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SMASHWORDS EDITION

THE INTERCESSOR

THE BEGINNING

FOREWORD

When Abigail decides to start a new life in a new home; she does not realise how much things will change for her forever.

Although the previous owner of her house has died, she has not exactly moved on. She must teach Abigail the ways of the Intercessor, a race of women born with a unique gift; and she is next in line.

She discovers that the fairies and ominous beings, she imagined as a child, really do exist. It was now up to her to keep the balance of good and evil in the Mythical world, and soon a battle would begin that would test her to her limits. If she fails, then all those in both worlds will be in danger. Can she succeed and keep the Human race safe?

PROLOGUE

First you have to know what I look like. I am a small woman, only 4 foot 11 inches, medium build, long brown hair. There is nothing special about me to look at, just an average person. It's what I was born to do that makes me far from normal.

My life could never have been described as normal when growing up, if truth be told. It became near, when I became a writer of books, and a successful one. I had enough money to pay my bills and live comfortably.

Looking back now, most of my life had been spent in training for the position I was destined to take. I would like to tell you about myself, and the life I now lead, but I ask you first, keep an open mind. If only one of you who read this believe me, then it is one more I can hopefully call an ally. If you think this is nothing but a work of fiction; then I hope you at least enjoy the read.

Well here it goes! This is how it all began.

CHAPTER 1

When I was young, I could never sleep with the wardrobe door open. Every night I religiously checked under my bed for the illusive monster or bogeyman that might be lurking there. Even though I never saw anything, as I turned out my bedroom light, I would run and jump into the middle of my bed. I would secure the blankets under me so nothing could creep in as I slept. Just because I couldn't see them, it didn't mean they weren't there. I was sure I could feel their presence.

Once in my bed, my eyes were always squeezed tight shut. I did not want to see anything from my nightmares, become a reality. My main fear was catching sight of the trees, silhouetted by the street light onto my ceiling and walls. I had been brave once, and opened my eyes for a short while. I would never make that mistake again. I saw changing shapes as they swayed in the wind. I would have sworn, at that time, under oath, they were morphing into evil creatures. The longer I looked, the shapes took form, mocking me and daring me to watch. Luckily, I shut my eyes before they had fully formed. I thought, if I had not, they would have snatched me away to the dark malevolent place they came from. I was determined never to give them the chance. My fears stayed with me through my younger years, dreading the darkness that was inevitable each night.

Even during the day, I couldn't relax and just join in with my peers. I was thought of as weird, and spent most of my school life, on my own. Each time I tried to interact, I would catch sight of something from the corner of my eye, I would snap my head around quickly; but nothing would be there. I would turn back to see the raising of an eyebrow, or the shaking of a head, and the moment had passed. My parents told me I had an over active imagination and the reason things got worse as the day went on; was only because I was getting tired. I tried to believe them, I honestly did. I would spend most of my time in my room or the garden, making up little stories and poems which I saved in a scrap book, and kept it locked in my drawer.

CHAPTER 2

As I grew up, I decided to tell myself, the evils of the dark did not really exist, and eventually, my fears left me. My imagination however grew, and not surprisingly I became a writer. I developed a love for children's books. My books were full of fairies that lived in a perfect magical land. This was a world full of happiness, kindness and love. It was always twilight there, and the whole land was filled with lanterns, strung through the trees. They blew gently in a constant soft breeze. Flowers filled the fields; primrose, cowslip and clover, all spread out like a beautiful pastel painting. Fire flies flitted around leaving bright sparkling trails, and the world was full of peace.

My books gave me confidence, and I became more normal and outgoing. I dated and married and to top my happiness off, my books began to get rave reviews.

I became a success, and was on the best sellers list, with a movie in the pipeline. The years passed by and my life was now good, until one day, my husband walked out on me. No reasons, no excuses, just left and never came back. I fell apart. My publisher had made an advance for my next book, and although trying to be supportive, he was running out of patience.

I knew I had to move away from all the memories surrounding me. I had to make a fresh start and then maybe I could get back to my writing. Money was not a problem, as I said I was doing very well. I sat down and thought about what kind of house I would like to live in, and where I would like it to be. I wrote a wish list, if I was going to do this, then I wanted the perfect home. I contacted quite a few estate agents, sending them a copy of my wish list, and asking them to send any details they thought would interest me.

Every day I checked through the post and short-listed any I wanted to view. I had to admit there were not many, I didn't know what I was looking for exactly, but nothing seemed right, there was always something missing. I was becoming discouraged. I thought maybe I was asking for too much; until one day my mail

arrived. I checked through the listings I had been sent and once again found nothing. I then opened an envelope unlike the usual ones I had become so familiar with. The first thing I saw was a covering letter from an agent I had not been using, "Graham and Johnson". The letter asked me to consider the details they had sent, as they thought the property would suit me.

I took one look at the picture in front of me, and I knew immediately, I had found my new home. I rang the number on the top of the letter and made an appointment to see the house that afternoon. For the first time in months, I was excited. I was to meet the agent at his office and he was going to drive me to the property. He explained the property was not sign posted, and was situated at the end of a track road; it would be easier for him to take me than to try to give me directions.

I arrived at the office early and Mr Graham himself came to greet me. I was eager to get straight to the property, so Eric, as he asked me to call him, took me to his car and off we went. As we drove along, we chatted easily, and I asked him how he had known I was looking for a new home and how he had obtained my address. He explained the old woman who had lived there, had died almost a year ago at the ripe old age of 104 years. The house was now out of probate and the only relatives she had were distant. He was very honest and did not hide his dislike for these people; he went as far as to say, that he knew they could not wait to get their hands on the money from the sale.

They had gone to check out their inheritance and probably picking over anything they had thought was worth money. They said they had found a letter by the kitchen door, telling them to give my details to their agent and to send the information on the house out to me. He admitted he had sent them out of desperation to get rid of an unsavoury client; I sat trying to take the information in. As he chatted on, my mind wandered. I was trying to imagine who would leave my name, and if it was a friend, then why didn't they just come and tell me about the house themselves. I stared out of the window and suddenly

snapped back to reality. I realised we had turned off the main road and were heading down what he had described correctly, as a dirt track. Large trees grew either side making the way appear dark and shady.

About five minutes' drive down the track we came to a bend. As we followed the track around the bend, the sun blasted once again, and I saw it, standing there, in front of me. I gasped at the beauty of what I could only describe as a quaint old cottage, glowing in the rays of a golden sun. The building was made of stone, with ivy scrambling up the walls. The tendrils seemed to be searching and reaching out for the next foothold. Time had weathered the old stone and it blended into the surroundings perfectly. I had a feeling the cottage was alive and waiting for something. This thought, far from scaring me, excited me. I felt as though it was welcoming me.

I turned to look at the garden. This was an incredible sight. Wild flowers filled the space, the colours spreading out like a pastel painting. I was in awe at the splendour, and asked Eric, who had been responsible for the gardens upkeep. He informed me the owner had hired an old gardener, and a proviso had been included with any sale of the house, that his employment must continue. He told me the pay was low and the gardener had assured him he was not interested in changing any part of his agreement with the previous owner, including the wage. This suited me fine, as I had not been blessed with green fingers and would have hated to see this heavenly space ruined.

I looked across to the middle of the garden, and there stood an old well. A wooden strut stood above it with a hanging bucket and lever to lower it, it was so pretty and as I stared, I thought I caught sight of something peeking over the well wall, and then it was gone. It was probably a small animal or even a trick of the light.

CHAPTER 3

I stood there soaking it all in. My eyes were trying to take in everything at once, and I could picture summer afternoons sitting at a table with my laptop. I realised Eric was talking to me and turned to listen. He was telling me how the building was structurally sound, and the surveyor had found nothing that required urgent attention. Of course if I wanted to bring my own surveyor in, then I was more than welcome. He explained, as he led me to the front door, that the house had full electricity but with the location it sometimes went off for short periods of time, and therefore had a generator as a backup. It also had running water and a few mod cons such as a telephone line. Nothing could put me off, I was home, and I just knew it.

As soon as I entered the front door, my feelings were confirmed. I felt I had stepped back in time. The cottage was not shabby or old fashioned; it was more quaint and welcoming. I made my mind up there and then and I boldly declared, 'I'll take it'. Eric's jaw dropped. After the initial shock, he insisted I take a look around the rest of the house and then he would take me back to the office. I only took a quick look, I didn't care, and I knew already, it was the house for me. Once we were back at the offices of Graham and Johnson, we immediately got down to arranging all the paperwork, informing the clients, and contacting my solicitor. Within 4 weeks, deeds were exchanged and the property was mine. I did not want to change a thing, so arranged to purchase the furniture along with the house, this pleased the relatives, as I knew they would have just scrapped the lot.

Moving in went so smoothly. My belongings were stored and personal touches were made by pictures and ornaments that I could not part with. I immediately loved the peace and just wanted to relax and soak up the atmosphere, but first, I decided I should deal with the mundane things, like obtaining the internet, power providers being switched to my name, and new address cards being sent out.

Once all that was out the way, my curiosity got the better of me and I decided to explore. The kitchen was more than fully stocked, and a big range stove dominated one side. The previous owner must have loved cooking. I was not even sure how to use most of the utensils. Herbs grew on the window sills and I guessed the gardener must have been tending to these also. Of course this meant he must have a key, and I decided to let him keep it. If the previous owner had trusted him, then so would I. An enormous table stood in the middle of the kitchen, it was well used, but this only added to its charm. This room had most definitely been the heart of the home, I could feel it, and thought of cold winter nights, and me sitting warm in front of the range, with a nice cup of tea. I shook my head and smiled and I moved on to the living room.

The large overstuffed sofa stood in front of the fireplace and I sat down on it. I seemed to sink into comfort, the sofa easing its way round me in a big caring hug. I had to be careful not to sit there to work, or nothing would get done. I would more than likely fall asleep. Small tables were dotted round the room, in perfect position for ease and efficiency. A glass cabinet hung on either side of the fireplace. I had placed my lovely ornaments here for display. It was not until I was admiring how my ornaments fit in so well; that I realised there was not a speck of dust on anything. The house had been empty for so long, but looked like it had been lived in yesterday. I wondered if the family had hired a cleaner to keep the place looking fresh for prospective buyers. I discounted that immediately and thought Eric's' agency had probably arranged it. I would have to send a note thanking them.

I climbed the wide staircase onto a large landing and headed to the main bedroom, one of four, and stood at the door. The wallpaper was pink floral and must have been there for years, but did not look worn. I walked over to the bed and tested it. I had never before felt such comfort. It comprised of a mattress on top of giant coiled springs, it must have been over a hundred years old. A huge patchwork quilt lay on top of crisp clean sheets and I smiled at the

thoughtfulness of Eric and his staff. I must have been a dream come true to the firm, for them to go above and beyond the duties of Estate Agents. A big rocking chair stood to the side of the bed, complete with a cushion which matched the wallpaper. A beautiful white distressed dressing table resided under the window, it held a trio of ornate mirrors on top of it, and a chair in front, once again upholstered in matching fabric; I felt like a princess. Two enormous wardrobes matched the dressing table and yet there were still lots of room to move around. I felt so at peace in this room and looked forward to sleeping in it that night. I walked to the other bedroom. It was a pretty, guest room, about the same size as the main bedroom. It had been decorated in a bright yellow and held two single beds. The furniture in this room was dark wood and complimented the yellow perfectly. I walked along the landing to the bathroom. A large roll top bath stood at one end of the room and it was fully tiled. It held no shower, and I thought I could wait to put one in; it would be a nice change for now, to lie and enjoy a relaxing bubble bath. I moved on to the smaller two rooms. Both were decorated beautifully, and each had a single bed. There was nothing spectacular about these rooms and one seemed to have been used for storage, even so, there was nothing I wanted to change. The décor and furniture suited me perfectly. All in all, I was so happy with my purchase.

I went back downstairs, made a sandwich and a cold juice and spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the garden, laptop ready, trying to write. I felt I could do that here, but for today I just wanted to soak in the view.

It was soon time for bed, I got changed and sat at the dressing table brushing my hair and I looked out of my window into the garden below. I saw a very large grey dog pacing along the edge of the forest. I watched it for some time as it patrolled the edge of the garden. It stopped and turned to look at me. I didn't feel worried or scared; I felt calm for some reason. I had the impression the dog was protecting me; I smiled, said goodnight, and turned to my bed.

My first few days in my new home flew over. My internet had been installed and I had begun writing, in earnest again. I loved my long luxurious bubble baths and decided against a shower, I could never go back to the hurried cleansing ritual I had been used to in the city. I would sit at the dressing table each night and look out into the garden to find my protector, always on patrol, and say goodnight to him. I had even bought dog food to put out for him, but it was never touched. I had already settled in to my new life so well. It was on the fifth night, however, that my whole world changed.

CHAPTER 4

I had fallen asleep quickly that night, as I had since I had moved here. I felt myself stirring from the fogginess of the dream world, to the sound of creaking, and the feeling of movement nearby. I turned sleepily, and jumped at the sight of a small, white haired, robust, old woman sitting in the rocking chair beside my bed, and rocking to and fro. Then she spoke.

'Well it's about time deary, we really have a lot to do you know.' 'Who on earth are you?' I stammered. 'How did you get in here?' This was my first conversation of many with the previous owner Miss Hattie Gracefield.

'I'll make you a cup of tea Abigail, come down when you're ready.' She got up and left the room. I sat on the bed and rubbed my eyes. I was dreaming; I had to be. I was just about to lie down again when I heard the clinking sound of a spoon in a cup, wide awake now; I jumped out of bed and grabbed my dressing gown. As I went to leave the room, I made a last minute decision to grab the candlestick off the dressing table, then, armed with my weapon, I made my way downstairs.

As I cautiously edged my way into the kitchen, I saw Hattie sitting at the table with two cups in front of her; a milk jug and sugar bowl was set out as well.

'Well come and sit down! We have lots to do. I just pray you are a quick learner. For goodness sake, put that candlestick down, it would be useless on me anyway!' My mind refused to work, and my body took on a life of its own, as I walked over to the table and sat down.

'Right dear,' Hattie said, as she poured the tea, and as I began to drink it, she said; 'Finish your tea then listen carefully, I have a lot to explain to you before you begin your lessons, and time is running short, I can feel it in my bones.' My mind woke up, I took in what she was saying but never uttered a word, and I stared at her rosy face, drank my tea, and listened.

CHAPTER 5

Hattie continued, 'I have lived here for a very long time Abigail, as did Effie, the lady before me. It took longer than I had expected to find you. I would like to take my time to train you properly, but time is against us dear. They are rising again and we have to hurry.'

You are from a special kind of breed, and only our kind can live here. We have a very important job to do, but we do it quietly, it wouldn't do to have people know what really goes on in this world.

You are now my replacement as 'The intercessor of the Netherworld'. I know dear, such a pompous title and such a mouthful, so let's just say you are peace-keeper. There are good and bad all around us and every now and then one side wants to rule and when that happens; we are the ones who have to fight to keep the balance. The world, as we know it, would collapse if evil ruled and wiped out the good, but it would be just as bad the other way. We need both to survive. Now something is going to happen to upset that balance, we don't know what yet, but we can feel it coming. We have to get ready for it now, so you are going to have to learn quickly.'

