of the Protectors stepped toward him and kicked him in the head. Brenna sent a spear of mental force toward him, and he screamed as she shattered his shields and captured his mind.

*\*I have him, Donny. Bring him along,\** she sent. She saw the Protectors grab the man and hustle him toward her, while Donny covered them. It took some time, but cautiously the party worked their way down to the lobby.

“Collin says to hang out here until he can clear the outside,” Rebecca said in a low voice.

“Perhaps we can get a drink while we wait,” Morrighan said gaily, nodding toward the lounge.

At Rebecca’s furrowed brow, Morrighan’s Protector lowered his voice and said, “There’s no back door to the bar. It would be easy to defend.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Rhiannon said. “Rebecca and I left our drinks when you got in trouble, and at seven quid a piece, I’d like to finish mine.”

Rebecca nodded and the women went in and sat down at a booth. Looking out into the lobby, they saw a swirl of activity. Hotel security was scurrying around and so were others, including two police officers.

Looking at Brenna’s captive, Rebecca asked, “What’s going on?”

Brenna took a deep breath. “There are fifteen of them all together, some outside. They’re only interested in Irina, and they have orders not to hurt her.”

Irina sucked on her lip and nodded. “Who sent them?” she said soberly.

Shrugging, Brenna said, “A man named Sergei Gorbachev. He evidently thinks he’s your grandfather.”

Irina took the news without changing her expression. “My mother’s maiden name is Natalia Sergeevna Gorbacheva. In Russia, the second name is a patronymic and for a woman the surname is feminized.”

“I thought you didn’t know anything about your mother’s family,” Rebecca said.

“I don’t, but I know her name,” Irina said. “I know she and my dad came to the U.S. running from someone.” She glanced at Brenna. *\*May I come in?\** she asked. Sliding through Brenna’s mind into that of their captive, she sat staring at him for a few minutes. “I think I need to go home and see my parents when we get back to the States,” she finally said.

Collin walked into the lounge. Behind him, Protectors filled the lobby.

“Can’t you go anywhere without getting in trouble?” he asked. “Come on, let’s go.”

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Chapter 2

No man will ever put his hand up a woman’s skirt looking for a library card. – Joan Rivers (commenting on men being attracted to intelligence)

When Irina returned to the States, the first thing she did was call her mother and tell her she was coming home for a visit. Two vans full of Protectors—along with Collin, Brenna, and Rebecca—accompanied her to Ohio.

Irina had been home only twice since discovering the Clan, but she called her parents weekly. She hadn't told them about the Clan, and they still thought she had taken a job with a normal company in New York.

Thirty miles north of Columbus, she directed Collin to pull off on a dirt side-road and asked that the Protectors stay behind. They drove around a bend and past a large copse of trees to where a modest ranch-style house stood. Collin pulled the car next to an SUV and a compact sedan parked on the side of the house.

A short blonde woman looking to be in her late thirties stepped out on the porch and walked toward them. Even from a distance, it was obvious she was a succubus. Irina flew into her arms. They hugged, babbling in Russian and kissing each other's faces. Then Irina broke away and turned to her friends.

"Mama, this is Collin," Irina said, "and Brenna and Rebecca. This is my mother, Natalia Moore."

Natalia ushered them into the house, past an older man with graying hair. In the living room, Irina introduced them to her father, Martin Moore. In spite of living in the U.S. for twenty years, Martin still had an English accent. He glanced at his wife, meeting her eyes.

As Natalia served tea and biscuits, she eyed her daughter's friends.

"You've been keeping things from us, Irisha," Natalia said, using the Russian affectionate name for her daughter. "Your friends are telepaths." Her voice was melodic and soft, and a strong Russian accent still flavored her speech.

"Yes," Irina said, "and you've kept some things from me. I have a lot of news. I'm actually working for a telepath-owned business and I met your mother's twin sister in Ireland. If you don't mind us staying for a couple of days, I'll fill you in on all of it. But the major thing I need to know is, who is Sergei Gorbachev and why did he try to kidnap me?"

Natalia's eyes widened and she gasped. She stared at her daughter for a few moments, then shot a look at her husband. Martin shuffled his feet and turned to his daughter's friends.

