

the king's prey

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the king's prey

saint dymphna of ireland

susan peek

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seven swords publications

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*“In many chapels,
reddened by the setting sun,
the saints rest silently,
waiting for someone to love them.”*

These words, penned by an unknown priest, long dead,
were the inspiration for this series on the lives of saints
who have fallen deep into the shadows of obscurity.
My hope is that, in reading their heroic stories,
you will make the acquaintance of some of

God's Forgotten Friends

Susan Peek

To broken families everywhere.

*And to Saint Dymphna and Saint Gerebran,
with the prayer that they will find
“someone to love them.”*

introduction

What is the point of this book?

Why did the author (as it happens to be, my wife) work so hard to write it?

She will tell you that it took all of three years. As her husband, I go a little further back. This story has haunted her. Almost begged to be written.

I read the first draft over fifteen years ago. In those days, Dymphna was portrayed as the classic production-line saint. No real personality.

Things are very different now in the pages you are about to read.

Dymphna has come alive. She is the Patron Saint of anyone suffering from any kind of psychological or emotion disorder. This is very apt for these times. We would all like to say, *not me!* But we all know someone. Don't we? A spouse. A parent. A child. A brother or sister. The neighbor next door. The boss. The in-laws. Oh yes, we all know someone who could use a little help along those lines. That is why the Catholic Church has given us Saint Dymphna. She is the champion of any soul hurting in mind or heart.

Before going to print, my wife sought and received differing views about this novel. Some, glowing. Some, less flattering. Nonetheless, she has finally achieved her goal. Because, whether you love it or hate it (it really doesn't matter which), there is one thing I personally guarantee:

Read it . . . and you will never, till the end of your days, ever forget the name Dymphna.

And THAT, dear folks, is precisely the point of this book.

Dymphna, from Heaven, for the most part unknown and ignored, is waiting for us in this modern age of confusion to call upon her. Her time has come. Now it is up to us to make good use of her.

But we can't love someone we don't know.

After finishing these pages, you will love her.

Saint Dymphna, pray for us all.

Jeffrey Peek, A.T.C.L., A.I.R.M.T.(N.Z.)

Br. Joseph (3rd Order SSPX)

1

the kingdom of oriel
ireland
628 a.d.

Turlough never intended to shatter his brother's life. He only wanted to keep Brioc alive, to find a way for him to be safe and warm and fed every day. Winter drew near, and as the two of them tramped across the lonely windswept hills, all Turlough knew was that unless he did this terrible thing, his younger brother wouldn't survive. There was only so much hunger, so many freezing, fearful, and desolate nights the little boy could take. Turlough had no choice.

“Slow down,” Brioc begged. “Please, Turlough. You're going too fast.”

Turlough stopped on the rugged path so his brother could catch up. He didn't mean to hike so quickly. He had to keep reminding himself there was a big difference between his own endurance at fifteen and Brioc's at ten. It didn't help, of course, that neither of them had eaten since yesterday.

Brioc reached out a hand to steady himself as he climbed the steep slope. As he did so, his sleeve rode up his arm, revealing the scars. Even after all these months, Turlough's breath still caught with horror every time he saw them. Brioc clung to his miniature harp with his other hand. He'd been lugging the thing since they'd left home this morning. No wonder he struggled to keep pace.

“You look exhausted. Need to rest?”

Brioc reached him, shaky and breathing hard. Tugging his ragged cloak tighter against the cruel wind, he gazed at the cliff ahead. His face was a mask of despair. “Are we climbing that?”

“Of course not. A trail winds around and comes out back. We can't see it yet.” Why were these places always built in the most inaccessible areas? It was one thing to want solitude, but to live on a veritable cliff top? Seriously?

“Let me carry your harp. I know you can't bear to part with the thing, but you've been hauling it all morning.”

“But you're carrying everything else.”

Everything else. Brioc made it sound like a lot. A few shirts that once belonged to their brothers, two pairs of patched trousers that wouldn't fit Brioc for at least another year, and a couple blankets. That was it.

Oh, and the tiny statue of Saint Brigid that Mam had loved.

Every night before blowing out the candle, she had traced a cross upon the

forehead of each of her seven children and whispered the same ancient blessing: *May Saint Brigid keep you safe beneath her cloak.* Mam had blessed them and said that prayer to her dying day. Every night. Without fail. Turlough had packed the statue at the last minute.

He pushed the painful memory away. “Just give me the harp, will you?”

Brioc handed it over, gratitude filling his eyes. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Turlough took the instrument, relieved he hadn't sold it after all. God knew how tempted he'd been. It was the only thing they owned worth money, and it would have given him enough to buy a sword. But that little harp was his brother's lifeline, the thing that held Brioc together.

Well, not quite. *They* held each other together, and had for two years now. But the harp helped.

Turlough hoisted the bundle of clothes over his shoulder so it wouldn't bump against the delicate instrument. As he did, the bundle knocked against his hip and dislodged the hunting knife on his belt. It dropped to the ground.

Brioc automatically reached for it and picked it up. He gazed at it, his eyes filling with sadness.

The knife had been Daid's.

