

Daughter of the Morning

*To my friends and family.
Thanks. I owe you big time*

Contents

<i>The Curse of the Hunter</i>	4
<i>Into the Oak</i>	18
<i>A Test of Worth</i>	29
<i>The Dark Strikers</i>	46
<i>The Moment of Truth</i>	61
<i>Duke of the Red Dragon</i>	77
<i>A Father Found</i>	86
<i>And Lost</i>	95
<i>Beneath The Mountains of the World</i>	105
<i>Full Circle</i>	114

Chapter 1

'The Curse Of The Hunter'

The girl's jaw protruded mulishly and her blue eyes narrowed to slits as she glared back at the man. Her blonde hair fell below her shoulders and was unbound which accounted for the fact that she looked more like a wild animal than a civilised human being. She pulled one of the fronds of her hair around to her mouth and began chewing it. The man's lips compressed to a thin line before he turned back to stare out of the windscreen. The woman at the steering wheel surveyed the man quickly, her soft brown eyes taking in everything that was being said, then flicked back to the road ahead. The man turned around to face the teenager sulking on the rear seat. "We're going to Windsor Great Park. I've told you once Cerian. If you continue to sulk we'll leave you in the car."

The autumn air had turned the verdant green leaves to various shades of brown, from a dull russet to vibrant ochre. A wind whipped up the leaves covering the road and hundreds more cascaded onto the roof of the car like a benediction. Cerian shivered and the sense of unease that had begun to pervade her consciousness for the past year made the hairs on the nape of her neck prickle. She had felt like this twice before, once when she had visited Salisbury with her father and the second, she swallowed hard, the second was when the class had been on an expedition to Urconium. Ceri had been standing some distance away from where the archaeologists had defined the boundaries of the town and she had suddenly known that a young Roman centurion had been standing in exactly the same spot and had stared down at the black water of the Severn. Those other times she had been able to retreat from the places and the fear that it engendered in her, but this time Ceri wondered how she could break away from it. The feeling of uneasiness grew as she stared at the falling leaves to her it seemed as though they were falling in a salute, "As if - as if they're falling for a *King!*" She whispered softly. She turned and gazed out of the rear window of the blue Range Rover. The wind seemed to have become even stronger and the trees were tossing their heads. Cerian stared hard at one then slowly she began to perceive the shapes of Dryads within the trees. The oak she was staring at was a large red-bearded man, who bowed solemnly, and then it was a tree again. She turned to the other side of the road, and saw a delicate silver birch. Before her astonished gaze the form of a young girl appeared. She bowed courteously, her black hair obscuring her face, and then it was as before, merely a silver birch. Cerian whimpered suddenly her fear threatening to overwhelm her.

Her mother turned around, "Everything all right Ceri?" Cerian swallowed hard and said, "I'm fine Mum, I was looking at the trees."

"They are pretty at this time of year," her mother agreed smiling at her daughter's reflection in the rear-view mirror. Cerian suddenly felt afraid as if a cold hand had squeezed her stomach as she realised that only she could see the Dryads within each tree.

She slid down on the seat until her head was below the top of it and shut her eyes tightly. *I don't like this*, she thought fiercely, *I don't like it!* After almost thirty seconds she opened them and sat up, the leaves were still falling from the trees, but the wind appeared to have lessened and Ceri no longer saw the Dryads. She breathed a sigh of relief.

When the car stopped, Cerian pushed open the door and scrambled out. She walked to the back of the vehicle. Her mother opened the boot and began taking out coats; she handed Ceri's to her. "Do you want to come and have a look around the chapel?" she asked.

"No." Ceri replied sullenly.

"No, Thank you" Her father rebuked her sharply, "don't speak to your mother like that!"

"She's not my mother!" Ceri snapped, "just leave me alone!" Then she was running away across the field leaving two dumbfounded adults behind her.

Ceri's father put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "She didn't mean it, Connie love, she's just upset about something."

Constance smiled wanly at her husband, "If you say so, Richard."

"Let's go and take a look at what needs restoring." Richard squeezed his wife's shoulder; "Ceri will find us. If she hasn't by the time we need to leave I'll contact the Park Keepers."

Ceri ran, ran away as fast as her legs would carry her. Eventually she stopped, panting. She looked around, wondering where she was, the trees seemed to have closed in around her. She wiped the back of her hand across her nose and looked around. She didn't recognise any of her surroundings, and for a split second a wave of panic erupted in her and she nearly burst into tears again. Suddenly a stag trotted out from between the trees. Ceri froze, she knew very little about deer, but what she did know was that in the autumn stags were dangerous because it was the rutting season. She watched the animal quietly and hoped that it would move away so that she could continue her walk. Stag and child looked at one another for a long moment and then the stag lowered its head, turned and trotted into the forest.

Ceri stood watching the animal walk away, conscious that something unique had happened, and also strangely aware that she could never tell anyone.

She began walking again, more cautiously this time. The park opened up before her and she stared in amazement at the forest, it was a blaze of colour. Copper, crimson and chestnut leaves combined to make the forest look as though it was

on fire. As she passed the lake a figure emerged from the water, "Greetings, Lady."

Ceri rocketed backwards so fast she tripped and fell over, landing heavily on her behind. The creature laughed, a bubbly sound, like water running over stones.

"What-what are you?" Ceri spat.

"A Naiad," the creature replied. "Don't you know anything?" It added scornfully.

"What's your name?"

"What's a name?" the Naiad asked.

Ceri frowned, "It tells other people who you are."

The Naiad smiled, "But this is who I am." She raised a hand to gesture at the lake and Ceri realised that her arm was composed of moving water. There was a greenish tinge to it and Ceri saw small silver fish wriggling within the nymph's arm. The sight made her feel quite ill. "But who are you?" she asked.

The Naiad smiled showing sharp, pointed teeth, "I am the lake; the river, the stream; I flow from the mountains where water is solid, down to the rapids where the water bounces wildly off the rocks in its path and laughs its way to the great meandering river that flows through your valleys and down to the sea."

Ceri stared, the being's voice had become suddenly deeper, the voice had taken on a new timbre and the woman's eyes seemed to glow. "Come closer," its voice bubbled, "come closer to the water. Rest your head on the moss that grows beside the pool and listen to the sound of running water."

Cerian's head suddenly felt very heavy and she struggled to her feet and tottered across to the pool. She lay down on her side so that she could still see the woman. The Naiad smiled showing a long, bright red tongue and sharp pointed white teeth, and she began to speak again. Ceri felt her head becoming heavier and heavier until it was a relief to let her head fall until it rested on the soft moss by the side of the pool. She remembered watching the woman gliding towards her, her red lips slightly parted as if she was panting. Ceri watched a delicious feeling of excitement beginning in her stomach, as the creature bent over her, as if it was going to kiss her. Every fibre of her being seemed to quiver with anticipation.

Suddenly it seemed as though the pool erupted outwards and a deluge of water soaked Ceri, jerking her into wakefulness. She wiped the water from her eyes and turned to the mere to see what had caused the explosion. Then she stopped. Another Naiad was in the pool, an elderly gentleman with long river weed for a beard, and he was holding the female as if she was a puppy.

"You were banished from here!" he snarled, "I forbade thee to enter this place when I came here. Why hast thou returned?" Then he saw Cerian, "I see why thou hast returned. So the prophecy has come true – but thou hast not succeeded. Return to thy masters, Dark One. Tell them that she is protected from such as thee. Now begone!" He threw the creature out of the pool and Ceri watched as

the Naiad lost all shape and form and slowly vanished into the ground. The man turned to Ceri and offered her his hand, "My Lady."

Ceri turned to look behind her for the person he was talking to and then realised that he was addressing her. "I am sorry you were attacked. It was my intention to offer fealty to you when Tethys did, but I offer it now wholeheartedly and hope that you will forgive the outrage perpetrated on your person."

Ceri didn't answer, her mind reeling. The Naiad nodded, "I see. Perhaps you are right, it is hard to forgive such an affront. Very well. Mayhap in the future you will find it within your heart to forgive the assault." He began to sink back into the pool, his form vanishing as he merged with the water. Just as the top of his head was about to disappear, Ceri said suddenly, "Please don't go!"

He rose again until just his head was above the water. "You will forgive the Naiads of these pools for the affront?"

"There is nothing to forgive." Ceri said, and wondered where the words came from. "You did not allow the other-" she tried the unfamiliar word on her tongue, "Naiad into your pool. I do not consider the fault yours." *How do I know what words to use*, she thought.

"Then my people shall serve you whenever you call us." He replied. "I must leave you, my Lady. Your destiny awaits."

"I thought that to see a water-spirit would drive me mad," Ceri said slowly.

"Not you." The creature replied shortly and then something like a smile appeared on the mouth. "You must go. Seek your Destiny." He began to slowly merge with the pool, becoming liquid again. "Seek your Destiny, my Lady." And Ceri realised that the voice came from stream as it ran from the pool. Slowly, still somewhat afraid she stared at the bubbling brook and thought she heard the voice gurgle, "Your Destiny awaits, Lady."

Something like delight seemed to take hold of Ceri and turning she ran away from the water and into the main park her spirit singing. She reached the crest of a hill and stopped to catch her breath, and then she really did catch her breath as she raised her head and stared down at the mass of woodland below her. It was a blaze of colour. Copper, crimson and chestnut leaves combined to make the forest look as though it was on fire.

She walked down slowly. A group of visitors had halted to read a plaque set up beside an old gnarled tree. They departed, laughing, as Ceri approached. The tree was ancient and yet somehow Ceri felt waves of power emanating from it. She turned her attention back to the plaque, '*Herne's Oak*' it read, '*Great Windsor Park is reputed to be the haunting place of Herne the Hunter who is supposed to appear when the thoughts of man turn to dark desires.*' On an impulse, Cerian slipped beneath the rope that cordoned the tree off, keeping it away from the inquisitive hands of youngsters. Carefully she laid a palm against it. To her surprise, the tree felt faintly warm beneath her touch, and although Ceri could never explain it later, it was as if the tree itself welcomed

her. Suddenly a voice said “Don’t put your hand into the holes - I got tired of nasty little boys poking around my home and carving words on my property, so I installed a family of ferrets.”

“Does it work?” Ceri inquired her blue eyes laughing.

“Sort of.” The voice was gentle, “I’ve had no more problems. That’s why they cordoned the tree off. Couldn’t risk any more people being bitten. Not that I mind. If they stay away nothing will happen to them.” Cerian turned to face the speaker and saw a tall figure with antler horns jutting from his head; he appeared to be wearing furs joined by invisible seams. She smiled tentatively and then she saw his eyes, the irises were golden and suddenly she was afraid.

“Greetings,” he said, “may I be permitted to introduce myself?”

Ceri opened her mouth to reply just as one of the park wardens came into view. He spotted Cerian and walked across to them,

“Get away from the tree!” he yelled when he was within earshot, “you shouldn’t be under the barrier, come out at once!”

Reluctantly Ceri slipped back beneath the rope, “I was only looking,” she tried to explain.

“Yeah?” the sneer in the man’s voice was unmistakable, “and when I came back in ten minutes there’d have been another pair of initials on the tree, or another heart with your initials in it!”

“I was talking to someone,” Cerian stood her ground.

“Yourself? There’s no-one else here!” With that the warden seemed satisfied and stalked off muttering to himself.

Ceri’s face blanched and she wheeled around to face the figure,

“They can’t see you!” she spluttered.

“Correct,” the figure replied, “I was about to introduce myself - I am Herne the Hunter.”

Cerian’s eyes widened and she finally whispered, “The man who hanged himself on this tree!”

The figure inclined his head and then replied, “Not quite, I was murdered. The only reason it is said that I am allied to the Dark is because I appear when murder is in men’s hearts. I lead The Wild Hunt that forces that Dark Powers beyond the boundaries of Time, I could not do that if I were truly evil.”

Cerian’s eyes narrowed speculatively, “You’re neither Light nor Dark though, you are part of the Old Magic, which serves itself.”

To her surprise Herne laughed a rich, full sound, then he gazed down at Ceri, “They chose well when They chose you. Tell me thy name, Lady.” The tone of his voice had become strangely formal and archaic.

“Cerian Aurelia Prichard.” she replied making a small curtsy.

“A Welsh lass!” The smile that played about the firm mouth became broader. “Lady,” to Cerian’s horror, Herne suddenly knelt before her; “I have been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Please get up,” Cerian implored, then she said curiously, “how could you know of me? For that matter how could anyone know of me?”

“You have seen someone else?” Herne rose to his feet with one fluid motion that made Ceri envious. “Tell me who, Madam.”

“Someone that called themselves a Naiad.” Ceri replied. “Well two actually.”

“Tell me what you saw,” Herne took two quick steps across the ground and took both Ceri’s hands in his own, “Tell me!” he demanded.

Slowly, haltingly Ceri told him what had happened and saw Herne’s eyes harden and his lips thin, “So it begins. Sooner than I had anticipated.”

“What begins?” Ceri screwed her face into a frown and stared up at the creature.

“Your Destiny.” The creature’s features softened and he smiled down at the girl, “I am glad you have come.”

“What tried to stop me? And what would it have done to me?” Ceri asked quickly.

“That I can’t tell you.” Herne smiled sadly, “if you choose to help me you will know soon enough.”

“Oh. Great!” Ceri turned and looked around for the park warden. No-one was in sight. “What are you?” she demanded.

“A creature.” Herne replied, “Not subject to the same space and time laws that you are, but a creature nevertheless. It is you that I am concerned with.”

“That’s bad grammar,” Ceri replied automatically, “you should say ‘It is with you that I am concerned.’ Why?”

“My Lady, prophecies have been made of you and tales told of you - it has been written that when you came you would lift the curse of man from me.”

“How?” Ceri stared at him, “I’m just an ordinary person.” She realised what she had said as the words landed in the empty air.

“Are you?” the creature smiled, “I rather think that you are anything but ordinary.”

“But you could be a hallucination,” Ceri spluttered. “Saint Bernadette had them all the time.”

“Have you ever had hallucinations before?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Ceri smiled sheepishly.

“Then I would venture to say that what you’re experiencing at the moment is not a hallucination.”

“But why now? Why here?”

“As soon as you reached your tenth birthday you were chosen.” The creature smiled again, “and the moment you came into the park every creature within these environs would have known who you were. You must have seen the dryads.”

“I saw something. People. Within the trees.”

“Yes.” Herne smiled, “the dryads. They showed you their fealty. Every creature of my world has known of your existence from the moment of your

conception. It was written that when you returned you would lift the curse of man from me.”

“Then the writing is false,” Cerian eased herself around the other side of the tree and fled. She was certain that she did not follow the path yet wherever she walked a path opened up for her, the trees seemed to uproot themselves and move for her as they would for a sovereign. Then they began to change shape. It was like watching a ghost appear within each tree. Cerian stopped and stared in amazement, the trees were **dancing!** *That wasn't quite true,* she reflected, *the trees weren't dancing.* Instead each dryad had moved from its respective tree, and now formed a corridor in front of Cerian. She could see their solidity before her eyes and yet she knew that if she tried to touch them her hands would pass through them as if they were smoke.

At the end of the gathering of Dryads, another figure appeared that of Herne, Ceri almost sobbed with relief. Slowly she began to walk past the row of creatures and was absolutely disgusted when as she passed, each dryad dropped to one knee as if giving homage to a Queen. As she reached him, Herne took her cold hands in his own and his golden eyes looked into Ceri's blue ones and he said, “They offer you their fealty - to reject it would be unworthy of you.”

How can I accept it when I am not virtuous?” Ceri demanded.

“Because you have been chosen,” Herne replied, “Lady, you must accept this - turn and speak, the words will come.”

Cerian swallowed hard and then turned and faced the assembled tree-spirits behind her, for a moment panic threatened to overwhelm her and then she felt the light touch of Herne's hand on her shoulder. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth; “I thank you for the honour you give me,” Ceri smiled, “for you are more worthy of honour than I, for I have not earned it. But I thank you.” The wood seemed to revolve and Cerian suddenly felt dizzy, she felt Herne's hand on her elbow, “They will celebrate your arrival, our business is elsewhere.” The dryads parted for them as they left the circle.

Once outside the group of spinning wood-spirits Herne bowed again and offered her his arm, “Come, daughter.” When they were halfway down the path Herne said, “You'll have to get used to their allegiance, you will probably find that it happens wherever you go.”

Cerian winced perceptibly and howled, “But I don't want to be different! Well I did, but not this different!” Her voice ended on a wail.

“I trust you will cope,” Herne responded, “but you will have little time at present, there are others whose wish it is to be allowed to give thee their fealty.”

“Oh,” Cerian said slowly, the air about them suddenly felt taut and then they were walking through a pair of what seemed to Ceri to be familiar gates. She turned to view them more closely and said, “This is Hyde Park!”

Herne nodded without stopping, “Yes, my Lady. The creatures who offer you their allegiance have come here.”

“More dryads?” She asked quickly, and a little colour came into her pale face.

“Not this time, Lady,” Herne escorted her along a woodland path where great trees grew on either side, Cerian watched with a sort of numbness as each bowed its leafy head in acknowledgment. They emerged onto a green carpet of grass, ahead of them the afternoon sunlight sparkled on an expanse of water, Ceri turned to Herne, a quizzical look in her eyes, “The Serpentine?”

Herne gently released her arm and bowed deeply, “Lady, I must leave you for a short moment, for one comes who is as great as I; without whose allegiance you will never succeed.”

Cerian turned, the water began to bubble alarmingly and as Cerian stared at it she saw a group of young men break the surface bearing a litter, Cerian saw a tall imposing figure, caught sight of the circlet of gold bound around the brow, and immediately dropped to one knee her eyes firmly fixed on the water.

A low laugh broke from the figure and it said, “Up, child and let me look at you.” Cerian rose to her feet and found herself gazing at a handsome, dark-haired woman; her dress appeared to change colour from blue to green to grey, undulating all the time. *Like the sea*, Ceri thought.

“I am Tethys,” the woman said, “you have heard of me?”

Cerian’s face shone as if a lamp had been lit within her, “Aye, Lady. You are Empress of the Deeps and when the wind is high and the waves leap to touch the sky the children of Adam fear you.”

“They have good reason.” The woman smiled warmly. “Many fear me. Yet -” she paused while the grey eyes, cold and calculating, surveyed Ceri, “yet you do not, you are in awe of me but there is no fear in you.”

“Madam,” Cerian curtsied, “I have loved you almost since I was born - I have loved you when the waves beat upon the boat and the wind screamed past the ear like a ravening demon. I have embraced you wholly to me every time I dived from the boat and I have felt your embrace as the waves leapt so that I was drenched with spray. Why should I fear you?”

Tethys gazed at her for a long moment and then flung back her head and laughed, her eyes focused on someone behind Cerian, “A wise choice, Cernunnos.” Herne bowed, “Empress, I was merely the servant, the gods chose her.”

Tethys nodded thoughtfully, her red lips curved in what might have been the suggestion of a smile, “You have my blessing, Cerian, for all things that dwell in the waters beneath the earth are bound to me - but they will now also serve you. If you need mine or any of my servants’ aid, you have only to call. May you succeed, Princess.” A true smile touched the grim mouth and she looked up at the being standing behind Cerian, “she has the mark of a struggle upon her Lord.”

“She has already encountered the Dark, Madam.”

“And?”

“And Thy husband vanquished the creature.”

Tethys looked hard at Ceri, “Did she touch you child?”

“No, Empress.”

“But I see her words did. Would you let me touch you to see if I might identify her?”

“I will.” Ceri stepped forward and slowly into the lake, instantly the Naiads were either side of her, holding her up and guiding her towards the woman seated on the dais. Tethys knelt so that their faces were inches apart and then said, “My companions will dip you in the water that I might see your mind. Take a deep breath now.”

Ceri inhaled as hard as she could and felt the cold waters close over her head, then she was raised so that she lay on her back, looking up at the sky. Something, or rather someone was holding her up, although she couldn’t see anyone she could hear the laughter of the naiads all about her. Tethys bent over her and raising her hand water dripped from the ends of her fingers into Ceri’s eyes. Ceri blinked as the salt stung, “Sleep.” Tethys intoned softly, “sleep and dream of what you saw today.”

Ceri’s eyes opened very wide as her pupils dilated to an enormous size and then they closed again, Tethys watched her for an instant and then nodded to her court. With one motion, the girl was drawn down into the limpid depths of the lake, Tethys smiled at Cernunnos, “She will be safe, Horned One, I promise thee this.”

“I know that, Lady,” Herne smiled and the smile seemed to soften his stern features, “you would not harm her. But while she has no awareness of who she is and what she is, she is vulnerable.”

“Not in my realm.” Was that laughter Herne heard in Tethys’ voice, “she will be as safe as if she were in God’s hand.”

“Then I wait, Empress.”

“So be it, Lord of the Trees.” Then Tethys herself had disappeared into the lake.

To Ceri it seemed as though she moved through a green mist. She was aware of others holding her and then darkness took hold of her and she dreamt. She was back in Windsor Great Park walking along the path, yet she was also acutely aware that she was an observer, she smiled wryly as the stag bowed again and then felt suddenly afraid as she remembered what was about to happen. As the Naiad began to cast its spell, she began to struggle, to try and reach out to the child about to be maimed or killed.

Peace, the word was soft and all at once the image dissolved, and with the word came so many images of rest and sleep that she was powerless to resist them and darkness took her once again. She opened her eyes slowly. She was warmly wrapped in blankets and from the corner of her eye she could see bright tongues of flame licking the chilly air.

“What-“ she sat up and as she did so, realised she was completely naked. A movement to her left caught her eye and she hurriedly pulled the blanket over her

again. Herne knelt beside her and almost as a father might he wrapped another blanket around her front.

“Your clothes are dry,” Herne said more gently seeing the fright in her pale face. “But I thought you might like something hot to drink first.”

Ceri nodded, still not trusting herself to speak, Herne handed her a pewter mug and she carefully extended a white shaky hand from the blankets to take it. Herne smiled and moved around behind her, for a moment Ceri thought she was alone and then she felt him kneel behind her and wrap his arms around her. Warmth slowly crept into her frozen frame. She sipped the drink and was surprised to find it was hot, rich cocoa. “How long-?” her voice cracked and she tried again, “How long was I unconscious?”

“A little over ten minutes of your time.” Herne said softly, “Tethys apologises, she forgot that it might cause you distress to relive what happened, but she saw enough within your mind to know that you only encountered the Dark, it did not taint you.”

“Good.” Ceri smiled, “If the ritual of purification was anything like that experience, I’m not sure I could go through with it.”

“Lord Cernunnos,” a gentle voice interrupted them.

Both turned to see that Tethys had risen from the lake, with her retinue. “How are you, child?”

“Well, Empress.” Ceri replied.

“Good. I returned to apologise. Our methods must seem strange to you. I perceive that this creature of the Dark had no lasting effect. Therefore, to you I pledge my support and that of my friends and allies.”

Cerian knelt, “Thank you, Empress.” The waters bubbled again and when Cerian looked up Tethys and all her retinue had disappeared back into the lake. She grinned up at Herne, “I’d better get dressed, my parents would have a fit if they saw me looking like this.”

“Aye,” Herne nodded, he turned his back and waited until Cerian said, “You can turn around now.” He smiled when he saw her running her fingers through her wet hair and produced a comb. “May I, Lady.”

Ceri nodded and as Cernunnos touched her tresses with the comb, they dried instantly, she felt Herne take another handful of damp hair and heard him say, “Well done, Lady, you have behaved with dignity and courage. Tethys approves of you. You have proved yourself worthy, Lady.”

Cerian stared dumbly at him and then snapped, “Instead of speaking in riddles, Master Herne, perhaps you would care to explain what I’m supposed to do for you. You might also care to explain why these Naiads and Dryads keep bowing to me and why in Heaven I should be so honoured!” While Ceri had been speaking the scene around them shifted until they stood facing one another in the middle of Windsor Great Park.

Herne turned away from her, “I cannot even begin to explain that until you agree to help.”

“And I’m not sure that I want to help unless you tell me a few things!” Cerian retorted, her anger threatening to overwhelm her.”

“We seem to have reached stalemate,” Herne sighed, “Very well. If it will help you choose I will tell you a little and answer some of your questions.”

Cerian waited silently. Herne looked out across the park and began to speak. “Many writers and historians assume that Artus, Second True High King of All Britain appeared just at the right moment in order to unite the warring Saxons - they were wrong. Artus was prophesied about long before King Uther Pendragon lay with Igrayne, Duchess of Cornwall.” He paused, Cerian was listening quietly, “and there are also prophecies that relate to you, Lady, that were written many centuries before you were born.”

Cerian swallowed hard, her blue eyes wide, “Would you tell me one?” She pleaded softly.

Herne smiled, the stern mouth relaxing under Cerian’s gaze, “I will tell you the one I remember, it runs something like this; *The Hunter’s days are drawing to a close. For a girl has been given freely, a child born, and she shall be called, Much Loved, Princess, Keeper of the San greal and with her birth the Salvation of the Hunter is nigh.*” He stopped and then turned his gaze onto Ceri, “I believe that you are the one, I have appeared to others, but none of them accepted my presence the way that you did.”

“No.” Cerian said suddenly. She began walking purposefully away from him, the trees bowing to her as she passed. Cerian kept her head down and looked neither left nor right, *If I don’t admit anything’s happened, nothing will*, she thought firmly. She emerged from the forest and took a deep breath of the sharp, but not yet cold, air. Relief swept over her as she recognised her parents walking towards her.

She turned and saw Herne behind her, “I’m sorry,” she said quickly, “but this is scaring me more than you can imagine. I cannot help you; I don’t know why you thought I could. Goodbye.” Cerian was conscious of Herne’s eyes upon her as she plodded towards her parents.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Ceri?” The woman asked.

Ceri smiled, “Yes thanks, Mum. I got a bit lost in the forest but a very kind man found me and brought me back here.”

“Your father’s been into the chapel and had a look at some of the remains of the tapestries that were destroyed by the fire.” her mother said,

“Can some of them be restored?” Ceri swept her fair hair back from her face and surveyed her parent with clear blue eyes.

“Possibly.” Her father remarked, “but I must write up the notes I made and contact the Society. If we undertook the restoration it would be a six-month long project here. I’d be away most of the time.”

“Could I come with you?” Ceri asked quickly.

Her father shook his head, “No, love. You’ll be back at school when we start work. If you’re interested in the history of this park then I’ll bring you back here after Christmas. I’ve some books on it at home.”

“I’ve read one.” Ceri said, “all about Herne the Hunter. Do you think he exists?”

For a moment Ceri saw something indefinable pass across her father’s face, like the shadow of a cloud across the land, then it was gone and he replied, “Get in. That particular book was really about a King who couldn’t resist a pretty face, and who had he reigned this century would have brought the monarchy down. Want to sit in front?”

“Please!”

Cerian clambered into the front seat car and fastened her seat belt. About five minutes later both her parents climbed into it. “Home, James,” her father said slipping the car into gear.

“And don’t spare the horses!” Ceri and her mother chorused. He started the vehicle and gingerly eased it out of its parking place. Leaves covered the road ahead of them and coated the roof of the car and continued to fall as it beetled down the drive. Cerian cringed on the seat and felt like a traitor.

“I presume you know about Henry VIII,” her father began.

“The one with six wives?” Ceri nodded, “I learnt about him at school. I thought he was just slightly eccentric.”

“He was a bit more than that,” her father smiled, “he was completely mad. Historians believe that he suffered from syphilis made him insane, and he abused the responsibility that a King has to his people.”

“So because he was King he could squash anyone who disagreed with him?”

“Something like that,” her father agreed, “Herne the Hunter only appears, or is supposed to appear when there are people around who have thoughts of murder. Henry VIII sent at least two of his wives to their deaths by way of false trials, and Windsor was his home.”

“Grim,” Ceri said, “but do you think the Hunter’s evil?”

“I don’t know,” her father replied, “perhaps not evil, but dangerous all the same.”

“Why?”

“Because he commands neither the Light nor the Dark and that makes him very dangerous, because he’s unpredictable. But-” he turned briefly to Ceri, “you’ll have to make your own choices, if you ever come face to face with the Hunter.”

“And I’m likely to do that,” Ceri hoped that she put the right amount of sarcasm into her voice and felt a great tide of relief as her Dad’s face relaxed. She relaxed letting the seat support her tense muscles and gradually the motion of the car made her eyelids heavy and lulled her to sleep.

She woke just as the Range Rover was turning into their drive, “I’ll shut the gate, Dad,” and she was out of the car before Dad could protest. Once closed she

leant on it for a moment looking out across the landscape, and thought again that she lived in one of the most beautiful places in all of England and that nowhere could compare with it.

As she walked up to the house the wind plucked at her eyelashes and hair and the trees seemed to have gone wild, "I'll just take Rufus out for a run," Ceri said quickly as she stepped into the kitchen.

"Don't let him escape into next door's garden," Mum warned as Ceri slipped out the back door. She trudged up the garden, Rufus bounding at her heels. The wind whipped at the cerise jacket she had pulled over her jeans and blue sweatshirt. She watched the trees numbly as they bent almost double in the wind and again she saw the dryad within each one bowing to her.

Herne materialized beside her, "I did try and tell you," he said quietly, "Unfortunately, your Destiny has already been made."

"I always believed that my Destiny was in my own hands," Cerian replied.

"I wish," Herne replied. He laughed harshly and then said, "I told you, you were prophesied about when this country was being torn apart by the Saxons."

"But by all rights it is up to me whether I help you or not." Cerian's eyes flashed blue fire.

"Of any normal being that would be true," Herne's citrine eyes held Ceri's, "but there are some who because of the time they were born, or the day they were born, have no choice of Destiny."

"Are you telling me that I was born on a special day?" Cerian asked softly.

"You were born on midwinter's day, when the sun's rays touched the altar stone. It is the shortest day of the year and one of the Great Festivals." Herne's voice was gentle, "when the Giant's Dance was first erected on midwinter's day the sunlight poured through the arch to fall in a sparkling pool of light on the altar stone and one of our noblest gods was revealed. Mithras."

"You're talking about Stonehenge!" Ceri said delightedly.

Herne looked outraged, "That Circle was constructed long after the first Giant's Dance, most of that stands at the place you and your fellow men call Stonehenge." Herne seemed to be looking inward his eyes faraway.

"Who was Mithras?"

Another smile enhanced Herne's features, "Your books will tell you that he was a good spirit who attended on the Lord of Life, Ahuramazda. Our legend is one that tells of Mithras as the same, a good spirit, It is said that in the gardens of the Lord of Life, there dwelt a white bull, Ahuramazda wept because this bull's blood could bring life to the barren and wasted earth yet the only way that this could be accomplished would be if one who served Him would become human and suffer at the hands of Evil, Mithras volunteered, and Ahuramazda created him a soldier, and bade him take the bull to a Holy place and sacrifice it. Ahriman, the Power of Darkness, sent plagues to drive the White Bull back, so Mithras tethered the bull and went out to fight Ahriman.

Ahriman set a plague of boils upon him. When this failed to stop Mithras he sent fire to burn him. Badly wounded now, Mithras brought the bull to the Holy place, the first living creature. When he arrived, he forced the bull to kneel while he sacrificed it. From the bull's blood sprang all life on earth and Mithras too died at the White Bull's feet. Legend runs that the Sun himself came down and dressed the wounds of Mithras, then he laid his hand upon him and restored him to life, they shared a meal together and Mithras ascended into heaven. He stands on the right hand of the Invincible Sun."

"Sounds like the God my parents believe in."

"It doesn't matter what men call the Light, Mithras, Artus, Christ. The Light has had many names over the ages and if men do things that are right for right's sake, then they follow the Light. But I am digressing. I need your help, please?"

Cerian shook her head again, "I'm just an ordinary person - I mean - I always felt different - but-but--"

Then Herne did something that unnerved Cerian completely, he took both her small hands and said, "Lady, Tethys, Queen of the Springs and Neaps, Empress of the Tides would not offer her fealty to anyone. That she gave you permission to command beneath the waters is almost proof positive that this is your Destiny."

"That old chestnut again," Cerian whistled sharply and Rufus came bounding up to them. Ceri patted him absentmindedly and the bearded collie leapt up at her planting its paws on her chest, nearly knocking Ceri off her feet. Herne snapped his fingers and Rufus dropped back on all fours and licked Ceri's hand.

"Will you help me?"

"You're immortal - why on earth do you need my help?"

Herne looked away from her and for a brief second Cerian thought he looked ashamed, "I am under a curse," he said finally, "I have haunted many places but the last time was about four hundred years ago. I appear when murder is in the air. I am so weary of this curse. I was told that one day a girl who could see beyond the visible world would come and release me from it. Please?"

In the grey blue twilight of an Autumn evening Herne saw the shine of tears in Cerian's eyes, she took both Herne's hands and said, "If it is within my power to grant you rest and peace I shall do so," she smiled, "I can promise no more than that, Master Herne. If as you say I am the key to your salvation I shall help you."

Herne bowed formally, his antlered head just brushing the top of Ceri's hair, "Your truly deserve your name, Cerian. I thank you, Lady." The cold nose of the collie made Cerian start and when she looked around Herne had disappeared and there was only the wind in the trees and the white face of the moon gazing down coldly on the young girl and the dog.