"Why don't I show you around the place?" he said, motioning toward the back of the house. Brenna and Rebecca looked to Irina, who nodded. Irina's friends stood and trooped out after her father.

"Mama, I know that Daddy isn't my real father," Irina said softly when she and Natalia were alone.

Natalia took a deep shuddering breath. Biting her lip, she looked out the window, then turned to her daughter. "Sergei Gorbachev is my father, and yours," she said.

Irina thought she was ready for almost anything, but that statement was completely unexpected. Numbly, she stared at her mother.

"I hoped I'd never have to tell you that," Natalia said. She turned from her daughter and stared out the window again. "Where should I start?" she finally said. "My mother was in Moscow and met a man there, a telepath. She got pregnant with me and was trapped there when the Nazis invaded Russia. My father was a high-ranking member of Stalin's NKVD, a very cruel man. In the chaos at the end of the war, she escaped him by hiding with a group of Jewish refugees going to Palestine. She left one war zone for another."

Natalia stood and paced the room. "As I told you, she was killed in the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946. It was the headquarters of the British forces occupying

Palestine, and Zionist terrorists blew up the hotel. My mother had gone there for an assignation with a British officer. I was only six, almost seven, at the time.”

She pushed her hair back and walked to the window, looking out at her husband and Irina’s friends in the back yard. “The woman who was taking care of me didn’t know what to do with me. She took me to the Russian embassy. In time, my father came and took me back to Moscow.”

“I know the Gorbachev Clan is one of the most powerful telepathic Clans in Russia,” Irina said. “I’ve learned a lot about telepaths since I left home. I had pretty much figured a lot of this out. As I said, I met your aunt, grandmother’s twin sister, in Ireland. She told me about grandmother, and she gave me these.” Irina walked over to her mother and handed her several old black and white photographs. Natalia took them, shuffled through them, and then started crying.

Irina put her hand on Natalia’s shoulder, awkwardly patting her. Among the photographs was one taken the day Mairead O’Conner left Donegal to explore Europe. That was the one Natalia held in front of her.

“I never had any pictures of her. I haven’t seen her face since that day when she left me,” Natalia said.

Irina handed her a handkerchief and led her back to their seats in the living room. She waited for her mother to regain her composure, then asked, “How did it happen?”

Natalia, still staring at the picture in her hand, said, “He came to my bed the first time on my sixteenth birthday. I was a virgin and didn’t understand what was happening. When he passed out, two of his men came into the room and took him away. After that, he sent me to many men through the years. Some were men he wanted to reward; some were men he wanted to use or harm. One of the women in his Clan taught me how to control my ovulation and how to use my telepathic talents. Then, when I grew older, he became cruel. He told me that I wasn’t desirable anymore.”

She looked up at her daughter. “I met Martin, and we fell in love. I don’t know how Sergei found out, but he did. He was furious. He beat me and controlled my mind. I woke up one day and discovered it had been almost two months since I went to sleep. I was pregnant. He said he needed a new woman, a younger woman, and I was going to give her to him.”

Straightening and taking a ragged breath, she met Irina’s eyes. “It took me another two months to escape, to get away and call Martin. Using my talents and his connections inside the British embassy, we got out of Russia the next day. We came here, and you, my beautiful daughter, were born. As much as I hate my father, I’ve never regretted having you. I’m sorry, Irina. I hoped I’d never have to tell you this.”

Irina sat back in her chair and thought about her mother’s story. After a few minutes, she said, “So now that he knows I exist, he’s trying to capture me to breed another succubus for him.”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, Irina. No.”

“Oh, yes. He wants to use me the way he did you. The pattern is too clear. Some men become addicted to succubi. It sounds as though he might be one of them. We also know,” Irina waved her hand toward her friends, “that the Russian Clans are experimenting with genetic engineering, and they’re buying telepathic women.”

