

BIRTH OF A SOLDIER

A DRAGON KEEP CHRONICLES

SHORT STORY

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Birth of a Soldier

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TALAM'S HOUSE, CLAN MACDUFFY. TWO YEARS BEFORE THE START OF THE SEA WARS.

Rhys muffled a groan into his pillow and rolled over. The sky still held the darkness of pre-dawn. He rubbed his eyes. He almost regretted getting up this early. Almost.

A muffled scraping from under his bed sent him rolling to the edge and hanging over the side to peer under the frame. A tiny paw dabbed at his nose. He smiled and reached down to collect the kitten.

"Doing better this morning?" he whispered, cuddling it to his chest.

It *mrowed* in answer and snuggled against him. He checked the tiny bandage around its front leg and chest by feel in the darkness. Its coarse tongue scraped over his fingers in return. He fought back a laugh at the tickling sensation.

Rhys placed it in the folds of his blanket and reached for his shirt and boots, left carelessly on the floor beside the bed the night before. He didn't have much time to get dressed, get the kitten back out to the barn, and then meet Alan.

The kitten purred in the darkness behind him as he finished dressing and tightened his belt around his waist, the heavy knife his father had given him two birthdays ago a solid comfort against his hip. He knelt on the bed again, and gently eased the window open, allowing the cool air to ruffle past him into

the room. Collecting the kitten and nestling it under his shirt, he slipped out.

The thatched roof creaked under him as he slipped down to the edge of the house with practiced ease. The family bedrooms were on the second floor of the Talam's house, but the woodpile was conveniently stacked below Rhys's window. He caught the wooden frame of the eaves and lowered himself down to the wood, wobbling a bit as the split logs shifted under his weight. He sat and hopped off, landing lightly on the ground.

Nothing stirred in the house or the yard. He ran around the corner of the house, across the wide yard, and eased the barn door open. The plow horses shifted in their stalls and whuffed a greeting. They were used to his routine by now. A low crooning moo came from the back where a mother cow nursed her calf. Rhys headed past the animals, stopping only to rub the dozing hound's ear as he passed a pile of hay.

Clambering up into the hay loft, he dug the kitten out of his shirt where it had fallen asleep again. It yawned in protest, tiny pink tongue flickering, before it snuggled down into its nest of old blankets and straw.

"Be back later," he promised and retreated from the barn as quickly as he had come. He paused only to retrieve the wooden practice sword hidden behind the low stone fence bordering the back of the Talam's yard, before setting off towards the town at a quick jog.

Dim light had begun to gather at the horizon when he spotted the figure on the side of the road. Alan looked up, yawning widely as Rhys ran up.

"I was about to fall asleep waiting for you." Alan stood and headed up the incline that rose against the road, on the other side of which was a sheltered dell far enough from both the town and the Talam's house to wake anyone with their clatter.

"I had to take care of Freya first." Rhys replied, setting his practice blade down and joining Alan in the stretching routine.

Alan huffed in amusement. "That thing hasn't died yet?"

A bit of indignation stirred in Rhys. "She's getting better every day!"

"Your father figured out you're keeping her under your bed yet?"

Rhys smirked. His father never allowed animals into the house. Which made it more difficult, or fun, whenever Rhys came home with his latest stray.

"Not yet. Sean doesn't know, so there's no one to squeal on me unless you do."

Alan picked up his sword and swung it a few times. "What do you take me for?"

"A terrible teacher."

Alan snorted in mock offense. "All right. Here's what we went over yesterday." He began to lead Rhys through the new forms, his silhouette growing more visible with the light. Once Rhys grew more comfortable with the new drills, they moved into repetition, and Alan spoke again.

"You asked your father again?"

Rhys snorted, pulling back from a lunge. "No. It's going to be the same answer it was the last ten times. 'You have a duty to the land.'"

Every time he heard it, he felt like a piece of him died. The part that came alive with a sword in his hands.

“You were the best of our age group when we finished training last year.” Alan grunted as he straightened. No doubt sore from having trained for hours the day before. His uncle, Laird Brogan MacDuffy, had instantly granted Alan’s wish to keep training after the mandatory two years. Alan could be a warrior, or whatever he wanted. Rhys, it seemed, had an inexcusable duty as the eldest son of the laird’s farming steward.

He didn’t even like farming.

“That doesn’t matter. Even the captain came and asked my father. His answer is still no. Why do you think we’re still out here at this hour?”

Five months ago, Rhys had turned sixteen, thus ending his two years of training. His father had denied his request to join the warriors. Two months ago, Rhys thought he would burst from the injustice of it, until Alan had offered to teach him what he could.

It meant getting up earlier than anyone else, practicing for nearly an hour, then performing his normal duties on the farm, then maybe another hour of practice in the evenings with Alan or by himself if Alan couldn’t get away. So far, they hadn’t been discovered. But Rhys had almost fallen asleep on his feet twice in the last week. He still wasn’t about to give up.

“All right, let’s try a round.” Alan turned towards him, bringing his sword up in a ready position.

The light was getting brighter, and their eyes adjusted enough to see. Rhys shifted his feet. He felt the imbalance in the wood, the inadequacy of it. He wished for the dull steel blades that he’d used for the last two years, but those would be more easily missed from the training yards than the easily whittled wooden blades.

Alan began the fight, slashing down in a quick strike. Rhys parried and sidestepped away from Alan's follow up blow. The racket of their blunts against each other echoed back off the low hills surrounding them. They'd frozen in terror the first few days, certain someone would hear and come investigate. But when nothing had stirred the darkness around them, they'd proceeded to fight with fearless abandon.

They called it off when Rhys's blunt cracked. He froze. Alan muttered a word they weren't strictly supposed to know.

I don't have time to make another one.

"Guess that means we're done for today." Alan lifted one shoulder, sounding just as unhappy.