As she talked, I was transfixed by her, but at last my senses returned to the room and I noticed we were not alone. I hesitantly turned my head and was met with such an array of strange creatures. Some bigger than others, some flying around in little circles, many of them were so beautiful and others I could only describe as ugly. I thought my mind had gone, I just sat staring. Had I snapped? Was this what they meant by a breakdown? I shook my head and closed my eyes, then opened them again; they were still there, and I seemed to be the centre of their attention. Then Hattie spoke again.

'I see you have noticed our friends Abigail, they will be invaluable to you, let me introduce them all.' With that, one by one the little people, or whatever they were, stepped, or flew, forward to be introduced.

The first in line was a small man of about 3 foot in height. He had a brown face and was covered in sparse brown hair. He stood in front of me, nodded his head and smiled. With all my research for my books, I knew immediately, he was a brownie.

'Meet Clax, Claxton Metterhorn the 4th, to be precise, but he prefers Clax. I couldn't have managed without his help around the house all these years, and he is my oldest friend.' Clax smiled again, and looked so pleased and proud. Once I had said hello, he moved to go to the back of the room.

'Next is Drinad, he is from the Porhines people.' A rather small old man came forward, even smaller than Clax, his face all wrinkled with age, but a lovely twinkle in his eye. As he moved to the back of the room Hattie whispered in my ear, 'good natured little man but don't ride a horse near him at night, he can't resist leading you to your doom. It's not his fault; it is just the way he is, but that's his only fault.'

The introductions went on. Gwent was from the Plant Rhys Dwfen tribe; he was very small but perfectly formed, and extremely handsome. Orchid was from the Sprites, she was a beautiful creature, tiny and slim. Oswald was a Sylph; he was a very tall and extremely thin man. Selena was from the Turehu, a beautiful fairy with long golden hair, larger than most of the other Fairies, and so the introductions went on, Fairies, Gnomes, Elves; Eventually I had met them all.

Throughout all this, something was bothering me, and eventually I said, 'How have you all come to be here? I know many of you come from Ireland, and Wales. I can maybe understand those of you from Scotland coming here, as we are not too far from there. Surely it is a long way to travel and I thought, from my research, that various tribes didn't mix with each other.'

A small beastly looking little man stepped forward. He had been introduced as Grenville, a troll. 'When we sense trouble stirring, small troops from the many clans are sent to help. It is in our best interests to pull together at times

like this.' He seemed to drift off, but continued talking, 'I remember a time when they even came from as far away as India to help; of course that was when Effie lived here. I'm glad we won that one; life would have been so bad if Agred had won. Now he was evil and when.....' It seemed he would have rambled on if Hattie had not stopped him.

'Yes, we all know Grenville, and one day you can tell Abigail the whole tale, but now is not the time to be telling stories. We can all feel the urgency and Abigail must be taught the basics, at least, if we are to stand a chance. I haven't got much longer in this world to help you all, so it is best we get started immediately' Hattie said. The room filled with rumblings of 'here, here' and 'poor Hattie.'

I managed to open my mouth again, 'What basics? I don't understand what you expect me to do.' The only reply I got was 'You will know Abigail, when the time comes.'

She quickly got everyone organised into groups to start my training. I had herb recognition with some, spells with others, enemy spotting with a third group and lastly potion making with Hattie. I really don't know why, but this seemed normal to me, I didn't question anything, I just went along with them and tried to do my best to learn all that was taught to me. Once I had begun, I wanted to learn all I could.

The time passed quickly, my days crammed with lessons. I loved every minute of it, except I must admit, enemy recognition, as it scared me. The creatures I was to fight against seemed formidable, and I didn't see how I could ever defeat them. The names alone made me shiver; Eachy, Ettin, Hobbididance, Black Annis; the list seemed endless. My favourite lessons, however, were spell casting and potion making. I loved spending time with Hattie and seemed to have a flair for these particular subjects.

She taught me how to recognise the various herbs and how to mix them for different effects. I never knew there were masculine and feminine herbs and within these categories they were split into air, water, fire and earth. I found that plants such as, Cumin, Cedar, and Angelica root, was masculine and from the fire category; Whereas Burdock, Bramble leaf and Catnip were feminine from the water category and so on. I was so interested, prior to this I had only thought of herbs as something to add flavour to food. Their uses were amazing; protection, healing, curses and even to aid your love life!

Before I realised, a month had almost passed. Hattie had explained she would be doing a spell soon and wanted me to watch each step. A few days before; she had taken me to Seth, the old gardener, and had chosen a twig for him to cut from the big old oak tree in the garden and she had taken it into the kitchen. She had carefully stripped it of all its leaves and bark and then soaked it in rain water and left it for a couple of days. I had to check on it to make sure it was safe, and then she made me take it out, and said it must dry for 3 days. It was now the eve of the full moon and everyone gathered in the big kitchen. A candle was placed on the table and lit. Hattie checked the twig, nodded, and then placed the thinnest end into the candle. She left it there till the end was blackened. She then took a square piece of paper and wrote on it with the burnt end of the twig. There was silence throughout, until Hattie spoke;

'Mighty oak of ages past.

Watcher of the world and all that passes, Impart unto me thy knowledge.

That which has been brought to thee on the four winds and transferred to your heart from the depths of the earth.

Let no secret thing remain hidden, but rather as the light brings thee life, let the life bring unto me knowledge.

So this I ask, so may it be.

She then blew out the candle, and rolled the paper up, sealing it with the candle wax. We followed her to the garden where Seth had dug a small hole. The paper and twig were buried and rain water poured in a circle round the little burial plot.

She turned to me and said 'Be prepared for some strange dreams tonight dear, I have also put a few bay leaves under your pillow to help you remember them. I have asked for knowledge of what is being planned so we are better armed, and tonight this knowledge will come to you in your dreams.' I was shocked, to say the least. What if I couldn't remember, or got something wrong? I voiced my worries. A giggle went round the room. 'You were born for this Abigail. Did you never wonder where all your ideas for your books came from? They were all from inherited memories, you know the old saying 'writers write what they know about' well it's mainly true. From the day we met, you have been drinking chamomile tea, this has helped awaken your memories and make your body and mind open to magic. Don't worry you have been well prepared.' This explained my lack of protest to my new life, and why I was so ready to believe all I had been told. I was still not certain it would work but they would hear no more from me.

CHAPTER 6

I went to bed that night, positive that I would not be able to fall asleep. I was wrong; within minutes I must have drifted off.

I had never experienced anything like this in my life. At first everything was hazy and then I found myself in a forest of some sort, with a large gathering. I seemed to bounce from one place to another, like a small Power-ball let loose in a tiny room, gaining speed and losing control. I just missed trees and glanced by the groups of people standing there. I tried to calm down and gradually I felt my composure returning, and I settled on a damp mossy bank, beside a huge old tree, twice as wide as me, and so tall and bushy that it made the area dark and cold. No one gave me a second glance, and I realised I was invisible to them. Of course I was, I was dreaming; wasn't I? I did a silly little dance in front of them; just to make sure then went back to my tree, giggling as I did. I could get used to this, and I thought of all the fun I could have with my family and friends. I had to concentrate now though, I had been sent here for a reason. I looked around and, much like the one at Hattie's' house, there was a gathering of all types of creatures, the only difference being; nearly all of these creatures were ugly, with two exceptions. A beautiful woman stood in the middle, beside a handsome black stallion. There was an array of voices arguing with each other. 'Stop!' shouted the woman. 'Are we agreed or not? If you stand with me you will be greatly rewarded. 'A murmur of 'ayes' grew. 'Good, we will begin on the winter Samhain when I change to Caileach Bheur. The humans and those who aide them will fall. I will make it the worst winter ever. Dagda, you will be needed in battle and you shall stand by me.'

A huge man, with the cruellest face I had ever seen, but quite handsome at the same time, lifted his axe slightly, and nodded as he said 'forever my sweet.' She smiled, although it seemed more of a smirk, and then turned to some really small, ugly creatures. 'When I have made the blizzards and ice unbearable,

Hedgar, you will take your Gremlins and sabotage the human machinery.' A cackling little laugh emanated from the loathsome beings. 'We will halt the passage of food and fuel to the humans,' she turned to a man, who seemed to be a hunchback and spoke; 'Orbreen, you must use your talents inherited from your forefather, Aghelhor, you must spread poxes to those already weakened.' Orbreen looked up and nodded, I reeled back at the sight. His face was covered in oozing warts and spots, his eyes crusted over with scabs. He smiled and showed the blackened teeth inside, and as he did so, his lips cracked open and blood began to run down his chin. I had to stop myself as I felt the bile make its way quickly up my throat, and I swallowed hard.

'Now you Duerger,' as she turned to some little people standing not far from me, 'I need you to....,' she stopped mid sentence. She seemed to be listening and looked around, and at first I thought she was looking directly at me. I pulled myself behind the tree, trying to shrink so impossibly small. Had my invisibility worn off? I felt panic rising up my body, and then I relaxed when I heard her next words. 'I feel eyes are watching us, there may be a psychic spy somewhere near so that is enough for tonight. Our plans are in motion and we will be victorious.' A loud cry of agreement and excitement erupted. They began to leave and I wasn't sure what to do next. I thought of my home and my bed; with that I felt the haze again, and in an instant the crowd and the forest had gone.

CHAPTER 7

It was light outside when I opened my eyes, and I quickly got ready and went downstairs. The kitchen, once again was full, with Hattie sitting at the table with pot of tea and cups at the ready. As I entered, all eyes were on me, a look of anticipation and worry on the faces of the gathering. 'Sit down dear, have a cup of tea and relax before you tell us your dream.' As she spoke she was pouring the tea and nodding her head towards the chair beside her.

I took the seat, and she offered cup. I sipped at the tea and felt myself relax, and then I started to recount the happenings of the previous night. It was mainly silent throughout my narrative, except for the odd gasps and whispers now and then. Whenever I said a name I had heard, I was asked to repeat it for confirmation, and it was written down. It was not until I had finished, that the room came alive with discussions and theories. All were in agreement that we were to be in for a hard fight. The woman in charge, I was told, was Epona, and on Samhain, which I knew as Halloween, she changed into Cailleach Bheur. From that time she looked like an old hag, although in reality she was eternally beautiful, and she would bang her huge staff on the ground bringing frost and snow. Once winter is upon us, she has formidable power, but her reign ends at Beltane, May Day eve, when Brigit, the goddess who ushers in spring, takes over. It was well known she hated to relinquish her power, and now and then she would hire underlings to hamper the coming of spring. She had never tried anything like this before though. She was not strong enough on her own, but with Dagdar by her side, she would be hard to beat.

'First things first,' Hattie said. 'We must stock up on all we need, if we are to have a chance, we cannot run out of food, herbs and fuel. We must also go back to old ways, no electrical devices or technology that the Gremlins can sabotage. We must ask the Wood Nymphs if we can harvest extra wood for the fire and the range, it's going to be very cold. Once our defences are sorted, we can begin to plan our counter attack. It is only five weeks till Samhain.' Again she

organised the groups and in a flurry of activity, the work on our defences began.

My job was to drive to various nearby towns to stock up on food and fuel. Questions would arise if I did all this in one place. The basement was cleared as a storage area and guarded by a small gang of Leprechauns. I ventured out twice a day, filling my car each time, with the items on my list that Hattie had wrote.

The Wood Nymphs agreed to our request and each one gave extra wood from the trees they inhabited. These were stored against the walls in every room, as nothing could be left outside once the winter began. All our helpers were to move in the cottage also, except those who thrived in the cold. I went out again and bought camping beds and sleeping bags, more than enough for our needs, but the extra could be stored for emergencies. The fairies could not stay in their Brugh, which was the inside of a fairy hill, for fear the ice of the witch would seal them in, so they too moved in.

I telephoned my friends and my publisher to say I was going away for a couple of months, and not to worry if they couldn't contact me as I wanted seclusion to write. My family lived abroad, so they were safe, and I contacted them to say I was going on a trip to America for a couple of months. I didn't want them worrying about me and trying to return to England. I told my publisher I was doing well with my new book, and needed the seclusion to finish it; a lie, but he was happy. I tried to warn them all of a severe winter coming, and urged them to take care and stock up. This was all I could do, as who would believe the truth? I wished I could have done more and the regret nagged at me, but I had work to do, if I was going to save any of them.

As soon as that was done, the task of storing anything the Gremlins could use against us began. The electricity was disconnected and lighting replaced by oil lamps. The old range was fine to use, as it was wood burning, and I had bought a

huge old fashioned kettle to boil water in. Two weeks had passed and we had stocked up as much food, wood and other essentials, as the house would hold.

CHAPTER 8

On the morning of the 17th of October, I sat at the table with Hattie. There was just the two of us and that was most unusual of late. I could see she had something to tell me, and, because of her hesitance, it had to be something bad.

'Hattie, is there something I should know? I have never seen you like this.' She looked at me and I could see the pain in her eyes. She spoke quietly to me. 'Yes Abigail, and I have been dreading this moment, but I know you are ready, I have faith in you. Remember our first day together, I said you were my replacement, and time was short. Well my sweet child, I cannot join in this battle with you, I must leave this plane on the Samhain and you must lead the others to restore the balance.' I choked and tears filled my eyes. 'I need you Hattie, I can't do this alone, how can you leave? We need you!' My voice rising with fear and panic, I babbled on. She took me in her arms and hugged me as I sobbed. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'you have been quicker than I was at learning. I know you will do me proud. I wish I could stay, but the dead cannot stay forever, my time is nearly over and I need to rest. When I am gone, my memories will fill your mind and help you. Be strong Abigail and you will succeed, never doubt your instincts child, they will always be true.'

I couldn't begin to think of her not being here, she had become a second mother to me and my best friend. As she hugged me; I knew she felt the same. All too quickly the moment passed and we pulled ourselves together. Hattie called to the others and they all gathered in the kitchen once more.

'We need to defend ourselves against Orbreen. I am going to do a health spell; it will help to ward off his pox. I have also made up pouches for everyone; I have included a variety of herbs such as Angelica root, Blessed Thistle and Caraway to give protection. I have also ground Basil and mixed Cumin and Salt to sprinkle on the floor of every room in the house to further our protection from evil. Now gather round and get your pouches, remember keep them on you at all

times. Once everyone had collected their little bag of herbs, Hattie once again lit a candle in the middle of the table and the room became still while she said the incantation;

I call upon the ancient powers,
to give good health to those listed here.
Make all diseases and maladies disappear.
I empower this spell three times three.
As I do will, so mote it be.

She sprinkled herbs on the flame and then blew out the candle. 'Well I think we have done all we can to ward off the evil, now we must begin our strategy.