Irina gazed around the room, trying to find something to grasp out of all the thoughts

running around her mind. “I guess I’m going to have to go to Russia,” she finally said, her face hard. Natalia gasped. “I’ll find him and kill him, and then we’ll all be free.”

~~~

When Natalia discovered there were a dozen Protectors sitting just outside their property, she insisted that they come for dinner. Conscripting her daughter, Brenna and Rebecca, she set about preparing a feast. It took almost every chair in the house and adding two card tables in the dining room, but everyone had a place.

“Russian mother syndrome,” Irina said with a grin. “No visitor goes hungry in a Russian home.”

Brenna had been thinking all afternoon about what to do concerning Natalia and Martin’s situation.

“Martin, Irina told me that you’re a civil engineer. Would you be open to taking a new job?”

Irina froze with her fork halfway to her mouth. *\*What do you have in mind?\** she sent to Brenna.

*\*I think they’d be safer in the valley, don’t you? I have a lot of building going on, such as my lab, the school, new housing units. I could use a project manager to oversee it all. The guy doing it now lives in DC, and he’s not on-site all the time,\** Brenna replied.

Irina’s smile was all the endorsement that Brenna needed.

“What kind of job?” Martin asked.

Brenna explained what she was doing in West Virginia. “I think you and Natalia would be safer there,” she said. “Natalia would have the chance to live among other telepaths, and you would have work in your field.”

“And we’d get to see each other all the time,” Irina said, looking back and forth between her parents.

Natalia and Martin stared at each other, and Irina held her breath, knowing there was a silent conversation taking place.

Natalia turned to Brenna. “If you don’t mind, I would like to see your valley. Martin can’t come for a couple of weeks, but if I like it, then he’ll come. Can you wait for a decision until we see it?”

Brenna nodded. “Certainly. You can ride back with us if you wish.”

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Although their curiosity was boiling over, it wasn’t until they arrived back in West Virginia that Irina told her friends what she had learned from her mother.

“No,” Collin said. “Absolutely not. You’re not going to Russia. That’s the stupidest idea I’ve heard since Samantha went hunting Gless.”

Irina smiled and grabbed him by the ear, drawing his face close to hers and kissing him. “Sweet man, I’m going to let you plan the whole thing. I’m not going to barge into Moscow tomorrow searching for my father. Take your time, and set it up so you’re comfortable with it. But go I will. It’s up to you to make sure I’m safe and the operation is successful.”

Rebecca spoke up, “It could take a year or two to gather the proper intelligence and set up an op to take out a major Clan member someplace like Russia.”

Collin barked a laugh. “Not just a major Clan member. Sergei is Clan Chief. Taking him out

means taking on the whole Clan.”

“That’s fine,” Irina said, waving her hand as though the difficulty was trifling. “Like I said, I want to be successful when I do this. But I’m not going to spend my whole life looking over my shoulder, afraid he’s going to come after me. I’m not going to live in fear the way my parents have.” She fixed Collin with her eyes. “But don’t think I’m going to forget about it. Plan your operation, and keep me informed.”

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## Chapter 3

*The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living. - Marcus Tullius Cicero*

Four years before, at the age of 23, Brenna had been named heir of the three Irish Clans. Her grandfathers and great uncle had long dreamed of uniting the clans, and as they neared the end of their lives, they looked to Brenna to make that dream come true.

The dream wasn’t shared by everyone. The oldest sons in Clans O’Byrne and O’Neill and their respective sons thought it was a terrible idea. Other people had a problem with Brenna’s age or the idea of a woman Clan Chief. Some had a problem with the fact that she was a succubus, or Druid as they were called in Ireland.

The O’Donnell Clan, which was now centered in the United States rather than in its ancestral base in Donegal, embraced Brenna. Her grandfather Seamus was only one hundred and sixty-one years old, and planned to hold his position for at least a few more decades. Clan O’Neill, where Corwin was two hundred, and Clan O’Byrne, where Fergus was one hundred and ninety, knew her ascension was nearing, and so did Brenna. A dread of that day lay in the back of her mind.

