

The illustration depicts a tall, multi-story stone tower on the left side of the cover. The tower is heavily covered in thick, green vines that climb up its side. At the base of the tower, there is a small arched doorway. To the right of the tower, the landscape consists of rolling hills and a valley. The sky is a mix of yellow and green, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall style is that of a classic children's book illustration, with visible pencil or charcoal lines and soft watercolor washes.

The
TOWER
and the
EMERALD

Moyra
Caldecott

**THE TOWER AND THE
EMERALD**

MOYRA CALDECOTT

a Mushroom eBooks sampler

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First published by Hamlyn Paperbacks in 1985.

Hardcover edition published in 1986

by Century Hutchinson Ltd.

This Edition published in 2003 by Mushroom eBooks, an
imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, United Kingdom

www.mushroom-ebooks.com

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ISBN of complete edition 1899142762

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Chapter 1

An old spell undone

The hunting party of Prince Caradawc, son of Goreu, drew together at the sound of the calling horn. What had gone wrong? Princess Viviane, far to the rear, her mind only half on the hunt, heard the thin horn-silver sound like bird call through the thick green of the forest. It was not the sound of victory, the long low note of the kill, it was a brief agitated trill.

‘The hounds must have lost the scent,’ she thought. What would the Lord Goreu say from his great furred chair, looking at his slender son. ‘Are you fit for a woman if you can’t provide her meat?’ Caradawc would flush, always a shade too timid when outfaced by his mighty father, and she would have to endure the old man’s arm about her, the smell of his breath on her face, and the innuendoes that if young men were not ready for their responsibilities, older men would have to take them on. She dreaded being alone with her future father-in-law, Goreu the Great, Goreu the Mighty Lecher. How beautiful his son was in comparison: hair nut-

brown touched with sun-gold: eyes sea-blue and clear as the sky, and in form – the finest of any young man she had ever seen. She thought she loved him, though in fact she knew nothing of him but his beauty.

The horn called again and she followed it, her white mare stepping unhurriedly through the bracken, the rider stooping gracefully under the overhanging branches of oak, ash and thorn. Sparkles of sunlight flickered like emeralds in the crown of the forest, half dazzling her. She felt warm, relaxed, happy. Her own home was far away but for the first time since she left it she felt no homesickness. This would be her new home, this forest of shimmering gold and green.

She heard voices calling her and increased her pace. She came upon the others gathered in a clearing, Caradawc standing on his stirrups to look back along the way they had ridden, his face anxious. It lightened at once when he saw her, but he said nothing. She joined the circle around him quietly and waited with the rest for what he would say.

The hounds were behaving strangely. It was as though when they had lost the scent, they also lost interest in the hunt. Many of them lay sleeping – only Cull, Caradawc's favourite, was still alert and he sat on his haunches, his ears cocked, his eyes searching the undergrowth surrounding them. From time to time he gave a low growl or a faint but unmistakable whine. Viviane, too, could sense something, but she could not define it. She shivered slightly though she was not cold, and drew instinctively closer to Caradawc. He explained

that they would rest awhile and then fan out to try to start up some more game.

‘The dogs are tired,’ he added calmly, but she noticed a puzzled frown. He had never known them behave in quite this way. He sprang down from his chestnut and reached up his arms to her – and she slid from her silver-white mare into his arms. He held her lightly – like a stranger. When would he take her as his woman with confidence and strength? Her body stirred to his, but always there was this barrier, this hesitation on his part . . . this uncertainty. Was it the giant shadow of his father that inhibited him . . . the knowledge that his father’s way with women was wrong yet he himself had not yet found a way of his own?

He let her go almost at once and moved away. The servants served barley bread and ale and the hunters sat on fallen logs and lichen-covered rocks, hungry and glad of the rest. A stream as clear and cold as melted ice fell over mossy boulders and she stooped to drink, parting the fern fronds. It seemed to her that as she did so she heard fine voices and faint music, but when she lifted her head she could hear nothing but the sound of water falling over the rocks and the murmur of her friends as they talked quietly of the day’s adventures.

Caradawc sat alone, hitting the toe of his boot with a switch of young beech, deep in thought, a stiff leather mug of ale forgotten beside him.

Suddenly she heard a sound over to the left of the clearing, and she stood up to see more clearly. Surely . . . surely it was a hart? He stood in shadow, but she could

see his eyes – and they were looking into her own. She turned at once to her companions but none of them seemed to have noticed, though the hart had moved again with a sharp crackle of twigs. She could now see him distinctly, a red gleam to his velvet flanks, his tall antlers branching proudly. Surely the dogs would sense him? But they were all asleep – even Cuall, at his master’s side, lying as still as death.

She moved very slowly and carefully towards Hunydd, her mare, thinking to signal to the others as soon as she could catch their attention. She did not dare to take her eyes off the hart lest he should disappear. She whispered Caradawc’s name, but he did not look up. There was no doubt that the hart was aware of her. His eyes never left her own and his whole body was poised for flight.

When she reached the mare she hesitated, and a sly thought came to her. How beautiful it would be to bring him down herself: to show Caradawc – no, Goreu – that she was no simpering maiden to be put upon, but a strong and independent woman who could provide for herself if need be. She would bring the carcass to the betrothal feast as gift to her beloved – as proof that she would bring worthy blood into the family.

Silently she mounted Hunydd, the lovely creature responding at once to her mistress’s firm but gentle guidance. Carefully she checked the arrows in her quiver, and the bow of red yew resting on her saddle. Around her, as though frozen, the scene remained the same, her companions talking and eating, the dogs

sleeping, the prince staring at his boot, his thoughts far, far away . . .

But the hart waited no longer. He turned his handsome head and slipped away into the shadows. Hunydd and Viviane followed. Always in sight, but just out of range, the creature moved so gracefully that hardly a twig snapped, barely a branch was pushed aside. She knew he could have moved more swiftly, but it seemed as though he was playing with her. Time and again he looked back as if to be sure she was following. Each time their eyes met she fancied she detected challenge and mockery. She forgot the hunting party; she forgot Caradawc. There was only one thing in her life and that was to bring down this arrogant animal.

At last he paused within range, and she lifted her bow and let fly the slender feathered arrows, one after the other. But each fell short, or to the left or right. She could not believe it! She was justly proud of her skill with the bow and the target seemed an easy one. How could she have missed? The hart stared at her calmly, unafraid.

She urged Hunydd to go faster, but the hart sensed the change of pace and fled even more fleetly from her. The forest became thicker, darker, wilder. Branches nearly knocked her from the saddle, gouged a shallow cut along the flank of the mare. Normally Viviane would have stopped at this injury, but now she could think of nothing but the creature ahead of her, and how much she wanted . . . no, how much she needed to bring it down. More than once it paused within range, and more

than once an arrow that left her bow true turned falsely aside before it reached its mark.

It was Hunydd who first sensed enchantment – and refused to go further no matter how hard her mistress drove her on.

Impatiently Viviane slid from her back and pursued the creature on foot, caring nothing that the forest was full of wild boars, and that the hart itself was fiercely antlered.

The forest grew darker and so thick that the young woman could scarcely force her way through. Brambles scratched her bare ankles and arms, and tore at her hunting tunic. The thick coil of copper-red hair, once so neatly piled that it resembled a crown, was now loosened by a passing branch and tumbled round her shoulders and down her back. She pushed it from her face, scarcely aware of what was happening to her. The animal was out of sight but she was following the sound of it. All that she could think of was that she must see it again . . . that she must face it . . . that she must look into its eyes . . .

Suddenly she was alone in a terrible silence. She stood still, like an animal herself, her head tilted, listening, her nostrils sniffing the air. But her prey had vanished as mysteriously as it had come.

For a long while she stood there, catching her breath, trembling with the strain of the pursuit, at first not even considering her plight, so far from her companions, so deep inside the forest. But gradually as she rested, she became more aware of her predicament.

She put an ear to the ground, hoping to catch the vibrations of the other horses, or perhaps of her faithful Hunydd coming to look for her. But there was no sound – except occasionally the soft rustle of a leaf falling from a tree.

What a fool she had been! Anger with herself temporarily kept her from fear. Hunydd had showed more sense than she had. Reflecting on everything that had happened she now knew without any doubt that she had been *spell-led*. But by whom, and why? She knew no one apart from her betrothed, his family and friends in this alien country. She had made no enemies, crossed no witches. Tears began to prick behind her eyes and a lump rose in her throat. She swallowed angrily and jumped to her feet, wiping the tears away with the dusty back of her hand. This morning all had seemed so fair: her future settled and not unpleasant. Why, why had she allowed herself to be so misled? If she did not regain control of her life soon she knew that she could die in this forest.

Resolutely she turned about and started back the way she had come, following the broken strands of bramble and bracken, the crushed fern, the scuffed moss.

She had been walking a long time and was on the verge of despair when it suddenly seemed the trees were less dense, the shadows less dark over to the right. When she saw a shaft of bright sunlight she began to run, calling to Caradawc, convinced she had at last found the clearing where she had left him.

But there was no clearing, no familiar faces.

Instead she found herself at the edge of the forest, overlooking a gently sloping valley with a low, flat hill beyond. It was a relief to see open space and sky at last, and she hoped she had come full circle in the forest and was back to Goreu's grazing lands.

But the landscape was not familiar. There was no path or track in sight; no herdboy with his docile lumbering charges; no village women drawing water from the stream that ran at the foot of the hill.

Viviane's eyes kept returning to the hill across the valley. She felt a strong urge to climb it – to stand upon that strange, blunt summit – to feel the wind in her face and to rejoice at last in vast open spaces and unencumbered vistas . . .

She began to wade downwards through the tall grass, falling to her knees at the valley stream and drinking deeply. She washed her face and hands, her scratched and bleeding arms and legs, and then began to climb the slope beyond. It was steep, but even so she was surprised at the effort it cost her to move upwards. Surely it was not weariness alone that made her limbs feel so heavy? It was almost as though there was some force dragging her down to prevent her reaching the top. She fought it, knowing that it had become as important to her to climb the hill as it had been before to hunt the enchanted deer.

At last she reached the rim of the hill, the hair on her forehead clinging damply with sweat. Involuntarily

she gripped the knife at her belt, not knowing what she might encounter there.

She now stood on a ridge beside a deep ditch. Facing her was the flat summit of the hill. It was occupied by a circle of huge slabs of stone – of the kind it was thought a race of giants used to erect to their gods. These were not standing upright and tall, but each one lay flat as though blown down by some dread force at the centre.

She gazed around her in wonder. Although it was late in the afternoon, the summer sunlight still fell sweetly on the green grass and the flowers that grew amongst it. Behind her the same forest that had seemed so dark and dangerous when she was lost in it now, from this distance and from above, glowed richly with every pleasant shade of green. To the north, over clear grassland, she could see a thin plume of smoke and knew that there she might find people to take her in against the night.

She should have set off at once to seek them, but found herself loath to leave this strange place. She had heard of such mounds and such stones before, always as places haunted by demons, to be avoided at all costs. She was frightened and yet fascinated, and told herself that a few moments longer here would do no harm. In the sunlight all seemed innocent. The crystals in the stone occasionally flashed and sparkled, and buttercups, daisies and celandine glowed in the green grass. She climbed down into the ditch and up the other side – standing on the grassy edge to look at the giant monoliths that lay spread out around the circular

summit. She felt her life was on the verge of a great change – and not just because of her impending marriage to Prince Caradawc. Whatever it was, she both dreaded and longed for it. She had been brought to this place for some purpose, and could not leave without knowing what that purpose was. She touched one of the stones nervously, but quickly withdrew her hand. Did she imagine vibration?

She took one step forward . . . and then another. She knew she wanted to move towards the centre. And she did not notice at first that with step after tentative step she was walking a spiral. She watched her feet press the grass and flowers down. She heard her voice humming a tune, but did not notice that the tune was unfamiliar to her – nor that she was beginning to sing phrases in a language that was strange to her . . .

Finally at the centre she lifted her head and looked around her. She suddenly sensed that no one had entered this circle since that ancient time when the huge stones were blown down – nor had any sound broken the silence until her song.

She was alone.

No, she was not alone.

Quickly, apprehensively she turned around, glancing over her shoulder. She could see no one.

‘Fool,’ she told herself.

She decided she must leave this place at once, her heart now beating fast, like a small bird’s caught in a trap. Finding that they were sweating, she wiped her hands against her tunic.

Then she tried to move – but she could not.

Fragments of thought that seemed not her own began to tease her mind. At first they were strange disconnected phrases in an alien tongue, and then – growing more coherent – what appeared to be sentences. At first she fought them, thinking that fear was driving her insane ... but then she began to recognize the words ... began to understand their meaning.

It seemed a voice was speaking to her, pleading with her ... whispering: *‘Unwind the spiral ... unwind ... unwind.’* She shut her eyes, listening to the shadows of sounds that were not sounds crowding into that vast dark hollow which had been her mind.

‘Who are you?’ Her own thought-voice like thin smoke curled around the other ... touched and dissolved. ‘Who? Where are you?’

‘I am at your feet ... the earth holds me ... ai aai the earth holds me!’

She felt the other-pain, the other-loneliness, the long, long years, the centuries, the millennia of darkness, of waiting ...

Pity became her heart ... sorrow her breath.

She reached out her hands ... they moved ... they floated on the air ... but her feet were still rooted ... deep as a tree ... to the earth ...

‘The earth holds me ...’ The other-suffering was her suffering.

‘I cannot move ...’ Was it her own voice cried out or his?

‘I will help you,’ she breathed. ‘Help me to help you.’

'Unwind ... unwind the spiral!' His words were unmistakable.

She swayed like a tree in the wind striving to uproot herself.

'I cannot,' she sighed.

Words came ... other words ... strange words she did not understand.

'Say the words,' he whispered. *'Say them aloud with your earth-voice ... your voice of throat and mouth ... your voice of flesh ... of life ...'*

It seemed to her the words were all around her and she reached up and plucked them, making them her own ... singing them as she had sung walking the spiral into the centre.

