

His horse's head swung back in terror, screaming a whiny that pierced the calm stillness of the night. Startled by the sudden noise and movement, Aidan jumped up and stretched out his arm to reach the frightened animal's head. Unhindered by his smaller stature, which had been the source of much anxiety during his adolescent years, he caught his horse's nose in his hand, and brought the shaking head down to his eye level. The horse's scream continued to echo throughout the woods, carried along by a small breeze winding through the tree tops. Stroking the velvet nose gently, he whispered quietly into her swiveling ears. "I can't have you doing that tonight, Star. You'll frighten away every living creature for miles. Almost had me there as well, you know."

As he talked to her, his fingers trailed along her forehead where the marking which gave her name nestled in a coat of soft brown hair. Tracing a circle with his finger onto her forehead around the small white star, his whisperings took a lower tone. The whispering of a spell played across his lips as he traced the marking on her forehead. Weaving his desire into the night air, he willed a spell of calming into the frightened horse's mind. As he finished the last sounds of his murmuring, Star's ears stopped their frantic turning and she whuffed quietly into his hand, all trace of fear gone from her mind.

Aidan patted her firmly on the shoulder and was rewarded with a gentle nicker. Picking up the loose reins, he finished tying her to a low hanging tree branch. He knew that there was ample food for her to reach here, and should no one from the village come by in the morning and find her, the reins were slack enough that she could break free if it was absolutely necessary. Praying softly that that would not be the case, he made his way alone into the stubby bramble of the forest.

Small twigs and thorns caught at his pants and jerkin, making small tears in the worn leather, but he never even once noticed, his mind being completely focused on the task still waiting ahead of him.

The forest underbrush thinned as he traveled, although still too thick to allow passage for a horse. He cursed his bad luck that he was forced to leave Star behind; the deathly quiet of the night around him made him ache for the familiar companionship of his horse. Turning his head, Aidan gazed up through the tree tops. The forest was thinning enough at this point that small pinpoints of distant worlds and stars had become visible. Picking up his stride, he thought to himself, *Soon....not too much longer now. Then all of this will be over with.*

Brushing an errant lock of ruddy brown hair out of his eyes, he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, flinging the tiny sweat droplets into the air. The tree line stopped abruptly as he pushed a low pine branch out of his way, ending on the top of a barren cliff side. Senses alive for any presence of danger, Aidan carefully made his way into the open. A few small blades of grass dwarfed by the sea salt's presence stubbornly poked their way through the rocky soil of the cliff and crunched under his soft sole boots.

The island was dying, that much was obvious if one knew where to look for the signs. The withering plants along the coast line were only one of the yet visible indications that anything was wrong, but those gifted as he was, those who could see and weave the very fabric of life as he could, knew for months now of the danger that faced those living on the island.

Aidan stopped at the point of the cliff, and he traced the rocky side with his eyes, planning his method of descent along the steep climb. Fragments of spells wafted across his memory, but he brushed them aside with a mental shrug. From the young age when

he used to sit at Old Faiolin's knee before he even knew how to control his gift, he had learned that to use power when power was not necessary only brought ruin upon the El-Macchai. Every use of the gift, every spell cast, used up some amount of power, and the El-Macchai always paid for the power they used. Every spell had its cost. He would pay later for the small spell he had used with Star. That he kept in the back of his mind, along with all the other small worries which plagued his memory. At this rate they would all pay. Every man, woman, and child on the island would pay the ultimate price that anyone could be asked to pay if he didn't succeed in his task here tonight. Aidan was very well that he was the last defense between the destruction of the island and the village which he called home, and the thought chilled him back into the present. Picking his way carefully between the shifting rocks, he slowly maneuvered down the steep grade.

Sighing with relief when his boots soles touched the sand of the beach, Aidan ran his hand through his sweat-soaked hair. He stretched his arms out wide after his strenuous climb, feeling his muscles tighten in his arms. His jerkin rose slightly from the movement, and the light of the rising moon caught the edge of the dagger he had slipped between his belt loops. The sudden glint at his waist caught his eye and an involuntary shudder ran up his spine before he could stop it. Grimacing at himself, he pulled the jerking down to cover the naked blade once more. He, Aidan Kel' Adrionnas, born Tel' Amar but elevated to noble status with the discovery of his gift, only Master of the secret arts of the El-Macchai, would become tonight the last Master of the El-Macchai, either saving the village and his people, or dooming them along with him.

