

Many of you have read my "first seven pages" that were prepared for the Emerald City Opener and had good things to say. Here are the *real* first few pages. ~Elizabeth

Thanks for your support and enthusiasm! Please grace my guest book with your thoughts!

Chapter One

"I thought Ireland was supposed to be beautiful. I can't see a damn thing through all the rain." Devin mumbled under her breath as the damp, gray landscape flashed past the car window melding into an endless parade of dreary fields and houses. It didn't really matter she supposed since clinging to the armrest on the door was keeping her fairly occupied. It was either hang on to the grimy rubber handle or slide across the cracking vinyl of the seat every time the car whipped around a corner since seat belts were apparently a luxury here. Also monopolizing her touristy side was the permanent wrinkle in her nose as it protested the pungent perfume of stale cigarette smoke and rancid grease that permeated the interior of the car.

Rolling down the window one squeaky inch at a time she stuck her head out allowing the driving rain to burst stinging freshness over her skin. Inhaling a few deep breaths she allowed the rain sweetened air to flow through her. As nice as it felt to be able to breath freely she pulled herself back inside in an effort to preserve her mascara and avoid the raccoon eye effect. Running a hand over her pinstriped trousers to smooth out the wrinkles she couldn't help but wonder if the odor permeating the

interior was infusing itself into her clothing. She imagined they would have to be discarded, as there was no soap that could possibly rival the stench that was aged to a ripe perfection.

Despite the less than satisfactory conditions a little voice in her head kept repeating, "Just remember everything will be fine, you are safe here." Even with the uplifting mantra in her head she wasn't quite able to suppress the doubt that crept in with each jarring maneuver of the car. If the atmosphere wasn't so dreary maybe she would be able to view her new start in life with a little more enthusiasm instead of reflecting back on why she had jumped at the chance to change continents. Then again, even the sunniest conditions wouldn't stop her ex-husband Ian from haunting her.

Forcing her focus onto her throbbing head instead of her troubled past didn't prove too difficult since it felt as if someone was pounding a sledgehammer into her temples. Knocking against the door she swore under her breath as the metal window knob jabbed another bruise into her side. Why couldn't she have gotten a normal chauffer that obeyed traffic laws and wasn't hell bent on tossing her around like loose change in a pocket?

Mitch, the man who had been employed to drive her to

her destination was a kind, but crusty elderly man. When she first met him she had been skeptical to let him drive her anywhere on appearances alone. Having little option, she had decided it couldn't be worse than being stranded at the airport in an unfamiliar country. She was starting to think the airport might have been better as his creative driving was getting scarier with each passing mile.

"Oh my god!" The curse slipped through her lips involuntarily as Mitch narrowly avoided colliding with some poor man on his bike.

"What was that miss?" Mitch cheerfully inquired seemingly unaware of the near accident.

A wave of nausea washed over her, rendering her unable to reply. Trying to regain her composure she twirled her ring around her finger, its pretty delicacy always soothed her. Not one of those girls that had to have jewelry, she remembered quite clearly the day she found it with its three graceful pillars lined up neatly, the outer two leaning in slightly towards the center. Hovering slightly above the pillars was a round sparkly green stone. The clerk had explained its meaning, but she only knew she had to have it. As another wave of nausea swept over her she had to wonder if she had the putrid odor or Mitch's questionable driving skills to thank for her queasiness.

"I was just saying how beautiful the drive was," she replied, when fairly confident opening her mouth wouldn't result in disaster. She had no intention of telling him her true thoughts. It seemed unwise to insult his country when he held her life in his hands. Clutching a hand to her stomach she wasn't sure her hold on breakfast was really under control and decided keeping any future conversation to herself was probably wise.

"That it be lass." He smiled in agreement, highlighting a set of teeth so atrociously crooked she had to wonder if they had ever been under the care of a dentist.

Nodding weakly she allowed her forehead to fall against the cool glass of the window. Thankful as a small respite in the bumps presented itself she willed her tense muscles to relax for a minute. The tap dance in her head was distracting her from whatever Mitch was saying. Sending another nod his way she dropped her head onto the back of the seat and letting her eyes close she let some of the tension ease from her.

Mitch was still rambling on about something, but the only sound that made it through the fog of her aching head was a pleasant drone of his thick accent melding nicely into the constant patter of rain against the roof, creating

a soothing lullaby that had her nodding off against her will. Unable to fight the pull of sleep, she drifted off letting the apprehension of her destination and the fears of her past vanish for a short while.