Her limbs moved. She staggered and almost fell – and then found herself, step by step, unwinding the spiral ... still in darkness ... aware only of his voice.

As she walked, her step strengthened, the turning of the spiral easing, quickening at every moment.

Half done, her whole body shook with exultation.

'At last! At last!! At la-ast ...!'

She forced herself to stop moving. There was something in the voice that screamed within her – that made her shiver.

What was she doing? What was she, Viviane, allowing herself to do?

Who was this man? Why was he here ... imprisoned?

'Go on! Go on!' he shrieked, but the violence in his voice made her even more hesitant.

She felt something was very wrong. What if . . . ?

'Pity me . . .' he whispered. *'Pity me!'*

She felt his pain, but forced herself to open her eyes.

'I must think clearly,' she said aloud, and aloud she said: *'Who are you and why are you imprisoned?'*

A cold wind shook the grass at her feet, and then she experienced such a feeling of suffering and longing and pain that she could scarcely bear it.

'I must know,' she insisted. *'I must.'*

'I was falsely accused . . .'

His words were everywhere. She looked from side to side and they were everywhere . . . invisible . . . inaudible . . . but louder than the thunder of a waterfall.

'Pity me,' he wept. *'I was innocent. They pinned my soul to this place for eternity . . . They caged my soul that I might never live again . . .'*

Pity filled her heart. She began to move again, eager to put his suffering at an end, knowing now why she had been drawn to this place.

She stepped lightly – as though moving along spiral lines, invisible, yet marked.

And then again she paused. The exultation she had just been feeling was somehow not the exultation of pure joy. There was something else . . . a sense of triumph.

She frowned. Behind words lay always other words . . . And these were the ones one should strive to hear.

What if those who had imprisoned him had reason for what they did?

'Ask yourself ...' His voice was soft again – silence within silence. *'Ask yourself who would be the innocent and who the guilty. He who lies here denied what rightfully belongs to every living being ... or they who deny it?'*

It seemed to her she saw the circle of tall stones standing erect, each transmitting the energy of sky to earth and earth to sky. Between them the force flowed from one to other, completing the ring. Within this ring, four priests and one priestess in cloaks of wolfskin and eagle feather, with golden torques about their arms and around their necks, stepped slowly and deliberately to the rhythm of the fatal chant-spell, gradually, inexorably, closing the spiral. Each face was masked: the mask of Judgement: set and hard and impersonal: but through the eyeholes the eyes glittered: some with triumph: some with fear: all with hate.

In the centre lay a man with both legs ritually broken: his handsome face the face of an angel . . . pleading with them for mercy . . . protesting innocence with words so persuasive that surely no one with a heart could remain unmoved. How many times had the powerful and the corrupt destroyed those who threatened them, she thought.

She started to move again, resolved to unwind the spiral, finding the strange words she had spoken before now coming easily to her mind. But this time there were changes in the sequence. She was trembling, almost dizzy with the turning. But now she was determined to make haste.

Stumbling, she finally completed the last steps and fell panting on to the grass. She was drained – exhausted – but well pleased with what she had done.

A cloud must have passed over the sun, for a sudden chill made her shiver. As she looked up, the icy cold that a moment before had touched her flesh now reached her heart. In shock she clambered to her feet. There was no cloud – but a dark and shapeless miasma over the land. The buttercups at her feet seemed dead . . . the grass scorched as though a fire had passed swiftly over it. The sky was clear and black as night – but without moon or stars!

Horrified she stared around her, her hands up to cover her mouth . . .

What had she done? *Oh God! What had she done?*

Then she heard a cruel and mocking laugh. She spun round, but the circle was empty . . . truly empty now. She knew that she had broken the ancient spell, and the prisoner was set free.

Suddenly she remembered.

She knew that she had not always been Viviane, daughter of Garwys, betrothed of Caradawc – but once was Fiann, priestess, and lover of Idoc, a priest turned sorcerer.

How sweet her adolescent love had been . . . the touch of him . . . his eyes . . . the turn of his head . . . Everything about him had made her heart beat faster. There had been a time when the whole of her life hung on a word, a glance, from him. She had even entered the priesthood to be near him.

When Idoc first lay with her the ecstasy had shut out all other thoughts, all other dreams. As his flesh entered hers, her experience of him had been total. But those early years had passed, and the handsome young man changed, becoming ever more remote and secretive, lying with her only rarely, and each time more selfishly and violently than the last, until her love and her body were so bruised and shamed that she swore never to let him touch her again.

Yet his colleagues honoured him increasingly as he passed with brilliance each trial and test devised for him. At last he stood so high among the adepts that he was named as successor to the High Priest.

She could see him now standing in the Holy Place, bowing his head as each ceremonial robe was placed over him: the white, the blue, the purple; and with each robe an ancient mighty Name, each Name a Power. She saw the marking as each Name was given: on the soles of the feet, on the palms of the hands, and finally on the forehead. She saw his eyes as the crystal and the rod of silver were placed in his hands, the circlet of silver and hawk feather on his brow. How many times had she run her fingers through that long, thick black hair, kissed that severe but handsome face, traced those winged eyebrows to the strong, straight nose? Ah, but he was handsome – magnificent in his robes. Surely now that he had so much, he would not demand more? Surely now that the long and gruelling training and initiation were over, he would relax and be as loving with her as he used to be?

But this was not to be. His very first act was to rid himself of the three priests who had not been whole-hearted in his choosing. Two died suddenly, mysteriously and horribly, and the third fled for his life. They all realized, too late, that they had given power to someone who was either a madman or a demon. From that time on no one was safe – nothing was sacred. The High Priest found himself no more than a figurehead, powerless to interfere. The ancient laws were now twisted round to suit Idoc's whim. Anyone who dared to cross him was cruelly destroyed.

At last, in desperation, realizing that his genius for destruction was not limited to their own community, but that his ambitions reached out across the whole country, the priesthood secretly planned to use a binding spell, the last resort of the desperate, a spell so fearful that whoever pronounced it risked his own life.

The spell was cast. With their last act of knowledge the priests pulled down the Stones upon themselves and closed the circle forever. She could hear the sound of their falling now, the roar, the rushing wind, the thud that struck her heart into darkness.

And then . . . the long silence.

Now, standing in another life, in another body, Viviane – who had been Fiann – remembered the look in Idoc's eyes when he realized that she had betrayed him.

She began to shake. 'O God,' she sobbed. 'O God . . . O God . . .' Should she call on the Christ? On the Holy Spirit? Or on the ancient gods of her people?

Stumbling, she fled . . . fell and rose and ran . . . and fell again . . . Where should she go? Where was there to hide? She could not believe that she had been foolish enough to fall victim to his cunning and his charm once again.

Viviane crouched by the stream in the valley, weeping, fingering her knife . . . wondering if she should kill herself . . . but she knew that the death of the body would be no escape . . .

And then she heard a sound, faint at first, but steadily increasing. Puzzled, she held her breath and listened. She was so distraught with fear that at first she did not recognize it. It was the distant sound of a hunting horn, the calling note of a party searching in the forest.

She leapt up, frantic with fear that they might pass her by, and began to run towards the forest, calling their names.

‘Caradawc!’ she screamed as she ran. ‘Caradawc!’

The dark shadow had lifted from the land, the forest was in leaf again, the grass springy beneath her feet. Overhead a lark sang in the clear air. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her breath coming short with the effort of running. Surely she had imagined the whole thing?

The horn blew loud and clear, and when its notes died away she could hear voices shouting her name amid the thunder of hooves.

Suddenly the party broke out of the cover of the forest. Caradawc waved and galloped ahead to meet her, full tilt down the slope of the hill. How beautiful he

looked! How she loved him! She could see the relief on his face, the white flash of his smile . . . Then suddenly his horse lost its footing on the uneven ground and Caradawc was sent flying over his head. The others laughed. The young prince's horsemanship was unquestioned, and spirits were high now that they had found her.

But then a strange thing happened. Caradawc's chestnut reared up on its hind legs, whinnying with fear, and then galloped off towards the west. Caradawc himself lay still, his body buckled awkwardly in the grass. Viviane reached his side at the same moment as his great friend, Gerin. Together they turned him over and straightened him out.

'He must have hit his head on that stone,' Gerin said, allowing her to cradle her lover in her arms. Caradawc was very pale and still, and there was a thin trickle of blood from beside his temple.

Viviane looked anxiously into Gerin's eyes.

'He'll be all right,' he said soothingly. 'He's taken worse falls than this in battle.'

The others were now dismounting and crowding round them, but Cuall, Caradawc's dog, howled disconsolately and backed away from his master as though he did not recognize him.

Gerin arranged for Caradawc to be lifted up on to his steed in front of him, while his friend Rheged galloped off to bring back the prince's horse. Cai, another close friend, rode on ahead to warn Goreu of his son's accident.

Gerin had said that Caradawc would be all right, but would he? He looked so pale . . . so dead. Seeing him slumped against Gerin, his legs flopping against the flanks of the horse, Viviane found it difficult to imagine him conscious again. She shuddered. Could Caradawc's fall have anything to do with what had occurred in the ancient circle? Impatiently she dismissed the idea. 'That way madness lies,' she thought, and she stroked her mare's silky mane as she rode, taking comfort from the animal's companionship.

* * * * *

Goreu's dogs came streaming through the gates and over the fields to meet them, barking with excitement. The sun had set while they were still in the forest, and the long twilight had almost faded. Some of Goreu's people with torches were standing anxiously in the quarter-light, peering at the party of dark shapes picking its way carefully down the last hill slope. The hunting dogs joined in the din, excited as they were to smell home at last, and the horn blower, carried away by the occasion, blew continually on his horn. Every man, woman and child who lived around Castle Goreu – serving its master, sheltering under his protection – was out, milling about them, asking what had happened. The cries of alarm when Caradawc was lowered down gently in the arms of his friends brought the huge bulk of Goreu himself into the courtyard, growling like a bear. But when he saw the young prince he was shocked into silence, and as the flickering torch flames lit up his face,

Viviane saw no trace of the contempt he usually showed towards his son.

They carried Caradawc to his room and laid him on his bed, Goreu calling for Kicva, the healing woman, part Druid trained, whom he trusted more than the Christian priest with his cedar box of herbs and ointments.

Viviane washed the prince herself, stripping off his dusty clothes one by one.

Goreu strode about the room, glowering and grumbling, more irritated now than worried, complaining that they had returned without meat from a forest teeming with deer and boar, sneering at his son for not being able to stay on his horse . . .

Kicva came at last and pushed Viviane aside with her bony hands.

‘My lord,’ the young woman turned, outraged, to Goreu. ‘Surely the priest has been called? You are not trusting your eldest son to this . . . this . . .’

Words failed her as she stared at the evil-smelling crone. The great age of the Druids was long past . . . the Romans had seen to that . . . but still the Celtic people clung to threads of the old knowledge, ragged as they were, often meaningless and dangerous for being misunderstood. Viviane, whose own father still held to the old religion, knew something of the Druid faith, and looked on Kicva as a sorry representative of the ancient line of bard-masters and shaman-priests that lay behind her.

At Viviane's words Kicva turned on her a look of such malevolence that the young woman shrank away from her – but then, remembering Caradawc's plight, she stood her ground, meeting the woman's eyes stare for stare.

'The Christian will be called,' Goreu said. 'There will be time enough for his mumblings. But first Kicva will tend him, for she nursed me as a child and saw my father through all his battle wounds. Stand back, girl! Give her room,' he commanded.

Viviane moved out of the woman's way but still kept close to Caradawc, taking his limp hand in hers.

'I can't work with all these people here,' the old hag snarled, looking at Goreu. 'Send them away.'

'You heard her,' he snapped. 'Everyone leave the room!'

'I will not!' Viviane said defiantly, as the others moved to leave. Gerin paused at the door, anxiously meeting her eyes, asking her silently if she wanted him to stay. She shook her head and he reluctantly left. She settled down upon the edge of Caradawc's bed, clutching his hand as though she believed no force on earth could prise her fingers from his.

Goreu took her roughly by the arm and jerked her away. If she had not let go her lover's hand, he would have been hauled off the bed with her.

'Go to your room, girl,' he snapped. 'I am in no mood for this!' And he pushed her angrily towards the door. She looked back, her arm bruised from his rough handling . . . Already the old woman was stooping over

the young prince, Goreu standing beside him, holding up the lamp. It was as though she were already forgotten: a stranger who had briefly intruded and then passed on. There was something disturbing in the scene: something sinister in the flickering light that held the three figures together against the surrounding darkness.

But she was too tired to worry about it. She found that she could barely drag herself to her own chamber. She hardly felt the servant undress her and bathe her face. Dimly she knew that she pushed her hands away when she started the combing . . . and then she sank into the merciful oblivion of a dreamless sleep . . .

* * * * *

Caradawc remained unconscious for three days. The life of the castle was subdued as its young prince, heir to his father's kingdom, lay silent, locked in a shell of darkness that no one could penetrate.

For some reason Goreu and Kicva would not allow the Christian priest near Caradawc. Viviane brought him to the door several times, but Kicva had locked herself in with her charge and would let no one enter. In vain Viviane alternately pleaded with Goreu and railed against him, furious that she also was barred from the chamber. But Goreu was morose and sulky and unmoved by anything she could say. He had put his faith in Kicva and was determined to follow her instructions minutely.

'The Christian can pray in his chapel,' he said gruffly. 'Kicva knows what she is doing.'

‘What does she say? How does she explain it?’
Viviane begged to know.

‘His soul is on a journey. It will return,’ Goreu said
briefly.

‘If it is his soul that is affected, surely the Christian
...?’

‘The Christian knows nothing about the soul,’ he
growled.

Viviane bit her lip. There were many things she
would have liked to say to him – but how could she
speak to such a stubborn old man, holding like a dog to
an old bone?

She turned away and sought the comfort of Hunydd
in the stables. ‘If only I’d listened to you,’ she sighed,
stroking the soft muzzle, ‘none of this would have
happened.’ But she knew that we can never unravel
Time and what has been, is, and always will be.

