

Chapter 1 - The Reunion

Rowan slumped against the stone door of Red Eagle's tomb, sealed shut with no chance of its occupant to break out. His companions, Madanach and Cyhrain, sat by his side. All three were disheveled, and Rowan felt downright exhausted and miserable. He lost the fight, and had to be dragged away by his companions before Red Eagle would have ended him. Cyhrain healed the worst of the cuts he had received, but they couldn't heal the pain of knowing he'd never live up to the fate he was dealt. He'd never be Red Eagle reborn. Maybe if his Briar wasn't damaged, he'd have a chance, but now he was too weak and broken and tired.

A sound of hurried footsteps brought Rowan out of his brooding and he tensed, listening. Cyhrain heard it too as they looked towards the tunnel leading up and out of the tomb. A tall figure in a deer's head headdress emerged into the antechamber and fixed the three of them with a burning glare. A sorry sight the three of them must have been, sitting on the ground, covered in blood and grime. The man walked into the beam of light next to the podium that, until recently, held Red Eagle's sword, looked at it, and then back at the three. He was a Briarheart, tall and muscular, bigger than even Rowan, with a mane of long black grey-streaked hair that went past his waist, and a beard. Most of his face was obscured by the headdress, but Cyhrain and Madanach could see glowing orange-green eyes glaring down at them.

"So, I take it Red Eagle doesn't give a damn about your claim to the Reach, Madanach?" The man growled mockingly. Madanach didn't even bother replying. Cyhrain shifted closer to him protectively.

And then the Briarheart's gaze fell upon Rowan, who was still holding onto the sword after he had yanked it out of the pedestal to lock the tomb.

"Wait... Rowan?"

Cyhrain and Madanach raised their eyebrows and exchanged glances as the man took several steps towards them and helped Rowan to his feet and stared at him intently. Rowan shivered, the deep voice familiar somehow. He raised his head to face the source of the voice, an almost pleading expression on his face.

"What's going on here?!" Madanach finally exclaimed.

"Yeah, who are you and how come I have never met you, I've been with every briarheart in the Reach but somehow you-" Madanach shushed the werewolf before they could spill more of their conquests.

The man ignored both of them, his attention focused on Rowan.

"Rowan, is that really you?"

Something clicked in Rowan's memory, and he recognized the voice.

"Tiernan?" He whispered weakly, managing a small sad smile.

Tiernan silently pulled Rowan to his chest in a crushing embrace. Behind him, Cyhrain and Madanach exchanged glances once more.

"We'll be outside," Madanach said, ushering Cyhrain along.

"Should we leave Rowan with this guy?" Cyhrain asked when they made it out of the tomb.

"I think they know each other, and this Tiernan doesn't seem to mean him harm."

Cyhrain frowned, but didn't argue anymore. Instead, they found the nearest flat rock and sat down on it. Madanach sat next to them, and they waited.

Back in the cave, Tiernan dragged Rowan into the light to take a better look at him. Rowan looked more worn out than Tiernan remembered, and his eyes were now milky and blank, and there was a jagged scar on his cheek.

"What happened to you?"

Pain flashed in Rowan's blind eyes, and he lowered his head before responding.

"I was moved to another camp, the hagraven there...Well, a lot has happened."

He stopped, collecting himself, a pained expression on his face. Tiernan reached for him and hesitantly placed a hand on his cheek, and when Rowan didn't move away, stroked it gently.

"You don't have to talk about it."

Rowan gripped the hand on his cheek tightly, nuzzled against it, and gave Tiernan a sad smile that made his hollow chest ache.

"It's...I want to say it's okay but it's not, but it's in the past. She didn't let me write to you, or let me go far out. I was her property, a pretty thing to be used by her or her coven however they saw fit. I tried to escape, and she blinded me..."

Tiernan let out a deep growl, and wrapped Rowan in his arms, hugging him tightly. He wished he could have done something, wished he had known.

"I am truly sorry. I didn't know. I would have gotten you out."

"It's okay. The hagraven's dead. Cyhrain killed her."

"Who's Cyhrain?"

"One of the two people with me. They're the one with the antlers."

"Ah, so they're the Beast of the Reach? I expected someone bigger."

"Oh, trust me, they are ferocious."

Rowan sounded proud of the werewolf, and Tiernan smiled and let go of him, looking him over once again, noticing old wounds he hadn't noticed before, like the scars on his waist and the fact his briar had a deep dried out gash in it, and was missing several scales.

"Your briar..." Tiernan began, and immediately regretted saying anything, seeing Rowan's shoulders hunch and his expression become sad again.

"Her, too. I can't fight anymore. I get tired far too quickly." He let out a long, exhausted sigh.

"And yet I'm Red Eagle's Chosen, somehow. He haunts my dreams, talks to me."

Well, that explained why Rowan and the other two were here to begin with. Madanach wasn't the one undergoing the trial.

"I take it that didn't go so well..." Tiernan didn't sound as mocking this time.

Rowan just shrugged.

"You could say that. Maybe I'll get better one day. Then I'll try again. Otherwise, Red Eagle will have to find a better Chosen."

Tiernan sighed and put a hand on Rowan's shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly.

"I'll stand by you next time."

Rowan actually smiled at him this time, and they made their way out of the tomb. Still, something gnawed at Tiernan.

"Wait, how did you get the sword? The Briarheart who held it isn't dead or wounded."

"Um...Lets just say Cyhrain convinced him to part with it peacefully."

Chapter 2 - Rest

It started to drizzle while Cyhrain and Madanach waited. When Rowan, still leaning on Tiernan for support, exited the tomb, the two of them moved under a rock outcropping nearby, and were huddled there, grumbling. They rose to meet the two Briarhearts. Cyhrain alternated between staring at Rowan with worry and staring at Tiernan with apprehension and interest. Madanach

just glared at the newcomer, about to demand an explanation, but Cyhrain strode towards Tiernan, looking up at him.

