The Three Stones of Bethany

Chapter One

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The horses’ hooves beat against the warm ground, rending leaves and branches as three siblings and their dear friend rode toward the house of an old witch called Brigid. The moment they had received word that their two younger sisters had been captured by dredgelings, they'd set out to see if the hag could tell them where to find the girls, only eight years old and probably terrified beyond description. They'd been riding for hours through the night. No one wanted to say it, but they were all beginning to wonder if they were lost.

Of the four, Kane felt the worst. Since his father died in battle three years before, he'd felt the weight of responsibility for his younger brother and sisters resting upon his shoulders. It was greater now even than when they'd been forced to flee the castle five years ago, the day the dredgelings seemed to appear out of thin air, taking over the kingdom and infesting the land like some inescapable plague. Their blotchy vomit-colored skin, beady red eyes, and unnaturally long pointed noses made the dredgelings look every bit as horrifying as their cruel nature actually was.

Kane was only fifteen years of age when it all began. He’d gotten his siblings settled into hiding with a kind family in Celestial nation and gone straight to join the war. Joy and Holt joined him in the fight three years later, only a year after their father’s death, and Tor had become close enough to them both in the years spent in Celestial nation that he absolutely refused to be left behind.

Kane was twenty now, his oldest sister nineteen, and his brother and Tor, eighteen years of age.

By the time the dredgelings tore through the little Celestial village, pillaging and burning houses to the ground, only Charity and Hope remained of the royal family there. The young twins shouldn't have been recognizable. They looked and acted like the other villagers. They’d even dyed seven blue streaks into their hair as the Celestial people did. But the dredgelings were able to sniff out their royal blood easily, something Kane hadn't anticipated.

"Oi, look there," Holt cried out, pointing to the speck of light at the top of a nearby hill.

"It has to be her," Joy said hopefully.

"We shall soon find out." Kane urged his horse to go faster. It didn’t take them long at all to cross the plain separating them from the egg-shaped house made of dried mud and straw.

At the base of the short hill, Kane climbed down from his faithful steed and left it with the others to be tied to a towering tree. He hurried to the front door and raised one fist to knock, but was startled when an angry wrinkled face appeared in the little window beside it.

A white eyeball stared at him through the dusty glass. A hole and a shadow was all that remained of the other eye. He couldn't help but notice how hunched over her back was as she turned to open the door.

"What do you want?" Brigid asked him in a scratchy voice.

"We need your help," Kane said. "Our little sisters have been taken by dredgelings and we need to know where they are so we can rescue them."

"Oh? And why should I waste one twig a' time on you?"

"You will be well-paid for it." Holt held out a brown sack as the others joined Kane at the door.

The witch stared at it for a moment and then spread her pruney, crooked fingers as she took the bag. She reached in and held a gold coin up to the light cast by an oil lamp burning in the center of the room on a scarred oak wood table. She licked her lips and puckered them out as she squinted her one eye. Then she put it back in the bag, which she placed on the table, and turned to face her eager visitors.

"Come in then," she grumbled.

Kane stepped into the one and only room first, followed by the others. Aside from the table and a lopsided chair, all he saw was a bed and shelves and more shelves of magical instruments, jars of all sorts of strange things, and a bit of food.

Brigid pushed some things around on the lowest shelf against the wall and took a jar of purple powder before throwing a handful of it into her fireplace. Deep blue flames lit under a hanging cauldron, the thick black liquid inside of it beginning to bubble immediately. The witch went to put the powder away and took an armful of other things from the shelves—a vile of blue goo, another of glowing red stones, a jar of crinkled leafy-looking things, and three small jars of spices. She set them on the table's edge closest to the fire and hobbled over to Kane.

"It's no wonder how the young Celestial man got through the magical spell I cast around my home, but how'd the rest of you manage it?" She glanced in the direction of Tor, the blue steaks in his hair marking him a member of the most magical of the five nations in Bethany.

The day they were born, Kane, Joy, and Holt had enchantments cast on them to repel and protect them from any other magic, a privilege of the royal family. But it was better that Brigid didn't know who they were. A witch living all alone like this had cut herself off from the kingdom and bore no allegiance to it, so they didn’t trust her with this sort of information.

"I did not come to answer your questions," Kane said. "I came so you could answer mine."

"Humph." Brigid gave him an ugly scowl as she reached up and plucked a few hairs from his head.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kane pushed her arm away.

Brigid ignored him and walked over to the cauldron to throw his hair into the dark liquid. "A few drops of mermaid's blood," she muttered as she took the vial of blue gunk and let some of it ooze into her great pot, where it joined the sandy brown hairs. Then she took one of the red stones and a few of the leafy things to toss in. "A fragment of dragon's heart…A pinch of dried bat wings…" Next came a sprinkle from each of the three smallest jars. "A bit of salt…A bit of sage…And the ashes of a dead man…" She replaced the jars on the table and pulled a long wooden spoon from inside her black hooded robe to stir the brew that had begun to burn orange. "Now show us the little sisters of the ill-mannered man."

Everyone backed away from Brigid as thick smoke began to fill the room. Bits of color swirled together. The most vivid were yellow, orange, red, green, and blue, the five colors of Bethany’s fine nations and all its power. Slowly, a picture began forming in the eerie haze. Holt was terrified, backing farther and farther away until he couldn't see anyone or anything but the smoke engulfing them.

Gradually, a cage took center stage to the billows of gray. Two little girls lay close together inside, fast asleep. Bars protruding horizontally from underneath the small prison rested on broad shoulders, the bodies of which didn't quite take shape.

Brigid’s voice deepened as she began.

*"Ah, the sisters of your royal birth, captured by the enemies worst.*

*The time is short I feel I must warn, and then their lives apart are torn.*

*You will have seven days to roam, before the dredgelings return to their home.*

*Your castle is where they lay their heads, and here your sisters will be made dead."*

Holt began to tremble as the smoke darkened. In the three years he spent with the Celestials, he'd never gotten over his fear of magic.

*"In three short days they pass Emerald nation. Save the girls here, north of medicine's creation.*

*For once they pass the healer's land, their lives are no more in your hands.*

*Your time is up; their lives are lost. You must arrive in time or suffer the cost...*

*But wait…there’s more...*

*When your quest to save these children is done, a new one begins under elderlord sun.*

*If you will seek audience with the elderlord king, the secret of victory to your heart he brings.*

*There is something your father never told, the answer to the war your quest will hold."*

The vision of the sleeping sisters was shaken when a dredgeling leapt into view, banging his fists against the bars and shouting. The girls screamed and sat up. He began laughing at the terror he'd caused. Holt jumped back with the girls, slamming into the shelves behind him. The room was suddenly filled with the sounds of metal rattling and glass smashing against the floor.

"What was that?" Brigid screeched. "What have you ungrateful brats done?"

A black cloud arose behind Holt. "I'm sorry. It was an accident.”

In the gray fog, no one saw the spinning blackness solidify but him. Kane's arm came out of nowhere, clasping his brother's wrist and pulling him toward the door. He felt his way along the wall to the door and pushed Holt through the entryway. He'd already managed to get Joy and Tor outside, since neither one had gone far from him.

"What are you doing?" Brigid waved her arms around wildly in the fog, trying to see what was happening.

Kane thought of going back in to search the darkening cloud for her, but froze when he heard a strange rumbling like nothing he'd ever heard before. It grew louder and louder inside her little home, until he was sure the entire thing was about to burst.

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