Taking on long look at the night sky around him and whispering a final apology to Star along the wind, he steeled his mind onto the final spell that lay before him to cast. Removing his jerkin and soft white undershirt he folded them carefully by habit onto the sand, laughing at himself as he did it. No one would care by this time tomorrow whether his clothes were neatly piled or cast about in circles, but the old and mundane habit of folding his clothes left him feeling strangely peaceful. Next came his soft boots and he placed those next to his growing pile. Last were his breeches and belt and those too were folded and added to the small heap which were his only belongings in the world now. Clad only in his undergarments, he took the dagger in his right hand and turned his body toward the open sea.

The full moon had risen by this time, hanging fat, full, and low over the horizon, reminding him of a she-Banshee spider waiting on her web for the next unsuspecting creature to fall into her trap. Feeling a lot like how a green fly must when he senses his fate, Aidan placed his right foot into the foam of the sea water. A stronger gust whipped his hair around his head and lifted his light clothes into the air. If it were possible for his imagination to play ticks on him, he would have thought that the moon began to give off an eerie jade glow. However, because of his gift, he could see the tiny beams of light fall to the water surface and how, somehow against all laws he knew of, actual produce a different color in the air. He tasted the sea air for a spell of any kind, and found, not to his surprise, nothing at all to account for the abnormal effects around him.

Both feet were now in the shallow water along the beach, and he took a last moment to squish the sand between his toes. As a child before he was aware of his gift, Aidan used to go to this beach every morning with his mother and collect shells and seaweed for the village to use. As his mother would sift through the shallow water with her sun-warmed hands, he would run across the beach, feeling the sand move beneath his

feet, and laughing as the surf would tickle his toes. She would always yell at him not to stray too far and the sigh when he would turn his head to agree and yet still keep going in his chosen direction.

Wiping his twice-damned unruly hair from his eyes he brushed those memories as well from his mind. Those times were a long, long time ago, and any distractions such as these would only hinder his concentration. Lifting his head towards the moon, he began to move once more into the deeper water.

Only when the water began to lap at his waist did Aidan stop again. Dipping the knife blade into the ocean water he raised his voice for the last spell he would ever cast. To his calm surprise, the words which flowed from his mouth were strong and willful, and not one edge of doubt or uncertainty colored his speech.

“Oh Gods of the Sea, hear me now, Aidan Kel’ Adrionnas, Master El-Macchai. In the past we of the El-Macchai and you peoples of the sea have always respected each other’s power, never hindering the other. In this bond of alliance between my people and the gods, I come as the messenger for the people of this land. I ask as only an El-Macchai knows and how as only an El-Macchai can for your assistance now.” Raising the knife from the water he placed the tip against his breast, letting it sit there against his skin on the brink of drawing blood. The wind, stronger and wailing now, whipped his hair around his face and into his eyes, stinging and bringing forth a wash of tears, but Aidan at this point was beyond the dealings and pains of his body.

“This island is dying, the plants and the wildlife thin, and the drinking water runs foul with taint from the sea and earth. The people of my village and all life on this island will wither and die; it has already begun in certain areas. In days of old, the El-Macchai would have had the strength to fight this battle alone, not needing the help of the ancient gods. But these times have sadly passed. I now stand before you, the last of my line, last of the El-Macchai Masters. After me none shall be able to claim the title of Master, or partake in the secrets of our ancient brotherhood. None shall have the power to talk with you as I do now. And yet I am willing to doom the traditions and knowledge of the El-Macchai into the forgotten sands of time, all for this.

“I, Aidan Kel’ Adrionnas, offer myself and the entire knowledge of the El-Macchai as sacrifices to the Gods of the Sea, to you mighty Neilphannor and to you, daughter of Neilphannor, Goddess Elluyshin, mistress of the waves. I pay the price of my spell with my blood, my knowledge, and my life. Please, save my people, of this I ask of you!”

Holding the knife in both hands, Aidan raised towards the sky, the sharpened tip aimed directly for his throat. Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, he whipped his arms toward his body, intent on slamming the cold steel into his neck.