Rhys held the sword limply in his hand. He'd check it later in the full light. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it had sounded.

A rooster crowed from some farm, carrying across the stillness of the morning. Rhys cursed and whirled back up the hill.

"I'm late!"

Alan hastened after him, still beating him to the top of the hill. "We meeting later?" He panted from the quick burst, following Rhys back down the road.

"I don't know. I have to go out into the fields this afternoon."

"I can come help so you can get done early," Alan offered. While it wasn't unusual for Alan to come work alongside Rhys in the fields, it meant taking him away from his afternoon training. Which meant taking away something he could teach Rhys.

"No. I'll go over the new forms myself tonight. Besides." He tried to smile. "I'll probably have to make myself a new sword anyway."

"You sure?" Alan didn't offer, knowing that Rhys would refuse him sneaking another blunt from the training yards. Too many and someone would get suspicious. Besides, Rhys liked making it himself. It made him feel like he was actually doing something instead of kicking his heels up in the dirt.

"Aye. See you tomorrow." Rhys lifted a hand in a wave before breaking back into a jog. He had half a mile to cover and chores to start before his father could notice him missing.

He started in the barn, dumping small measures of grain into feedbuckets and hauling fresh water for the horse and cows. Chickens chased after him on his trips back and forth from the well until he scattered grain for them too. He climbed up into the hayloft and grabbed the pitchfork, tossing forkfuls of hay down into the stalls with practiced flicks.

The kitten dogged his steps, pink mouth parted in hungry meows. He scooped her back up and gently scratched between her ears, earning a small purr.

"I'm going to get breakfast now," he promised.

He slid down the ladder from the hayloft and thumped to the ground. Grabbing the milk buckets, he went into the first stall with a cow, and began milking. Despite the ache for something more, the quiet of the barn, disturbed only by the sounds of animals contentedly chewing, still settled him.

The kitten's meows became more insistent. He scooped a cupful of the milk and left it out of reach of the hound who eyed the loft curiously, before taking the pails around to the kitchen. By now the house was stirring. The kitchen door stood open, emitting the sounds of conversation and pans rattling.

He knocked dirt from his boots before taking the two steps into the house in one stride. His mother half-turned from the stove and flashed him a smile.

“Morning!”

He dutifully went over to her for the kiss she planted on the top of his head every morning, even though he’d almost outgrown her.

“Milk by the cellar,” Ciara said as if he hadn’t been bringing it in since he was old enough to lug the pails in one at a time.

“Morning, Rhys!” Eireen glanced up from the table where she kneaded dough.

“Morning.” He flashed a smile. She was about his age, and had worked for his parents for the past two years. She could be counted on to help take care of his animals if he couldn’t.

“How’s Freya?” She rubbed flour away from her nose with her shoulder.

“Getting better.”

“It has a name now, I hear.” Ciara smiled at him.

“Names are important!” He set the pails down. “I’m going to go feed her.”

“Breakfast is in a few minutes. Don’t take too long!” Ciara called after him as he went back outside.

Back in the hayloft, he placed the kitten in his lap and began soaking a cloth in the milk and letting the kitten suck it dry. After a few rounds with the cloth, he allowed it to dip its face into the shallow cup and try drinking. It came up with whiskers and nose beaded with milk. He laughed and wiped it clean just in time for the kitten to resubmerge itself.

The barn door creaked below, and footsteps creaked up the ladder. A head of wavy red hair emerged over the top of the ladder. Sean leaned on the top of the ladder to watch the kitten.

"How's she doing?" He frowned at the way his voice cracked a little. Rhys tried not to laugh. Sean's voice had been all over the place since he'd turned thirteen.

"Good." Rhys wiped the kitten's face off again before she scrambled off his lap to go explore.

A strip of matted fur still clung to her back and she limped around on the bandaged forepaw. He'd found her in the lower fields, mired in mud and half starved. It looked like she'd been abandoned. He'd taken her home immediately, somewhat to his father's irritation since it meant he didn't finish clearing the rocks from the soil. Everyone had told him that she wouldn't last long. Some sort of infection had gotten into scrapes on her back and paw. But a week later, she was almost a normal kitten.

"You sleep all right last night?" Rhys asked. He'd woken up once by the nudge at his shoulder telling him Sean was restless.

Sean nodded, biting his lip as his blue eyes stared at something beyond Rhys.

Rhys reached out to ruffle Sean's hair. Sean ducked away with a scowl, his face reverting to his normal self, not the sometimes painfully *other* look when he had after a vision.

"I've been Seeing some strange things. They don't really make sense," he admitted.

"You told Father?" Rhys scooped up the kitten as she strayed too close to the edge of the loft.

Sean shook his head. "I don't think it's anything too serious that Laird Brogan would need to know."

Rhys almost hated how old Sean sounded. Like he wasn't barely thirteen.

"Let me know, all right?" Rhys leveled a serious look at Sean. Sean had started trying to deal with his gift on his own sometimes and not telling Rhys when it got bad.

Sean nodded, resting his chin on the top rung with a sigh.

Idiot.

From the moment Sean was born, three-year-old Rhys had been protective, able to tell where Sean was, what his mood was. If he was having visions. Sometimes the only one able to comfort him. Last winter, Sean had spent more time in Rhys's bed than his own because of visions that left him troubled or silently crying over things he couldn't change. Rhys hated how the gift didn't even spare someone so young.

"Come on. Let's get breakfast." He nudged Sean back down the ladder and raced him back into the house. Rhys and Sean slammed into their chairs beside each other. Their father just raised an eyebrow at the clatter. Ciara came out with full plates of eggs, biscuits, and sausage.

She sat down to Dermot's left-hand side. After a quick blessing, Rhys and Sean tucked in.

"Are you sure we don't just have bottomless wells for sons?" Dermot raised a wry eyebrow at Ciara. She chuckled as she spread apple butter on her biscuit.