"Who are you?" Cyhrain asked. "You're beautiful."

They grinned up at him, apprehension gone and replaced with a lustful look. Tiernan ignored their attempt at flirting with him.

"My name is Tiernan, I am the guardian of Red Eagle redoubt." He sounded less grumpy now, but he still glared back at Cyhrain and Madanach.

"We have a history." Rowan said, standing by Tiernan's side.

Tiernan hesitantly placed an arm around Rowan, and when Rowan didn't flinch or recoil, hugged him around the waist. Rowan cuddled up to him.

"That, we do. But it can wait until we get to a camp, unless you want to spend more time in the rain."

Madanach and Cyhrain exchanged looks and then shook their heads at Tiernan.

"Yea a tent would be nice." Cyhrain rasped, shivering a bit. "Some company to help warm it up would be even better."

They winked at Tiernan, who, again, seemingly ignored it. Cyhrain shrugged, and turned to walk by Madanach's side, and the four of them started a slow trek towards the nearest Forsworn camp, aptly named Red Eagle redoubt. Cyhrain looked forward towards revisiting that big Briarheart they had pretty much seduced the sword out of during their previous visit. Madanach just looked forward towards a warm meal and maybe drier clothes. Rowan still brooded over the fight he had lost, but it was a bit eclipsed by being reunited with a friend and (former?) lover. He just hoped it wouldn't complicate his relationship with Cyhrain, even though he had a feeling the werewolf would be okay with it. It was Tiernan who worried him, as he didn't know what his stance on being in a relationship with several people was. Rowan had memories of Tiernan having been somewhat possessive back in the day, and wondered if he still held onto that trait.

The awkward conversation came sooner than Rowan expected and wanted.

"So, you and these two," Tiernan nodded towards Cyhrain and Madanach who outpaced them and were some distance ahead. "Are they your friends? Lovers?"

"Yes."

"Both of them?"

"No, just Cyhrain. They saved me from the hagraven, and I've been following them since. They are my friend, and they are my lover. Madanach, well, Cyhrain approached him first, and he's

good to them, and I like him. Not sure where that one will go. Maybe we will become lovers too, maybe not."

Rowan was tense when he started talking, but relaxed somewhat as he told Tiernan of Cyhrain and Madanach, affection for Cyhrain clear in his voice. Tiernan listened to him, feeling jealousy and possessiveness rear their ugly heads inside him. He pushed the feelings down, and forced a smile, selfishly grateful that Rowan couldn't see it because it probably looked fake. The two Briarhearts fell into a long silence after Rowan had finished talking, and when Tiernan finally replied, his words were weighed carefully.

"I, hm. I admit I struggle with the concept of having several partners, but I can see the werewolf makes you happy. And that's all that matters."

Rowan listened quietly, and nodded, mulling over it in his head.

"Would you want to give our relationship another try?" Rowan asked quietly.

"I would, but...Wouldn't you be torn between two lovers?"

"Cyhrain manages two partners well enough. And an untold number of one-night stands in between. Which I have no energy for, so it would be just you, Cyhrain, and maybe, possibly, Madanach. If you're okay with that."

"I would be happy to be with you again, then," Tiernan said, smiling.

Rowan beamed at him, then stopped and pulled him into a crushing hug, nestling his forehead in the crook of his neck. Tiernan's arms came to wrap around him, holding him close, and he nuzzled into Rowan's red hair. It felt safe, familiar, and Rowan wished he could stay like that forever. Tiernan wished he could just stay like this and have Rowan all to himself too. Alas, he was torn out of the moment by Madanach's gruff voice calling out to the two of them.

"Get to a camp, they said. Get out of the rain, they said."

Madanach stood on the path ahead of them, hands on his hips. Cyhrain huddled next to him, shivering. Tiernan grumbled and reluctantly let Rowan go, and they caught up to the other two. The rest of the way to the redoubt was silent and uneventful save for Cyhrain complaining about being cold.

When they reached the camp, Cyhrain immediately stopped complaining and slunk off to the topmost level, probably to see the former owner of Red Eagle's sword again. Madanach looked at them go, and sighed, wondering if he'd have to spend the evening alone or if they'd be back after having another romp on that old throne. Either way, he tagged along with Rowan and Tiernan.

They entered a large tent, the warmth welcoming after so much time in drizzling rain. Tiernan made sure they were settled by the fire, and went out to arrange food. Rowan stretched out on the furs that covered the floor, and dozed off right away, completely exhausted.

Madanach wasn't as tired, and so he unwittingly guarded Rowan's sleep, alone with his thoughts that inevitably turned towards Forsworn and his status among them. Even though Madanach had been free for a while, and started an effort to contact various Forsworn settlements across the Reach, it seemed like his influence hadn't been as widespread as he'd hoped. Tiernan had mocked him in the tomb, and the Forsworn in this camp seemed to just go on about their business, not recognizing him, but saluting Tiernan instead. He wondered if they knew about Rowan being Red Eagle's chosen. He wondered if his time had simply passed and people looked up to new leaders these days. He wondered if Rowan would make a better King. Madanach could definitely see that as a possibility, especially if and when he succeeded in confronting Red Eagle again. People would flock to him, he would be a symbol that could unite the Reach again, like Red Eagle had done. Also, Rowan definitely had the patience and Madanach had seen him settle arguments in the redoubt, calmly listening to both sides, and then coming up with a solution or compromise. He had seen how people seemed to seek the blind Briarheart out to talk to him, and how he'd listen and offer advice and comfort. He wondered if Rowan could do that for the entirety of the Reach. Madanach would certainly be okay with it, he could do what he did best, pull the strings from the shadows and advise Rowan.