Just as the knife broke the top layer of his skin, the ocean floor beneath his feet rolled and grumbled, the water breaking over him in waves. Flailing his arms in a vain attempt to keep his balance, he fell over backwards into the raging sea, his head immediately covered by a torrent of water. Legs and arms pumping madly and his lungs fighting for breath, his head broke the surface and he gulped in a breath of cold air that seared his lungs. Cursing at himself, Aidan realized that in his tumble into the ocean he had lost the knife, and in his current battle to stay afloat there was no chance to look for it. The night air had grown cold and the moon that was glowing so strangely before was nowhere to be seen. His entire world had gone dark and cold.

A giant crash of water to his right snapped his attention, and his eyes swelled open as his gaze caught the sight farther off in the ocean. A large plume of water had shot out of the ocean depths, reaching high towards the moon. Out of this pillar of water a small jade sphere of light, the same color of the moon his mind automatically noted, glided across the wave tops toward him. As it drew closer he noticed that the light was in fact only a small part of the being which approached him atop the ocean waves.

She was tall and slender and the jade light of her necklace played shadows across her smooth pale skin. Luxuriously beaded and embroidered robes in rich colors and fabrics folded around her body, giving her an air of complete control and majesty. Touches of gold sparkled bright in the light of her necklace and he could see other hints of precious stones embedded throughout her floor length, straight, black hair. The one thing that held his attention was not her fine adornments or the striking beauty of her face, but her ears, or rather the place where her ears should have been. Two long silver green fins grew forth from her head, scaled and shaped not unlike the wings of the dragons of the legends of his childhood. As she approached him, her feet never actually dipped into the water, instead she danced lightly across the wave tops on her toes, and only the edges of her gown being tinted dark by the jumping spray.

She stopped a short distance in front of him, power radiating from her in waves of warmth. He gulped it in greedily as she stared unblinking black eyes at him, no hint of emotion marring her perfect face. After what seemed like Aidan to an eternity, she finally spoke, the bell-like quality of her voice sending shivers down his spine. “You have called Us,” she simply stated at first, eyes never once moving from his face. In the silence that ensued he found it difficult to maintain his gaze into her eyes.

She repeated a little more forcefully and with the hint of a frown playing along the side of her lips, “You have called Us, El-Macchai, Watcher of the Waves, and many other forgotten titles. You have asked for Our help and have been prepared to give to Us the ultimate price for the use of Our power. You have asked for deliverance of the island and your people, and We have answered.”

Aidan was held fast by the very presence that emitted from her and he could only manage a slight bow of his head a weak “My Lady” in reply. Closing her eyes she lifted a slender hand towards his face and placed a finger onto his forehead. Searing warmth flooded into his head and it was all he could do to keep himself from gasping aloud in pain.

“You have asked for deliverance and have been found worthy of Our power. Now you must pay for what you have gained. Although the El-Macchai are allies of My people, nothing can ever be given freely. You knew this when you came to Us, and yet you still came forward fearlessly, without hesitation or concern for your one life. Come forward now once more and accept the price We put upon Our bargain. Know this first, we promise that the island shall be saved. You have no need to worry for your people anymore.”

She raised both hands now and lifted the glowing jade necklace from her bosom. As the stone setting swung between her hands, the stone began to pulse in rhythm, and Aidan gave a start when he realized that the rhythm was that of his own beating heart. The flashing of the light pulled him towards her, even though every muscle in his body screamed for him to turn and run the other way for this was certainly the end of his time as he knew it. But he was trained in the ways of the El-Macchai, and using his mind to

control his instincts was nothing new to him. He would not dishonor the ancient ways by showing fear in front of one of the Goddesses of the ancient people.

Body trembling, he watched with wide eyes as the gold links fell past his head and lay heavy on his shoulders. When the stone fell against his chest, a roaring sound blasted his ears and a searing pain shot through his entire body. He felt as if his entire body were being burned from the inside out, leaving only his skin as an empty shell. Despite his years of training, he heard in the back of his mind him scream in agony again and again as his body was slowly torn apart by the pulsing light.

Somewhere amid the screams and pain he thought he heard the chime-like voice continue, but the world was growing very faint and very black very quickly. “You have served us well in this life, Aidan Kel’ Adrionnas of the El-Macchai, and you shall continue to do so in lives present and distant. Welcome to the people of the Sea, Aidan Kel’ Adrionnas, welcome to the peoples of the ancient worlds, welcome home.....”

Her voice continued into oblivion as his consciousness rolled across the waves of a sea of darkness.