CHAPTER 9

The word was to be sent to the clans across the country. As many houses as possible were to be sprinkled with herbs and health spells were to be said. These were not as strong as they would be when said by an intercessor, but they would ease the infection of the household. Work parties were organised to make sleighs and other methods of transport that could be used in bad weather. Muses travelled up and down the country putting ideas into the minds of mortals to make their lives easier while the uprising progressed.

The Blue Caps, little fairies dressed as miners and sometimes seen as a blue flame, had agreed to mine coal for fuel and because of their mischievous nature, they had loved the idea of being an anti Santa Clause, and delivering the coal to households during the night.

There were things we could be getting on with before the Samhain, and they took our minds off the impending battle and friends we may lose. Preparation was of vital importance.

I spent a lot of my time with Hattie mixing herbs and potions; everything we could think of that we may need was made and stored. A spell was then said over them.

Elements of wind and fire,
Bring to me my heart's desire.
Water, earth, my wish fulfil,
Strong my magick, strong my will.
Within these Elements fourfold,
the power grows and so will hold.

She handed me a big old leather bound folder, full of clipped in pages. These were spells and potions handed down over the years. 'Never stray from the words,

you must say them as they are written Abigail; the power comes from the very first intercessor, and is strengthened as it passes down.' I poured over the book trying to memorize as much as possible. Some were so old, they were written on a kind of parchment, and they had faded slightly over the years, but other than that, they were in good condition.

On one of the pages, there was a love potion, and a disgusting one at that! I wondered if any of my predecessors had used it, and shuddered at the thought. The woman must collect a drop of her menstrual blood and mix it in the drink of her loved one. Once drunk the man would love her forever, although, it did not guarantee fidelity; a further spell was needed for that. I smiled to myself. So even way back in history, men could not help themselves from straying.

This book was now my bible and I would treasure it and guard it. The contents could save my life, and others, and therefore I kept it locked in a cupboard in my room. I sat thinking of how my life had changed, and how easily I had fitted in to it. In my writing, I did lots of research, and thought how even that had prepared me for looking for the right spells and potions, and finding out my enemies weaknesses. After all these years, I now knew what I was meant to do. I just hoped it wasn't going to end as quickly as it had begun.

CHAPTER 10

The nights were drawing in really fast now and we only had a few days left with Hattie. I could feel the tension in everyone, and decided we needed to have some fun; while we still could.

I spoke to all our friends discreetly, which was a feat in itself, as Hattie seemed to be in a hundred places at once. All were in agreement though, we worked together secretly and two days before the Samhain, everything was organised. I called Hattie into the kitchen and she was met with one huge greeting of 'Surprise!'

The table overflowed with cakes and goodies that had been slyly made by Clax. Big urns of wine and beer were on the kitchen worktops for all to enjoy. Garlands of ivy had been hung, and table decorations had been made with wild flowers and foliage. The music began from a group of Elves and before long the Earthmen were doing what came naturally; dancing. It wasn't long before we were all joining in.

I could see Hattie's eyes glistening and she wiped away a tear. I knew she didn't want to leave, but at least she knew how much she meant to us, and for one day at least, she could relax and enjoy herself. She danced as though she were a young woman, and had us all singing to the music.

The party went on long into the night, and I knew it had been a good idea. I had managed to organise the group and accomplish something on my own, granted nothing life threatening, but I felt better about myself and hopeful of being able to take up my position once the Samhain was upon us.

At long last the gathering drifted off and I climbed into my bed. I tried not to think of being without Hattie, but my mind wouldn't let me. In two days she would be gone forever and I would be left to lead my new friends into a battle so important, that losing was not an option. They were putting all their faith in me.

I must have fallen asleep sometime in the early hours and awoke late in the morning. I quickly washed, got dressed and went downstairs. My usual pot of tea was waiting for me and I drank it down quickly, and poured a second cup. As I was drinking this, the room began to fill. My friends seemed a little hung-over, but more relaxed than I had seen them for a while.

Once we were all there, we talked of the party and laughed at some of the antics. All too soon though we had to get back to business, and our daily meeting began and we went over the information we had received from our scouts. The enemy had managed to enlist a few more to their army, mainly lowly creatures with not much power, but also some we had to be wary of.

They had a Phouka, a very dangerous being from Ireland, which could take on animal form, so we had to be careful of any animal we encountered. A lot of Kelpies had joined the cause; these could take the form of horses, and were very evil. The Cu Sith had been spotted in several parts of the country. A Cu Sith was a fairy dog, but not on the side of good, this fairy dog was born of pure evil. He was large, about the size of a cow, and covered in dark green fur. He carried his tail over his back like a saddle. At night they would go out and hunt and kill humans. They were very rarely seen, and lived in areas that were mostly unpopulated, and therefore only travellers were at risk. They had been seen moving closer to small villages and this brought dread into our hearts.

We did have a small piece of news which brought us hope, and this came from a Snotling which had been easily tricked for information.

CHAPTER 11

A Snotling is a small green creature, not known for his brains. They are used as slaves and given menial tasks. One of our scouts had come across one of these, and had pretended they were on the same side. He had shared food and sat and gossiped for a while, The Snotling had let slip that there was a certain amount of nervousness amongst some of the troops, and a few were only there out of fear of Dagdar. He giggled that they would change sides quicker than they would change their socks, if the battle were to go against them.

Armed with this knowledge, we sent spies out to see if they could plant more seeds of doubt in the enemy ranks. We let it be known our ranks had grown and we were well prepared, a small lie on our part, but we had to try every trick.

Even before Samhain, we had felt the days growing colder, much colder than was normal for that time of year. We found out little ugly elves, we humans know as Jack Frost, had been sent out early in order to prepare the ground for Cailleach Bheur. This just proved to us that our enemy was very well prepared.

Hattie took me to one side and looked slightly hopeful. 'You made mention in your dream the name Dagda, and the Snotling also mentioned him. I have been checking certain things, for all Dagda looks cruel, he can also be very benevolent. I couldn't understand why he should side with Epona, and stay with her when she becomes Cailleach Bheur, normally he would never go against Royal laws, as he was once a King himself. I have found out Epona sought Dagda out, and started to court him. He is well known for his prowess as a lover and could not resist showing this off to Epona. I think, during this time, she has bewitched him, and that is why he is by her side. Her magic is very strong though, and I have had no luck in finding any spell, or potion that would remove this hex. You must continue searching for one after I have gone, as without him by her side, others will fall away and our side will have the upper hand. She has no knowledge of battle strategy and will be easier to defeat on her own.'

I agreed to do everything I could; I wouldn't admit I didn't know where to begin. This was not the time to show weakness, I had to put on a show of confidence. By the end of the day, Hattie would be gone and the conflict will have begun.

We spent that last day going over all our plans again and again. We checked all our stores and made sure we had left nothing out that we would need. We had more than enough food for us, and basic ingredients. We had camp beds set out in all the rooms and even on the landing. They would not put any in my room, even though I argued. The Intercessor needed privacy for thoughts, and night time visions, they said. Luckily for us, so many of the group were small and more than one could fit on a bed. Hattie had been meticulous in every detail, and we couldn't have done any more.

The day was sombre, but even so, none of us wanted it to end. What was to come after didn't bare thinking about. As time does though, it moved on. The time had come for all to say our goodbyes. Hattie moved round us all, giving personal words of wisdom and good wishes to everyone. At last it was my turn.

'My dear, don't look so upset. I can rest now, and believe me; my tired old bones are ready for that. When the light comes for me, you must stand with me and hold onto my hands, that way I can pass on my knowledge of things which can't be learned. You must feel them. Whenever you have a hunch, go with it as this will be the joint knowledge of Intercessors past, stirring within you.' She took me in her arms and continued; 'It has been a pleasure knowing you Abigail, I have a feeling you are going to be one of the best intercessors we have had. Remember, I have faith in you. Now follow me everyone, Seth has made a safe circle for my journey.' With those words she turned and led us all into the garden.

CHAPTER 12

Outside the cottage, herbs had been set around the garden and we gathered in a large circle. Hattie and I stood in the centre. She looked up to the sky, nodded, and then took my hands. We were instantly engulfed in a golden light. I had never seen anything so beautiful and the feeling of peace within it was almost overwhelming. I know it sounds strange, but I felt myself ageing inside. Not my body, but my mind. I was filled with euphoria, then in an instant, the light and Hattie was gone, and I stood arms still outstretched, and changed, once again, forever.

I don't know how long we all stood there in silence, it could have been seconds, or minutes, and then I turned and headed back to the kitchen. I was now in charge, and everyone would be looking to me for answers, as they followed me back into the cottage, I silently prayed I could find those answers.

In a couple of hours I would be leading my friends into a crusade, I had to hope I was ready. We knew at first there would be no outward signs, except for the change in weather. We also knew though, if we were caught unprotected, we would have to fight for our lives; kill or be killed.

I had to make them believe in me and my power to lead them as their Intercessor. I called them all to the table, letting them know we had to carry on.

As we sat, we once again went over our individual tasks, and those of the group as a whole. We were deep in conversation when we all stopped at once. It had begun. We felt it, now we were in a battle to save ourselves and the mortal race alike.

CHAPTER 13

The drop in temperature was so swift; the severity of it took us all by surprise. The fire was stoked, and more oil lamps were lit, as the night seemed blacker. I looked at those around me, and I knew at that moment, I would do everything in my power to halt this vile mutiny and restore the balance. My friends were ready to give up their lives to follow me; I would not let them down.

That night a storm grew, and the first of many blizzards began. We were well prepared, but the rest of the country, the ordinary mortal folk, would be taken by surprise. By morning we had scouts reporting an increased number of deaths and injuries among the mortals due to car crashes, hypothermia and various other things which could be put down to accidents. We knew already, the Gremlins had already begun their work, and had a lot to do with some of those 'accidents'.

While we still could, we topped up our stores and told the troops around the country to help out anyone they could, human and fairy alike. There wasn't much else we could do for now. Our troops did what they could and through their vigilance they managed to thwart the Gremlins on quite a few occasions. A group from Oswald's clan had managed to avert a rather large disaster. As they look just like tall humans, when their wings are covered, they were on patrol in a shopping centre when they saw some Gremlins. They followed them in secret to the rafters of the building, where huge air conditioning and heating fans were placed. They managed to stop them as they were loosening the holding bolts. They had been too slow for one though and it did fall, crashing through the roof. It had landed on a decorative fountain at one end of the shopping centre. Screams rang out and panic followed. A few people had been injured, but no one had been killed, thank goodness for that. As the centre was so big, people on the other side of it knew nothing of what happened so the panic was quickly settled and the area closed off. The tannoy asked everyone to leave as there had been a technical fault, so the disaster had been averted. There had been hundreds of

people in the centre, taking refuge from the cold and stocking up on supplies. If all the fans had collapsed through the roof; there wouldn't have been many survivors.

It was in the third week we heard disturbing and upsetting news. A group of Seelie Fairies, known as the Blessed ones, had been checking on some mortals in a village near York, when they had been attacked by a group from the Slaugh. The Slaugh were formidable creatures, said to be a host of the unforgiven dead. The Seelie had spotted a couple of children, one of them had fallen on the ice and had been hurt, they had gone to help when they were cornered by the Slaugh. Some of the Seelie managed to think quickly, and flew with the children to safety. The others were caught and had to stand and fight. The Slaugh had sharp spears and small axes, and had been taught well how to use them. We had arrows, which were no good in this close proximity, and shields. It was by no means a fair fight, but we did our best. Luckily a few of our shape shifters were nearby and came as large fierce dogs. The Slaugh retreated and the fight was over. We had managed to kill two of their kind, but had lost five of our own. This was the first Fairy bloodshed, and it brought home to us the reality of the battle ahead.

Our spies reported their rumours and lies had only scared off a few lowly Duergar. The Witch and Dagdar made a powerful couple, and fear of their wrath prevented most of their group from leaving. We were trying more elaborate lies, but we needed to show some sign of our power.

We gathered again and agreed to send the word across the country. The enemy must be hunted out; if we could not take them prisoner, then we had no other option but to kill them. We could no longer take the defensive, we had to attack. We had to send out a message that we could be just as aggressive in our quest.

I felt the blood of many would now be on my hands. I now realised some of us must be lost for the greater good, but it didn't make it any easier for me.

We sent Hippogriffs out to tackle the growing problem of the Cu Sith. A growing number of Villagers had been reported missing, and piercing howls had been heard in the night. We knew the villagers had fallen victims to the evil Fairy dogs and had to stop them. The hybrid Hippogriff was seen as a mix of lion, horse and eagle. It was very strong, yet fast and wily. They were sure to be victorious over the Cu Sith.

We had reports every day. We had won a few of our skirmishes but lost men in the process. I had always hated the idea of war and the thought of bombs and guns were disgusting to me, but I had never realised how savage a Fairy war could be. Our troops had not been shot; they had been hacked to death, or ripped apart by claws or sharp teeth. Fairies had had their wings chopped off before death as an act of degradation.

The human world was fairing a bit better but not much as unfortunately the spread of flu was taking its toll on the population of the country, although our herbs and spells had reduced the severe effect amongst those we had managed to protect.

Others however had not been so lucky. Inevitably, the old and ill were hit the hardest and hospitals were reported to be overrun and unable to cope. The death toll was rising, and the inevitable panic had taken over in some places.

With weeks of severe snow and blizzards, the country was already beginning to show signs of collapsing into chaos.

CHAPTER 14

I needed to go out and see for myself, how grave things had become. Trying to drive my car was impossible, so Seth and Oswald pulled out the sleigh and a couple of shape shifters turned into horses to pull it.

Dressed in various layers of clothes and a bag full of herbs, as well as my protection pouch, I set off, with Oswald, to the town nearby.

The air was so bitter; it felt like my blood was freezing inside my body. As soon as we turned on to the main road, the transformation was immediately evident. Firstly there were no cars, except for those that had been abandoned. The road had not been gritted or ploughed for days; probably because of the ferocity of the blizzards, and the amount of snowfall, but also we would not have been prepared for this, and we could have already run out of our stock of grit. The snow made it hard to see and, if it hadn't been for the strength of the shape shifters, we would have been lost.

The noise of the wind was deafening and I pulled my hood tighter around my head. It only took us thirty minutes to get to the outskirts of the town; but it felt like hours had past. In normal conditions, a car would have taken about five minutes to complete the same journey. The sleigh eventually stopped, and I cautiously climbed out.

The snow was so deep; the townsfolk had given up trying to completely clear it, but had been ingenious in their methods to ease getting around. Shops had fitted long banister like structures to their outside walls to hold onto when walking. Outside each door was a copious amount of rock salt to keep the doorway clear and as the depth of the snow grew, small makeshift steps had been carved into the mounds. As I looked round I noticed some of those who were brave enough to venture out were also using sleighs or walking pulling sledges on which they had put their shopping bags. It seemed the muses had done their jobs well.

I entered a large supermarket and was surprised to see it was still quite well stocked, but some empty shelves showed that may not be the case for much longer. Bread and milk seemed to be in very poor supply and, as usual in severe situations, people had bought extra of these to stock up.