* * * * *

During that night, the third of Caradawc’s ‘journey’,
Goreu came to her chamber.

She did not at first know that he was there. Deep in
sleep she began to dream that Caradawc’s fingers were
exploring her body. She stirred and groaned with the
pleasure of it ... and then a sound woke her and she
found it was not the prince but his gross father who
floundered in her bed, heaving himself upon her, his
hand where she had dreamed her lover’s was. She pulled
away in horror, crying out and beating her fists on his
grey head. He clasped her tightly and forced his face

into her breasts. What had seemed so delicate and beautiful a moment before was now an outrage.

‘Viviane, girl . . .’ the old man ground out in a hoarse whisper as he wrestled with her. ‘Don’t fight me. I’ll show you what a real man feels like . . . not a boy. My son is no use to you. He’ll never wake up. You need me just as I need you!’

‘I’ll never need you!’ she screamed, fighting like a wildcat for her freedom, spitting and biting and tearing with her nails. ‘Get out of here!’

As she frantically turned her face to escape his kiss she saw a figure at the door.

‘Help me!’ she screamed. But the figure did not move.

Then Goreu lunged his bearded face at hers again. She bit his nose and as he screamed and momentarily withdrew she saw the figure again.

It was Caradawc. He was standing quite still watching them, a small terracotta Roman lamp held high in his hand, its flame lighting the whole shameful scene with extraordinary brilliance while their monstrous shadows played across the wall.

She called his name, and Goreu loosened his grip and looked round, shocked.

She wrenched herself away from the man and he fell off the bed, landing heavily on the flagstones, swearing and muttering. She staggered upright, naked before the prince, scratched and bleeding, her long red-gold hair floating around her like fire in the lamplight.

Suddenly he moved, and it seemed to her the scene remained totally static except for that movement. Afterwards she could not remember if it all happened between one breath and the next, or whether it took longer. At any rate she watched as though in a dream as he crossed the room, picked up the dagger from her little wooden table, and plunged it between the shoulders of his crouching father. She had never seen him move more decisively. Goreu had been partly right when he had accused his son of being 'a boy' – but he had changed. It was no boy who strode across the room.

She heard the gasp of her own breath, part horrified, part exultant. Her hate for the old man was so bitter at this moment that she felt no pity as he slumped and lolled, blood spurting from the wound.

'Caradawc,' she whispered and reached out her arms to him, thinking that he would need comfort when he realized what he had just done. When he would begin to feel remorse.

But he ignored her and stood looking down on his handiwork for what seemed a long time. Her arms dropped to her sides. He did not need her.

Then, without looking at her, he strode towards the door. When he reached it he turned. The lamp, which he had put down when he seized the dagger, shone on his face. For the first time he looked into her eyes. For the first time she saw clearly into his. *They were not the eyes of Caradawc – but of Idoc.*

Horrified, she stood and stared at the open doorway, even when he was no longer there. And then sheer, mindless terror took her over.

She rushed to the door and shut it with trembling hands, leaning heavily against it, her heart pounding. She saw the body of Goreu . . . she saw the eyes of Idoc . . . All she could think about was getting away, as far away as possible. Darting across the room, she seized her long blue cloak and flung it over herself. She seized the little oil lamp and dashed it at the furs on her bed . . .

She climbed out of the window . . . She rushed to the stables . . .

* * * * *

Now, looking back, she saw the blaze of flames leaping from her bedchamber and hoped that all would think that she had perished there.

Moonlight and shadow wove a cocoon around her, soon distancing her from Castle Goreu. But where could she go to be safe from Idoc? Where hide? She thought of her distant home, her father's castle with the green ocean rolling at its foot, but between her and it lay many leagues of dangerous travel. Besides, would not the man she dreaded also look for her there?

'Christ of All the Worlds! Angels of Light!'

The prayer in her heart was wordless, but the cry for help was unmistakable.

In all the Realms of Being beyond our own the impact of her cry was felt. Angels, Spirits of Light, who had

never known the weight of a physical body, nor the limitations of Time and Space, chose to take on form to give her aid, while those human souls who were already on their way to the higher Realms chose to stay behind to help her in her time of trial. Cave spirits and mountain spirits . . . nereids of the sea and river nymphs . . . tree elementals and the keepers of Springs . . . all saw her riding on her white mare, her long hair streaming out behind her like flame, her body naked beneath the long blue cloak.

But the beings of Light were not the only ones who saw her. Idoc had now left Caradawc and – a dark presence in a dark tower – stood brooding before his tall obsidian scrying mirror, seeing all that he chose to see, whether it be past, present or future; whether it be one league distant or a thousand.

Chapter 2

The challenge of the black knight

Caradawc was acknowledged as Lord of Castle Goreu, king of all the territory conquered and held by his father. He mourned Viviane whom he supposed had perished in the fire, as he mourned for the days that were past when he had been carefree and happy. His father had made many enemies in his lifetime, but his formidable strength had kept them all at bay. Now that he was dead, and a young untried man stood in his place, it seemed that some landholders were ready to challenge his right to hold what he had inherited.

At night, the dream he had had in those 'lost' days still haunted him. He wandered through a darkness where there were no stars . . . He was aware of searching for something or someone and that a nameless passion drove him on . . . but for what or for whom he could not tell. Sometimes he found himself mounting a narrow spiral staircase, a flickering torch throwing a huge shadow both ahead of him and behind him. Sometimes he stood in a chamber at the top of a tower and stared

into a black mirror. The reflections that stared back at him chilled his blood.

It was himself in every physical detail – handsome, tall, slender – but in the eyes he saw such brooding evil, such bitterness and lust for vengeance that he woke trembling and groaning, Cuall growling at his side.

It was not long before Huandaw, son of Neved, arrived at the castle, claiming that he had come to attend the funeral of his old friend and to pay respects to the new king. Caradawc knew very well that there had existed no friendship for ten years or more between the two old warriors. But as the man put on such a show of sorrow, and as they had been companions in youth before Goreu had forcefully taken half his lands, he was allowed to camp nearby. It was only when Gerin observed that there were more armed men in Huandaw's camp than mourners that a consultation was called in the Great Hall, and a herald was sent out to request the presence of Huandaw.

When the herald did not return, Caradawc and his friends knew that the moment for confrontation had come. Rheged and Cai were sent out under cover of darkness to seek help; the gates were locked, and guards mounted at every possible vantage point.

As Caradawc waited through the night, wondering if the dawn would bring his death, he thought of Viviane. She had come into his life unsought, presented by her father to his father to cement an alliance. Their wedding was to have been a political matter, and until they had met he had no interest in it. Indeed he had strongly

resented it. But within days of her arrival at his father's court he had begun to love her. She was not simpering and docile, as the women around his father had always been, but full of life and spirit. When he feared that he had lost her in the forest he had been desolate, and now that he *had* lost her, he thought he would not be sorry to lose his life on the morrow. He had officially mourned his father's death because it was expected of him, but the real loss he suffered was his lovely princess.

He searched and searched his mind for memories of those missing days. Perhaps in there, somewhere, lay some knowledge of importance – something that might give him Viviane back. Her body had not been found – nor her mare. Was it possible that she had murdered his father and then fled, for his charred bones were found in her chamber and her knife was nearby? If this was so, his duty was to hunt her down and avenge his father. But he had known his father well enough to assume that whatever he had received was probably deserved. No, it were better to believe her dead so that the question of vengeance need never arise. But how could he endure the years ahead without her? The long night seemed cruelly drawn out by his desperate longing for her.

Just before dawn, when he should have been most alert, he finally fell asleep. Clearly he saw her standing in a forest glade, clad in a simple white dress. With her was a tall woman, luminously beautiful, a sheen of silver-green on her skin, a crown woven of willow wands from which ivy trailed to mingle with the shimmering leaf-light silk of her robes, and the fine flow of her green

hair. She was tying a cord of green silk around Viviane's waist. He saw Viviane turn her head as though listening for a moment, as though she sensed that he was near, but as he reached out for her he was woken by the whine of an arrow past his ear and the smash as it hit an earthenware water jar standing on the table. Cursing, he staggered to his feet, seized his weapons and ran down the corridor, shouting for Gerin.

But Gerin and the others were already at their posts and the battle was raging. There was no sign of Rheged or Cai or their reinforcements.

* * * * *

As the hours passed and Huandaw's men attacked time after time, Caradawc began to doubt if his men could hold out. There was a well of fresh water in the courtyard but the food supplies would not last long. However, the walls were strong and high and his archers nimble and accurate. If it came to hand-to-hand fighting he and his companions would give a good account of themselves.

Just before noon a shout of joy drew all eyes to the east. Cai and Rheged were returning with every man they could muster, and among the ragged crowd of peasants and labourers there were some real fighting men.

Suddenly the battle was turned about, and Caradawc led his men out of the castle to attack Huandaw on the field. Arrows were no longer feasible with the two sides so closely interlocked and the fighting now was hand-to-

hand with swords and axes. Rheged swung his axe fiercely and mercilessly. He had lost count of the men he had slain and was beginning to think it would not be long before Huandaw led his men into retreat. But suddenly he was confronted by a huge man in black armour, an iron visor over his face: nothing to be seen of him but a dangerous gleam through the eye slits. Rheged's boisterous confidence was shaken – but he was no blustering coward and faced up to the stranger boldly. Long and savagely they fought, Rheged at last falling to a blow from the blunt end of his opponent's axe. As he fell he thought it odd that the man did not slice him in half with that swing, but then pain and darkness overwhelmed him and he lay as though dead.

It seemed to him that he and the black knight were alone in an extraordinary place – the sky pitch-black but with no stars, yet the ground on which they stood was in bright light. Neither they, nor the bare, bleached trunks of the dead trees cast any shadows. He was standing upright again with his axe in his hand, delighted that he would have another chance at his assailant. To Rheged war had always been glorious: peace was the grey and boring period between battles. He swung at the black knight, and the knight parried. Soon they were locked in a contest every bit as fierce as before. Blow and counter-blow, neat feint, swift footwork . . . the two men were formidable warriors and well matched. Rheged at last gained the advantage and the other staggered and fell. He pressed home another blow, and another, until the knight could rise no more. Sweating and triumphant

Rheged made sure his opponent was dead by driving his sword through the chinks in his armour. His whole body tingled with exhilaration, and his heart pounded with the excitement of victory, the relief of danger well met and conquered. And then, consumed with curiosity, Rheged stooped over the body and raised the vizor. He stared into a face hideous with plague sores. He backed away, shivering and terrified, already feeling the fatal disease crawling over his skin.

‘No!’ he screamed, and started to run, his weapon dropping from his hand. A voice seemed to whisper in his head, in the air around him, in the black sky.

‘This is war,’ the whisper was telling him. *‘Stay! Look! Do you not see the glory of it? Do you not feel the pride?’*

Night was falling on the battlefield and Huandaw’s warriors were retreating, carrying their wounded, before Rheged was found. Those who looked after the dead were harvesting their bitter crop in baskets drawn on sleds. Women who no longer had the protection and comfort of husbands wept, very much afraid of the future. Mothers stared into the gathering dark, remembering their sons’ first faltering steps . . . the years of growth and effort now brought to nothing . . .

Caradawc, Gerin and Cai were standing beside Rheged’s bed when he became conscious again. He stirred and opened his eyes slowly, looking around himself calmly, even smiling faintly to see their anxious faces . . . and then it was as though he remembered something. His face distorted with appalling disgust and

fear. He looked at his hands, his arms. He tore aside the bed covers and looked with terror at his limbs. Beginning to scream, he seized a cloth and began to rub his body, shuddering.

‘Get away!’ he cried out to his friends. ‘Leave me! You’ll catch it too. There’s no hope for me . . .’

They stared at him in amazement. There were no marks on his body. They had washed the dirt of battle off him, yet here he was scrubbing his skin as though it was covered with the most unutterable filth.

Gerin grasped him by the shoulders and shook him. Caradawc sat on the edge of his bed and firmly held his wrists. Together they forced him to lie down. They looked into his eyes and assured him that there was nothing to fear – he was home and safe among friends.

Gradually he became calmer, and accepted that there was no blemish on his skin. Then he began to laugh and told them the whole story as though it had been nothing more than a bad dream.

‘I wonder who that black knight was,’ Rheged said at last, sobering.

The three friends had been listening with growing seriousness for each of them had encountered the same mysterious knight, and each had his own memories.

Young Cai, who boasted so much of the women he had lain with that he was often called ‘The Goat’, was actually a virgin and very much afraid of committing himself to the act. His encounter with the black knight had taken the form of a hand-to-hand battle ending in his own defeat, the huge man standing over him with his

feet on either side. Cai shivered as he remembered the scene, but dared not tell his companions. He had lain there looking up, expecting the death blow at any moment, the man's legs like mighty columns of polished black basalt stretching for ever above him, the man's crotch like a huge arch and beyond it against the sky the foreshortened shape of the head. He could barely see the visor, but he would never forget the gleam of the eyes through those iron slits as the man bent forward to look at him. Although he could not see the face, he had an overwhelming conviction that the black knight was enjoying the fear he could see in Cai's eyes. Unlike Rheged, Cai did not enjoy battle. He hated it, but the code of honour among his companions being what it was, he would rather die than admit it. He kept to himself the thought that they would not be risking their lives now if Goreu hadn't stolen land from Huandaw in the first place.

He shut his eyes and waited for death, hoping the knight would be merciful, and make it swift and clean. But no blow came, and after a time Cai opened his eyes. In the place of the black knight there was a giant snake . . . rearing up against the sky, its malevolent yellow eyes staring into his . . . its venomous forked tongue flickering in and out of its huge jaws. The scales of its body shimmered and glittered like jet and emerald. It was the most magnificently beautiful creature he had ever seen, and in his heart he could not have then distinguished between the fascination and the fear. He stared back into its eyes, unable to move . . . paralysed.

Suddenly it struck – and the scream he gave seemed to shatter it into a million glittering pieces that fell around him like rain. Doubling up in agony, Cai writhed and groaned.