On her way home from London, Brenna stopped off to see her grandparents at the O’Byrne estate in County Wicklow. From there, she traveled to see her great-uncle at the O’Neill estate in County Tyrone. After arriving home in the States, she went to visit her Aunt Callie at the family estate in West Virginia.

Callista O’Donnell Wilkins was Chief Executive Officer of the O’Donnell Group, the Clan’s business interests. With their long lives, telepaths need to ‘die’ and switch their identities to avoid suspicion. In a previous ‘life’, she had been a professor of genetics at two prestigious universities. Her major research, for obvious reasons never published, concerned mapping the telepathic genome. She had collected genetic samples from hundreds of thousands of telepaths. Even those Clans unfriendly to O’Donnell had participated, wanting the results of her research.

“Callie, I’ve been looking at the genetic profiles in your database,” Brenna said. “Something isn’t jiving with Hugh O’Neill.”

“We aren’t perfect,” Callie said, sitting down at her computer. “Look at what happened with your baby sample.” The genetic swab taken when Brenna was a baby was never entered in the database. When it was analyzed, the results were so fantastic it had been discarded as a contaminated sample.

“You know this manifestation, Talent, Gift, whatever you want to call it, that I have? The one where I see auras and can tell what Gifts a person has?” Brenna asked.

Callie nodded.

“When I look at Hugh, I see twelve Gifts, including the O’Neill Gift and the O’Byrne Gift. Neither of those shows on the analysis you have on file.”

Callie called up Hugh’s record. “Yes, the database shows seven Gifts, and not particularly strong ones. I think that’s why Corwin was reluctant to have Hugh inherit. He doesn’t think Hugh’s strong enough to protect the Clan, or to command the respect to lead it.”

“Where did you get that sample?”

“Hugh gave it to me. Remember, I started this project in the 1970s, and the tools and knowledge we had then were fairly primitive. Let’s see,” Callie said, clicking to another screen on the computer, “1984 is when this sample was catalogued. Why?”

“Call up Finnian’s record,” Brenna said. Finnian was Hugh’s son and had tried to assassinate Brenna shortly after Corwin named her heir to O’Neill. Corwin had exiled him as a result of that attempt.

“They’re identical,” Callie said, her brow furrowed. “Either Finnian’s a clone, or one of these isn’t accurate. A father and son wouldn’t be identical.”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen Finnian since my Talent manifested,” Brenna said, pointing to the screen. “But I know that the Gifts I see when I look at Hugh are definitely different than what is listed there.”

“It shows the Lindstrom Gift on these profiles. And these are the Gifts that everyone thinks Hugh has. He’s a Construct Artist,” Callie said.

“His mother, Corwin’s wife, was from the Lindstrom Clan,” Brenna said. “The daughter of the Clan Chief. She could have embedded a nine-level construct for him. It’s a fairly common way for those with the O’Neill Gift to mask their abilities.”

“She died around the time Hugh reached puberty,” Callie mused. “Hugh would have been tested at puberty, as we’ve always done with children. If you’re right, then he’s been masking his abilities all his life.”

“If I’m wrong, it would be the first time,” Brenna said. “I wonder why Hugh’s doing that.”

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Brenna was working in her office in Washington when she received a call from Hugh O’Neill. “Brenna, Father’s dying and he’s asking for you.”

“Right now?”

“As soon as possible. I don’t think he’ll last out the night.”

Brenna swore as she disconnected. The moment she’d dreaded had come, and no matter how many times she had run scenarios through her mind, she wasn’t sure what to do.

Rebecca was draped across a chair next to the window, trying to decipher a book in Gaelic from Fergus O’Byrne’s library. “What’s up?”

“That was Hugh. Corwin’s dying.”

With a sigh, Rebecca said, “It never rains but it pours. I’ve been expecting this.”

“In Ireland, it just rains all the time,” Brenna said.

“True.”

“Do you know where Rhiannon is?”

“No. Why?”

“Can you contact her?”

“Probably. If I can use your Gift.” Rebecca was referring to Brenna’s Gift for Distance Communication. Rebecca had manifested a Lost Gift, inelegantly called the Soul Thief Gift. One of its elements was that she could use another telepath’s Gifts if she was in the person’s mind.

Brenna opened her mind and invited her sister in. Rebecca found the Gift’s trigger and reached out through the bond she had with Rhiannon.

Rhiannon. Where are you?

Rebecca? <confusion> In Monaco. Where are you?

In Washington. I need to come see you.

