

THE
WILD
COURT



E. G. RADCLIFF

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BOOK THREE OF *THE COMING OF ÁED* TRILOGY

E.G. RADCLIFF

FIRST EDITION



MYTHIC PRAIRIE BOOKS

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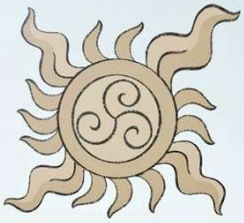
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GLOSSARY

<i>Amadán:</i>	Fool
<i>Ceann beag:</i>	Little one

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Áed	Aid
Eamon	Ay-mon
Lachtna	Lahkt-na
Neasa	Nya-sa
Fionnuala	Fin-noola
Fionnlagh	Finn-lee
Iarlaith	Eer-lah
Echdían	Ekh-dee-un
Róise	Ro-ish-a
Niamh	Neev
Rian	Ree-in
Síofra	Shee-fra
Líadan	Lee-din



CHAPTER THREE

ÁED

Scenes came to Áed in fragments.

A billowing plume of fire rolling across the garden, leaving a blackened wake of grass smoldering behind it.

Arrows flying indiscriminately, crackling with blinding sparks of flame.

Shadowed forms writhing with fire—or perhaps they were haloed with it, ringed in flaming coronae that lashed out in the forms of whips, or swords, or nets.

And in the chaos and the darkness, between the panicking nobles and bursts of wild firelight, there flashed pair after pair of ember-red eyes.

Éamon was standing over Áed protectively, but he looked transfixed, his eyes wide and glassy. He wasn't moving, only staring unblinkingly at the flame-gilded chaos that had overtaken the night. "Éamon!" Áed could feel magic hanging heavy in the air, fire and desperate emotion cascading from the open veil and the fae who came through it. Too powerful for any human to bear. Protectiveness poured through Áed, acutely enough to make him gasp, and he grabbed Éamon's hand with both of his own. As Áed dragged Éamon to a crouch, the sheer quantity of magic around them made

his head spin. He wanted Éamon to be safe from this. He wanted him *protected*.

As the intention hammered through his mind, Áed felt his hand grow warm. It didn't feel warm in the way his fire did—instead, it felt like his own emotion was spilling through the connection between his hand and Éamon's.

He had never felt anything so strange.

At Áed's touch, the councilor seemed to come back to himself. "Áed?" Wildly, he looked around. Screams were splitting the air; the garden was full of smoke, and the sounds of coughing and crying came from every direction. As Áed watched, a woman's figure, red eyes alight with internal luminance, tripped over the edge of the dais. Áed shoved Éamon back into the shadow of the nearest tree, praying that the faerie wouldn't look two feet to her left. The woman instead scrambled to find her feet, her face a mask of terror, and, gathering her skirts frantically, sprinted away across the darkness.

Áed stared after her.

"Áed," Éamon managed. "What's going on?"

Áed spotted his guards standing by the dais, mere silhouettes against the raging bonfire—was it his imagination, or was that fire dancing higher than it had before? As Áed watched, one of the guards clutched desperately at another before their hands moved to grasp at their head. A moment later, their knees seemed to buckle, and they sank slowly to the ground. From his vantage point in the shadow, Áed could see the glassiness in their eyes. Across the field, nobles were scrambling to evade bursts of flame in gold and white, but before his eyes, he watched them stagger, one by one. Éamon squeezed his hand, bringing him back to the moment. "Áed?"

"Don't let go of my hand," Áed gasped. He gripped Éamon's fingers as tightly as he could.

“Why?” Éamon looked panicked, his back pressed to the tree. Firelight and shadow made his face look unearthly and sharp. “What is *happening*?”

Fire.

Illusions.

Madness.

The weight of fae magic was hanging heavy over the night, thick as the smoke from a burning house. Áed had never felt anything this potent, and Gods, his head wasn't done spinning. The only magic he'd ever experienced was Boudicca's healing spells and whatever power lived in his own diluted blood, but this... *this* was the tension that had been splitting his head since that morning. He didn't usually sense any difference when the veil thinned, but with this much magic actively in use just on the other side, he could understand why it would be different. No *wonder* he'd had a headache. It was gone now, as if pressure had been relieved—the way a great river might be released when a dam gives way.