I spoke to the assistant and she said they were lucky, they lived above the shop and were trying to keep it open for as long as possible, but they had received no deliveries for a week now and didn't know how long the stock they had, would last. Her father had been taking some of the stores to a small rest home nearby to help them out, but he had been taken ill with the flu. I thanked her and gave her some herbs, telling her to make a broth for her father and he would feel better. I said goodbye and left the shop, sprinkling my strongest mixture of herbs at the door to help ward off the evil spirits who wanted to do harm.

Some shops had closed altogether, and, as these were non essential shops, I was pleased they had been so wise. I struggled through the snow sprinkling my herb potions where I could. I came to a freezer shop, where a man was loading a sleigh with food. I stopped to talk to him. He told me it was his shop, and suddenly all the freezers had gone off. Several electricians had tried to fix them, but to no avail. He had decided to deliver the food to those who needed it and close his shop to be with his family. I offered our services, and for a while Oswald and I helped him. Every house we went to, I said a spell and sprinkled my herbs. At last we went with him to his home and he invited us in to get warm and have some tea with him. His family was as friendly as him, and made us feel so welcome. He had three children, two of them under five. As him and his wife were getting the tea, I hid herb sachets around the room, and said the strongest health spell I knew. This family deserved the best protection I could think of; to repay them for their kindness to us and their fellow man. At last it was time to leave. We said goodbye and we climbed back in to the sleigh and I asked to be taken back home.

I had seen the reason we had to win this war; through all the hardship, there are still those who would do their best for others, gaining nothing in return, and the least they deserved was to live in freedom and peace.

CHAPTER 15

As the weeks went on, the onslaught of bad weather continued. Our scouts had heard, from the few radios and televisions that were still working, that the death toll had risen to such an extent that a National Disaster had been declared. Hospitals were full and makeshift ones were being set up in nearby halls.

There was now a severe shortage of food getting to the shops, but once again the great human race was fighting back and finding ways around the difficulties.

Groups organised themselves around the country, taking care of those less able. They had crafted makeshift vehicles suitable for the severe weather and travelled to the local farms and warehouses to collect food and fuel to distribute to the people in their towns. Houses were shared, as it was easier to keep fewer homes warm and safer to keep people together. I sent troops out to once again give protection to these houses. Spells were said over them to discourage the Gremlins, and health spells were repeated to ward off the power Of Orbreen.

The Hippogriffs had fought well and defeated most of the Cu Sith. It had, as I expected, been a bloody battle. Only a few Cu Sith had retreated back to the wilderness, the rest of them had been killed. Two of our Hippogriffs had also been killed though, and we praised their courage and mourned them in our own ways.

Our worst losses had come from London itself. Grindyflow, evil water spirits, had gathered in force and headed down the frozen Thames. We had been warned of their coming and formed an army to fight them, but it was a trap. Our information had been false and we had fallen prey to one of their spies. As we concentrated on the Grindyflow, a large army of Redcaps had come behind us. We were caught between the two groups and, although we fought bravely, we were defeated. They had closed in on us, heavily armed. Once again Dagdar was there, he had an

enormous club with him. He wielded the club and the smaller of the Fairies were swatted like flies as it flew through the air, crashing down hard on the larger of the troops. Only a meagre few survived, but with horrific injuries. The white snow stained red from the blood of so many.

We fared better in the North of the country and in Scotland. There was still large pockets of enemy dotted around, but we definitely had the upper hand. Not all the evil creatures had joined in the fight some, who lived in the far regions of Scotland, preferred their solitude and didn't want to take sides. This did make things easier for us. The mortals were also coping better in these areas and this, I was sure, was due to the fact we were used to colder climates in the Northern half of the country; and many were poor, and therefore had learned to make do.

We gathered in the kitchen once again, and went over all our reports. We were not losing, but we were not winning either. We really needed to gain an advantage to bring this to an end. I still had no luck in finding anything to remove the bewitching spell from Dagdar.

He was a master of war, and it was he who was responsible for the enemy strategies. If only we could bring him back to normality, I felt sure that would be the beginning of the end for Cailleach Bheur. I sat every night studying the book Hattie had given me.

One night I sat in the comfort of the living room, in front of the fire to study the book. I had become so frustrated and still finding nothing, when I suddenly realised the date, it was the 19th December; less than a week to Christmas. I looked around the room; it was bare of anything to show the festive season was upon us. Normally my tree would have been up and the house fully decorated. I would have been spending my evenings wrapping gifts and baking goodies. I thought of the shopping days last year and the thrill when you find the perfect present for someone. I loved the hustle and bustle of the shops, the carols

ringing out and the little chestnut stalls that appeared every year. There would be no queues at tills, and bulging shops with pre Christmas sales, this year. I thought of all the poor children, still waiting for Santa Clause to come, and wondered what their parents would be saying to them. I sat and wondered if I would ever be able to celebrate my favourite time of the year again. Tears filled my eyes and with a heavy heart, I climbed the stairs to my bed.

CHAPTER 16

Over the next few days, I tried to carry on as usual, but my mood was dampened. I hadn't realised how much it showed, until I woke up on the morning of the 25th December. I knew what date it was and waves of depression washed over me. I felt like staying in bed, but I knew we had work to do, Christmas day or not. As I went downstairs, I heard whispers, and wondered what news I would be told today. As I passed the living room door, no fairy folk or creatures lay sleeping on the floor or any other available space, I hadn't slept late so where was everyone? I stopped, and walked back to the door, and I looked into the room and gasped at the sight. Clax stood, in front of a blazing fire, with a huge smile on his face. The room had been decorated with Christmas decorations; and baubles hung on the potted pine tree, with a golden star on the top, the only thing missing was the lights. Holly and Ivy garlands were draped around the fireplace. The room looked beautiful. Once again I found myself crying, but these were tears of pure joy. Clax just nodded, and gestured for me to follow him to the kitchen. Here too had been decorated with sprigs of holly and mistletoe. My friends all stood there, and I could see they were anxious at the sight of my wet cheeks, so I smiled and went around the room hugging each and every one of them. Orchid took my hand and led me to the table. As well as my pot of tea, I spotted a package wrapped up in linen and decorated with small pine cones.

'Merry Christmas Abigail,' they all chorused. I took the gift and removed the linen cover. Inside was a kind of handmade book. The front and back was made of wood and beautifully carved with Fairy symbols. Inside was full of pages of drawings and hand written notes. My friends had each wrote a piece about their history and their kind, and some of the Fairies had drawn pictures to go with each piece. They had included a personal message to me also. I had never received such a beautiful and thoughtful gift. Each and every one of the group had contributed.

My heart went out to them. Everything we were going through and they had taken time out to do something for me.

'Clax had the idea, and we all wanted to help,' said Sweeny, one of the Leprechauns. I turned and smiled at Clax, I knew not to thank him outright or he may disappear, but he knew how I felt without me saying it. My eyes said it all, and of course, the huge grin I couldn't remove from my face.

Even though we had to be careful with food, a small feast was laid out later that day, and once again, we drank and danced well into the night. Cailleach Bheur had not taken Christmas away from me after all.

CHAPTER 17

I woke up the next morning with a strengthened resolve. I was determined to win, and restore the balance of power; I couldn't let anyone down, they were depending on me.

Over the next few weeks, we held our own and in some areas of the country we were winning. I ended each day by reading my beautiful handmade Christmas present and felt closer to my allies by learning more about them.

One evening I was reading, as usual, and some of the words popped out of the page to me. I read it over and over again and an idea began forming in my mind. Next morning, I called the group together. I sat at the table and began; 'I have been reading the book you all made, and in a few of the pages the name Taliesin is mentioned, could any of you tell me more about this person?'

One of the prettiest Elves came forward, her name was Rosebud, and in a lovely melodic voice she said; 'Our race knows of Taliesin well. He was once a prophet named Gwion Bach. He worked for a Witch by the name of Cerridwon, helping her by mixing her potions and other small tasks. One day, he was mixing a potion to give her all knowledge, the potion was knocked over and some splashed on to his hand, which he licked off, without thinking. He, at once, knew everything. Cerridwon was so angry she chased Gwion, and eventually caught and killed him. The Fairy Royalty at that time, took pity on him, and allowed him to be reborn as Taliesin, a shape shifter and a magician. To this day he still lives.' I thanked Rosebud for this information, and then I outlined my plan.

If Taliesin was agreeable, I wanted to find a spell to bring his past existence through. With his knowledge and his prophetic powers, he would be able to help us in our quest. I was immediately bombarded with raised voices from every corner of the room. The arguments went on for quite some time. The fear of the majority was, some evil spirit may come through instead, and we could make things worse.

I tried to calm their fears and argued it may be our only hope, but the group held fast and the arguments became very heated. At last I agreed to; first find a safe spell, and secondly, only use it if it became absolutely necessary. Only then did things calm down in the kitchen. I knew, however, that my plan would eventually be used, and I would spend my nights looking for a spell to satisfy my friends' fears.

Clax made another pot of tea, and we decided to get back to business and read the daily reports.

CHAPTER 18

The Dryads, female spirits who protected the forests; a different one for each species of tree, had moved from being neutral, to joining our side, as had Bugul Noz, another forest spirit. The constant cold and bad weather was now also affecting the trees in their charge, and they wanted an end to the conflict. They were excellent in providing information on the troops of Cailleach Bheur. They hid in their trees listening to the whispers of the enemy and passed it on to us.

We were also told a large group of Blue Caps had been delivering coal in the Buckingham area, when they were set upon by the Phouka. They had at first taken on the disguise of a pack of dogs, and had changed into large vicious wolves, when they had them surrounded. After a bloody fight, mostly all one sided, all the Blue Caps had been killed, most of them had been torn to pieces by the sharp teeth of the Phouka. This was another huge loss to us, and it was now happening too often.

I knew mankind was suffering greatly and the longer this went on; the more power would be gained by the Witch. Although a National Disaster had been declared; very little help and aid could get through from other countries. The conditions were so severe only a few succeeded. This was not the case with the netherworld. Fairies and the like could travel on a different plane and we had word from Europe.

Our allies overseas had been watching and had decided if Cailleach Bheur won her battle here; she would then try to spread her power, and the nearest countries to Britain would be next. They had joined forces and we were to be sent troops to help defeat her. This had been news we were hoping for, they would be fresh to the fight, and could also bring new ideas.

We set about making more room in the already cramped cottage. Our stores of wood were now moved to the basement and the fourth bedroom was made ready for our new

arrivals. Even the large garden shed was prepared, with camp beds set out and herbs and spells to protect it.

A few days later, the leaders of our new allies had arrived, and our spirits were lifted. We settled them in and regrouped in the kitchen for a welcome meal and introductions.

First to introduce herself was Corisande; from the Mellusina fairies of France. She was so beautiful and was adorned with jewels. Her clothes were exquisite and seemed to be made from the finest silk.

Eirikr was the next to come forward. He was an Elf from the Nissa of Scandinavia. He seemed a very jolly and friendly man, with deep blue eyes that made you feel safe when looking in them. A large dwarf, named Aage, greeted us; his clan was the Kobalds from Germany. These were mainly mining dwarves who helped out the mortal miners, but were no strangers to battle.

There were two fairies standing and I turned to the first and nodded. She said her name was Bay and she had brought with her troops from the Brittany clan of Fees. The other fairy had wings that glistened like a spider's web in the morning dew. This was Lucia; she had brought with her the Hada De Luna; the moon fairies of Spain.

A very large and handsome man, stood back from the others. I walked over to him and took his hand to lead him nearer the group. With my small stature he towered above me. I turned to him and said; 'Would you like to introduce yourself to the group? We are all friends here.'

He spoke and his voice was like honey, so smooth and gentle. 'I am Jarl; I bring with me some of the Huldafolk from Scandinavia. Forgive me, but we are usually very reclusive and do not like to mix. We agreed to come to stop this Witch, as we will have no one rule over us.' I smiled and nodded. I made the introductions from our side and bid them eat and drink as they must be hungry from their journey.

Although the conversation was strained to begin with, it soon loosened up as we discussed the events and the progress of the war. We heard of the fear of the Europeans because of the lack of news coming from our country. There had been cries that the end of the world was coming, and of course the religious fanatics had said it was a warning from God. The governments had a collection of the top scientists and meteorological experts to try to figure out what was happening, but they couldn't come up with any one reason for the devastating climate change of the United Kingdom.

They had been testing the temperature of the seas surrounding us though, and they were dropping at an alarming rate. The shores of neighbouring countries were beginning to cool down, and this is how the decision to send help had been agree.

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, plans had been discussed, and the new troops were sent out to the areas that needed them the most. A large group had been sent to help out in Lincolnshire. We had been told the previous day that the Greencoaties, the main fairies of that area, had been almost wiped out and this was becoming an enemy stronghold. Eirikr sent an army of his elves there along with some Kobalds.

Jarl sent his Huldafolk down to London as did Lucia with her moon fairies. The rest travelled around the country, helping as and when they were needed.

We had heard that the Aughisky, a clan similar to Kelpies but far more dangerous, had been almost defeated in Scotland; this was fantastic news; we were continuing to gain the upper hand in Scotland, and making great progress in the North of Britain.

The Ferryshin had fought so well, that the Isle of Man, their territory, was now free of enemy. Jersey and Guernsey were also free again, so the majority of clans moved in on the southern parts of the country to help out there, leaving small armies to keep their own territories safe.

It was now the beginning of February. A quarter of the mortal population had died due to illness or accident. An extremely high number had died due to the flu, and many due to just hypothermia itself. I mourned the loss of my kind, and hoped my friends were all well. I hoped they had taken some notice of my warnings at least. I tried not to think they could be amongst the dead; that thought cut deep into my heart. I was made stronger only by the thought of saving as many as I could, and one day giving those who had died, the burial and mourning they deserved.

The fairy world had faired only a little better. We had lost many of our troops; but had taken the enemy with us. Our reinforcements gave us the larger force now though, and we had to hold onto that and make good use of it.

We decided to concentrate on London, as the capitol had been hit extremely hard. So we set about devising a plan to take back the city, and hopefully if this worked, it would discourage some of the enemy clans in smaller towns.

CHAPTER 20

We made sure we had surrounded London so we could close in and trap or kill anything in our way. We sent the less able of our troops in first to draw the enemy out and make them think they had an easy fight ahead. Our main troops however, were just behind them and attacked. Over and over again our plan worked and eventually, we had taken London back. Fairies travelled around the homes renewing the health spells, and giving aid. Of course not many of the mortals would ever say they had been helped by a fairy; those that did were said to have been in shock and hallucinating.

Although we had won a few battles; Cailleach Bheur was not about to give up the fight and with Dagdar by her side, she fought on.

We had to lure Dagdar away from her, so we could try a few spells I had found, to remove the bewitchment. We sat for hours trying to come up with a plan that we thought would work.

Eventually we all agreed the only thing that would draw him out, was using me as bait. The Witch would not be able to resist the chance to send him to slay the Intercessor. So our plan was put into motion. We let the word spread that I would be travelling to Hexham, a small town in Northumberland at the end of the week. I would be attending a meeting there of great importance and urgency, so I had decided the journey was worth the risk. Once again the sleigh came out and I had Oswald by my side to accompany me. Shape shifters and others came as my bodyguards. We had also stationed troops all along the route in readiness for an attack and sure enough, just outside of Hexham the attack happened.