He must have passed out, for suddenly he was lying in a grassy slope far from the battlefield . . . and a woman so beautiful she could have been a goddess was tending his wound. From the ivy in her hair down to her sandals, she was all in green. He lay naked, her gentle hands administering herbal ointments . . .

Now – remembering – his cheeks burned.

* * * * *

On hearing Rheged's story Gerin moved to the window and stood looking out. His own encounter with the black knight had been equally strange, but he was not prepared to talk about it.

He, too, had been challenged on the battlefield, and had fought long and hard. In the end it had been he who had felled the other and, standing above him, had felt, as Rheged had felt, an uncontrollable urge to discover who his opponent was. With one foot on his opponent's chest, Gerin had roughly hauled off the black helmet with its high, dark plume. As he did so, quantities of brilliant red-gold hair had fallen out of it like a stream of molten lava. Shocked, he stared down into the pale, dead face of Viviane.

The Lady Viviane! The memory of her made him tremble. He could see the long dark eyelashes against her cheek, the sad curve of her mouth, the contrast of

her softness against the harsh metal of the armour. Without pausing to think how it could possibly be her, he had unlashd the metal plates from her and lifted her in his arms, his heart aching, calling on her name . . .

He bit his lip now lest he should cry out and his friend Caradawc would know how he had kissed her limp body, held her close . . .

* * * * *

But Caradawc would not have heard him, even if he had spoken, for he had a memory of his own. He had put up a good fight against the stranger – but had to yield at last. Backed against a tree, sword pointed at his throat, he had waited for his death. Why did the man not strike? The waiting was more painful than he could imagine the fatal cut would be. The waiting was prolonged, limitless . . . Caradawc's acceptance of his fate gave way to hope that he might yet live – and with the hope came fear. He realized just how badly he wanted to live; he realized just how much he feared death.

'Strike!' he cried, sweating and trembling with the strain of waiting. 'For God's sake, strike!'

'Strike?' mocked the knight.

'*Or let me go!*' The words were wrung out of the young warrior – words which he had been taught were shameful for a knight to speak. He pleaded, he wept, he grovelled . . . suddenly desperate for life at all costs.

The black knight laughed, and his laughter rolled hollowly across the land like thunder. He laughed and

laughed, but his sword point never left the young man's throat.

And then with his left hand he had lifted off his helmet, and Caradawc could see who his tormentor was.

It was Goreu, his own father, dead and buried – yet here before him, laughing, as he always laughed . . .

The four young men in the room drew together silently – and silently took each other's hands. All forming the circle knew that from that moment there would not be peace for any of them if the black knight was not faced again – and faced this time with full awareness of what the challenge meant.

* * * *

Idoc watching, smiled, and stroked the cold black surface of his mirror, the images fading as he did so. There had been four men and one woman who had brought about his downfall in that ancient life – and all were now ready for his vengeance.

* * * *

Over Goreu's fields the night-owl swooped, and one more small rodent ceased to breathe.

Chapter 3

The green chapel and the river horse

The Green Lady had found Viviane exhausted and sobbing, having ridden all the night and most of the day. Gently she lifted her from Hunydd's back and carried her to a place where she could rest, touching her eyelids with sleep and laying her down on a grassy bank so comfortable that a swan's-down pillow would have seemed lumpy in comparison.

When the young woman awoke and stood up, she found herself clothed in white with a green silk girdle swinging at her side. Wonderingly she touched the fabric, the weave so fine she could believe magic had been in the spinning and the weaving of it. She was alone, but beside her she found bread and wine which she fell upon hungrily. It was not until she had satisfied her hunger and her thirst that she looked around and pondered where she was. She was certainly deep in the forest, in a clearing – the trees crowding thick and tall

around the edges. But this was no natural clearing. She stood inside a ruined building, open to the sky, the forest already reclaiming what it could. She moved about and tentatively explored, thoughtfully touching the lichen-covered stones that remained in place where once the walls had been. At the eastern end she found a table of stone, the huge slab cracked across but not yet fallen. Behind it the ruined walls formed a semicircle, and from them grew a huge beech tree, its silver-grey branches spreading wide, shimmering with light. Awed, she stood and gazed up at it, drinking in its force and beauty, its energy, its power.

She put out a hand to touch what she thought was a low-lying branch but found that it was a root, the blocks of the ancient wall and the roots of the tree so intertwined that it was impossible to decide whether the building was turning into a tree, or the tree into a building. She found that her heart was beating hard, almost aching, knowing that she was in a sacred place. It seemed to her that the huge branches reached out like arms to protect the space between. She felt compelled to kneel – overwhelmed by the feeling that she was in the presence of the Divine – and as she knelt it seemed to her that she was no longer alone.

Viviane opened her eyes, and light suddenly blazed in, dispelling the darkness behind her lids. Every leaf in the towering tree seemed individually lit. She could see the fine hairs around the young leaves like rays of silver. Between her and the tree the Green Lady stood in an aura of light, her eyes infinitely wise and kind. She held

out her hand and helped the young woman back on to her feet. She was trembling, but the lady smiled and murmured that she should not be afraid: that she was among friends. Viviane turned her head and looked back along the ruined nave. The place was crowded now with joyful beings.

A young boy lifted his arm to wave to her and she saw that his fingers were supple twigs with leaves growing from all the joints, his hair a crown of living shoots. She waved back at him, finding nothing strange in such a combination of human and plant form. A girl smiled at her, folding a fine gold mist around her like a cloak. Another being was winged. Another transparent, shining like a crystal. Tree spirits were everywhere, green and brown and muscular. There were water nymphs whose liquid forms seemed continually to flow away and yet never leave . . . She saw a mountain-hermit standing separate from the rest, a gnarled stick in his gnarled hand, the oldest man she had ever seen . . . And she knew that he, and she – and all who were present – were more than a million years old, and had seen God in many forms but not yet – no, not yet in the form beyond all forms . . .

All this while beings had been coming and going at the altar, laying down gifts and taking up others. Nuts and leaves and flowers, baskets woven of river reeds, pottery vessels, wine jars, wool and flax both woven and unwoven, bread and fruit . . . Each brought something and each took something away. She heard the chattering, the laughing, and an occasional spontaneous burst

of singing. She wondered what she should offer. She felt so loving, so part of all these beings. She longed to give. What did she have that they needed?

An old, old crone tottered up to the altar and laid down something she could not see. She was clad in rags and Viviane could see goose pimples of cold standing out on her thin arms. She suddenly remembered the only thing she had brought with her – her blue cloak, her mother’s cloak, the soft warmth of which had seen her through many a fierce northern winter. Her mother was dead and she would hate to part with it – but it was the only thing she now possessed . . . the only thing of her own to give . . .

She looked around to see what had happened to it, and found the Green Lady standing beside her holding the cloak folded in her outstretched hands as though she knew it would be needed. With a lump in her throat Viviane laid it on the altar. With it she felt she gave up her childhood and her childhood home. There would be no turning back now to the carefree days, the caring arms, the loving breast to weep on . . .

The ancient woman’s rheumy eyes lit up at the sight of it. She was so old, so doddering, she could not lift it, and Viviane had to put it over her bony shoulders. It looked incongruous on the stooped, skeletal figure, and trailed on the ground behind her. Momentarily Viviane felt such a pang of pain at parting with it that she almost seized it back – but stopped herself. The old woman looked gratefully into her eyes and pointed with her shaking, withered hand at what she herself had laid on

the altar. Viviane stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, then reached out and picked up the small, ragged bundle, trying to hide the disappointment that this was all she was to receive in exchange for her valuable royal cloak.

‘Open it,’ the Green Lady said to her quietly, knowing her thoughts, yet not condemning them.

Unwillingly Viviane peeled off the filthy wrappings. She gasped. Inside she found an exquisite sphere of crystal, shining softly with light the colour of pink rose petals. She gazed into its depths. She turned it from side to side. She trembled at its beauty. Suddenly she thought she saw a star in its depths; but as soon as she held it still the star vanished. She turned it round again. *Nothing*. And then, suddenly, it was there! It seemed to hover above the surface, yet when she tried to touch it, to pick it off, she found it was deep inside the crystal ball, an ephemeral shadow of light, lighter than light . . . the spirit of light . . . there and not there . . .

There was a pouch of soft doeskin at her waist. She slipped the rose-crystal sphere into it for safe keeping, now content beyond belief at this exchange of gifts. When she looked around to thank the old woman, there was no sign of her. The ruined chapel was deserted, the altar empty.

Viviane took a deep breath and turned from the altar and the mighty tree that grew behind it. She hated to leave this place, but she knew that she had to, as surely as she had needed to part with her childhood and her mother’s cloak. Here she might learn to understand

things she had never understood, but she could only learn 'out there' in the world, how to put that understanding into practice.

Slowly she retraced her steps along the path to the gaping hole that had once been the west door. On the threshold she hesitated, looking out into the forest. Already memories of what she had been fleeing from were crowding back.

Hunydd was cropping quietly in a patch of sunlight – but where was she to go? She really did not feel at all ready for what she had to face.

She took a step back into the chapel. But then she realized that she might never be ready. The readiness would come with the doing of whatever had to be done, not in the fearing of it.

Resolutely she stepped forward again, and whistled for Hunydd. The mare tossed her mane and came at once to her mistress. Viviane mounted and set her course for the north. There was a monastery she knew, called the Community of the Fish, ruled by a remarkable Irish abbot, Father Brendan, tucked away in a steep-sided valley, where she had spent some time as a child during the dangerous period before her father secured his kingdom. If she was to be safe anywhere she felt she would be safe there.

But what she did not know was that the dark tower lay between her and the sanctuary she sought.

* * * *

An hour of riding took her out of the forest into open countryside. She came upon a village and was given food and drink and a warm cloak by the smith's wife.

'It is no bad thing for a young lady to become a nun,' the smith's wife thought, on hearing that Viviane was on her way to a monastery. Praying and singing all day seemed a preferable way of life to the one of heavy work she herself had in bringing up seven sons and five daughters. She looked down at her own rough hands and misshapen figure, remembering when she, too, had been a beautiful girl. She patted Viviane's shoulder. 'Say a prayer for us, my dear,' she said. 'Think of us.' She, like most ordinary people, thought herself too busy to pray, and relied on others to do it for her.

The smith offered some village men as escort, but Viviane refused, not wanting to involve others in her problems. She said she did not have far to go, and if she could perhaps be given a knife and a flint for making fire she was sure she would be all right.

The smith hesitated: bread and an old unwanted cloak were one thing, but an expensive knife was another. He would have refused had he not realized that she was from a noble family and thought about the rewards that might come his way from a grateful father. He chose the best knife he had and honed it carefully. He gave her a broad leather belt and a sheath in which to house it.

'You don't want to ride about looking like a grand lady,' his wife said, fussing around Viviane as she prepared to leave. She pulled the hood up over the

young woman's shining hair and arranged the long cloak over the fine white weave of her dress. 'There now,' she said proudly. 'You look almost like a peasant.'

Almost. But not quite.

* * * *

The road that led out of the village was deeply rutted, red valerian and foxglove flowering profusely in the ditches on either side, while at ground level blue speedwell and wild strawberry spilled over with the grass to the very edge of the cart tracks. The woodland had mostly been cleared for farming, but there were still clusters of trees holding out against the axe.

It was late afternoon before Viviane decided that she must have taken a wrong turning. The instructions she had received from the smith had been simple. She was aiming for the local monastery, where she hoped she would be able to obtain proper directions to Father Brendan's more remote Community of the Fish. Yet there was no sign of the river, or the ferry she must use before she could reach it.

She slipped from Hunydd's back and tethered her lightly to a young birch sapling. They were both tired, and a rest might help her to think more clearly and recall the details of the directions she had received. Warily she lowered herself on to a log and sat hunched up with her elbows on her knees and her head buried in her arms. The courage she had brought with her from the chapel of the Green Lady was now rapidly leaking

away, and she wondered what would become of her if she did not find shelter before nightfall.

Perhaps she dozed off. At any rate her thoughts were so self-absorbed that she was suddenly startled, as though from sleep, by the feeling that she was being watched. She leapt up at once, her hand on the knife at her belt. A few yards from her a man was standing – a tall man dressed in black, his arms crossed on his breast, a sword at his side. The intent stare he was giving her came from beneath lowered brows. His mouth was set in a hard line.

Idoc! She would know him anywhere, any time! How long had he been watching her?

She turned at once and ran to Hunydd, hauling up her skirts and leaping on the mare's back as easily as if she were in hunting gear. Hunydd's tether must have worked loose because nothing delayed the smooth, swift flight. As she leaped a small ditch she looked back over her shoulder and saw him standing there still, gazing after her impassively, making no attempt to pursue her.

At first she could think of nothing but of leaving Idoc as far behind her as possible, but once she felt this was achieved, she sought for some kind of track that might lead her to a farmhouse or village. Eventually she saw a fairly well-worn road to the left and pulled gently on the reins to guide Hunydd towards it. But the mare, who usually responded to the slightest touch from her mistress, seemed not to notice and continued in the direction they had been going. A firmer tug on the reins was equally ineffectual, and Viviane spoke sharply,

pulling in the leather firmly to bring them to a halt. The mare shook her head to relieve the pressure of the bit, and galloped on.

‘Hunydd!’ shouted Viviane, pulling with all her strength, astonished at the creature’s disobedience. Shadows were gathering and the sun was near to setting. She experienced a twinge of fear. Why would the mare not respond?

The mare increased her pace, flying over obstacles, her hooves cracking and thundering on the earth, small pebbles spinning from her hooves. Viviane noticed foam at the sides of her mouth and on her flanks and tugged less firmly on the reins so as not to hurt her.

‘Whoa! Hush! Hush!’ she called. ‘Hunydd! Friend!’

But still the mare galloped on, faster . . . wilder . . . A jerk of her head caused Viviane to lose the reins. She clung to the animal’s neck, knitting her fingers in the long matted mane.

Long matted mane? Suddenly Viviane realized her steed was not Hunydd! White it was – but in her haste to get away from Idoc she had not noticed the substitution.