Madanach looked upon Rowan's sleeping form, and decided to lie down and rest his old bones after all. When Tiernan came back with a huge plate of food for the four of them, Rowan didn't even wake up, while Madanach sat up, grumbling. Cyhrain still wasn't back, and Madanach made a mental note to save some food for them. Guess this was his life now, watching over the overly energetic werewolf, he thought. It wasn't so bad.

Careful to not wake Rowan up, Tiernan set down the food, and sat cross-legged opposite Madanach. An awkward silence hung in the tent, interrupted by the cracking of flames in the firepit, and Rowan's quiet snoring.

"So," Madanach said in a quiet voice. "How do you know Rowan?"

The two men sat around the fire, eating, while Tiernan relayed his history with Rowan in a quiet voice. Apparently, one fine day, he was patrolling the river banks around Karthspire camp, when he saw a Briarheart's body floating down the river. Confused, he dragged the Briarheart out of the water, and then it turned out the Briarheart was merely asleep. Tiernan smiled at that part.

"Rescued him from the river. I wager there's probably a fairy tale like that in High Rock somewhere. If not, there should be one."

"Maybe you can write it, and have the book published anonymously. Would do wonders for the Reach's image."

Tiernan chuckled at that, and continued. Rowan had stayed at Karthspire for a bit, and the two became fast friends. He then went back to wherever he came from, but he would float down the river once in a while to see Tiernan. They'd become lovers soon. And then Rowan disappeared,

stopped writing, and Tiernan had no idea where to even look for him. Madanach listened and nodded. Then the entrance flap lifted, and Cyhrain slipped in, looking disheveled, but content.

"Oh, food!"

Tiernan and Madanach both shushed them, and gestured at Rowan, who was still fast asleep. Cyhrain piped down, and quietly plopped down next to Madanach, leaning against him and picking up some food.

"Sorry." They murmured with their mouth full.

Tiernan sighed, not wanting to retell the story again.

"So, that is how I know Rowan, and this brings us to today. And the Red Eagle's tomb. How did he even land this fate?"

This time it was Cyhrain's turn to answer.

"He says he's been having dreams. Something about Red Eagle talking to him, and a sword, and a tomb, and the Reach being united again."

"Except I don't think I'm up to it." Rowan's voice murmured, as he sat up, yawning. He still looked exhausted, and his shoulders were hunched. Tiernan passed him a plate, which he accepted.

"Maybe before my Briar was damaged, I would have won that fight. But now..."

Rowan shook his head somberly. He sighed, the usual spiral of thoughts coming in unbidden, while he poked at the food on his plate. That he was broken, too damaged, too weak.

"Maybe Red Eagle needs to pick someone else. Like Tiernan."

Tiernan reached for him, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and kissed his temple.

"He chose you, and he did so for a reason."

"I... might know someone who could possibly help," He started, seeming strangely unsure.

"However, you might not like it."

Rowan picked at his food, ate a small piece, then turned towards Tiernan, one eyebrow raised.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she is a healer, and she knows about Briarhearts, but she is a hagraven."

As Tiernan expected, Rowan almost recoiled, shuddering. He shook his head vigorously, a single terrified "No." escaping him.

"I think I would rather die than deal with a Hagraven again."

Tiernan sighed. He wasn't a patient man, but deep down he realized that snapping at Rowan would only ruin things even further and push him away. Rowan had reasons to distrust Hagravens, reasons that he had confessed to Tiernan just a few hours prior.

"What if we went with you?" Cyhrain offered. "If she's actually decent, she might help you, and if she tries anything, between the four of us she stands no chance."

Cyhrain flashed a wolfish grin, and Rowan shrugged. Cyhrain had a point, he had to admit, and they've already killed at least one hagraven. And that was before their Dragon Soul awoke, when all they had were their beast form's claws and teeth. Still, the thought of it, of the unclean talons anywhere near him made his insides freeze. Tiernan seemed to like the idea, though.

"Cyhrain has a point. Still, I would understand if you don't want to do it. My brother knows old magic, I'll talk to him, and maybe we can find another way to heal you if there's one."

Rowan sighed again, then smiled weakly, grateful for the others' support.

"I'll think about it. I know I will feel safer with all of you around. Thank you."

"Good. Now, you need rest. You can stay here tonight."

Tiernan turned to Cyhrain and Madanach. "I have arranged a tent for you two to stay in."

We all need rest, Madanach thought. But Rowan needed it most of all, he tired out so easily, and this day in particular hasn't been kind to him. He could barely defend himself from Red Eagle's wrath, and it took all three of them to hold the ancient Briarheart back and get Rowan out. At least with the tomb closed, Red Eagle couldn't follow them here. Madanach wasn't sure if Red Eagle could leave his tomb, if he were to be honest.

Madanach's thoughts were interrupted when a Forsworn came in and escorted him and Cyhrain to a tent where they would be staying. Madanach climbed into a bedroll, and Cyhrain curled up next to him, and they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 3 - The Healing Ritual

Morning found Madanach alone in the tent. It was early, but Cyhrain was pacing restlessly outside, their beast blood not letting them sit still. The two then wandered about the camp, ate,

and met Rowan and Tiernan. He had an arm around Rowan, who looked much less tired. Cyhrain immediately ran up to Rowan and cuddled him.

"How are you feeling?"

"Still pretty exhausted, really sore, but kind of slightly rested," Rowan stretched. He did feel somewhat rested, and was in a better mood. Madanach and Tiernan stood a small distance away, having a quiet conversation.

"So, tell us about this healer you've talked about," Madanach asked.

"Her name is Mirel, she's a hagraven living nearby, in Karthspire. My brother is learning magic from her. She's as trustworthy as they get."

Madanach nodded. So, at least they wouldn't have to run all over the Reach to find her. Still, he wondered if Rowan would even agree to visit her. He didn't seem very keen on it the night before, and neither him nor Cyhrain had any idea what else to say or do to convince him. They had already promised to come with him, and that was the only argument they had.