As we had hoped, the great man himself led the attack. Our troops came out of hiding and as the battle went on I chanted my spells, none of which seemed to work. Unfortunately for us, the Witch had come with Dagdar to watch my demise, and her bond with him was stronger than my spells. I watched in horror as our

troops were slaughtered. That was the only word I could use, it wasn't a noble battle; rather one of malice and hatred.

I saw Dagdar coming towards me, and looked around in panic. There was no one to help me, my poor friends were lying in pools of blood, or still fighting for their lives. He was closing in on me and I thought my life would end and I would have failed all those counting on me and all those that had gone before me.

All of a sudden Oswald swept me up, just as Dagdar swung his axe. He saved my life but suffered a huge injury, still he flew me out of harm's way, but not before I saw poor Jarl, one of the last standing, fall and be torn to pieces by Kelpies, and finished off viciously by Dagdar, brought on, I thought, by the frustration of missing out on killing me.

The plan had been a total failure, and we had lost so many of our friends. I openly wept as Oswald swept down to the cottage. He had just put me down at the door, when he collapsed. We got him inside and immediately began tending to his wound. It was a blessing that he had fallen into unconsciousness. His left side had a huge open wound, spreading from his hip, up to his chest. I did what I could for him and I dressed his wound and fed him a powerful potion of; Annise, Arnica, Caraway, Centaury, Daftodi, Great Mullein, Monkshood and Yarrow, mixed together with a small amount of Cowbane. This, I hoped would cover the fever, wound and pain. We could only wait and pray that Oswald would pull through. I tried not to think it was entirely my fault, but I couldn't help it, it had been my plan and my troops had followed it. I had to pull myself together again; I couldn't show weakness now, for everyone's sake, including mine.

While we waited, hoping for Oswald's recovery, the fight continued. We had taken back London and some of the southern parts of the country. We also had Scotland and some northern parts of England. The situation in Ireland was a stalemate, no one side was winning or losing. It was Wales and central England where we were losing ground and we were struggling to keep defeat away.

We had word a large battle had begun in Manchester and we sent extra troops to help. Some of the leaders from our group went with them. We gathered quickly before they left and I gave the leaders various spells to take and herbs to keep them safe. I empowered the spells and hoped and prayed this would be enough.

CHAPTER 21

It was on the sixth day after our defeat at Hexham, that Oswald came out of his fever and opened his eyes. My heart soared at the sight of his half hearted smile. He was still in pain, that was to be expected, but the worst was over and he was going to survive.

I called every one into the living room, they had been worried as much as I had, and we all sat around and chatted, thankful for this one piece of good luck. Inevitably, the talk returned to that fateful day, and our mood dropped for a while. I told Oswald everything we now knew, as we had found out a spy had been amongst us, and had told Dagdar and Cailleach Bheur of our plans. We had never stood a chance, and all except the two of us had perished. I cried as I told him of my last sight of Jarl, and I saw a tear fall from his eye also.

I decided this was the moment to remind them of my previous thoughts, regarding Taliesin. We discussed this at great lengths and voices once again were raised. At last I won them over and we agreed it was something we must try or we may be defeated. By this time poor Oswald looked exhausted and we all took to our beds and left him to rest.

Clax was the only one to stay up and watch him as he did his duties around the house. As Hattie had said, he was invaluable and already I could not think of how I would cope without him.

I could not sleep; I took my book of spells out and once again I searched for the perfect spell for Taliesin, one which would keep us safe from any stray spirits who may try to come through in his place.

At last, in the early hours of the morning, I found one and I was sure it would be acceptable to all. Now all we had to do was get Taliesin to agree to our request. The first problem would be persuading the group; and the second would be finding him, as it seemed he had been reclusive for some years. I slept then

out of pure exhaustion and when I once again opened my eyes, it was late in the morning.

CHAPTER 22

My first task was easier than I thought it would be. I brought up my plan again, and instead of the argument that ensued the last time, the group was quiet. They reluctantly agreed, we had lost too many people from our side, and it was time to do something drastic.

We started by spreading the word to the wood nymphs, and through the city dwellers and country fairies. Anyone with any knowledge of the whereabouts of Taliesin, would they get a message back to the Intercessor, it was of uppermost importance.

The days past and we had no news, he had disappeared and no one knew where he was. We had heard of a tribe of Jewish fairies who also had the gift of prophecy. They were called the Mozikeen and were thought to have descended from Adam and Eve after they were removed from the Garden of Eden. We sent word and asked for their help. They sent back that they had discussed it, but it was not their fight yet, and they did not want to become involved or bring unwanted attention upon themselves. It was back to plan A; and the search for Taliesin continued.

We were losing hope and then we had a breakthrough that lifted our spirits. A clan of Merrow-folk, mermaids from Ireland, sent news that Taliesin had taken up home in some caves near their home. They had told him the Intercessor was asking for him, and he was now on his way to see me.

Even though we were not sure he would agree to what we wanted, or even that the spell would work, we were overjoyed.

More good news; the battle at Manchester had been long, and well fought. We succeeded in taking over the town and all our friends returned safely. Troops were left to help the mortals who were still coping there.

Unfortunately, we were told Cailleach Bheur had found out about Taliesin and had sent Dagdar to slay him. We only hoped he had left Ireland before Dagdar had got there. We realised that was how we had won Manchester, the enemy troops, left on their own, could be defeated. Without Dagdar on their side, we could win the war; Taliesin had become our only hope to bringing an end to all this. The mortal folk of Great Britain had done so well, but they could not last forever in these conditions and eventually the Witch would have whoever was left, as her slaves.

We were woken by a commotion one evening. I rushed downstairs to find most of our group already there. As some of them moved out of the way, I saw Seth, the gardener, standing with a rather tall, very thin man. He had a long, pointy, grey beard and looked extremely dishevelled. He looked at me and said; 'so you are the new Intercessor, not what I expected at all, so unimpressive and so.....short!' This was the last thing I expected to hear, and stood with my mouth open, looking rather dumb, for a few seconds. I realised all had turned to look at me and tried to regain my composure. 'Well we have established you are rude. Now would you like to tell us who you are and why you have come here?'

'My name is Taliesin, and apparently, you wanted to see me on a matter of great urgency, so maybe you can tell me why I am here.' The sigh of relief that went the room was clearly audible, I apologised, welcomed him, and we moved quickly to give him a seat and some food and drink before resuming any conversation.

CHAPTER 23

When Taliesin had been fed and was relaxed; we asked him about his journey. He had not dared use his magic to travel, he told us, as he knew it would be detected immediately. He knew if the Intercessor wanted him, then so would the enemy.

He had travelled some of the way as a mortal. He had found the going so hard; he was about to just find shelter and give up. As luck would have it, he had been grabbed by a group of Grogoch and hidden, just in time, as a small tribe of Dullahan passed nearby.

The Grogoch were small and very dirty. They wore no clothes but they were very hairy and covered in dirt and twigs. They may not look nice or have good hygiene; but they were friendly and didn't mind helping out when needed. Their quick thinking had saved Taliesin.

The Dullahan, on the other hand, were evil beings. They travelled on horses and had no heads on their shoulders; they carried them under their arms. They used a human spine as whips for their horses. Any mortal who came into contact with them would inevitably die. They had most certainly been sent out to look for Taliesin, and kill him before he could get to us.

The Grogoch had kept him hidden and sent word ahead amongst the Netherworld. They managed to set up a network of Fairy folk to help to get him across to England, and then onto the Intercessor. So once more he had started on his journey, but this time, he had found it easier.

Once through Liverpool; he had been handed to the Twylyth Teg, the fair ones, to be taken across the fairy hills of Cumbria and on to Kelloe, near Durham, where our cottage stood.

He had arrived late in the night only to be set upon by a huge grey dog. He had thought he was about to die and had shouted out for help and screaming, his name

and how the Intercessor had called for him. Luckily for him, the dog had disappeared as Seth came to his rescue.

I knew I had been right, my lovely nocturnal dog was my protector, and although he had been wrong in his judgement, he had stopped the attack when Seth came, I smiled.

Once Taliesin had finished his story, he turned and looked expectantly. It was now my turn to explain why he had been called for, and therefore, the reason for his long journey.

I took a deep breath, and outlined my plan to him, at the same time doing a very mortal thing; I had my fingers crossed behind my back the whole time. I told him he would be protected, and the spell was sure to work. We had to wait for an answer, however, as he decided he needed to sleep and have time to think. Once again we returned to our beds. We left instructions with Clax, not to let us sleep late the next morning. If Taliesin agreed, then we must be ready to begin straight away. All we could do was hope for sleep and a good result in the morning.

CHAPTER 24

Clax followed orders, and got us all up early the next day; breakfasts were ready and the usual chamomile tea. I had taken a great liking to this and so carried on drinking it after Hattie left.

The last to enter was the man himself. We all turned, and could not hide the hope that must have shown on our faces.

If he refused our plea, I didn't know what we would do. Even though we had prepared well, I was becoming worried at our depleted stores. The extra help had not been expected and therefore, we were using up more of our food than we had thought. I knew we could not carry on for many more months and sooner, rather than later, we would have to begin rationing the food and fuel we used. Our hopes were now depending on this man and his previous identity, Gwion Bach. It could be dangerous for him and us, but I was certain of my spell; I knew it would work.

Taliesin was kind and didn't make us wait long. 'Well Abigail, if I can call you that?' I nodded and smiled. 'Let's see what you are made of. I'll agree to your request my dear, just make sure you take good care of me, I'm not ready to expire yet. I'm placing my trust in you Intercessor; please do not make me regret my choice.' As soon as the words had left his mouth, I couldn't resist rushing to him and giving him a huge hug. Not professional, I grant you, but after all, I was just a mortal, and couldn't and wouldn't, let that part of me disappear.

The next couple of hours were chaotic. Even though our garden was protected; we decided it would be safer to do the spell in the confines of the cottage, and warmer too. We began by removing all the furniture from the sitting room. I mixed a potion of aloe, pepper, musk, vervain and saffron and also added a small amount of sweet grass. I set it in pots, in a circle around the room. I sat Taliesin in the centre of the room, in a comfortable chair, and warned him the

spell would take a while. I had to repeat the words three times with twenty minutes apart; only then, with luck, would it work. We had replenished the protection dust around the room to help keep any unwanted spirits away from us.

With everything ready, I began my spell:

Guardians of the spirit realm, hear and guard my plea,

When the witching hour rings true, bring Gwion Bach to me.

Other souls who hear my call, are not welcome in this place.

Only the one known as Gwion Bach, may enter sacred space.

We dared not talk in between the incantations, so the time seemed to slow down.

I made sure the pots of herbs were kept burning, and paced around the room. I didn't know what the outcome of all this would be, but I knew I was doing the right thing. My mind went back to Hattie. She told me to follow my instincts and that was exactly what I was doing. I looked up and gave a silent prayer; please let me make you proud Hattie.

At last the time came and I made my final incantation:

Guardians of the spirit realm, hear and guard my plea,

When the witching hour rings true, bring Gwion Bach to me.

Other souls who hear my call are not welcome in this place.

Only the one known as Gwion Bach, may enter sacred space.

We waited, it seemed forever, but probably, in reality, only a few minutes and then a light shone down on Taliesin and he seemed younger in his stature. He spoke and it was a young man's voice. 'Tell me the meaning of this, why have I been called forth, I do not belong to this time and place.' It had worked; I was elated but knew he couldn't stay long, so I chose my words well before I spoke.

CHAPTER 25

'Welcome Gwion Bach, I am sorry for this disturbance and would thank you for your patience. I needed your counsel on a matter of great urgency. I am Abigail, the Intercessor, and our country is in terrible danger; mortals and fairy folk alike.' He looked at me and nodded for me to continue.

'Cailleach Bheur has declared war and wants to rule. She has bewitched Dagdar, and he is using his great battle knowledge, to help her in her quest. Please great prophet and magician; could you help by telling us a way to remove the hex from Dagdar so we may defeat the Witch, and return the balance?'

Gwion Bach looked around the room and then took a deep breath and closed his eyes, and lowered his head. I turned to look at my friends; I wasn't sure what was happening. Orchid smiled, and put her fingers to her lips in a sign for me to stay silent. I nodded and turned back to entity in the middle of our circle.

He eventually lifted his head and spoke; 'Even I cannot tell you of the outcome of this war. I have looked to the future and can only see up to a certain point. A quest you must undertake Intercessor, and not one I envy you of. The only way to rid Dagdar of this hex, is to visit the other plane and talk to the Fairy Kings and Queens.'

There was a gasp around the room and Gwion Bach continued; 'only they have the power to remove this hex, but tread carefully and protect yourself well. The Royalty do not like to be bothered with earthly things and may swat you like a fly. You must get them to listen to you, and I urge you; be forceful, but courteous, be arrogant, but humble and be strong but meek. This I can tell you, if they decide you are not worthy, then you will never leave their plane alive. I wish you luck Intercessor, and now I wish to return to my rightful place.' I thanked him, and we all said our farewells. I then thanked the Guardians for their help. Once again he lowered his head and the light disappeared. Taliesin

was with us once more. He stood up and seemed to check himself and then simply said with a chuckle; 'well done Abigail, I hope I was of help.'

CHAPTER 26

Not wanting to discuss anything until I had digested all the information; I set about replacing the furniture and clearing away the pots of herbs. Eventually I called a meeting and we sat once more in the kitchen, and talked about what had happened with Gwion Bach.

'Well it seems I must go to see the Kings and Queens of the Fairies, has this happened before, and how do I get there; more to the point where is there?' I asked my friends. Everyone spoke at once and I had to calm them down to understand anything I was being told.

What I learned then had me more frightened than anything I had faced so far. It seemed only one Intercessor before me had dared go to the other plane, which the Royalty resided in. No one knew, for certain, what had happened, but tales were spread that she never even got to see the Royalty. She had not been protected well enough, and the evil souls and spirits that haunt the outskirts of the plane itself, had taken her and killed her.

I shivered, then noticing all eyes were on me, I lifted myself up and said; 'well I had better be well protected then.' With that one sentence as the end of the meeting, I left to look in my spell book and see what I could come up with. I sat for hours over my book and still found nothing suitable. I was beginning to think there was no such spell, when a thought flashed to me.

I sat with a pen and paper and thought for a while, I wrote down words and then looked at them, changing the odd one here and there. When I was eventually happy with it, I went downstairs and made a potion of Bay leaves, Cedar and Red Clover. I added this to some chamomile tea and went back to my room. I then said a spell of my own, my first of many, which I later added to my book.

Intercessors of times past, and those of times to come,

I make myself ready, as I sleep here in this home.

Come to me in my dreams, and put my mind at rest,

Hear my plea to join forces and help me in my quest.

Bring forth to me the knowledge, to find the perfect spell.

I have faith in your wisdom, I will listen well.