Chapter 2

'Into The Oak'

When Ceri awoke the next morning and looked out of her window, the wind had disappeared as suddenly as it had risen; she was almost tempted to believe that the events of the previous evening had been her imagination. She clipped the lead onto the dog's collar and holding him firmly opened the back door. The morning air was sharp and cold. Ceri shivered in spite of the thermal underwear and the thick anorak she wore. Every sound seemed magnified by the stillness of the morning.

As they left the road and began to walk up the lane, Rufus started to bounce around at the end of his lead. Cerian leant down and unclipped him whereupon the dog bounded away like a greyhound. Suddenly a familiar voice said, "Do you do this every morning?"

"Most mornings when I'm home," Cerian straightened and knew without turning that it was Herne, "It helps me think." She admitted.

"You were thinking about last night?" Herne's voice was surprisingly gentle.

Cerian scowled, "I'd just convinced myself that it was my imagination."

Herne smiled sadly, "It wasn't. I thought the same thing - once. I will walk with you if I may; we have things to do. Now that you've agreed to help I am allowed to speak more freely and to tell you more about your quest."

Cerian looked up at him shyly, "How can you appear here - I thought that you were constrained to Windsor Great Park."

Herne inclined his head and the great antlers bent in a sweeping bow, he pointed to the huge tree ahead of them. It rose dark and majestic above the earth, its branches stark and bare against the autumn sky. There was something regal in the way that it defied the elements. "Anywhere there is an oak I may appear if I so choose. Unfortunately, as humans destroy the forests there are fewer places for me to go. If you continue to chop trees down, soon I shall be confined to Windsor Great Park forever. But-" he smiled again. "That is your problem."

Cerian nodded, "Yes, I know. That's not what you wanted to tell me though was it?" She surveyed Herne curiously.

"No," Herne agreed, sighing, "Did you know your ships were made of oak once, wooden walls they were called-" he sighed again his eyes far away and Ceri realised that he was looking back into the past - his past, he began to hum a tune and then to sing the words, "Heart of oak are our ships; Heart of oak are our

men! We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again!" He broke off as he realised Cerian was staring at him.

Finally she broke the awkward silence that had fallen between them, "What do we do now?"

"First we get your dog back," Herne replied and he whistled sharply, ten seconds later a very muddy Rufus hurtled up the lane and nearly knocked Cerian over. She vainly tried to fend him off and then Herne's hand descended on the dog's head, Rufus suddenly stopped prancing and sat down. He gazed at the Lord of the Trees his long pink tongue hanging out.

Cerian stared and gasped, "What did you do?"

"A little knack I have with animals," Herne admitted somewhat ruefully, "However, I'm glad to see that I haven't lost the touch."

Cerian scowled, "Shall we go?"

She let Rufus in the back way and fondled the dog's sandy head, "Go and lie down." She commanded, "I'll brush the mud off later."

"Do you want to come in for a moment?" She turned to Herne.

"I only wish I could," Herne pointed to the rusted horseshoe that her father had nailed to the lintel. "Cold iron bars the way."

Cerian stared at him perplexed and then she shut the door behind her so that the horseshoe was not a barrier between them.

Herne took Cerian's hand and slowly, hesitantly began, "My Lady, if I were to enter your home, I would have power over every living thing within its walls. It is better that I do not have that much power. Princess, you and I are of the Old Magic, the High Magic. Ties of Love bind you and because of that, you will not harm those for whom you care. Love transcends even the High Magic; you will never injure those you love. As for me," a grim smile touched his lips and Cerian saw his eyes become cold and far away again, "I am not bound by Love or Hate and when the wind is high and the moon sails across the heavens the High Magic, the Wild Magic takes hold of me and I must ride the clouds with the Yell Hounds baying at my heels."

Cerian suddenly felt a chill of apprehension and for the first time wondered if it was safe to trust Herne, she looked up at him and saw that his eyes were full of the same fierce humour as the day she had first encountered him, their eyes met and held and Herne said very softly and quite deliberately, "Never trust anyone who commands the High Magic, of the men who have held it many have fallen into the abyss because they were swayed by base emotions. You may be called upon to make a choice between those you love and the High Magic."

"I could not make such a choice," Cerian whispered and knew in her heart that it was the truth.

Herne surveyed her for a moment or two and then he held out his hand, "Come my Lady, we have work to do."

For a moment Cerian saw the old Herne standing before her, the one who made her heart leap with joy and before her resolve could falter she nodded.

“Good.” Herne patted her hand tenderly and the scene around them appeared to melt and shift and when it solidified again they stood before Herne’s Oak, “Lady,” he spoke again. “You would do me great honour if you would enter my home.”

Cerian felt as though she was speaking words from a play, “The honour is mine, Lord Herne.”

The oak suddenly parted before them with such a creaking and groaning that Ceri was sure some of the park keepers would come running, she looked up at Herne and he shook his head, “They see only what they expect to see.”

“And what does that mean?” Ceri snapped, “I’m truly getting sick of being spoken to in riddles!”

Herne took her shoulders and turned her to face him, “Lady, you must understand that you differ from these mortals that surround you. Much of the world that mortals inhabit is invisible to them and there is a veil that drops between this visible and the invisible one that Beings such as I inhabit, Therefore, when impossible things happen to mortals like trees opening, this veil drops over their eyes and their brain forbids them to see what is actually before their eyes. It is more blessing than curse, if many mortals could see the invisible world they would go mad. Now will you come?”

Cerian swallowed hard and smiled tightly, “Thank you. I am grateful for the explanation.” She did not voice her other fear that if she could see oaks opening, and dryads dancing within trees, perhaps she was not fully mortal.

She felt the gentle pressure of Herne’s hand on her back as he ushered her into the oak, it closed behind them and Cerian found herself standing in a large chamber, far larger than the inside of the oak could ever be, she and Herne stood in a pool of light, it was as bright as day and yet the glow was not the yellow warmth of the sun but nearer the cool impersonal touch of the moon. Ceri stared upwards at the lamp and wondered what magic kept it there.

“Persuasive,” Herne said softly. Cerian stared at him shocked and then found her voice, “you can read my thoughts?”

“Not really, most of your thought was written on your face. I can pick up thoughts from you much as you pick up radio transmissions - but I cannot read the deeper levels of your mind and I have no intention of trying. I will tell you more of this later when you can more fully comprehend it. For now there is a short ceremony that you must undergo. Herne’s right hand grasped the back of Cerian’s head and Cerian felt his left hand against the side of her face, she closed her eyes and heard him speak, “Out Cold Iron. Out.”

A sharp stab of agony drew a gasp from Ceri and then she was alone on a sea of pain, she drew a shuddering breath and opened her eyes, Herne’s face slowly swam back into focus. She blinked and felt two tears slide down her cheeks, Herne was still a black shadow.

“Forgive me.” He dropped his hand and reached across her shoulder to take something from the shadowy recesses, Cerian closed her eyes and let her chin

fall onto her chest willing herself not to collapse in a heap of hysterical female. A skin bag was put into her hands and she heard Herne say, "Take a small sip, it will revive you somewhat."

Cerian nodded and lifted the vessel, she tipped a little into her mouth and swallowed, Herne lifted it from her dazed fingers. She licked her lips thoughtfully, the liquid had been light and faintly sweet but there was a wildness about it that lingered at the corners of her mouth. Ten seconds later a warm glow began in the tips of Cerian's toes and spread upwards.

Herne smiled, "Better? Good. Come," he commanded taking her hand in an iron grip, "This is where I tell you why I need you and there is much about yourself that you must learn."

Herne stretched a fur-covered arm into the shadows and when he pulled it back he was holding a smooth metal torch holder, still clasping Cerian's hand he held it upwards towards the light illuminating the area in which they were standing. A small orb of light detached itself from the lamp and slowly descended into the torch, there was a brief spark and then the torch lit up like a magnesium flare and Cerian saw that they stood on a seamless floor; here and there piles of leaves covered the ground in front of them. Cerian moved forward gingerly, Herne held the torch so that she could see ahead of her and Ceri saw a flight of wooden stairs spiraling downwards.

Cerian laid her hand against the wall and began to walk down the staircase into the darkness beyond.

They emerged into a large, brightly lit room. Herne placed the torch, which had mysteriously been extinguished, in a metal holder near the foot of the staircase and walked across to the fire blazing in the grate.

Cerian meanwhile was looking around completely dumbfounded, a rich crimson carpet covered the floor, a carpet was hanging on one of the walls and three Queen Anne chairs stood empty before the fire. It resembled a room straight from mediæval times and yet as Ceri looked up at the ceiling she saw that it was the same light that had hung above them as they entered the oak, although this lamp seemed to be warmer.

"Is this still Herne's Oak?" She turned to face the Lord of the Trees.

"In a sense," Herne replied, "if you go up those stairs the oak will open for you and you will find yourself back in Windsor Great Park but it is also my true home - beyond Time itself."

Cerian looked around her and again noticed the great vastness of the room; there were shadows at the circumference as if the room was really part of one long tunnel. "I like it," she said simply. "Your home I mean."

"Thank you," Herne's mouth curved in a smile and then he had taken two goblets from a cupboard and pushed back a curtain of green fern, water oozed out from a crack and trickled down into a granite rock basin. Herne filled both goblets and then walked across to where Cerian was standing and handed one to her, their hands touched, for an instant Ceri felt the warmth of Herne's palm on

her knuckles and then he was moving away to ease himself into one of the chairs opposite.

“Be seated, Lady,” he gestured to the chair.

Cerian nodded and slowly lowered herself into the ornately carved chair, she stared down into the goblet, and it was so clear that she could see that the bowl had been inlaid with silver.

“Please drink,” Herne said softly, “I would offer you wine, but it is too early to indulge in alcohol just yet and we need to keep clear heads. Now - you do want explanations, and as I believe I have said, there is much that I must tell you. So ask your questions.”

Cerian raised her eyes from their contemplation of the chalice and wondered what to ask, so much had happened in the past few days that she almost felt at a loss. A part of her insisted that this could not be happening, but another part, a part of which she had been only half-aware was drinking in the surroundings and experience like a thirsty man drinks water. She raised the vessel to her lips and let a little of the water slide down her throat. It was cool and sweet and Ceri could taste a hint of the wildness of the other drink that Herne had given her.

Carefully setting the chalice down on the small walnut table beside the chair, she began, “You told me at my house that you were under a curse - can you tell me why?”

Herne surveyed her thoughtfully for a moment, “This could take some time.”

“I have until three this afternoon,” Ceri replied quickly.

Herne laughed, “We are outside Time itself, it won’t affect us. Forgive me, I should have said what I meant. I did not wish to bore you.”

“Considering you went to all the trouble to convince me that I was the answer to all your problems I would have thought that boring me would be the least of your worries!” Ceri retorted.

Herne’s aureate eyes blinked and then he laughed, “I was right, there is fire in you. I told you that you and I are of the High Magic, the Old Magic. It is what holds Life itself together, what binds those from the distant past with those in the present. In you it could not be tapped because of the iron in your teeth.”

Unconsciously Ceri’s hand went to her cheek the pain still a vivid memory, “Who am I?”

She looked up and saw compassion in the depths of Herne’s eyes, “You were born on midwinter’s day, as I believe I have already told you,” Herne stood up and strode across the crimson carpet, he knelt before Cerian and taking both her chilly hands in his own, looked up into her face, “it is the shortest day of the year. Your scientists herald it as the beginning of the Winter Solstice; we did not regard it with such delight. For us it meant that the Sun was journeying away from us again to spend the winter months in His own land to recuperate after the summer. As for who you are, that you may discover later, it is not as bad as all that.”

Ceri mused thoughtfully and then she raised her head and met Herne's eyes, "The Beltane fires, the great fires that were lit during the winter months, were they really a plea to the Sun to return?"

She could see that Herne was thinking, "No and yes. At first as the nights became longer, man mirrored the fire of the sun bidding him farewell and then it became a symbolic thing, that the Beltane fires would be lit and people would gather together to bid the Sun farewell and to plead for his return. Later couples leapt over the flames and if they remained unscathed then it meant a long life and strong children."

Cerian nodded and suddenly it seemed as if something caught her and when she spoke it was in a voice not her own, "For the fire of the Sun is what gives us life, therefore we echo the fire of the sun that he may return to us." She blinked and then looked down at Herne, "How-"

Herne's hands gripped her own and his eyes were full of xanthous fire, "It is beginning. We must move quickly, let me tell you my story and then I will teach what little knowledge I possess." He released her hands returned to his chair and cupping the bowl of the goblet in his hands, he began, "I have been many people and it is possible that I may be more. I am conceived from man's dark side, from his hates. I first appeared to Henry II."

"Who will rid me of this tempestuous priest." Ceri remarked suddenly.

Herne's eyes became far away as he nodded, "I was there when those three knights rode past. However, Henry Plantagenet took the blame for the thought was in his mind. I was an attendant attached to his court. Sometimes my liege would hunt for deer in the forest. I accompanied him on all his drives. One day I was gored by a buck, my liege killed the beast but I was still wounded sore. Then a man appeared from the forest and told the other courtiers to remove the stag's head and bind it to mine. I was lifted onto a hurdle and borne back to the castle. I lay unconscious for almost three weeks. I should have removed the creature's head a week later but before I could, three fellow courtiers discredited me in the eyes of the King and I fled into the forest. I hanged myself on this oak."

Cerian's eyes became wide with fear, "You mean you're dead!" She squeaked.

To her amazement, Herne threw his head back and laughed, Ceri stared at him suddenly feeling very alone and very vulnerable and then Herne shook himself and surveyed Cerian.

"There is more to Life than Death, some people's spirits are so strong that they remain part of the country forever, they remain alive in legend and story and song and that is another kind of immortality. There is an old saying that a person only dies when the last thing he set in motion is completed, if a person remains alive in memory, then they never die. Those persons whose spirits are bound up in the history of the country survive as long as the country survives - many mortals see their country as forever. You see beyond forever and Never and

Always because of what you are but the fact that I am dead should not bother you, I am part of the country and because the country is alive, I am alive. It is a difficult concept to get across.”

“Yes,” Ceri nodded, “I can see that. So everyone I have spoken to is dead?”

Herne sighed, “We are going to have problems with this idea.” He took another sip of his water and then said, “no, not everyone, dryads lives are bound up in his or her trees, they can move away from them but when the tree dies then the dryad dies. Tethys on the other hand embodies all of the oceans, she is the ocean and it was from the sea that the first life ever came.”

“You are much more than the courtier who served Henry II,” Cerian said suddenly, and thought *and I am much more than the girl who is to save the Hunter.*

“Yes, my Lady,” Herne surveyed her for a moment and Ceri wondered which statement he was answering.

“What happened to the men who discredited you?”

“Three weeks later they were found hanged on my oak, I took my revenge on them, or rather the Hunter did, by that time we were inseparable.”

“Has the Hunter appeared since, I mean, you do seem to be two distinct personalities.”

“The last time was during the reign of Henry VIII. But no-one died, at least his body was never discovered. He was an attendant at the court and he loved the forest. Henry VIII plotted to murder two of his wives and when foul deeds are afoot I am summoned,” Herne paused and drank from the goblet, Ceri had the impression that he wished it was something stronger than water, “This is difficult to explain, in order to fulfill what mankind expects from the Hunter, I have to commit murder, thus continuing the circle. Murder leads to murder, this man offered me his life as long as part of him would still care for the forests and the animals. The Invincible Sun, the Lord of the High Magic was so impressed by this selflessness that he made this my last murder.”

Ceri swallowed hard feeling slightly sick, “You mean that in murdering people you gained power?”

“Certainly,” Herne replied, “Blood is very powerful. It is the essence of Life, why do you think the Celts sacrificed animals to me. Blood has always been recognised as being the Life-force.” He glanced at Cerian’s face and hastily continued, “I have learnt over the years that I was not to blame. Man, or rather some men, try to blame the evil that they do on a spirit or a demon. Unfortunately, many of the more superstitious ones lay the blame on me. Soon the race of Adam will be left to their own keeping and will have to take the consequences of their actions.”

Cerian leant forward her blue eyes alight, “Tethys called you by another name - what did it mean? Tell me who you were and why you became to all men - evil.”

“Which question would you like answered first?” Herne inquired lazily.

“The first one.”

“Tethys called me Cernunnos. He was the Celtic god of the underworld, or I should perhaps say that I was.”

“But the Celts died out when the Romans invaded Britain! How could they continue to believe in you!”

Herne’s own golden eyes bored in Ceri and he said gently, “I suppose that is what your history books tell you? Oh no, my little Cerian, you cannot destroy a people except from within, the rituals were held in secret, in groves deep in the forest on altars sacred to me and me alone and the priests chosen carefully so as not to draw attention to the cult. Oh the Romans tried to imprint their own religion on this country, but this land was pagan long before the Romans landed, that the Vikings discovered. Belief is a strange thing, if you truly believe something with your heart, mind, and soul then that thing is true; if you feel that you will fail and always fail, it will be so because of your nonbelief. People are very good at nonbelief, belief is harder. But the early Celts believed in me with all the power of their spirit and to them I was a generous god, I defended their villages many times against the Viking hordes and it was only when they forsook me and did not make the ritual sacrifice that I turned my face away from them.”

“You’ve answered some of my second question,” Ceri smiled tentatively, some of her confidence returning, “would you answer the rest, about how you came to be evil?”

“Christianity,” Herne muttered, “I have many names, Cernunnos and Herne are two of my oldest, we are linked because we both wear horns, the Christian missionaries said that because of that I was the Devil.”

Ceri nodded comprehension dawning in her eyes. “And the White Christ swept the country-”

“Like a fire, and the priests preached that because I wore horns I was Satan.” Herne took up the story. “The people turned away from me and believed those missionaries. Thus for over five hundred years the Kings of your country sustained that belief with their murders and their dark desires. Those two Kings I have already mentioned committed such grievous sin that even today the world gasps at it.”

“There were worse Kings than Henry VIII,” Cerian remarked miserably, “Kings never had very good morals at that time. But I do understand.”

“You wished to know the story of my curse,” Herne smiled, “And I have told you. Have you any other questions?”

“Only one,” she replied. “How am I supposed to lift it?”

“I do not know.” Herne’s face became grave.

For a split second Ceri was suddenly filled with the desire to run away to get out of whatever she had got into and deny all knowledge of what had happened, she took a deep breath, “Tell me what you do know.”

Herne rose to his feet and walked across the claret-coloured carpet, he took the goblet from her and set it on the table then he drew Cerian to her feet. His dazzling golden eyes held Cerian's ultramarine ones and a real smile touched his lips, "Tethys accepted you, that is a great magic. I know now that you are my salvation. If you were to read some of the prophecies about yourself they might clarify things, there are others who must have discourse with thee." Herne's words had suddenly become very archaic and there was a formality to his actions that had not been present before.

Slowly Cerian nodded, "Very well."

Herne released her hands, walked across to a shelf, and took down two bound scrolls. Cradling them in his arms he returned to where Ceri was standing and handed one to her.

She unrolled it gingerly as if afraid that the yellow parchment would crumble in her hands, slowly she began to read the words; *And it shall come to pass, the Hunter will meet the girl who shall be his salvation; And Tethys, Empress of the Oceans shall bind herself unto her that she need fear nothing that swims in the depths or flies upon the surface of the waters. And she shall be called; Much Loved, Hunter's Salvation, Daughter of the Morning, Keeper of the San greal.* Cerian raised her eyes from the scroll and squeaked, "Me?"

For an answer Herne handed her the second scroll, Cerian took it and held it tightly, half afraid to open it. Eventually she unrolled it slowly and scanned the contents; *And the three highest who have beheld the San greal wait for the Keeper. The Keeper shall come before them to be found virtuous.*

Herne replaced the scrolls and turned back to Ceri, "I suppose now you have even more questions."

"Just one," Cerian sighed, "Why am I called the Keeper of the San greal, come to think of it what is a San greal?"

"I do not know why you are The Keeper," Herne said slowly, "but as for the San greal - it is the Holy Grail, the reason that the Round Table broke up and the bright fellowship of knights dissolved to end as nothing more than a glorious memory. The Grail is the cup that Christ is supposed to have used at The Last Supper, there are three who have seen the Grail with their own eyes and they shall test you."

Cerian eased herself back into the chair and demanded, "Who will test me?"

"Joseph of Arimathea, The Grail Knight and the Lady Nimüe."

"The Grail Knight? You mean a knight of the Round Table will test me?"

"Certainly. But this you must do alone, I can take you there but they will examine you and I will be forbidden by the High Magic to intervene and save your life should you fail."

For the first time Cerian wondered what she had to do, "Lord Herne, I'm scared."

Herne took her hands and knelt so that the antlers were level with the top of her head, “Lady, you cannot show fear. You must be warrior and wisdom. You battle not an earthly foe and you have no army at your back. I have the utmost faith in you.”

“And if I fail Lord Herne, will you do me one favour?”

“If I can,” Herne replied guardedly, “what favour would you ask.”

“That you administer the coup de grâce, I would rather it was you than someone I did not know.”

Herne stared at Ceri, “Do you know what you ask, Lady?”

“Yes,” Ceri replied solemnly, “the coup de grâce was an act of mercy to a vanquished knight in a joust or in battle. If an opponent was too badly injured in the stomach then a charitable knight would administer the ‘cut of grace’ and give him a painless death. Usually by cutting the jugular.”

“You did your research well,” Herne said softly, “but I do not know if I could do that for you, Lady.”

“But I demand it, Lord.” Ceri said softly, “you see, even a condemned man has to have one final request. This is mine.”

“You haven’t been condemned yet,” Herne responded “and there is yet another test that you must undergo first - you must face the Verification. You must face the Sol Invictus. If you fail that you will never even remember me, you will be reduced to the status of an ordinary mortal and that would be a loss.”

Cerian smiled and stood up, “Shall we go, my Lord. After all we mustn’t keep the Light waiting.”

Herne led her to another chamber, or was it another time, they were standing in a huge open place. All around them was light, the dazzling light of sun on snow. Cerian looked around to speak to Herne and discovered to her horror that he had disappeared. For a moment she panicked and then ahead of her something began to glow even brighter, taking her courage in both hands Cerian walked towards it.

She halted almost a dozen paces from the edge of the brightness, there was no other word to describe it, it was an ovoid corona of light pulsating slightly. She swallowed hard, licked her very dry lips and spoke, “Sol Invictus; Sol Unconquered; Sun Unconquerable, I am here to stand before you as a test. Test me, Invincible Sun.” Cerian dropped to her knees and waited.

Something whispered in the corners of her mind, “Rise my child. I must look into your eyes and into your heart when I test you.”

Cerian rose to her feet and the shape moved forward, for a brief moment Ceri felt an instant of fear and then the dazzling nimbus obscured her.

“Cernunnos chose well,” the words were spoken but Ceri still kept her eyes closed, something warned her that she would be blinded if she didn’t. “Go in peace, Daughter of the Morning. You have my blessing and my love.”

Someone was holding her strongly and Ceri felt her mouth opened and little liquid poured in, it burnt the back of her throat and made her cough and splutter.

She opened her eyes and stared up into Herne's face, "Are you all right, my Lady?" He enquired solicitously.

Cerian struggled to her feet and the room swayed. She grabbed Herne for support and sat down again, "Never better, Lord Herne," she whispered. "Tell me where are we?"

"Back in my home," Herne replied. Reassured Cerian released her grip on the furry mantle covering Herne's body. She looked around and saw that she lay in a small bedroom area just off the main cave. "My sleeping quarters," Herne said softly.

Cerian scowled, "Can't you turn that off or something?"

"I told you, my Lady, it only occurs when your mind forms questions. "Try burying them deeper or asking them outright."

"I shall try to remember that, Lord Herne." Cerian nodded, "but it could be useful, a telepathic link."

"It would be like being permanently wired to another person's innermost thoughts. Thank you. No."

"I never considered that," Ceri frowned.

Herne meanwhile had gone across to the granite basin and filled another goblet of water, which he handed to Cerian. this time she drained it.

"You passed with flying colours," He said, "you have almost nothing to fear from the others who will test you."


"Save that they may find me unworthy of the San great," Cerian remarked dryly.

"You would have always had to prove yourself to them whatever the outcome here," Herne replied. Suddenly he clasped both her hands again and knelt before her, like a knight offering his fealty to a queen. Cerian stared down at him and then everything seemed to slip into place, "Rise, Lord Herne," she said softly, "I may be one of you, but I have not yet your wisdom. I would be honoured if you would stand with me."

"In truth, Princess, the honour is mine." Herne rose to his feet and stood regarding the child to whom he had given his allegiance.

Chapter 3

'A Test Of Worth'

erne handed a goblet to Cerian, her fingers closed around the cool stem gratefully, "Thank you, Lord."
 "Are you feeling better, Lady?" Herne asked.
 "Less light-headed," Cerian replied, "but what happens now?"

"You have passed one of the most difficult tests, now we journey to Lady Nimüe, she holds the Grail."

"But all the legends of Arthur and his knights say that the Grail was taken up to heaven."

"There is a reason for that," Herne mused for a moment. "A reason that I cannot explain here, but soon you must take the Test of The Keeper."

"Ah," Cerian swallowed hard. "When?"

"Tonight," Herne nodded gravely, "We must journey to an especial feast day - I shall wake you."

"How do I get home?" Ceri quavered.

Tenderly Herne removed the goblet from her hands and drew Cerian to her feet, with an arm around her shoulders he led her to the far end of the room. A pair of doorposts and a lintel appeared. "Walk through and you will arrive exactly where you were this morning." He informed her.

"How much time has passed?" Ceri murmured.

"Barely three hours in this world or perhaps half a lifetime in your own."

"I thought you said that time had no meaning here?"

"I did indeed," Herne laughed, "but Lady, much has happened here and you are not the child I met a day ago - nor yet are you the woman you wish to be. Tell me - how much time do you think has passed?"

"Almost half a lifetime," Ceri whispered, "I have become someone I do not know."

"You will eventually know her," Herne bent and kissed her knuckles, "Time being what it is, it is different to all men-"

"And for us that can move through Time - it is even more so." Her eyes snapped back into focus and she whimpered, "Lord, help me!"

Herne's xanthous eyes became even more intense and he bit his lip, "Lady, I may advise you, defend you and even comfort you, but I cannot help you. Your latent power is emerging. I do not know what your gift is, you yourself must discover that without my aid. Unfortunately power such as ours brings with it great knowledge and responsibility. Be brave, little one."

“I do not know if I can be brave,” Ceri told him doubtfully.

“I doubt that anyone does,” Herne replied. “However we shall soon see. You must learn Latin and Brêton, your English is as foreign to the Saxons as your clothing would be.”

“But I thought that this power would enable me to speak any language I chose?” Ceri frowned, “stories say that.”

“That’s why they are stories,” Herne replied. “Reality is very different. Go. I’ll see you tonight.”

Ceri nodded and just as she was about to step through the doorway, she heard Herne’s voice behind her, “Leave your window open, I need to be able to enter your room to wake you.” Then she had stepped through the portal and disappeared from Herne’s sight.

Herne watched as the doorposts and lintel slowly disappeared.

“You didn’t tell her the truth?”

He turned and regarded the woman quietly, “Greetings, Morgana. Do you usually drop in unannounced?”

“On occasions such as these, Cernunnos.” Morgana replied. Her jet-black hair was held back by a jewelled headband.

Herne surveyed her figure quietly, “I’m not sure emerald is your colour.”

Morgana laughed and smoothed her pale hands down the front of her velvet dress, “This is old, Cernunnos. But I have not worn it for a thousand years or so.”

Herne sighed, “What do you want, Enchantress?”

“So formal, Cernunnos? I remember when we were lovers. Never have I felt such passion as the years I was in your arms, you were Lord of the Underworld and I loved thee as I have never loved another. Not even my husband.”

“Which one, Morgana?” Herne’s mouth twisted in a smile; “Thou hast had many husbands.”

“Artus.” She replied shortly, her green eyes suddenly hard. She turned away from him and walked across the carpet her jet-black hair flying behind her. She turned just before she reached the chair Cerian had been sitting in and clasped her hands before her, “I came to ask thee to reconsider, Cernunnos. Return with me to thy kingdom, thy subjects ask me daily where their lord is and why he hath departed and I cannot answer them. Come back with me, husband and let us rule our own country.”

Herne stared at her and sighed, “I cannot. You know that, Morgana. I have only this existence now and I am tired beyond imagining.”

Morgana stared at him and then moved across to stand beside him, “My Lord,” she said, her voice had changed subtly to a deeper timbre, “if thou art tired, let me refresh you; return with me, when we are home I shall bathe thy head with cool water and anoint it with scented unguents.” She moved to stand before him

and gently reached up a hand and gently touched his antlers, “Your horns need attention, my lord,” she said softly.

Herne cupped her pointed face in his palms, “Would you care for them, wife?”

Morgana’s eyes shone with an iridescent light, “I would polish them daily, Lord. Only return with me and I myself will clean them and polish them until they gleam.”

Her eyes closed as she reached up on tiptoe to kiss his lips, “My Lord,” she murmured, “Cernunnos, Lord of the Underworld, Guardian of the Dead.”

Herne caught her wrist before she could touch his face, “No!” he snarled and his face became almost bestial, “you’ll not snare me that way again, Morgana. I’m proof against that now.”

Morgana’s eyes flashed green fire and she pulled her hand away, “You were never proof against it,” she spat. “And now you’ll put your life and your future in the hands of that mortal.”

“What I do with my future is my choice alone,” Herne replied quietly.

“She’ll break - enough pressure and they all break.”

“Not this one, Morgana, there is fire and steel in her.” Herne turned and Morgana saw the contained rage in his eyes and backed away her emerald eyes suddenly filled with fear. She swallowed as Herne continued, “I know that you broke the others.”

“*Mortals*, pah!” Morgana snarled, “useless creatures. Constantly fearing Death, seeking to evade him at every turn and then running straight into his arms.”

“Yes, they are a paradox.” Cernunnos smiled, “are you finished, Enchantress?”

“You will not yield this foolish idea of release?”

“It is not release I seek,” Cernunnos replied, “if you have not grasped that, Morgana, then you have grasped nothing. Still, I could forgive you that for ‘twas why I first fell in love with you. Your single-mindedness of purpose was inspiring at times. Terrifying at others, but you are still the same Morgana. That is your tragedy, I must try not to let it become mine.” He turned away from her and Morgana stared at his back, she lifted her hand as if with one finger she could consign him to the utter depths of Hell and then her mouth set in a hard thin line.

“I shall have her, Cernunnos. And you – you will watch her break before me.” she turned and walked into the shadows at the room’s circumference.

Herne waited until only the crack and hiss of the fire was audible and then he murmured to himself, “I have no doubt that you will try.”

Herne sighed and walked across to his sleeping quarters, a gentle voice behind him spoke, “You fear for her, Horned One.”

He turned to the bright, shining figure standing behind him, “Yes. She is the last – if she fail, then we all fail.”

“But you principally.”

“Only that I would never find rest.” Cernunnos remarked, “I have not yet told her of her heritage, nor of the dangers she will face. Morgana and her sister are dangerous enemies.”

“But she has the support of the Empress Tethys; and the protection of the Invincible Sun and my assistance too if she should call upon me.”

“She may have to do that old friend,” Herne gestured to a chair, “Sit. Tell me why you came.”

The man sat, placing the centurion’s helmet with its white, transverse crest on the table next to the chair and some of the brightness faded from him. He sat and took the goblet Herne proffered, “The Dark is massing,” he spoke without emotion but there was a tremor in his voice. “They know that a saviour is expected and you must tell her soon who she is, if the Dark tell her before we do, we may lose her.”

“I cannot protect her once she leaves my realm,” Cernunnos looked around, “even if it only consists of this room. She is safe in her own home, both front and back portals are guarded by cold iron, no creature from our world can abide it.”

“Do you miss your Kingdom?”

Herne grinned showing sharp white teeth, “I might as well ask you if you miss being human, Mithras.” He rolled the bowl of the goblet between his palms and sighed, “Sometimes, sometimes when I call the Yell Hounds and we gallop across the sky, I recall that they can return home their kennels and I am exiled. But-“ he looked up at his friend as the beginnings of a smile spread across his face, “I am also obliged to recall that my banishment is self-chosen.”

The other grinned suddenly, “Aye. But what made you come? You had a Kingdom, a Queen and a partner. Why give all that up?”

Cernunnos sighed again and shook his head, “I never had a partner – and I begin to wonder if I ever had a Kingdom; I did not rule it – She ruled it through me. Or perhaps in spite of me.”

“She’s been here hasn’t she?” Herne’s silence was all the assent he needed. “What did she promise this time?”

“The usual, my Kingdom, my throne, my people – with one exception.”

“And that was?”

“She wanted to be my partner again.”

Mithras raised an eyebrow, “Indeed. Then there must be something special about this particular female that worries her.”

“Yes, but what? The others had skills equal to hers, though none were healers. What could she have that would make Morgana so afraid?”