Thankfully, it turned out Rowan didn't need convincing. After a night's rest and a meal, Rowan thought hard about Tiernan's offer. True, he hated it, and the thought of having a hagraven's claws anywhere near his briar or his body made him nauseous. However, he didn't see any other options. He wondered if Red Eagle would listen to reason, but even then, the ancient Briarheart had seemed bent on fighting, so Rowan would need all the strength and energy he could muster to stand against him. Which meant he had no other choice but to give the healer a chance.

"I'll go." He said, startling everyone.

"Why the change of mind? You seemed opposed yesterday."

"I thought about it, and while I'm still terrified, it doesn't seem like I have much of a choice if I want to heal, do I? That, and you three will be there."

Rowan smiled weakly at Tiernan, and the sad smile made Tiernan ache inside. He walked up to Rowan and Cyhrain, and put a hand on Rowan's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Then it is decided. We set out at noon."

The group set out to Karthspire soon after breakfast. It was warm, but the air smelled like autumn, and the wind was cold. They slowly made their way down the many stairs of the ruin, then through a narrow tunnel that made Madanach uneasy as it reminded him of Cidhna mine, and then down a winding path and across the narrow part of the river. This will be an absolute nightmare to climb back up, Madanach thought, fearing for his old bones. The walk was slow, as Rowan set the pace, and he wasn't very fast. Meanwhile Cyhrain was full of energy and jogged ahead and circled back to burn the excess off. They were particularly excited about the river crossing, jumping over the narrow stretch of water several times.

The four finally stepped down onto the wooden platforms that made up the lower levels of Karthspire, and Cyhrain seemed to perk up, looking around excitedly. Madanach caught up with them, curious.

"Well you seem really happy out of sudden."

"I grew up here. Haven't really been back in a long time."

Last time Cyhrain visited the camp was with the two members of the blades, and in the middle of a dragon attack. Cyhrain helped slay the beast, and that convinced the Forsworn to let the strangers get to the abandoned Akaviri temple higher up the mountain.

Madanach smiled, Cyhrain's excitement contagious, and seeing them happy made him happy too. The four of them made their way to the upper levels, and then along a small gorge to a tiny isolated valley that housed a few tents and several altars and tables, the largest of which had an arrangement of sacrifices laid out on it on top of a sigil drawn in blood. A stooped figure covered in black iridescent feathers hopped about in front of it all, mumbling to herself in a scratchy voice. Rowan tensed up immediately, and Tiernan was by his side, arm around his shoulders, gently reassuring him and urging him on. Cyhrain felt a pang of pain for him. They remembered the state he was in because of his cruel hagraven master, and didn't blame him for being afraid now. He was beaten, bleeding from many claw marks, and bruised all over, a cruel collar fastened around his neck. That's how Cyhrain found him when they chanced upon the isolated hagraven lair while hunting. The scars Rowan still had from the claws and the collar, and whatever the hagraven had done to his eyes, forever marred his skin, serving as a grim reminder of what he's been through.

This was a completely different hagraven though, and a familiar one at that. Cyhrain sniffed the air, trying to discern the scent beneath the usual bird smell all hagravens had. Faint memories came of being carried by someone as they ran from a city of stone. Of being held and soothed.

"Wait..."

Madanach gave Cyhrain a quizzical glance.

"I think that's my mother."

Cyhrain grabbed Madanach's hand and walked towards Rowan, and gently headbutted his shoulder, joining him and Tiernan as they approached the hagraven. She seemed oblivious so far, at least until her hopping brought her to face the newcomers. The hagraven immediately froze, tilting her bird head this way and that, studying them with bright purple eyes. Cyhrain grinned.

"Hi mother."

The hagraven cawed excitedly and hopped up to Cyhrain, looking them over. She hasn't seen her child in a long while, in fact, they'd drifted apart some years ago when she started preparations for her ascension as a hagraven, and Cyhrain had become a werewolf. Now they met, both part beasts.

"You've grown, child, and by the gods, all these scars!"

"Yea that was the plan. A lot has happened. I'll tell you later. It's a long one."

Tiernan stepped forward and bowed his head respectfully.

"Healer Mirel, I've brought you someone seeking help. This is Rowan, he was hurt by another hagraven long ago, and his briar was damaged. Can you help him?"

Tiernan ushered Rowan along, so the hagraven could take a look at him. He never let go of Rowan's hand, and the Briarheart seemed to relax a tiny bit.

"Please be gentle with him." Cyhrain asked. "Rowan's scared of hagravens."

"Don't worry, child, he'll be alright. Bring him over here."

Tiernan led Rowan to a bench and sat down with him. Rowan clutched his hand tightly. Cyhrain and Madanach hung a few steps back to give the healer space, but close enough to intervene if things went wrong. The hagraven hopped over and leaned close to examine Rowan's briar. He couldn't help but flinch and whimper when the healer's claw touched the scarred edge of one of the briar scales. Tiernan's arm was around Rowan's shoulders immediately, his voice murmuring soothing words into Rowan's ear.

"Oh you poor dear." The hagraven cooed. She sounded as genuinely sympathetic as her scratchy voice allowed. "I won't hurt you. I'm just going to take another look, is that alright?"

It took a few moments for Rowan to calm down and catch his breath and rein in the panic enough to nod. The healer waited patiently for his consent before examining his Briar any further. She tilted her head, clicking disapprovingly at something as she took note of the three scales partially missing from the briar heart, and the cut beneath them, and the way the edges were scarred.

"This is an old wound, won't heal right away, but it's doable. I can perform a ritual to start the healing."

The two Briarhearts nodded, and Rowan clung to Tiernan, relief washing over him. Tiernan stroked his back in small circles.

"Can you do it now?" Rowan asked, his voice quiet and desperate.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. If it helps me heal, why wait?"