"Sean, slow down."

He looked up guiltily from where he'd shoved half a sausage in his mouth.

"Rhys, you, Sean and Tommy need to finish clearing out the lower field today. We need it ready for the summer planting

next week.” Dermot scraped his plate clean. “I need to go see to the eastern holdings.”

Rhys nodded, still intent on his food.

“You been getting enough sleep, son?”

Rhys jerked his head up when he realized Dermot had addressed him instead of Sean.

He mutely nodded, afraid to speak unless he betrayed his secret and brought up the argument with his father again. His father regarded him with quiet brown eyes, his weathered face creasing a little more in concern. Rhys swallowed and looked down at his plate. He hated worrying anyone. But he had to keep training.

I have to. I can't be a farmer for the rest of my life. I can't take over as Talam. It's just not me.

Dermot cleared his throat, but didn't press. The meal ended a few short minutes later. Rhys and Sean met Tommy outside as he and the other men who normally helped look after the Talam's personal lands arrived. They grabbed their tools and headed down to the lower fields, walking along the low rock walls dividing the fields already waist high with wheat and corn.

The morning passed with Tommy and Rhys digging out stubborn stones and Sean taking them to the outskirts of the fields to add to the fence. The freshly tilled field hadn't been planted in two years as it rested. But it still seemed that rocks had found a way to grow and had been unearthed in the plowing.

They stopped only for lunch. Rhys dozed off against the wall, the warmth of the summer sun drying his sweat-soaked

shirt. Sean's foot in his ribs nudged him awake. He shielded his eyes and frowned up at Sean.

His brother crossed his arms and stared down at Rhys. Rhys looked away. If he knew everything about Sean, his brother knew him too. And he knew when Rhys was hiding something. Some people whispered that they had a mythical blood bond, shared by powerful Seers and a close blood relative. Rhys thought it was stupid. They were just brothers.

But Sean didn't protest as Rhys shoved to his feet and went back to work. Alan didn't come. Not that Rhys had expected him to, but Rhys suddenly wanted his friend there to talk to about everything. A nagging worry had built up in his mind after seeing Sean's look in the hayloft.

The sun hovered low in the sky when they finished moving the last of the stones and began their long trek back. Light washed the green hills in a gentle golden light, casting long shadows from the larger boulders and trees that grew between fields. Tommy whistled a meandering tune. Rhys took Tommy's tools for him and waved as they parted ways, Tommy returning to his own family's house.

They stored the shovels and picks in the shed behind the barn. Sean waited while Rhys checked on Freya one more time before walking across the wide yard back to the house.

Rhys stopped a few paces from the porch, realizing Sean had fallen behind. Sean stood, eyes wide as the rest of him froze in place. He swayed once, then fell to his knees.

Stormagh! Rhys ran over, catching Sean before he pitched forward to the ground. He gently tipped Sean's face toward him. Sean's pupils were wide, and he stared unseeing at Rhys.

In a vision. Sean hadn't had a vision when he was awake in a long time.

Rhys kept a steadying hand across Sean's shoulders as he waited for Sean to come out of the vision. It happened suddenly. Sean shuddered and nearly wrenched from Rhys's hold.

"Sean!"

But a moan and a gag from Sean cut him off. He moved too slow as Sean vomited across the ground and Rhys's leg.

"Really?" he muttered, trying not to gag himself as it soaked through his trousers. He scooted away, moving Sean with him to sit up and lean against him.

"You all right?" He nudged Sean's arm.

A scream tore from Sean in response. Rhys started back, but grabbed Sean's shoulders and pressed him close as the tears began to fall.

"It's all right, it's all right," he repeated helplessly as Sean sobbed into his chest. Footsteps pounded on the porch and Dermot crashed to his knees beside them.

"What happened?" he demanded, resting a hand over Rhys's where he protectively held Sean.

"He had some sort of vision, threw up, and then started doing this," Rhys explained helplessly as Sean clutched tighter to him.

"Sean?" Dermot gently pried him from Rhys's arms. Their mother appeared and rubbed a hand through Sean's hair as he gasped for breath.

"He's burning up." She frowned. "Let's get you to bed."

Dermot scooped up Sean and carried him into the house, leaving Rhys sitting in the dirt staring after them, confusion and unease warring in his heart.

Slowly, he got to his feet and went inside. The large common room stood empty, the dining table set for supper, but the steaming dishes forgotten. Rhys climbed the stairs to the upper loft, weariness clinging to his bones.

He paused in Sean's doorway. His mother sat on the edge of Sean's bed, her hand resting on his shoulder. But he was curled away from her, clutching at the blankets covering him.

Dermot stood beside her, a frown twisting his features.

"How is he?" Rhys asked.

His father crossed over to him. "He looks to be all right. Maybe just in shock at what he saw. He didn't say anything?" Dermot kept his gruff voice low.

A sniff came from Sean's direction. Whatever it was, was bad.

Rhys rubbed a hand over his face and shrugged. "Nothing."

His father tucked a hand around the back of Rhys's neck, checking him over. "You all right?"

Rhys nodded again, still staring at the lump of Sean.

Dermot wrinkled his nose. "Looks like you need to go change too."

Rhys glanced down at his stained trousers and managed a smile. "He's going to pay for throwing up on me later."

Dermot chuckled and nudged him back to the door. "Go on, then. Your mother will stay with him for now."

Rhys continued the few more feet to the end of the loft and entered his room. He sank onto the bed and kicked off his boots to lay strewn across the floor. The bed tempted him to forget dinner and Sean and just sleep. Standing with a sigh, he pulled out fresh trousers and a shirt from his chest and changed. He carefully gathered up the dirty trousers and headed back

downstairs, barefoot. The main room remained empty as he went back outside.