Mithras laughed and laid a hand on the fur-covered limb holding the goblet, “My friend you will have to discover that for yourself.” His face became sombre, “Beware Morgana, Cernunnos, she’s destroyed every other child who might have saved thee; this girl survived because she was hidden from her – if you intend to bring her before the company Morgana will know.”

“Perhaps Morgana will not be as vigilant as all that,” Herne mused, “Cerian must be shown to the Ancient Ones, the meeting place cannot be closed until after the ceremony. We would not want to shut any of the Light from the Glass Island.”

Mithras stood up, “Then I hope that she is well defended.”

“That too remains to be seen,” Herne responded, suddenly looking very old.

Mithras tucked his helmet beneath his left arm and extended his right hand, Herne gripped his wrist fiercely, “May the Invincible Sun protect thee.”

“May He protect thee too,” Mithras replied, “and the Princess.”

“The Princess especially.” Herne nodded. The Hunter set the two goblets on the ledge next to the pool of water and when he turned back the room was empty.

For Cerian, the instant she stepped through the gateway the world spun before her eyes then righted itself and she stood with her hand on the doorknob. She pushed open the door and Rufus immediately leapt up at her. “Off!” She commanded, and Rufus dropped to the cork tiles.

Cerian knelt on the floor and ruffled the sandy ears, “Oh Ruf, what am I going to do?” The dog whined and pawed her leg, Ceri pushed herself off the floor and said, “I know, Rufus, first I let you out. Come on!”

Cerian began to prepare the evening meal around quarter to five as she usually did around school holidays; nothing had changed all that much she still had to do most of the preparations by hand. She reflected as she flaked the fish for the pie that Herne was probably right and that magic didn’t necessarily make every task easier.

Dinner was the same as usual although for once Ceri was lost in her own thoughts. When the dinner plates had been cleared away and her father had a cup of coffee before him he took Ceri’s hand in both his own, casting a conspirative glance at his wife he said, “Your mother and I have some wonderful news, she went to see the doctor today, we’re going to have a baby!”

Cerian stared at them both and then suddenly rose to her feet and hugged them, “I’m so pleased!” She gasped, “I’ve always wanted a baby brother or sister!”

“I’m not promising anything,” her mother smiled, “we’ll see if we can give you a brother. Or aren’t you bothered?”

“Not really,” Cerian laughed, “after all I’ll be fourteen years older than him or her. I just don’t want to be neglected.”

Her mother pulled Ceri to her and hugged her, “Why should you think that we’ll neglect you? You are our daughter and we love you very much.”

Ceri laughed and felt the dark cloud of loneliness that had begun to overshadow her melt away with hardly a trace.

She lay awake for a long time before sleep finally claimed her. She jerked awake to see Herne standing over her with a lantern, the same pale cold light emanating from it.

Cerian sat up and said, "Is it time?"

"Technically we are a thousand years too late, but yes, we ought to depart."

"May I dress and put some shoes on?"

"I have both for you, put a dressing gown on." Herne responded tightly.

Cerian nodded and pulled a crimson wrap over her nightdress, "I'm ready," she said quickly.

"Thank you for leaving your window open," Herne's voice was flat and colourless, "Turn and face the window, Lady, tonight we begin your instruction." Cerian did as she was bidden and she felt Herne move to stand behind her, "Close your eyes and imagine that you are standing in my home, you can see the crimson carpet, hear the hiss of the fire, now mentally transfer us from here to there."

For a moment Cerian felt a brief sense of disorientation and then she opened her eyes. They stood in Herne's oak, she raised a hand to touch the one of Herne's on her shoulder and said, "I believe we have arrived, Lord."

This time Herne's voice had regained some of its warmth, "Not quite, you haven't yet learn to cut yourself out of time. Put your hand out."

Cerian reached out and touched something solid; it was as if a pane of glass separated them from the scene before them.

Herne squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and Cerian felt the room spin again. When it steadied they stood in exactly the same place. "There is a knack to it," he said, "but you have done very well. I have taught those who took months to master time and had me tearing out chunks of fur. Everyone learns."

"But I haven't mastered it!" Cerian protested.

"You came very close, you must see yourself as the only real and aught else as illusory and transient. It will be hard."

"It has been that already, Cernunnos," Cerian sighed, "You are saying that it will get harder."

"Yes." Herne's eyes were pools of such great sorrow that Cerian could not look at them, "Your dress and shoes are waiting in the next room. Go and change and I shall tell you of this feast day." He held a curtain aside and Cerian entered the room and felt it drop behind her.

The dress shimmered softly in the light, it had a round neck, and quarter-length sleeves and was shaped to mid-thigh culminating in two tiered frills that ended just above the knee. The colour was the royal blue of the ocean and it seemed composed of some light, silken material. Cerian slipped it on over her head and knew that there was magic in it as it fitted her exactly without seeming to shrink or expand. She turned her attention to the shoes, at first glance they

seemed nothing more than a pair of sandals, she slipped them on and saw that each strap was composed of tiny shells moulded together with mother-of-pearl.

She stood up and pushed the curtain back, Herne was standing in front of the fire, his back towards her. Cerian felt suddenly speechless, "I'm ready," she finally managed to blurt out.

Herne turned towards her and a smile lit his features, "You look radiant Princess."

Cerian was too nervous to absorb the title Herne had conferred on her. She nodded shakily like a badly manipulated mannequin and Herne said, "There is a gift from the dryads who greeted you in Windsor Great Park."

He brought forth a necklace of oak leaves with an acorn as the pendant. "It was their wish that you wear it tonight."

"It would be a privilege," Cerian replied, her knees were already beginning to shake, "would you put it on for me."

She lifted the hair at the nape of her neck and Herne fastened the necklace for her. He took her hand and said, "Face me."

Cerian could not have disobeyed him to save her life, Herne knelt before her and looked up into her face, "Lady, tonight you come into your true rights - you are my liege lady for whom I have waited for half a century and I will jump off the edge of the world if you demand it. From this night forward I dare not sit without your express permission nor may you call me Lord for you are higher than I."

"Herne, please rise. I shall call you Lord, for you deserve the courtesy of your title and my desire is that you stand beside me, for I must be warrior and wisdom. I may be your mistress, but I should welcome your support."

"Then it is a privilege I shall not abuse, Lady." Herne nodded and said, "Turn around." Cerian turned slowly and before them stood a great Abbey. Light blazed from the windows and the sounds of music and merrymaking floated out on the night air.

"May I escort you inside, Princess?" Herne offered her his arm.

"Thank you, Lord," Cerian replied and laid her hand gently his arm for him to lead the way. The side door opened easily on smooth hinges and Cerian looked up at Herne, "Are we expected?" she asked quickly.

"We are indeed," Herne replied, "Your Hallowe'en. It comes from All Hallows Even, we Ancient Ones call it The Day of The dead. The last day of the year when the dead rise from the graves to wander the earth, it is almost midnight and the dawning of a new year, you call it All Saints' Day. Once a year, to celebrate the return of the Sol Invictus the Grail itself is shown to us. All who live and work in different times try to attend this one night for this too is a place out of Time." He smiled tautly, "although parts of this corridor connect off into different times. Do you understand?"

Cerian shook her head, "Not really, Lord. But I hope comprehension will dawn with time."

“Time. Something we may not have too much of.” Herne replied cryptically. Cerian stepped inside the building and looked around, she stood in what appeared to be a corridor, and it was lit with the same glow that illuminated Herne’s home. He turned to her, “Would it please you to wait, Mistress?” He inquired, “I wish to introduce someone to you privately before we enter the Great Hall in state.”

Cerian held her hand out and Herne took it gravely, “It would be a pleasure, Lord.”

Herne bowed, “Thank you Mistress.” He reached the end of the corridor and turned left disappearing from view.

Cerian looked around; she wondered what surprises were in store for her and what tests she would have to undergo. She turned around in a full circle and saw the corridor behind her. Once again she was aware of the familiar sensation of unease that had characterised her entrance into Windsor Great Park, and yet this time there was a sensation of urgency and then she saw the cowed figures of monks, one approached her and spoke, “Father Abbot, he is dying.”

“He will not die,” a voice, deep and rich spoke from a point near Ceri’s shoulder, “he waits. He waits for the Princess.”

“And who is she, Father?” the same cowed figure spoke again.

“She is the answer to his prayers and his peace. He will not die, yet neither shall he continue to live, when she comes she will release him.” The voices grew fainter as if they were being blown away by the years between them and Ceri stood alone in a small corridor.

The same sense of urgency was still present; Ceri took a step forward and remembered the last words of the Hunter, *Parts of this corridor lead off into different times*. Then she took a deep breath and walked forward. At the end of the corridor was a small wooden door, slowly Cerian turned the ring, it opened smoothly to reveal stairs spiralling upwards. Cerian looked up into blackness and then surveyed the area around her for something to light her way. Set into a bracket on the wall was the metal holder of an unlit torch; Cerian lifted it, surprised at how light it was. She pointed it upwards at the glow illuminating the corridor, taking a deep breath she stared into it and said, “May I have some light - for I have a dark path to tread and I would welcome it.” There was a brief click as if something slipped into place and then the torch flared brightly and Cerian found herself staring at a ball of light exactly like the ones in the Oak. “Thank you,” she said softly and then holding the torch before her began to walk up the stairs.

The stairway led upwards for what seemed a long and interminable time and soon the slight glow from the corridor was obscured and Cerian’s only surety was the darkness around her and the staircase leading upwards.

As she rounded the central pillar she saw the faint glimmerings of light ahead and as her footsteps mounted the last few steps she realised that the light came

from one of the cells along the corridor. The door stood open and unsure how to proceed Ceri tiptoed forward and looked inside.

She saw a man lying motionless on a bed. The room was furnished with a chest and a worn rug. The stone walls were bare apart from a silver coloured crucifix above the head of the bed.

The man turned his head towards Ceri and snapped, "Go away! I told the other brother, I do not wish to join the feast!"

The sight of his face wrenched a gasp from Cerian because she saw that his eyes were filmed over and she knew that he was blind, "What's your name?"

"Brother Bedwyr," the man replied grudgingly, and then more curiously, "yours?"

"Cerian," Ceri replied, and then feeling that she ought to say something more added, "why don't you wish to go to the feast, my lord?"

The man's harsh laugh made her flinch and he barked, "Lord! Ha! I am no lord and what I was has passed like the halcyon days of summer." He paused, "Cerian - art thou Welsh?"

"I believe so," Ceri nodded and then felt silly because Bedwyr couldn't see her. She noticed the flagon of wine and the goblet sitting on the chest, "Would you like a drink?"

"Thank you, little Sister, it might ease my passing." Ceri started at the word 'Sister' but poured the wine. She knelt on the worn rug and slid an arm beneath Bedwyr's shoulders; he lifted himself slightly and sipped the fragrant, slightly steaming wine.

"No more," he gasped and slumped back against Cerian's arm. Tenderly she lowered him to the bed and took his hand. She placed the goblet on the floor beneath the bed and rising from her knees seated herself beside the prone figure.

"That wine is drugged," Bedwyr spoke suddenly, "I am dying you see and the wine is to make that dying less fraught."

"It might mean a peaceful death," Cerian murmured doubtfully.

"My life has been far from easy," Bedwyr laughed bitterly, "I do not see why my death should be so."

"Care to tell me about it?"

"I may as well - but you cannot absolve me, Sister, you would need to fetch a priest to do that."

"I disagree," Cerian said gently, "I may not be able to absolve you but I can forgive you. Tell me your story."

"Once, long ago, I was a Knight of the Round Table. Artus was my best friend, he chose me to escort his wife, Gwenhwyfar from Lodegraunce to the newly constructed castle at Camelot. On the journey I fell in love with her. She was beautiful, her hair was the colour of corn in high summer and her eyes were the eyes of deer in the forest. She wore her hair plaited and hidden from view. I did my duty by my King and escorted the Lady Gwenhwyfar to my

King. But the love and desire I felt for her did not diminish. One night, Artus was away and my Lady called me to her, when I entered the room her lady-in-waiting had departed and she was alone. Her golden hair spilled down her back in a train and when she turned to me I saw the love in her eyes. I could restrain myself no longer; I took her in my arms and kissed her. Thus I betrayed my king and I betrayed the trust he bestowed on me.”

“Perhaps it was fated to happen thus?” Cerian mused, “Betrayal takes two, Bedwyr, she may have wanted you to father a child in Arthur’s name. But even the bright and shining example of Camelot had to end. ”

“But why with me?” Bedwyr paused and then the words spilled from him like a dam that had been under pressure for too long, “but I did much worse. I held a position of power in the court and many ladies admired me because I was a knight - in my arrogance I thought I could even be the one to achieve the Grail. It was my son, Galahad, by Elaine, whose destiny it was to take the Grail back to Jerusalem. That was right, now, I know. But what grieves me most is the wrong I did to one who was little more than a child.”

“Are you sure that you should speak of it to me,” Cerian enquired, “I am very young, Brother, perhaps I should fetch a priest.”

“Tonight?” Bedwyr shook his head, “they wait for the coming of the Princess. Tonight - if she passes all the tests the Lady Nimüe will acknowledge her. She is probably eating and drinking in the Great Hall and I doubt that she would have the time to listen to a fool like me.”

“I think she would.” Cerian replied firmly.

“You mean if you were her you would. Stay with me, Sister, forgive me if you can, you listen to my most grievous sins and somehow I feel as though a weight has been lifted from me. What I tell you, Sister, is because I think you will listen to me without judgment. There was another called Elaine of Astolat, who told me that she loved me. It was before the Great Tourney that she gave me her token and bade me wear it for her. I decided that in order to cover myself with more glory I would enter the lists unrecognised only wearing her token. This I did and was badly wounded because of it. She sought me out and for two months nursed me back to health. And I refused her. I told you that I was arrogant, in my arrogance I did not see that the very day I took her token, that from the love in her heart I constrained myself to her. I do not think that God will ever forgive me-” he broke off and Ceri saw the shine of tears on his cheeks. “I-I did my liege great wrong even if Gwenhwyfar and I did love each other, for even when she was condemned to death and I rescued her she could not live with me preferring to end her days in her father’s castle.”

Cerian stared at him in a mixture of contempt and horror and then she looked at the broken man and thought *What would it avail to berate him now? Has he not suffered enough all these years. He knows the wrong he has done and has been punished accordingly, does he not deserve forgiveness?* And the

answer, from within her heart whispered, *He deserves all that and more. If you can find it within your heart, then forgive him.*

Cerian took both Bedwyr's hands in her own, "I forgive you Bedwyr, in the name of Queen Gwenhwyfar and Elaine of Astolat."

And something happened. Two pale transparent figures flickered, wavered and then appeared either side of Ceri, one had long fair hair that streamed down her back while the other's hair was raven, but falling to shoulder level. The first woman reached into Ceri's hands and Ceri's grip on Bedwyr's tightened, "Bedwyr, I pardon you, I never wanted you to die like this."

"Elaine?" Bedwyr whispered, "Elaine!"

"Elaine." The woman confirmed, Ceri's lips moved but the voice that emerged was not hers, "you heard me, Bedwyr, the door has been opened and I may tell you that I forgive you the wrong you did. Adieu, fair knight." The figure wavered and then dissolved, the second reached into Ceri's hands and Ceri's fingers uncurled from Bedwyr's left yet continued to hold his right in her own, the second voice was rich and deep and belonged to a Queen, "Bedwyr, forgive me, I never meant this much hurt. At first, because I thought Artus had no seed I chose you to father a child in his name - and then I fell in love with you. I did not intend that for it brought shame upon me and upon Artus. I am truly sorry, Bedwyr."

Bedwyr's face lit up, "Gwennie? Gwennie, I had to choose between you and Artus and even when I chose you - you no longer wished my company and I could not go back to my King. It broke my heart."

The figure bent and with transparent fingers gently brushed Bedwyr's forehead, "I know. I cry your pardon and forgive you. Fare thee well, my most beloved knight."

Cerian felt as if she was coming apart at the seams, part of her was speaking and the other part was the cold observer who merely watched the events happening before her eyes. Slowly she released Bedwyr's hands and the women's voices spoke again, this time in unison, "Farewell, sweet knight."

Cerian blinked and Bedwyr spoke sluggishly as if his tongue didn't belong in his head, "Sister, thank you. Your forgiveness allowed my Lady Gwenhwyfar and the Lady Elaine to grant me pardon for my sins."

Cerian nodded and gently laid Bedwyr's hand on the coverlet and said, "You can go to God now, Sir Knight. I have an errand I must perform, I have to go and find the Midwinter Thorn."

"But it doesn't bloom at this time of year," Bedwyr's forehead creased in a puzzled frown.

"I know that," Ceri nodded, "but I have to go and search it out - have you any idea where it might be?"

"I have not seen the Midwinter Thorn bloom here at Ynys Witrin for many years," Bedwyr replied, "if it ever bloomed it may have been within the land of Listinois - even if the legend says that it thrived here in Glastonbury."

“Wait for me, Bedwyr.” Cerian instructed as she rose to her feet, “I shall return. And then you may sleep in peace.”

The torch lit up as she grasped it and Cerian wondered what magic she possessed and then cleared the thought from her mind and began to move down the stairs.

As she felt the darkness close up around her she wondered why it was so important that she find the Midwinter Thorn and discovered that she couldn't understand why. It was as if she was becoming two separate people, one who knew exactly why she was searching for the Midwinter Thorn and the other to whom everything that was happening was a mystery.

She shook her head to clear it, and walked on, a tiny figure trying to hold the darkness back.

For the second time that evening Herne's words floated through her brain, “Some corridors lead off into different times,” and she looked up into the darkness above her and wondered if she had indeed walked into a different time.

She found the side door without much difficulty and was about to slip out into the darkness when a voice said, “Madam, you ought not to venture into the gardens alone at this time of night.”

She turned and came face to face with a young knight, his face reminded her in some way of Bedwyr, but she couldn't place it.

“Sir, I have much on my mind this night and I sought comfort in mine own company. Therefore I thought that I wouldst walk in the gardens for a spell.”

“Mayst I be permitted to accompany thee?” The knight smiled, “I am supposed to champion the Princess but she has not yet arrived and as I have already said, it is not seemly for a lady to walk alone this late in the evening.”

“Your company would be a pleasure, chevalier,” Ceri replied, then realising she had not introduced herself, “My name is Cerian. Yours Sir Knight?”

“Galahad,” the man replied, “at your service, Mademoiselle.” He bowed stiffly and then offered her his arm, gingerly Ceri accepted it and together they walked into the cool air of the gardens.

Cerian felt as though she was part of a dream, here she was, a nobody walking arm in arm with the fairest knight in all Camelot. She wondered what to say to him and then came to a decision, “Sir Knight,” she began slowly, he turned to face her and Cerian came very near to losing her resolve, “I should tell you the truth - I am no lady - you should return to the Great Hall and wait for the Princess.”

Galahad regarded her quietly and then a smile touched his lips, “Madam, you have behaved like a lady, I cannot leave you alone here, there may be those who would take advantage of your loveliness.”

“But I seek-” Cerian began and then stopped, ahead of them stood an ancient tree, its green thorny branches stark and bare. Galahad followed her

gaze and then he said, "I have heard tell that this is the thorn tree that sprung from the Lord Jesus crown and that Joseph of Arimathea brought from Jerusalem. It only blooms in midwinter on the day of Christ's birth. However -" his voice broke, "it has not bloomed for the past two Christmastides, perhaps the Light has deserted us."

"No," Ceri said softly, "its waiting."

"For whom?"

Ceri didn't answer, she stepped to the foot of the tree and took up one of the long thorns that littered the ground beneath it, "For me." Then without waiting for an answer she drew it across her palm and then stepped forward to clasp the trunk so that the wound was in contact with the tree. Staring up into the darkness of the tree, she sent the thought upward, *I have come, it has been a long time, but I have come. Tell me what I must do.*

The answer was slow, like the sap pulsing through the trunks of trees with a steady systolic beat, but the force behind it was the force that sends a shoot bursting through the earth to seek the sunlight. **A Princess of Blood Royal may clasp the thorns without injury and release the last knight of Camelot. Art thou such a one?**

Ceri's tongue felt like lead and the assurance she had felt before was slipping away from her like water, finally she summoned up the strength and replied, *Could one not of Royal Blood touch a wound to you and live?*

For a moment she thought that she'd lost and then the thorny branches enclosed and held her and the world went black. Her hands were still in contact with the trunk but all around her was blackness. A branch curved around her brow like a circlet and trickles of blood where thorns had scratched her forehead contrasted starkly with her pale face.

Eventually the darkness around her lightened and the answer came, this time gentler, **Hail Princess! Then you shall be given the power to release him, God speed, Princess.**

She felt the branches uncurl away from her all except the one around her forehead, she looked up and saw pale flowers burst into existence on the branches. Finally in place of every thorn on the tree was a small, white, flower. Cerian reached up and touched the mossy bark gently, almost sorrowfully, *Fare thee well, most beloved of trees.*

Farewell, Princess Cerian. Your future lies, as it always will, within your own hands. Then the brief contact was gone. She stepped away from the tree. At that moment a figure stumbled from the shadows and fell heavily on the thorn-littered grass, he lay groaning, without considering what the cost Cerian ran across to him, she knelt on a patch of clear grass and carefully examined him, the thorns had pierced his body and Ceri could see the blood pumping out of him. Galahad cushioned the man's head and looked across at Ceri and carefully shook his head, she reached up to touch the circlet of flowers and for a moment thought of a man lying alone and unshriven in a bare tower and

then made her decision, she reached up and removed the crown. "It is said that in the hands of a healer this can restore a man on the verge of death," she said quietly, "perhaps it may restore this man." Carefully she laid the chaplet upon the still figure.

She stood up, "Your helm, Chevalier."

Galahad removed it from beneath his arm and handed it to her, Ceri walked across to the stream and knelt to scoop up some water, Galahad laid a hand on her shoulder, suddenly a voice said, "You will not need that, Daughter."

Both turned and in place of the old man stood a middle-aged gentleman with a circlet of silver on his brow, and in his hands he held the chaplet of white flowers, "Princess. I am Joseph of Arimathea." Slowly she returned Galahad's helm and rose to her feet, as if in a dream she stumbled towards the old man, Joseph gazed at her, "Few there are who are accorded such honours by this tree, yet you would give all this up to save the life of an old man. Kneel, my Lady."

Cerian did as he bade her and Joseph said, "I am very proud of you, My Princess. Accept your crown and your power again." Cerian felt the chaplet placed on her head and she rose to her feet and curtsied, "My Lord."

Joseph took her shoulders lifted her up, "Nay, Princess, do not kneel to me." She turned around and for the first time Galahad saw the brightness of her face and the chaplet on flowers on her head and dropped to one knee, "Forgive me Princess," he murmured. "I should have recognised you."

"Should you?" Cerian responded feeling more at ease with herself than she had for days, "if I cannot recognise myself - why should you recognise me? Besides which - it was not only I who was tested this night, it was you also - this was your test to see if you would behave with all courtesy to any woman, be she Princess or peasant. You were to test me by leading me to this tree-" she gestured to the thorn, "for only if I were the Princess would I know what to do." She took Galahad's hands in her own and raised him to his feet, he stood looking down at the slight figure and bowed his head, "and I am to serve you Princess, as your knight."

"Then I accept your service," Cerian replied, she turned to Joseph of Arimathea and said, "Will you excuse us, my Lord, I must needs fulfill a promise."

"Go, I have no hold on you now. The last and final test awaits you. Go in the name of the Light!"

"Yes," Cerian responded and resisted the impulse to say, 'Lord', "Will you be at the feast?"

A smile curved Joseph's full mouth and his dark eyes sparkled, "Of course!"

"Madam," Galahad cleared his throat, "may I accompany you?"

Cerian turned to him and said slowly, "As far as the Abbey, yes. Beyond that I must go alone, but I thank you for your words. Will you wait in the Abbey for me?"

"It would be an honour," Galahad smiled, "may I escort you there."

"I would welcome your company, Chevalier." Cerian replied slowly. As they entered the Abbey Cerian felt the air - taut with expectancy, Ceri was about to turn off into the corridor when she heard Herne behind her, "Princess! I have been searching for you! There is much afoot - the greatest knight of Camelot has deigned to be presented to you."

Cerian stepped forward and Herne saw the chaplet of white flowers on her brow and Galahad's bulk loomed over her small frame, "My liege," he murmured and dropped to one knee.

"Rise, my Lord," Cerian said, "and escort me to the Hall."

"At once, Madam." Herne said quickly. He rose to his feet and Cerian turned to Galahad, "if you would stand at my left side and guard my heart, Chevalier."

"Madam." Galahad inclined his head and Herne offered her his right arm.

"Shall we go in, gentlemen?" Cerian enquired softly.

"As you wish," Herne replied, "it is just after midnight."

The hall was filled with people. She heard a herald's voice announce her name and the music stopped as suddenly as if cut with a knife. They began to walk, side by side, towards a dais at the one end of the Abbey. Suddenly Cerian noticed that the people were dropping to one knee and bowing their heads. *They're showing fealty to me, I'm not ready-I'm*, her thought rose high and shrill, and then she heard another voice within her mind.

Peace, Princess! The chaplet you wear and the very fact that you have been twice tested give you the right. Do not fear.

Her mind probed the sender and a small smile curved her lips, *Lord Herne!*

The same. Be still! This is only the beginning, you may not allow your fear to show. Too much depends on you.

Cerian wanted to ask what but they had reached the foot of the dais and Herne halted and they both turned to face the assembly. A woman detached herself from the throng and approached the throne, "Princess," she began dropping to one knee, "I am Nimüe-"

Suddenly from beyond the hall came the sound of trumpets, the woman turned and a herald entered, "Make way!" he was calling, "Make way for the last knight of Camelot!"

A bed was carried in and Cerian's face blanched as she recognised Bedwyr. Herne leant across and said, "Madam, this is where times mingle, I know not what you did while we were apart but you may live to regret it."

The figures standing in the hall seemed to become misty and transparent, Cerian turned to Galahad at her side only to discover that he was no longer there and that the entire Abbey had changed, she now stood in front

of an altar. The heralds had become monks and the rich bed a shabby pallet covered with blankets.

For a split second Cerian felt a moment of panic and then she reached up to touch her head and felt the chaplet of flowers, her hands also touched two tiny cuts made by the thorns.

“Bedwyr,” she said softly, kneeling beside the pallet, “Brother Bedwyr?”

“The little sister I spoke with earlier?” Bedwyr’s face lit up, “greetings sister, I fear that death has overtaken me at the last.”

“Oh Bedwyr!” Cerian reached out and her fingers gently brushed his eyelids. Bedwyr blinked up at her and then it was as if the film covering his eyes drained away.

For a long moment they stared at one another and then Bedwyr whispered, “You restored my sight!” Then cognizance dawned and he whispered, “*You* are the Princess?”

Cerian nodded, “It would appear so.”

“I am sorry for what I said earlier-” Bedwyr began, but Cerian’s finger on his lips silenced him.

“Sssh. I returned to grant you peace. You have done your penance.” Cerian smiled and as she did so another figure appeared on the other side of the pallet. He was fair-haired and his eyes were the faded blue of cornflowers but his face was noble, he dropped to his knees.

“Greetings, most worthy knight,” he said slowly.

Bedwyr turned his head slowly and stared up into the face of the stranger, “My liege!” he gasped. “I-I should rise.”

“My knight, I have waited many years for one of Royal Blood to come and relieve your curse. I have come to take you home - there will be a short sleep first - will you come?”

“No more grief, or guilt?”

“No, Bedwyr. Your sleep will be deep and dreamless, that I promise you.”

“Then I shall come with all my heart, lord. Can you forgive me?”

“You were my truest knight and most loyal companion. I forgave you long ago, you needed to forgive yourself. This child has enabled you to do that.”

“Lord,” Cerian said suddenly, “may I?”

The man turned and a smile lit his features as he regarded Cerian, “It is your right and privilege, Lady.”

Slowly Cerian reached up to the chaplet of flowers that adorned her brow and as she touched them the sweetest smell filled the entire hall, she removed the circlet and as she did so it disintegrated in her hands and a cloud of petals, like snowflakes fell onto the pallet. That moment seemed to go on forever, Cerian watched as Bedwyr stared up into the older man’s face and then the man gripped Bedwyr’s wrist as a man clasps one who is bound closer than friend or brother and then Bedwyr’s eyes filled with light. A smile touched his lips

and as the petals touched the ground there was nothing there. Only an old pallet with a monk's habit and inside the habit a hair shirt.

Cerian reached up a hand to her face and found it wet with tears. She stood up and stepped back and felt a firm hand take her elbow, "That was well done, my Princess."

The bed was being carried from the hall and the woman presented herself again, "Madam," she began again.

This time Cerian walked forward and raised the woman to her feet, "Do not kneel to me," she said softly, "I have not earned the right of rulership."

"I have a gift for you," the woman said, she turned to one of her ladies in waiting who held a cedarwood box, "when the sword of power, Caliburn, was forged long ago, not all the metal could be used. Therefore, the remainder was used to forge a crown that would be worn by the last of the Ancient Ones and set with an alexandrine, this is the final test. Lady will you take it?"

There was an indrawn gasp of breath as Cerian nodded and knelt before the woman. "Lady Nimüe, it would be a singular honour if you would crown me."

A smile touched the corners of Nimüe's lips and she replied, "Thank you, Princess."

Slowly and with dignity the thin crown was lowered onto Cerian's head. The circlet suddenly blazed with a white light, and Cerian suddenly saw the whole assembly drop to their knees while she could only stand and stare.

Then the doors at the end of the Hall flew open and a cup appeared, Cerian suddenly felt her mouth go dry for this she knew with a startling clarity was the San Greal, the Holy Grail of legend. A wonderful sweetness pervaded the Hall and the golden bowl began to move towards her.

Cerian stared at the bowl, it hung before her like a globe, a voice boomed, "Those who have a measure of Sang real may hold the San Greal for a moment. Wilt thou hold it and undertake the quest for which thou wast chosen?"

Cerian cleared her throat, "I will." She reached out her hands and the bowl settled into them like a bird returning to its nest, "Does thy blood make thee worthy to hold the Grail?" the voice asked coldly.

"I would say not," Ceri replied thoughtfully, "my actions make me worthy to hold the Grail. I hold it now to swear that I will undertake the quest to free the Hunter and to do the best I can. Is that sufficient?"

Ceri looked up and saw the figure of Joseph of Arimathea standing before her, "Then thou who wast royal only by birth art now truly Royal and the blood of Kings flows in thy veins. Give me the cup." Ceri handed him the Holy Chalice and Joseph smiled at her before letting it go.

The Grail swept the length of the Hall before disappearing from view through the huge double doors, Nimüe rose gracefully and gazed at Ceri, "You have come at last." She said slowly, and then she knelt suddenly baring her head, "Hail, Princess!"

Cerian licked her very dry lips and staring at the hall of people and swallowed hard.

Chapter 4

'The Dark Strikers'

Much later that same morning a very weary Cerian sat in a high-backed oak chair in front of a blazing fire. She was half-asleep when a gentle hand on her shoulder jerked her awake. she looked up to see Sir Galahad regarding her, contrition stamped on his features, "Forgive me, Mistress," he walked around the chair to stand in front of her, "I did not mean to frighten you. I thought a goblet of mulled wine might help to warm you on such a cold night."

Cerian looked up at the young man thoughtfully and then smiled, "Thank you, Sir Knight," she replied, then she added, "I also give thee permission to stand in my presence."

Galahad bit his lip and when he had regained some of his composure he responded, "I meant no disrespect, My Lady."

"I know that," Cerian said, "and I was joking, mon chevalier." She smiled again, "you may always stand in my presence."

Galahad bowed, "As you say, Mistress."

Tentatively Cerian sipped the wine and found that it tasted of cloves and cinnamon and something else that lingered on the tongue but to which she could not put a name. She set the drink down on the small table at her feet as Herne entered the room, she half-turned in the chair and started to rise to her feet but Herne's hand clamped on her shoulder and he said in a soft voice, "Nay, Lady, you rise to no-one save the High King for tonight your royalty has been recognised."

"I like your choice of tests, Lord Herne," Ceri remarked, "rather clever that, to begin the test the moment I walked into the Abbey."

Herne flung back his antlered head and laughed, turning to Galahad he said, "This one is sharp and her I should be glad to serve, Madam," he turned back to Cerian, "Had we not tested you thus your behaviour might have been very different - we had to be sure. Madam, the Grail you saw this night is merely a symbol, the true test comes when all the threads of the tapestry of Life have been woven. The Grail is held by The Fisher King, Nacien, until the final meeting of Light and Dark, when the Ancient Ones gather in one place again then our time here is ended and with our passing the world is left to mankind and his descendants. There were three tests and three is important to us, for there are three stages of time, Past, Present and Future. You have dealt in the past tonight, but you also have a part to play in the present and in the future. I am afraid that I have misled you somewhat in my desire to gain your help."

“I was beginning to realise that, Lord.” Ceri remarked dryly, “is there anything else you haven’t told me that I should know about?”

Herne smiled tautly, “There are many things,” he began, “some I may tell you about; some you shall find out for yourself and others, others you would not wish to know about in your darkest nightmares.”