Rowan didn't want to interact with the hagraven any more than he had to. Even if she was his partner's mother, and hasn't hurt him so far.

"I can, yes. Go and lie down on the table, would you?"

Rowan got up, feeling somewhat faint. Tiernan led him to one of the empty tables, and watched as Rowan lay down on his back. He stayed by Rowan's side, holding his hand, and Cyhrain took a spot by Rowan's other side together with Madanach. Mirel shambled up to the altar, looming over Rowan.

"It might hurt, and you might pass out." She warned. Rowan could only nod. The hagraven then suddenly grabbed a wicked dagger, and Tiernan growled out loud. The healer raised her hands in a placating gesture.

"To heal, I will need to cut away dead scars. So I can make his briar regrow."

Rowan whimpered upon hearing that, but didn't make any move to escape, determined to go through with it. He nodded, again, and clutched Tiernan's hand. Rowan let out a short scream when the blade cut into the damaged scales, the hagraven expertly prying away dried tissue. The briar started bleeding, and Tiernan watched, anxious, as the hagraven extended her claws over him, and started chanting. Her hands glowed a warm green colour, and she moved them in intricate patterns above Rowan's chest, vines of green energy pulling into his briar. Rowan winced and groaned, his chest hurting, not unlike the way it hurt back when he had just become a Briarheart. Tiernan squeezed his hand, and kept watching the ritual unfold. The green glow pooled into Rowan's briar, and the bleeding edges of the damaged scales started regrowing into healthy tissue.

At some point, Rowan passed out. He awoke in a bed, in a nest of furs and pillows propping him up comfortably, and covered by a fur blanket. He felt weak and exhausted, but there was also relief, like the worst part of a sickness had just passed and he was on his way to recovery. The pain in his chest subsided, replaced with a strange faint itch that felt removed from his body, and yet localised to his chest. He made a noise, and tried to sit up, but quickly discovered he was too weak. There was a hand on his shoulder, pushing him to stay in bed.

"Careful, you're very weak." Tiernan's voice sounded relieved, and he leaned in and kissed Rowan's forehead gently.

"I'm so proud of you."

There was shuffling somewhere to the side, and more hands were carefully patting Rowan's hair and shoulders.

"Welcome back to the world of the living! You passed out during the ritual. Tiernan here was about to riot." Madanach chuckled, and received an absolute death glare from Tiernan.

"Mother says she made your briar start regrowing." Cyhrain was by his side now, nuzzling him.

"She says you'll feel weak for a while, but then you'll get better than you were before."

"I feel like a sickness is taking a turn for the better..." Rowan admitted. He turned his head around and sniffed at the air, trying to get his bearings. He could smell food cooking, and the furs he was wrapped in, and Tiernan's familiar scent clinging to them.

"Are we still in Karthspire?"

"Nah, Tiernan picked you up when the ritual was done and took you back here. His brother showed up and helped. I stayed to catch up with my mother. Did you know Tiernan has an absolutely gorgeous Briarheart twin brother?!" Cyhrain was as close to screaming excitedly as their mangled vocal cords would allow.

Rowan smiled at them.

"Yeah, I know he has a brother. I dated him for a long time after all. You're going to try your luck with Tiernach?"

Cyhrain nodded vigorously, a feral grin plastered on their face.

"You bet I am. He seems friendly. I smell a chance of getting laid."

Cyhrain bolted towards the tent entrance, then stopped, eyeing Rowan anxiously, torn between wanting to go and try talking to Tiernan's brother, and being worried for Rowan.

"Will you be okay?" They finally asked.

"Yeah. Tiernan is going to take care of me. Go, I'll be fine."

Cyhrain didn't need to be told twice, and in a blink, they were gone.

"I take it you two need space," Madanach said, getting up and making his way out as well. He felt irrelevant again, wandering the camp alone like a ghost.

That would become his routine for the upcoming weeks. Tiernan spent all his time with Rowan as he recovered, Cyhrain tried to cozy up to Tiernan's brother, which left Madanach to spend time alone. Cyhrain did their best to give him all the love and attention they could, and Madanach was grateful for that, but they were torn between him and at least two big strong briarhearts, and it was clear they wanted to use any chance they got to spend time with the latter. So Madanach spent his time practicing his spells, wandering around, and even sparring with Rowan and the others when Rowan got well enough. He even came to enjoy the fact no one remembered him. He could just be a regular old person again, just one of the Forsworn.

Rowan was healing quite well, and started leaving the tent on the third day after the ritual, and practicing with his spear staff after a week, and Tiernan was at his side almost constantly, beaming with pride. Sometimes Tiernan would spar with Rowan, and he would usually win as Rowan tired out easily. Still, Rowan came to hold his own even against someone as ruthless as Tiernan, and it was as good a preparation as he could get.

All was going well.

Chapter 4 - The Final Battle

"So, how do we deal with Red Eagle?" Cyhrain rasped, looking over the other four people around the table. There was a crudely drawn map of the interior of Red Eagle's tomb, with notes scattered about, mostly in front of the twin briarhearts and Madanach. Rowan sat in a chair and had a large mug of tea in front of him, kept carefully away from all the parchments. The twins were on the opposite side of him, and Cyhrain was leaning over his shoulder.

"You three were there, so you tell us what you had to deal with." Tiernan gestured at Madanach, Cyhrain, and Rowan.

"One angry ancient Briarheart, a bloody mess of Briar tree roots, and several undead Reachfolk." Madanach summed up.

"I could use the roots to my advantage, if I don't trip over them like the last time. I could turn them against Red Eagle and hold him back. Maybe then I could talk to him. Maybe if I'm really his Chosen, he'll listen."

Tiernan shrugged, unconvinced.

"You should be ready to strike him down if words prove ineffective."

"I suppose..."

"If he's stuck in roots, he's an easy kill." Cyhrain pointed out.