How are you ... how can you reach this far?

I’m using Brenna’s Gift. I’ll explain later. Are you alone? Can you visualize a landing spot? We need to teleport in.

A blank space of carpet was transmitted from Rhiannon into Brenna’s mind. A few seconds later, that spot, thousands of miles away, had two women standing on it.

Rhiannon Kendrick stared at them with her mouth open. She was dressed in a black off-the-shoulder evening dress with silver trim, with her copper-colored hair in a French twist. Brenna thought that she’d never seen anyone look so beautiful and elegant.

“That’s a beautiful dress,” Brenna said.

“Thank you. And to what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit?”

“Are you on a case? What are you doing in Monaco?” Brenna asked.

“I’m on holiday. Just spending a bit of time at the casinos refilling the coffers and having a good time.”

“So, you don’t have any pressing engagements? Are you here with anyone?”

“I’m alone and I don’t have a date tonight. Brenna, what the bloody hell is this about?”

“The world, my world, is going to hell in a hand basket. I need your help, and I need it now. Corwin is dying. I need you to come to O’Neill with me. I need more than Rebecca to keep me alive.”

“Well, if that’s all. Give me a moment to change.”

“No, we don’t have time for that, and that dress is perfect. You can change later. Rebecca, help her pack a bag.”

Rhiannon frowned. “Perfect for what?”

Brenna turned away, not answering, and sent a spear thought to Jeremy, her transition manager in County Tyrone at the O’Neill estate. In less than ten minutes, Brenna took the other two women by their arms and teleported to O’Neill.

They appeared back in reality in an empty room. Looking around, they saw Jeremy and his wife Maggie standing in the doorway.

“Just leave your bag here,” Jeremy said. “I’ll take you to Corwin.”

Do you ever get used to that? Rhiannon sent to Rebecca. **I’m completely disoriented.**

It makes my stomach all flip-floppy, Rebecca replied. **But the disorientation isn’t from the teleportation. It comes from being in close proximity to Brenna.**

Do you know what I’m doing here? Rhiannon asked. **I mean the real reason.**

No, I don't. She's like you. She just does things. When she gets going, she's moving too fast in her head to explain anything, and no one has a chance to catch up until the roller coaster comes to a stop.

Jeremy led them down a hall and through the main parlor of the O'Neill manor house. Halfway through the room, Brenna stopped and gestured to a painting hanging over the massive fireplace. They all looked up, and Rhiannon gasped.

"Delilah O'Neill. Mean as a junkyard dog, sweeter than sugar, prettier than a sunset," Brenna said. "That's what Seamus told me once about our great-grandmother."

The woman in the portrait was dressed in a nineteenth century evening dress, black with red trim. Her copper-colored hair was in an elaborate up-do, and her face was a mirror image of Rhiannon's.

"Holy Goddess," Rhiannon breathed.

"We were told the picture was painted around 1830," Rebecca said. "You haven't been time traveling, have you?"

"It seems to run in the family," Jeremy said. "Brenna and her mother are carbon copies. I guess the Goddess likes to reuse the most beautiful faces."

Brenna reached out and took Rhiannon's arm. "Come on. We have an appointment, and we can't afford to be late."

"Where are we going?" Rhiannon asked. She looked around and found that they were completely ringed with O'Donnell Protectors.

"To meet your grandfather," Brenna said.

Rhiannon stopped so suddenly that Brenna was almost jerked off her feet.

"No," Rhiannon said, shaking her head. "Just because he's dying doesn't mean I want to meet the old bastard."

"I don't have time for this," Brenna growled.

Rhiannon drifted off the floor and Brenna pulled her along. Rhiannon tried to fight, but discovered that Brenna had covered her with an O'Neill super mental shield so strong and tight that she couldn't access her Gifts. Rhiannon was one of the strongest telepaths in the world, fully mature and at the height of her power, but Brenna had overwhelmed her as though she was a little girl. For one of the few times in her life, Rhiannon experienced fear of another telepath.

"Brenna, what are you doing?" Rebecca asked, clearly alarmed. "That's not right. You can't just bully someone like that!"

"Don't fuck with me," Brenna responded. "He's dying. I can feel him. We don't have much time."

Brenna broke into a trot, hauling a terrified Rhiannon behind her. Rebecca shot a look at Jeremy, who shrugged.

When they reached Corwin's quarters, his son Hugh met them. "He's been asking for you," Hugh said. "I think he's almost gone."