#

Cool mist flowed over Ivy's bare skin caressing it with a gentle touch. The tree branches sang as the breeze fluttered through them providing a melodic contrast to the rhythmic chanting from her and her sisters. It created a haunting melody inspiring her dance to the Mother Goddess. Raising her arms to the heavens she swayed them gently back and forth following the dance of the wind. The movement flowed down her body as magic began to well up inside her. She felt the sweet, sensual heat of it licking up her skin like flames threatening to consume her with its intensity.

As each of her senses embraced the elements of nature she felt closeness to the earth she had originated from. It felt so natural to be here with no barriers between her and what she loved most. The Mother Goddess had blessed her with an intimate relationship to the beautiful world she was currently immersed in. It puzzled her that so many felt shame when they were unclothed while it was the only time

she was able to relax into her natural environment and free her mind from her guilt-ridden soul and just exist.

Glancing across the sacred fire's brilliant flames she watched her two sisters Willow and Rowan. They looked exactly like her, each mirroring her own physical features. Unfortunately that was where the similarities ended. They were unfailingly innocent and untouched by the harsh realities of the world while she could barely remember a time when guilt and regret hadn't ruled her life. She loved them intensely and vowed to shoulder as much of the burden she had unknowingly placed on them so many years ago. Watching as her sisters danced around the fire, arms raised and eyes closed, their milky skin glowing almost translucent in the shadow of the flames as their fiery hair flowed around the curve of their hips shimmering with each movement. The intricate beauty of their dance continued unwavering despite the fact they were risking their very lives to be here.

Sighing with frustration she knew her musings were dampening the magic needed to complete the ritual, the ritual that would contact the one they needed so desperately to help them overcome the threat to their race. Closing her eyes once more, she allowed the beauty of the moment and the richness of nature to flow through her

veins, infusing her with its rhythm. Letting her worries and thoughts flutter from her mind she gave herself over with abandon allowing the magic to flow freely through her once more. Entering a trance like state her movements became more sensual and flowing as her body swayed to the rhythm nature and her were creating together. Her magic sparkled through her veins as it was reaching its full power, its strength growing as her dancing whipped her energies into a frenzy.

Suddenly a high squeal let forth from her horse Ahren and pierced through her trance dragging her violently back to the present. The blood flowing through her veins turned icy as she feared her worst nightmare was about to become reality.

"We must leave now, we are ill prepared for an attack, we cannot risk trying to reach the horses," she shouted breaking her sister's trance.

Closing her eyes in concentration Rowan's shoulder blades began to lengthen and grow, unfurling into majestic black leathery wings that spanned the length of her slender figure. Her ears grew and came to a sharp point giving her face an alluring elfish look.

"We must flee in the fastest way available to us, there is no time to lose," Rowan shouted.

"Will you be alright on the ground alone my sister?"

Willow asked Ivy with concern thick in her voice.

Ivy nodded, trying not to break her concentration as she strained to make her transformation as quickly as possible, already coarse red hair was beginning to ripple up her forearm. Spreading quickly it soon engulfed her entire body as limbs changed and transformed. Dropping down to all fours to accommodate her paws she felt her face contorting, allowing a muzzle and sharp intelligent eyes to emerge. She was fully changed.

"I will be fine, I am small and nearly as fast as you and Rowan both. Have no fear I can run undetected. I shall meet you both back at the manor when it is safe to do so,"

Inwardly she was worried. Both her sisters were blessed with the gift of flight. Rowan could become part bat while Willow was blessed with aspects of the hawk. She however was the only one with the gift to fully transform to her beast, the wolf. While attuning her senses to the surroundings she was alerted to others of her kind. They were not normal wolves, they were tainted, being used as servants of evil. Shaken by this knowledge she decided it was best to keep it to herself. Nothing her sisters could do would help her and to worry them further would be needless.

"Be careful my sister," kneeling down Willow gave Ivy's fur covered neck a quick hug and with one last glance at her earth bound sister she stretched out her muscular wings, adorned with rich golden brown feathers, and leaped towards the sky with a hawk's cry.

Not wanting to linger longer, Ivy sent a last longing look towards the sky where both her sisters had taken flight and took off running stretching her long lean muscles. Haste was necessary as she was being pursued by those as swift as she was. A lead was her only advantage.

Her heart pounded causing her to pant as she loped through the underbrush coaxing every ounce of speed from her rangy muscles. The mixture of adrenaline and fear drove her forward at speeds she thought impossible. Even so, she feared it wasn't enough, as the smell of evil was growing stronger as her pursuers closed the distance between them. Her stomach threatened to heave as evil wafted through her heightened senses; it was an acrid mixture of sulfur and pain. If you were unlucky enough to smell it, the memory of would linger with you for a lifetime.