Funny how such a small object could bring back a flood of memories. But memories were lethal for Brioc. Turlough should know that by now. He should have hidden the knife, not slipped it so carelessly into his belt. Anything could set Brioc off. He held out his hand, a silent command to return the knife.

Brioc obeyed, as always. The wind whipped a strand of hair across his cheek and he shoved it away. A lump rose in Turlough's throat. Gosh, he looked so much like Mam. Brioc was the only one who had inherited her striking dark hair. Aislinn would've had it too. Turlough had been cursed with Daid's sandy-colored mess, just like Branduff and Ragnall and — *Stop*. Today was painful enough. Forget the past.

He jammed the hunting knife back into his belt and yanked his shirt down over it. Thank God it hadn't set Brioc off.

Starting uphill again, Turlough's eyes searched for the trail that would go around the cliff. Now that they were so close, he felt an urgency to get this over with. Just thinking about what he was going to do made him feel sick.

Brioc scrambled to keep up. “Turlough?”

“Hmm?”

“Where are we going?”

The question was bound to come sooner or later. Turlough's insides twisted. Incredibly, this was the first time Brioc had asked. Even when he'd watched Turlough collect their clothes this morning and cram them into a sack, Brioc hadn't questioned him. He'd looked bewildered when Turlough told him to fetch

his harp, then led him outside, past the seven mounds with their carved wooden crosses and away from their ramshackle cabin and towards the hills. But even then, he obeyed with never-failing trust. The farther they had gone into the woods, the more nervous Brioc had become, and when they reached the waterfall — the one of his nightmares — he froze with terror. But Turlough was used to that by now, so he gently but firmly steered Brioc on, holding his hand until the sound of rushing water was behind them, promising Brioc the whole time that nothing would happen, that the wolves only came at night. Brioc had nodded, but his rapid breathing and the vice-like grip of his small hand in Turlough's betrayed his fear. Yet even then, he hadn't asked where they were going. Or why.

It was always like this. So unwavering was Brioc's trust in him that Turlough could tell him to do anything and Brioc would obey without a word. Order him to jump off a mountain and he would probably do it, all the while with that innocent trusting look that said he knew Turlough would catch him before he died.

Being your little brother's hero was the hardest job in the world.

Turlough sucked in his breath, unwilling to tell Brioc where they were going.

Brioc startled him by blurting, “I know! We're going to Gheel, aren't we?” His face lit up. “That's where, isn't it?”

In Brioc's mind, Gheel was a magical land. A place where hunger and cold and fear didn't exist, and dreams came true. Turlough felt a knife through his heart.

“No, we're not going to Gheel. I've told you a hundred times, it's in Flanders, on the other side of the sea.”

“But if we buy a boat —”

“Forget Gheel.” The words came out harsher than Turlough intended. *A boat*. As if. He couldn't even afford a crust of bread. He blinked back threatening tears.

Brioc went quiet. Turlough shifted the harp to his other shoulder, trying not to think of the sword he could have bought if he'd sold it. But if Brioc already needed music so desperately, how much more would he need it by tonight.

The gray-bearded minstrel must have sensed something like that when he gave Brioc the harp a year ago. Turlough couldn't even remember the old man's name. Just some carefree wandering musician from Gheel, passing through Ireland, full of laughter and song and endless stories to tell. Brioc heard him play in the village and was so entranced by his melodies that the man, having compassion on the little orphan, gave him the tiny harp right then and there. It was the first time Turlough had seen Brioc happy, radiantly happy, since disease had swept the region two years ago, claiming in death not only their parents, but

their four brothers and baby sister too. The kindhearted minstrel even stayed around long enough to teach Brioc how to play. By the time he left, both boys had picked up a smattering of the man's strange language, and after that, all Brioc talked about was going to Gheel someday and becoming a wandering minstrel himself.

Turlough knew he would never get there. Neither of them had traveled farther than the woods around King Daemon's fortress, let alone to Flanders beyond the sea. Traveling was for the rich and noble, not for sons of a dead woodcutter without the means left to buy a scrap of food. But Brioc was entitled to dream.

For Turlough, there were no dreams left. Just survive another winter.

"If we're not going to Gheel, why'd you bring our clothes?" The trust in Brioc's eyes thrust the knife deeper. Turlough knew he'd have to tell him eventually. Might as well do it now. There was no way out.

"I'm taking you to a monastery."

There. He'd said it. The most awful words of his life.

Brioc's dark eyebrows squished together in confusion. "A monastery? We already went to Mass this morning. Don't you remember?"

"We're not going there for Mass." A chunk of ice formed in Turlough's stomach. "You're going to live there from now on."

"We're going to live at a . . . monastery?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, *you* are. I'm dropping you off there. The monks will take care of you." Turlough picked up his pace, this time on purpose. He couldn't bear to see his brother's face.

Brioc scrambled after him and grabbed his sleeve, forcing Turlough to stop and face him.

"But . . . you're going to live there with me, aren't you, Turlough? We'll still be together, right?"