Cerian looked up into his face and smiled, “Then I shall just have to be content with that answer. Now - what next, Lord Herne?”

Herne raised his goblet to his lips and drank deeply before answering, “We have a riddle to decipher you and I. We have little time to waste.”

“You’ve said that before too,” Cerian told him, “but how much time is little time.”

“A day, maybe a little longer,” Herne nodded at Cerian’s shocked face, “as soon as the forces of the Dark discover that a new member of Light has been added to our ranks then they begin to amass their armies.”

“Can’t we fight them - raise an army ourselves - I’ll lead them!”

Herne rested a hand on her shoulder and crouched that his eyes were level with hers, “That time may come, Princess and yes, you will lead them but it is not that time yet. At the moment we must work in stealth, and we win allies by trust and friendship and not through betrayal, or blackmail or promise of riches. Now to lighter subjects - Sir Knight!”

“Lord!” Galahad turned swiftly.

“I suspect the Princess would welcome an opportunity to dance. You can dance - can’t you?” he hissed at Cerian.

“Not very well.” Cerian grinned, “but passably.”

“Do your best.” Herne growled.

Galahad bowed and extended a hand to Cerian who took it graciously, meanwhile from somewhere the music of mediæval instruments began. Galahad took her right hand, put his arm around her supporting her back, Cerian’s left hand lay along his arm; slowly they began to waltz.

As Cerian eased herself back into her seat Galahad bowed and said, “Thank you, Princess.”

“It was a pleasure, mon chevalier,” Cerian replied. She sipped the wine again, it was just cool enough to drink. Galahad smiled down at her, “Tired, Madam?”

“Exhausted,” Cerian replied bluntly, “but I’ll be all right in the morning.”

“Would you excuse me one moment,” Galahad said, “I must needs speak with someone.”

“Certainly, Chevalier,” Cerian yawned suddenly, just managing to cover her mouth with her hand, “you have permission to leave us. If we do not see you tonight mayhap we shall be graced by your presence tomorrow.”

Galahad laughed and suddenly knelt before her so that she was looking down at him, “Princess, you have a tongue in your head that would charm the

very birds of the air, I am proud to serve you.” He gently kissed the hand resting on the arm of the chair. “Goodnight, Princess.”

“Goodnight,” Cerian said softly and then when his footsteps no longer sounded in the corridors she murmured, “my beloved knight.”

She finished the remainder of her wine, and then curled up as much as possible and gazed into the fire. The dancing flames made the shadows leap and shapes appear in the glowing logs. Cerian yawned again, then her eyes drooped even further, and suddenly she was asleep, her lashes making dark semi-circles on her cheeks.

Two figures walked into the room, Herne bent over Cerian’s quiet form and he said, “She’s sleeping.”

“Did you?” the other figure’s hand went to the hilt of the sword hanging at his waist.

“Put it away Galahad. Of course I didn’t, but it is well for us that she has fallen asleep for we have much to discuss.”

“Such as?” Galahad’s tone was sharp.

“Who she is. What I suspect that she is and the part you both must play in all three times.”

“Begin then,” Galahad demanded.

Suddenly a trumpet sounded and Galahad turned drawing his sword in one swift motion, “Intruders!”

Three black shapes rushed into the room, two seemed shadowy figures trapped between the worlds of fantasy and reality, who could harm but with no real or lasting effect, but between them stood a figure that seemed to ooze darkness itself, a stench of death rose from him and when he spoke it was a voice that was little more than a hiss, “O purest knight,” the sneer was unmistakable, “this is not your quarrel, my desire is the Princess.”

Galahad swallowed hard, “And my desire is that you should not have her!”

“So be it,” the creature laughed and fear began to congeal in Galahad’s gut, “but think that ye can stand against this?”

From a point of darkness near its leg the monster drew a long, pale lance with a bloody tip.

Galahad blanched, “Where did you get that?” he demanded.

“You of the Light never take the trouble to destroy that which could destroy you, this was the lance that killed your Artus, you never made sure that it was destroyed. This weapon will kill any who have Sang real in their veins.”

“Not while I have life and breath!” Galahad’s voice rang true and clear, “for I too drew a sword from a stone and I discovered the Grail.”

“Then we are evenly matched,” the voice replied, “let us begin.”

Out of the corner of his eye Galahad caught sight of Herne, the true Herne, tall and proud blazing light from every pore bombarding the shadows with all his might.

“Aye, let us begin!”

Slowly they began to circle the room, Thrust. Feint. Parry. Thrust. Parry. Galahad crouched like a leopard about to spring, while the other creature shuffled and squelched making the bile rise in Galahad's throat, it hissed and lunged for him, raising his sword Galahad parried the blow; sparks of blue fire hissed as the two weapons met each other and ran down the sword and into Galahad's arm, he cried out in pain and pulled his weapon free.

The creature snarled and raised the lance for an attack, Galahad tried to parry, but his sword arm was still numb from contact with such a deadly weapon, the lance pierced his shoulder.

A deathly cold seemed to fill his body, he could feel his legs beginning to give way beneath him and he sank to the floor. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, his sight was fading and he could feel the bottomless abyss of darkness sucking him into its depths.

The being leant over him and raised the lance to make a final thrust and suddenly every fibre of Galahad's being rebelled, summoning up his last ounce of energy, he gasped, "I may succumb to the Dark, but you shall not have my Princess!" and thrust upwards with his sword, it pierced the entity's rags and light suddenly burst along the blade. it screamed in agony and a noxious smell filled Galahad's nostrils, he retched and tasted vomit in his mouth, the creature screamed again and Galahad half-raised himself and with the last of his strength gave a final thrust with his sword. The being fell backwards and Galahad slumped to the floor as consciousness left him.

At the first scream of the thing Galahad was fighting the two shadowy figures seemed to shrink slightly and as the creature fell backwards they shrivelled and died. Herne turned to see Cerian sitting bold upright in the chair her blue eyes wide and frightened.

"My Lady-" Herne began, but she was already on her feet and without thinking, or knowing about it had torn away the protective barrier Herne had erected around her. She knelt beside Galahad and began patting her way up his body. His right hand was ice-cold and his shoulder where the lance had entered even colder.

Herne moved to kneel on the other side of Galahad's figure as Ceri removed the cloak she wore and threw it over Galahad. His face was grey and a thin layer of perspiration was already beginning to bead his forehead.

"Cernunnos," she said sharply, "fetch attendants immediately, I want this man moved to private quarters where I may have the best physicians to tend him immediately!"

"At once, Highness," Herne nodded and rising to his feet Cerian noticed that he no longer wore his antlers and coat of fur but seemed to be a middle-aged man.

"Where are the theatrics?" she enquired.

Herne smiled wryly, "This is who I was many times ago, the Hunter has not always appeared as a corporeal form but sometimes as a voice or a vision.

Sometimes I wonder if this was how it started - but I shall fetch the attendants.”

“We must talk later.” Cerian said softly and Herne knew it was not a question.

Eventually Galahad lay on a bed in a large room, heated bricks had been wrapped in cloths and set round him in an effort to warm him. Once his eyes opened but they lacked cognizance and Cerian began to weep.

“Come,” Herne said, raising her to her feet, “you must sleep, we will speak in the morning.”

Ceri was too tired to protest, she felt him lift her and lie her down on the bed, his voice seemed miles above her and the words seemed to set up a resonance in her head, “Go to sleep,” she felt him cover her with a blanket, “you’ll feel much better later.” Then darkness claimed her.

Herne looked down at her, he regretted using the sleep-charm but Cerian was his responsibility as much as Galahad. *Galahad*, he sighed, *There was little that could be done except to give him drugs to ease the pain. I fear for his soul, Herne thought, I blame myself - as soon as the ceremony was completed, I should have thrown a barrier around the place. At least I should have checked that the portals were guarded. How could they get in!*

Someone was shaking Cerian hard, she opened her eyes and turned her head, a small serving girl was kneeling beside the bed.

“Ma’am,” she whispered, “the Knight, he is much worse and like to die. Please will you come?”

Cerian nodded her mouth suddenly dry. The girl, barely more than a child led her along the corridors and into the large room Galahad had been placed in the night before. Carefully Ceri pushed through the people gathered at the bedside and leant over him. He was even greyer than the night before and his wound was oozing a green pus, a tumescent odour assailed her nostrils and made her gag. Steeling herself she removed the dressings and was almost sick.

“Get me cloths and warm water,” she ordered, “and clean dressings. Have the bricks been changed?”

“Yes Ma’am,” the girl bobbed a curtsy, “but they seem to make no difference. Lord Herne says he is like to die.” Tears began to fill her eyes and Ceri felt her own begin to water in sympathy, “Go and fetch the water and cloths,” she said kindly.

When they arrived she gently cleaned the wound, and placed new dressings upon it.

“Leave us.”

“But Ma’am, Lord Herne said no-one was to leave the Knight.”

“We are staying with him are we not?” something blazed in Cerian’s eyes and the attendants decided to leave. When they were alone, Ceri bent over Galahad’s still form and gently sponged his face, “I am a failure,” she whispered softly, although she knew that he could not hear her, “You’re dying and there is

nothing I can do about it.” She gently took his left hand and laid her right on his wound, “Oh Galahad!”

Suddenly her world fragmented, she was standing alone on a plain beneath a panorama of stars. She began to shiver, it was as if she was being examined beneath a microscope. Then the man who knelt beside Bedwyr was standing before her, he took her hands, “Every door may be unlocked if you have the key.”

“But I do not have a key,” Cerian stared at him hopelessly.

His smile became broader, “You do. You dared the wrath of the ages to free a Knight bound in chains of sorrow and guilt, you risked not being able to free that Knight, to save the life of a man you never knew when he was wounded on the old thorns, you made the Midwinter Thorn bloom at Glastonbury, you hold the Key within yourself, no-one but you could do this and you know what power you have if you will only allow yourself to feel it.”

“But what must I do?”

“Do? Oh Princess, you already know, you proved it in the gardens when you risked all. Courage of the heart is very rare; they have a power those who dare. You have more than a courage of the heart, in you the Power rises and flourishes unlike any that I have seen and I too commanded the Old Magic once. You know me of course.”

“Artus.” Cerian replied.

“Look deep inside yourself, Daughter, then you will find what it is that you seek and having found that you may find yourself.”

With those words he was gone and Cerian was back in the Abbey, she stared down at Galahad and thought, *Courage, courage to do what? What must I dare?*

Suddenly it hit her, *I have within me a love of humanity, for despite its tragedy and bitterness and misery; humanity has great potential and all humanity are worthy of love.*

She stared down at Galahad and discarded her guilt and bitterness and despair and said delightedly, “I love you, Sir Knight!” The results were almost immediate, a soft glow began to illuminate Ceri’s hands and run up Galahad’s body enveloping him in a cocoon of glowing light, the hand on his wound began to pulsate with a regular rhythm and all at once the glow faded.

Ceri’s head fell and a weak voice whispered, “Princess?”

She looked up, Galahad’s eyes were open and there was the light of reason in them. Slowly she removed the dressings from his shoulder and stared, the great rotting hole in his shoulder had disappeared, there was only a pale, pink scar from a newly healed wound.

“Princess?” Galahad’s voice roused her from her astonishment and she dredged a smile from the depths of her being, “Feeling better, Sir Knight?”

“Have you tended me all this time, Madam?” Galahad’s tone was sharp.

“Not all the time,” Cerian admitted, “just for the past hour or two. How do you feel?”

“Tired,” a weary smile touched the corners of Galahad’s mouth, “will I see you later?”

“Most assuredly,” Cerian replied and watched while his eyes drooped and he fell asleep.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and heard the pride in Herne’s voice as he said, “That was well done. I did not believe that anyone could save him.”

Ceri smiled and raised a hand to lay it on Herne’s, “I did not think I could save him either, My Lord. How long have you known I was here?”

“Half an hour or so,” Herne replied.

Ceri nodded slowly her head feeling as though it was about to come off her shoulders. Dimly she heard Herne’s exclamation and then she was scooped up in his arms.

“We’ll get you to bed,” Herne said quickly.

“No sleep charms,” Ceri ordered drowsily, as Herne laid her down on the bed she was asleep. A maid undressed Cerian and slipped a woollen nightgown over her body. Herne gently laid a hand on Ceri’s forehead before covering her with a blanket and dimming the lamps.

She slept dreamlessly for a while and then suddenly passed from sleep into wakefulness, she lay blinking up at the window watching the dust dancing in the rays of sunlight passing through the narrow window.

The door opened and Herne entered bearing a tray, Cerian sat up in bed as he placed it on her knees, “What time is it?”

“Early afternoon,” Herne replied, “have you slept well?”

“What about Galahad?” Ceri asked quickly, “Is he all right - I-I mean he’s not-” “Galahad’s still fast asleep, snoring his head off in the room above this one, in fact I’m surprised that the floorboards aren’t vibrating. Now eat some breakfast. the kitchen provided oatcakes with goat’s cheese or honey if you prefer and milk.”

Ceri ate hungrily even to the extent of licking her fingers and dabbing up the oat crumbs.

When she had finished, Herne handed her a small basin of water and a towel. She washed the stickiness off her fingers dried her hands and handed the bowl back to him, “Sit down, what did you want to speak to me about?”

“How do you know that I did?” was the reply.

“Because it isn’t your job to serve people.”

“‘Job’,” Herne looked puzzled, “I do not understand the word. My task is to serve you in any capacity I can, but essentially, you are correct. We must needs speak, Madam, and some of it will not be pleasant.”

“Pray continue.” Cerian said slowly.

Herne eased himself onto the bed and said, “As soon as you were recognised in the Great Hall the Dark would’ve known about you. I should have

realised that, I did not put the defences up, they must have slipped in after the celebration. You are in less danger now, but the danger is still great even though much of it has passed.”

“Two questions, My Lord,” Ceri responded softly, a slight frown puckering her forehead, “How could creatures from the Dark enter here? And how do we combat them?”

“This place is Sacred to the Light, the Dark could not enter here unless they either came to parley on Sacred ground, or-” Herne paused, the thought was unthinkable, “or someone of the Light gave them entry.”

“So I may have a traitor to contend with,” Ceri nodded, “fortunately I come from a world where people are generally nasty. I think I can deal with a traitor. What were you going to suggest I do about their attempt to murder me?”

“I was coming to that,” Herne replied, “And I do have a plan, they will expect you to remain in relative safety here and not to have to search elsewhere for you so my suggestion is that I send you back in time and you may continue the search for the solution to my salvation. That way if the Dark seek you here you will be long gone.”

“I hope I can help you,” Cerian replied slowly, “riddles were never my strong point.”

“I will come with you part of the way, but this is your quest and as such you must do this on your own, so the riddle you must decipher alone too.”

“You’re not making this very easy Cernunnos.”

“I never said that it would be easy,” the Lord of the Trees replied, “but you have proved yourself beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are the one chosen to free me. Will you at least try?”

Ceri sighed, “I owe you that much at least. Yes, I shall try. First I shall visit Galahad and then we may depart. Tell me this riddle.”

“Very well. You must trust someone you have only just met; and you must heal someone who doubts you.”

“Full of the joys of spring aren’t we?” Ceri remarked.

“I don’t understand it either,” Herne replied.

“Would you leave us, Lord,” Cerian said, “and I shall dress.”

Herne nodded and vacated the room closing the door behind him. Cerian dressed quickly in a shirt, hose and jerkin. She pulled a pair of soft doeskin boots on her feet.

Slipping out of the room she crept through the corridor and up the stairs. Gently she turned the ring on the door and pushed it open. A bright fire burnt in the grate and the sunlight fell through the narrow slit that formed the window. Galahad lay sleeping and for a moment Cerian watched him her eyes tender, then she kissed the tips of her fingers and touched them to his lips, “Farewell, mon chevalier,” she whispered, “I must depart and I know not when I shall return.”

Herne was waiting for her downstairs, he gave her a cursory glance, “Not quite what I was hoping for but it’ll do. Come, as soon as night falls the Dark will be upon us and you are still vulnerable.” He led her across the courtyard and again the scene shimmered, they stood at the edge of a forest. Herne gazed around and murmured, “These were the days, when forests covered half your country, it was an evil time, but it was also a great time and some men blazed their names across the sky in fiery letters so that England and history has never forgotten them.”

“Why didn’t you stay in this time?” Ceri stared at him curiously.

“Because I cannot die, so I must watch the times of triumph and the times of shame, when you came I finally thought that I might find some vestige of peace.”

“Oh,” Cerian looked around her, “where are we?”

“On the outskirts of Sherwood Forest,” came the reply, “less than five miles from Nottingham,”

The track was dry and fairly clear of weeds and brambles, it soon opened up onto a clear straight road.

“Lady,” Ceri turned to see Herne proffering a small dagger, “there are brigands in these woods, I should like you to have something to defend yourself with should some of them attack us.”

“Thank you,” Ceri said taking the weapon. As they entered another part of the forest the atmosphere seemed to darken, suddenly Ceri felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to prickle, she turned to see something that looked only half-human charging toward her, she drew her dagger and without thinking almost casually stroked it across his eyes, he screamed and reeled backwards clutching his face, blood oozing between his fingers. The others came in ones and twos and although she thrust and parried, inflicting wounds, eventually one of them knocked her weapon from her hand with a branch and their leader caught her arms roughly and pushed her against the rough bark of a tree.

“Now, my pretty, what’s someone like you doing all alone the forest?”

“I-” she began and then looked around, Herne was nowhere to be seen. “I did not think I would be set upon by thieves,” she sneered.

“I am sure that there is a ransom for you, my pretty,” the man cackled and shivers of fear ran up Ceri’s spine.

“Not to my knowledge,” she replied as coolly as she dared. The man stared at her as if he could not believe his ears and then he laughed, “This one has fire - I shall keep her as my captive and she shall bear me fine sons!”

Cerian kicked him hard in the groin, he yelped in pain and lurched backwards, she dropped to the ground and scabbled around finally locating her dagger. Another of the men came towards her and she plunged her dagger to the hilt in his midriff, she twisted it and pulled, it came free with a squelching sound and blood poured from the wound.

Cerian turned and ran, ran for her life through the dark forest, from the crashing behind her she could tell that they were gaining and that they would not be slow to take their revenge on her for injuring their leader. She tripped suddenly and fell headlong and the world turned black.

She was being jolted along rather roughly, it was a most uncomfortable feeling, she struggled to get free. "Hang on," a voice said, "I think she's coming round, put her down John."

The bouncing stopped, she was lifted down from someone's shoulders, she stared up into a gentle face, roughened by anger and pain. "Sit down," the same voice said.

Then she saw him, a young man, no more than twenty-five or six, his hair was coal black and his eyes dark as pools of still water. He crouched down and gently pushed the hair back from a cut on her forehead, "Does it hurt?" he enquired gently.

She nodded and then suddenly said thickly, "I think I'm going to be sick-" she retched uncontrollably for some minutes after her stomach had expelled its contents, she was aware of the big man's hand gently holding the hair away from her face during her retching bout, and then his arm was around her shoulders as she struggled to rise, steadying her, through her still fuzzy vision she saw him proffer a bottle, "It's only water," he said quietly, "just to rinse your mouth out."

She accepted it gratefully and was glad of the cool freshness of the liquid on her sore mucous membranes. She rose to her feet and the dark-haired one came forward again, "Let me put this on the cut," he said, "it'll help it to heal."

Her vision was starting to clear, although her legs still threatened to give way beneath her. The big man, what was he called, John? Yes, that was it, John, guided her to a place where she could sit with her back against a tree while the dark-haired man gently applied something cool and soothing to the pain in her temple.

Then she was lifted again, only this time with her head on John's shoulder and they began moving, with time with a more purposeful air. She remembered that journey only in terms of waking and sleeping, sometimes she could see open sky above them, while at other times she remembered looking upwards at the leafy green canopy and wondering how the trees had moved so fast. Afterwards all she could clearly remember was the darkness surrounding her punctuated by little flashes of light, like fires, arms holding her securely, a woman's voice asking her something and then having to watch a finger moving without turning her head. Then the woman again and something was held to her lips, she drank gratefully, gradually the merciless pounding in her head began to ease and as it did so she fell asleep.

She awoke in the early morning, the breeze stirred the tops of the trees, she sat up and looked around her. The camp was quiet, from the embers of the fire a thin trickle of blue smoke floated slowly upwards. A hand gently

touched her shoulder, she looked up to see John looking down at her, “Good morning,” he said softly.

“Good morning,” Cerian replied, “what time is it?”

“About two hours after sunrise, I’m on guard duty today, the others are scouting the London road, I promised I’d look after you. So what’s your name?”

“Cerian,” Ceri said, “Cerian Prichard. I’m very grateful, you must have moved fast in order to stop those bandits from cutting me into small pieces.”

The man sat down and said, “Much spotted them first, he alerted Robin and me and when we moved into position they were gathered around you. A few carefully placed arrows soon made them move.”

“What about the leader?”

“I rather suspect that you took care of him with a swift kick,” the man replied, “My name’s Little John, I came from Hathersage. You’ll meet the others tonight, there’s Much, myself, Will Scarlet, Friar Tuck and of course Marian and Robin.”

Cerian regarded him strangely at the mention of Robin’s name, “Robin. Do you mean Robin of Locksley?”

“I believe that was his title before he was made wolfshead.” Cerian stood up, “I think we ought to go and catch breakfast,” she said quickly.

“There’s no need for that,” John said, he took her hand and led her over to the fire, “I’m afraid its only cold Coney but you don’t mind that do you?”

“I don’t mind anything as long as its food,” Cerian said taking a piece of the rabbit and sinking her teeth into it.

Later they went down to the river and John showed her how to tickle trout, they caught thirteen big ones and as the shadows were beginning to fall John called a halt. “The others will be back by now, come on, I think you should explain yourself to them.”

The camp was alive with people when John and Cerian entered it. Taking the fish she carried John excused himself, “I think Robin will wish to speak to you.”

Cerian was only left for a couple of moments when someone tapped her on the shoulder, she turned to see a young ginger haired youth standing behind her, “Hello,” he said, “I’m Much. I found you yesterday.”

“I’m very glad that you did,” Ceri replied, she smiled again, “I must go, Much, I think Locksley wants a word.”

Robin touched her arm, “Do you remember me?”

“Vaguely,” she said, “you put something on my head I think.”

“That’s right,” Robin smiled tightly, “now I need some answers. You said that your name was Cerian, I can tell from your accent that you’re not from around here.”

“I’m from the future,” Cerian said softly, “I have to speak with Herne.”

Robin’s gaze became sharp, “From the future - prove it!”

“How?” Ceri stared at him, “there’s no way I can prove I’m from the future, the only way I could would be to tell you of your fate, and I think you already know.”

“Tell me of Richard? What happens to him?”

“He dies in France and England passes to John.” Ceri replied slowly, “I need to speak to Herne.”

“What do you know of Herne the Hunter?”

“More than you think,” Ceri replied, “I serve him in the future. May I speak to him?”

“No!” the voice was Scarlet’s. Both Robin and Cerian jumped, Will jumped out in front of them, “Get rid of her Locksley, she’ll bring Gisborne down on top of us.”

“I have no intention of bringing Guy of Gisborne here - like you I have no love for the man, whatever you think, Scarlet.”

“Do they still talk of me in your future?” Robin asked.

“In my future and the futures to come - you are remembered as a man who stood for Justice and Honour. You are remembered when Richard Coeur De Lion is dust.”

“Then I am satisfied,” Robin replied. “You shall be given all courtesy, Lady, and escorted as far as Kirklees Abbey. From thence I trust you will find your own way. My spies tell me that there is a shipment of gold on its way to Nottingham for the Sheriff’s coffers, the poor could use that money better than the Sheriff.”

Cerian said nothing and Robin smiled tightly and bowing departed, Ceri watched as the darkness swallowed him up. Cerian curled up beneath one of the great oaks and pulled the blanket up around her, sleep came eventually and with it, no dreams.

She awoke early, the sun was still low on the horizon, Robin and the others were talking in low voices around the fire. Cerian pushed through the group until she stood before Robin, “I must needs ask you again,” she said softly, “may I have an audience with the Lord of the Trees.”

Robin looked down at her, the earnestness of her face, the white knuckles, heard the tight plea in her voice, “No. If you will not tell me why you need to speak to him-”

“I can’t,” Cerian replied, “I would trust you to lead me into Hell and out again safely and I have known you little less than a day. Can you not trust me the same?”

“Regrettably not, Madam, I have been misled by a pretty face before, I cannot take the risk again. As I have said before, you shall be escorted to Kirklees tonight. Now Lady, if I may be allowed to continue with my previous conversation.”

Her hopes dashed, Cerian turned away, John touched her shoulder, “Is it so desperately important that you see Herne?”

Cerian looked up into Little John's face and nodded not trusting herself to speak, she swallowed hard and said, "It would help someone in my future if I could speak to him for even a few moments, perhaps I cannot get back home without his help."

"Then I pity you," John replied, "because if Robin refuses to take you, you'll never get to see him."

She turned and John saw the shine of tears in her eyes, "Thank you for your candour," she said softly.

All that day Cerian waited in the camp in the hope that she might be able to speak to Robin or any of the other outlaws when they returned to the camp. Thus it was that she saw the other outlaws bearing the body of Scarlet back into the camp. It was impossible to see how badly he was injured as the other men carrying him obscured her view, but through their upright forms she suddenly caught sight of feathers at the end of a shaft and suddenly felt sick.

They carried him into one of the huts and Marian went in some little time afterwards carrying some implements wrapped in a blanket. Suddenly Cerian made her decision, she pushed open the door and saw Marian poised to try and cut the arrow out.

"No!" She yelled at the top of her voice, Much made a grab for her but she evaded him easily and dropped to her knees beside Scarlet's shaking form.

"Get some alcohol," she ordered. Marian nodded to someone behind her and Cerian heard the door open and close. "Help me sit him up," she said. Together they eased him into a sitting position and Cerian took Scarlet's hand, "Will? Will, don't try to talk, I want you to listen to me, we're going to have to remove the arrow, I'm going to shorten it and its going to hurt. Can you hear me, Will?"

Scarlet nodded, his face was white as milk and a thin film of perspiration covered his cheeks and his forehead. Slowly and carefully Ceri took the knife and began to cut a deep groove around the arrow, Will moaned and Ceri looked across him at Marian, "Hold his shoulders."

Marian pushed his shoulders back and looked across at Ceri, "Ready," she said quickly.

Taking the arrow Ceri pressed both thumbs upwards either side of the groove, the arrow snapped and Scarlet's scream of agony rent the darkness. She sat back on her heels and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, it was wet with perspiration.

She took the knife and a heavy, flat stone, "Be ready to pull the arrow out," she said quickly. Marian nodded, Ceri placed the knife flat against the end of the arrow and picked up the rock. *One clean blow* she told herself, *One, two, three!* On three she hit the knife, the arrow slid through Will's shoulder the point and shaft emerging the other side. He groaned in agony and slumped against Ceri.

"The dressings," she snapped. Padding the wound, she gently laid her hand upon it and the now familiar tingle began again. *Oh Will, you brave irascible*

idiot! The glow spread all over his body and then just as suddenly dissipated. Marian looked down at Will. He was sleeping and his face was peaceful. She lifted the dressing and saw only a new scar.

Ceri got to her feet and went outside into the cool night air. She leant against an oak and closed her eyes, she felt a familiar hand on her shoulder, "Thank you."

She opened her eyes to see Robin gazing at her, "It was nothing," she said.

"It was to me and it will be to Scarlet. Remember he suspected that you were working for Gisborne-" he broke off as Ceri started to laugh, "what is it?"

"Nothing," Ceri assured him, "I was just thinking about something someone said."

"Do you still wish to speak to Herne?" Robin enquired, "if so I shall take you to him."

Cerian could only stare, speechless with gratitude, then she found her voice, "Thank you, Robin Hood."

The mist of twilight lay thickly in the hollows and curled around the roots of the trees when Robin shook her awake, "Come, Madam, we must depart."

Ceri followed him down to the river where a small bark lay moored to the bank. Robin helped her board and then began to punt them upriver. Eventually they arrived at a dark cave, Robin bent and said, "Will you close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you to open them."

Ceri nodded, she felt the bark glide through the darkness and suddenly was tempted to open her eyes and it was as if she heard Herne's voice in her mind, *You must trust someone you have only just met*, and she squeezed her eyes even more tightly shut.

Robin touched her shoulder again, "You may open your eyes now."

Cerian did so and was amazed, the boat was gliding towards a tiny lit ledge in a subterranean lake. Robin helped her onto the bank and then a figure appeared garbed in fur and wearing a deer's head on his own. "Who is this stranger you have brought here?" the creature demanded.

"One who asked to come here and even when I refused did me a service by restoring one of my men to health." Robin replied, "she put herself at risk so I chose to bring her here."

"I bear a message from the future," Cerian said, "I was told I am the Hunter's Salvation. I come to you in the hope that you have the knowledge to save him."

Herne took her shoulders and regarded her for a long moment, "So you have come at last. I have waited long for you. I do not have the knowledge for my salvation; but I do have another riddle that will lead you part of the way towards it. The line runs thus; **You must right him that was wronged; and rescue him who spilt the Crochan.**"

"I do not understand it, Lord, but I shall consider it."

“I know.” A smile lit the features of the Hunter and he said, “It is time for you to go home.” He placed an arm around her shoulders and escorted her towards the altar. “Walk forwards and you shall be where you were.”

“One moment,” Ceri said, she walked over to where Robin was standing and took both his hands in her own, “Remember me?”

“Oh - always,” Robin assured her, “Scarlet will be sorry that you’ve gone. I know he would have wanted to say goodbye.”

“Quick good-byes are always better,” Cerian said, “until we meet again, Robin i’t’h’Hood.”

“Until we meet again, Lady Cerian.”

Herne led her back to the altar and she hugged him before closing her eyes and stepping forward, “Your Gift goes with you, Princess.”

Ceri opened her mouth to thank him but his voice was growing fainter, she hit a grass tussock and dropped to the ground. She opened her eyes, she stood in the orchard, on her right the Abbey loomed over her casting a comforting shadow.

Chapter 5

'The Moment Of Truth'

As Ceri gazed at the surrounding forest, Cernunnos took one last look at the Princess he served and slowly disappeared. A few minutes later, he stepped out of the shadows surrounding his room carrying a small object covered by a black cloth. This he laid on one of the side tables and then sat down himself. He removed the cloth and carefully lifted the glass orb; gently he cradled it in his palms and stared hard into its depths. Gradually the image of a young girl appeared, Cernunnos stared at the blonde hair and blue eyes and thought about this child he had lifted from her own world and her own time. She was running through the forest and as Herne caught sight of her pale, frightened face and flying hair he realised she was in danger. Slowly he replaced the sphere and replaced the cloth. Then he stood up and was about to leave the room when a new voice said, “So, she *is* special to you,”

Herne looked up and into the face of Mithras, “Yes, she is special. But she is more than that.”

“You think this one can save you?” He asked.

“I begin to hope so. I cannot stop my friend, I need to contact an old disciple of mine.”

“She’s in danger – from the Dark?” Mithras’s hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“No. Not the Dark, a group of brigands that haunt the outskirts of Sherwood; but if they kill her she will be just as dead – whether in this time or in the twelfth century.”

“Then you must go,” Mithras replied, “I shall wait.”

“Please.” Cernunnos gestured to one of the chairs and Mithras lowered himself into it. He set his helmet with its white transverse crest on the table beside it and turned to Cernunnos. “Go my friend.”

Herne nodded and walked into the shadows, for a moment there was a flicker and then he was gone. Mithras looked around the room and then up at the lamp illuminating the room, “He truly believes that she is the one who will release him.” He murmured softly to himself.

“He has reason,” another voice said, “though he knows it not as yet.”

Mithras turned and saw the figure of his Lord, the Invincible Sun standing behind him, instantly he was kneeling at the feet of his saviour.

“Greetings, most beloved of my disciples,” the voice said softly, “you have some questions I think.”

Mithras stood up, “Yes Lord. Why should she be the one? The others were as she is, no more, no less, they had royal lineage and royal bearing. She may have

the lineage but she was never brought up as one of them, she has no understanding of what it is to be royal.”

“My son, even I do not know if she is the one who will save the Hunter,” the being said softly, “that is not given to me to know, nor to thee even if we wished it. And even in the books where this is written it is only one half of the story, if she is to save the Hunter, we will know soon enough, if she does not then Morgana and her sister will triumph.”

“I cannot allow that!” Mithras stormed.

“Do you suppose I wish to allow it, my son,” it sighed and responded, “you know as well as I do that we agreed not to try and discover who was the true Keeper.”

“No, you agreed for me,” Mithras replied and for the first time the anger he had held in check was visible on his face. “You forget that I loved one of those so called pretenders, and when Morgana destroyed her it almost broke my heart. And you refused my petition to search through Time for her – you want me to assist this child without even knowing if she is worthy of the honour we give her.”

Suddenly the Sol Invictus grabbed him, Mithras gasped in pain but the creature held him even tighter, “Do you suppose I wanted those others to be lost?” he snarled, his face inches from Mithras’s, “I cared as much for them as I do for this one, more, for one of them was my true daughter as thou art my true son – but she knew the risks and she knew that I could not look for her. Do you forget the battle we fight?”