What was going *on*?

“I—I'm shielding you,” Áed managed. “I think.”

“You're *what*?”

A blast of fire, so dense it looked like flickering red water, engulfed the dais. Behind Áed, Éamon cried out and covered his face from the heat.

Áed pushed Éamon deeper into the shadows. “Are you okay?”

“I'm—Gods, define ‘okay!’”

“Do you think it's like this over the whole city?”

“I don't know! Áed, what—” Éamon froze as a burning arrow whizzed over Áed's shoulder and embedded itself in the oak tree not two inches from his face. Áed caught a whiff of burning hair.

“Fae,” Áed said. He couldn't tell if Éamon heard him over

the roar of fire and the shrieks of people all around them.
“We can’t stay here. Don’t let go of me!”

Áed wrenched Éamon to his feet, and then they were sprinting across the garden toward the palace.

“They’re—they’re *fae*?”

Áed only nodded, gripping Éamon’s hand so hard that his bones protested.

They were fifty feet from the door.

Twenty.

Ten.

Without warning, Áed found himself thrown to the ground. His side skidded over the cold, hard earth, and his breath left him in a choking wheeze. Éamon crashed down beside him, still holding Áed’s hand in a death grip. Gasping, Áed scrambled to his elbows. He tasted blood, and through the high of terror singing in his veins, he could tell his shoulder and hip were bleeding too, skinned from the impact with the half-frozen ground. He looked up frantically, trying to find what had hit him.

All he could see was white fire.

The blinding light resolved around a figure, wreathed with flames so stunningly bright that Áed winced at the pain of his pupils contracting. The faerie’s face was hidden by a featureless black mask, and as he stood above Áed, the night sky was blotted out by the brilliance of his ice-white flame.

He raised a hand, and the flame flowed along the course of his outstretched arm.

Where it became a blade of fire.

Áed’s eyes widened. He rolled to the side just as a burning blade sunk deep in the earth where he’d lain a fraction of a breath before.

The faerie was unreadable behind his mask. Éamon hauled Áed up as he clambered to his feet, but the faerie only slid

his sword out of the ground and raised it again.

And then he froze.

Áed and Éamon watched, motionless, as the white fire haltingly stuttered out. The faerie collapsed to his knees.

He slumped face-first onto the ground, a knife embedded firmly between his shoulder blades. Behind him, a faerie whose hand shone with red fire stood wide-eyed, still frozen in the position of throwing a knife. For just a moment, his eyes met Áed's. "Thanks," Áed managed. He was dazed. The word made no sound, and then the faerie was looking over his shoulder fearfully and taking off into the night.

In the next heartbeat, Áed and Éamon were once again dashing for the palace door.

Inside, the hallways were chaos. Áed saw more white fire punctuating the bursts of gold and red, and screams echoed through the corridors. A pair of fae, one of them clutching a sobbing child protectively to his breast, bolted for the door to the garden, but they skidded to a stop in front of Áed and Éamon.

The one with the child addressed Áed, sounding desperate. "Did you just come from the outside? Can we make it?" His voice was accented in a way that sounded lilted and musical, but that did nothing to mask the fear in his tone.

"Make it where?"

The child let out a terrified wail, and the faerie shushed her frantically. "Anywhere safe. Is there anywhere safe?"

"Not outside," Áed answered automatically. "I don't know what the rest of the city is like—*fuck!*" His mouth fell open. "Ronan! Where's Ronan?"

The faerie without the child winced. "Did you lose someone?"

"We're missing a member of our party, too," said the one carrying the little girl. He'd started making a low purring

sound deep in his chest, clearly meant to comfort his child, but it was choppy with his own fear and uneven breathing. “She was supposed to cross with us, but I don’t know where she came through.”

“Or if she even did,” said the other. “They were ready for us.”

A shout came from the end of the hallway. The fae family startled, fear etched into their faces. “Is there *anywhere* safe?”

Áed had no idea what was happening, but his head was buzzing with magic and adrenaline, and he heard himself reply. “Left here, down the stairs. There are lots of empty rooms. Maybe you can hide.”