As she leaned over the fearsome neck she saw that its eyes were glowing red, and she knew that she was lost. Such demon horses she had heard about luring people on to their backs and riding off with them. These creatures were deep-water fiends. They rose from the watery depths and they returned to them . . . their hapless victims with them.

Viviane loosed her feet from the stirrups, thinking to fling herself off the creature’s back – preferring the

bruising she would receive to the drowning. But although her feet were now free, she found a force held her to the beast's back and she could not leave it.

So this was why Idoc had not pursued her!

They were galloping beside the river now, the very river she had been seeking: but now she would rather they had not found it. It was wide and deep, and the rays of the setting sun stained the water the colour of blood. The fiend she sat on was making the most horrible noises . . . shrieking and howling and wailing like no earthly horse. Perhaps it was calling to its fearful mate . . . or perhaps rejoicing that it was nearly home. The current was running swiftly beside them – the water grey and muddy where it was not red. She had never seen water so dark and sombre before. No bright water sprites would live here, only dark and harmful things: savage and cruel beings.

The creature rose on its hind legs and gave one last fearful bellow before it plunged. She was pulled down with it, feeling the icy water coursing over her skin, thundering in her ears. Frantically she held her breath, hoping against hope that once in its natural habitat the creature would release her and there might be a chance of escape.

Greasy bubbles were surging past her, and her chest ached with the effort of holding her breath. Her steed's hairy sides were growing slimy and slippery, its tail like rotten leather that had lain long in a stagnant pool . . .

'O God in Heaven . . .' her heart sighed as she slipped into darkness, giving up the struggle . . .

* * * *

Caradawc and his three friends, Gerin, Rheged and Cai, rode out together from Castle Goreu, determined to find the black knight and solve the mystery of the attention he was paying them. They had each confessed that he had confronted them, though the story each told his companions and the true story of what had happened were not necessarily the same.

As they set out in the early-morning mist they rode close, talking and laughing, four young men embarking on an adventure, full of hope.

He had appeared to them during their battle with Huandaw, and so it was towards Huandaw's lands that they headed first.

In mid-afternoon it was Caradawc's decision that they should separate so as to be less conspicuous. In his mind was the thought that when he met the black knight he would rather the others were not there to witness what happened. A recurrent nightmare had greatly disturbed him since the battle. In his dream he killed his father – not once, but many times. Wherever he turned his father seemed to be there – laughing at him. Time and again he saw himself plunging a dagger into Goreu's back, only to find that his father was still standing unharmed, still laughing.

It was thus that Caradawc found himself alone at sunset, riding along the bank of a wide river, his chin sunk on his chest, brooding about his father. There must have been a time when he had loved him, but he could not remember it. His first memory was of the fear

in his mother's face when he failed to bring down the bird his father expected him to kill with the bow he had just given him. He remembered even today the pity he had felt for the creature as it beat against the bars of its cage and the joy with which it flew to the heavens at its release. He remembered how he had deliberately missed the target. It was his mother's face that alerted him to his father's wrath; the way she gathered him hastily to her side, to protect him with her slender arms.

'He is very young,' she had pleaded. 'Must you take him now?'

But taken he had been 'to be made a man,' and he himself had become the bird in the cage, longing for his freedom.

A breeze sprang up and the sudden chill of evening brought Caradawc back to the present. Clouds had gathered low on the horizon, but not yet closely enough to shut out the huge orb of the setting sun. A flight of geese passed over, honking forlornly, the water dark as the grave beneath them, the sky as red as fire.

A movement, a flash of white, in the distance caught his eye. He reined in and strained to see what it could be. The light now was deceptive and the object, whatever it was, seemed to billow and change like a sail before the wind.

At length he discerned it was a rider on a white horse that was galloping towards him, though still too far away for him to distinguish details. He waited where he was, preparing for the encounter, but suddenly the steed seemed to rear on its hind legs and plunge into the

river, taking its rider with it. Caradawc stared astonished at the swirl of water, tinted red by the setting sun, which closed over their heads. A moment of shock . . . but when he realized that they were not rising to the surface again, he drove his heels into his chestnut and galloped forward.

It was difficult to be sure where they had gone in; the river's face was a blank. But he thought he remembered a particular tree at the spot, and took a chance, leaping from his horse, and plunging in. The water was cold and murky and he came up for air twice before the third dive gave him what he was looking for. A woman's body was floating, held back from the tow of the strong current by the waterweeds that had entangled her. There was no sign of the horse at all.

Frantically he cut at the weed and pulled and tugged, his lungs aching with the effort; and he himself was almost dead before he had her free. Together they burst through the surface of the water, he taking great gulps of air, while she still lay inert. He dragged her to the bank and hauled her out, pummelling her roughly till she choked and coughed and vomited water and the vile river slime.

'Live!' he shouted as he worked, his heart breaking to see the state she was in, though as yet he had not recognized her through the mud and weed that clung to her.

At last she was breathing, though not yet conscious, and he fell back to recover his own breath. It was then he saw it was Viviane. Joy leapt in his heart like a flame

in dry kindling, and it was all he could do not to fall on her and smother her with kisses.

He sat back on his haunches, gazing at her, her long hair matted and dark and interwoven with slime-weed, her gown torn and soaked in mud.

There were runnels of blood where her skin had been torn, but she was alive and he had found her! He was both shivering and smiling, feeling this was perhaps the happiest moment of his life . . . asking no questions . . . seeking no answers . . .

But moments break like waves and cannot be held back.

He heard a sound behind him and turned quickly. It was nearly dark now and the figure that stood beside him was almost indistinguishable from the shadows. He sensed the malevolence rather than saw it. He had dropped his knife in the water when he had finally freed the girl from the weeds; his other weapons were on his horse a few paces to the left. The stranger was watching him intently. Whether he was armed or not was difficult to tell, but Caradawc did not feel like taking a chance. Cautiously he rose and stepped towards his chestnut, keeping his eyes warily on the dark figure. The man did not stir.

‘Who are you, sir?’ Caradawc challenged.

‘You know me well,’ came a voice as dry as dead leaves blown by the wind.

‘You are mistaken, sir,’ the young man said, but his voice faltered. How many more paces to his horse?

‘You know me as well as you know yourself,’ the other said and took a step forward.

Caradawc turned swiftly and leapt across the remaining distance between himself and his horse. The chestnut trampled nervously, and Caradawc found that he could not get a firm grip on the weapons fastened to the saddle.

‘Whoa,’ he said softly. ‘Gently, friend.’ But the horse suddenly bolted, as he had done once before, apparently terrified. Caradawc swung round, determined to face the stranger with his fists if need be. The huge dark figure was very close now, shutting out what feeble light there remained from the day.

‘Hold, sir!’ Caradawc said warningly, raising his hands to ward him off. But the stranger continued forward until Caradawc could bear it no more, and lunged out.

To his astonishment his arm met no resistance. Although the stranger appeared as solid as he was, his flesh had no substance. He came still closer, undeterred by the blow, and Caradawc felt an icy shadow touch him, then spread over him. Suddenly the figure was gone, and Caradawc was shaking with cold. It felt as though an iron fist had seized his heart and was squeezing it. He sensed himself sinking into a bottomless pit . . . falling . . . spinning . . . his voice crying out as though from a great distance . . .

* * * *

When Viviane opened her eyes she found Caradawc bending over her.

‘Ah, my love,’ she murmured softly, seeing how handsome he looked, how gently he lifted her in his arms. The full moon poured its light upon them, the river was like a sheet of silver. He kissed her, stroked her hair.

‘It has been so long,’ he whispered and his touch became rougher, more intimate. At first she did not resist, still half dazed by her experience. But then she remembered the eyes that had stared from Caradawc’s face in her chamber, the knife brutally plunged into Goreu’s back.

‘Idoc!’ she cried – but the sound was smothered as he kissed her. And, though a doubt still lingered, she let herself be taken.

At the end, with her lover resting beside her, she rose on her elbow and looked down on his face in the moonlight. The features were those of Caradawc, but was there something about the expression – a hardness of line that belonged to an older man – a slight curl to the lip as though he was savouring a victory, not an act of love?

The fear that had become her unwelcome companion since that ill-fated hunting expedition now returned. He was heavily asleep, and if she were very, very careful she might just be able to slip away. With tiny, imperceptible movements she eased herself away from him, rolling finally out of reach. She stood up silently,

trembling with fear lest he should wake. But luckily he did not.

She had no means of knowing which way would be the safest for her to take, but she thought it best to try to retrace her steps in search of Hunydd. To be a woman alone was bad enough, but without a mount her plight was really desperate. She began walking quietly, trying not to make a sound, but as soon as she felt she was out of earshot she began to run, stumbling occasionally on the uneven ground. She felt at her belt and was relieved to find that she still had the smith's knife and the Green Lady's little pouch containing the precious rose-crystal sphere.

It was nearly dawn before she dared stop for rest. She had left the river and worked her way back as best she could in the direction she hoped would bring her to Hunydd. Exhausted, she could go no further. She found a sheltered place on a soft bank among bushes and fell asleep.

When she woke she felt much refreshed. The morning sun was well up and everything sparkled – buttercups shining everywhere and birds busy about their business as though nothing untoward had happened. Cautiously she examined her immediate environment. In such a pleasant spot it seemed inconceivable that just a few hours before she had been fighting for her life against enchantment.

After smoothing her dress as best she could, she followed the sound of trickling water and found a spring from which she drank thirstily before washing herself.

Her hair soon began to dry in the sun, all its brilliant flame-like lights returning. Then she found a wild apple tree and ate heartily, though the apples were very sour.

But where would she find Hunydd?

As though in answer to this thought, she heard a sudden whinny, and a party of children came out of the wood, leading Hunydd amidst them and chattering excitedly at their find. Upon her back a slender green figure was riding. It waved cheerfully at Viviane, then seemed to dissolve into light and disappear. She stood amazed for a moment, wondering if she had imagined the figure, for the children did not seem to have noticed its presence, nor its disappearance. Then, as the party seemed about to pass her by without a glance, she pulled herself together and rushed forward to tell them that the mare was hers.

They laughed. 'Such a ragged peasant woman could not own such a fine horse.'

Surprised, she looked down at herself. Certainly her fine white gown was no longer so fine or so white, and the cloak from the smith's wife had been ragged to begin with and was worse now. Luckily, at this moment Hunydd pulled away from the children and came up to her mistress.

Then they were curious, wanting to know why a lady like her was wandering about the countryside looking like a peasant. She told them she was escaping from a very wicked man, and asked them to direct her to the monastery she sought. One of the older boys said he knew the place she meant. It lay on the other side of the

river. Her heart sank. She did not relish facing those murky depths again, but she followed where the children led, through meadows of tall grass, musk mallow and clover, through copse and barley field and, finally, to the river. From time to time she glanced uneasily over her shoulder, fearing that Idoc would find her again before she reached sanctuary. She could not shake off the feeling that he was even now watching her.

* * * *

When Caradawc awoke, both Viviane and Idoc had left him. The sun shone warmly on his skin and his chestnut horse, Osla, was not far away, cropping contentedly. He remembered nothing clearly after the dark hand had touched him, except the sensation of falling, and . . . but this he could not be sure of . . . a terrible yearning.

He stood up and took his bearings. The river that had seemed so cruel and fearsome at sunset was placid and golden now in the daylight, willows growing along its banks. He must have lain there all night, because his limbs were stiff and painful. For a while he paced up and down, stamping and claspings his sides with his arms, trying to get rid of the cramps and the lingering night cold. He wondered if anything he remembered had really happened. Had he indeed found Viviane, only to lose her again?

He whistled and Osla came running, apparently unrepentant for having deserted him.

‘That’s a fine thing to do,’ he chided. ‘Run off when I need you most.’ But he did not scold him too hard, for

he too had felt the icy clutch of fear. Neither he nor his steed would ever run from battle, but what they had faced the evening before was not natural – a grim wight sent from the dark regions to destroy them.

He climbed on Osla's back and set off along the riverbank, not knowing where to go or what to do next.

Chapter 4

The ferry and the rose-crystal sphere

The children chose a different route to the river, much shorter than the one Viviane had already used, and their cheerful voices lifted her spirits. When they reached the ferry station the raft was over the other side, so they sat on the small jetty to wait, their legs dangling over the edge. From time to time there was a soft ripple, a curved flash of silver, and then a splash as a trout leapt into the air for a dragonfly and then fell back into its own element.

At last they could see the raft returning across the water and the children pushed and jostled each other at the end of the jetty to have the privilege of catching the mooring rope. Viviane stood behind them, looking over their heads at the sturdy craft, more punt than raft, and the ferryman who stood wielding a long punt pole as he neared the bank. She noticed a large, flat oar lying at his feet, no doubt for use when in deeper water.

She stroked Hunydd and murmured soothing things to her, more to comfort herself than the mare. Knowing now what lurked beneath the surface made her fearful of the crossing, though she had been on many a ferry before.

To her surprise the ferryman was an old man, but, watching the way he manoeuvred his ungainly craft to the jetty, threw the rope and leapt after it on to the planks, she knew he was as fit and strong as need be for his work.

‘This lady has to cross the river,’ the children chorused, ‘but she has no coin. You’ll take her, won’t you?’ they cried. ‘Good old ferryman – you’ll take her, won’t you?’

The man looked at her sharply, his expression clouding.

‘I take no one without payment,’ he said sourly. ‘I have a family to feed. If I let one go free, all will expect it.’

‘Just this once, old man – just this once!’ pleaded the children. ‘No one will see.’

‘Not even this once,’ he said firmly. ‘No payment. No crossing.’

Viviane joined her pleas to theirs. ‘I swear I’ll return and pay you as soon as I have reached my friends,’ she said. She thought that surely the holy brothers and sisters at the monastery would help her when they knew her plight.

‘No payment. No crossing!’ he repeated sternly, standing with his arms crossed on his chest, glaring stubbornly at her.

She looked round helplessly. She had nothing with which to barter. She could not and would not part with Hunydd’s saddle, nor the smith’s knife.