He circled around to the back of the house and left his trousers in the washbasin before going to the well. The well-worn dirt of the yard warmed his bare feet as he hauled up a bucket and took it back around.

Eireen met him there, a block of soap in her hand. "Here." She held out a hand for the bucket. But he dumped it in and let her take over scrubbing the mess from his trousers. He sank onto the nearby bench, leaning forward on his knees.

"Thanks."

Her nod brought her braid sliding over her shoulder. "How's Sean?"

Rhys shrugged. "Father said he looked fine. I'm not sure what happened."

"Are you all right?" She tilted a glance at him as she wrung soap out.

Sudden irritation flashed through him at being asked the same question three times that day.

"I'm fine!" he snapped.

She merely raised an eyebrow. He sighed and hung his head forward, rubbing at his eyes.

"Sorry. I'm just tired."

"You going to ask your father again instead of sneaking out for the rest of your life?"

His head flew up. "What?"

A smile tugged at her mouth. "I've passed Alan on the road here at least four times in the last few months. And each time he's been holding a training sword. Not too hard to figure out what he's been doing."

Rhys stared, swallowing hard.

"I haven't said anything."

"Thanks." He cleared his throat. "But it's going to be the same answer. I know you heard the last time I asked."

She wrung out the cloth with a wry smile. "I think all of the highlands heard." She came around, setting a hip against the tub as she held out the pants. "Maybe it'll all work out, right?"

He scoffed as he stood and clipped them to the line. "Maybe." He shifted his hands to his hips and stared out over the fields, shadowed in the fading light. "Don't you want to do something other than stay here and help my mother in the house? Something more than becoming assistant to your parents at the physicians?"

She sighed, crossing her arms as she came to stand by him. "Sometimes. My father's taken an apprentice and has made no secret that he wants me to marry him in a few years. But I want nothing more than to leave with Casey MacLarra the next time he and his father bring their horse herd to our markets. My parents won't hear of such a thing, so you tell me what I should do then."

Rhys sighed. "I think it would be more serious for you to be caught sneaking out."

Eireen huffed a sarcastic laugh.

"But I think you should do it anyway." He tilted his head enough to offer her a smile. "Even if Casey MacLarra is a reckless idiot."

Her features softened to a smile. "Aye. But I think he's my reckless idiot."

Rhys's chuckle died almost as fast as it came. "I haven't found a way to show how important this is to me yet. Maybe you can find a way to show your parents and one of us can be happy."

She nudged his shoulder. "You're very dramatic, you know?" But longing didn't quite leave her voice.

A smile tugged at his mouth. "Side effect of having Sean as a brother."

She laughed again. "Maybe I'll try then." She went back to tip the sudsy water out on the ground. "See you tomorrow, Rhys."

"Thanks again." Rhys lifted a hand in farewell as she left by way of the main road with one last wave.

He and his father ate in quiet, Ciara still sitting upstairs with Sean. They cleared the table themselves. Rhys scrubbed the dishes clean in the kitchen with more water hauled in and his father dried and put them away. The entire time they worked, Dermot stayed silent. Rhys knew his father was waiting for him to talk. But they'd left the table and he didn't know how to bring up what he wanted again.

Rhys headed upstairs, pausing at Sean's door one last time. Ciara sat in a chair now. Sean hadn't moved.

"Sean?" Rhys asked tentatively from the door. Fear and unease toiled inside him, but not all of it was from him.

"Go 'way!" Sean's muffled voice came back.

Ciara tipped a look of pleading sympathy at him. But he already knew what she didn't say. Sean didn't mean anything by it. He just wasn't ready to talk.

"Good night," Rhys said instead. Ciara got up to come kiss his head again.

He fell into bed, wrapping his blankets around him and staring out the window at the starry expanse.

Ilan, please help Sean. I just want him to be all right. He didn't really pray much, so he never quite knew what to say. *And—I don't know—maybe help me figure out how to show Father how much I want to keep training?* The stars winked back in quiet commiseration. *Please?*

Restless sleep plagued him all night. He woke once or twice, thinking he'd see Sean standing by the bed, poised to wake him. But Sean never came, and neither did the nudge at his shoulder. Sean didn't want him to come.

He peeled his eyes open with the dawn, smothered in deeper grey by clouds that had snuck in overnight. Rhys sat bolt upright in bed. He'd overslept and had missed Alan. But regrets were chased away by an ache that came to nag the muscles in his shoulders and neck. Grittiness filled his eyes and didn't leave no matter how much he rubbed.

He straightened his clothes, trying to swallow away the dryness in his mouth. The air seemed too thick. He grumbled under his breath. *If Sean got me sick, I'll kick his arshe.*

Rhys stumbled down the stairs, mechanically starting his chores. Freya couldn't tease a smile from him even as he apologized for leaving her in the barn overnight. He still made it to the breakfast table before his father did. Leaning forward on the table, he pillowed his head on his arms as his eyes dragged shut. Everything ached, his head pounded, and even the scent of hotcakes couldn't tempt his stomach into growling. The thought of heading back out into the lower field was nauseating.

“Rhys?” His father’s voice tugged his head up. He blinked blearily at Dermot.

His father frowned in concern and reached over to place a hand on his head. “You all right, lad?”

Rhys nodded and tried to straighten. The worry from last night still creased Dermot’s face and he didn’t want to make it worse.

“Ciara!” Dermot called over his shoulder.

“M fine,” Rhys mumbled, starting to reach for food, but he wasn’t hungry at all.

His mother crossed over from the kitchen, coming around to tilt his head up to her.

“You look terrible.” She felt for fever.

“Thanks.” He tried to smile, but it came out more a grimace.

Her face twisted in concern. “You never get sick.”

She and Dermot exchanged a glance over his head. He would have rolled his eyes if they didn’t ache so much. He knew that they were thinking of the supposed blood bond.