The childless one looked near tears. “Goddess bless you. Good luck!”

Éamon stared at Áed incredulously as the trio ran off in the direction Áed had indicated. “You just gave a faerie directions!”

“No time!” Áed yanked Éamon down a side hall, and then they were running again. This passage had windows that looked out over the garden, at the fiery carnage raging there. The sound of screams penetrated the glass, and the air hung heavy with the smell of smoke. Some of that smoke was clearly from *things* burning—wood, fabric, grass. Some of it, however... Áed’s stomach turned. He caught more of those blinding white flames, saw more figures running for cover. Half of the trees were on fire. “I need to find Ronan!”

“Do you think he ran off?”

“Yes! Probably! Definitely!” Áed couldn’t keep the panic out of his voice, and he didn’t try. “The whole city could be like this! Éamon, I don’t know where he is!”

“Where was he *supposed* to be?”

A blast of fire collided with the windows immediately behind them, shattering glass inward over the floor in a

deafening explosion and a spray of shards. Áed tripped, and Éamon jerked him upright. “Anywhere!” Áed shouted, feet crunching over the broken glass. He could feel a bleeding laceration on his shoulder blade, but his frenzied mind blocked the pain. “So long as he keeps with his guards, he can go anywhere! But he never keeps with his guards, so now he’s anywhere and *alone!*”

“In here!” Éamon said urgently. He shouldered open a door along the hall, and they both tumbled in. Still holding Áed’s hand, Éamon slammed the door shut and fumbled the knob until it locked. “Help me move this bookshelf!”

“We can’t barricade ourselves in! I have to find Ronan!”

“Áed.” Suddenly, Éamon’s face was inches from Áed’s. “You cannot go out there.”

Áed snarled. His eyes were hot, but with tears or magic, he couldn’t tell. “I can, and I will!”

“No!” With the hand that wasn’t holding Áed’s, Éamon gripped Áed’s shoulder. “Áed, did you see what they were doing?” He gave Áed a little shake. “Did you?”

“I—”

“Most of them were *running away*. The white-flame ones with the masks were attacking the other ones, did you see it? The fae were going after each other. Each other!”

Áed stared at him as the pieces began falling together. They didn’t make a shape he recognized.

“They aren’t targeting humans. For all we know, you and I are the only humans in the whole Gut that aren’t just *asleep*. At first glance, they’ll assume we’re fae since we’re awake, but they aren’t actively attacking anyone who’s passed out!”

Áed’s brain wouldn’t slow down. “I can’t leave him out there.” Even if Éamon was right, and fae were fighting fae, there would still be collateral damage. If this had extended to the city, then it was safe to assume there were fires breaking

out all over the White City and probably the Maze.

“Are you listening to me?” Éamon looked desperate, too. “You! Will! Die!” Éamon’s eyes were wide; his hair, damp with sweat, was pushed off to the side to reveal both eyes at once, and both were frantic. “He’s probably passed out on the ground with everyone else, but if you go out there, you’re going to wind up on the end of a *sword made of fire!*”

Both of them jumped at the sound of another explosion outside the door, followed by screams. The screams fell silent within a heartbeat, and then the crunch of a heavy tread on broken glass sounded from down the hallway.

“Help me move the bookshelf,” Éamon whispered sharply. “*Please.*”

Haltingly, Áed lent his weight to the side of the heavy furniture. Éamon was stronger than him, but it still took both of them to slide it in front of the door.

Áed’s breath was shaky as he and Éamon stood motionlessly in front of the barricaded door. Outside, regimented footsteps continued down the hall until they turned and faded out of earshot.

Éamon sank to the floor. Still holding his hand, Áed bent over before giving up and collapsing.

He had never felt so helpless. Ronan could be *anywhere*; he could be injured, he could be dead. He could be frozen on the floor of a burning building, fire creeping closer and closer until it caught the end of his braid and began licking toward his body.

Áed shuddered violently, claspng his free hand over his mouth and squeezing his eyes shut with a violent gasp.

He couldn’t do this.

“Áed?” Éamon said concernedly.

“Let go of my hand.”

“What?”