Mithras pulled himself free and snapped, “I no longer choose to fight this battle. It has been raging since the beginning of time. Let Humankind handle it, it is their battle, not ours.”

“It will be soon enough,” the Sol Invictus replied. “For the moment it is ours. You knew the choice we made – hast thou forgotten thy humanity?”

Mithras refused to answer and the god spoke again, “Then I cannot convince thee, Mithras. Very well. If I ask you to come to Glastonbury will you come?”

Mithras turned and his eyes were full of tears, “I follow you anywhere,” he replied thickly, “but I follow you because I pledged myself to you – not for some foolish battle for which I no longer see any future.”

For the first time the god smiled, “Then when I summon thee to Ynys Witrin, come.”

Mithras nodded and knelt at the feet of his god, “Yes, my Lord.”

“If she asked for help for one of your own would you assist her?”

“For one of my disciples, yes!” Mithras retorted, raising his head to look into his deity’s face, “it is her I do not believe in.”

The Sol Invictus laid a hand on his apostle’s head, “Then go in peace my son. Remember, when I call thee to Ynys Witrin, thou art bound to come.”

“I shall remember,” Mithras responded and slowly disappeared. The god was still standing in the same place when Herne returned.

“I thought Mithras would be here,” he said smiling into the face of the divinity.

“He and I have spoken.”

“About the Princess.”

“And of other things. He still blames me for Myfanwy’s loss.”

“No.” Cernunnos walked across the room to stand in front of the roaring fire, “he blames himself for seeing qualities in her that were not there. Myfanwy was a jewel, but she had only passion, she had no strength to carry her through. I think Mithras thought that with his support she could gain those qualities. He forgot that she had to fight the battle alone and without him by her side.”

The Sol Invictus shook his head, “For a being who was once himself a deity you have a rare insight into humanity. Perhaps that is why you were cursed.”

“It is the consequences of the curse that make me despair,” Herne said softly, “the death and grief that I and the Yell Hounds cause and have caused every century.”

The god gently laid a hand on Herne’s shoulder, “Perhaps this girl may indeed save you.”

“I believe she will, Lord.” Cernunnos replied.

“She certainly appears to have something the others did not, are you so afraid of Morgana?”

“I am not afraid of *her*.” Herne replied with a light laugh, “but I am afraid of what she may do to the Princess.”

“You think she is?”

“I know her history,” Herne replied spreading his hands as if that was all the proof he needed. “However, you are correct, Lord, she has not been tested and she is still a child. She may break.” He sighed and his eyes became far away.

“It is unfortunate that Mithras does not share your belief.”

“He may. There is always time.”

“For us, yes. For you, perhaps. Regrettably not for her. If she is this saviour then time is against her. We can wait for an infinite number of candidates to save you, if you are to be saved.”

“Sounds ominous,” Cernunnos replied, seating himself in the Queen Anne chair and inviting the deity to do the same.

“She must know the truth soon,” the Invincible Sun said, “It was not your fault about the others. Morgana and her sister Morgan seduced them and once seduced it was easy to lure them into the abyss. You have not told her of her Father?”

“No.”

“Or of the real reason for her power?”

Herne looked up at him, “Do you mean-”

“Yes. Have you told her that it is her blood that gives her the power she commands. It has nothing to do with her courage, or her stamina or her belief.”

“I have not. I have not been able to find the words to tell her. She was shocked when I explained about the sacrifices to me, how could I tell her that the real reason she restored Bedwyr’s sight was because of her blood and her lineage?”

“She may be more understanding than you would think.”

“How will she feel when she discovers that I have misled her.”

“Concerning what?”

“Morgana.”

“Ah. You have not explained your involvement with her.”

“How could I? Morgana is the enemy, what would she think if I told her that she was once my spouse?”

“How would she feel if you didn’t tell her?” the being enquired, “and more importantly, my friend, if the Dark discover this, they will use it against her. They could turn what we use for good to evil ends.”

“I know.” Herne sighed, “she will be returning to the Abbey soon and I must speak with her. I shall begin by telling her that her father was a King.”

“You’d best tell her that he was The High King,” the Invincible Sun said, “and one initiated into my Temple.”

“I shall do that, my friend.” Herne smiled, “Did you want something else?”

“I thought that if Mithras talked with her, it might convince him that she is worth his support.”

“He is not that easily convinced,” Cernunnos replied dryly.

“It is worth a try.”

“Very well, Lord.” Herne nodded and together both men walked out of the room.

Meanwhile Cerian flew up the stairs as if there were wings on her heels, she opened the door tentatively. Galahad was sitting up in bed being fed by a young serving maid.

“Enough,” he said wearily, and then he saw Cerian standing quietly beside the door, “Princess!” he gasped.

The maid turned and bowl and spoon clattered to the floor as the girl dropped to her knees in a gesture of submission, “Lady, bless you!”

Cerian said nothing and the girl gathered together the implements and scurried from the room her eyes never meeting Ceri’s. Suddenly Ceri began to feel slightly ridiculous, slowly she walked across the room and sat down on the bed.

Suddenly Galahad leant forward and wrapped his arms around her waist pulling her to him in a fierce hug. “My little Princess!” he murmured and there was such a wealth of affection and pride in his tone that Cerian blushed. She slipped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“I was so worried about you,” she whispered softly.

Galahad released her and leant back against the cushions, "I'm fine," he smiled, "but Cernunnos insists that I be spoon fed for the next three days. I'm not an invalid!"

"No, Sir Knight, but I did have my reasons," Cerian turned at the sound of Herne's voice and then sighed, "I wish you'd stop that corporeal shifting," she complained, "I never know who you're going to look like next!"

A smile touched Herne's lips, "I forgot, Princess." Cernunnos had changed from an old man to one who bore himself like a general; the eyes were unchanged but his hair was black and luxurious, and his steel breastplate shone, in the centre was an embossed image of a horse. "When believers pray to a god they cast him in a certain image - why do you think there were illustrations of me, because my believers cast me in a certain shape, because of the curse my image has remained much the same. But this image was given me by a devout believer and I enjoy wearing it for it reminds me of her."

Suddenly Cerian felt Galahad go limp against her arms, she gasped and then Herne was beside her easing him down on the bed and pulling the sheet up around him, "Did you do this?" she demanded turning to him.

"No," Herne's voice was tender and very low, "I was about to explain that the reason Galahad may not get up is that he is still recovering. He faced one of the Great Ones of the Dark and very nearly died."

Will he recover?"

"Yes," Herne smiled, "in three or four days. You and I must speak, Madam."

"Yes, we must," Ceri replied, "but not tonight. Tonight I tend this man, we will speak in the morning."

Behind her Herne opened his mouth to say something then bowed formally and left the room. Ceri gently turned Galahad so that he lay on his side and with a damp cloth wiped his face. He slept on oblivious, Ceri stayed with him throughout the night. Once he seemed to be in the throes of a nightmare, she gently stroked his forehead and his shuddering ceased and his breathing became less laboured.

The serving girl who had been feeding him when Cerian entered brought a flagon of honey sweetened wine before she went off duty. Ceri hardly noticed her for she moved silently just like a ghost.

As the door closed a quiet voice whispered, "She's quite a sweet little thing," Galahad smiled up at her, "she's been good with me."

Ceri gently stroked a damp curl of hair back from his temple and said, "Thirsty?"

Galahad nodded, "A little."

"Let me help you sit up slightly," Ceri responded, carefully she eased Galahad to a sitting position and held the goblet to his lips. He drank slowly and slumped back again.

“Rest,” Ceri advised, “if Lord Cernunnos says you will be fit in three days, you will be.”

Galahad took her hand, “My delightful Princess,” he murmured, and yawned. Ceri watched as his eyes closed and when she was sure he was asleep she bent and kissed his forehead.

Dawn gilded the horizon orange when Herne entered for the second time, “Madam,” he began, “I regret the intrusion but we must speak - it may wait no longer.”

“Yes, lord.” Cerian replied, “lead the way.”

Cernunnos opened the door and led her up another flight of stairs to the room directly above Galahad’s, this one sparsely furnished with a threadbare carpet and two oak chairs. There was a bright fire burning in the grate and the room was pleasantly warm. Ceri looked around her, “Who did this room belong to, Lord?”

“It is a meeting room, Princess, this room is directly above Galahad’s. In fact the whole tower is isolated from the rest of the Abbey so it was considered an admirable place for parleys to take place. Enemies could sit on neutral ground without fear that they would be attacked because of the single staircase. What is now Galahad’s room would house the contingent of bodyguards.”

“Sit, Lord,” Cerian said suddenly, “I am forgetting my manners. Now I should like an explanation, beginning with why you left me alone in Sherwood.”

Herne looked sheepish, “This is another of the things I thought it best you should not know about, I needed you to meet, Robin i’ the Hood because through him you would meet a former incarnation of me.”

Ceri stared at him and said, “If you get me too angry Lord, there is a possibility that I could do you some harm.”

“I am aware of that,” Herne replied, “but I will not lie to you Princess. That is the way of the Dark and we dare not even bend the truth slightly in order not to hurt someone for if we do then the Dark will have already won.”

“It does not make me any happier” Ceri sighed, “The Light is a harsh master, it is like the Blazing sword of Law, or the burning sun, and it doesn’t care much for individuals. But speak, my Lord.”

“My dear Princess-” Herne began.

Ceri’s eyes blazed, “Forget the ‘dear’, you afford me the title Princess so I presume that at least one of my parents was Royal.”

“Both your parents,” Herne confirmed, “but your father held the distinction of being first True High King of all Britain, he united the tribes together under one King. Vortigern killed his father when he was ten and he and his brother fled to King Budec of Brittany.” Herne paused and then continued, “when he was sixteen, King Gorlan of Lanascoll took him as his Lieutenant and bade him go to North Wales to bring his new bride home. Her name was Cerian Aurora, she was the daughter of the King of Segontium, Caer’na-fon.”

Ceri frowned and then said, “Caernarvon?”

Herne scowled, “Your Welsh is atrocious. Your father’s job was to escort her to King Gorlan. He fell in love with her and she with him, they consummated their love aboard the boat. He even asked her to come away with him. She refused and he had to take the place of her father and give her to King Gorlan.”

“I’d already been conceived, hadn’t I?” Ceri whispered miserably.

“Your mother was a Priestess in the cult of Epona, she came to the shrine in the forest and made sacrifices not knowing it was to me. Therefore it was to me she came when she discovered her pregnancy and told me that the father could not be Gorlan because the night they were to have consummated their marriage a message had come saying that one of the outlying tribes was in revolt and he had gone to quell it. He had hugged her to him and said that there would be another feast when he returned triumphant and that she would bear him many sons. Then he had gone.”

“What did you do?”

“Reached in her mind and saw how she perceived her deity and appeared to her. I told her to pretend that it was Gorlan’s child and to return to the grove every month so that she might not forget her religious duties.” Herne stopped and then began speaking more slowly as if he was remembering, “she went into labour a month before she was due, I always said her hips were too narrow, she begged me to save your life. I transported her to the twentieth century in the hope that its doctors could save her. They could not, she died a little while after giving birth to you. She did not show her pregnancy so nobody knew that she was going to have a child. However both Gorlan and your natural father grieved over her death.”

“Lord, what do you wish me to do?”

“There is someone that I wish you to meet,” Herne said, “he was a good friend who brought me from the Void to the Light. I wondered if you would speak with him.”

“I will try,” Ceri said reluctantly.

“I must leave you,” Herne explained, “My god felt that if you two met alone it might be easier to convince him.”

“I said that I’d try,” Ceri replied, “that doesn’t mean that I’ll succeed.”

“I think that you have more chance of succeeding than I do.” Herne scowled, “Neither my god nor I can convince him that you may be the one for whom we have waited.”

“But if he doesn’t believe-“ Ceri said and then stopped. “That’s it isn’t it? Belief.”

Herne sat down again and looking in her eyes saw comprehension in their depths. He smiled sadly, “That’s part of it. Not just that he believes in you, but that you believe in you.”

“And the other part?” Ceri eyed him warily.

“It is the blood in your veins that gives you your power.” Herne swallowed hard, “remember that I told you about the power that runs through blood. That it is the Lifeforce.”

“So, it is my blood that makes me who I am.” Ceri eyed him thoughtfully. “But I still don’t feel chosen.”

“Who does, My Lady?” Herne sighed, “Mortals seem to think that I actually enjoy riding the sky with the Yell Hounds.”

“But when you ride against the Dark there must be a certain satisfaction in it.” Ceri replied, the hint of a smile playing around her lips.

“Well...yes.” Herne replied reluctantly, “but sometimes the creatures that the Dark employs are too stupid to stay within shelter.”

“Then its not really revenge,” Ceri nodded, “send your-“ she stopped as her brain fought for the word, she considered using *colleague*, but a part of her felt that the Hunter wouldn’t understand or would pretend not to understand, “Send him in Lord Cernunnos. I promise nothing, but I shall speak with him.”

Herne bowed as a courtier might to a queen and for the first time she realised that she was no longer being treated like a piece of baggage to be carried from place to place. She leant back in the chair and felt the first tendrils of fear curl around her gut. The door opened again and another man entered, “Madam, the Lord Mithras.”

“Please, come in my lord.” Ceri responded, her mouth felt suddenly dry. *Where’s a glass of water when you need one?* She thought grimly. Outwardly she smiled and gestured with her right hand, “Be seated, Lord. Lord Cernunnos has told me that you wished to speak with me. Would it be imprudent to enquire why?”

The man stood before her and did not smile in return. “I did not request this audience.” He stated bluntly.

“I know that,” Ceri replied gently, “I think that the Hunter thought that we might talk and see if we could find agreement somewhere.”

“Unlikely.” Mithras looked around the room and then appeared to make a decision. “May I speak plainly.”

“Please.” Ceri replied, “and do sit down. You make me dreadfully nervous standing there.”

Mithras sat gingerly in the chair opposite and for a long moment there was silence between them, then he spoke, “I do not believe that you are the chosen.” He said finally. “You have not done enough, you have not led armies into battle, you have no skill in fighting and you’re never rallied an army in your life. How could you be the one who will free Arthur’s Realm.” Silence greeted his words and he looked up to see Ceri smiling at him.

“My Lord, even I do not know if I am the chosen one. The Hunter speaks in riddles even to me. My blood may be the proof of my lineage, but without experience or knowledge, lineage is nothing. I do not ask people to follow me,” Mithras looked up his eyes alight with hope, “yet,” his head fell again and Ceri

smiled, “but I do ask them to look at what I do, not what I say. There lies your proof.”

“Brave words,” Mithras replied, “but what deeds have you done that would prove that you are who Herne says you are.”

“What deeds would?” Ceri’s eyes flashed blue fire and looking into them, Mithras saw a core harder than diamond and saw a hint of the fire he’d only ever seen in two other men. “I doubt you would believe even if you could witness the proof.”

“If I witnessed your power, I would know whence that power came, and I would believe.” Mithras replied softly.

“Be careful what you say,” Ceri smiled sadly, “you may witness it and wish that you had not said those words.”

Mithras stood up, “I take my leave of you, Madam. I will not address you as Princess, in my eyes you do not have the knowledge or the lineage to be either.” He turned and walked from the room. Minutes later Herne entered, Ceri smiled up at him, “Where did you meet that friend of yours?”

“Mithras has been to see you.” Herne sighed, “and left still unconvinced.”

“He talked about deeds, Lord Cernunnos.” She paused, “What must I do that he would support me?”

“Vanquish the Dark on its own territory,” Herne mused, “I do not know, Princess. His anger is not directed at you, rather it is me he is angry with. A woman he loved was once one of the Chosen. She had grace, honour, lineage and power, but she fell and Mithras has blamed me ever since.”

“Why did she fall, Lord?”

“I do not know,” Herne replied, “in truth, I do not know. She was like you in all ways. She had the lineage, the bloodline, she certainly had power. But you begin to realise that you must walk this road alone, as all who are of the Ancient Ones walk alone.”

“She didn’t?”

“She had passion, but little strength. And-“ he paused and then continued slowly as if every word was being winched from the depths of his being, “She did not have courage. It takes courage to be what you are, what we are. She did not have that, but I have not told Mithras.”

“Then perhaps you ought.” Ceri frowned, “fighting among ourselves will only achieve the Dark’s purpose. We must be able to trust one another – if we cannot then the Dark will have already won.”

“Sometimes I feel they have.” Herne turned to leave the room.

“Not yet. But is that why you didn’t tell me about Morgana, Arawn?” Herne froze, and the slowly turned back to face her and she saw that his face was white as chalk.

“When did you know?”

“I-I don’t know,” Ceri replied slowly, “I just seem to have made the connection. Cernunnos was your title among the Celts when you were Lord of

the Underworld, Herne the Hunter is who you were when you began to haunt Windsor Great Park, but you wore horns as Arawn Pen Annufn, Arawn, Lord of the Underworld. Was Morgana your Queen?"

"I don't know," Herne shook his head, "Truly I do not know. It seems as though she wanted to rule in her own right and instead of taking her own realm, chose mine."

"Why did you leave her?"

"I met the Sol Invictus one morning and he offered me a chance for peace," Herne smiled at the memory, "your people do not regard death as a part of life, Princess. They see it as something to be feared and something to be avoided for as long as possible. Besides-" he paused and reseated himself opposite Ceri, "there were things about my own rule that were beginning to disturb me."

"Concerning Morgana?"

"Concerning Morgana." He confirmed. "it is difficult to explain, my Lady. Even now with clear sight, I cannot see clearly when I think of her."

"Perhaps you were bespelled," Ceri mused.

"I was certainly enchanted," Herne responded, he sighed and then looked up at his liege lady. "I was dreading having to tell you about Morgana. I thought that you would refuse to help me."

"Is there reason why I should?" Ceri enquired.

"Perhaps." Herne paused and then get to his feet, "May I get a drink, Highness?"

"Of course," Ceri replied. She leant back in the chair and thought, *That's all I need. First I have a meeting which doesn't go terribly well, Lord Mithras hates me. Now I get to find out that Cernunnos is playing both sides off against one another, just to make life even more interesting.*

Herne reseated himself and took a sip from the wooden goblet he held. "Forgive me, Princess. I did not tell you because I was afraid that if I did, you would refuse to assist me in this battle."

"You felt that you had cause," Ceri responded. "Something has happened hasn't it?"

"She appeared to me and offered me my throne if I would renounce this 'foolish quest'." Herne smiled gently.

"Do you believe it's foolish?" Ceri asked quickly. She leant forward and brushed a tendril of fair hair away from her face, her eyes bright with passion.

"I do not know. All these centuries I have waited for the woman who would free me and now when she sits before me I do not know what to say to her."

A slow flush, like the edge of a wave began to creep up Ceri's face as she realised Herne meant herself, she opened her mouth and said slowly, "I do not know where this Quest is taking me, sometimes I feel that whatever I discover, it will not help you."

"Perhaps not." Cernunnos smiled, "but perhaps it is intended to help you."

“I did not think of that, Lord.” Ceri replied sheepishly. “Will you tell Lord Mithras what you have told me?”

“I cannot,” Herne responded shaking his head, “we have fought over Myfanwy many times and more since your arrival.”

“Myfanwy. My rare one,” she mused. “Shall I tell him?”

“No.” Herne smiled again, “this is my problem, Lady. His too of course, but we will solve it together.”

“The question, my Lord Cernunnos is will he support me in the battle I must fight.”

“He said that he would assist you if one of his own were injured, beyond that I do not think he will go.”

“So I cannot count on his support for me.” Ceri looked thoughtful. “Thank you, Cernunnos. Somehow I must change his mind - and I do not know where to begin.”

“Perhaps it is not your problem.” Herne stood up and crossed the distance between them to lay a comforting hand on Ceri’s shoulder, “you have not the time or the energy to worry about everyone, Princess. You must remain true to the goal of this quest and you must remain strong.” “What do I do now?” Ceri looked up at the creature towering over her and in spite of everything that had happened suddenly felt very young and very afraid.

“Go home, and then we will decide where you will go next and who we must see to accomplish our goal.”

“I’d like to meet my father,” Ceri said softly, as Herne ushered her down the stairs, “I mean it would be nice to know who he was.”

“Can you wait for a little?” Herne enquired, “and I shall tell you who he was with pleasure, but I would rather do so when you have rested and are ready for our next foray into time.”

The fields were still covered in a ghostlike mist, which the dark crimson rays of the sun had not yet managed to pierce. Herne touched the front door of her house and it swung back silently on its hinges.

“Is this farewell,” Ceri asked quietly.

“For a few days. Three at most. Rest my dear Princess. Continue to walk your dog, I shall find you when I need you.”

Cerian pushed open the door and turned around to see Cernunnos striding across the mist as though it were solid ground. She continued to regard his progress until the swirling clouds hid him from view.

The next morning she awoke quite late. She was brushing her hair in the mirror and wondering how she would broach the subject with her adoptive parents when the mirror became hazy and she saw Herne standing behind her, she turned to greet him but there was no-one there. She turned back to the mirror and Herne said softly, “Think you that it will be so easy to renounce your ties with them? They are not your parents by blood but they are your parents nevertheless. They loved you, nurtured you and cared for you, more than that

they allowed you your freedom to be who you are. Much of the love you bear must be towards them.”

“But what of my real father?”

“Who is your real father?” Herne asked, “The man who found you and took you into his home and hearth and under whose protection you grew, or the man who took your mother in a wild moment of passion and had he even known of your existence could not have acknowledged you as his daughter. You place too much store by blood, blood has its merits and there may be a day when you must choose between those of your blood and those whom you love. If you are lucky they will be one and the same but most of us of the Light have had a hard choice to make - I cannot think yours will be any easier.”

Ceri smiled, “I hadn’t thought of it like that, Lord. My parents are those who have loved me all these years. But what of my real father, I thought that you wanted him to acknowledge me?”

Herne nodded, “I do. Your father was the first True High King of all Britain, you are his daughter and the last of the Light. You have a latent legacy that is now becoming apparent.”

“So what do I do?” Ceri demanded.

“For the moment,” Herne sighed, “nothing. However, your final task lies ahead of you and this will be the one that decides your fate.”

“Do you always talk in riddles when you’re not sure?”

Herne laughed suddenly and despite her frustration Ceri could not help but smile, he spoke again. “Very well. You must face your father - not as his daughter but as one of the Light. This is where you must prove your heritage and your ancestry - if you do it properly you will be obeyed as your father was obeyed.”

Ceri stared at the mirror perplexed, “Why?”

“Because only one who had Sang real in her veins would face the forces of the Dark and triumph.” Herne stopped suddenly and then sighed, “I have said it. Lady, you said you wished to meet your father.”

“Lord-” Ceri’s voice died in her throat and she swallowed hard, “Meeting my father face to face is one thing but to face the Dark again - I couldn’t. Those creatures terrified me.”

“You had every reason to be terrified,” Herne said, “but the moment that you were crowned in the Great Hall at Glastonbury it sent shockwaves throughout the Dark. That’s why they sent three of their minions the same night.” Herne’s form wavered and he said, “I have to leave you. In your time Lady, the Dark have no knowledge of who you are. For the moment that is our salvation, but be warned, the moment you come face to face with your father it will send the knowledge spreading from you like ripples in a pond and all times will know who you are.”

“One might think that it would be better that I did not know,” Ceri suggested tentatively.

“You must - not because of who you are, but because you must do something for your father - if there were any other way I would have taken it long ago, but I believe that only you may accomplish this particular task.”

“You won’t help me?” Ceri’s voice quavered on the last two words.

“I didn’t say that,” Herne’s voice was surprisingly soft, “I told you, you are my liege lady, I mean only that you will discover your true gifts when we journey to this time and the decisions will be yours. You hold your destiny in your own hands. Farewell, My Lady.” The mirror went blank and then Ceri was staring only at her own reflection.

I forgot to ask, she thought suddenly, I don’t know when I will be going - or how!

The next few days dragged - on the fourth day the weather was mild so Ceri took a cushion and sat on the front step, *This is like the end of term she thought, only its worse - I know that he needs me but I don’t know when or how. Ah hell!* She sighed miserably and Rufus came and shoved his nose beneath her hand. Ceri sighed again and rubbed the dog’s silky ears, “You don’t really care who or what I am as long as someone fusses you.” Rufus whined and pawed her leg as her hand stopped moving.

Suddenly the sky darkened, Ceri shivered and looked heavenwards to see the clouds thickening until the light of the sun could barely be seen, flashes of lightning illuminated the clouds and from a distance she could hear the rumble of thunder, “What in-” she began but Rufus whined pitifully and as a lightning flash illuminated the skyline she saw it, a figure garbed in black and carrying a crossbow.

“You are the *Princess?*” the tone was almost disbelieving, “you are but a child.”

Cerian felt the rain on her body and she said quietly, “Your masters sent you to kill a *child?*” By all rights, she should not have been heard above the sound of the rain but the creature took a step back and then laughed.

“Aye, my Masters were right. You are worthy to be called your father’s daughter - this will be a great triumph for the Dark.”

“You knew my father?”

“You do not? This will be even better!” He threw his head back and Ceri saw that the rain was falling around it as if even water was afraid to touch this creature.

“Who was my father?” She demanded.

“Your father was the Duke of the Red Dragon, Count Ambrosius, why else do you think you are a Princess? Your mother was just a King’s daughter, she would have been sold to the highest bidder. Princess, Hah! You’re no more a Princess than I am a knight!”

“That’s not true!” Ceri cried and she couldn’t tell whether the water on her cheeks was because of the rain or her tears.

“Oh but it is.” The being raised the crossbow it carried and fired, she screamed a name, “Galahad!” and suddenly the landscape around her began to melt, afterwards she said that it was like running through an oil painting that had had turpentine splashed onto it and all the colours were running together. She ran and ran, though whether her feet were actually moving afterwards she was never sure - all that passed through her mind was the necessity to evade the bolt from the crossbow.

Suddenly a pair of strong arms caught her and held her, there was a sensation of falling and with it a picture flashed across Ceri’s mind a tall, blue eyed, black haired man sitting astride a black charger and a black arrow coming from nowhere to embed itself in his thigh. Someone was gently rocking her back and forth as she sobbed, great gasping sobs that seemed to wrench at the very soul of her being. Over the sobs she could hear a voice murmuring, “Sssh, my Princess, sssh. It’s all right, there’s nothing to fear any longer. He’s gone. Sssh.”

She pulled herself away and raised a tear-streaked face to see Galahad bending over her, “Mon chevalier,” she said shakily.

Galahad smiled and said gently, “Its not every day I get to comfort a damsel in distress.” He tactfully handed her a handkerchief.

A gleam of mischief lit Ceri’s eyes, “I thought that’s what all you knights of Camelot were meant to do - help damsels in distress.”

“Yes,” Galahad replied, “but the majority of them didn’t fall on my neck the way you did.”

Another figure knelt beside Ceri’s and handed her a cup of something. She smiled wanly as she recognised the antlers, “Lord Cernunnos,” she said softly, “where are we?”

“You have been running through Time,” Herne replied, “you probably aren’t aware of it but when the creature of the Dark fired on you, you screamed Galahad’s name. But by then we were powerless to help you. All we could do was to come to this time and call out to you in the hope that you would hear us and come towards us, and you did.”

Cerian suddenly remembered her vision, “A man - a man was wounded with the arrow meant for me. Who was he?”

Herne nodded, “The arrow was meant for you, but it would also be attracted to any member of your family-”

“Then that thing that was sent to kill me - he was right?”

“Yes,” Herne sighed, “your father is Count Ambrosius Aurelianus, at present he is being borne back to King Budec’s stronghold. Look into the flames.”

Ceri stared into the fire and slowly a picture formed, she seemed to be standing on the ramparts of a castle or a fort, a group of people were carrying someone on a hurdle. Her vision telescoped and it was as if she too was walking beside the stretcher, she looked down at the face and saw the man who had

been wounded, the bolt still protruded from his thigh. She looked up and into the face of another man, this one with russet hair and a beard yet there was something in him that reminded her of the Count. The men laid him down and her peripheral vision caught sight of a young man carrying a cloak of some sort, he covered the Count warmly, Ceri stared at him, he could only have been about twelve but already she could see that the boy was a copy of the wounded man. The Count was lifted and the men set a quicker pace to reach their goal, at the gate stood a cloaked black figure, a smooth, milk-white hand touched the russet-bearded man's arm, "Lord," Ceri heard a soft voice that made the hairs on her neck prickle, "I have the skill to save him, wilt thou permit me. I am Gwenwyn."

"Lady, you have my permission," the man bowed his head and the image before Cerian's eyes faded and she was left staring into the flames. "I fear for Count Ambrosius," she said softly.

"As I," Herne replied quietly.

"That woman, she's in the pay of Vortigern!"

"That would not be so bad. Search your heart Princess, she is much more than that."

Cerian let her mind drift, something about the name, about those milk-white hands, "She is one of the Dark Ones. Great she is and few can stand up to her power, Her name is **poison**."

"Good." Herne said his antlered head nodding, "we must depart. Sir Galahad - I regret that you may not accompany us this time but fear not, we shall have need of you in the future. I shall return thee to the Abbey if thou wilt permit it."

"Most assuredly, Lord," Galahad knelt and took Ceri's shoulders, "You bear a gift that may do great good, use it wisely My Princess." He kissed her gently as a brother might and slowly faded from view. Ceri could still feel the pressure of his hands on her shoulders.

How good is your French?" Herne asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"C'est passable, mon seigneur. Mais ce n'est pas Brêton."

"Well at least your French is better than your Welsh." Herne looked slightly sheepish again and then said, "I am afraid I lied when I said that I could not make you speak any language, I can of course make you as fluent in Brêton as in English, it is just rather a complicated spell and it only lasts three days. What I will do is enable you to comprehend spoken Brêton, and an ability to speak French as you would speak English. Now - let us see what you can wear."

Cerian pulled on a long woollen gown of an aquamarine hue, it had a scoop neck and long sleeves. She slipped on a pair of soft leather sandals and Herne pulled a vermilion red gown from somewhere and then he looked at her, "This was your mother's" he said, holding out the brooch, Cerian took it gingerly, the images were of three horses their legs intertwined, "your father

gave it to her, it is how he will know you.” He fastened it at the neck of the cloak.

“I’m not ready,” Cerian said slowly.

“If not now, then when?” Herne took her shoulders and said, “I shall escort you to the stronghold and turn you over to the care of the Warden, you will be all right, my magnificent Princess.”

“But how do I get back?”

“At the moment I should worry about Ambrosius, if he should die then the invasion of Britain dies with him and Artus will never rule a united kingdom.”

Cerian nodded, “Yes my lord Herne.”

Herne nodded curtly as if satisfied, “I shall fetch the horses, drink your mead my lady.”

Cerian stared into the fire, she wondered how she was going to confront her father. *For that matter, she thought, how am I going to confront the Dark - I am not so great as Herne thinks.* She felt a hand touch her shoulder, “Are you ready, Madam?”

Cerian smiled, “I doubt I’ll ever be truly ready, but ready or not I must face the wrath of the Dark.”


She mounted the chestnut steed Herne had brought her and heard the creak of leather as Herne mounted the other animal behind her. The steed walked forward and Herne turned to her and said, “You must announce yourself as a friend of Ambrosius, I doubt you will be allowed access to him but you will be treated with all courtesy.”

“Who do I ask the answers of?” Cerian enquired.

“This time, Princess, of yourself.” Herne’s dark eyes fixed themselves on the horizon and he spurred his mount forward into a trot. Cerian sat watching him for a moment before digging her heels into her steed’s sides and following him.

Chapter 6

‘Duke Of The Red Dragon’

erian pulled her vermilion cloak more tightly around her as a misty drizzle began to fall. Her fingers brushed against the pewter brooch, it felt faintly warm and she wondered about her mother.

She urged the chestnut into a trot and reined it in next to Herne’s mount,

“Lord-” she began hesitantly.

Herne turned towards her and saw the query in her blue eyes, “Ask any question of me, Princess, I shall do my utmost to answer it.”

“Do I look like my mother?”

Herne appeared to ponder this for a moment and then he said, “Yes, but your eyes are a legacy from your father. You act very much like him, impetuous, foolhardy, irresponsible-”

Ceri looked away suddenly ashamed of her behaviour.

Herne’s voice became very gentle, “but also compassionate, courageous and noble. Ambrosius would be followed into the jaws of Hell because his men love him so much.”

“You have more faith in me than I,” Ceri remarked, “As whom do I introduce myself?”

Herne was silent for a couple of minutes and then a smile lit his features, “As Lady Cerian Prichard, kinsman of the Duke Of Tintagel, Gorlois.”

“Why Gorlois?”

“Because he is far enough away not to arrive unexpectedly and because Gorlois has ever been a staunch supporter of Ambrosius. When all is explained to the satisfaction of everyone then he will understand that you had your reasons.”

“I hope so,” Ceri sighed suddenly and said, “not everybody is going to be pleased to see me. There are those of the Light who have led for centuries since the age of Arthur, and I fear that I may upset them.”