“Back to bed with you.” His mother rested a hand on his shoulder.

He began to protest. There was too much to do. The field had to be finished. He had to change Freya’s bandage. Find Alan to apologize. Practice the forms he never did last night. And try and get Sean to talk to him.

“Listen to your mother.” Dermot put it. “We can catch up the work tomorrow.”

“I’ll bring up some soup later.”

Rhys pushed back from the table, suddenly too tired to argue. Maybe the last few months had finally caught up to him in the

stress of Sean's strange vision. He stumbled back up the stairs, ignoring the murmured conversation his parents fell in to.

"Rhys?" Sean's quiet voice halted him as he passed the door.

He went in and sat on the edge of Sean's bed. "How you feeling?"

Sean's head poked out from under the blankets. His freckles still stood out too sharp against the paleness of his face. "Better than you look, probably."

Rhys reached over and shoved his shoulder. "I think you got me sick."

Sean emerged a little more. "Sorry."

Rhys made to get up, but Sean tugged at his shirtsleeve. "Can you stay for a little bit?"

He kicked off his boots and flipped back the blankets. "Move."

Sean scooted over, letting him slide in. Rhys stole the extra pillow that Sean usually hugged and tucked it under his head.

They lay in silence for a few minutes, both staring at the wooden ceiling beams. Rhys suddenly felt a little more awake.

"I saw something horrible last night," Sean finally said in a small voice. "It was a war, I think. The vision wasn't very clear, but I just felt scared, and sad, and angry all at once. I think it happens here."

Rhys turned his head to look at him. "The highlands?"

"No. Just here in Alsaya." Sean paused a moment longer, biting at his lower lip. "I think you were there, but I just got the feeling that something really terrible was going to happen."

"You sure? How am I supposed to be in a war when Father won't let me train?" Rhys didn't keep the bitterness from his voice.

"I don't think you want to go, Rhys. It looked awful." Sean's voice hitched unevenly.

No, I really do. "What else did you see?" he asked instead.

"Lots of other jumbled things that don't make sense. But then at the end, I saw this really dark *thing* and it felt like it was coming for me. That's what scared me the most. I kept dreaming about it all night. Nightmare," he clarified.

"You think it was real?"

Sean shrugged. "Things from my visions always come true somehow. But all of it was in the future and I don't know when." He brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. "Father said I needed to tell Brogan about the war."

"I wonder if the other Seers have seen anything about it," Rhys mused.

Sean shivered beside him.

"What?" Rhys turned again.

"It's just...remember how MacCullough's Seer told me I was really gifted?"

Rhys nodded. They'd both gone the summer before to MacCullough's holdings for Sean to study a few weeks with their Seer. Rhys had gone only because Sean had begged for him to go.

"What?" Rhys prodded when Sean lapsed into silence again.

"I don't know. Ever since then I've been afraid that maybe I'll dream something so important they'll take me away and lock me in a tower or something until I keep dreaming important things." Red tinged his pale cheeks. "It's stupid, I know."

Rhys nudged his shoulder. "It is stupid. Because I'd never let anyone take you. You know that, right?"

A grin quirked the corner of Sean's mouth as relief shone in his eyes. He sobered just as quickly. "But what happens when you leave?"

"What do you mean?"

A sigh broke from Sean, and he rolled to face Rhys. "I mean, you're not going to stay here." He said it so matter-of-factly that Rhys wondered if he'd seen it. "You want to leave, to go train, to go be a warrior. I see it in your face every day."

This time Rhys sighed. "I just can't be a farmer, Sean. It's not in my blood like it is in your and Father's."

"And what, being a warrior is?" Sean rolled away.

Rhys tucked a hand behind his head. "I don't know. But even if I did convince Father to let me join the warriors, it's not like I'd go very far. I'd just be up in the town."

"And what if they sent Alan away to some other outpost? Would you go with him?"

Rhys turned, surprised at the jealousy in Sean's voice. "Sean, you know Alan's like another brother to me. But he's not ever going to replace you. No one is."

Sean scrubbed at his nose. "I know." His voice compressed again. "But if both of you went, then I'd lose two brothers and then what happens?"

"Hey now." Rhys half turned towards him. "No one's taking you away. And no matter what I do, nothing's going to take me away from you. That's a promise, Sean."

Sean blinked rapidly a few times. Rhys pulled him close and let Sean press his face into his shoulder.

"Do you have to go back to work?" Sean's voice muffled against his shirt.

Rhys ruffled his curly hair. “No. Father sent me back up to rest. I swear if you got me sick, I’ll kick your *arshe*.”

Sean’s shoulders shook with a laugh. “I said sorry!”

Rhys rolled his eyes, and nudged him away. His spirits lifted at the impish grin that had taken over Sean’s face. He swore he felt better just looking at it.

“I’m assuming since you’re not up yet, Mother wants you to stay in bed too?”

Sean nodded.

“All right. Go back to sleep then.” Rhys pushed him back to his side of the bed.

Sean stuck his tongue out, but flipped over onto his stomach and closed his eyes. Rhys settled more comfortably on his side, leaving his arm draped over Sean.

Sean was asleep in minutes, his breathing lulling Rhys’s eyes closed. *Just for a little bit. I’m already feeling better.*



Shortly before the noon hour, Dermot climbed the stairs to check on his sons. As expected, Rhys was with Sean. He lay on his side, arm draped protectively over his younger brother, both still asleep. Dermot eased his way across the floor, crossing his arms as he stared down at them.

Rhys was growing up and sometimes it sounded like Sean already had. He rubbed a calloused hand over his beard.

Is that why I won't let Rhys join the warriors? I don't want to admit he's almost a man?

He sighed. He could see it in Rhys's eyes. The desire for something more than farming. The hurt and anger when he denied his son's request to join the warriors for the third time. But he also didn't want to take Rhys away from Sean. Because if something happened to Rhys, then he was sure it would break Sean.