Then he saw Rhiannon. "Who is that? What's going on?"

Brenna didn't answer, pushing past him and through the door to Corwin's bedroom. She sat Rhiannon back on her feet, and taking her hand, pulled her toward the old man lying in the bed.

Corwin's hair had turned completely white. His breathing was labored and shallow. Multiple

strokes had stolen his strength and ability to speak.

Uncle? I've brought someone to meet you, Brenna sent to Corwin, including Rhiannon in her transmission.

The old man opened his eyes, then they opened so wide Brenna thought they might pop out of his head.

Mother? Have you come to take me home? Corwin sent.

No, Uncle. This isn't Delilah. This is Rhiannon, your granddaughter.

He stared at Rhiannon in horror for a full minute, then tears began to spill down his cheeks and he sent, **Oh, dear Goddess. What have I done? I shall surely burn in hell for what I've done.**

He looked back and forth from Brenna to Rhiannon. **What should I do?**

Acknowledge your blood, Uncle, Brenna sent. **Give Rhiannon her birthright.**

"Rhiannon, my beautiful granddaughter. Please forgive me," Corwin said aloud. Hugh jerked as though he'd been slapped.

The old man reached out, taking Rhiannon's hand and also grabbing Brenna's elbow. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his breath rattled in his throat. He lay still.

When a telepath dies, at the moment when the soul leaves the body, his or her memories can pass to another telepath in physical contact. Long before, Corwin had told Brenna that he planned to pass his Death Gift on to her. Brenna had dreaded that moment, and hoped she could engineer the passing of the O'Neill legacy to Corwin's granddaughter, where Brenna believed it properly should go.

She hadn't found anything in her research or from talking to other telepaths that a Death Gift could be passed to more than one person. With the old man holding her arm in his death grip, she discovered that she should have asked the question.

The others in the room saw Corwin breathe his last, his hands touching each of the young women standing in front of him. Brenna and Rhiannon stood stock still as if frozen. They stood that way, eyes unfocused, for almost half an hour, and then both slumped to the floor, senseless.

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Memories and knowledge flowed into Brenna, overwhelming her. It was worse than when she was a little girl, before her mother taught her to shield, when the thoughts of everyone around her invaded her mind. She couldn't figure out who all the people were, or where they stopped and she began.

Thoughts and memories, men and women, children and aged crones, a flood of people were in her head. Some of the memories were beautiful. Others were horrifying. Memories of war, torture, and death. Memories of giving birth to a child, of being in love, of betrayal and humiliation. All the things a person might have done when they were alive now crowded her mind. Memories of sunny summer meadows in mountains she had never walked through mingled with memories of making love to men and women she had never met. Memories of being a man and making love to a woman. Terrifying memories of an axe descending, splitting her skull, the pain and darkness bursting through her mind. A sword piercing the child in her arms, continuing through and into her chest.

Over and over, the memory of dying. All of them had died. A mother held her child in her arms as it died, and received its young memories. A wife had held her husband, and discovered

he had been faithless. A man held his father's hand and discovered that in spite of his hard, unbending ways, he had loved his son and been proud of him.

It was too much for one mind to hold. She was going mad.

But every one of those people had done this and the majority had survived and emerged from the experience sane. Not all. Some had succumbed to madness, and those memories were there, too.

Attempting to restore some kind of order, she began categorizing, cataloging, and finding a place to store all the memories. Telepaths have extremely well-ordered minds, unlike the fragmented disorder, the chaos, in the mind of a norm. Fearing for her sanity, she worked to restore the order she was used to.

But there was so much of it. Centuries of memories, hundreds of people. Sometimes she would find memories of the same event as remembered by two different people. It was so confusing that her frustration grew and grew. Even trying to figure out how to store it, and where, was so much work that she despaired she would ever get it under control.