I then drank the concoction, put some bay leaves under my pillow and settled down for the night. It wasn't perfect but I hoped my spell would work. I certainly needed all the help I could get.

CHAPTER 27

As before, I fell asleep immediately, and the haze came over me. I kept my calm this time and landed in a beautiful, cottage style, sitting room. I looked around and saw seven old women sitting on large armchairs; they looked at me and smiled. This time I was not invisible, which was made clear when a familiar voice said; 'Hello, my dear, it's lovely to see you again; although I didn't think it would be so soon.'

'Hattie!' I gasped and I ran straight over and gave her a huge hug. Another voice brought me back to my senses. 'Well you were certainly right Hattie, she is a natural. She has managed to call as far back as Agnes and she was from 1410. I never even thought to call upon any of us, did any of you?' She looked to the other ladies, who all shook their heads.

Hattie smiled and said let me introduce you to our line, Abigail. I will go back in order of time, newest first, and the first is the one who gave you the compliment; Effie, my predecessor. Then we have Sara, Elizabeth, Margaret, Charlotte, Theda and lastly Agnes.' The ladies sat and greeted me. The difference in the style of clothing gave away the era in which each lived. I then noticed two shapes seemingly floating around the room. 'You have done something we didn't think possible Abigail, these are future Intercessors, they cannot be seen properly because they have not yet been born. You really do have great power dear, just as I thought.' Hattie said and then as she finished, a smug, I told you so, look came on her face. I had to stifle a giggle and get back to the reason for this gathering.

I explained to the ladies all that had happened, and the journey Taliesin had said I must take. They huddled together mumbling, and even seeming to talk to the opaque apparitions. Hattie scribbled things down on paper, crossing various parts out. After what seemed like hours they handed me the paper. Charlotte turned and spoke to me; 'My dear stick to these words, do not stray and make the

strongest protection potion you can, also carry several different protection pouches, you never know which evil may try to harm you. Good wishes to you, my dear. Please though, be warned, you must always keep your eyes forward on the journey; never look to the right or left and never ever look back.'

I thanked the ladies for their help, I wanted to stay for a while and chat but reluctantly, and with a heavy heart, I bade them goodbye. Once again I awoke in my bed, but this time I was holding a piece of paper. I looked at it and there was the spell to see me safely, I hoped, into the plane of the Fairy Royalty.

CHAPTER 28

I set about making my protection potions. I could feel the mood of my friends, they were all worried about me, and I knew some of them thought I would be lost forever. I tried to lighten the atmosphere, and portray a confident attitude. I joked and laughed, and even made myself feel better. I had to put aside all my fears and doubts and believe in myself, and my success in this quest.

I decided to do as Charlotte had said, and I made several protection bags. I mixed some with Heather, Pine and Motherwort; others with Angelica Root, Blessed Thistle and Bramble Leaf and more with Caraway, Coltsfoot and Comfrey Leaf. Then I threw caution to the wind and mixed them all together in a couple more pouches; I hoped I was covering all threats.

I had to try this quickly as it was now the end of March. I gathered everyone around and told them I was doing the spell that evening. I knew they were worried; and with all my preparations finished, I made a meal we could all share; I just hoped it wasn't my 'last supper'.

It actually turned out to be a lovely meal and excellent conversation. We talked of Intercessors past and I told them how I had met some of them the night before. Now I had faces to put to the stories and felt I knew my predecessors better. They were amazed at this news, and I think their respect rose for me and they began to think this plan would work.

As all good things do; the meal came to an end. We made the room ready for my spell, and, as an extra precaution, I rubbed Geranium and Vetivert oil over my body. Now the time had come, and I could hear little chants from my friends, all of them sending me their luck in their own way. I moved to the table, filled with candles and herbs, took a deep breath, and began.

I ask thee now with honour, to answer this my plea.

The noblest of Royals, I beg of you, please give your council to me.

I need your words of wisdom, to help me in this fight.

For all your loyal subjects, I need your strength and mite.

Grant me safe passage, so I may speak with you and learn.

So I can win those against your ways, upon my safe return.

I know I am not worthy, to stand before the likes of thee.

But above all else you are just, please help us the powers that be.

Now all we could do was sit and wait, hoping they would allow me to see them. I

had done all I could for now.

CHAPTER 29

It was over three hours later when I began to feel something. This wasn't like the haze, I felt a sickly dizzy feeling and had to swallow hard and breathe deeply so I wouldn't faint. Wave upon wave of these feelings came over me and at first I fought it. I realised this made me feel worse so I tried to calm myself down and let the feelings wash over me.

This worked and rather than feeling ill; the waves were pleasurable and I became relaxed. The people at the table disappeared and I could feel myself lifting up and suddenly shot forward at great speed. I never liked roller coasters or fast rides, so all I could do was close my eyes and pray I didn't bang into anything. At last I felt myself slowing down and felt brave enough to take a peak.

It was daylight, and I could hear jolly music blasting all around me. I was about to look around, when I remembered the words from Charlotte telling me to look straight ahead. I wasn't taking any chances. I soon realised I had chosen well, I could see ahead several of the fairies I knew to be from the Unseelie Court, the evil ones. I also saw Ettin, a three headed giant, and Eachy, a human-like lake monster. I soon realised this was the outer kingdom. This area was full of evil and if I had turned my head, they would have seen me, and I would surely have died. If I looked straight ahead, I was invisible to them.

I said a silent 'thank you' to Charlotte, and before I knew it I had entered a slightly darker place. Here it was twilight, and I found myself slowly descending to the ground. I could feel the peace straight away, and knew I was in the Royal Kingdom. I looked around and gasped, it was the land from my books; right down to the lanterns entwined through the trees.

I saw the fireflies, and the fields of flowers; how could this be? I was still in shock when a large humanoid creature came to meet me. He had a deep, growling voice, but his face betrayed kindness and serenity. He bid me to follow him, and off we went towards an archway made of tree branches, stretching across to meet

each other, and entwine their arms. We passed under the archway, and once again, my breath was taken away.

Before me stood the most beautiful castle I had ever seen. It was even better than those seen in fairy-tale books. It was coloured with a rainbow of pastels, and circular towers rose in to the air and glistened as though they were encrusted in diamonds. We entered golden doors into a hall of crystal floors and cream fur rugs dotted around.

We walked through the hall and into another room, smaller, but just as impressive. At last I had come face to face with some of the Fairy Royalty, and all I could think of to do, was courtesy.

CHAPTER 30

One by one the noble men and women were introduced to me by my guide. For want of anything better; I bowed my head at each name. I knew of most, but not all, and my nerves were beginning to show.

The queens were first:

Cliodna, she had long flowing fair hair, and I knew once she had fell in love with a mortal and had left the fairy world. A wave of magic had brought her back and eventually she had become a Queen.

Grainr, had the brightest cheeks I had seen, but that was all I knew of her.

Orla, I knew she was known as the golden queen.

Aine, she was the goddess of fertility, healing, vitality and prosperity.

Grian, the one I hoped would be my ally. She was known to help people achieve their goals, and was very persuasive.

It was now the turn of the kings:

Donn, he was the most impressive of them all. He was benevolent but also fierce.

Midhir, he was the father of Donn, although not as large.

Knop, was the king who loved music and dancing. The last was another I could use as an ally;

Ilbhreac, he took over the position of King when Dagdar gave it up. I knew he had a great respect for Dagdar and would hate to think of him under a witches spell.

Well I was here, in front of some of the most noble of the Fairies; now all I had to do was persuade them to help. I knew it wouldn't be as easy as that.

CHAPTER 31

Fairies were known for their hospitality; and these ones were no different. I was ready to get down working and putting my case forward, but the nobles would have none of it. Firstly I was taken to another room where a feast had been laid in my honour. It was not often they had guests, and they were making the most of it. They chatted as we ate and then the entertainment began.

The Fairy music began and I could feel myself falling into a state of euphoria. I fought it, and if it had not been for the many protection potions I carried, I think I would have been mesmerised, and I would have forgotten my task. I knew this is how mortal folk had ended up being kept in the Fairy world forever. This was probably their intention, I was being tested, and If I failed; then so would my mission and the war that was being fought on the mortal plane.

There would be no discussions tonight, and so I pretended exhaustion. This was taken as a good sign by the Royalty, and I was shown to a room where I could rest for the night. Once I was on my own, I checked my herb pouches. I knew the magic would not last long in this place, so I had to keep my guard up. I needed my rest to keep up my strength, so I went to bed. It was a shaped as a sleigh, with silk and fur as the covers; to be honest I had the most perfect sleep that night, and woke up feeling more relaxed and confident. Everything about this place was carefully created to lure you into complacency, and to make you forget your past and want to stay there.

My confident feeling didn't last long though, as a group of Fairies came in giggling, and said they were to show me around the realm. Reluctantly, I went with them. If I was honest, I did long to see the realm but I knew my journey had been one of importance and this was just another delay. It would not work; I would not forget why I was there.

The serenity of the place was overwhelming. As before it was twilight; I found out this was always the case, and I looked again at the warm glow cast by the

thousands of lanterns entwined in the trees and across the small homes. The air was filled with bird song and the humming of the fireflies. I was taken across a glorious field of clover, to a group of 'picture box' cottages.

I found out these belonged to mortals who had been lured by the Fairy song and had been trapped in the Fairy Realm. Of course they didn't feel trapped, they lived in peace and tranquillity, and there were no worries here. I was introduced to some of them and I knew this was yet another tactic to make me want to stay.

One lady I was introduced to, was called Guene, she told me she had been here for many years now, and loved it. As she rambled on about the life and the goodness of the Fairies, a feeling crept over me that I could not shake. I knew I had never met her, but she felt familiar somehow. The more she talked, the stronger the feeling became, but it was not until she hugged me, I realised who she was.

Her memories had flooded into me; this was the missing Intercessor, who was thought to have died. She had been taken over by the Fairy magic and had forgotten all that had gone before. I was pleased she was safe, and longed to talk to her, but I knew this would do no good. If she returned to the mortal world now, she would turn to dust. She had been here for centuries, even though she thought she had lived a normal lifetime.

I was not Guene, and never would be. Rather than lure me into their world, this meeting had strengthened my resolve to obtain the help I needed, and get back to my world. I asked for an audience with the Royalty, but was told they were unavailable and I would see them at dinner. I had to assert myself at the dinner, I knew this, as the magic here was powerful and I would not be able to fight it off for long. All I could do was to wait for the evening meal and make my plea then, even if I was risking the anger of the Kings and Queens there, it was then or never.

CHAPTER 32

After a long day of trying to keep my mind free, I was, once again, led to the vast dining hall. They had already begun eating; Royalty waits for no one. I took my seat and ate. As the meal was drawing to a close, I took my chance and stood up. Remembering the words of Gwion Bach, I picked my words carefully.

'Your majesties, I must speak with you now, this matter cannot wait any longer. I will not be put off by frivolities. I am so grateful you granted me this chance, and I know you will help me for you are the great and just, and care about your subjects.'

A silence swept around the room and then King Donn shouted; 'how dare you mortal, you are mocking our hospitality.' I once again thought of my words and spoke loudly, with a confidence I didn't really feel.

'I dare because I am the Intercessor. I may not be Royalty, but my duties are great and important. Please remember, your majesties, it was through your wisdom and power that my line began. You gave a gift to only a few mortals, to keep the balance on Earth, it was through your great foresight that the Realms have co-existed for so long.' They all looked at each other; it was obvious they had not been spoken to like this.

'So you are the Intercessor, and that gives you the right to interrupt our entertainment? What can you do anyway mortal?' This was said by King Knop, and I knew my next answer had to be perfect, or I had lost.

'What can I do? I will not talk of what I CAN do; I'll tell you what I WILL do. I will fight those who dare to go against your laws and proclamations. I will defeat these people, and I will restore the balance. I will do the work I was born to do and never give up.'

I am, however, only mortal and I have come here to beseech you to help me in this quest. I would have been nothing without you, and now I need you so much. Help me to be all I can be, in your name.'

I hoped I had got the balance right. Gwion Bach's words rang in my ears; forceful but courteous, arrogant but humble, and strong but meek. I waited and watched as they looked at each other. They seemed to be silently talking to each other, but I couldn't be certain. At last it was Queen Grian's turn to speak; 'follow us and we will listen to what you have to say.'

We moved to some kind of board room, but it was unlike those of mortals. It was so ornate and comfortable. There was no big table, just lots of huge armchairs dotted around. A rather old man sat in the corner at a small table and held a feather quill pen over a long parchment of paper; much like a stenographer at a court. When we were all seated I was told to begin.

CHAPTER 33

I began recounting all the events that had taken place over the last few months. I told them about Caileach Bheur and her plans to take over. I relived the battles of London, Manchester and Hexham, to name a few, and explained the ferocity of the battles had been mainly due to Dagdar. I looked around when I said this but not one of them showed any emotion. I didn't know if I was getting through to them or not, but I saw the little old man writing it all down.

At last I told them of Taliesin, and how we spoke to Gwion Bach and how it was him who said I must gain Royal council. I then explained about my meeting with my predecessors, to help with a spell to travel to this Realm, and now, here I was, to get their help to remove the hex from Dagdar.

Once again they looked at each other and slight nods could be seen, I knew then, they did have a kind of telepathy. Queen Grian once again spoke; 'Go to your bed now Intercessor, we need to discuss this. We will call you in the morning and tell you of our decision.' I was dismissed, and although I was frustrated at yet another delay, I could do nothing but obey.

The next morning, true to their word, I was told to dress and come straight to the meeting room. I stood in front of them and was told to sit. 'We decided to look into the mortal world to see for ourselves what was going on,' said King Ilbhreac. 'You have described the events well, and we saw for ourselves the bewitchment of Dagdar and the devastation of our country. We have all agreed that releasing Dagdar and stopping Caileach Bheur is way beyond your power.' I was about to argue when Queen Aine jumped in; 'how dare this witch!' She turned to me and softened her voice. 'My dear, rather like a Vampire gaining strength from blood; Caileach Bheur has become powerful by draining the magic from others. She now has a very strong bond with Dagdar and is using his great power to make hers stronger.'

I was beginning to feel worried, I was sure I had left it too late, and I had failed in my first task as Intercessor. Queen Aine, however, continued; 'You must first do something for us, and we will remove the hex and take care of Caileach Bheur.'

They went on to explain what I had to do in great detail, and told me to return to my world immediately. I had to be ready by May Days Eve. They said a spell over me and once again I felt the sickly dizziness descend over me. This time I didn't fight it and, keeping my eyes straight ahead, I shot through the plane, and once again, found myself in my kitchen.

CHAPTER 34

The call went out, and all my friends rushed to the kitchen. I was hugged and kissed, and the relief that I had returned was evident. I told them about my meeting with Guene, and how she was safe and happy, as were the other mortals there. I laughed and joked, at their happiness to see me, after all, I had only been gone a couple of days, or so I thought. In the mortal world, I had been gone almost three weeks, and my friends had thought I may have been caught or killed. I asked the date; it was now the 16th of April, I didn't have long to complete my mission. I calmed everyone down and told them what had happened to me in my absence and what we must now do to make the Fairy Royalty plan work. We had to somehow lure Dagdar to the Ribble Valley, which was near Blackpool. Once there, we had to travel to the top of Pendle Hill. At the top of this hill, the Fairy Kings and Queens would surround him and remove the hex. All this had to be done by May Days eve for the spell to work.