Maybe I don't have enough faith in my sons. Nothing would take Rhys away from him.

"Dermot," Ciara whispered. She stood in the doorway, a shadow behind her.

Dermot nodded and went back over to greet Brogan, Laird of MacDuffy and current Chieftain of the Seven Clans.

"Brogan."

"Dermot." Brogan looked past him to the sleeping boys. "That's a strange sight. Your boys not giving everything they have to their work."

Dermot allowed a smile. "Rhys looked like death this morning, and Sean hasn't been himself since last night."

Brogan nodded. "You think it's connected?"

Dermot hid a sigh. The blood bond. Some thought his boys had it—a connection that ran soul deep between a Seer and another. It would explain how Rhys always knew where Sean was. How Sean always knew how to tread around whatever mood had hold of Rhys.

Some days he hoped they didn't have it.

"I don't know. But from the look of Rhys over the past few months, this has been some time coming."

Brogan offered a wry smile. "You think it has something to do with sneaking out to train with my nephew in the wee hours of the morning for weeks now?"

Dermot glanced sharply at his laird.

“Alan’s not as subtle as he thinks he is.” Brogan crossed his arms. “He also doesn’t know I sometimes wake early to get started on my day and he has to pass my office to get outside.”

Dermot shook his head. So Rhys was determined to keep training, no matter what.

“It’s your decision, Dermot. He’s your son. But I don’t know that you can keep him from the warrior’s life.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Ciara offered an understanding smile from where she leaned against the door behind Brogan. They’d discussed it at length the last time Dermot had denied Rhys. Their son hadn’t spoken to him for nearly two days unless strictly necessary.

He went back to the bed and laid a gentle hand on Rhys’s shoulder, calling him. Rhys started awake, curling more protectively towards Sean until recognition brightened in his eyes. He half turned to take in his mother and Brogan also standing in the room.

He looked back to Dermot, his brown eyes clearer and more alert than they had been that morning. His head tilted the question, and Dermot nodded. Rhys scooted closer to Sean, nudging him awake. Sean rolled over so fast that Dermot wondered if he’d already been awake and just listening to him and Brogan talk.

Rhys sat up to swing his legs off the bed, looking guiltily at his boots on the ground as if embarrassed to have been caught off guard by everyone. Sean curled his knees up to his chest, clutching at the blankets.

“Laird Brogan.” Rhys nodded, and Sean murmured the greeting after him.

"I hear you had a strong vision last night, Sean. Can you tell me about it?" Brogan stepped a little closer. Dermot dragged over the low chair for him to sit by the bed. Rhys stayed where he was, almost protectively beside Sean. Sean kept his same position, his eyes going out of focus for a moment before he looked back at Brogan and began to relate the things he'd Seen.

War. Death. The sea.

But Dermot got the feeling there was more. Rhys leaned a little closer as Sean faltered a few times. Brogan's attention never wavered.

"MacCullough and MacLarra's Seers have reported some things like this. But not quite so detailed yet," he said when Sean finished.

Sean sniffed and rubbed at his nose.

"I'll send messengers to them. You might have to meet with them, Sean."

A bit of fear flickered across his younger son's face, but he squared his shoulders and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And there's nothing else you saw?" Brogan pressed gently.

Sean dropped his gaze, fingers fiddling with a bit of string that had come unwoven from the blanket. He slowly shook his head.

Brogan raised an eyebrow at Dermot who inclined his head. He'd talk to Sean later and see. Though from the wary look Rhys darted between them, his older son already knew. But Dermot didn't alert Brogan of this. His boys usually came clean eventually, and if it was serious, Rhys would find a way to let him know. He always did.

"Then I'll be on my way back." Brogan slapped a hand against his thigh and pushed upright.

"Have a drink before you go." Ciara walked him downstairs.

Dermot lingered a moment, looking at the boys. Sean rubbed his nose, trying to scrub some of the guilt away. Rhys opened his mouth, hovering on the edge of a breath.

"It just scared me is all, Father," Sean admitted.

Dermot nodded. "All right then. How are you feeling, lad?" He pressed a hand against Rhys's forehead.

Rhys ducked away with a scowl, combing a hand through his mussed hair. Sean smirked a little.

"I'm fine."

"Sean?"

"I'm all right, Father." A hint of Sean's normal cheer shone through.

"The fields can wait till tomorrow. I'll go see Brogan off. Your mother was going to bring up food for the both of you."

They perked up at the mention of food. *Bottomless wells.*

"Don't be fretting her," he said and received dutiful nods in return.

Dermot hid a sigh. It was so easy to see them as young lads, not one of the cusp of manhood and the other about to begin maturity. They had the day off, but he'd walk the fields anyway to think. He and Rhys needed to have a talk.



The afternoon away from the fields turned into one of forced inactivity as their mother decreed a few more hours in bed would have them both "righter than mist on the moors."

Rhys chafed at the inactivity, but Sean was more content to burrow back in the blankets. Thirty minutes after their plates had been whisked away, Rhys grabbed his pillow and slammed it into Sean's chest.

"Hey!" Sean pushed it away, righteous indignation in his face.

"I'm *bored*." Rhys swung again.

Sean ducked, then retaliated with his pillow, catching Rhys on the side. He dodged to the foot of the bed, gaining a slight advantage on his knees and pummeling Sean who gave up on his pillow and dove forward to tackle Rhys around the waist.

Teetering precariously, a frantic laugh burst from him before they tumbled off the end of the bed.

"Boys!" Ciara shouted from downstairs in response to the impact.

"Shh!" Sean attempted to smother Rhys's laugh with the pillow. Rhys jabbed him in the stomach.