Rowan sighed and took a big sip of his tea. He didn't want to fight Red Eagle to begin with.

"So." Tiernan started. "The simplest plan would be: we go in as a group, me and Rowan deal with Red Eagle. Tiernach and Madanach are mages, so they can deal with the undead from afar. I suppose Cyhrain would lend a hand as a werewolf, or assist Rowan and me, their choice."

"I'm fast. Can deal with the undead, then help Rowan."

"Good, good, then we're all settled."

"You make it sound almost easy." Rowan sighed. "Anyone else has any ideas?"

Madanach just shrugged, and no one said anything else.

There wasn't much point in waiting, so it was decided that they would set out the next morning. They were as ready as they could get unless they brought an entire army with them, and Rowan just wanted it to be over. Even in his resting hours, he was beset with strange dreams in which his fight with Red Eagle would replay, or Red Eagle would whisper things, urging Rowan to face him again. Rowan was tired down to his bones. If he won, Red Eagle would probably leave him alone, and if he lost, he'd be dead, and his sleep would be eternal and dreamless. In some grim way, it was pretty much a win-win as far as Rowan was concerned.

Rowan had spent most of the day in the company of Cyhrain, Madanach, and Tiernan, and he was grateful for them as they kept him distracted from the uneasiness about the upcoming battle. They held a small feast, a quiet sort of party just for their little group, with stories and laughter. Cyhrain told Tiernan the story of how they met Rowan and killed a hagraven and lost their voice, and of their travels together which seemed to earn Cyhrain a tiny bit of Tiernan's respect. Madanach spoke of his past and a united Reach and his own reckless exploits. Tiernan surprised them with a song. His voice was clearer and less gruff when he sang an old song of the Reach. Rowan let the others have the spotlight, quietly enjoying himself, the food, and the company.

By dawn Rowan woke up in the middle of a warm tangle of people. Tiernan was sleeping on one side, Cyhrain was curled up against his back with their arm draped over his waist, with Madanach asleep somewhere beside them. Rowan smiled at no one in particular as he lay there, unwilling to get up, as it would mean the inevitable confrontation with the Red Eagle, and also waking up the three people clinging to him. In the end it was Madanach who gently roused Cyhrain, who in turn had no reservations about rolling off the pile of furs and yawning loudly.

"Dawn of the final day?" Madanach asked, looking down at the other three. Tiernan growled and opened his eyes. Rowan slowly untangled himself from Tiernan's arms and sat up, running a hand through his red hair.

"I guess so..."

Cyhrain was shaking themself off by the tent exit.

"We'll be fine. There's many of us and one of him. Also, I'm Dragonborn. Anyway, food?"

They stared expectantly at Tiernan who grumbled some more. Cyhrain ended up being sent to get the food themself, and took Madanach with them. The group ate, and there wasn't much conversation. Then, it was time to go.

Tiernach joined the other four by the edge of the camp, and the group set out towards the tomb. The walk there was silent, even Cyhrain seemed unusually subdued, walking in the back of the group with Madanach. They weren't afraid, at least not for themselves. They were more worried for Rowan and Madanach. Rowan was hesitant, and Madanach was the only fully human of all of them, and an older one at that. Eventually, Cyhrain reasoned that they and Madanach's own magic would keep him safe.

The tomb was as they left it, the stone door still firmly in place. Cyhrain stopped, listening for any sounds coming from the inside, but it was silent. Rowan stopped before the pedestal and took a long deep breath. It didn't do much to chase away his fear, but it grounded him somewhat. He gripped the hilt of Red Eagle's Fury, and drove it into the opening in the middle of the pedestal. The cave shuddered, and the stone slab moved up, opening the way into darkness beyond. The party waited a few moments, expecting Red Eagle to come charging at them. But nothing happened.

Cyhchain was the first to move, changing into their beast form. The group exchanged glances, while Rowan slowly stepped forward into the narrow corridor, one hand tracing the wall. The others crept after him.

The main chamber remained unchanged since their last visit. Torn banners still decorated the walls, and mummified Reachmen still lay in dark corners, ready to spring up and defend their king. There was a giant cluster of briarheart tree roots spreading from the far end, cradling a sarcophagus, and within it, the still form of an ancient Briarheart. Red Eagle was tall, probably even taller than the twins, but painfully thin, his skin a sickly grey color. His hair was long and was a curious dark red color, with a white strand in front, and a wooden antlered circlet sat on his head, a green gem above his forehead.

The twins examined the room quietly.

"So that's Red Eagle," Tiernan drawled, squinting to see the ancient king's features.

"There's magic here," Tiernach whispered, "Fascinating."

"There is. See the corpses in the corners? Red Eagle's friends. They wake up with him." Madanach motioned at the remains, then at the sarcophagus.

"I'm sure talking won't wake them all up," Tiernan snapped back, sarcasm dripping off his hushed whisper. Madanach glared at him, and was about to fire something back, and Tiernach was going to move in to smooth things over, but all of them just stared silently as Rowan slowly started walking towards the far end of the room. He seemed numb and not at all there. Cyhchain reached out to grab him, but their claws fell just short of him.

Rowan's feet carried him forward until he stood opposite Red Eagle, a strange reflection of the king. They both were briarhearts forced to do what they had to, both had long red hair. But Rowan was gentle, and he thought he was broken, and he desperately didn't want to be here.

Still, Faolan chose him. So he would do what he had to. Even if he lost, it would at least be over, and Rowan took a small comfort in that.

Cyhrein crouched, Tiernan readied his axe, and the two mages had spells flare up in their hands, and everyone tensed as another moment of complete stillness passed by. And then Red Eagle moved, and opened his eyes.

Rowan clutched his staff, suddenly aware of the roots around him, and of the sound of old bones creaking back to life. Last time, the roots were a hindrance, but now that he was more aware of them, he could try to use them to his advantage.