"No. I'm too old. I need to find work. I'm going to try to join King Daemon's army." The violent life of a soldier was the last thing Turlough wanted, but he could see no choice. Survival was survival. He didn't even know if Captain Barrrhoinn would accept him so young. His only hope lay in that he looked older than fifteen. Heaven knew he felt it. Fifteen going on fifty.

"You mean, I'll be alone? Without you?" Brioc had been petrified of separation ever since he'd seen the little girl eaten near the waterfall a few months ago. Turlough feared leaving him alone for more than a couple minutes, in case Brioc had one of his . . . turns. The nightmare-things. Flashbacks, awake-dreams, whatever they were. Turlough didn't even know. But they were terrifying to watch. And the scariest thing was, anything could trigger them.

"Please take me home. *Please*." Brioc was close to panic. Turlough knew

the signs. He saw them every night when the wolves prowled outside their cabin. Brioc would fly into Turlough's bed, so scared he could barely breathe. Not that Turlough could blame him, with scars like that. All he could do was hold Brioc tight until the pack wandered away. His heart ached for his brother.

He knew he had to keep Brioc calm, lest a flashback was triggered, right here on the steep hill. He groped for something to say to make the monastery sound attractive. "The monks will teach you to read and write. Imagine that. None of the rest of us ever got learning. Daid would be so proud of you."

Lame, lame, lame.

Brioc's gaze flew towards the unseen monastery, holding back tears. "I don't want learning. I want to stay with you."

"I bet they'll teach you music."

"I don't want to live there."

"Brioc, listen —"

"I won't stay without you. I won't." Brioc gulped in breath after breath. "I'll run away. I'll sneak out at night when the monks are asleep and search all of Ireland until I find you."

Turlough was aghast. "Don't you dare."

"I will. You'll see."

Horrifying images leaped into Turlough's mind of his brother wandering defenseless through the wild countryside, searching for Daemon's army. He'd be dead within a week. Even if he did find the troops, Turlough could never let him stay. Daemon's soldiers were for the most part pagans, like the king himself. They were the roughest and most violent men in the kingdom, and even for Turlough it would be risky at fifteen. He shuddered to think what men like that would do for sport to an innocent little boy.

"I swear I'll run away and find you."

This was getting out of hand. Fast. Turlough had to say something — *anything* — to prevent Brioc. He said the first thing he could think of.

"If you run away, the wolves will get you."

Instant terror leaped into Brioc's eyes. But his very survival depended on this, and if anything would keep him safe with the monks, it would be his paralyzing fear of wolves. So, hating himself for it, Turlough said, "If you run away, they'll eat you. Just like that little girl."

He couldn't believe he was saying these things! The tragedy near the waterfall had traumatized Brioc beyond words. Not only had he seen the girl killed, but he'd barely escaped with his own life. It was only because the wolf was away from its pack and already wounded that Brioc got away at all.

He had gone that first week into a kind of shock, a strange numbness in which he couldn't remember the attack, at all. That alone frightened Turlough.

Then came the flashbacks, the *reliving*. The memories so overwhelmed his little brother that Brioc believed the attack was actually happening again. He seemed to be in two places at once, and when things got that bad he didn't even register his surroundings. Sometimes Turlough had to physically tackle him and hold him down to prevent him from harming himself in his panic to get away from an imaginary wolf.

Thus to bring up the little girl herself, devoured alive before Brioc's eyes, was the cruelest thing Turlough could do. But the brutal words were already out. He cringed, bracing himself for Brioc's reaction.

But . . . it didn't come. At least not the reaction he expected. Instead, to his amazement, Brioc drew in a deep breath, squared his little shoulders, and said the most incredible words of his life.

"I'll still run away and find you."

Dear God, even the wolves couldn't keep them apart!

It was Turlough's turn to panic.

"Brioc, stop this. I mean it. I'm taking you to that monastery and you're going to live there and that's all there is to it." He snatched his brother's wrist, feigning anger as his only defense, and started to haul him along the path.

Brioc jerked his arm away and the dam holding back his tears burst. "I won't stay. You're my brother and I'm not living without you."

Turlough hadn't bargained for any of this. His mind reeled. "You can't run away because . . . because . . ."

Think of something! THINK!

Then it came. In a headlong rush, the lie tumbled out.

"You're staying with the monks because I don't want you with me. Ever thought of that? Maybe I don't want you anymore."

Brioc froze.

Once started, it was impossible for Turlough to stop. Desperation for his brother's survival swept him away in the tide of nauseating lies. "Maybe I'm sick of taking care of you. Maybe I've had enough." His voice rose, the voice of a stranger, someone Turlough didn't know, spewing forth such cruel words to the brother he loved. "We're separating and I'm joining the army and that's all there is to it."

Brioc could not have looked more dumbfounded if Turlough had whipped out Daid's hunting knife and started stabbing him. In his shock, even his tears stopped.

Then it happened. The last little light remaining in the child's eyes went out. Flickered with incredible pain and died, just like that. Like blowing out a candle whose flame was already too fragile.

Everything in Turlough wanted to scream, *No! I didn't mean that! We're*

brothers and I want to stay together as much as you do! But he couldn't say those things because then Brioc would threaten again to run away to find him, and it would start all over again. So, with that iceberg inside him growing bigger and colder and more monstrous with every step, he silently led the way up the hillside.