We got straight to work, trying to come up with an idea that would work. Hours had past and we still could not think of a plan that would fool Dagdar. Clax came in and started preparing some food for us. He didn't look himself, there was something wrong. I left the kitchen, and called to him, I wanted to talk to him privately. He came into the room and I noticed he seemed smaller, and his brown hair had become lighter.

'Clax, my dear friend, how are you? I hope you haven't been doing too much while I have been gone.' Clax smiled at my concern, but gave nothing away. 'Just my duties Abigail,' he said. I knew I would get no more out of him, I wanted to hug him and beg him to tell me what ailed him; I knew it would do no good.

I vowed when this war had ended, I would make him relax more and help him with the household. Now, though, I had to get back to finding a solution to our problem. I went back to the kitchen, where the others were still deep in discussion. We thrashed out several plans and discarded them all. Tiredness

brought about silly arguments and I decided we should call it a night. We needed to sort this out quickly to be ready for our deadline; but we would gain nothing by driving ourselves to exhaustion.

I fell in to my bed that night, but I tossed and turned, I couldn't sleep. I thought of everything that had happened during the last few months. We needed an angle that the enemy would believe; and we were running out of time. My mind must have shut down, because I eventually fell asleep.

I woke up the next morning, tired, but full of hope. We would work it out in time, after all I was the Intercessor.

CHAPTER 35

I decided to jot down all that had happened, everyone chipped in with various battles and occurrences. At last we had written down a very good account of the last few months. With all this information in front of us, we could look back and see if the past events could help with new ideas. As it turned out; this actually initiated our breakthrough.

We had sat around the table for hours when we were discussing my journey to the other Realm. Bay suddenly spoke up; 'what if they have found out about your meeting with the Royalty? They would know they were helping us and not believe anything we said!'

We hadn't thought of this at all, and realised Bay was right. If they knew of my journey, then they would most definitely be on their guard. 'It would have been better if the Kings and Queens had decided not to help at all,' lamented Grenville. His words seemed to repeat themselves in my head.

'That's it!' I shouted, and everyone jumped in shock and surprise. 'I think I know how we are going to do this. We have to make sure they do know about my meeting, but only we know what was said at that meeting.'

I set about telling them my idea, they listened, the smiles growing on their faces. The kitchen erupted with ideas, and with a lot of input from everyone, we came up with, what we thought was, a workable plan. To make this as authentic as possible, we couldn't let anyone else in on what we were going to do; the less people who knew the truth, the more it would be believed. We knew it was going to be hard on us, everyone had to be in agreement. We had to keep to the same story to enemy and allies alike.

Clax set about preparing food and drink for our last meal, before our greatest performance so far began. We couldn't stretch out the meal though, as much as we wanted to, we knew we had to begin straight away to pull this off. We ate, hugged, and wished each other luck. The next minute, my friends grabbed me and

dragged me out to the garden. They screamed and shouted at me, pushing me down to the ground. I got kicked and hit, although nowhere near as hard as it looked.

'Why didn't you tell us sooner?' Shouted Eirickr, 'you would have us die for nothing?' I tried to reason with him, but he wasn't listening. The others all joined in; 'were you trying to make a name for yourself Intercessor?' growled Grenville. The insults went on; Luna shouted, 'we came from Spain to help a deceiver, I am calling to my clan, we cannot even leave immediately as we would be killed. You have signed our death warrant Intercessor!'

Some of the nearby wood nymphs revealed themselves with all the commotion and Oswald shouted to them; 'Look at Abigail, she is no longer an Intercessor, we have no need for one anymore. She has been to see the Royalty, and she thought to delay telling us what happened.' The wood nymphs moved closer to hear what was been said. 'The Royalty have wiped their hands of the mortal plane, it bores them now. They said Cailleach Bheur could have this realm, she was welcome to it. Now what do we do? We will be surely killed for going against her and siding with the Intercessor,' The nymphs looked terrified, they too had sided with Abigail, they didn't know what to do.

'We could kill her,' said Bay, 'but they might just kill us after it is done. We are doomed!'

Gwent shouted out; 'I have it! We could trade her for our lives. I don't want to deal with Cailleach Bheur though, she may still kill us. If only we could somehow get word to Dagdar. He will follow the rules of surrender.' Some of the crowd turned to the wood nymphs and told them to spread the word, the war was lost. All should bow to the word of the Witch, for she would be our next Queen. We begged them to take care of themselves, as it was now every man for himself. We no longer had the protection of the Royalty and the line of Intercessors.

As they were leaving they heard, 'you are now our hostage traitor until we can think what to do with you.' I was then dragged back inside the cottage.

Phase one of the plan was now complete. We knew word of the mutiny would spread fast amongst our allies. It would also get back to the enemy, but in an indirect way. Once word got around that the Kings and Queens no longer cared about them or their battles, and the Intercessor had deceived them; Dagdar and Cailleach Bheur herself, would be swamped with surrenders. We only hoped our troops would go along with their leaders and no heroes would emerge to spoil the outcome.

CHAPTER 36

If our plan had worked, and the enemy believed us, we knew we would be contacted. The days dragged, however, each one passing with no news and time was running short. It took over a week for the word to come back to us. A note was pinned to one of the large oak trees, and Seth brought it to us. It read; a Gorgades was to come to the edge of the cottage garden the next day to discuss our terms of surrender. As with the terms of surrender discussions, they expected he would be safe from any attack, and be able to leave freely. This had been the news we were hoping for, and left a note in the same place agreeing to the meeting, and the terms.

That night we went down to the basement, as there were no windows down there, and celebrated our success so far. We couldn't show any kind of unity, even in the confines of the cottage, to be sure that everyone believed our story and so this was the safest place. During the day, I paced by my bedroom window, to make anyone watching, think I was confined there, and every evening I would sneak down to the basement so we could discuss our plans. We couldn't make any mistakes now, we had to work together to pull this off.

The next day, I stood at my bedroom window, and I put a dejected look on my face; it wasn't hard as I was worried that things may not go our way. At long last the Gorgades appeared at the edge of the garden. He looked much like a man; but was covered, from head to toe, in long wiry hair. I saw my group emerge and they all moved to the middle of the garden, keeping a gap between them and the stranger. My window was open slightly so I could hear the proceedings.

There was no blizzard or strong wind that day, Cailleach Bheur had stopped her onslaught, in order for the talks to proceed. This was the first respite we had experienced since the beginning of the war, and I felt it was a sign that Cailleach Bheur believed she had won.

It was Eirickr who stood in front of the crowd, his strong deep voice echoed out as he welcomed the visitor.

'Have you come with news for us from our Queen?' He said. The Gorgades looked only at Eirickr and answered, his voice seemed to growl as he spoke; 'The Queen has heard of your plight, what are your demands for surrender? She has agreed to listen and she will give you her answer tomorrow.' Again Eirickr spoke, trying to sound humble as he did so.

'We know we have lost, the Queen was greater than us, and Dagdar fought the superior battle. If it had not been for the treacherous Intercessor, we would have joined her forces from the beginning. She has led us on a foolhardy quest and we all see that now. She was willing to hide the word from the other Realm, in order to make a name for herself. We will not die in her name. We still fear the mighty Cailleach Bheur, however, and so we have thought of a way to honour her, as well as surrender, so we can show her how much she is worshipped. If she agrees to keep the weather calm for a short time; we also have the perfect way to show all who still might be against her that she is not to be disobeyed.'

A smirk spread across the Gorgades face and he told Eirickr to continue. 'We want to take the Intercessor to the Ribble Valley. We will climb to the top of Pendle hill. Everyone knows of the witches who lived there, and the evil past of the hill, even most mortals will not climb it at night for fear of ghosts and spirits. Here we will hand Abigail over to Dagdar, the Queens commander, and he can do with her as he wishes. We are too afraid of the Queens wrath to meet her, but we know Dagdar will honour the rules of surrender. We have thought of a way that would make this surrender an even greater feat for the Queen.'

The Gorgades seemed very intrigued and was enjoying every minute of the grovelling talk. 'So let me hear of this great plan and I will pass it all on to the Queen, so she can decide if it is worth her time.' He looked all around the group then, and each of them played their part well, they looked dejected and

beaten. He then looked up to my window. I was standing with my hands and head against the glass. In reality, it was so I could hear better, but to him it looked like utter despair. His grin widened as Eirikr went on.

'We will meet Dagdar at the top of the hill on May Days eve. This is the day the Queen would normally give up her reign and hand over to Brigit. Think how symbolic this would be, instead of Cailleach Bheur giving up her rule; it will be the last day of the line of Intercessors, and this will surely show all how great she is.'

I could tell, even from this distance, that the idea pleased him. He couldn't resist making a few sly comments about the superiority of his side, and the stupidity of following a mere mortal. He eventually left telling us, as he went, to be ready for his return the next day. He would have an answer to our demands then. Phase two of the plan was almost completed, we hoped the enemy would go for our proposal. With all I had heard and seen of Cailleach Bheur I really didn't think she could resist it.

CHAPTER 37

The next day dragged. Every minute felt like an hour, and I paced up and down my room. Clax brought me food and drink, to keep up the pretence that I was a prisoner. I longed to sit in the kitchen with my friends, I missed the chatter around the table; but we couldn't slip up now, we were so close.

It was not until around two in the afternoon, that the hairy humanoid appeared again. Once more Eirickr led the group into the garden. Greetings over, the Gorgades spoke; 'Cailleach Bheur, our mighty ruler, has agreed to your terms. She will send Dagdar to meet you and take possession of the Intercessor. She will make no blizzards or winds to hamper you on your journey. In return for this you must swear now, in front of me, to give praise to the rightful ruler, and to follow her and only her from herein.'

Each of the group solemnly swore this in front of him and he relaxed. Now the details had been agreed, he left. I sneaked out of my room, and we met, once again, in the privacy of the basement.

Our plan was working, we were jubilant. Not one of the group had lied in their vow to the Gorgades. They would always give praise to the rightful ruler, and even lay down their life for her; the rightful ruler was not Cailleach Bheur, and as she had not been named in the vow, their integrity was intact.

We now had to finalise our plans to travel to the meeting place. We had to journey as mortals, and set about planning the route. We also needed more sleighs, Orchid, Gwent, Grenville and Bay went out to get these whilst the rest of us sat over maps to find the best route.

After a great deal of consideration, we eventually agreed on the easiest route for us. As there was now no traffic, the best way to travel would be along the motorways for as long as we could. We decided, we would travel down the A1 to Wetherby, then take the A61 toward Ripon. It was here it got a bit tricky as we had to find the A59 to take us onto the A671. After that it was mainly B roads

and we hoped they were still passable. The journey would have been easy in normal conditions, and in a car; but it was far from normal outside. We would have to judge where we were, and clear road signs along the way to help us.

Our next task was provisions. We needed food, drink, warm clothing, and climbing equipment to help us up Pendle hill. For all it was called a hill; it was almost a mountain, it was 1,835 feet high. Seth, Oswald and Eirickr set off in the sleigh to the large town nearby, and, for want of a better word, stole the equipment we needed from a store that supplied outdoor goods. There had not been a great deal left in the store, but we managed to get most of the things we needed.

Next we had to decide who would be going on the journey. Yet more arguments followed, as everyone wanted to be there. We only had five sleighs, and one of those would have to be used to carry the provisions, and we only had enough shape shifters to pull the five. We also decided three of Jarls men would come with us; firstly to represent him, and secondly, they could help us as they were used to severe weather and freezing conditions. That only left three sleighs, carrying three people in each.

I came up with the only fair way to pick those who would accompany me to the Ribble Valley; an old mortal custom. I wrote everyone's name down and put them in a large bowl. I called for Clax to pick the names one by one until we had the eight we needed.

First to come out was Selena, then Gwent. We held our breaths on each pick, and then there was an audible cry of excitement from the winner, and sighs of disappointment from the losers. The names came out; Grenville, Corisande, Aage, Lucia, Eirickr and lastly Oswald.

The noise rose in the basement, congratulations and commiserations ringing in the air. Once everyone had settled down, we finished our preparations, and settled down for the night. We would begin our journey early the next morning.

I thought with all the scenarios of what was to come, going through my head, I would not be able to sleep; once again I was wrong. Before I knew it I must have drifted off into a very deep sleep.

CHAPTER 38

I woke at dawn to the smell of food. I entered the kitchen to find the table laid with food. 'You will need to eat well before your journey, so tuck in.' Clax had thought of everything, as usual. We filled our stomachs until bursting point, and then got dressed in our many layers of clothes ready for the journey. The sleighs were packed and the shape shifters were once again horses and harnessed to the sleighs. We had said our goodbyes in the house, so no peeping eyes could see the love and good wishes. Silently and without a visible audience, we set off. My sleigh was in the middle, to keep up an appearance of being a prisoner. I had Oswald on one side of me and Corisande on the other. We headed towards the A1, and even though I knew this area, it looked completely different covered in so much snow. Cailleach Bheur had been true to her word, there were no blizzards and no winds, but this made everywhere silent and eerie. The only sound we heard were the horses' hooves crunching in the snow and the jangle of the harness.

It took a couple of hours to actually find our way to the A1, but once on it our journey went quite smoothly. Every now and then we would stop to clear a sign, which were now easily reachable as the snow was so deep. At last we saw the sign for the A61 to Ripon, and headed towards it. We had to take it slower now, clearing more signs to find the route to the A59. By the time we got onto it, it was late afternoon and we followed it until we found the A671. By this time we were hungry and bitter cold and decided to look for somewhere to settle for the night.

It wasn't long before we spotted a house on its own, which looked deserted. Lucia used her magic to fly down the chimney to see if it was safe. She had only been gone a few minutes when she opened the window upstairs for us all to climb into; the full downstairs being covered by deep snow. The sleighs were stored behind the house, and everyone settled in the bedroom.

We closed the curtains and set the camping stoves away and lit the small gas heaters we had brought. We felt a little bit warmer now, and ate the food we had prepared. Now, in much greater spirits and stomachs happy, we snuggled in to our sleeping bags and after a long discussion about the plan ahead, we settled down to sleep.

The next morning, we filled the bathroom sink with boiled water, and cleaned ourselves the best we could. Feeling clean and refreshed, we ate a hearty breakfast and packed up the sleighs again to resume our journey.

It took most of the morning to negotiate the B roads and after several false turns, we entered the Ribble Valley at last. It was now May Days eve and we had to meet Dagdar by 8.pm. We had nine hours to climb the hill, which would be easily done in normal conditions.

We had winter hiking clothes and also some snow shoes to help us with the climb, but we knew it was going to be extremely hard.

CHAPTER 39

We started the climb, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I climbed with various scenarios going through my head. What if Dagdar wasn't there? What if it was a trap? What if the Royalty failed us? All these thoughts were swirling around my head and I knew I had to think positive.