Herne turned a mild gaze on her and said softly, “I am not upset and part of the charge to govern the Light has fallen on my shoulders.”

Ceri smiled, “But did you make the choice or was the choice laid upon you, you see those who chose of their own accord to lead will not be pleased when a usurper comes along.”

“Do you feel like a usurper?” Herne asked.

“Sometimes,” Ceri admitted, “they won’t follow me just because I prove myself.”

“On the contrary,” Herne replied, “that is precisely why they will follow you - you are the last of the Light and there are many tasks ahead of you; not least the one you face at present - they knelt to you at Glastonbury, why should you not lead them?”

“Why should I?” Ceri replied. “I fear that they knelt to me only because of who I was, not what I was.”

Herne chuckled softly, “You truly believe that they only knelt to you because of your title?” His golden eyes held hers and he spoke again, “they knelt because the Midwinter Thorn has not blossomed for over a thousand years yet it bloomed for you; they knelt because you freed the truest knight that ever lived and returned him to his king. The power within you ebbs and swells like the tide. You are the chosen one - even if you won’t admit it to yourself.”

Ceri fell silent and her fingers touched the brooch again, “Lord,” she quavered, “I don’t really want to be the chosen one.”

“And Galahad didn’t want to sit in the Siege Perilous, you are evenly matched you both. Be of good heart my Lady, it will not always burden you. When I am free, so will you be.” The lane became a definite track along which the riders steered the horses. Eventually they mounted the rise and saw the standing stones beneath them, a mist had risen from the ground giving the impression that the huge monoliths were floating. They halted the horses and waited while their mounts snorted and stamped and their breath hung in the air like white clouds.

“This is a holy place,” Herne said softly, “and you may - one day - discover why.”

“Why one day?”

“Because the god who inhabits this place is a soldier’s god - a man’s god, not a woman’s.”

“In my time,” Ceri began slowly, “there are women soldiers.”

“And in this time,” Herne replied, “but they have a goddess of their own. Make your obeisance to the god of this place for the Count worships Him and you may need His assistance.”

That sounds like a prophecy, Cerian thought but she said nothing. She stood up in the stirrups and bowed solemnly.

Herne regarded her approvingly and when she eased herself back into the saddle he spoke, “That was well done.” He nodded as if in recognition to the standing stones as if he was greeting an old friend, “come, the night is almost done and I must be far away by morning.”

“Then I am ready, my lord,” Cerian replied automatically and then realised she had spoken in French.

“Good,” Herne’s eyes twinkled and Ceri suddenly demanded, “you’ve cast the spell!”

“But of course,” Herne smiled, “this place is magical and I utilised some of its magic. The god of this place and I have known each other for some time.”

That’s what I thought, but again she said nothing. Herne dismounted and as he did so his form changed again and he appeared to be clothed in a monk’s habit and tonsured. He took the chestnut’s bridle and began to lead it towards the huge gates. The guard stepped forward and demanded their identities.

Herne smiled and turning to the horse he helped Ceri dismount. Her feet touched the hard earth and she turned to see Herne regarding her compassionately, “My Lady,” he bowed solemnly and turned to the guard. “I am Father Elias,” Herne said softly, “I am escorting a kinsman of the Duke of Gorlois to the protection of King Budec. May she be admitted?”

The guard looked doubtful and then he said, “Wait here.” He turned to the other man and said softly, “Watch them.” Then he opened the gate slightly and slipped inside. Ceri stroked her horse’s nose and patted its neck, “Sssh, my beauty, ssh.”

The guard reappeared and gestured for them to come through, Herne shook his head, "I must leave, my charge ends here." He smiled at Ceri and said softly, "Fare thee well, My Lady."

"Farewell, Father," Cerian replied and then her lips formed the words, *Be careful, my Lord*

Herne nodded and then taking his steed's bridle began to lead it away from the fort. Meanwhile the heavy gate swung back and Ceri led her steed into the castle.

She stood in a small courtyard of hard-packed earth, she slipped her cloak off and pocketing the brooch she threw the cloak over the chestnut's withers. The guard came forward to greet her and began to speak in a strangely formal tone, "Wouldst thou follow me, Lady. My liege doth desire your presence in the Great Hall and I-"

"I must first stable the horse and groom him. Convey my respects to my liege and say that I will join him as soon as I am able."

"Lady," the guard bowed and exited hurriedly.

Ceri rubbed the chestnut down and made sure that there was hay in the manger and water in the trough. She removed the saddle and bridle and set them on one of the racks and draped the tack over it. A shadow fell across her and she turned to see the guard standing behind her, he looked slightly desperate, "Lady, will you accompany me, please?"

Ceri nodded. "Certainly, would you lead the way."

Budec was eating in the Great Hall, in the fireplace a huge fire roared and on the walls torches burnt brightly illuminating the enormous room. Budec and the soldiers were eating what appeared to be a hastily prepared meal. The combined effect gave Ceri the impression that the servants had readied the room in haste only as Budec arrived.

"Why did you not come when I first requested your presence?" Budec's dark, almost black eyes surveyed her coldly.

"Forgive me, my liege," Ceri replied softly, "I was grooming my horse - I did not mean to offend your liege but I have no possessions of my own save that horse."

"You are kin to Ambrosius?"

"Yes, my liege," Ceri curtsied.

"The Count has been gravely wounded," Budec said slowly, "I regret that he is unable to offer you hospitality at present but I shall be glad to provide for you until he is well. Be seated lady and I shall have food and wine brought for you." Budec nodded to one of the servants. A chair was brought and set next to his and food was laid on the table.

Ceri sat and using the dagger at her waist cut a piece off her cold venison. As the wine flowed more readily Budec became more talkative. "Ya shee," he said, almost spilling his goblet into Ceri's lap, "the injury isn't serious, but the

offishers shwear that the arrow appeared out of thin air - it'sh black magicsh, thatsh what 'tis."

Ceri said nothing and wished that she was somewhere else. Eventually she plucked up the courage to speak, "My lord, your welcome has been most kind in difficult circumstances, is't possible that I might be excused?"

Shurely," Budec nodded, "Mayhap the Count will have recovered somewhat by tomorrow, Shleep well, Lady Cerian." He gestured to one of the servants and gentle if tentative hands escorted her away from the table.

I am Flaptongue," the man said as he lit an oil lamp and escorted Ceri up the long dark staircase, "you mustn't mind King Budec, he's upset, that's why he's drinking."

"Are he and the Count very close?"

"He brought them to Less Britain when Uther was but a babe and the Count himself had just turned ten. He is more worried than he will admit - give him time, Lady, he is not always this uncouth."

"Was Ambrosius expected?"

"In five days - yes - there was to be a parley here at Budec's castle. But because the Count was wounded so far from his own territory Budec decided to bring him to his own stronghold. The hall was hurriedly prepared for the soldiers and Budec himself. That is why I urge you not to judge him too harshly."

As they reached the top of the landing a huge man with russet hair and a beard that matched stalked out of the shadows making Cerian jump in surprise.

"Flaptongue!" The man bellowed, "where's Budec! My brother's condition worsens!"

"King Budec is drinking himself to oblivion in the Great Hall," Flaptongue replied, "I doubt he is amenable to rational conversation at present, Lord Uther."

Ceri stared at the man awe threatening to overwhelm her, Uther was dressed like a Roman warrior, his breastplate caught and reflected the light of the oil lamp the servant held. "You're probably right," Uther grumbled, "all right, there's nothing that may be done tonight, I shall speak with him in the morning."

"That was Uther," Flaptongue said as if that explained everything, "the Count's brother. Lady, your room." He opened the door and Ceri saw a medium sized room sparsely furnished with a bed, a chest and a table upon which stood another oil lamp. Flaptongue lit it and turned back to Ceri, "There are nightclothes in the chest, and a selection of clothes. When Lord Ambrosius is well he will see you properly furnished with garments."

"I am certain of that," Ceri replied, "thank you for your kindness."

"Lady," Flaptongue bowed and exited. Ceri looked around the room and saw the window. She walked across the room and opened it carefully, her room

overlooked the courtyard and the front gate. A pale golden moon shone down upon the castle. Ceri stared up at it for a long time wondering what she ought to do next.

Eventually she came to a decision and taking up the lamp and her scrip left the room and moved softly down the corridor. Once or twice she heard doors open and Flaptongue's voice. When this happened she flattened herself against the cold stone and shaded the flame of the lamp until all was silent again.

She padded softly down the corridor until she reached a large oriel window through which the rays of the moon shone faintly. To her left was another passage and to her right a large portal dark with age. Ceri stood before the windows wondering what to do next, finally she closed her eyes and let the tendrils of thought reach out left and right, yes, it was just a tendril but something urged her right. She opened her eyes and sighed softly. Picking up the lamp she turned to the great door and pushed it open.

For a moment she stared in horror at the scene before her, Ambrosius lay supine on a bed against the wall, his eyes were glassy and over his taut skin was a layer of perspiration, the creature calling herself Gwenwyn was bent over his leg and muttering. Ceri felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to prickle and the air around her become taut.

"What are you doing?" Cerian gasped.

The creature turned and instead of a face Ceri saw only an endless abyss, and in that darkness saw a reflection of herself, as others saw her, puny, ineffectual with powers that were of no use to anyone, erratic, awkward, useless. She swallowed hard and thought *I was right, they'll never follow me*, and on this thought she saw other images, the great hall at Glastonbury, doubt in the faces of those who knelt to her, all twisting round and round in her mind. The lamp dropped from her hand and crashed to the floor. Cerian's legs buckled as she pressed her hands to her head. She could sense the creature smiling and there was nothing she could do.

Princess, Ceri blinked, it was Herne's voice but it spoke in her mind, ***All this is lies, the Dark corrupt all that they touch, what I have told you is the truth, you are my Princess and the Last of the Light. Stand tall!***

From somewhere within her a spark of defiance flared and Ceri raised her head to stare at the foul creature, "Dark spawn, ally to Vortigern, in the name of the Light, begone!"

The creature stared and from the blankness beneath the cowl there came an air of puzzlement, as if it could not quite believe what it was hearing, it took a step back.

Ceri gritted her teeth and whispered, "Help me, Cernunnos!" Suddenly the pressure on her seemed to ease slightly, Ceri rose to her feet slowly, painfully, "In the name of the Light," she murmured and it was as if pure strength poured down upon her. "Go!" she ordered, "I command you to leave in the name of Epona, in the name of Mithras in the name of the Light!"

The creature laughed, "All your spells and incantations are of no use to you - for once over the threshold the Dark has power over all the inhabitants of a house and Uther gave me entrance."

"But I did not!" a new voice spoke. "Uther gave you permission to heal Ambrosius, you have not done that, therefore what power you had is void - get thee gone!"

The creature snarled and appeared to fold in on itself, as it disappeared Ceri thought she heard it say, "You have defeated me - but I have already branded my name in him. You can do nothing!"

She disappeared leaving a wisp of smoke and an oily feel to the air. Cerian ran forward and gently pulled back the covers, she stared abhorred, the shaft had been broken off and the arrowhead was still embedded in his thigh.

"By Mithras," a voice whispered beside her and Cerian turned to come face to face with a young boy of about twelve, she smiled hesitantly and then turned back to Ambrosius.

She turned quickly and saw Uther standing in the doorway, "My Lord Uther," she acknowledged, "your brother is grievously ill and it may take all my skill to save him. I need a brazier brought in here, some hot water, mulled wine, and clean cloths." She caught sight of Uther's face, "please?"

Something in her plea must have moved him because he nodded quickly and within moments Cerian had everything she had requested.

"I am Myrddin, Myrddin Emrys," the boy said softly at her elbow, "they call me Merlin."

"My name is Cerian, Cerian Aurelia. They call me Ceri. Will you watch with me this long night Merlin?"

The boy nodded and Ceri began her preparations, she poured a goblet of the mulled wine and added something from one of the vials in her srip. Gently she raised the wounded man's head and held the wine to his lips. His teeth chattered on the rim but a little wine slipped down his throat. His eyes opened and two pairs of blue eyes stared into each other, something flared in them and Ambrosius put up a shaking hand to push the cup away. He opened his mouth to speak but Ceri gently laid her finger on his lips, "Rest my lord." The dark head fell back the eyes closed.

Ceri carefully removed the glowing dagger from the brazier and bent over Ambrosius, she looked up quickly at Merlin, "You must hold his shoulders," she said softly. Merlin nodded quickly.

Ceri made four deep cuts, rather like the shape of a compass and pus welled up, a tumescent odour filled the room. Merlin gagged and turned away. Carefully Ceri drew out the arrow, Ambrosius moaned and tried to struggle up but the drug Cerian had administered held him. She bound a pad around the wound and bandaged the thigh. She nodded to Merlin who gratefully relinquished his hold on his father's shoulders.

Cerian eased herself into one of the chairs and surveyed Merlin who had collapsed into the other, "I think he will be all right now." She smiled tiredly as the first rays of the rising sun caught the gold of her hair and turned it to flame.

All through that day Ambrosius slept peacefully but as the sun began to sink in the west the symptoms of the fever returned with more severity. Cerian bent over a writhing Ambrosius. His body was drenched with sweat and his breath rattled in his throat. Cerian examined the bandages and discovered to her horror that the wound was bleeding again and the blood was almost black.

"This is Dark Magic," Cerian said, "and if we are to save your father's life - I must do that which I feared to do. Watch your father - I must speak to Lord Uther."

Just roused from sleep Uther stood proud and dark against the window, "I should not have listened to Gwenwyn."

"That is past, my lord. I desire a free hand and your blessing."

Uther turned heavily, "And if I give it, will you bring my brother back well and whole?"

"I do not know my lord, but by Mithras and by Epona I hope so."

Uther gazed at her for so long that Cerian began to become afraid and then he said, "Tell me what you need."

Ceri bit her lip nervously, "I will need a fresh litter made of branches and eight of your men who will speak no word of this night."

"Granted," Uther inclined, "what else?"

"Five torches and food and drink for one night," Cerian replied, "one last thing, my Lord, the flasks that the wine will be in must be new, the food freshly prepared and the torches newly made."

Torches lit the night sky outside the castle, Cerian bent over a shivering Ambrosius and tucked the bearskin around him. Then slowly the strange procession moved off towards the standing stones. Slowly the men carried the litter to the centre of the circle and carefully Ambrosius was lowered to the ground. The men stepped away from it and retreated to a place outside the circle.

"Come with me," Cerian turned to Merlin, "you have the Sight, it may be that you will see something." Cerian walked forward and raising her arms above her head sent her thought out, *Mithras, God of the Soldier, you are not my god but I bring one who needs the protection these stones offer and the healing that they may give. Mithras, God of the midnight let us pass!* Nothing happened and suddenly Ceri was afraid. She swallowed her fear and sent the thought out again, *Mithras, thou art not my god. But I bring thy disciple to this circle for the protection that it offers. Not for my sake or title, Lord Mithras, but for thy disciple allow us entrance and sanctuary!*

By her side Merlin gasped and then even Ceri saw him. He was dressed as a soldier, girt as for battle. He wore ankle-length sandals of leather and his kilt and belt were immaculate. His cuirass was burnished to such a sheen that the

reflected moonlight dazzled them both. A crimson cloak was thrown back from his left shoulder while his right hand rested on the hilt of a sword. Cerian looked up and saw a noble face beneath a shining helmet and white transverse crest. Gentle eyes surveyed them and then he spoke, "Ye are welcome here, Daughter, in this sure buttress of the Light. Enter and be not afraid. From what do you flee?"

"Not I, lord," Ceri stepped aside to show an unconscious Ambrosius, "One of your own, I suspect that the powers of the Dark have been used against him."

"Against this no force of Darkness may prevail, you will be safe here. I shall watch over you." Mithra regarded her thoughtfully and then said, "Know this, Lady. If ye bring him here for thine own glory and honour then I shall seek ye out and before all Ancient Ones will I decry your infamy."

Ceri nodded speechlessly, and then she said softly, "In some things Lord Mithras even I am powerless. I brought him here because it is only here in the presence of his god that he will find the healing he seeks and that which Britain needs if it is to be united again. He must live for many years yet and form Britain into a solid whole for his nephew."

"Then I shall watch over you." Mithras promised, "Fear not. The Dark shall not prevail. For this is Holy Ground."

Ceri nodded, "I thank you my Lord." She and Merlin then planted a torch at each corner of the litter, she knelt beside Ambrosius and laid her left hand against his face and took his right in her own, "Ambrosius Aurelianus," she said, the voice was gentle but there was a power behind the words. The deep blue eyes opened and with difficulty met Ceri's, the hand against the Count's face began to glow softly with a pale golden light. Ambrosius focused on Cerian's face, "Cerian," he whispered urgently, "you came - I thought you dead."

"Rest my lord," Ceri urged and Ambrosius smiled wearily and closed his eyes. Ceri felt Merlin wrap one of the cloaks around her shoulders, "Thank you, Emrys."

Merlin seated himself opposite Ceri and pulled another of the cloaks around himself. He poured two goblets of the honey-sweetened wine and handed one to Ceri, she took it gratefully, taking one of the cloths she wiped the sweat from the Count's face. He stirred and opened his eyes. Merlin grasped his left hand and said in a voice perilously close to tears, "Father!"

Ceri held a goblet of the wine to Ambrosius' lips, he swallowed the potion and then lay back gazing at the sky. Merlin smiled at her and he said, "By all the gods that ever were and are, you have a great power, Lady."

Ceri laughed and in the silent, frosty night the laugh was like bells ringing out across the landscape, "I'm no lady, Merlin, and I doubt I'll ever be."

"You're no serf either, I'll swear to that." Both Merlin and Ceri jumped when they heard the voice of Ambrosius and then suddenly they laughed with relief. Ceri stood up and stood looking eastwards. A wind had arisen and as

Ambrosius lay regarding her it seemed that he beheld another Cerian. She shook her fair hair and let the wind catch it, in the moonlight it looked like a white flag. A strange device fastened the crimson cloak enfolding her slender form, the moonlight gleamed on it, catching the design of intertwined horses.

“Cerian,” he said softly.

She dropped to her knees and asked quickly, “Are you in pain, my lord?”

“No,” Ambrosius smiled, “I wondered where you got the brooch.”

“I was given it by someone who knew my mother.” Cerian unclipped the heavy Epona brooch and placed it in the Count’s hand, “I was told it belonged to her.” Ambrosius lifted the ornament so that the moonlight sparkled off the pewter. His eyes met hers and then he handed the pin back.

Cerian slid the clip back onto the cloak and stood up again. Eastwards the sky was growing paler while a few stars twinkled in the west. The wind was fresher now and Ceri stood, like one of the great monoliths that made up the Giant’s Dance, awaiting the dawn.

As the sun rose Ceri turned to Ambrosius, “My lord, it is time we left this place - can you rise?”

Ambrosius eased himself from the bier gingerly and rose to his feet as if he had never been injured. Cerian’s eyes hurt and all she wanted to do was sleep.

The men-at-arms rose sluggishly as Ambrosius approached and stared dumbfounded at him as if he was an apparition, “Destroy the litter and everything on it,” Ceri ordered.

Suddenly she swayed on her feet and would have fallen had Ambrosius not scooped her up in his arms. Ambrosius gently laid Cerian in the arms of one of the men, quickly he mounted one of the horses that Merlin led forward, “Give her to me, “ he ordered “I go now to King Budec, do as the Lady commanded, I may speak with you later.” Gently Cerian was passed to him and he repositioned his arm so that Ceri’s head rested more comfortably and trotted towards the fort. Merlin spurred his own mount into a trot and followed.

Chapter 7

'A Father Found...'

Ambrosius gazed down at the body lying bonelessly quiet in his arms, he noted the shadows of exhaustion beneath her eyes and breathed in sharply through his teeth. Merlin rode up beside him and glanced across, "She said her name was Cerian. Do you know who she is Father?"

Ambrosius smoothed a lock of blonde hair from Ceri's forehead and replied softly, "I believe that she may be your sister, though how I cannot understand, her mother said nothing to me about being with child, but that seems to have been my fate," he smiled at his son, "both women I have loved have fought their own battles preferring to do that than to rely on the strength of any man."

Cerian stirred in her sleep but didn't awaken, "Will she be all right?"

"I hope so, Merlin," Ambrosius replied, "I hope so, she obviously risked much to save my life."

By this time they had arrived at Budec's fort, the two horses entered the courtyard of hard-packed earth. Gently Flaptongue took Ceri's form from Ambrosius and when the Count had dismounted handed her back. "I want the room next to mine prepared," Ambrosius ordered, "she is to be treated with all honour and courtesy."

"Of course Lord," Flaptongue replied. He scurried ahead to prepare the room while Ambrosius marched behind him.

The Count laid Ceri on the bed, Flaptongue spoke softly, "Shall I send the serving maids up, Lord?"

"There's no need," Ambrosius replied, "have you brought the nightshirt?"

"Yes, Lord," Flaptongue nodded, "shall I make the bed?"

"Please." With the ease of one used to undressing people he carefully divested Cerian of the clothes she wore and slipped the woollen shirt over her head. Laying her on the bed he covered her warmly and eased himself into the chair beside it, "Would you send up a flask of water and two goblets, Flaptongue."

Ceri woke slowly, she was aware of lying in a warm bed although and here her memory was hazy, she couldn't remember going to bed the previous evening, someone slid an arm beneath her shoulders as she was lifted easily and a cup was touched to her lips, "Drink slowly," the voice urged. Ceri forced open her eyelids and stared up into eyes as blue as her own. Their eyes locked for an

interminable time and then the man's eyes dropped to the arm cradling the girl.

"Feeling better?" he queried gently.

"Yes, thank you," Ceri smiled, "how-how long have I been asleep?"

The man smiled in return, an easy smile that lit his eyes and lips, "Half a day, do you feel like getting up?"

"Yes," Ceri replied, "thank you, Lord."

Ambrosius smiled and inclined his head slightly, "You are my guest," he said quietly, "I shall send Malla up to you with some clothes."

When he had gone Ceri swung her legs out of bed and sat staring stupidly at the room, she picked up the goblet of water Ambrosius had set down and drained it. After a few moments she felt better and standing up walked across to the window, instead of overlooking the courtyard she was overlooking the Brêton countryside and in the distance she could see the sparkle of sun on water and knew that she was looking at the sea!

There was a soft tap on the door and a young girl, about the same age as Ceri entered the room, over one arm she carried a selection of clothes. They stood gazing at one another for thirty seconds and then Malla said, "I have brought some clothes, my Lady, would you like to try them on?"

Suddenly Ceri realised that Malla was waiting for her to divest herself of the woollen nightgown and a crimson flush crept up her neck and face. Malla stared at her, surprise etched on her features then she laid the clothes on the bed and walked across to Ceri, "I am sorry, my Lady," she took both Ceri's hands in her own, "you did not know that I was to assist you. Lady, we seek to do you honour, not to embarrass you. Let me help you dress, we ought not to keep the Count waiting."

"No," Ceri agreed, she pulled off the woollen nightshirt and thrust her arms into the tunic Malla held out for her, Malla fastened a crimson cloak on her shoulders that fell to thigh length and a silver belt was fixed around her waist. The final touches were a pair of red leather sandals and a gold circlet that the servant set upon her hair, she surveyed Ceri and said, "Now you look like a Princess."

Cerian looked down at herself and said, "I think we'd better go to Count Ambrosius."

Malla led her to a spacious room, books and scrolls lined the walls, near the window stood a table upon which another scroll lay, sunlight poured in through the window and fell onto the table, the Count was reading something and the light seemed to form a corona around him, and Cerian was reminded of the gods.

He laid the scroll down and as he walked away from the window the glow faded until she was looking at a man, he gestured to a chair, his eyes flicked up and down her figure and a sudden smile lit his face, "You do indeed look like a Princess," he said softly.

“You flatter me,” Ceri replied dryly.

“Not without reason,” Ambrosius replied, “Cerian, we must talk. Please, sit down.”

Slowly Ceri eased herself into one of the chairs beside the fire, Ambrosius filled a cup and handed it to her, “It’s only water.”

He poured himself a cup and sat opposite her. He glanced at the girl’s hands holding the neck of the goblet and saw that the knuckles were white. His dark, hawk-like eyes softened and he felt a wave of sympathy for her.

“I owe you a debt,” he began gently.

Cerian looked up from her contemplation of the water and a little smile curved her mouth, she shook her head, “No. No, my Lord, you owe me nothing, you see, it was my fault you were injured.”

Ambrosius smiled again and the smile made her feel a little better, “How can it be your fault?”

Cerian sighed and for a moment her head dropped, then a new courage seemed to infuse her, her shoulders straightened and she raised her head and Ambrosius saw his own eyes gazing back at him.

“I am not what I seem,” Ceri began softly, “my mother was a Princess in her own right, she was a Priestess of a strong religion and she bore a gift of healing. That she passed on to me - her name was-” but Ambrosius had gently laid a palm across her mouth, their faces were very close and Ceri could feel the power emanating from this man.

“Her name was Cerian Aurora,” he said quietly. Slowly he removed his hand and eased himself back into the chair, “How much do you know about your mother?” he enquired.

“I know that she was betrothed to King Gorlan of Lanascot,” Ceri glanced at his face and took a deep breath, “and that you, as his lieutenant, were sent to bring her to him. I know that you fell in love-” her voice died in her throat, Ambrosius’ eyes had become distant, their vibrant blueness dulled by melancholy.

“I loved your mother very much,” he began slowly, “and I believe she loved me. I asked her to come away with me but she refused-” his voice cracked and the lids dropped on his dulled eyes.

Ceri stared at him, seeing the pain etched in his face, placing the cup on the floor she leant forward and laid her pale hand over his weathered one. Ambrosius opened his eyes and Ceri began hesitantly, “My Lord, I know that she loved you, but she was a Princess who had been brought up to understand that when she reached marriageable age, she would be betrothed to a Prince or a King who could best defend the country. If she had not loved you, I doubt she would have wanted me to live.”

Ambrosius caught her hand so tightly that it made her gasp, “How do you know she wanted you to live!” he demanded.

“Because when she went into labour, they said a choice would have to be made between her and the child.” Ceri halted suddenly, “she begged them to save me, instead of her. I know she loved you-Father.”

Ambrosius caught her up in his arms and crushed her to his chest as if he could somehow merge their bodies, he gently set her down on the floor and dropped to a knee so that their eyes were on a level, “You speak very much like she did,” he remarked softly, his arms still encircling Ceri’s waist, “but the eyes are mine. Once I thought that I would die without issue, then a son appeared from Wales, and now a daughter. Welcome home, Daughter!”

“But I have interrupted your story,” he eased himself back into the chair and gestured for Ceri to do the same, “please continue, there is so much I want to know - how did you know of me? Where did you live? Who cared for you?”

Ceri sighed slowly, “Lord-” she began.

“Father,” Ambrosius admonished, “you are after all my daughter, it will soon be time for the Beltane Fires, I should like to celebrate your coming then if I may.”

“I didn’t grow up in this time, Father,” Ceri said softly, “I am very much afraid that I may be more of a trial to you than you can safely bear. There is so much you do not know and so much that I am afraid to tell you-” she stopped, suddenly unable to go on.

“I know that I will return to Britain,” Ambrosius regarded her silently for a moment and then he said, “and I hope to unite all the tribes under one King and one God whether that god be Mithras, Christ or any other. I also know that my greatest enemies are not those with swords and daggers, but those who use the power of the Dark,” he stopped at Ceri’s thunderstruck face, “did you think that I didn’t know. I am aware that there are powers other than human ones that seek to manipulate the course of human history.” He paused momentarily, “did you think that I wouldn’t understand?”

“Mmmm,” Ceri nodded, “I couldn’t even begin to explain this to my parents-” she halted suddenly as she realised what she’d said.

“Don’t worry,” Ambrosius smiled, “I would expect you to regard those people who raised you as your parents. Your conduct before Budec and Uther and myself has shown your quality.” He laughed softly at Ceri’s astonished visage, “I have spoken with both since my return and both told me of your courtesy. Uther himself told me of your bravery.”

“I am not brave,” Ceri shook her head firmly, “Father, the person who delivered me believed that through me a prophecy to free someone long held in bondage would be fulfilled and because of that the Dark would seek to kill the baby. I was placed somewhere safe for my own protection, but not a place, a time. The future.” She stopped again trying to find the words to say.

“How far into the future?” Ambrosius asked. Ceri didn’t hear him, her eyes had become vacant, faraway as if she was looking inward. Gently Ambrosius

posed the question again, then when that received no answer he touched Ceri's arm, she jumped startled, "What century in the future?"

She half-smiled, "The twentieth."

He stared at her, shock etched on his features and then they relaxed in a smile, "Do they still speak of me in your Britain?"

"Yes," Ceri assured him, thinking of all the books in the library that dealt with the subject, "they do indeed, Lord Ambrosius Aurelianus."

He laughed, a glorious sound, in that enclosed room. "Did the person who took you into the future tell you about me?"

"No," Ceri shook her head. Taking a deep breath she said, "the Dark finally discovered who I was and then they sent one of their minions to despatch me, the creature of the Dark told me." She smiled wanly, "at the moment I never know from one day to the next whether I'll have any power or not, and when the creature raised its weapon I fled through Time and fell into yours."

The Count's forehead creased in a frown, "But if you escaped the minion of the Dark then how can it be your fault if I was injured?"

"The being fired an arrow that would follow me, even through Time, it would also aim for anyone related to me. I think you were closer and the arrow wounded you by mistake. It nearly killed you."

"But you had the courage to amend the ill you had wrought. Besides -" his eyes softened and he took Ceri's hands again, "the Dark were waiting for such an opportunity to attack me, perhaps it was fated thus. I am still here - the Dark cannot rid themselves of me that easily."

The doors to the study opened and a young boy entered, Ambrosius greeted him warmly and Ceri saw how similar they were in appearance, same hair, same eyes, even the set of the jaw was the same and she knew that she was regarding Ambrosius son, "Merlin, I believe you and Cerian have already met."

Merlin nodded and Ambrosius gestured to another chair, "Join us, my son."

He sat and poured himself a cup of water, "Are you really my sister?"

"Yes," Cerian replied, "at least the Count says that I am."

"I say nothing," Ambrosius corrected her, "I gave that brooch you wear to your mother on board ship, the fact that you wear it and that you know about your mother is proof enough for me. Besides which-" he paused and then said softly, "you are the image of your mother."

"I am more concerned about King Gorlan," Cerian half-smiled, "he would not be best pleased to discover that his wife was pregnant at the time she died."

Ambrosius smiled in return, "Fourteen years have passed since then," he said quietly, "I am no longer a lowly lieutenant in Gorlan's army but a King in my own right, I do not think he will be as displeased as you assume, he barely remembers your mother."

"But as you say, my lord, I am the image of her, and if he remembers her he will recognise me. Do you not think?"

“We shall see,” was Ambrosius reply.

Suddenly there was a blast of trumpets and Flaptongue entered again, “My lord, King Gorlan has arrived and has been admitted, are you coming to the Council.”

“Aye Flaptongue,” Ambrosius replied, he turned to Cerian, “would you accompany us, daughter, both Uther and Budec will wish to express their thanks to you.”

“What of Gorlan?”

“What of him?” Ambrosius laughed suddenly, “I do not think that you will strike any chord in his memory, it was so long ago. Come.” He held out a hand and gingerly Cerian took it.

The Council was held in the tower room, Ceri noted with mild surprise that it only had one staircase and that the room beneath it was occupied by at least ten soldiers.

“Father,” she said softly, “was the meeting room used for parleys?”

Ambrosius stern face relaxed and he nodded, “How did you know?”

“Because of the single staircase and the room with the soldiers in it, if anyone was to get up the stairs the soldiers would see them before they could act.”

Ambrosius pulled her to him in a massive bear hug, “Never cease to amaze me, Cerian. Promise?”

“If my lord so wishes,” Cerian replied softly.

As they entered the Council chamber, Budec had his back to them and was poring over the map set before them on the table. He stepped back and for the first time Ceri caught a glimpse of the man standing on his left. Their eyes locked, and then he had pushed the men standing next to him aside and dropped to his knees before her.

“Ceri!” he gasped, “how can *you* be here? I saw your body.”

Cerian felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and realised that Ambrosius was standing behind her, she drew strength from his presence and heard him say, “Cerian, this is King Gorlan of Lanascoll, Your Highness,” he surveyed Gorlan, “this is my daughter, Cerian Aurelia.”

Gorlan reached out a trembling hand and nearly touched Ceri’s face, his cheeks were wet, “You are the Count’s daughter?”

Ceri dropped to a curtsy and nodded, “Aye, Your Highness.”

“You look so much like a woman I once loved.” Gorlan mused, “she was named Cerian too. Do you have something to tell me, Lieutenant?”

The use of his old title in Gorlan’s army made Ambrosius start but when he looked down he saw only humour in Gorlan’s eyes, “Your Highness?”

“Come Ambrosius, you are not so foolish as all that,” Gorlan’s eyes were dark, “My wife told me that she was in love with someone else but that she went through with the marriage because of what it meant to the Kingdom. I always wondered who it was, I must admit, however, that I am glad it was you.