Watching her closely and seeing what she was thinking the old man suddenly pointed at her waist.

‘I’ll have that green girdle,’ he said.

Involuntarily she put her hand to the fine, strong, silk cord. It had been given her by the Green Lady and was surely some form of magical protection.

‘I cannot part with this,’ she said, thinking fast. Perhaps it would be better to give up the knife. It had come from no faery source. ‘You can have my knife.’ And she started to undo the belt to give him the knife and its sheath.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I have a knife. I want the green girdle.’

‘You can have the leather belt *and* the knife,’ she said.

But he was not interested, for it seemed he had set his heart on the girdle and nothing would direct his attention away from it. Viviane’s every instinct told her not to part with the girdle, yet she had heard that evil spirits hated crossing water, and apart from her determination to seek sanctuary with the Community of the Fish, she hoped by crossing the river to leave Idoc well behind her.

Even as she hesitated a horseman was sighted by the children, and they shouted out that the ferryman would

soon have another customer. Viviane looked back over her shoulder and, although the rider was still a fair distance away, she was sure it was Caradawc.

‘If only it *was* Caradawc,’ she thought desperately. But Caradawc inhabited by the soul of Idoc was more than she could bear.

‘You can have the green girdle,’ she cried hastily to the ferryman, ‘but only if you cast off now before that horseman arrives.’

‘He’s the wicked man she’s running away from!’ the children cried in delight, crowding off the jetty on to the bank to get a better view.

‘Please!’ she begged, her fingers trembling as she untied the knot the Green Lady had fastened so lovingly.

The ferryman glanced speculatively from her to the rider and back again.

‘I’ll have the girdle *and* the knife,’ he said.

‘But, you said . . .’ she cried.

‘*And* the leather belt,’ he added.

‘All right!’ she almost screamed. ‘You’ll get them – but *please* cast off now.’

He gave her a last amused look and released the rope from the post. He seemed to be moving deliberately slowly as he picked up the punt pole and put it in place to start. He looked at the rider rapidly approaching and then he looked at her – still hesitating to push the craft off.

The horseman was obviously heading for the ferry, because he was galloping now and shouting for them to wait. He was near enough for Viviane to see without a

doubt that it was Caradawc. She finally managed to undo the knot, and almost flung the precious green silk at the ferryman. He caught it deftly and, with a smile she hated, he swung it round until it fastened around his forearm like a snake.

She looked back at Caradawc, tears streaming down her face . . .

He was calling her name.

Oh God . . . if only she knew! She would give anything for it truly to be Caradawc. But she could not be sure. Would she ever be sure again?

‘Go!’ she shrieked at the ferryman. ‘You’ve got what you wanted – now *go!*’

He pushed off the craft at last.

Caradawc reined up at the jetty, shouting after them. The children milled around him pummelling him and trying to pull him from his horse. Her anguished emotions were torn between wanting him by her side and dreading that she might discover he was once again inhabited by Idoc’s fell spirit.

The young king, like a giant among dwarfs, managed to fling the children aside. Frantic to reach her, he dived into the water and started to swim towards her. It seemed to her the ferryboat was scarcely moving and the ferryman was delaying deliberately. Caradawc was gaining on them. She looked round angrily at the ferryman. He had a sly, unpleasant face, and his eyes were shining like beads. She could see the silk cord on his arm, and there was something horrible about the way it now seemed that the veined and knotted forearm

was wound round the green cord, rather than the cord around the arm – almost as though he was absorbing the silk into his body.

Caradawc had now reached the boat and was stretching up his hand to seize the side. He looked into her eyes, and she gasped. They were the sea-blue eyes of Caradawc, untroubled by anything but his love and concern for her.

Then she rushed forward to help him, wild with joy – but the ferryman tripped her so that she fell sprawling on the deck. Then he struck the man in the water full in the chest with the punt pole. Her face almost on a level with Caradawc's, she saw the agony that flushed across it . . . saw him gasp and flounder . . . saw him sink . . .

'No!' she cried, struggling to her feet. 'Help him! Get him out!'

'Make up your mind, lady,' the ferryman mocked her. 'One moment you want to escape him, and the next you want him for your bed.'

'How dare you!' she screamed. She tried to wrench the pole from him but he held it firmly. She saw his yellow teeth as he grinned. '*Help* him,' she demanded. 'I made a mistake. It's not the man I thought it was.'

'It's too late now,' the ferryman said callously. 'The current will have taken him away.'

Distraught, Viviane peered downriver. A dark shape that could have been a man or merely a log was being carried rapidly downstream, a scum of waterweeds and debris floating with it.

The ferryman returned to his task. He set down the pole and pulled on the rudder rope with his bare foot, one toe very much longer than the others. With his hands he worked the paddle-oar to prevent the ferry drifting too far with the current.

In despair Viviane stared at the river, too exhausted by the conflict of her emotions to think clearly. Then suddenly she remembered that she had received *two* gifts at the Green Lady's chapel: there was also the rose-crystal sphere in the little leather pouch she had worn on the green cord around her waist. Terrified that she might have lost this too she turned to the place she had been standing when she had ripped off the girdle. The man presumably had not noticed the pouch, or he would most certainly have been interested in its contents. She searched discreetly and spotted it at last, lying where it had rolled against a coil of rope. The ferryman was still looking back in her direction and she could not make a move without his seeing her. If only he would turn . . . But he did not.

Viviane stood up and, pretending to peer over the side towards their destination, she moved until her skirt covered the pouch. Then she staggered slightly and sat down on the coil of rope. Carefully, under the cover of her skirt, she retrieved the pouch and prised it open until she held the small rose-crystal sphere naked in her hand. She did not know how it could help her – only that it would.

Gripping it tightly, she looked up at the ferryman.
She caught her breath.

Behind him stood a mighty being of bronze and yet of flesh, of darkness and yet of light. Upon the one skull he had two faces, one looking forward, one backward. Past and future seemed to flash through him like lightning, his eyes seeing what was not to be seen.

Terrified, she drew back, and then remembered what she clutched in her hand. She raised it up. She watched the sunlight flash through it, the star riding just above the surface . . .

Suddenly the Janus-god was gone.

The ferryman seemed confused. He rushed forward, but appeared not to be able to see her. He searched the water on either side of the boat . . . he looked frantically towards the bank.

Like the star in the rose-crystal sphere, she was momentarily invisible!

She slipped over the side and swam and waded the short distance to the bank, the water hardly moving under the lee of a bend in the river.

It was Hunydd who gave her away, scrambling beside her up the steep bank, breaking off great chunks of loose earth as she did so. She heard the ferryman shout, and breathlessly hauled herself up by clutching roots where the lapping water had undercut the bank. With a foot in the loop of one, she grabbed Hunydd's bridle, and used the mare's strength to swing her up on to the riverside path.

She guided the mare downstream, hoping that they would come upon Caradawc, but there was no sign of him – only the river flowing hard and strong to the

distant sea; the willows crowding thickly, leaning well over the water as though to drink; the occasional heron watching for fish. She looked frequently over her shoulder to check if she was being followed.

She saw no one. But in the scramble to mount Hunydd she had dropped the precious rose quartz sphere, and the dark river mud had sucked it down into its depths.

* * * *

Eventually Viviane gave up searching for Caradawc and turned to the north, away from the river, hoping to find the monastery the smith's wife had described. She headed into woods of oak and ash and alder, Hunydd's hooves muted on the thick carpet of leaves and ground ivy. Out in the sunshine on the other side she found peasants working the strip fields, women and children beside the men, bent double, pulling weeds, hoeing and trimming. They straightened up when they saw her and stared at her silently. She asked a woman with a child on her hip for directions, and was given them, briefly, unsmilingly. She supposed she must appear strange to them, a ragged woman on a mare fit for a princess.

Following instructions she climbed towards the long rocky ridge beyond the fields. She could feel the peasants' eyes still upon her back.

Near the top Hunydd began to sniff the air nervously and sidestep a little. But Viviane urged her on firmly until they could look down on to the plain on the other side; and there she saw the reason. The monastery,

which a few hours previously must have consisted of a collection of sturdily built wooden houses gathered around a central chapel, was now a smouldering and blackened ruin. Viviane shivered, the thought that Idoc might have been responsible crossing her mind.

Near her on the ridge stood an ancient preaching cross – a cross bearing a circle – the symbol of the new religion and the old combined in one powerful stone image – a marker that had been there for centuries before the monks had come and would remain there long after they were gone. She climbed down from Hunydd and put her arms around the stone, leaning her head against it, saying a silent prayer.

What now? She did not want to go back to the cold, unfriendly peasants and beg a bed for the night in one of their cramped little huts. Nor could she return to the comforts of Castle Goreu. Her father's home was far, far away. There was still the Community of the Fish . . . but would she ever be able to find that?

Since she had left the woods, clouds had gathered. She searched the landscape that lay spread out like a quilt below her, wondering where in all that web of forest, rock and stream, crop-field and pasture, she would find what she was looking for . . .

There was a ridge of hills in the distance but the black clouds hung so oppressively low they were almost invisible. Suddenly she heard a sound above her and looked up to see that a pair of swans had risen into the air and, like white thunder, were winging their way across the landscape. Their necks outstretched, like

living arrows, they pointed the way to a knoll of rock in the distance – a knoll she recognized for it overlooked the sanctuary she sought. At that very moment, as though in confirmation, the clouds parted a fraction and a ray of light caught the swans' wings, burnishing them with dazzling silver. She caught her breath. But as suddenly as it had happened it was over. The clouds closed over again. The swans landed. The moment now only existed in her memory . . . but she knew that it had been a gift and she would cherish it forever.

The landscape seemed even darker now in contrast to the brilliant white of the swans, and she noticed that the knoll overlooking the sanctuary was not the only prominence. Dark as the clouds were, she had the impression that there was a more powerful source of darkness on the earth. Its centre seemed to be a hill with a tower upon it, lying between her and the sanctuary. Towards this, like shoals of fish all swimming in the same direction, flashes and gleams of light seemed to be drawn: only to scatter in apparent confusion as they reached the black shadow surrounding the tower. Most were instantly sucked in, finding the force of darkness too strong for them. When they re-emerged they themselves had taken on the darkness and were part of the shadow that was reaching out across the land.

Shivering, she spoke to Hunydd. 'Come, we must find shelter before it rains.' She would try to skirt the dark tower, but meanwhile there was a great deal of travelling to be done.

She had not gone far when she came upon a party of warriors. They surrounded her at once, their eyes stripping her naked.

‘What have we here?’ one said.

‘A woman ready for laying,’ another replied.

‘My turn first,’ a third broke in.

‘No, mine!’ spoke a fourth.

‘Let’s toss for it.’

‘Neol should go first.’

‘After Neol we’ll toss.’

Hands came out and groped her, one cupping a breast while the others whistled. She tried to pull away but they were pressing too close, and had Hunydd firmly by the bridle.

‘You’ll pay for this,’ she said fiercely. ‘I am the betrothed of Caradawc, son of Goreu!’

The effect of her words was startling.

The men drew back at once and gathered into a tight knot for consultation. Seeing them thus occupied, she encouraged Hunydd to slip away and make for the woods where she hoped she would have a better chance of hiding. But they turned and spotted her before she reached cover, and set off at once in pursuit. Once again Hunydd was urged to a gallop, but the men were upon her in moments, the leader leaning over to seize her bridle. The others encircled her – but this time silently. Only the one holding the bridle spoke, and with more respect than before.

‘We apologize, my lady,’ he said. ‘You must be the Princess Viviane?’

‘Yes.’ She tried to keep her dignity, in spite of the eyes that still looked her over greedily.

‘You must agree . . . dressed as you are . . . it was an easy mistake for my men to make.’

‘Is any woman who comes your way subjected to the same treatment?’ she asked coldly.

‘We are men, my lady,’ he answered, equally coldly.

‘I know men who would not behave thus.’

‘I know women who would not ride about the countryside pretending to be peasants when they are royal born.’

‘I have been through many dangers, sir, and would be grateful if you would give me your protection and guide me to some civilized household where I may find rest and food and perhaps a change of clothes. I am sure that the Lord Caradawc will amply reward you.’

At this the men laughed loudly, and even the polite young man who had been speaking smiled grimly.

‘I am sure he will, my lady,’ he said quietly, but she did not miss the irony in his voice.

Her heart was beating fast as she realized that she was not among friends – but perhaps they would be held at bay by what they feared to lose or hoped to gain from Caradawc.

The young man in charge spoke briefly to his companions, sending most of them on to continue along the way they had been going, but choosing others to head back with him in the direction whence they had come. Viviane was to ride beside him, his hand still on her bridle.

‘Where are you taking me, sir?’ she asked calmly, though she felt far from calm.

‘To my father’s house,’ he said.

‘Your father, sir?’

‘Huandaw, son of Neved.’ The names meant nothing to her. She had come too recently to the area to know the enmities and rivalries of all the local houses. But she caught the pride in the young man’s voice.

‘And you?’

‘Neol, son of Huandaw.’

‘I greet you, Neol, son of Huandaw.’

‘And I greet you, Viviane, daughter of Garwys,’ he said coldly.

‘You know my father, sir?’

‘No, my lady, but I have heard of you.’

‘You know Prince Caradawc?’

The answer did not come quickly this time. She could not see his face, but she saw his shoulders stiffen.

‘Yes,’ he said, the word devoid of any emotion.

‘And his father, Goreu?’

‘Particularly his father, Goreu!’ To *these* words he gave bitter emphasis.

‘The Lord Goreu is dead,’ she said hastily, hoping that the ill feeling she could sense lay between Huandaw and Goreu, and not between Caradawc and Neol.

‘I know,’ he said stiffly.

They rode in silence for a while, the others keeping just behind them.

Suddenly he shouted an order and one of the men rode swiftly ahead, no doubt to prepare Huandaw for their arrival. She began to feel more and more uneasy.

‘When I am guest in your father’s house’ – she chose the word carefully, knowing that to be a guest was to be under the host’s protection – ‘I would like to send a message to . . . to my father.’ What had this young man heard of the murder of Goreu, the fire, her disappearance? What interpretation did he put on finding her here so far from Caradawc’s lands, ragged and clad like a peasant?