Red Eagle glared down at Rowan, and even though the Briarheart was blind, he felt the heavy presence brush against his mind. He heard a commotion behind him as magic, axe, and claw met dried flesh and old weapons.

And then Red Eagle lunged at Rowan, slashing at him with his sword. Rowan heard the steps, and jumped back, calling onto the Briar roots to shield him from the attack. He knew that even with his Briar on the mend, he would get tired quickly, so he had to conserve his strength at least until the others dealt with the undead.

Tiernan hacked and slashed through the enemies with his axe. Backed by his brother's spells, he was making his way to Rowan's location. Still, speed wasn't exactly his strength. He threw a quick glance around to assess the situation. Madanach was flinging ice spikes, and Cyhrein had a glowing aura about them, shaped vaguely like a dragon's horns and scales, and they were throwing undead around with powerful strikes of their claws. Their one good eye met his, then looked at Rowan, whose living shield was crumbling faster than he could replenish it. The werewolf growled something, and suddenly they dashed forward in a blur, ending up behind Red Eagle and clawing at his back. Madanach was left behind to deal with the few remaining undead in his corner of the room, then joined the twins.

Cyhrein got a few reckless strikes in before a kick landed in their midsection, sending them flying backwards with a startled whine. They recovered quickly, growling and circling the ancient Briarheart. Rowan staggered away from the two while Red Eagle was distracted. He only fought for a short time, but already felt exhaustion weighing him down. Cyhrein gave him a precious few moments to recuperate and gather his magic, and he focused on the everpresent roots all over the chamber.

He heard Cyhrein growl again, then a sound of a flame spell powering up, and then a whine, and Madanach shouting, and sounds of ice spells flying through the air and evaporating on a flame shield.

"Begone, beast," Red Eagle spat, glaring down at Cyhrein rolling around trying to put out the flames. He raised his sword to strike the werewolf down, but an ice spike impaled his arm, causing him to drop the blade, and giving Cyhrein time to scramble away. A thick root then

collided with Red Eagle's side, sending him flying towards the tangle of roots he stepped out from to begin with. Rowan moved slowly to pick up the sword, one hand raised, glowing a faint green. The roots moved, wrapping all over Faolan, keeping him still. He stopped before the trapped Briarheart.

"If I'm your chosen, why are you trying to kill me?!"

Red Eagle stayed silent for a while, struggling against the bonds. The twins, Madanach, and Cyhrain came to stand by Rowan's side. Cyhrain had a nasty burn on their shoulder, and Madanach's hands were glowing gold as he tried to heal it.

"You must prove yourself by combat. You won. Now, kill me."

Rowan shook his head.

"You deserve better than to die alone and forgotten in a tomb. I'm not one to kill a defeated man, or kill without a reason. I'm merciful."

"I have been trapped here for too long. Death IS mercy." Red Eagle snarled.

Rowan smiled sadly, and shook his head.

"The prophecy says you would return to rule the Reach once again when it's taken back. That hasn't happened yet, but you can help us. The Reach needs its hero."

"Have you, like, tried to leave?" Cyhrain piped up.

Red Eagle fell silent, rusted gears turning in his head. He hated to admit it, but the thought of simply leaving never crossed his mind. That, and Rowan was the first to open the tomb since one lecherous fool far too long ago. For someone so sickly and scrawny he sure had ran too fast for Red Eagle to follow.

"I've given everything, my humanity, my heart, my everything, and it wasn't enough."

Rowan winced, the despair in the old king's voice all too familiar to him. He sat cross-legged in front of Red Eagle.

"I think... I think you lost because you were alone. I won because I wasn't. Even though I'm a broken, damaged thing."

"Which is why I reached out to you. You seemed to be the only one listening. I was alone."

Rowan rose, leaning on his staff heavily. The roots holding Red Eagle weakened and retreated, but the ancient Briarheart made no move against Rowan, instead watching him take a few unsteady steps towards the exit.

"Fine. I will follow. But if it so happens that I cannot leave this tomb, you will end my suffering. Let us see how the Reach fares these days."

"Try anything, and I will eat your Briar," Cyhrain warned, fixing him with a glare.

"I will feed it to Cyhrain myself," Tiernan grumbled. He offered Rowan a shoulder, and he gladly accepted the help.

Turned out, there was nothing stopping Red Eagle from leaving, other than the now open door. No magic wards, no traps targeting him. Nothing. The bright midday sunlight shining through the opening in the cave ceiling proved to be a different story. Red Eagle hissed, shutting his eyes as soon as the light hit them. It was Madanach who came to his rescue.

"Keep your eyes closed. It's going to take a while for them to get used to daylight again. Trust me, I know."

"You're the one with the ice spikes. Your magicka is strong. Who are you?"

"Madanach, King of the... never mind, not a king anymore."

"Hm. How long have I been gone? My slumber felt eternal."

Madanach shrugged.

"Longer than I have. Don't be surprised if they don't accept you. I've been gone for a bit over two decades, and people have moved on. Most who remembered me are gone too. Your legend is far older than that. Wouldn't be surprised if it's been a thousand years or more. You, my friend, have a lot of catching up to do!"

Madanach let out a laugh, then gave the much taller briarheart a pat on the shoulder. Red Eagle glared at him through squinted eyes, then at the werewolf who came to cuddle the old man. A thousand years, and the reachmen still didn't have their land back. Was his sacrifice really in vain? The Reach was still fighting, and that put a glimmer of hope in Faolan's mind.

Epilogue

The news of Red Eagle's return spread fast to the two nearest Forsworn settlements, Karthspire, and Red Eagle Redoubt. The return was met with a mix of curiosity, disbelief, and hesitant cheer.