Worry for her horse Ahren invaded her thoughts. Leaving him behind tore at her heart. He was more than her horse, he was her most beloved companion and watcher and she had abandoned him. Knowing that he was perfectly able

to take care of himself didn't take the fear for his safety from her thoughts. She would be lost if anything were to happen to him. Sending forth a quick prayer to the Mother Goddess begging protection for her dear friend, she attempted to push her worry for Ahren from her mind and focus on the task of staying alive.

Bringing her thoughts back to the situation at hand she was taken aback by a break in the landscape ahead. Skidding to a halt she stopped herself from tumbling head first into a ravine looming in front of her. Peering cautiously over the edge she was confronted by a tumultuous river swirling below her. Fear came flooding over her. This was too much and it seemed karma had caught up with her at last. Looking down at the gash in the earth all she could see was a boy tumbling in with a look of stark fear etched on his face. The image haunting her was from that day so long ago when she had her first brush with evil and now it was chasing her down once more. Shaking her head, she tried to banish the images of that long ago day that changed her life forever, and bring her focus back to the problem she now faced.

Knowing time wasn't on her side she had to figure a way out of this mess. Her heart was hammering in her chest as much from her physical exertion as from fear. Fighting

was entirely out of the question. There wasn't enough time to summon magic and she was at the decided disadvantage with no clothing or weapons. Her only choice was to face her worst fear, the nightmare that had haunted her sleep from that fateful day in childhood. The rustle in the underbrush was getting louder as the wolves drew near. A loud crash behind her warned her she was out of time.

Backing up she gave herself enough room to gather the momentum required to clear the looming void in the earth. As scared as she was she knew her only option was to jump or face a confrontation she would lose. Sprinting forward she coaxed forth every ounce of speed she possessed. Waiting until the last possible moment to leap she bunched her powerful muscles, coiled her hind legs and pushed herself from the edge. As she leapt into the air a sharp pain shot through her leg as fangs sank into her back tendon. Her attacker lost grip being unable to get a decent hold due to her being mid-flight, but it was successful in breaking her momentum.

A howl of pain tore through her muzzle as she connected hard with the opposite cliff. The position in which she landed wasn't adding a very promising outcome to her predicament. Her front paws barely clung to the slick surface as her lower half dangled precariously over the

angry vortex of water swirling below. The smooth compacted earth made it impossible to dig her claws in and pull herself to safety. Thinking of a solution was difficult as the rapids cascading under her were creating a deafening roar. Her precarious position was threatening to give at any moment. Making a last attempt to grab on to something she shifted back to her human form and grasped at anything she could hold onto. Relief flooded her when her fingers closed around a protruding branch. Grabbing hold of it tightly she didn't mind the tiny slivers of wood embedding themselves in her palm as her success at gaining safety was near.

Her arms ached in effort as she pulled herself up inch by slow inch. She could feel each rough stone and sharp branch tear into her soft flesh. Pushing the pain aside she focused on getting to solid ground and away from the horrible void she was dangling over. Sweat was cascading down her body both from physical strain and from facing the situation she feared above all. Preparing to pull herself over the cliffs lip her relief changed to a shiver of fear as she was confronted by a low evil laugh. It wasn't necessary for her to lift her head, she knew who was there.

"Hello Straife", she said, casually hoping to buy her self a few precious moments to figure a way out of this situation before it was too late.

Ivy's gaze met a pair of intelligent amber eyes embedded in black fur. She knew it wasn't a wolf she was looking at, but her enemy. Watching as his body contorted into the shape of a man she shuddered at what he had become. A wave of repulsion ran through her as he proudly displayed his well sculpted nude body advancing toward her with malicious intent.

"Hello my beautiful Ivy," he purred. "It has been far too long since I've had the pleasure of your company."

Stroking a long narrow finger down her cheek he chuckled again. Moving his finger down the side of her throat he slid it over the smooth slope of her shoulder and down the arm that was trembling with the effort of keeping her hold on the branch.

"I see you have gotten yourself into trouble again, now what kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't offer my assistance?"

Settling back on his heels he made an obvious perusal of her vulnerable position, leering at her breasts streaked with dirt and prominently on display due to her awkward position on the cliff.

"You are no gentleman," she spat. "You only seek to corrupt what is good in our race and destroy those who do not choose to follow."

"I might be persuaded to spare you, it would be such a waste of beauty and power to kill you. Think of the things we could accomplish together. We would be unstoppable. I suggest you see things my way or I can't promise to be a gentleman." Reaching over he cupped both her breasts in his hands. "Oh yes I believe it is better for you if you join with me, besides my love, you owe it to me or have you forgotten? Personally I will find you enjoyable either way so it's your choice love."

Knowing the consequences she faced if she stayed she knew there was only one option. Staring straight into Straife's flat cold gaze she sent him a last defiant look and released her hold on the branch.