‘My lady, you will not be a “guest” in my father’s house,’ Neol replied equally carefully. ‘You will be a hostage.’

Her heart sank. ‘A hostage, sir?’

‘Surely you must know that the House of Goreu and the House of Huandaw are sworn enemies?’

‘No,’ she said in a low voice. ‘You will find that I am not of much value as a hostage, sir,’ she continued, trying to steady her voice. ‘My relationship with the House of Goreu is no longer good.’

‘Yet when it suited you you claimed Caradawc’s protection?’ He turned and looked at her sharply.

She flushed. ‘Surely you can understand, sir, a woman set upon must defend herself as best she can.’

‘And when her deception is found out – what protection can she expect then?’

What indeed?

‘Sir – the protection of an honourable man: Neol, son of Huandaw.’

He reined in their two steeds, and the others came to a halt behind them. He looked at her long and closely; but in that look she could read nothing of what he was thinking.

* * * *

Idoc was in his tower, staring into his scrying mirror. The images before him appeared to float in front of the mirror; they were solid-seeming, almost tangible. He bit the knuckles of his left hand. Even in rags she was beautiful: the sun catching her hair, touching the curve of her breast . . . The image was so clear he could even see the long dark lashes shadowing her green-grey eyes. The interference of Neol had not been in his plan. Who was this Neol that he looked at her so boldly? Was he contemplating taking her from Caradawc? That must not be allowed! Caradawc's body was open to Idoc in a way that Neol's would never be, for Caradawc had been under his control in that past life, and Caradawc's weakness then was his weakness now: then as now he could be manipulated – by fear . . . by jealousy . . . by loving too blindly. Neol was a colder, harder man, one who knew his own strengths and weaknesses, and those of the people around him. He would never allow himself to be taken over. Idoc strode about the chamber. If Neol lay with Viviane he, Idoc, would not be able to feel a thing. Cursing, he returned to the mirror to see what further was happening.

If Neol had made reply to Viviane, Idoc had missed it, and he was furious with himself for allowing his

irritation to interfere. The group of figures was on the move again: as before, Neol leading Viviane. But the image was fading. Idoc cursed again. It was his own agitation that was causing this – his control was slipping. He was allowing his feelings for the woman he had once desired so desperately to interfere with his simple pursuit of revenge. Bitterly he put his hand over her image in the mirror, his palm against the ice-cold obsidian. He would not look at her. To look at her was to desire her. To desire her was to be diverted from his purpose.

Viviane, riding beside Neol, felt a sudden shadow cross her path and, as it touched her, it was like the touch of a hand.

* * * *

It was Gerin who found Caradawc sitting on the north bank where the river narrowed and the water divided into fierce white streams rushing between huge rounded boulders. He was badly bruised and there was blood on his shoulder, but he had been very lucky to recover consciousness before hitting the worst of the rapids.

Gerin himself had crossed the river further downstream, and was making his way back towards Huandaw's house when he came upon the young king, soaked and shivering.

When Caradawc told him how he had found and rescued Viviane, Gerin thought his heart would leap out of his chest. Since the first moment he had set eyes on her he had been drawn to her, so strongly that it was

almost more than he could do to hide it from his friends. It was he who had found the charred remains of Goreu with Viviane's dagger still in his back, and it was he who had removed it before anyone else could see it; confiding only in Caradawc. Had she been driven crazy by remorse for what she had done? Why else would she have plunged into the river and tried to drown herself? Why else, after Caradawc had risked his life to rescue her, would she still run from him, and bribe the ferryman to push him off the ferry?

'I'm sure she didn't mean him to kill me. She even tried to help me – but it was too late. The man was over-zealous.'

'At any rate,' Gerin said, 'we know she is alive and heading north. She's probably trying to return to her father.'

Caradawc frowned. 'That is too far! She'll never reach him on her own.'

The two young men fell silent, thinking. They had set off to solve the mystery of the black knight, but that seemed unimportant now.

Gerin stood up decisively. 'I'll be back as soon as I find Osla,' he said, 'and then we'll look for her together.'

Caradawc nodded. 'Take care,' he said quietly.

'You too, my friend. Keep out of sight if you hear anyone coming. We are very close to Huandaw's lands, if not already on them.'

Caradawc nodded, and Gerin remounted and rode off the way he had come.

* * * *

Rheged was the first to find a place where he could watch the house of Huandaw without being seen. He found a tor capped with rocks and trees, and took up his position inside a huge boulder that had been cracked open by an oak tree. The tree itself was stunted and deformed, all its energy having gone into the prodigious work of splitting the solid rock.

From here, hidden by leaves and branches, Rheged could see down into the walled area of the great house: he could watch all the comings and goings in the courtyard and through the main gate. He could see a herdboyc driving cattle back from the pasture, and hear the thin, high call as he summoned his dog. He could see a woman scattering grain for the chickens, and children playing around the well. The tor was out of arrow range, but there was a higher hill nearer to the buildings where he was sure a lookout would be posted. It was not the intention of Caradawc's friends to beard Huandaw in his den, or even to plan a revenge raid. They had not thought further than discovering more about the mysterious black knight: whether he was part of Huandaw's household, or whether he had arrived during the battle for some other purpose – unknown both to Huandaw and to Caradawc alike.

There was certainly no sign of his presence here in the valley.

Rheged's limbs were growing stiff in the cramped position he had chosen and he glanced anxiously more than once at the sky, where the clouds were pressing ominously low. He had just decided he would stay no

longer fruitlessly watching, when suddenly he spotted a party of riders emerging from a nearby copse.

In front rode a figure that looked like Huandaw's son, Neol, leading a white horse beside his own. As Rheged suddenly leant forward he nearly pitched headlong down the tor, saving himself just in time by seizing hold of a branch. A few pebbles went skittering down the steep slope to the valley, and he feared someone watching from the other hill might notice, but any guard there was also watching the horsemen, for no one appeared to challenge him.

Rheged had recognized Viviane on the white horse.

The men accompanying her were joined by others from the house, and she was led through the gate in triumph, everyone running to stare at her, with Huandaw himself appearing at the door of the main hall.

Rheged saw her helped down from her mare by Neol, and presented to his father. They then went inside and out of sight. He continued to watch while the other horsemen dismounted and handed over their mounts to grooms and stable boys. The others who had ridden out to meet them dispersed to take up guard positions: it was clear that they were expecting trouble.

When one began to ride towards the tor on which Rheged was hidden, he knew that if he did not leave at once he would be discovered. Luckily, what sounds he made as he descended the tor were lost as the storm that had been brewing finally broke. His last glimpse of Huandaw's yard was of the children running for the

house, squealing, as the huge drops of rain started to pelt down and the air rumbled with thunder.

Rheged mounted up and rode off as fast as he could, a wind driving the rain into his face and almost blinding him. Within seconds he was soaked through and exhausted, but he was confident he would not be pursued.

Chapter 5

Kicva and Elined

At the feasting that night, beside Huandaw's great chair, on the right hand, where his eldest son should have been, sat Kicva, clearly as honoured by Huandaw as she had been by Goreu. Viviane's heart sank when she recognized her, particularly when she saw how the old woman looked at her.

As she was led in on the arm of Neol, arrayed in his sister's finery, green gown with gold at waist and throat, gold on her bare arms and swinging from her ears, her hair plaited and twisted high upon her head, she felt confident that she could charm these people into treating her with kindness and respect . . . And then she saw Kicva and knew that she was lost.

Neol guided her round the tables where companions, relatives and retainers sat, proudly parading her as though she was some trophy won in battle. She held her head high, allowing him the pleasure of his game; biding her time.

He ushered her to the chair on Huandaw's left side, and she looked hard at the old man, remembering Goreu. But Huandaw was not like Goreu. He was thin and spare, grey-haired and grey-eyed. His face was lined as though he smiled a lot; his manner was gracious. She wondered what he could be doing with that evil hag on his right, and a son with such cold eyes. She bowed formally to Kicva in greeting, and Kicva bowed mockingly back.

'You see, my lady, we already have here someone known to you,' Huandaw said mildly, and she could not tell from his expression if he were being sarcastic or whether he genuinely thought she would be pleased to meet an old acquaintance.

'Kicva is known to me, my lord,' she said carefully, 'but I am surprised that an enemy of Goreu should entertain his most devoted servant with such honour.'

Kicva's eyes sparked dangerously.

'It is because she was so devoted to the Lord Goreu that she is now here,' Huandaw said.

'Explain, my lord,' Viviane said coolly, trying not to let the old woman's malevolent stare unnerve her.

He gazed at her appraisingly before he answered. 'She tells me Goreu was murdered, and has come to offer her services in avenging his death.' His eyes did not leave Viviane's.

'Why would you want to avenge the Lord Goreu's death, my lord?' she asked softly. 'Surely, as he was your enemy, you would reward the man who did the deed.'

'Or the woman,' he said, watching her closely.

She kept control of her face and looked at Kicva. 'Does this Druid know who killed her lord, sir? Was she there?'

'She has the Sight.'

'Ah, the Sight!' Viviane was relieved. If Kicva's Druid 'Sight' had told her that she, Viviane, was the murderer, then Kicva's Druid 'Sight' was not worth fearing.

'Her vengeance might well serve our purposes,' Huandaw continued, 'though it is not vengeance for his *death* we seek.'

'Your son tells me, sir, that my lord Goreu robbed you of many things during his life.'

'That is true.'

'I am sure you'll find, sir, that my lord Caradawc will gladly make recompense.'

'He has already shown his "goodwill" towards us by attacking us.'

'I know nothing of that, my lord,' she said, 'but I am surprised. Goreu's son is very different from his father and does not relish conquest.'

Neol, sitting to her left, leant forward and spoke across her.

'The son is always loyal to the father, sir, though there be differences between them.'

Viviane caught a look that passed between them which intrigued her.

'I must have my lands back,' Huandaw declared. 'If you, my lady, think I'll get them back by asking – well, I will ask.'

‘And when you do, you’ll take a sword in the belly,’ said Neol bitterly.

‘Not from Caradawc!’ she said quickly.

‘No? Why do you run from him then, my lady, if he is so fair and just?’

She bit her lip. How could she possibly explain?

‘She runs because she was given hospitality and yet she murdered her host,’ Kicva said suddenly, clearly and loudly.

Viviane could hear the gasp, and see the hostility in every eye in the hall. Her composure broke.

‘No!’ she cried. ‘It is not true!’

Kicva stood up and pointed her bony finger straight at the young woman’s breast. Though it did not touch, Viviane experienced a sharp pain. She gasped and clutched her heart and sank back in her chair, her face drained of colour.

‘You see!’ Kicva said with satisfaction.

Viviane felt she could not breathe, as though some great weight lay on her breast. Kicva’s eyes never left hers. She tried to speak, to defend herself, but the words would not come.

‘It seems the Druid’s accusations strike home,’ Huandaw said coldly. ‘Take her away,’ he bade the two armed men who stood behind his chair. ‘Lock her up until we decide what to do with her.’

‘Locking up will do no good!’ Kicva snarled. ‘She is driven by demons. Kill her now . . . or let me bind her with spells.’

‘Kill her!’ The whisper started like a small wind rustling among dry leaves . . . and grew in volume until all were standing, shouting, shaking their fists . . . and then the wind was huge, swirling the dead leaves until the air was thick with them, and no one could see through them . . .

Viviane was dragged from the room. She saw the angry faces . . . the docile people turned suddenly violent by the dark wind that blew through the hall . . . the wind that was no wind . . .

She was thrown into a small dark room and heard the bolts slammed home. She could still hear the chanting, led by Kicva, and put her hands over her ears to shut it out. Gradually it faded and the terrible pressure on her chest began to lift . . . but not the despair. Perhaps she *was* possessed by demons? She thought back to all that had happened since she had followed that hart deeper into the forest. But in thinking back Viviane also remembered the Green Lady, and the chapel of the tree . . .

Did she imagine a light tap on the door? She listened, holding her breath. It was so intensely quiet she was aware of her own heartbeats. Then the sound came again: as though the bolts were being drawn back furtively, gradually.

After a few moments the door opened a crack, and a sharp triangle of light flooded in. Viviane blinked like a night-owl suddenly woken in daylight. It was Neol’s sister Elined.

‘Hush,’ the girl whispered, putting her fingers to Viviane’s lips. ‘I’ll help you to escape if you’ll take me with you.’

Viviane nodded silently, surprised, but unquestioning.

The girl slipped a dark cloak over her shoulders and took her hand. Together they glided like shadows down the deserted corridor. As they passed the sleeping guard, Elined smiled mischievously and pointed to herself, proudly, claiming that this was her handiwork. She knew her way through the labyrinth of corridors, which ones to take and which to avoid, and it was not long before the two young women were out of the house and into the dark of the night. A young groom was waiting for them holding ready two horses (one of them Hunydd!) and Elined kissed his cheek lightly as he helped her to mount. Viviane saw the adoration in his eyes and knew that Elined would always inspire such loyal devotion, so it might be no bad thing to have her company.

The gatekeeper must also have been dealt with by the resourceful girl, for he was nowhere in sight. They walked their horses carefully and quietly until they were well clear.

Much later, after they had put a good distance between themselves and the great house, Viviane learned why Elined had gone to all this trouble. It was to save herself from an arranged marriage to an old man she hated.

‘I could probably talk my father out of it, but Neol would not give way.’

‘Surely it is your father’s word that is heard in your house?’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But it is not so. I’ve seen Neol get his way time and time again against father’s wishes. For instance, it was Neol’s idea to attack Caradawc. My father was reluctant.’

‘You dislike your brother?’

‘No, I love him, but over this matter of the marriage I am really angry with him.’

Viviane was silent, remembering how she herself had been sent on a long journey to marry a man she had never met. But she had been lucky. The prospect of marrying Caradawc was not at all unpleasant. If only . . . She wondered if she should warn Elined of the frightening and inexplicable things likely to happen to them. She decided against it for the moment: to have a companion on her difficult journey would be a great relief.