Éamon would be safe in this room. Without Áed dispelling the magic—however he was doing that—his mind would slip away like everyone else’s, overwhelmed by the power of the magic pouring from the fae battle. Áed could... could what? Comb the entire city district by district, street by street, building by building? He had no idea where Ronan was. But he had to find him.

Éamon only redoubled his grip. “Áed, I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I am *not* letting you go out there.”

“Éamon—”

“Morning is only a few hours away. The veil won’t stay open much longer.” Éamon’s eyes were wide and haggard. “I have family out there too.” His voice was unyielding. “We’ll look in the morning.”

Áed’s stomach curdled. “I had Cynwrig supervising the guards at the palace gate. Where was Boudicca going to be tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

The silence that followed hung heavy.

The only source of light was a vent that connected the room to the windowed hallway; in moon and firelight, it was just enough to see by. Smoke wafted in under the door that was mostly blocked by the bookshelf, and periodically, more screams echoed from farther away. After a while, Áed found that Éamon’s head was on his shoulder, his bone-white hair streaked with soot and his eyes half-mast. Áed focused on combing the flecks of ash from his friend’s tangled curls, concentrating on the repetitive motion and trying to force himself not to imagine Ronan dead in a thousand increasingly more horrible ways.



Hours later found them sitting against the bookshelf.

The world was finally silent.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Áed asked. The words came out flat, but he could feel the tension behind them. Éamon startled, jerking his head off Áed’s shoulder with a gasp, and Áed regarded him with some surprise. “You managed to sleep?”

Éamon blinked. “I guess I did.” He paused. “It’s quiet.”

“I think we can leave.” He glanced to their hands, still clasped. Áed’s bones were aching. “I want to see if it’s safe for you to drop my hand.”

Slowly, Éamon loosened his grip until Áed’s hand slid free. He blinked a few times, as if his eyes were re-focusing. “Whoa.”

“Are you all right?”

“I—I’m fine.” He shook his head. “Dizzy. You don’t feel this?”

Áed shook his head. “The magic must be lightening. You can function?”

Éamon clapped his palms to his face a couple of times. “I can function.” He shot Áed a glance. “You will explain this to me later, won’t you?”

“Later.” Áed walked around to the side of the bookshelf and put his back to it to push. “Help me?”

The bookshelf screeched against the floor as they pressed it away from the door, a few tomes tumbling from the shelves and landing, undignified and flapping open, on the ground.

Morning light spilled through the doorway as Éamon turned the knob, and they squinted as the scene came into focus.

Éamon swore quietly.

Most of the windows along the hallway were shattered, glass blown both inside and out in long, deadly shards. Scorch marks scored the floor and walls, deep enough

that the burnt stone crumbled under Áed's touch, and in the garden, Áed could see at least three trees felled, their trunks burned through. The marble floor of the hallway was cracked and stamped with streaky footprints, cast in blood and ash.

“Everyone's still in the garden.”

Áed blinked, looking past the destruction. Sure enough, the slumped figures of humans were sprawled here and there across the grounds. They were concentrated where the crowd had gathered the night before, around the bonfire long since reduced to a pile of embers. For a moment, Áed thought they were still unconscious. Then, he saw that the person nearest them was entirely carbonized. White teeth grinned at him from a charcoal face. Another had been crushed under the burnt shell of a great oak tree.

Áed had to look away, bile rising in his throat.

Éamon took a deep breath and stepped carefully through one of the broken windows. He stepped carefully through the broken window and walked to one of the nobles on the grass who looked mostly intact. “So this is fae magic,” he said grimly. He found her pulse with deft fingers. “She's alive. Is she... asleep?”

“In a sense, I think.” Áed made his way out of the window as well, looking around through the fine morning mist and ignoring the pointed, inquisitive glance Éamon sent his way. There wasn't a single faerie to be seen, and he could feel the enchantment wearing out of the air. People would be coming around. “Come on. We have people to find.”

Éamon looked a little guilty about leaving everyone lying helplessly, but he stood without complaint. “Let's find Cynwrig first. He should be closest. He can help us look.”

Áed nodded, gritting his teeth. This was overwhelming on a level he'd never faced before, and anxiety was tightening

his breath. He forced himself to move with purpose, concentrating on the next step. “Right. Follow me.”