Corwin had the O'Neill Gift. Those with the Gift had seventeen mental levels as opposed to the nine levels of those without it. Figuring out where Corwin had stored a piece of information helped her to construct a model to use. It struck her that Rhiannon only had nine levels. The confusion and chaos must be worse for her.

Guilt hit like a hammer. Brenna had been so terrified of Corwin's Death Gift that she'd attempted to force Rhiannon to take it instead. Forcing another telepath, someone weaker than you, was a major breach of the rules her society lived by.

That hadn't been her original intent when she brought Rhiannon to O'Neill. She just wanted to force Corwin to acknowledge his granddaughter. She wanted to bring some reconciliation between the two. She knew how much pain Rhiannon carried from the denial by her father and grandfather. If Brenna was going to be Lady of O'Neill, she planned to bring Rhiannon into the Clan and give her a place of honor. When Corwin acknowledged her, it fulfilled her wildest hopes. And then a wild idea had blossomed inside her. Rhiannon was the rightful heir. Brenna might be able to dodge the responsibility she had no desire to assume.

Her half-formed idea went awry when Corwin grabbed them both. Now she and Rhiannon shared a bond she had never imagined, two millennia of memories and knowledge. And if Brenna was terrified of what that meant, at least she had agreed to it. Rhiannon had been given no choice. But there was even more to it than that.

Worst of all, when Corwin's mind had flowed into them, their own minds had merged and she had absorbed Rhiannon's. Everything Rhiannon had ever done, ever felt. She knew every thought, feeling and hope another living being had ever experienced. Each of them knew every pain, fear, and joy of the other. They knew each other's motivations, insecurities, and hopes.

Even though Brenna and Collin had merged their souls, they didn't rummage around in each other's minds. They still had their privacy. Even as close as she and Rebecca were, there were things they didn't share. What she had done to Rhiannon, and to herself, was almost unfathomable. It was the ultimate breach of privacy. It was a crime so appalling that other telepaths might consider it grounds for a mind wipe.

Finally, her mind cleared. Order was restored. She opened her eyes and saw that it was light outside, a bright sunny day.

*\*Rebecca?\**

*\*You're finally awake,\** Rebecca answered her.

*\*I did a bad thing.\**

*\*Yes, you did. I think I know why you did it, but good intentions don't make it right.\**

*\*I know. I think she's going to hate me, and I wouldn't blame her.\**

*\*Ask her yourself. She just woke up, too.\**

Brenna reached out and contacted Rhiannon's mind. It wasn't difficult. It was like looking in a mirror.

*\*Rhiannon?\**

*\*You bitch! You forced me! I should slap you silly for that. What the hell were you thinking?\**

*\*I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen.\**

*\*Yeah, I know. Hell, I know everything about you. But guess what? You failed. He acknowledged me as his granddaughter, but he didn't name me his heir. You're stuck with it.\**

*\*We're also stuck with each other.\**

*\*Yeah, we are. At least you're not a monster. I can think of a lot of people I wouldn't want in my head, but you're not so bad.\**

*\*You forgive me?\**

*\*Hell, no. I'm going to hold this over you for the rest of your life. You owe me.\**

*\*But you don't hate me?\**

*\*No, I don't hate you. I'm hungry.\**

A feeling of well-being settled over them, a feeling of warmth, safety and comfort that Brenna had felt before, and a presence entered her and Rhiannon's minds.

*\*The triumvirate is complete. The Power and the Shadow I foresaw, but I had not hoped there would be a Pathfinder. Three shall lead my people out of the apocalypse and into a new world. Brenna, Rebecca, Rhiannon. Know that you carry my blessing.\**

The presence withdrew.

*\*Was ... that ...\** Rhiannon asked.

*\*Yes, that was the Goddess,\** Brenna answered.

Brenna struggled out of bed and found Rebecca sitting in a chair watching her.

"Pathfinder?" Rebecca asked.

"You heard my conversation with Rhiannon?"

"I didn't hear that. I heard the Goddess speak to us. I guess She forgives you, even if Rhiannon won't. Do I need to order her taken to the dungeon so she doesn't kill you?"

"No, I think we're okay. But we're hungry."

Rebecca chuckled. "I'll bet you are. You've been out for thirty-six hours. I'll order you breakfast and tell Rhi to come here and have breakfast with you."

"Thank you. I'm going to take a shower."

Breakfast and Rhiannon arrived at about the same time. Rebecca served them in a small dining room off Brenna's bedroom, then left them alone.

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