We stopped, after we had been climbing for a couple of hours, to catch our breaths. I had never climbed anything in my life, except a flight of stairs, and I was gasping, my chest tight. I sat for quite some time before my breathing returned to normal and my heart had stopped racing.

We set off again but I had not even been climbing for an hour when I signalled to stop again. The Huldafolk looked at me despairingly, from way up the hill and made their way back down to see what was wrong. I was gasping for breath, and they had to tell me, step by step, how to fill my lungs. I was not up to this, I knew, and to be honest, I screamed out loud in frustration and despair. We had to decide what we could do. Even if we went at a much slower pace, I would not be able to finish the climb.

The Huldafolk brought out flasks they had made up, with hot sweet tea and gave me a drink. They then handed them round to the others. When I had calmed down enough, we resumed the conversation about the climb ahead. We had four amongst us who could fly, but only two of those could hold the weight of another being. The Huldafolk could carry on ahead, they would be able to climb up the hill in no time, without our hindrance. Eirickr decided to go on with them, as he too was used to this terrain.

Oswald would carry Aage to the top, and Corisande would carry Grenville. They would have a short rest and then come back down for myself and Gwent. Selena and Lucia could fly to the top by themselves. The hikers set off before us, and the rest of us took our time sipping on our tea, and resting. When we felt we had rested enough, Oswald and Corisande set off with their first two passengers,

while the rest of us packed the cups and flasks away. It was just under half an hour, when they returned. The hikers they said had made great progress and would be at the top within the hour. Oswald sent Selena and Luna on their flight, while they got ready to carry us. Corisande was to carry Gwent and Oswald would carry me and the two back packs we still had with us.

He set the backpacks on both shoulders and then scooped me in his arms like a baby. I clung to his neck, even though I trusted him with every bone in my body, I was taking no chances. We took off, slowly at first, and then gained speed and height, and flew easily up the side of the hill. I saw Corisande up ahead, with the child sized Gwent on her back. He too clung to her neck and kept his head tucked down between her shoulders.

Oswald told me to look down, and as I did so, I saw the hikers, not far from the summit. They had made great time and still looked strong and confident.

At last Oswald set me down on the top of Pendle hill, and I joined the others who were there already. We didn't have long to wait before we were joined by the hikers and we set off to a small flat area where we could set up a kind of camp, as we still had a few hours until our meeting with Dagdar.

CHAPTER 40

We passed the time with small talk, trying to keep things light. We knew if things were to go wrong now; we would all die. Tales were told of homelands and kin, and we all prayed we would see them again.

The sky darkened, and we stood, and moved to the centre of the peak, to be ready for the final part of our plan. My friends fanned out in a slight semi circle, and I stood in the centre and about six foot forward.

We didn't have long to wait, coming up to meet us was Dagdar riding on a huge stag, and two further stags slightly behind him. Once in front of us, he dismounted, and the stags changed shape into three very large Humanoids. He looked around the group and then his eyes rested on me.

'So this is the infamous Intercessor. You are hardly worthy of my axe, but I will kill you in the name of my Queen. When I have done this, the rest of you may go free, but make sure you tell all of what happened here tonight, and spread the word that any who dare defy the Queen will have the same fate. Come forward Intercessor, if you dare.' He laughed as he said it, and I was terrified.

I pulled myself together and moved forward, silently praying to the Royalty to hurry up. Dagdar stepped forward, raised his axe and shouted. 'In the name of the Queen, Cailleach Bheur!' I had failed, I was about to die. I thought of my parents, and how I would never see them again; I hadn't even said goodbye. I thought of my friends, those here, and those at the cottage, what would become of them. I waited for the drop of the axe, but it didn't come. I opened my eyes and saw a golden light surrounding us.

I looked up to see the nine Kings and Queens descending in a circle around Dagdar and myself. Everyone but me, seemed hypnotised, and didn't move a muscle. The three Humanoids had, however, changed back into stags, but still stood

absolutely still. Once on the ground, the Royalty joined hands and began a chant in unison.

By Basilisk and Bloodstone, by Garlic in the fields,

By the Poppies and what they yield,

Invisibly we make our shield,

To detect the and deflect thee.

By Dragons blood and Salamanders,

By horses when their hooves strike sparks,

By the Dragon breathing flames from the Book of Life.

We erase thy name, we cut the cords and unlock the chains,

We sever all the ties, by which thee were bound,

And with impenetrable walls, we surround,

Against the power and its source.

We banish thee forever from him,

And any harm from thee to him,

Doubles back and tables turned, thou shall by thyself be burned.

By the power of three times three,

We banish thee, we banish thee, we banish thee,

and He is set free, so mote it be.

Dagdar lowered the axe, and fell to the ground weeping. The spell had been removed, but the memories of all he had done in the name of Cailleach Bheur had not. As he lay on the ground, we heard an angry scream fill the air, it was undoubtedly the Witch, she had not wanted to miss the proceedings, and had seen, instead, her greatest advantage being taken away from her. We caught sight of her riding away, as fast as the wind, on the grey mare she now rode.

CHAPTER 41

Dagdar, full of grief and guilt, suddenly grabbed his axe, and jumped on one of the stags. As the stag took off in chase, he screamed; 'I will avenge all those who I have wrongly killed, you will pay Witch, you will pay with your life!'

After that, was a bit of a blur. The witch could not be killed, even through all she had done, she was needed to keep the balance true. She was the bringer of Winter, without her, many other species would die, and the human race would inevitably suffer.

I felt myself being lifted into the air, it was Oswald, he knew also that we had to stop Dagdar. As we flew behind we could see the two of them riding down the hill, Cailleach Bheur well ahead. All of a sudden, something went wrong. We couldn't tell if the mare lost its footing or slipped on ice, but it went down throwing Cailleach Bheur to the ground.

Dagdar closed the gap and we had to hurry, we knew he wasn't thinking straight, he was clouded with the need for vengeance, for all those he had been made to slay. We swooped down as he was getting off the stag. All I could do was shout for him to stop. Oswald put me down and we both ran up to Dagdar as he was raising his Axe.

'Stop this Dagdar, she will be punished.' I begged. 'She doesn't deserve to live, we will all be better off without her,' He raged. I had to get him to see sense. 'We may be, but what of all those who need the winter? You will be signing their death warrants also. Why give this Witch an easy way out. Let the Royalty choose her punishment so she may endure it for eternity.' These words got through to him and he lowered his axe.

Cailleach Bheur, in a last stupid attempt, began to say chants to hurt Dagdar, but he had been protected from her by the Royalty, and this eventually, was what brought him back to reality, and he laughed at her. 'You are right Intercessor,

look at her. She is nothing without my power and I will not sully my blade with her blood.'

Relief flooded through me, I turned to see the leaders coming down the hill to join us. Then the Royalty appeared, and the Witch, once mighty, curled up in fear. They must have been using their telepathy again, for one at a time they nodded. Ilbhreac stepped forward and spoke, as he did so, the rest of the group fell to their knees, so I thought I should follow, and I saw him smile slightly at my actions.

'Cailleach Bheur, you have dared to go against the noble laws. We would finish you now, as you deserve, but the mortal world would suffer greatly. We have decided your fate and will bind you, from herein, you will have no choice but to do our bidding. You can use your full power for a few days at a time, then you must give respite. No more will the winters be so severe. From this time forward, your might and power has been taken away, you will never again be feared.' Then they all moved forward and chanted over the Witch;

We call upon our joint powers,
To bind Cailleach Bheur, forever more,
Only our bidding will now be done,
She will live to uphold the Noble law.
Never again will she let lose her might,
Her power now mild, her anger restrained,
From herein she will live within our binds,
This, our will, we here now proclaim,
By the power of three times three,
As it is said, so mote it be.

With this over, he turned to the Witch and said, 'Now lay down your staff, your reign is over.' We thought for one moment, it had not worked, as anger flashed

in her eyes. The moment passed, however, and as she laid the staff on the ground, another woman appeared.

Queen Grian walked over to her, 'Brigit, take over your reign, and bring the spring. Make the snow go quickly, but no floods, the mortals have had enough devastation. We will give you aid in this task, do not worry.' Brigit smiled and agreed. Immediately we felt the temperature rise, and the chill began to wear off us.

Ilbhreac turned to Dagdar, and shocked us all, by hugging him, 'My dear friend, don't dwell on things you had no control of. Redeem yourself by helping, mortals and Fairy folk alike, come back from this and rebuild their lives. The only blame you have, is not choosing your lover wisely.' He laughed as he said the last part and Dagdar smiled but looked sheepish.

It was my turn next, as Queen Aine addressed me; 'Intercessor, you have done your job well, you have intrigued us with your imagination and versatility. That is why we agreed to help. We will say to you now, we will take greater interest in what happens on this plane. You made us see we have neglected our duties for too long. That does not mean you can call on us any time, you must deal with things yourself, but we will be watching.'

With the word said they disappeared in a golden light. All that was left, was our group, and Dagdar. We officially introduced ourselves, and began to make our way down the rest of the hill. We chatted as we travelled, and Dagdar, turned out to be a nice and interesting being, when he wasn't trying to kill us.

As we reached the bottom, the changelings came up to us to say they had found another abandoned house we could spend the night in. We settled down in the house, once again we shared a meal, but the difference to the last time was so obvious. We laughed and chatted, with no lack of conversation, it was well in to the early hours of the morning, we eventually decided to sleep.

With nothing of any urgency to take care of, we all slept late and it was almost noon when we were ready to begin our journey home.

CHAPTER 42

As we set off, the sun blazed in the sky, and we saw people emerging from the upper windows of snowed in homes. The depth of the snow had already dropped, but it would take a few weeks of work from Brigit and the Royals for it to disappear completely.

The news, of the previous evening, had already spread through the Netherworld. We were met, along our journey, by various tribes of Elves, Fairies and Nymphs, all cheering and rejoicing. We had travelled over halfway home, when we were feeling hungry. We stopped to talk to a tribe of Dryads, and they invited us to join them to eat and rest. We gladly agreed and followed them to their camp.

What was to be a short stop, turned out to be a long and joyful party. Other tribes came to the camp, after the word went out we were there, and music, dancing and singing began in full force. A feast was laid out for us and the wine and beer flowed freely. We soon realised we would be going nowhere that day, so sat back and enjoyed the festivities.

We were also told of individual events in detail, and the true horror of the Witches reign, was revealed. Even children of the tribes had been slaughtered, and there had been devastation in the Netherworld population. Dagdar was filled once again of guilt and remorse, he apologised profusely and promised to help the tribes build their homes and lives again. The mood returned to frivolities and we at last fell asleep, drunk and happy.

My head felt so heavy the next day, and looking around the group, I wasn't the only one suffering. Tea was brewed and I greedily drank one after the other. We at last felt fit enough to move, and began, once again, to pack the sleighs.

Dagdar asked to speak with me in private, and we walked to a clearing away from the camp. 'I know I was bewitched, and the terrible things I did were not in my control; but I still feel the guilt weighing heavily on my heart.' I tried to argue with him but he begged me to listen. 'I have thought long during the

night, Abigail. I have come to a decision and I hope you will honour me in agreeing with it. I need to repent for the sake of my soul, and therefore, I would like to stay here and help these poor beings. From here I will travel through the country, giving my help wherever it is needed. This is the only way I can give back to the people I have unwittingly wronged.'

He looked so soft now, but his eyes were full of remorse. I smiled and hugged him. 'As long as you understand, the blame belongs to Cailleach Bheur, and not to you. You are a good man, Dagdar, and this act you wish to do, shows that. I wish you luck and hope you find peace in your heart.'

He came to see us off, and we could see him standing, long after the others, until we were too far away. Our journey continued, the weather warm and sunny, and the snow dropping in depth as we travelled over it.

It was late afternoon, when the sleighs drove down my little lane, and turned the bend, to the sight of my beautiful home. As we were pulling up, the huge grey dog ran over to us, howling and crying. I stepped out of the sleigh and went over to him. I was just about to put my hand out to stroke him, when he changed in front of me.

Where the dog once stood; Seth stood in his place. After everything I had seen and been through; this revelation still shocked me. I had, not once, thought of Seth as anything but a mortal gardener; albeit one who knew of the happenings that went on in the cottage.

'You must hurry Abigail, it's Clax, he took ill not long after you left, and I fear he doesn't have much time left.' I raced into the house, my mind blurred, he had to pull through, after all this he couldn't die now.

He was in the living room, and as soon as I saw him, I knew Seth had been right. I lifted him slightly, and sat down, so his top half of his body was in my arms.

'Clax my dear friend, what is wrong and why didn't you say before that you were ill?' He spoke, quietly, but without fear; 'Abigail, I am glad I have been able to see you again before I go.' Tears immediately fell down my cheeks. 'Don't cry for me dear, I have known for a while my time was almost over, but I wanted to hang on to see you through your first battle. I am honoured to have known you, Abigail, you will be one of the greatest Intercessors in history.' I tried to speak but it came out in little sobs; 'I can't manage without you Clax, but apart from that I have grown to love you, you have been the best friend I could have wished for.'

'You will manage, my dear friend, and I will tell you now, I love you too Abigail and I wish I could have spent more time with you, but that is not my fate. Don't weep for me, for I shall be watching over you, I would never leave you without help. You will always be in my thoughts, even in my afterlife. Goodbye, my dear sweet Abigail. Intercessor of the Netherworld.'

With those last words he died in my arms, and all I could do was sob. I kept my arms around him for some time and then he faded away. There was no body, nothing at all was left of my beloved Clax.

I couldn't move, I was full of grief and I did nothing to stop the flow of tears. My friends left me to my grief, and I sat for hours as nightfall came.

I had exhausted myself, and was just about to doze off to sleep, when I heard a noise in the hallway. I listened, and it sounded like a kind of shuffling heading towards the doorway. As I stared, I saw a small head peep around the door frame. It was covered in brown hair, and the face was brown. The eyes twinkled, they seemed full of joy and mischief. 'Who are you?' I whispered.

'Claxton Metterhorn the Fifth, at your service.'

But that is another story.....

EPILOGUE

So that is how it all began.

I have had many more fights since then to keep the balance right for the sake of all worlds. I may tell you about them one day.

So what do you think? Fact or fiction? Of course I know the truth, but I would never force it on you. You must make up your own minds. Those of you who believe me however, watch out for the signs, and let it be known you would be willing to help me if I need it. Tell the trees, the word will get back to me don't worry.

For those who don't believe me, well I hope you enjoyed it anyway. If I do my job right, you can live in the belief that the mystical world is nothing but fantasy, and everything strange that happens, has a logical reason behind it. I hope I can continue to make that happen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miriam Davison was born in the North East of England and spent her childhood years in Killingworth. Miriam moved to Washington, Tyne and Wear, when she was fourteen years old, but still has ties to her home town. She has three adult children, and is now living happily on her own after a very abusive relationship, and two divorces. She has a love of anything supernatural or science fiction. She also loves to read or watch horror stories.