Brioc hung his head, shriveled up in his cloak, and silently followed. Neither said another word all the way to the monastery.

An elderly monk opened the door, bent with age and obviously hard of hearing. Turlough had rehearsed a hundred times how he would explain, but now that they were actually on the doorstep, he was too distraught to say a thing. Not that the monk could hear anyhow. Turlough could only manage to relay Brioc's name, then, knowing he himself was on the verge of breaking down, he rushed away before his tears could come. The monks would figure it out. They'd keep Brioc alive.

But Brioc was already dead. Gone from Turlough forever, just as truly as the seven in the grave.

As Turlough wound his way alone down the windswept hills, he knew he would never forget the shattered look in his brother's eyes as he handed him his harp and the ragged bundle of clothes and hurried away. There were no good-byes. Brioc merely cowered behind the white-haired monk, as if Turlough had beaten him, and wouldn't say a word.

Everything had become a nightmare.

eleven years later

2

If she didn't move, didn't breathe, maybe he wouldn't find her. Dymphna burrowed deeper into the musty hay, her fists clenched so hard it felt like the bones might crack. In all her fifteen years, she had never known such terror.

She heard him stomp across the floor directly below the loft, searching the barn, cursing and screaming, enraged that she had gotten away.

Jesus, Jesus, don't let Daidi find me.

They were alone here, not another soul within a mile. The dilapidated barn was hidden deep in the woods, overgrown and abandoned. If Daidi spotted the ladder in the corner, if he managed to heave himself up the flimsy rungs and discover her cowering in the hay, she would have no escape. If he found her, he would . . . he would . . . No, don't think of it! She squeezed her fists tighter, her palms slick with sweat. Night had plunged the barn into darkness; she prayed he would not see the ladder. She held her breath for so long it seemed her lungs would burst.

“Odilla!” he screamed in rage. “Come out! Come to your husband this instant!”

Go away, go away. I'm Dymphna, not Mamai. She's dead. You know Mamai's dead. Tears streaked her face and sharp prickles of hay stabbed her, but she didn't dare move.

Running away from him earlier on the path had unleashed his fury, a rage beyond anything she had ever seen. Below the loft, something banged. Something else crashed. He stormed through the barn like a savage beast, completely out of control, ransacking everything, slamming and hurling objects across the cavernous space.

“Odilla! I know you're in here! I want you! I will find you!” His voice rose.

Through the wild pounding of her heart, Dymphna heard his animal grunts, imagined his deranged movements a few feet below her. When she'd entered, an ax had been leaning by the door, rusted and sticky with cobwebs. If only she had grabbed it. But in her frenzy to scale the ladder, she left it behind — only to see through the cracked floorboards that Daidi snatched up the weapon when he barged inside after her. He was using it now. The thud of splintering wood echoed through the barn as he slashed and destroyed everything around him. It sounded like he was ripping chunks out of the walls, as if he thought she might be hiding behind some loose board.

“I know you're hiding!” he screamed. “You're mine and I'm going to have

you!”

Another splintering crash. A curse and a grunt as he dislodged the massive ax from the wall.

Then . . . silence.

She huddled in the hay, drenched in cold sweat.

Seconds ticked by, stretching out to eternity.

Minutes passed.

Only ominous silence.

Her heart slammed in her chest, her breath came in choking gasps. *What was he doing down there?* His sudden silence was more terrifying than even his rage.

It was so quiet now she could hear his uneven breathing below her. Could he hear hers? The moldy hay pressed against her face. Strands of damp hair clung to her cheeks and she tasted the salt of sweat mingled with tears.

A soft creak of floorboards. She swallowed. A few tentative footsteps clomped towards the corner of the barn.

Don't move. Don't breathe.

“Odilla? Odilla, are you up there?”

Dear God, he'd spotted the ladder.

3

Seventeen-year-old Ethlynn burrowed deeper beneath the blanket and yanked her pillow over her head in frustration.

Bang!

Squeeeak.

Four seconds of silence.

Bang!

One . . . Two . . . She held her breath and counted . . .

Three. . .

It's coming . . . Wait for it . . .

Squeeeeeeeek . . .

Four . . .

BANG! Right on time.

With a frustrated groan, Ethlynn gave up. She dumped the pillow on the floor and looked with exasperation at her husband, peacefully snoring beside her. How could he *sleep* through this? The angels could be blaring the apocalyptic trumpets and he would snore his way through Judgment Day. Were all men like this? The only sound she knew that could wake her husband was the howl of a wolf. Never mind if it came from three miles away, Brioc would still leap awake and fly through the ceiling. But a gate slamming in the wind a few feet outside their door? Not a hope.

Bang-BANG.

Twice this time. The wind must be picking up. *Squeeeeeek . . . BANG.*

BANG-BANG!

With despair Ethlynn heard the next thing. *Scratch. Scritch-scratch.*

Then a whine.