From there it fell into a full out scuffle on the floor, the pillow exchanging hands frequently. A thump on the stairs sent them scrambling back into bed, straightening clothes and blankets, and adopting innocent expressions as Ciara strode around the doorway.

She surveyed them, hands on hips, finally shaking her head. "I suppose you lasted longer than I thought you would. Though if that pillow is ruined, you boys are stuffing me a new one."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"No end of trouble, you boys. I should have prayed harder for girls." But the smile lurking under the pursed lips told

another story. She exaggerated a sigh. "Might as well get up since Alan's waiting outside for you, Rhys."

Rhys bolted out of bed, hopping from foot to foot as he pulled boots back on. He paused to plant a kiss on Ciara's cheek.

"Love you, Mother!"

"Away with you!" She shooed him.

"Don't take forever, Sean!" Rhys called over his shoulder as he ran to the stairs. He leapt the last six steps, thumping to the floor accompanied by his mother's,

"Rhys *MacDuffy*! What have I said—"

"Sorry, Ma!" He spun before pushing out the door.

Alan waited in the yard, kicking at clods of dirt. "Finally!" He threw hands wide when Rhys jumped down from the porch. "Your mother made it sound like you were at death's door!"

"We're fine. What are you doing here?" The middle of the afternoon meant Alan could be training.

"Afternoon off. And I can't come see my friend and his annoying little brother?"

"Very funny, Alan," Sean's voice oozed the accompanying eye roll.

"When are you going to accept that I'm always hilarious?" Alan draped an arm around Sean's shoulders, having to stoop a little. Like Rhys, Alan had undergone several growth spurts that year alone, keeping Alan's aunt and Rhys's mother constantly muttering about trouser lengths and new boots.

Rhys watched fondly as Alan checked on Sean in an intentionally careless manner. He and Alan had been inseparable since they'd met at three years old. Alan a wide-eyed, with-

drawn child whose father was dead and whose mother had left him with his Uncle Brogan and run off.

He'd grown to be friendly with most people, unlike Rhys who more carefully chose his friends. But never complained about how often Sean tagged along, instead treating him just like a younger brother Rhys often suspected Alan wished he had.

"Come on, I brought something," Alan's arm descended over Rhys's shoulders, steering him toward the barn.

Alan paused as they passed the corner of the house and saw Eireen hanging clothes.

"Eireen, you look lovely today!" he called.

"Caitlin's still mad at you," she returned without even looking away from her work.

Rhys laughed as Alan's shoulders slumped. "I told you not to mention the tapestry," he said.

"I told you not to mention the tapestry!" Alan mimicked in a high-pitched voice. "It's hideous."

"It's also a present from a MacLarraigh trying to make a deal for her hand in a few years," Rhys said.

"Then it should be a warning sign." For some reason an edge had come into Alan's voice. "And good luck trying to marry her off."

They circled the barn and Alan gestured grandly to the two wooden blunts leaning against the wall.

"I worried a bit when you didn't show this morning until Uncle told me what'd happened," Alan explained.

Sean dropped to the sun-warmed grass and leaned against the wall. He, of course, knew about Rhys sneaking off, but had dutifully sworn secrecy.

“And I figured you hadn’t gotten a chance to make a new one yet.”

Rhys shook his head and grabbed one. A bit of his restlessness stilled into focus with the promise of being able to hit something.

An hour later, he wiped sweat from his forehead. Alan rested the tip of his blunt in the ground.

“Want a turn, Sean?”

Sean shook his head, his features scrunching up into distaste.

“Ah, you’ll get over it when you hold a real one next year.” Alan waved him off.

But Rhys shared the uncertainty in Sean’s eyes. He didn’t think, didn’t really want, his little brother to take to the training as well as he had.

Instead he turned to the fields, stretching his arms overhead and resting the blunt across his shoulders. His father’s broad shoulders and head were visible on the far side of the upper wheat field as he strode slowly around. Thinking.

It looked like it might be serious. Dermot only walked the fields like that when faced with impossibilities or thinking of the future. Maybe Rhys’s future.

Restlessness surged again. He needed to keep moving. He spun back to Alan and Sean.

“Want to go to the river?”

Sean jumped to his feet and sped off. “Race you!”

Alan rested his blunt back up against the wall, taking as much care as if it were a real sword, then took off after Sean. Rhys did the same with his practice weapon, pausing once more to glance at his father.

Dermot looked up just then, watching Rhys for a moment. Rhys swallowed hard before turning on his heel and running after the others. He leaned into the wind, forcing himself faster and faster until his worries blinked away for a few steps to be replaced by a new resolve.

War was coming and he wasn't going to let Alan march off without him. Maybe he needed to talk to his father again.



An hour at the river turned into hours walking the empty highlands between farmers' fields. Alan parted from them on the main road back to town as they headed back to the Talam's house. Sean and Rhys finished the walk in silence, heading to the barn and starting on the evening chores. Fields could wait, but animals needed feeding and milking.

Freya surprise attacked Rhys's boot as he stepped out of the plow horse's stall.

"How'd you get down here?" He scooped her up.

She squirmed and *mrowed*, batting at his fingers with tiny paws.

"Hurry up. I'm starving!" Sean shouted after him as he climbed back to the loft with the kitten and the bowl of milk.

"Go ahead then." Rhys waved him off, settling down in the stillness and quiet to check the bandages and make sure she drank all the milk. He spent a few extra minutes trailing a long bit of hay for her to stalk while he tried to think of another way to convince his father to let him go back to the training.

Finally he sighed, tossing the straw away. Freya bounded after it, purring contentedly as she settled with it between her paws to gnaw. He slid back down the ladder and headed into the house.

Turning on the porch, he stared out over the barn and fields and distant houses. The setting summer sun bathed it all in a hazy sort of light as it sank over the higher hills. It looked the same, it *always* looked the same, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed with Sean's vision.