But perhaps I should have suspected it-" he paused, "after all, you were her escort from Segontium. I always thought it was some peasant lad and that's why she was killed, because she would not flee with him. Are you her daughter?"

"Aye," Cerian replied, "she died giving birth to me, sire. The only person who knew of my birth was a woodsman and he saw that I was placed in a loving family. Those I regarded as my parents never told me of my heritage, and when I discovered it I was afraid that you would be angry with my father."

"Angry?" Gorlan half-smiled, "I would have been furious had my lieutenant told me of this fourteen years ago, but now-" he spread his hands and shrugged, "now I am speaking to an equal. We have been friends for many years, it would be a poor friendship if we let this ruin it." He regarded Cerian thoughtfully, "I wish that you had been my daughter." He took her hands, "but perhaps it is better thus. You will always have a place in my heart, Princess."

Ceri nodded and replied, "Sire, that is the most singular honour I have ever been granted. My thanks."

Gorlan suddenly flung his head back and laughed, he lifted Ceri as if she had been but a feather and hugged her to him. Carefully he set her down on the floor, "The honour is mine, Princess." He released her and turned back to Ambrosius, "Gentlemen, let us return to our strategies."

Ceri seated herself on a chair in the corner of the room and watched quietly. The men were taking no notice of her and she was free to let her mind wander, then she heard Herne's voice as clear as if he was standing next to her, *Liege lady, we must talk*

At once, Cernunnos. Give me a moment to take my leave of my father. There was no answer so she presumed that Herne acquiesced to her request. She rose to her feet and touched the Count's elbow, "Father?"

He turned to her and whatever he saw in her face softened his expression, "You have to leave?"

"Yes, Father." Ceri's voice shook on the words.

"Will you return?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not for many years in your time, Father. If I do return, Merlin will have become an adult, and I will still be fourteen. It is the nature of what I am, can you understand?"

Ambrosius knelt and it seemed to Ceri that it was only the pair of them in that room and the others had faded into the background, "My darling daughter, I love you. I told you that I thought I had lost everything with the death of your mother - to see her likeness in your face again is more than I could have wished. If perchance we should never meet again I shall remember these two days and know that somewhere in Time you revere my memory. Return if you can, if not I shall remember you."

"And I you, Father."

Ambrosius turned to the assembled group who seemed to come to life again, and spoke, his voice seemed to become stronger and deeper, "Hear me now as King, you Kings assembled here. This is my daughter who stands before you, henceforward you shall address her as Princess Cerian, gentlemen behold your Princess!"

With one voice they cheered, "Princess Cerian!" and each one bowed his head and knelt to her. Gorlan looked up and saw Ceri's pale face, "My Lady," he said softly, "may I speak?"

"Please, Lord Gorlan," Ceri replied, "and speak freely."

"I speak for us all assembled here, Princess. Therefore, to your father and to you we give our fealty, and that of our heirs and successors. If you should ever need our assistance you have only to call on us and we shall come to you - we can raise an army of fifty thousand between us."

Ceri smiled and replied, "My Kings, please rise, I am not worthy enough that you should kneel to me, and your offer of assistance is most graciously received but there are those who would scorn me for using it."

"Let them dare!" Budec was on his feet and his sword was half drawn from his sheath, "I'll kill any man who dares to insult you!"

"Your Highness!" Ceri raised her hands, "please sheathe your sword. I meant that I have other weapons at my disposal and other allies. Battles cost lives, I would wish to spare mothers the grief of seeing the bodies of their sons and warriors the grief of losing comrades if at all possible. It may yet be that a battle is inevitable but I would attempt all other avenues first."

Budec nodded and then dropped to one knee and took Ceri's left hand. With absolute solemnity he placed it so that it rested over his heart, "Gorlan has sworn our fealty to you as our Princess and we shall abide by that, but this I swear here and now for myself alone. Princess, you are my liege lady and I shall be your true knight and stand at your side to defend your honour."

"Thank you," Ceri said softly, "will you ride at my side if we go to battle?"

"Madam, it would be an honour." Budec rose stiffly to his feet and bowed. Ceri stood looking at them and then sighed, "My Lords, I regret that I must leave you, my status has been recognised and the Dark know my identity. My fight against them has just begun. Fare thee well!"

The men bowed their heads and Ceri inclined her head to them once and then she was walking out of the door and down the stairs, Ambrosius at her side.

The chestnut steed was already saddled and bridled, Ceri mounted in one fluid motion and gathered the reins up in her left hand. Ambrosius looked up at her, "I hope we shall meet again, Daughter."

"So do I, Father." Cerian reached out her hand and Ambrosius grasped her wrist as he would a warrior's, "I would consider it a poor world if we never saw each other again."

“As would I.” Ambrosius released her hand, “Open the gates!” He ordered. The huge gates creaked open and then Ceri had urged the horse into a trot. She did not look back.

Herne was waiting at the Giant’s Dance. The horse was stamping impatiently, “What kept you?” He demanded.

“Things,” Ceri replied, “Ambrosius acknowledged me as his daughter. Should I need to Lord Cernunnos I can raise an army fifty thousand strong. The other Kings swore fealty unto the Count and to me, but principally to me. I am sorry I am late.”

Herne noted Ceri’s pale face and nodded gravely, “Forgive me, Lady. I did not mean to reprimand you. Are you happy now?”

A sad smile touched Ceri’s eyes and she replied, “Not really, Cernunnos, I do not wish to leave but I have completed part of what I set out to do. I sense that whatever I must do for my father, I cannot do it yet. I do not even know if there is aught I can do for him.”

Herne said nothing and together they turned their horses and trotted side by side into the night.

Chapter 8

'...And Lost'

“Why did you wish to speak to me?” it was the first words Ceri had spoken since their greeting and her voice sounded unnaturally loud in the frosty silence.

“To inform you that the Dark now have full knowledge of who you are. My mission was to warn you to be on your guard, Lady.” Herne paused and then his golden eyes blazed triumph, “However, Ambrosius recognised you and what is more important is that the other lords of this domain did likewise. I doubt that the Dark expected that. They will no longer be able to thwart you, or not for some time at any rate. My Lady, you are truly fit to hold the San great.”

“So Sang real flows in my veins,” Cerian replied her blue eyes alight with laughter.

“Oh yes. The Grail made you truly Royal the moment you held it and promised to do your utmost to fulfill the quest to free me.” Herne replied with utter solemnity, “My liege, this is only a beginning and the end is not yet in sight. I believe that we now have a fighting chance.”

“And I must go forward in time,” Ceri remarked. “Come, my Lord.” Side by side they trotted forward and disappeared. Together the horses emerged onto the lawn behind the house. A cold wind whipped around them, making their mounts snort and stamp in protest,

“What now?” Ceri turned her eyes towards the Being on her left.

“It is almost time for the ceremony,” Herne seemed to be sitting straighter in the saddle and his voice had a deeper resonance. “The days grow shorter and the winter solstice beckons. It is an important time for you - it will be your fifteenth birthday. We must be there for these ceremonies.”

“We?” Ceri queried softly.

“We, my liege.”

“I miss him,” Ceri said simply, staring at the house before her, “he was more of a friend than a father. We never really had time to know each other before I had to leave and yet - and yet I miss him. But I miss my own family too, and these people who took me in when I was but a babe I shall always regard as my first family for without them I may not have had the courtesy to address my true father.”

“I know that,” Herne’s voice was no more than a whisper. “All of the Ancient Ones will be at this festival Lady. The Beltane fire will be high and it

may be that you will leap across those flames with your husband-to-be, you should come.”

Ceri flung back her head and laughed suddenly, “You have an ulterior motive, Lord Herne!” She dismounted still chuckling to herself and taking the horse’s reins over its head she handed them to Herne. “Call me when the time comes,” she instructed. Then she turned and walked to the house. At the door she paused and turned to look back.

Herne was still mounted on his horse and for a moment she thought that she saw pity in his gaze then it disappeared to be replaced by a grim smile, she saw him nod quickly and then he and the horses vanished from view. For what seemed a long while Ceri stood watching the spot where they had been.

She was sewing name tags into her blouses when her mother returned, Ceri kissed her firmly before settling down to her sewing again.

“Had a nice day?” her mother asked.

“Yes thanks,” Ceri replied, “quite quiet. Thought I’d get on with some sewing.”

Her mother inspected the work she’d done so far and replied, “Not brilliant but it’ll hold - still needlework was never your strong point. You haven’t been too bored?”

Ceri was tempted to reply, Bored! With Herne the Hunter appearing out of nowhere and suddenly discovering that out of all the myriad of peoples that exist in this universe I am the daughter of a King! Bored? Instead she replied, “A little, but I need the rest, its so frantic at school.”

“Holidays are almost over,” the woman said softly, “you’ll be returning in little less than a month - but you’ve had a nice time?”

“Oh yes!” Ceri hastened to assure her.

“I know I haven’t been around much-” her mother began but Ceri stopped her.

“Don’t worry about it, Mum. Its been nice to have some peace and quiet and some time to myself.”

Her mother slipped her arms around her and hugged her, for a moment Ceri remained rigid and then she relaxed and returned the hug. They parted and Ceri hugged her mother again. Her mother slipped from her embrace and a smile lit her features, “Are you looking forward to your baby brother or sister?”

“Mmmmm, sort of,” Ceri replied, “Though I’m not looking forward to all the nappies.”

“They can be a bit daunting at first,” her mother agreed, “but with practice it becomes easier.”

“I hope so,” Ceri smiled. She leant her elbows on the breakfast bar in the kitchen and said, “I want to help.”

“Don’t worry,” her mother slipped an arm around her and pulled her close, “we can make you chief nappy changer, bottle washer and cook if you want. We’ll count on your help sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Ceri smiled and then slipped off the stool. “Can I take Rufus for a walk?”

“Certainly,” her mother replied, “be back in an hour, all right?”

Ceri shoved her hands deep into the pocket of her anorak and trudged through the grey twilight, the earth was hard beneath her feet. Rufus came and nuzzled her leg, “I somehow think you can’t help this time Rufus,” Ceri sighed, she squatted so that she was level with the dog’s head and sighed again, “I feel that I’ve failed. Whatever I was supposed to do I haven’t done or couldn’t do it, and I think I’ve let Herne down. Oh Ruf, what am I going to do? I love my parents, but they’re not my parents, I can’t see my true father as my father, but more as a friend. The whole world is going mad around me and there’s nothing that I can do.”

Then it was as if she heard Herne’s voice in her ears again, “And who are you parents, Lady?”

Ceri shuffled her feet feeling ashamed, she looked up into the gathering dark and replied, “You are right, Lord. My parents belong to this time and to Ancient time. I stand between Times and claim both as my own!”

The warmth of the kitchen enveloped Ceri as she opened the back door, mingling with the smells of cooking. Her mother turned and smiled, “Have a nice walk?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ceri nodded rubbing her hands together, “its freezing out there.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mum said stirring the contents of a steaming casserole dish, “its almost Christmas, Winter begins soon, on the twenty-first of December. Then Christmas and you go back to school on the seventh of January.”

Ceri hung her coat up on the back of the door and went to stand behind her mother. “What’s for supper?”

“Chicken Casserole,” was the reply, “with rice, all right?”

“Fine,” Ceri replied, “anything I can do?”

“Not really,” she slipped the lid back onto the pot and replaced it in the oven, “should be ready in about an hour.”

“Mmmm,” Ceri replied and walked into the dining room. She curled up in a corner reading when she felt a shadow fall across her, “Mum!” she said, “what is it?”

“Nothing, darling, just wondered if you were feeling all right. You’re a bit quiet tonight.”

“Not over thrilled with going back to school,” Ceri lied, “I could quite happily spend the rest of my days lazing around doing nothing.”

“No I don’t think that you could,” Mum replied, “I think that after a week you’d be bored silly.”

“Maybe,” Ceri agreed. She smiled up at the woman and then returned her attention to her book. Her mother laid a gentle hand on her shoulder before returning to the kitchen.

Supper was eaten at the breakfast bar and as Ceri scraped her plate clean with her fork, Mum remarked, "I think someone was hungry."

Ceri leant back and carefully undid the top button of her jeans, "I've eaten too much," she remarked to no one in particular. Both her parents burst into amused laughter.

Later she helped to load the dishwasher and then they sat down in the lounge and watched the television for a while. Her thoughts flew back to the conversation between Mum and herself, *Three days until the twenty-first*, she mused, *so that's what Herne meant, the Winter Solstice*, a little thrill ran through her, *my fifteenth birthday!*

"Dad," she said quietly.

"Yes, sweetheart," he replied looking up from his newspaper.

"Could we-I mean can we, can I have my birthday on Christmas Day. Then you can combine my Christmas Present with my Birthday one."

"If that's what you want my love," Dad replied, "are you sure?"

"Please." Ceri responded, "I know that we usually don't celebrate my birthday until the fifth, but it'll be really hectic trying to get all my packing done - and I'd just like to have one day where I don't have to worry about anything."

Her father looked across the room at his wife and said, "That all right, love?"

"I don't see why not," Mum replied, "it means I only have to cook one meal instead of two. All right."

Preparations for Christmas began in earnest that week and Ceri found herself being drawn more into the family circle. She found herself stirring puddings, making cakes, mince pies, she even helped her father to fetch the Yule Log. She was so busy that two days passed in a glut of preparations. She had just finished the fifth batch of mince pies and walked out onto the back lawn, it was only half past four, yet the sun was already a orange-red disc on the horizon.

"Our Lord, the Sun, leaves us for another year, we must light the fires to tell him to return to us soon, for the Dark has regained its foothold for a short span.

Let there be rejoicing tonight, and let the Beltane fires burn high-" Ceri felt a little shiver run down her spine, there had been a resonance in that voice, as if another person spoke it, and not her father, "everything okay, Cerian?" he asked in a more normal tone of voice.

"Yes, Dad," Ceri smiled up at him, "what were you quoting?"

"Its a compilation of legend and myth," he replied, "the ancient Britons believed that the forces of Light and Dark held sway over all countries. They believed that the Sun was not just a source of light, but also their god of Light, so when the hours of light became shorter in wintertime they lit fires in the hope that this would induce him to return. After a while it became customary for the fires to be lit on one special day, the twenty-first of December as this was the true heralding of winter." He paused and then smiled at his daughter,

“they were great fires in those days, and it was said that if a betrothed couple jumped over the flames, hand in hand it prophesied long life and healthy sons.”

“No daughters?” queried Ceri.

“Daughters were not looked upon with favour by the Ancient Briton, all he saw was mouths to feed and dowries to pay to prospective husbands who would take them off their hands. Happily we have modified our approach somewhat and daughters are seen in a more favourable light.”

“Sometimes only a woman may accomplish that which a man cannot.” Ceri remarked.

He replied softly, “Perhaps, but I still believe that woman are the weaker sex and therefore need protection more than men, a man may take care of himself it is harder for a woman. Looking forward to Christmas Ceri?”

“I suppose so, Dad.” Ceri sighed, “I just don’t want to go back to school.”

“I know,” her father took her hand and gently shook it, “but unfortunately its the law, we have to send you to have some sort of schooling.”

“Couldn’t I choose what form of schooling I want?” Ceri queried.

“No.” Her father sighed, “not yet, but when you’re older you may decide what form of education you want to do. You like English, so perhaps you’ll want to study only English, or History, or any other subject.”

“But why can’t I do that now?” Cerian implored.

“Because you need a basic education in all subjects so that the Government can say that they’ve taught you a little about everything. Even if,” he paused at the scowl on Ceri’s face, “you don’t understand any of it. That’s where the system falls down, they check to make sure that you are taught certain subjects, but they fail to check whether the pupils adequately understand them.”

Ceri looked thoughtful and then she said, “Could I study Journalism?”

“Yes,” her father replied, “if you want to be a newspaper reporter, or an Editor of a magazine. Or even if you want to become a writer. Who knows,” his eyes danced wickedly, “you might even win a Nobel Prize for Literature.”

“I might,” Ceri forced a smile to her numb lips, because she knew that whatever power she held within her frame would take her away from those she loved before she could even begin to think of further schooling.

She slept fitfully that night and woke suddenly, as if a well remembered voice had called her from sleep. The night was pitch dark, Ceri pulled a robe around herself and pulled open the curtains. Every blade of grass glittered like a sharpened pilum in the lamplight from the road, a chill wind blew across the grass but the blades did not bend and Ceri was reminded of an army, waiting, waiting for its leader. A whisper touched Ceri’s face and coiled around the curtains making them sway, then Ceri saw him. Herne stood on the lawn clad in armour, he held out his hand and spoke the one word, “Come.”

Without hesitation Ceri stepped through the wall and onto the lawn, she felt him grasp her hand and it was as if she'd truly come home. "My liege," he said softly, "Art thou ready?"

"This time, yes, Lord."

Herne gazed down upon her and spoke, "Then come, my Lady." He took her other hand and kissed her knuckles, as he did so the breeze became stronger and seemed to be blowing them away for they became fainter with each passing moment until there was only the frost on the grass and the mournful note of the night air as it moaned above the garden.

The Abbey's windows were lit for the feast, in the courtyard a great fire blazed brightly. Herne regarded Ceri's form with some distaste, "Lady, I suggest that you change, I do not think that you will be regarded with much favour if you appear before the Ancient Ones dressed like that."

Ceri looked down at herself, her dressing gown looked old and shabby, fluffy pink slippers poked out from beneath it. She wiggled her toes experimentally and then raised her head and grinned up at Herne, "You have a point," she replied, "If you'll show me to my room I'll get changed."

Herne nodded courteously and one arm around her waist guided her into the building and up the stairs into one of the smaller cells. "Dress quickly," Herne said as he left her. "And wear this."

He handed her a medium sized casket, Ceri watched the door close and stood staring at it for what seemed a very long time. Finally she looked around, behind her stood an old table, she placed the box on the table and quickly divested herself of her dressing gown and nightdress. Her clothes were already laid out on the bed, she slipped them on, she wore a white cambric undershirt and above that a pale blue ankle length dress, soft blue leather boots adorned her feet and this time a pale silver belt with the image of a horse embossed on the buckle was fastened around her waist. A rich vermilion cloak hung on the back of the door, she slipped it on, it was equipped with a hood. Then she turned her attention back to the box on the table.

As she opened it a soft gleam came from within and the top fell open to reveal the circlet with which Nimüe had crowned her the night she had been hailed as Princess.

Slowly, reverently she lifted the crown, it seemed to become alive in her hands, as if it had been waiting for her. There was a full-length mirror inside the wardrobe, for a long time Ceri stood staring at her reflection, then reluctantly she placed the crown on her head. It blazed brilliantly, as if to proclaim that it had finally found its mistress.

"Stop that." Ceri commanded and the glow dimmed, she wrenched it off and collapsed on the bed. When Herne came for her he found her sitting on the bed, her face streaked with dried tears and the crown lying, discarded on the floor.

“I can’t wear it,” she said without turning, “I put it on and it started to glow, and when I told it to stop - it stopped! I don’t want to know any more. Just forget about tonight.”

Herne bent and picked the crown up and seated himself beside Ceri, gently he put an arm around her and cuddled her to him, “Oh Cerian,” he said gently, “this crown only augments the power you already have, it is only a tool, a sophisticated tool but still a tool. You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to of course, but you may find that the tasks you are called upon to do will be much harder without it.”

“But I can’t wear it in my own world,” Cerian turned to look at him for the first time.

“In a few weeks you will become a schoolgirl again and return to your lessons and your books and there will be no question of your power ever coming to the notice of the people in your own world. Lady, you don’t have to use it, not everyone can wear it with impunity, some it has scarred for life because they presumed that they could wear this crown. Will you wear it for me, or if not for me, for tonight?”

Cerian stared at him for a long time and then slowly she removed the circle of silver from Herne’s fingers and returned to the mirror. She combed her fair hair and replaced the band. It glimmered faintly, like starlight on frost. Walking across to the basin and ewer she poured some water and washed the tear marks from her cheeks. It was a more composed lady that turned back to the Hunter, “Shall we go, Lord?” she queried, “it would not do to keep our guests waiting.”

At the bottom of the stairs Galahad was pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. Ceri touched his arm and some of the tension seemed to leave him, “Have we kept you waiting, mon chevalier?”

Galahad smiled down at her and shook his head, “Not really, Princess, but something’s happening around us, Time appears to be shifting and it is disconcerting for one such as I who still remembers what it was like to be constrained by Time.”

“Then we must hurry,” Herne said quickly and the last thing Ceri felt was his hand beneath her elbow before the world around her collapsed. She looked around, Galahad and Cernunos had disappeared and she stood in a large room before a great fire. Suddenly the door opened and a monk entered, “My Lady, you must come quickly. A messenger has arrived from Winchester, the King, your father is grievously ill. You must go to him.”

“I’ll come immediately,” Ceri said quickly, pulling the cloak around her she followed the Brother out into the chill night air.

A man stood holding the bridles of two horses, Ceri stepped forward into the light and he bowed solemnly, “My Lady, I am charged to bring you to Winchester. You know about the King?” and as Ceri nodded, he continued, “he begged us to find you before he died.”

“Then we must leave immediately,” Ceri replied bluntly. She mounted quickly, fumbling for the stirrup on the sidesaddle and finally gathering up the reins.

She bent down from the horse to inform the monk of her destination and thought that she recognised him, as he held the torch up so that she could see his face, she suddenly knew she was regarding Cernunnos in another guise. “Return to us soon, Madam,” he said quietly, and she heard his voice in her mind, *Be of good courage, I shall be with you.*

Ceri’s lips set in a thin line and she urged her mount forward into the night. They rode like the wind for Winchester and the moon had set and the stars were beginning to pale when they arrived at the palace. Cerian marched into the keep with all the grace and audacity as befitted one of her rank, “Take me to the King,” she demanded.

“My lady, would you not prefer some refreshment after your ride,” Flaptongue quavered.

“There is no time,” Ceri replied, more gently now, “please, I must see the King!”

“And you shall.” Another voice said softly, Ceri looked up, a nun stood at the top of the stairs, “follow me, my lady.”

There was a smell in the air, and Ceri had to fight to keep from retching, it was a mixture of feathers, sweat and the peculiar foetid smell of sickrooms. Ambrosius lay on the bed, asleep, though even in sleep he muttered deliriously and his hands plucked the coverlet. Ceri divested herself of the cloak she wore and taking the bowl of water and cloths from the servant gently began to wipe the sweat from her father’s face and neck. As the day wore on he seemed to pass into a kind of sleep. However by mid-afternoon he was muttering again lost in the throes of delirium and Ceri knew that his malady was grave. It was night when she left the chamber to eat a bowl of broth and when she returned Ambrosius was conscious, although Ceri could see from his pallor that he was dangerously ill.

“Ceri!” he cried as he saw her and tried to rise but slumped back against the cushions, “you came. I thought I might never see you again.”

“I told you that if you ever needed me, I would come.” Ceri said, trying not to cry “Do you want me to try to heal you?”

“No.” Ambrosius shook his head, “not this time. Will you tell Merlin I was thinking of him?”

“Father, I’m here.” Ceri turned and saw Merlin standing at the end of the bed, he was older now and all at once Ceri felt more alone than ever, “rest easy Father, we’re both here.”

“You will remember me?”

“All of England will remember you,” they spoke in unison and a weak smile touched his lips.

“You will finish the monument for me?” he spoke to Merlin again and Ceri saw the attendants frightened glances and heard their whispers.

“The King is delirious, he speaks to demons!”

“He cannot live long now, he is not even aware of us.” Ceri saw them both make the sign to ward off the evil eye and suppressed the desire to laugh.

“Do you want to be buried where the monument stands?” Ceri asked. Ambrosius nodded quickly and smiled again, “Uther is to be King after me, you will tell him?” this was to Merlin.

“I shall do that, Father.”

“I have left Britain unified at last. Do not grieve, my children, celebrate my passing for I go to join the Invincible Sun.” He fell silent and his eyes closed, Ceri turned and saw Merlin smile at her, “Will this be farewell, my sister?”

“I don’t know,” Cerian sighed, “I should like us to meet again, brother. You and I are the only ones who understand what it is like to bear these burdens of knowledge and power.”

“I hope we meet again. Have the servants send for my mother’s coffin at the Convent of Saint Peter in Maridunum. Will you take care of him?”

“Yes,” Ceri wanted to say more but found there were no words to express the depth of her emotions. “Farewell, Merlin. I shall dress him in his battle garb with his sword in his hand.” Merlin raised a hand in farewell and then slowly faded until he was gone.

Ambrosius awoke once after that, he smiled up at Ceri and whispered, “Your crown, where did you get it?”

“It was given to me at Glastonbury.”

“I have seen it before,” Ambrosius sighed, “on the altar to Mithras beneath the Mountains of the World. The legend -” Ceri gently laid a finger on his lips, “Sssh, Father, you shouldn’t talk so much. You’ll exhaust yourself.”

Ambrosius grinned, a warrior’s grin, grim and fierce and replied with some of the old strength, “This is something that you should know. This Diadem has lain on the altar to Mithras for many Ages of Man. There is a story that a sword of Power was forged from a special metal long ago and with the excess metal a Diadem was made. It was said that whomsoever wore it would herald the new age.” He broke off suddenly and lay back on the bed his breathing ragged. Finally he looked up at Ceri and she saw that his eyes were full of love, “Is this the new age - now - in my time?”

“Not yet,” Ceri replied, she clasped her father’s hand and said quietly, “I am still not sure what is expected of me, all I seem to do is make mistakes.”

“We all do. Just be sure that you learn from the mistakes you make,” Ambrosius whispered. His lips curved upwards again, “But I have seen the Diadem of Mithras worn, by my own child! What more could a man ask of any god? Stay with me, Cerian.”

“Until you order me to leave you, My Lord.” Cerian replied, “may your sleep be peaceful and your dreams pleasant until the Sol Invictus himself takes your hand and awakens you.”

“My beloved daughter,” Ambrosius whispered and then his eyes were filled with a blue fire. His skin seemed to become translucent and a look of ineffable peace crossed his face. He took a last deep breath and then the breath escaped from his body in a soft sigh and Ambrosius seemed to sink a little further into the cushions.

Ceri slid from the stool and kneeling beside the bed buried her face in her hands and sobbed until she thought her heart would break.

Chapter 9

'Beneath The Mountains of The World'

he never knew how long she knelt there crying, but suddenly a gentle hand touched her shoulder and Ceri turned a tear-stained face to see a priest standing behind her, compassion in his eyes. Quickly she scrambled to her feet and murmured, "I am sorry, Father, you will want to perform the last rites-" her voice died away as the figure slowly changed until Herne was standing before her. She saw pity in his golden eyes, "Come, my Lady, there will be time enough for grief later. You have much work to do."

Ceri stood up and turned to face Herne, "You knew this would happen, that's why you wanted me here - you knew!"

"Yes." Herne replied, "I knew, we must take him and Niniane from this place into one of the Ancient Hills where they may lie in deathless sleep until they can be awakened."

"When will that be?" Ceri felt the tears course down her cheeks again. The thought of never seeing Ambrosius again was more than she could bear.

"Someday," Herne replied, "He was the First True High King of all Britannia, and Niniane would have been his Queen. They have that right."

Ceri said nothing but the tears that flowed down her face increased in number. Herne put his arms around her and hugged her, "Ssh," he said softly rocking her shaking figure, "it will be all right, you'll see."

Then Herne bent over the silent figure of Ambrosius and laid a palm on his chest. A glow illuminated it and spread to the rest of the body, Ambrosius started to breathe again, long slow breaths, like one caught in an enchanted sleep. "I shall see to the King." Herne said quietly. "Go and see to the Lady Niniane's coffin, it should be brought into the adjoining chamber."

The servants were clustered outside the rooms when Cerian emerged, "The King is dead." she said simply, "The body is being washed he will be garbed in his armour with his sword in his hand. I came to request the Lady Niniane's coffin from the Convent of Saint Peter in Maridunum."

"At once, your Highness." A servant bowed solemnly and then left the hall. Ceri stood wondering where to go when a gentle voice said, "Madam, would you like a cup of mulled wine? It is a bitter night and you have taken no refreshment since you arrived."

"Yes, thank you." Ceri replied. The girl slipped away and returned with a wooden cup more than half-filled with a dark steaming liquid. Ceri took it gratefully while another servant went to fetch a chair. She sipped the hot sweet

wine, tried to compose herself, she felt numb, and she couldn't believe that she would never speak with, or listen, to her father again. She started to cry silently and the tears ran down her chin and dripped into the wine.

A hand dropped to her shoulder and she turned to see Gorlois, the Duke of Tintagel standing behind her. "Is there aught I can do, Lady?"

Cerian shook her head, "There is nothing anyone can do, but thank you, Sir Duke." Gorlois regarded her silently, the tears coursed down Cerian's cheeks. Eventually he coughed and handed her a large handkerchief.

The cup of wine was long finished when Lady Niniane's coffin arrived and Father Elias emerged from the Count's room. He looked down over the balustrade to see a rude wooden coffin being carried in through the doors. "Bring it up to the King's chamber. I shall place it beside the coffin belonging to the King." Herne turned to Ceri and said quietly, "Would you accompany me, Princess?"

Silently Cerian rose to her feet and followed Herne into the chamber. Ambrosius lay on the bed, but in the coffin there lay another Ambrosius, white and waxen, Ceri knelt beside the breathing Ambrosius and bent to kiss his lips but Herne's hand on her shoulder stopped her, "No, My Lady."

Ceri looked up and her eyes narrowed in anger but Herne seemed unperturbed, "if you kiss him, you'll break the enchantment."

This time Ceri flung her head back and laughed, "Even my power is not sufficient to raise from the dead!"

"You still have no idea," Herne regarded her somewhat sadly, "the crown you wear means that you, above all the Ancient Ones have the power to halt Death in his tracks, for anyone. You could prevent old age, heal all the world and you would still not use one tenth of the potential you have. The crown you wear is the Diadem of Mithras, the god himself blessed it and conferred the power of the Sol Invictus upon it. You think that you're the only one to whom it has been offered - think again, the fact that you wear it, and that the crown allows itself to be worn by you means-"

"Means what?" Ceri turned around her eyes blazing, "means I have to abide by your precious rules just because you say so! This coronet means that I could do anything I choose and you can't stop me! Perhaps I should set myself up as Queen and command all those who swore allegiance to me to follow me, and they would." She added turning back to Herne, "they owe me that much, Cernunnos!"

"You will not do that," He said quietly.

"You can't be sure."

"Yes I can. If the Sol Invictus, or Mithras or even Nimüe had suspected that you would seek to set yourself up and wrest power from us by force none of this would have occurred-"

"You can't say that," Ceri replied angrily, "humans don't behave like that, for once I would like to defy you all and do something for me - I am sick and

tired of doing everyone's bidding. I was supposed to do something for my father - and I haven't been able to do it. I had to watch him die and you let him!"

"No - I did not let your father die -" Herne replied softly, "and had I a choice I would have spared you this. As for you defying us, I have no doubt that you could and might, but I do not think our trust in you is misplaced. If it brings you any comfort, I believe that one day you will take your father's hand and raise him from this sleep, Lady."

Ceri suddenly felt the anger drain away, she slumped onto a chair and buried her face in her hands. When she finally looked up at Herne he was smiling down at her, "I am sorry," she said thickly, "but I wish I could have done more, I wish he could have known how I felt about him and I wish I'd said goodbye."

"Lady," Herne replied, "You did do something for him, you comforted him, do you think he did not know his time was near? You offered to heal him and he refused, at least credit him with some intelligence, you eased his passing, your task was to soothe him and what you must do now is to prepare him for the day when he will be awakened. Know this too, that he knew that of all the peoples in the world, the one chosen to wear the Diadem of Mithras was his own daughter. Not a man, but a woman. You comforted him and held his hand - not even Merlin can say that."

Ceri sighed and Herne nodded curtly, "You'll be all right, for you are Much Loved, and not by me alone. Now come, we have a lot of work to do this night and for Niniane I need a woman's touch."

Somewhat more at peace with herself Ceri stood up and joined Herne. Their hands rested gently on each other and beneath them a soft golden light began to glow, Herne started to chant:

"Recreate in flesh and bone;
And auburn hair of faerie charm,
Sweet Niniane and this spell keep.
Her safe and blessed in dreamless sleep.
So she, until the mountains sing
May dream in peace, beside her King."

They opened the coffin and a woman lay within it, she wore a nun's habit and a cross was around her neck. Ceri stared at the face and watched the chest rise and fall with the same long, slow breaths that characterised the King's slumber.

"We must dress her in something more appropriate," Herne said, "this-" he gestured at the habit and cross, "will never do."

"I've never heard you use spells before," Ceri said as they removed the head veil and wimple, "normally you don't speak."

“This spell was more for your benefit, I do not know when the mountains will sing, but until they do, Ambrosius and Niniane will remain asleep beneath the earth.”

“I’ve never undressed anyone before, Lord,” Ceri suddenly felt young and alone, “I would prefer not to have to do this.”

“Yes, I know.” Herne said, “but I should like your assistance and it is not so bad once you have done it.”