Wonderful. Now Samthann was pawing at the door, trying to get inside. Brioc must have forgotten to let her back in before bed. That was unusual. He never forgot Sam. It showed how much he had on his mind. Not that Ethlynn could blame him. With Queen Odilla dead, Brioc was out of a job. King Daemon had dismissed all the Christians who'd been in his wife's service, and as court minstrel Brioc was the first to go. Daemon hated his beautiful harp music. He'd even threatened to take away their cottage, which would leave them not only destitute, but homeless too. Ethlynn knew Brioc was worried sick.

Sam's whining escalated to a bark and she scratched the door furiously. Ethlynn sighed, loathe to get up and leave the warm bed. Although it was spring,

the night air was chilly. Besides, if she moved, the nausea might return.

Bang --- squeeeek! Scratch, scratch!

Woof!

This was cacophony. *Bang-scratch-squeak-woof. Snoooooore.* Like a torturous song. The only thing missing in the chorus was the nanny goat's *baa*.

Ethlynn bolted upright. The goat! Oh no! It had probably escaped through the open gate! She suddenly remembered she had forgotten to tie the nanny up after milking. This was the third time this week.

She tossed off the blanket, swung out of bed, and winced when her bare feet touched the cold dirt floor. She scampered to the door on tippy-toes, praying wildly she'd find the goat still in the yard. It was their only source of milk; if it went missing, Ethlynn would feel awful. What would they do for milk and cheese? They already had too little to eat.

The second she unlatched the door, a hurricane of fur and muscle exploded inside. It launched into the air and sailed towards the bed, plunging straight on top of Brioc. Ethlynn heard a thud and a creak as the bed nearly collapsed, followed by a sharp gasp of pain. She looked over and saw by a beam of moonlight that her husband had vanished beneath his giant wolfhound. Samthann's tail wagged so fiercely that her whole backside wiggled with it, rocking the entire bed. Her tongue was going crazy. Ethlynn knew Brioc was buried alive under the mountain of fur. It was just a question of where.

Incredibly, Brioc never seemed to mind this unusual form of torture. In fact, after his initial gasp of pain, he only partially woke up, just enough to shove the huge slobbering beast off his face so he could breathe again. Then he ruffled her head affectionately, mumbled, "Hi, Sam," in a groggy voice, and rolled over to go back to sleep.

Sam turned three wild circles on the bed, smearing enormous muddy paw-prints everywhere, then settled down happily beside him, her chin on his shoulder, right in the spot Ethlynn had just vacated. Within ten seconds both were sound asleep.

Ethlynn let out a sigh, wondering just which female her husband loved more.

She dismissed the jealous thought. How silly. Of course Brioc loved her best. He loved her more than the whole world, just like she loved him. Let him sleep with the dog. Ethlynn feared she would be up the rest of the night anyhow.

At least the months of nausea had finally passed, though she still could hardly force any food down. She hoped Brioc wouldn't notice her growing bump or wonder why she was so tired all the time. She hadn't told him about the baby yet. By her calculations she was nearly seven months along, but being her first, she was carrying tiny and only recently starting to show. Just as well. She would

have to tell Brioc soon, but for now he had more than enough to worry about. No job and their food running out.

Food.

Milk.

The goat!

Ethlynn suddenly remembered why she stood turning into an icicle in the doorway in the first place. She took a reluctant step outside, shivering, and peered into the moonlit yard.

The gate creaked open and banged shut, every four seconds on the dot, except when a gust crashed it sooner. Leaves and debris fluttered across the grass. Apart from that, the yard was empty. Not a hoofed creature in sight.

Oh dear.

Ethlynn stepped back inside, wondering what to do.

“Um . . . Brioc?”

Man and beast snored on.

“Brioc? Sweetie?” she asked a little louder. She hated doing this to him.

Sam's ears perked, and she raised her head to look at Ethlynn. Her tail thumped the bed.

“Brioc, are you awake?”

He stirred. “Hmm?” he moaned, half asleep.

Ethlynn felt awful. “Guinevere's missing.”

Brioc sleepily propped himself up on one elbow, glanced at the occupant on the bed beside him, and noticed for the first time that his wife had mysteriously been replaced by his dog. He looked confused until he found Ethlynn standing by the door.

“What are you doing over there?”

“Guinevere's missing. I think she escaped.” Ethlynn bit her lip. “I forgot to tie her up again. I'm so sorry.”

Brioc groggily sat up and ran a hand through his mussed-up hair, trying hard to wake up. Ethlynn's heart fluttered. He looked so handsome with his dark hair sticking up all over the place.

“Don't worry,” he said sleepily. “I'll go find her.”

“I'm sorry,” Ethlynn said again. “You're not angry with me, are you?”

He gave her a tired smile. “I could never be angry with you. It's my own fault for not fixing the gate.”

Ethlynn knew why he hadn't fixed it. He spent all his time searching for work to keep them alive.

With an effort, Brioc forced himself up. The second he moved, Samthann leaped to the floor and vigorously shook herself. Puffs of doggy-dust flew everywhere. Sam was giant, at least three feet at the shoulders, not even counting

her massive head. One good shake meant the whole cottage would need dusting. Ethlynn sighed as the wolfhound bounded to the door, her tail swishing with such excitement that it knocked over one of their chairs. Sam must have sensed Brioc was going somewhere.