It took several days for Faolan's eyes to adjust to daylight enough to leave the tent during the day, and even then, it hurt him. Those several days were filled with thinking, and long conversations with the five people who fought him earlier. They were a fascinating bunch. Rowan, despite not being much of a warrior, seemed to have a calm but commanding aura

about him, and people would come to him to ask for advice, or comfort, or just to talk and drink tea. Together with Tiernan, the actual leader of the settlement, who was far more stern and no-nonsense, they made a very balanced pair.

Tiernach, the leader's twin brother, was friendly and keen to learn about the old magic that was mostly lost since Faolan's time. He was also curious about the events that took place during Red Eagle's time. He had informed Faolan that the Red Eagle might as well have been the first known Briarheart.

Cyhrein, the twig-like werewolf, turned out to be the Reach's new hope, holding the power of dragons. Despite having threatened him back in the tomb, they didn't seem hostile at all anymore, content to trust Rowan's judgment. If anything, they seemed a bit too friendly, and flirted with him, but backed off when Faolan told them he wasn't ready for anything like that yet.

Then there was Madanach, the only one fully human in the group. Madanach was helpful and sympathetic to Faolan's predicament, having been imprisoned underground for over twenty years, and helped Faolan get used to sunlight again. Madanach could also relate to having been forgotten. He had claimed the throne of the Reach once, if only for two years, but it seemed like the Reach had moved on in the two decades that he had been gone.

Red Eagle wasn't forgotten as easily. As the news of Red Eagle's return spread, small groups of Reachmen started arriving at the camp, and Tiernan begrudgingly started to prepare for a celebration. He mostly left it to his brother though, as he wasn't one for parties himself.

The feast was held at dusk, and lasted well into the night. A small band of Forsworn formed to play music, and Red Eagle himself was dragged into the dancing by Tiernach, accompanied by cheering and applause.

When the dancing died down, Red Eagle stood up, and everything fell silent. All the eyes were on him, as he walked over to where Rowan was sitting, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's time I acknowledge you as my successor," Faolan said quietly to Rowan, leading him towards the head of the table where everyone could see them. Rowan followed meekly. His feelings on the whole Chosen of the Red Eagle thing were still conflicted. He didn't ask for this burden, but in the days since returning from the tomb he has gathered the resolve to carry it, if not for his own sake, but for that of the Reach.

The two Briarhearts stood side by side now. One of the past, tall and harsh, and one of the present, softer, but still strong.

"I am not the one for pointless words," Red Eagle began, his raspy voice carrying over the quiet crowd.

"Throughout our battles, you've wondered why I chose you, Rowan of the Forsworn. Here is your answer. I have watched you since you've shown me mercy in the tomb. You do not realize it, but people see you as a leader, and trust you. And this is what the Reach needs now, even more than a warrior's prowess. It needs unity. I united the Reach by my strength alone, and it all fell apart eventually. Your strength is that of the people around you. Maybe you will be able to hold the Reach together."

When Red Eagle ended his short speech, he stepped towards Rowan. Faolan took his blade out of its scabbard, and took one of Rowan's hands, pressing the sword's hilt into it. Rowan accepted the sword silently, still trying to process everything.

"My blade is now yours, Rowan of the Forsworn. May the Reach accept you as I have."

Red Eagle stepped back, hand resting on Rowan's shoulder. The crowd stayed quiet, taking the sight of the both of them in. And then the people started cheering, quiet at first, among those who had crossed paths with Rowan in the past, and then louder, until the cheering became thunderous. Tiernan was at Rowan's side suddenly, wrapping an arm around him. Cyhrain and Madanach followed suit, and soon Rowan and Red Eagle were surrounded by people, many reaching out to touch either of them, as if trying to prove to themselves that they were real. Or maybe in Rowan's case, it was a gesture of acknowledgement.

Rowan's mind was far away, having pretty much shut down under the weight of everything. He sort of expected that Red Eagle would recognize him, but he didn't expect the burden of the entire Reach to fall onto him. He expected Red Eagle to take the lead. Not push it onto him. Rowan felt like he was pushed out of his body, listening to everything happening around it, but not completely present. He was dimly aware of Tiernan and Cyhrain being near, their arms around him. Madanach was nearby too, yelling at the crowd to give Rowan space. Red Eagle's clawed hand was still a cold weight on his shoulder. This was a mistake. Rowan wasn't fit to unite the Reach! No one could do that since Madanach and Red Eagle himself, and now even Madanach was mostly forgotten.

Rowan shrugged Red Eagle's hand off his shoulder, and turned away, clinging to Tiernan. The physical contact helped calm him somewhat, and bring him back to his body. At least no one seemed to expect a speech from him, and have mostly gone back to partying. Tiernan took advantage of that, and led Rowan away to his tent, followed by Cyhrain.

"You okay?" The werewolf asked as soon as the three of them settled Rowan down on the furs.

Rowan just shook his head slowly. Somehow through all of this he never let go of Red Eagle's blade. He now gently set it aside.

"This is... a lot. Too much. I thought he'd take the throne like the legend says."

"Maybe you should have killed him back in the tomb like he asked," Tiernan growled, busy with something by the fireplace.

Rowan shook his head again.

"It would have ended up the same, with the same burden on my shoulders. I don't regret sparing him."

Cyhrein sat by his side and cuddled up to him. Rowan wrapped an arm around them, relishing in their warmth.

"You're not alone. He's kinda right about that," Cyhrein rasped. "You have me, Tiernan, Madanach. You beat him cause you had us."

"I guess. I still don't know if I can do it, but I have to try, at least. If I succeed, the Reach will be better, and if I fail, at least there will be another tragic Reach legend to go with Red Eagle's."

Rowan let out a sad laugh. Tiernan came back from the fireplace holding a cup of tea.

"Here. Cyhrein said it's your favourite."

Rowan accepted the tea with a weak smile. Maybe there was truth in Red Eagle's words. Maybe he could do it, together with his allies. Maybe there was hope for the Reach.