Ceri nodded quickly, she was already feeling out of her depth and if she spoke she was afraid that her voice would give her away. Herne gently lifted Niniane, her wimple slid off and a mass of auburn hair was released. Herne laid her on the bed and together they divested her of her clothes. Ever afterwards Ceri remembered little of the experience and barely heard anything that Herne said to her, but she was aware of his voice in the background, and it was gentle and encouraging.

Eventually Niniane lay in an emerald green dress next to Ambrosius. Then Herne turned back to the empty coffin and made a few passes over it with his hands. Another Niniane appeared lying within it, Herne smiled triumphantly and then shut the lid. He did the same to Ambrosius’s coffin and then called the servants.

Ceri touched his arm, “Won’t they notice them on the bed?”

“No.” Herne assured her, “they will see two coffins that are to be taken to the unfinished monument for that is what they expect to see. You and I have more important things to do.”

The servants entered and bore the coffins away. Ceri left the room and found the Steward relaying his orders concerning the two coffins. He stopped when he saw Ceri, “Yes, my Lady?”

“I regret that I cannot be present for the funeral,” Ceri began, “I must make a long journey and I cannot wait, Merlin will understand, will you tell him that I should have liked to have been there. Please-” she held up her hand as the Steward made as if to assist her, “do not trouble yourselves. I should like to leave in silence, thank you for your kindness. Fare thee well.”

“May you fare well too, Lady.” the Steward replied but Ceri had already turned around and the darkness swallowed her up.

When Ceri returned to the upper room Herne was already beginning to weave his magic. Without any prompting she moved across to stand opposite Herne, she gazed down at Ambrosius and Niniane and her face was calm and her bearing queenly, “I hope you are right, Lord Cernunnos, for I would not like him to sleep forever.”

“Even if he did, Princess, it would be no loss to him. For sleep is pleasant and for him it will pass in the wink of an eye. We are the ones who are bound by Time.”

“That’s true,” Ceri smiled and then their palms touched, for a moment she felt the world rock beneath her and fought down the desire to steady herself,

she was alone at the foot of the stairs, Galahad and Herne were nowhere in sight. *I've just been here*, she thought puzzled, *so how am I back here?*

She felt a hand beneath her elbow and then heard Herne's voice, "Mea culpa, Princess. You had to see Ambrosius to show him that you were the one to wear the Diadem, and to comfort him. Once the main task had been accomplished, Time brought you back to your starting point, I helped but really we rode on Time for a while."

"You might have warned me," Ceri remarked. She turned to Galahad and took his hand, "You and I have experienced much, have we not, mon chevalier?"

Galahad lifted her hand and kissed it, "My Lady, we have realised the impossible! You are my liege lady, now and forever!"

"We are expected in the Great Hall," Herne interrupted, "The last part of this begins."

Slowly the doors opened and Cerian saw on the raised dais in the centre the bodies of Ambrosius and Niniane, the floral tributes around them both made it almost impossible for Ceri to move through them. Her nose started to hurt and tears began to trickle down her cheeks, she stood at their feet and whispered, "I shall come back and take both your hands and lift this sleep from you, by Epona and Mithras and by the Light I swear it!"

To her surprise it was Galahad who put an arm around her shoulders and held her. "We have to take them from here, to another Holy Place. Will you be all right?"

Ceri nodded and from somewhere she dredged up the strength to stand upright and move away from him. Cernunnos had lifted Ambrosius and for the first time she saw how stricken he looked. "Oh Cernunnos," she bit her lower lip, suddenly ashamed of her previous anger, "you grieve too."

"We both do, Lady," it was Galahad who spoke, he held Niniane in his arms and her copper hair spilled over his breastplate.

"I grieve his loss from our presence," Herne said softly, "for he too was one of the Ancient Ones and I shall miss the comfort of having him around."

"What must I do?" Ceri smiled at them both.

"The Diadem will show you the way." This time Herne's smile was warm and full, "relax, Princess, let it guide you."

Slowly, Cerian began to walk the length of the Great Hall, she paused at the door and carefully removed the circlet, she held it in her hands and then suddenly she flung it into the air, for a moment it glittered brightly, the black stone catching the lights of all the candles in the hall and then there was a noise, like a soft thunderclap, and before them stood another room, the floor was made of hewn stone and from somewhere, although Ceri could not see where, a cool blue light illuminated the place. Tentatively, Cerian stepped forward into the light and Herne and Galahad followed her. Then a door closed and the watchers were alone in the Hall.

Ceri looked around her, the corridor opened into a large chamber, Galahad and Herne stopped, the room was filled with people, all caught in slumber. Ceri saw one that she recognised and her eyes widened and she recognised Bedwyr, angrily she turned on Herne, "If he was to be sentenced thus, what was the point of my forgiveness, why should the Midwinter Thorn bloom if this was what was going to happen!"

To her surprise it was Galahad who replied, "Lady, without your forgiveness he could not have entered here, he awaits the One who will take him by the hand and raise him and present him to his King - as do all who sleep here. Come, we must place the King and Queen in their appointed places."

This time Herne led the way, to a raised dais, carefully he laid Ambrosius down and Galahad placed Niniane next to him. Ceri stood looking down on them her eyes dry and scratchy, she felt too weary to cry, she wrapped her arms around herself and pushed her chin onto her chest in an effort to block out the sight of them both.

She turned and began to stride down the rest of the hall, suddenly she stopped, there were no more bodies, caught in slumber, instead there was a small chamber hollowed out from the earth itself, set against the wall was what was obviously an altar and sitting on it was the Diadem that Ceri had thrown into the air in the Great Hall at Ynys Witrin, she stared at it and then a gentle and very familiar voice said, "I thought that we would meet again, are you going to take your crown?"

Cerian turned to see a young man standing behind her, he was still dressed like a Roman centurion, except that his helmet was held under his arm, "Greetings," she said softly, and then curtsied, "Lord Mithras."

"Lord?" the man's eyebrow lifted a notch and he inclined his head, "Ambrosius always gave me the impression you were among the most courteous of his offspring - I see that he spoke the truth. Listen to me, I may only appear to you for a short time, by rights I should not appear at all to a woman but you have been shown a great favour. Lady, the beginning of your quest is almost at an end, with every choice you make you reject one path and choose another, how things will progress I know not, but I know this - you of all who have attempted this quest have come farther and accomplished more than any of the others, when you leave this place go in good heart. Farewell, Lady."

"Wait!" Ceri cried, "why have you appeared to me now. You did not believe that I would save the Hunter - why should you appear before me now?"

Mithras bowed and when he raised his head Ceri saw a real smile playing about his lips, "The night you restored Ambrosius to life showed your quality. You have grace and majesty, Princess. The power runs in you like water. I await your summons, Princess."

He raised his arm in a typical Roman salute and Ceri curtsied solemnly, slowly the man faded from view. She felt rather than heard Cernunnos behind her, "He called me Princess!" Ceri gasped

“I should hope so,” Ceri thought she heard him chuckle, “Are you going to take your crown?”

“I will not wear the Diadem again until my father awakens from sleep.” Ceri said softly, she smiled half-heartedly. “Where is Galahad?”

“Beside Bedwyr’s bier.”

Ceri turned to see Galahad standing at the foot of the dais upon which one of the fairest of the knights ever to grace the Round Table lay and saw Galahad’s head fall and with a startling clarity knew where she had seen that turn of the head before and of whom Galahad reminded her.

She walked across to him and laid her hand on his arm, “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked softly.

Galahad’s face turned towards her and for a second Ceri saw the agony in his eyes, she reached up and hugged him to her, “Mon chevalier,” she murmured, “My dearest knight.” It was with a shock that she realised he’d started to cry, for an instant she was more afraid than she’d ever been in any of her encounters with the Dark and then that feeling too passed and instinctively she rocked him as one rocks a child. When he raised his head from her neck she saw that his eyes were red-rimmed, “I should have known, after all, Bedwyr told me you were his son on The Day Of The Dead, I wasn’t listening.” Cerian said softly, “after all he was the best, the bravest and the most beloved of all knights that didst ever sit at Round Table, the love of Gwenhwyfar and beloved of Elaine. He’s your father.”

Galahad nodded, “The Ancient Ones say that he will not sleep forever, but sometimes I feel that the world will dissolve in fire and wrath and he will dissolve with it. We spent such a short time together on earth and I miss him more than I ever dreamed possible.”

Ceri looked across at Ambrosius and Niniane locked in their enchanted sleep and then she turned back to Galahad, “I know.” She said simply, “it feels like that for me too, even if Cernunnos himself has assured me that someday I shall awaken them, but at the moment I can’t bear to lose them.”

Galahad reached up and with his thumbs he gently wiped away the tears that trickled from the corners of Ceri’s eyes and when he spoke his voice was harsh, “We must go, My Lady, the time for the awakening is not yet.”

“I know,” Ceri sighed again and for the last time looked back at the dais, it felt as though her heart was being torn apart but she turned back to her two friends and said, “Let’s go. The longer we stay the harder it will be to leave.”

Herne nodded slowly and without waiting for the word Ceri led the way, they halted as they reached the smooth wall. Ceri raised her hands, palms together, as if she was about to say a prayer and drew them apart. The wall opened, but instead of opening into the hall this time the entrance led onto a rugged hillside. Cropping the grass three feet away three horses were tethered, one of them raised its head and whickered a greeting.

Galahad stepped forward his face lighting up, “Crisiant!”

Cerian stepped forward and took the reins of the chestnut mare, "We shall give you some time to yourself, Sir Knight," she said formally, "I hope to see you very soon."

Cernunnos opened his mouth but Ceri glared at him so fiercely that he shut it again. Cerian mounted and Herne followed suit, they left Galahad with his face buried in Crisiant's neck.

"Don't say anything," Ceri bit the words out, "not a word. Understand?"

Herne nodded mutely, after a while Cerian turned to Herne, "All right. Ask your question."

"Why did you leave him? He might do something foolish?"

"I would have been more foolish to compel him to come with us," Cerian replied, "That was the first time he's seen his father, am I right?"

Herne nodded slowly, "I hoped that he would be so caught up in our ceremonies that he wouldn't notice."

"Well he noticed. From the little he said he knew about this."

"Yes. Or rather he knew that his father passed into the Halls beneath the Earth to sleep; until a Queen could raise him."

"But not where? That if I may say so, my lord was somewhat foolish. But on the whole, better now than later." By this time the horses had walked in a circle and they returned to see Galahad trotting towards them. As he reached them they saw his face was more composed. He smiled and spoke to Ceri, "Forgive me, Princess." Then his hand grasped her forearm and he pulled her towards him and kissed her lips.

Ceri's eyes opened even wider, she was too surprised to pull away. Then Galahad released her and was sitting back on his horse. From somewhere she found a voice, "You're forgiven, mon chevalier." He reined his horse in to match its pace to hers, they were both so taken aback at what had just transpired that neither saw the smile playing about Herne's lips.

"You know the place we've just been could be anywhere," Ceri remarked, "Wales; Scotland; it could even be parts of France or Switzerland."

"That's the beauty of the place." Herne replied, "it must be kept secret you see. Not just from the Dark but from ordinary mortals."

"Yes." Ceri mused thoughtfully, "Who knows what Archaeologists and Scientists and the like would do if they ever discovered that Hall."

Herne shuddered, "Don't. I have a very low opinion of the majority of your countrymen, Princess, in fact in four hundred years I have only discovered two who were worth the trust I placed in them. It does not say much for this world once the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve are left to their own devices."

"No. No, it doesn't." Ceri replied, "but it will be their world and they must make the best of it."

Herne halted his mount and said, "Do you know what you just said?"

Ceri nodded absent-mindedly, “Only that the world will belong to the Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve.”

“Yes, I heard that,” Herne licked his lips, “but you didn’t identify yourself among them.”

Cerian turned towards him and opened her mouth and then said, “But I’m not mortal, am I?”

To her surprise, Herne leant forward and hugged her to him, “I know that it is hard to break the ties that bind you; those of family and home are the worst. By acknowledging yourself and your power you’ve taken the first step.”

“The first step to what?”

“I don’t know,” Herne replied, “perhaps the first step to self-discovery. Perhaps the first hint of the greatness of your power.”

They rounded the bend in the track and before them the Abbey rose in all its magnificence and Ceri suddenly felt a great sense of relief at the sight of such a familiar edifice. Eagerly she trotted towards it.

Chapter 10

'Full Circle'

Cerian dismounted and turned to Herne, “Where are we now, Lord?”
 He appeared to consult some internal clock before replying, “Approximately thirty of your minutes after we left the Abbey. The others will have dispersed, their part in the ceremony was over when we disappeared.”

Ceri nodded thoughtfully as if considering something else, eventually she spoke, “You used that magic of yours to bring us back, didn’t you?”

“Of course,” Herne’s eyes glinted wickedly, “the very anonymity of where we have just been makes it an admirable place for those who have passed into the Sleep of Waiting to dwell until such time as one may raise them from it. But it would be too far for us to travel in a single day so I merely used what magic I possessed to make our journey somewhat shorter. Happy now?”

Ceri threw back her head and laughed, when she could speak she replied, “Yes, Lord Cernunnos, I’m happy now. I’m going to have a bath and dress in my old clothes, then I think it’s about time that I went home.”

Herne nodded, “For the moment, it is over. You will go home and it may be that all this will fade into your distant memory.”

“Never!” Ceri replied vehemently, “never Cernunnos, and I don’t think that I shall be able to forget what has happened, do you?”

Cernunnos knelt before her and this time smiled, “Oh my Lady, I do not think you will forget, although you may wish that this part of your life did not exist, for this quest is not yet over.”

“I had a feeling you might say that,” Ceri remarked dryly. “But I suspected as much, after all it was promised that I would see Ambrosius again and raise him and Niniane from their sleep. I shall go back to the world, but not my world and this world will become somewhat dim, at least for a while.”

“I don’t know when I’ll see you again,” Herne said softly, “it may be at least a year.”

“Yes.” Ceri nodded, “but if time is short it may not be as long as you think.”

“Mmm.” Herne appeared to ponder this for a moment and then he said, “The Ancient Ones have waited many centuries for you to appear, what is one more year?”

“We shall see, Lord Cernunnos,” Cerian replied, she stared out at the apple orchards surrounding the Abbey and at the bare trees their branches waving in the wind, “but I do not know what I feel at present.”

“Lost.” Herne said unexpectedly his hands closing on her shoulders, “I know, they say at the end of things one feels satisfaction but I have never felt it, only a great sense of loss and sometimes a feeling of triumph, but those times have been very few. There is certainly a feeling of not knowing what to do next, I am afraid that I cannot help you, I only hope that you make the transition back to your own world without too much pain.”

“Will I always have these powers?” Cerian asked.

“Oh, yes.” Cernunnos nodded, “it is unlikely that you will use them in your own time simply because of the way that you are perceived. You will be regarded as a schoolgirl again and not as a Princess in her own right.”

Ceri nodded wearily, she turned back to the Abbey and said, “I’ll go and have my bath. When can you be ready to leave?”

“Soon, my Princess,” Herne said, “I think that you ought to inform Galahad, I know that he cherishes you dearly.”

“You make him sound like a lovesick swain,” Ceri muttered her blue eyes flashing.

Herne smiled the smile not quite reaching his eyes, “Perhaps he is.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Cerian gasped, “he daren’t fall in love with me!”

“If I recall his history aright,” Herne responded. “He loved someone very much once until she died, he has searched half the universe looking for her likeness. I have seen him look for her in every face that entered this Abbey and he has never found her-”

“Until me,” Ceri said softly.

“Yes. Until you.” Herne said nothing for a few moments and then he continued his story, “Her name was Anchoret, Perceval’s sister, had they been different people and not on a quest for the most precious of the Light’s objects they would probably have married. But Anchoret died to save the life of a worthless harlot and Galahad grieved the rest of his days.”

“But I’m not Anchoret,” Cerian replied, “and she wasn’t me. If he loves her. And sees her in me. Then he doesn’t love me.”

“Perhaps in time-” Herne left the sentence unfinished.

“No.” Ceri’s voice was firm, “He loves Anchoret. I’m Cerian. He will be my dearest knight for all our days but that is all we can be. I shall go and wash my hair, perhaps you can find the words for Galahad. I cannot.”

She nodded shortly to Herne and walked back to the Abbey. Upstairs a young serving-girl was waiting next to a bath, the water steamed slightly. “Could you fetch the clothes I arrived in, please?” Cerian asked quickly. She stripped quickly and stepped into the slightly fragrant water, she lathered her body and when the serving girl returned Cerian asked, “Would you wash my hair?”

“Most certainly, Madam.” The girl soaped her hair and then rinsed it with clean water, which stood in large jugs next to the bath. Ceri stepped out quickly and rubbed herself dry with the rough towels. It felt peculiar to dress

again in her nightdress, dressing gown and fluffy slippers. Herne entered as she was combing her drying locks and said, "Are you ready? We must depart soon, my liege."

"I'm ready now, Herne." Ceri replied. Herne walked across the small room and took both Cerian's hands in his own. "Dear Princess," his golden eyes seemed to become larger, "I wanted to tell you that it has been both a privilege and an honour to serve under you."

Cerian's eyes filled with tears and she bent her head to hide them, "Thank you, Cernunnos," she said thickly.

The lawn was still silent in the grip of an early winter frost, Ceri stood looking at the stark, silent house and bit her lip while the tears ran down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. Finally she turned to Cernunnos and said in a steady voice, "Farewell, my lord Cernunnos. I hope it will not be too long before you and I see one another again."

Herne bowed and replied, "Go, my Princess. I know we will see each other again even if it is a hundred years hence."

Cerian nodded, she stepped forward, through the wall and into her room. She turned quickly to see Herne's form slowly fade and disappear. *I wonder if this is the last time I shall see him*, she thought. She slipped back into bed her teeth chattering, and wrapped the duvet around herself in an attempt to get warm. She lay awake, staring up into the darkness and the tears started again and ran down the sides of her face and wet her pillow.

Ceri was very subdued the next morning, "Are you all right, love?" her mother asked quickly.

Ceri managed a painful smile, "I'm fine, Mum." She lied, "just not looking forward to going back to school."

Her mother put an arm around her shoulders and said, "I know, I know. But once you're there it'll flash by and you'll be home again before you know it."

"Yes, I suppose so," Ceri murmured doubtfully.

"Would you like to go to Windsor Great Park with your father tomorrow?" Her mother asked, "you'll have to set off quite early - would you like that?"

Ceri's eyes lit up. "Could I really? I mean I have things to do - I really ought to start packing-"

The woman laughed, "I can start that for you, as it is I'll have to start putting name tapes into your new skirts and blouses. I think Dad would like the company."

"Can you feel the baby kicking yet?"

"Not yet," Ceri's Mum replied gently, "they usually start to kick around the third month."

"Oh," Ceri replied. Then changing the subject, "What time are we leaving?"

“You’d better ask your father that.” She replied, “probably at some Godforsaken hour like half past five.”

Her father was burning the last of the rubbish at the top of the garden, he turned as he heard Ceri’s footsteps scrunch on the frosty grass. “What is it, love?”

Ceri stood panting for a couple of minutes before replying, “I came to ask if I could come to Windsor Great Park with you tomorrow.”

“Of course, sweetheart.” He replied, “it may be a little boring for you, I just want to do a bit more research in the Chapel - still want to come?”

“Please!” Ceri’s lower lip quivered and for a moment it looked as though she was about to cry.

“Very well-” It seemed as if her father was going to say more but whatever it was, was lost as Ceri threw herself at him and buried her face in his jumper. “Hey! What’s this!” He laughed as he gently disentangled her arms, “why the hug?”

Ceri gazed up at him and said, “I just felt like hugging you, that’s all.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him. Ceri hugged him wanting to hold onto him forever, for them to remain locked as one person.

“Richard, Richard!” Her mother’s voice broke the spell, her father lifted his head and called, “What is it, love?”

“Supper’s ready - are you two coming?”

He gently shook Ceri’s shoulder and she looked up, “Let’s not keep Mum waiting,” she said, “I don’t fancy it cold.”

“Me neither,” he replied, and they walked down the garden together hand in hand.

“Are you going to do anything exciting this term?” Her father asked as they ate.

“I doubt it,” Ceri grimaced, “it’ll be absolutely freezing at Powys Hall, its the only place I’ve ever known shampoo to freeze!”

“You mentioned it in one of your letters home,” her father said between mouthfuls, “still you’ve got your winter duvet there and you can take one of our hot water bottles.”

“Yes but they go cold so quickly,” Ceri replied plaintively, “and when its cold in the morning I never want to get out of bed.”

“That’s normal,” her mother laughed, “especially when it’s cold.”

Ceri nodded and returned her attention to the meal. Her mother made the sandwiches that night and packed them carefully in the cold box. “I’ve made Chicken sandwiches for both of you, there’s salad in the ice-cream container, I’ve put a couple of apples in and two bags of crisps - I’ve also put a slab of chocolate in for you. I don’t think you’ll go hungry.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right here on your own?” Ceri asked quickly suddenly feeling terribly guilty.

“I think so,” her mother replied, “I’m going to have a nice long lie in bed and then I shall potter quietly around the house. You two go off and have a nice day.”

“I think we can do that, Connie,” her father wrapped his arms around Ceri and he bent to kiss the top of his daughter’s head.

The next morning her father shook her awake, Ceri dressed quickly and slipped outside. The sun was a crimson ball just resting on the horizon as she opened the car door and stepped inside. She dozed for most of the journey and opened her eyes just as the Range Rover turned into the road that led up to Windsor Great Park. The trees that lined their route were stark and bare, their grey branches cutting into the flinty blue of the sky, and this time there were no dryads within them to greet her.

Her father’s hand touched her thigh, “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Ceri turned to face him and forced a smile, “nothing at all. I was just a bit shocked - the trees look so bare and lifeless - quite a contrast from the last time we were here.”

“Yes.” Her father murmured thoughtfully, “but last night you were so excited - almost as if you were coming here to meet someone - and just then you looked so stricken - as if you’d been told that they’d just died.”

“Do you believe in demons?” Ceri asked suddenly, changing the subject.

“That depends on what you mean by demons,” he replied, “I believe in forces beyond our control - most demons are the result of man’s inner fears or guilt complexes. Why do you ask?”

“Because I believe in at least one demon,” Ceri said softly, “the one who inhabits this park. Herne the Hunter.”

“Yes.” Her father replied, “I believe in the legend - but legends change with the telling and people may have seen one thing and attributed it to the demon. People were very superstitious in mediæval times.”

He stopped the car and they both got out, Ceri pulled her anorak on and then said, “But I believe he exists - I’ve seen him!”

Her father turned to face her his face suddenly pale and for a moment Ceri was afraid he was angry with her, for a long time he didn’t speak and then he said, “You’ve seen Him? The Hunter?”

Ceri nodded dumbly her heart aching, she wanted to reach out and hug the man she had always regarded as her father but she couldn’t move. Her father licked his lips and then said, “I saw Him once, a long time ago, at his Oak, it was where I found your mother.”

“How?” Ceri’s voice emerged as a squeak.

Her father didn’t answer; he opened the door of the car and said, “Get in.” Ceri climbed inside. He closed the door and began to speak, “I was staying at a hotel across from Windsor Great Park, I can remember that day as if it were yesterday. It was a hot summer day, but dull and overcast,” he smiled to himself, “I thought it was going to rain. I had spent much of the day tramping

around the Park wishing that I was somewhere else when it seemed as if by chance I found myself approaching Herne's Oak. I remember standing reading the inscription when I suddenly heard a woman moaning. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the tree, I walked around it and saw the woman. She was in the last stages of labour. I helped her to her feet and drove her to the hospital; you were delivered five hours later. Then the woman started bleeding internally and there was nothing that the doctors or the midwives could do about it. She looked up at me and begged me to return her to the park. Against all the doctors' orders I signed the release form and did as she asked, she told me to leave her by the Oak, but I couldn't, so I stayed with her and the last thing she said was "Take care of the baby. Her name is Cerian, Cerian Aurelia." She just slipped away, "Everyone assumed we were married. I took you from the midwife and I felt an instant attraction-" he broke off and turned to stare at Ceri.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"We were going to this year. Her father smiled at the memory, "After all I have no idea who your mother was, perhaps she was another homeless vagrant who'd become pregnant and didn't realise it until it was too late to have the baby aborted. I couldn't give you up to the orphanages not after I'd held you. So I simply pretended that you were my daughter. I spent a lot of time out of the country in those days so it was easier than I thought it would be. Then I met your stepmother when you were four and you both seemed to like one another very much, and I'd fallen in love with her, so I married her."

"So when did you see the Hunter?" Ceri asked quietly.

"I came here when you were about five, you and your stepmother sat in the car and I suddenly came face to face with this fur covered creature with antler horns on its head."

"What did you do?"

"Thought I was hallucinating," her father replied, "then it spoke to me, it said, 'Greetings, Richard, I am Herne the Hunter. I charge you to take good care of the child you have adopted, many things may stand or fall because of her.'" Then it disappeared and I was alone. I kept it to myself because I didn't want to be sent to a Mental Institution. You say you met the Hunter too?"

"The first time we came here I met the Hunter," Cerian replied, "and I wanted nothing to do with any of it - and I'm still not sure that I want anything to do with it now!"

"What happened?" Her father asked gently.

"I met my real father, and I'd just got to know him when he died, I thought I would split in two. I saw him as a true friend and I miss him more than I can possibly say-" Ceri broke off and began to cry, she cried and cried as if her heart was breaking, she heard the car door open and then her door open and she was gathered up in a pair of strong arms. He rocked her gently and soothingly until her sobs abated, then he handed her a clean handkerchief, "Dry your eyes," he ordered, "I think we ought to talk."

He climbed in his side of the car and stared out into the brightening day, "It must be hard for you, coming to terms with all this."

"Its harder coming to terms with the powers I have," Ceri replied, "I'm sorrier for you - why didn't you ever tell me?"

A smile cracked the man's sombre mask, "Because I promised and I keep my promises - no matter how ridiculous. Besides which, I did not know what these powers had in store for you - you might not have come back to me!"

"You think so little of me?" Ceri stared at him.

"Not of you - of those whom you serve. Your blood ties are somewhere in the past, you have none in the present, how hard can it be for you to break your ties here?"

"You and Mum are as much my parents as are Ambrosius and Cerian," Ceri replied taking both her father's hands in her own, "in fact more so because you both brought me up, I look to you for my behaviour, I look to you for praise and punishment, I love you both because you are my parents if not by blood, then by the simple fact that you were there." Cerian smiled and then her expression became sombre again, "I did come here with an ulterior motive, I had hoped to see Herne again, to ask his advice, but there's nothing here."

"I must confess that I came with an ulterior motive too," her father replied, "I wanted to see if you were the one chosen, there seemed to be no significant change in you and I thought that if anything was going to happen it would be this year or not at all - so when you said that you wanted to come I thought it would be ample opportunity to see if I dreamed the whole thing up out of my head."

"And you didn't." Ceri responded, "how do you cope?"

"In the beginning I convinced myself that you were the daughter of a woman I had loved and that she was dead, I'd almost convinced myself of it, and I tried to bury myself in my work in the hope of distancing myself from you, except that never worked as you seemed to be drawn to me. So I watched you grow and held my secret in my heart and hoped that you could grow to adulthood in the twentieth century."

"Why isn't Herne here?" Ceri asked plaintively, she wrapped her arms around herself and buried her chin in her chest.

"Perhaps because you've done all you can do for the moment," her father said softly, "perhaps we have to work this out together."

"I probably have to work this out alone," Ceri remarked to no-one in particular, "I'm just becoming used to my new status and I have to return to my old one. It's no fun."

"Its no fun knowing about it," her father murmured softly.

"Can we go for a walk somewhere," Ceri said quickly, "I know you have work to do."

"All right." Together they walked hand in hand along the path through the forest. A thin layer of frost still glimmered on the ground and as they

stepped through some of the tall grasses a cloud of small white moths fluttered from their depths.

“Don’t disturb them,” Ceri said softly. Her father stood wide eyed as the moths spun upwards around him like a cloud of snowflakes.

“Aren’t they beautiful...what are they?” Her father asked.

“Plume moths,” Ceri gazed at her father, a mixture of love and regret in her eyes, “There’s an old saying about them, that they carry memories away.” The last of the moths fluttered upwards into the morning and her father shook himself like a dog emerging from a river.

“Dad?” Ceri said softly, “anything the matter?”

He looked down at her a puzzled expression on his face, “What was I talking about?” he smiled at his daughter, “my mind’s gone completely blank.”

“Something to do with work,” Ceri lied.

“Ah yes. I’ll give you the keys of the car and you can sit in there if you like. I’ll be back for lunch and then we can get home. Suit you?”

“That’s fine,” Ceri replied. She watched as her father began to walk purposefully towards the Chapel and at that moment she felt Herne’s hand on her shoulder. She turned around and flung herself into his arms, “You came! Oh you came! I thought you’d never come!”

Herne held her tightly and then released her, “I am sorry for what I did,” she said, “but it has been hard for him these past years, better that he should believe that I am his daughter, do you not think?”

“I was not about to reprimand you,” Herne said softly, “I think you have done the only thing you could. He hoped so much that you could be his daughter in every sense of the word and never know how you were found or how your Destiny might be affected.”

“Can we talk for a little, Lord?” Ceri asked tentatively, “I came back here because I wanted to talk to you - when we drove through the gates and you were not here to greet me I thought that I’d lost you.”

“You’ll never lose me,” was Herne’s reply, “you are my Salvation. I did not greet you because I was not sure that I needed to, my Princess you have come so far, are you still so unsure of yourself and your power?”

Ceri smiled, “I have just become used to my rôle; I hope I never take the power I wield for granted and now I have to become a schoolgirl again. I never was a good actor, Cernunos.”

“Then you will have to learn how to become one,” Herne replied. “I suggest that we go and refresh ourselves and discuss matters.”

Ceri smiled at him, “May I take us there this time?”

“With pleasure,” Herne replied, “Glastonbury, please.”

Ceri nodded and turned to face the trees, they wavered slightly as if blown by a breeze and then it seemed to Ceri as if the form of the Abbey at Glastonbury began to take shape before them gradually obscuring them from view as it

solidified and then they stood in the orchard. It was winter and the skeletons of the trees made Ceri shiver.

Herne mistook her shivering for the cold, "Come inside," he said quickly, "let's get a cup of something warm into you."

Ceri sat before a roaring fire and looked across at Herne, "This was where Galahad was injured."

"Yes." Herne replied, "at the moment it is the best that we have. We do not have many visitors after the Midwinter Solstice. I wanted to bring you here because I want to tell you something."

"My Lord," Ceri gazed at him. "You told me all I needed to know the last time we met - let it wait until we meet again. It has been one of the best holidays I have ever spent, of that you can be certain."

"Nevertheless, I feel I should say it." Herne paused to let the import of his words sink in and then he took her hands and said, "Sometimes I forget that you are a child, that you have not been schooled in the way of nobility and I forget too that this must be hard for you. If I do so in the future - I trust you will tell me because I feel that you must remain in your world for many years to come so somehow you must marry the two. Never forget that all of the Ancient Ones are proud of you, there have been others who had the same rights to your throne who have not behaved half as well as you. Drink your cocoa and then we will return."

This time it was gentler motion, they appeared in almost exactly the same place as they had before and Ceri saw a familiar figure coming towards them, "Dad!" she cried delightedly,

Herne laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, "Do not blame yourself for what you had to do, if he knew that with each step you take towards us you lose him it would grieve him. Remember, he is a good man and I placed my trust in him a long time ago when I entrusted your upbringing and education to him, hold him in honour."

"Always," Ceri replied simply, "he's my father."

Herne watched as she ran towards the figure and upon reaching it threw her arms around him and hugged him. Then arm in arm they walked back to the car. Ceri unpacked the lunch and they munched through the sandwiches while the inside of the car misted up around them. "Did you get your work done?"

"As much as is possible," her father replied, "the rest will have to be done on the typewriter I fear. Did walking around a deserted park bore you?"

"Not really," Ceri replied, "I had a lot to think about."

"School and the like?"

"School mostly," she said wrapping the utensils up. "Shall we get going?"

"Certainly," her father replied. He turned the key in the ignition and slipped the car into gear, quietly the Range Rover purred down the drive.

Ceri looked into the side mirror and saw Herne standing beside one of the oaks, *Farewell, Lord* she thought.

Farewell, my liege, was the reply, *may we meet again soon*.

“Do you think you’ll come back here?” Her father asked, “in the spring perhaps?”

“In the Spring,” Ceri murmured as if she had not heard and she seemed to hear distant voices whispering like the leaves on a hot autumn day **Come back to us, Princess, come back in the spring!**

“It’ll be cold in April,” she said quietly.

“But the trees will be budding and the snowdrops blooming, Winter will be past for one more year. Rejoice in the greenery of Spring and return to these woods.”

Ceri glanced sharply at her father but he was gazing out of the windscreen, “You sound just like a Druid.”

“I just like life,” her father replied, “in all its forms and we should always rejoice that the darkness of winter is over. Say you’ll come back here with me when the new grass is growing and the skies are clear.”

“All right,” Ceri replied dubiously, “Then I’ll come back with you in April.”

FINIS