While Brioc pulled on his boots and lit a lantern, Ethlynn stood on tiptoes at the open door and strained her eyes to see through the darkness outside, hoping to catch sight of Guinevere.

Squeeeek . . . Bang. The loose gate kept crashing.

BANG! The sudden gust of wind nearly blew Ethlynn over.

Brioc came to the door, fully awake now. “Stay inside,” he said. “It’s cold out there.” He was so protective of her. A warm gushy feeling rushed through her veins, and for a second she nearly got all romantic. But, really, it wasn’t a good time.

She expected Brioc to go straight out the door, but to her confusion he stood in the threshold for a long moment, hesitating, as if he had to gather his courage before stepping out into the night. Samthann was the opposite. After all her clamor to get inside a few minutes ago, she suddenly couldn’t wait to go out again. Her tail slapped against Brioc’s legs and she looked up at him expectantly and barked.

Brioc didn’t move. He sucked in his breath. The color had drained from his cheeks.

Ethlynn suddenly realized something out there frightened him.

“Promise me you’ll stay inside. Please, Lynn timer.”

“Why would I go out?” she asked. She had no intention of doing anything other than brushing Sam’s fur off the blanket and trying to get some sleep.

Brioc didn’t answer. His face was deathly pale.

“Um . . .” She hated to ask, but she really was desperate for sleep. “Can you stop the gate from banging before you leave? Please?”

He snapped out of his trance. “Oh. Of course I will.” He leaned in to kiss her, but in his distraction he caught her left nostril instead of her lips. He didn’t seem to notice. Through the fabric of his shirt, she could feel his heart galloping. It must be slamming a million times a minute. Obviously not from passion. *Was he alright?*

As he stepped into the night with Sam lolloping loyally beside him, Ethlynn realized there were so many things about her new husband she didn’t know. Tonight, for example. This wasn’t the first time she had sensed his reluctance to go outside after dark.

And what about the nightmares he had, when he’d bolt awake in a cold sweat of terror? And his refusal to talk about his family, or his past? Ethlynn didn’t even know where Brioc came from, although she suspected it was

somewhere around here. Sometimes he hiked to a tiny graveyard by an abandoned cabin in the forest, but for some reason he would only go there when he was certain the king's soldiers had ridden out of town, as if he were trying to avoid them.

Not even to mention those shocking scars all over him. The first time she'd seen them, her voice had abandoned her. Later, she'd gently asked what had caused them, but he froze up and wouldn't tell her.

And there was his music, too, which, for all its breathtaking beauty, was always so sad.

In fact, all Ethlynn really knew about Brioc — apart from the fact that she loved him more than life itself — was that he was an orphan raised by monks. Two years ago, Queen Odilla had brought a donation to the monastery, as she had every year, and she'd heard him play his harp. Instantly she fell in love with his music and invited him to come to the castle as her private minstrel. He accepted. The queen later twisted her husband's arm and arranged for Brioc to live in this little cottage by the meadow.

Ethlynn herself had met him ten months ago, when she was sixteen and he twenty. She'd come with her daid, a horse dealer down on luck, to King Daemon's village. He'd been trying to sell a pair of stallions, but no one was interested and they'd returned home to the Kingdom of Mide a week later, poorer than when they'd left. During the trip, more was lost than Daid's money. Ethlynn lost her heart. It had taken five minutes with the Queen's minstrel. She'd fallen hopelessly, helplessly, head over heels in love.

Back at home, she couldn't do anything. Not eat, not sleep, not concentrate on shoveling the stable floor. The pile of fresh manure would either end up in the water trough, or worse — on top of Daid's tools. She couldn't help it. Her brain wouldn't cooperate anymore. It was capable of one thing only — daydreaming about Brioc.

When he showed up at Mam and Daid's doorstep ten days later, she nearly passed out. He'd been so quiet at the castle that she hadn't realized he liked her. Had he really been thinking about her too? He must've been, otherwise he wouldn't be in Méifne asking Daid if he could court her.

Having no dowry for his ninth daughter, Daid was only too happy to give her away. Within a month Ethlynn found herself back in Oriel, floating in the clouds. No bride had ever been happier. Impossible.

Yet after the whirlwind of romance, Brioc had become withdrawn, bewildering Ethlynn completely. Whatever the reason, losing his job had little to do with it. Something else was going on inside him, something awful. Why wouldn't he confide in her? As horrid as the scars on his body were, the scars inside him must be much worse.

They were destroying him.

Ethlynn felt powerless to help. Maybe someday God would send someone who could.

4

Dymphna heard the wood groan and creak as Daidi tested the first rung. He was middle-aged and out of shape, and the ladder was old and cracked in several places. Would he try? Could he ascend with a lantern in his hand? What about the ax? Would he leave it below? She listened, every muscle strained. She clenched her hands so tightly they'd gone numb.

As in a nightmare, she heard him climb. His breathing sounded ragged with exertion as he slowly clambered upward, step by precarious step. Then suddenly he was there, standing in the loft, not three feet away.