But it's not going to change anything for me. He bitterly turned into the house, making sure to wash his hands before sliding into his seat at the table.

He ate in silence, stabbing at his food. His parents didn't say anything, asking Sean instead about the day. Sean darted glances to him through the meal, but didn't push as to the sudden change in his mood.

As they finished, Rhys grabbed his plate, preparing to help clean up, but Dermot reached out.

"Stay for a bit, Rhys."

He obediently sank back into his chair and surrendered the plate to his mother. She and Sean cleared the table. Sean had that *older* look again as he glanced between them. Rhys waited in silence. Dermot sipped the last of his ale.

Then finally, the dining room was cleared and the only sounds that broke through the house were Ciara and Sean doing the dishes.

Rhys skimmed a thumb along the table's grain. Usually he was the one who asked his father to wait at the table so they could talk about something important. He didn't even know how or why he'd started doing it. Just one day, he'd needed

to talk, and they'd sat at the table working through it until the candles burned low. Ever since then, if he had something to say, or Dermot needed him to hear, it happened at the table after dinner.

He did have something to ask, but it didn't seem like the time to.

"I saw you practicing with Alan earlier." Dermot spun the mug between his hands.

Rhys swallowed hard, still focused on the path of his finger. "It's just to keep up with some of the training."

"Is it?" The words held a weight behind them.

Restlessness swelled up again. He chanced a glance up at his father. Dermot sat back in the chair, studying him in return.

"It's...I've been sneaking out to train with him in the mornings," he admitted in a rush, bracing for the same anger as last time he'd asked.

But Dermot just nodded. "No wonder you've looked so tired."

Rhys didn't dare move, feeling that if he even breathed too hard, he'd never get a chance to say anything else.

Dermot sighed, dragging a hand down his face, carding through the neat ends of his beard. "It's really important to you."

Rhys nodded earnestly.

"You and Alan look like you know what you're about, even with wooden blunts. More than some soldiers I've seen practicing in the yards."

The trainer had said some of the same thing. He and Alan knew how to fight, and they knew how to fight together.

"It...it feels more right than a plow or a shovel or..."

"I know, lad. I've just been trying not to see it." A sigh cut from Dermot again.

Rhys leaned forward a little.

"Listen, Rhys. A man has sons, and he wants his eldest to take over for him. I've wanted that since I held you as a brown-eyed babe scowling up at me in my arms." Dermot softened in a smile.

Rhys allowed a tentative one in return. His mother had always sighed that he'd been stingy with smiles until Sean came along.

"And then you and Sean. I know." He held up a hand to forestall Rhys's automatic protests about the blood bond. "But there's no denying you are close. I worry that soldiering will take you away and I don't know how he'll take it, how any of us would take it, if the worst should happen."

And that seemed even more likely with the visions of war.

But eagerness had begun to bubble up to replace the restlessness. He didn't dare speak yet, afraid to change the course of his father's words.

"But I also don't want to see you trapped here. Soldiering is what you want?"

"More than anything," the admission whispered earnestly from him.

"All right." Dermot nodded.

Rhys's mouth fell open, but Dermot lifted a hand again. He clamped his lips together and managed to still on the edge of his seat.

"Sean loves the land. He's happy working it, tending to it like he does with the visions. If you decide the sword is where you belong, he could take my place when its time."

Rhys knew he should feel something *more* at the declaration that he'd not be taking a place expected by birthright, but all he could think about was stepping back into the training ring and earning armor and a real sword.

"But!" Dermot jerked him back to the present. "I can't lose you entirely. Sean's young yet, and I'll need you to keep helping until we can find someone else to take over your share of the chores and work."

"I can find time to help here, Father, I know I can," Rhys promised, already trying to figure a schedule. It would mean early mornings, late nights, and exhausting days, but...

"I don't doubt it," his father said in weary amusement. "I already talked to Brogan about it, trying to see what could happen. You wouldn't be the first farmer's son to take up the sword and still need to help in the fields. The trainers can set a schedule to not overtax you."

"You mean it?" Rhys regarded him anxiously as if it was some joke. "You really mean I can become a soldier?"

"Aye, lad." His father smiled, but there was a bit of pain behind it. "You're almost a man. I should have let you make this decision."

"I...thank you." He didn't know how to show what it meant to him.

Dermot nodded, gruffly clearing his throat. "You'll do us proud, no matter what you do, Rhys. I've always known that about you."

"I'll try. I will."

Dermot reached out, gripping Rhys's shoulder with a wordless nod. Then he pushed back from the table to stand. He looked down at Rhys a moment, then nodded to himself.

Rhys lurched to his feet and impulsively threw his arms around his father. Something in him twisted to find they were the same height, but he buried his face against his father's shoulder anyway.

"Thank you."

His father's calloused hand tapped his shoulder. "You're welcome. Now," his voice rumbled lighter. "To bed. You've still got chores in the morning before you head up to the training courts."

"Yes, sir." Rhys smiled.

Later as he sat on his bed, just thinking on the wonder that he'd wake up as a soldier instead of a farmer, Sean came to stand in the doorway.

They stared at each other a moment, then Rhys shifted over and Sean came to sit next to him. Sean stared at his hands in his lap.

"Father told me, but I was listening anyway," he said.

Rhys leaned his shoulder into Sean's. "It'll be all right. I'll be all right."

"I know." Sean nodded. "I'm glad you get to train. But, Rhys." His shoulders slumped. "I think that horrible war is coming, and I think it's soon. That means you'll have to leave. And..." His voice hitched.

Rhys draped an arm around him, jostling him slightly. "Hey. What'd I say earlier?"

Sean smiled and rubbed a hand under his nose. "I know, I know."

"I mean it, Sean."

There was one thing Rhys MacDuffy knew with every fiber of his being.

Nothing was going to take him away from his brother.
Not even a war.