‘He’s older than my father,’ complained Elined. ‘But Neol thinks he’ll die soon, and I’ll inherit his lands. Neol is ambitious to extend our family lands and doesn’t care that I may have to live with that disgusting creature for *years!*’

‘Has he no children to inherit?’

‘No. After two wives he’s still childless.’

‘Then perhaps he’s impotent, and won’t want anything from you but your companionship.’

‘Even that . . .’ Elined shuddered.

For a while the two young women rode on in silence. It was Viviane who first broke it.

‘We must expect Neol to send men after us,’ she said.

‘We’ll give them the slip with the help of your demons,’ Elined said cheerfully.

‘My demons?’

‘Yes. The ones Kicva told us about.’

‘You really believe I’m possessed by demons and yet you choose to ride with me?’

‘Well, I decided no ordinary means would get me out of this marriage!’

‘But if Kicva speaks the truth, you are in great danger.’

Elined looked across at Viviane. ‘I don’t care. Nothing could be worse than marrying that revolting old man.’

‘You don’t know what you’re saying!’ Viviane was shocked that this girl could have such a casual attitude to the forces of darkness. She had obviously had no experience of them. Indeed she was very young, a virgin still, Viviane thought. What was it in a person’s face that gave away this secret, no matter how closely guarded?

‘Is what Kicva said true?’ Elined asked, curious now.

‘No.’

‘Well, then . . . I’m in no danger.’

‘Yes, you are, though not because of me . . . but because I too am being pursued.’

‘By demons?’ Elined sounded positively eager.

Viviane did not answer. What would be best to do now? Should she send Elined back to her father and her angry brother before too much harm was done, or should they both try to reach the sanctuary? It was almost dawn and she felt very tired; her thoughts were sluggish and confused. She hated the thought of being alone again. Two women riding together were not as remarkable as one, but with Elined to look after as well as herself . . .

She reined in. She would decide in the morning, after rest . . .

* * * *

Idoc paced the octagonal chamber of his tower. On a polished brass table stood a collection of glass vessels and bottles of different shapes and sizes. Each of the table's four legs stood on a hard disc of beeswax carved with potent geometric signs. Charts of vellum hung on six of the walls, three worked all over with geometric signs and numbers, while the other three depicted hideous beings of the underworld in intricate detail. The black obsidian mirror, tall as himself, filled the seventh wall, while the eighth contained a heavy door, the lock itself an elaborate system of metal boxes, cogs and bolts, opened only by a series of keys in different metals, each preparing the way for the next. There was no window: no way of seeing out into the world by any natural means.

She had betrayed him. She must suffer – be destroyed. He would never let her be at peace again.

Through life after life he would pursue her. She had sealed her own fate when she used her feminine beauty to trap him. The priests who had pronounced the spells would pay, too – but it was against her he bore the most malice. He had loved her and she had destroyed him. Well, now she would love him and he would destroy her. But to do this he must first master his own need for her. The time he had lain with her on the riverbank, using Caradawc's body, was intended only to rouse in her the desire for him that would eventually destroy her – but he had felt too much joy himself, too much ecstasy.

He would not look at her again. Striding across the room he opened a heavy wooden chest and lifted out a black cloak stained with blood, the cloak he had worn recently to play the role of the black knight. He now hung it over the mirror. He would find other means of punishing her.

From the same chest he drew a sheet of lead beaten thin, and laid it on the table, pushing the glass vessels impatiently aside. He took his knife – double-edged, traced with the planetary symbols, its handle exquisitely inset with jewels in silver – and, holding it firm, began to scratch the words of a curse into the lead.

After he had done this, he looked up at the charts and thoughtfully pondered which of the many beings he should send.

At last he smiled, and began to draw on the lead sheet . . .

* * * *

Viviane awoke to find her clothes drenched, and a cold, sour rain driving down the valley before a grey north wind. Startled and shivering, she staggered to her feet, wondering where she was.

She had the feeling that she was being watched, but could not bring herself to turn around and see who it was. Remembering Elined suddenly, she thought it might be Neol's men come to fetch her back. She saw the girl, asleep under a tree, out of the worst of the rain, the horses tethered beside her. Calmly, and still not looking round, she began to move towards Elined, her cloak, soaked with icy water, dragging like lead against her shoulders. The rain felt like tiny painful needles as it beat upon her face: the wind howled in her ears like a banshee.

'Elined,' she called.

How could she sleep through such a storm? The ominously creaking branches of the tree above her were being tossed so violently it seemed they would soon be ripped out of their sockets and come crashing down. Viviane nudged the girl with her foot – but she did not stir. She stooped down and shook her violently, but still she slept on. It dawned on Viviane that this was no ordinary sleep.

She spun round, clutching her knife, and crouched like a cat ready to spring.

And then she froze . . .

The crowd that pressed closer and closer was not comprised of Neol's warriors – but of foul and infernal beings . . . Bat-winged and human-faced, vulture-clawed

and lizard-eyed, they flapped around her beating their webbed wings. She could feel the scalding heat of their bodies, smell their acrid and sulphurous breath.

She screamed, her tears mingling with the rain that poured over her face.

But Elined slept on, though the horses snorted and pulled at their tethers. And then, borne in on the wind, came thick black fog . . . at first in shreds and slivers, and then in waves and billows. She thought now she would surely die.

But it was not to her that death came with the fog. For it was as inimical to Idoc's fiends as they were to her. Howling as their strength failed them, they shrank . . . they withered . . .

And then it was all over. They were gone as mysteriously as they had come. She sat in silence – seeing nothing, hearing nothing. She held the sleeping Elined close, thankful for her human warmth. She could feel her peaceful breathing as though she slumbered naturally after all.

Viviane peered through the dark fog that surrounded her.

What now? She thought she saw a point of light high above her, and prayed that it was the sun trying to break through.

The point grew brighter, so bright indeed that it made her eyes water and she had to close them. When she opened them again, the point had become a rod, so bright against the darkness that it looked solid. Another appeared, and then another. As she watched, the

darkness became criss-crossed with thin, brilliant rods of light. They silently moved from above to below, from side to side, diagonally . . . steadily breaking the fog into smaller and smaller patches. She stared, fascinated. She had never seen such a sight: they were like swords cutting a solid into tiny pieces. Natural sunlight would have dispersed the fog gradually. She reached out her hand curiously to touch a beam close by. Her hand disappeared. She drew her arm back hastily, staring at where her hand had been. Very slowly it began to materialize again. Then she sat very still, watching the marvellously precise way the darkness was cut away from them – until at last she stood on a clear hillside in full daylight.

* * * *

Waiting for the curse to take effect, Idoc sat hunched in his chair. His hands locked and unlocked convulsively, his mouth worked, saying over and over again the words he had carved on the lead. He gloated when he felt the creatures he had invoked rising around him like so many vulture-shadows and go streaming through the walls out into the world beyond . . .

Time passed. Time strained and pulled and tugged at him. He longed to look in the mirror, but he clutched the chair arms and refused to move. ‘Now they will have found her,’ he thought. ‘Now they will be closing in . . . now they will be surrounding her . . .’

But something was wrong – he could sense it. He half rose, thinking of the mirror. But if he saw her he

might show mercy. He forced himself down again into the chair. The curse could not fail . . .

He smelled a strange smell – at first so faint he took no notice. But soon it became so strong he could no longer ignore it. Sniffing, he turned his head and searched the chamber with dark, tormented eyes . . . From the table where he had laid the curse a thin plume of black smoke was rising. He leapt towards it. What . . . ?

The smoke was gone before he reached it, and he would have thought he had imagined it but in the place of the neat leaden scroll was now a pool of molten lead still faintly sizzling. The brass table beneath was unharmed.

Furiously Idoc stared at it, then rushed to the mirror. He ripped the cloak away from its surface and glared into it. At first he was almost blinded by the flash of light that reflected off the surface. He staggered back, a shaft of pain striking him through the centre of the forehead. Screaming, he clutched his head. How could this be?

Who protected her?

Who fought her battles?

He forced himself to look in the mirror again, bracing himself for the light. But it was gone. Instead he saw a green hillside with a fringe of trees, two young women talking quietly, and two horses cropping peacefully. He spied a movement among the trees and leaned closer. Was he mistaken or did he see a translucent figure – as elusive a glimpse as the flash of crystal in clear water?

* * * *

Elined woke cheerfully, ready for any adventure, and Viviane chose not to tell her that she had already been through one. She chose also, much to Elined's joy, to keep her with her on the journey to the sanctuary.

* * * *

Cai came upon them in his wanderings in search of the black knight, and he was delighted to find Viviane still alive.

Viviane told him part of the truth. She had been captured, she said, by Neol for use as hostage against Caradawc. She had escaped with the help of Elined, who was fleeing from a hateful arranged marriage, and they were now trying to reach the Community of the Fish, where they hoped to be given sanctuary.

'Women should not ride about the countryside alone,' Cai warned. 'There are all kinds of dangers. May I offer you ladies my protection on your journey?'

Viviane smiled wryly, thinking that he did not know what he was offering to protect them against, but Elined instantly accepted. Cai, with his long blond hair and light blue eyes, was for her the answer to a prayer. She was already preparing romantic snares for him. And he was by no means sorry to put off an uncomfortable confrontation with the black knight for the chance of riding through the sunlight with two beautiful women.

They set off at once, Cai having a better idea of where they were than they did. He and Elined rode ahead through green lanes and beside fields of barley and rye, startling plover and pheasants, and little,

trilling larks . . . chatting together as though this was nothing but a summer pleasure ride.

Viviane followed behind, still shaken by the experiences she had been through and apprehensive as to what would happen next.

* * * *

When Rheged at last found Caradawc and Gerin, he reported to them that he had seen Viviane being taken as prisoner into the stronghold of Huandaw. Caradawc insisted on going at once to negotiate for her release, in spite of Rheged's dire warnings. He assured them that he would give up all the lands his father had taken from Huandaw, if need be. Never having been in love himself, though he had lain with many women, Rheged could not understand a man prepared to sacrifice so much.

'I'd give my life for her,' vowed Caradawc passionately.

'You may have to!' said Rheged.

'Well, so be it,' replied Caradawc stubbornly, and nothing would turn him away from his purpose.

They were challenged by four armed men on their approach to the great house and escorted in to see Huandaw himself. They had expected their arrival would rouse some curiosity, but were startled by the ferocity with which Huandaw's people came running towards them, shouting abuse. They were relieved when the door of the great hall slammed shut behind them, leaving them alone with their taciturn guards.

Huandaw at last strode in with Kicva at his side. The old man's face was grey and drawn with worry, Kicva's filled with self-importance.

'What have you done with my daughter?' Huandaw snapped as soon as he saw Caradawc.

'Your daughter, sir?' he said, surprised.

'Play no games with me, sir!' Huandaw growled. 'Where have you taken her?'

'I know nothing of your daughter,' Caradawc replied. 'I have come for my future wife, Viviane daughter of Garwys, to take her home.'

'You dare to talk to me of that *witch!*' Huandaw raged.

Bewildered, and suddenly afraid, Caradawc looked at Gerin.

'Sir,' Gerin said, stepping forward. 'It's clear there is some mistake here. We know nothing of your daughter – only that you hold the princess Viviane here.'

'Held. Held her here,' Huandaw muttered bitterly.

Caradawc cleared his throat. 'Held, sir? Is she gone then?'

'Yes, she's gone!' Kicva suddenly interrupted. 'She and her vile demons have spirited away my lord Huandaw's daughter. I warned them – but they wouldn't listen!' she screeched.

Caradawc looked at her in astonishment as though registering her presence for the first time.

Huandaw was now wandering distractedly about the room, muttering to himself about his daughter.

‘Why do *you* seek her?’ Kicva challenged Caradawc. ‘She who murdered your father, and would have murdered you if I had not been so skilled in healing . . .’

Caradawc stared at her blankly. What she said made a kind of sense to his mind – but not to his heart.

Gerin put his hand on Caradawc’s arm, understanding the turmoil in his friend’s heart because he shared it. But he kept better control of himself than Caradawc and demanded boldly and sternly to be told exactly what had happened.

‘They brought her here as hostage, and I warned them that the only way to stop her wickedness was to use the power of spells. But they wouldn’t listen. Her demons released her in the night, and out of spite she took the lady Elined with her.’

‘No one knows where she is?’

‘Only the dark ones whom she serves.’

‘My son Neol has taken men and gone after them,’ Huandaw broke in suddenly, returning to them. ‘But if they are fiend-protected, I doubt they’ll ever be found.’

‘We’ll find them,’ Gerin said confidently, frowning, his eyes dark with anxiety. ‘Our forces and yours, my lord, working together instead of against each other. What say you?’

Kicva laughed. ‘No force of ordinary men in the world can outwit fiends.’

‘We shall see . . .’ Caradawc said, suddenly decisive. ‘What say you, sir?’

‘Together – or alone,’ Gerin urged, seeing that Huandaw was hesitating. ‘Nothing will be achieved if we don’t go to it *soon*.’

Huandaw frowned. His son insisted that these men were his enemies, but he was not so sure.

‘If you go,’ Kicva insisted, ‘I must ride with you. Your arms will be useless against her demons. We’ll see what an old woman, Druid-trained, can do!’

‘Sir?’ Gerin ignored her and addressed himself still to the distraught Huandaw.

At last the old man nodded.

‘We both have an interest in this. So be it,’ he said.

* * * *

Over the hills and forests a cold rain was driven before a gusty grey wind. The search party, pulling their cloaks tightly around themselves, set off. Trees loomed and disappeared again into obscurity. Nothing was clear-cut, nothing definite.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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About Moyra Caldecott

Moyra Caldecott was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1927, and moved to London in 1951. She married Oliver Caldecott and raised three children. She has degrees in English and Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature.

Moyra Caldecott has earned a reputation as a novelist who writes as vividly about the adventures and experiences to be encountered in the inner realms of the human consciousness as she does about those in the outer physical world. To Moyra, reality is multidimensional.

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