The pale glow from his lantern revealed the toe of his boot under his scarlet cloak. Dymphna held herself in a tight ball, heart hammering. Could Daidi see her? Did a corner of her dress stick out through the hay needles in a bright splash of color?

I'm not here. I'm not here. Go away.

Panting, breathless from his climb, Daidi rested the heavy ax head on the floor with a thud. She could make out his shadowy bulk leaning against its handle. For the longest time he stood there. His eyes must be adjusting to the deeper darkness of the loft, roaming the space for a sign of her presence.

Perspiration trickled down her back. She bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

His boot disappeared. The floor creaked as he moved away, ax in one hand, lantern in the other. He prowled the loft, a beast stalking prey. Something crashed as he violently kicked it aside.

"Odilla!" he screamed, smashing the ax into the wall in blind fury. Tears streamed down Dymphna's face. Daidi grunted and snorted like some hideous wild pig. He hurtled chunks of wood across the loft.

Something small and swift darted out of the hay and scuttled across the floor. She jerked involuntarily, her breath catching in her throat, before she realized it was only a mouse.

Had Daidi heard her gasp? She froze.

"Odilla! I know you're in this barn! Come out right now!"

Jesus, help me.

"I'll find you!"

His footsteps clomped across the floor, back near her haystack. Dymphna couldn't breathe. Then, to her great relief, he returned to the corner with the ladder.

He huffed his way back down, experimenting with each flimsy rung before

surrendering his full weight. With his descent, the dim glow from the lantern disappeared. Dymphna stayed clamped in her tight ball.

Another minute of crashing below, then a sudden gust of cold night air told her the door was flung open. It slammed shut, plunging the barn into silence.

Dymphna slowly let out her breath, not daring to move. Had Daidi left, or was he pretending, waiting outside the door? Too afraid to crawl out from her hiding place, she lay there trembling, teeth chattering uncontrollably. She waited for a sign, a definite sound of his departure.

Somewhere a wolf howled. Branches scratched against the barn roof. Something that sounded heavy enough to be a rat scabbled back and forth across the rafters above her head.

The agonizing minutes ticked by.

* * * * *

Dymphna had no idea how long she remained buried in the hay, an eternity it seemed. Finally she allowed herself to move enough to push the hay from her face. She gazed around the loft. The shadows across the floor had shifted drastically with the moonlight. At least an hour had passed. Maybe two. Was Daidi outside?

As if in answer to her question, the door below crashed open and slammed into the wall with a thud. A scream caught in her throat. The door swung back and forth a few times, then banged shut. The wind. *Just the wind.* Dymphna let out her breath.

The cramps in her muscles tormented her. She needed to move. She needed fresh air. Brushing the loose hay aside, she staggered to her feet. Her legs, numb from ankle to thigh, shook as she tried to stand. How could she possibly descend the ladder without making a sound?

She groped through the dim light towards the hole in the floor. Trembling, she lowered herself onto the top rung of the ladder. She clambered awkwardly downward, legs wobbling, fear racing through her veins.

Her foot missed a rung and she fell with a clumsy thud to the bottom, landing hard on the floor. Horror surged through her. Her eyes snapped to the door. Was Daidi on the other side, his face twisted in a grotesque hungry smile? If he'd heard her, she was trapped.

Trust in God. Trust! She'd consecrated her life to Him already, hadn't she? He would protect her.

Taking a deep breath, she summoned her courage and, praying her legs would stop shaking, tip-toed across the floor. Never had she been so grateful for such soft doe-skin shoes. At least they made no noise. But the door stood a

hundred miles away. *Don't panic. Slowly. Just get to the door . . .*

She reached it and quietly nudged it open, inch by torturous inch. A narrow wedge of bright moonlight sliced across the dirt floor. She peeked out. The night air chilled her through her sweat-soaked dress. Tree branches swayed in the shrieking wind, their shadows dancing wildly across the ground. She strained her eyes and ears for a sign of Daidi and, seeing none, crept outside.

Something screeched and exploded above her head.

She ducked in terror. A black object swooped down at her. The thing cast a wild flapping shadow from the eaves of the barn and let out an earsplitting shriek. Then it flew past Dymphna with a flurry of feathers, and disappeared into the night.

An owl. Only a harmless owl, startled from its nest in the barn. Dymphna exhaled, the relief so great it made her dizzy. She steadied herself against the door and tried to regain breathing. But she had to move, and quickly. Daidi could be anywhere, hunting for her in these dark, isolated woods.

Trembling, Dymphna gathered her flowing skirt off the ground — and ran.

5

By the flickering lantern light, Brioc nervously gazed around the dark woods. The wind sent shadows dancing in mottled patterns across the forest floor. Chilly fingers raced up the nape of his neck. He strained his ears for the tinkle of Guinevere's bell. Surely the wind would make it ring. Instead he only heard the lonely hoot of an owl and a frog gurumphing somewhere in the dewy grass.

He'd been searching for close to an hour. How could such a small goat have wandered so far? It became harder to remain calm with every step. Could a wolf have found Guinevere? He blocked the image and moved closer to Sam. A dog of her size and breeding could take on a small pack. She'd protect him.

Besides, he had fire. Wolves feared fire. If one appeared, he knew what he would do. Throw the lantern at it and pray the woods caught fire. Insane idea. Terrifying in itself, but the only thing Brioc could think of. Anything, even death by burning, was preferable to being shred again by fangs.

If only he'd fixed that broken gate.

He took another wary step, his legs shaky. What kind of a man feared something that wasn't even there? He strained his ears for the tinkle of a bell or the sound of bleating. And that's when he heard rushing water.

The waterfall.

His chest constricted and his lungs froze. The gentle cascading water grew louder and louder, thunderous, deafening, crushing him with terror. And with no warning, the deadly beast inside awoke.

Not now, he begged. *Please no*. This couldn't happen tonight — not with Linnie counting on him to find their goat.

She didn't even know about the flashbacks. Brioc had never told her.

The sound of the falls overwhelmed him and the beast inside sprang. He dropped to one knee and desperately grabbed for Sam, yanking her close, his mind clamping down against the memory. Suddenly nothing else mattered. Not Guinevere, not even Linnie. He knew only that he must fight the monster being unleashed inside him.

Sam must have sensed his panic. She pressed her huge body protectively against him and whined.

Please God. Please, please.

He couldn't allow the pain to swallow him again. It had already claimed years of his life, six years of mute darkness he could hardly remember, as if his brain chained up that part of his childhood to prevent the pain from killing him.

Sam licked his hands, then his face, trying to help. She was the one who'd pulled him out of his private hell in the first place, as a tiny abandoned puppy. Sam — and Dymphna, his two most loyal friends, to whom he owed whatever sanity he had left. Slowly, *slowly*, the warmth of the dog's rough fur calmed him, anchored him to the present moment. *The little girl wasn't here. That was years ago.*

Brioc said it over and over again. *She's not here. She's not here. There is no wolf.*

Sam nuzzled him, licking him with her huge sopping tongue. Gradually the sound of the waterfall receded to its place in the distance, returning to a bubbling murmur far away.

Brioc felt numb. His hands tingled. He struggled to fill his lungs with air.

But the flashback had stayed at bay. Thank God. It had actually stayed away.

Shakily he forced himself to stand, ashamed of himself, ashamed that he was trembling so badly. And over what? Over the gurgling of a distant waterfall.

Something was wrong with him. Seriously wrong. And the flashbacks were getting worse lately, not better. They were becoming more frequent, like when he had been a child. Stress always made him vulnerable, but this was getting out of hand. Guilt for not telling Linnie stabbed him.

He must tell her. She was his wife. She had the right to know.

He didn't want her to know. She might stop loving him.

Sam barked, the sound jerking him back to now. Disoriented for a second, he struggled to remember where he was.

The woods. Of course, the woods. He was looking for Guinevere. The instant he remembered where he was, he thought of wolves. The waterfall grew louder again. The panic rose.

Dear God, he wasn't normal. He needed help.

Sam's wild barking turned into a whine. She crouched forward, upset by whatever she saw. Brioc's gaze flew in the direction she was looking.

Guinevere!

Her head poked through the trees about twenty feet away. The moonlight reflected off her little bell.

Brioc squinted, trying to understand what he saw. Something about her head didn't look right. Sam must've noticed it too. Distressed, the wolfhound pawed the ground, inched forward then back two steps. Chills crept up Brioc's spine. Samthann looked at him and whined.

Something was terribly wrong.

6

Dymphna groped her way through the maze of trees, fear slamming through her. A sliver of moonlight streamed through the lattice of dark rustling leaves overhead, her only source of light. Where was Daidi? Behind every black tree trunk lurked a man with an ax. Everything inside screamed at her to run, but she forced herself to move slowly. She prayed that the howling wind would drown out any noise she made.

Another knotted root tripped her but she grabbed a nearby branch and managed to stay upright. She'd already fallen twice, bruising her knees and scraping her hands. She wiped her clammy palms on the skirt of her dress and fumbled her way through the twisted branches. A clump of clouds pushed across the moon, sheathing the forest in sudden darkness.

Her mouth went dry. With arms outstretched in front of her, she reached into black space. An overhanging leafy branch slapped her in the face and she jumped. Clumsily she moved around a thick tree trunk. Something threadlike and sticky wrapped around one hand. She jerked back, stifling a scream. Images of hairy black spiders crawling up her arm flashed across her mind and she frantically swatted at the huge spider web.

A tiny tinkling noise flitted on the wind. She stumbled past the spider web and stopped to listen. What was that? A bell? Far away, water tumbled against rock. The waterfall must be nearby. A dog barked, sounding close. A rush of hope pulsed through her. If there was a dog, there might be a person. Her heartbeat quickened.

The patch of clouds made its way past the moon and a wedge of yellow light reappeared. She took a step, and the ground squelched beneath her shoe. Another step and she slipped, both feet shooting out from under her. She landed hard on her backside in a puddle of mud. Sharp brambles ripped her hands.

Eyes stinging, she scrunched up the edge of her skirt and clumped it in one fist, trying to push herself up off the ground with the other. She managed to scramble to her feet.

And saw the ax.