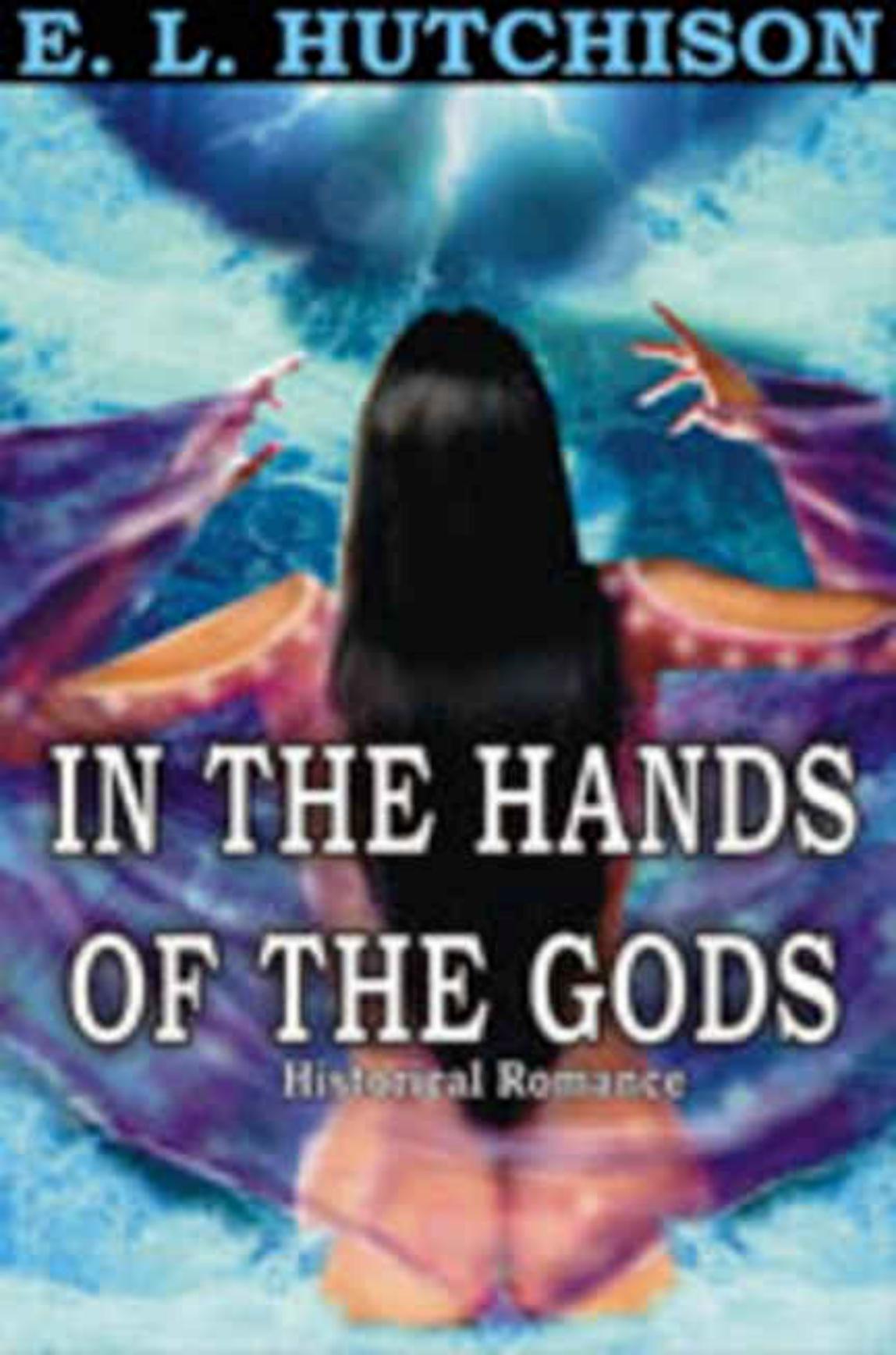


E. L. HUTCHISON

The background of the cover features a central figure with long, dark hair, seen from behind, wearing a black garment. This figure is surrounded by large, ethereal, purple and blue wings or robes that appear to be floating or blowing in a wind. The overall color palette is dominated by vibrant blues and purples, creating a mystical and divine atmosphere. The text is overlaid on this background.

**IN THE HANDS
OF THE GODS**

Historical Romance

In The Hands of the Gods
by E.L. Hutchison

Whiskey Creek Press

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In The Hands of the Gods
by E.L. Hutchison

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Dedication

To my husband, who has been my greatest cheerleader and
the inspiration for all heroes.

To my daughters, who are the driving force behind all I do.

To my mother, who always said I could do it.

Most especially to the ladies of RRTT Thanks for the wings to fly

Prologue

Ceridwen was in her palace rooms only half listening while Rhiannon, the daughter of Hefaidd Hen, was complaining about the chieftain her father had chosen for her to wed. Ceridwen contemplated how to extricate herself from the child without causing offense, for, truthfully, there was nothing she could do to help Rhiannon. If Rhiannon's father truly wished for her to wed a powerful Celtic chieftain, Ceridwen couldn't stop him. It was her father's decision to make without the interference of a meddling goddess.

"Do you not see, Ceridwen? I cannot marry Gwawl when 'tis Pwyll who holds my heart. My father only wishes to make a powerful match to benefit himself and cares nothing for what I want. My father has tricked Pwyll into this situation."

Ceridwen understood all too well what it meant to be kept from the one her heart desired. But what one desired and what one often received were two very different things.

"Why does your father desire to make such a match for you with this Chieftain Gwawl?"

"Gwawl has been appointed chieftain of a fierce Celtic tribe by Lugh. My father thinks Lugh is rallying his forces to make a move against your husband, Cernunnos. If Lugh defeats Cernunnos, then he will hold more power than any other god in the heavens." Rhiannon sighed and began to pace back and forth in front of Ceridwen.

"'Tis Lugh's goal to overthrow Cernunnos. If he succeeds, only those loyal to him will be given favor. Since Lugh

appointed Gwawl as chieftain, if I am married to him, my father thinks Lughs favor will also fall upon him, since I can read the hearts and minds of mortals."

Ceridwen was shocked upon hearing this news. She heard little of Lugh after she wed Cernunnos, had in fact, hoped he had gotten over his rage when she refused him. "What benefit to your father would it be if Lugh destroys my husband?"

"The benefit will be to rule the heavens and the Celtic tribes of Britannia, because Gwawl does Lughs bidding. The only thing standing in Lughs way is Cernunnos." Rhiannon stopped her frantic pacing and fell to the floor before Ceridwen, imploring her for her help. "Dont you see? It wouldnt be to Gwawl that I am married, but to Lugh. The power formed from such a union would, in my fathers mind, grant him favor in Lughs eyes."

Rhiannon looked around Ceridwens chambers to ensure they were still alone. "Lugh has reportedly captured the daughter of a powerful goddess. Tis rumored she is blessed with the ability to control the elements and possesses great knowledge of herbs and spells. Lugh is holding her in the stronghold of his high priest, Duartar, on the Emerald Isle."

For a moment, Ceridwen though her heart had stopped beating within her breast. It was not possible, Ceridwen had ensured Lugh would never be able to find her.

How?

When?

With a sense of urgency in her voice and her posture, she captured Rhiannons arm in a vicelike grip. "Do you know this maidens name? Do you know where she is from?"

Rhiannon blanched when she saw the look of panic enter Ceridwen's eyes. "My father only said her name was Zahinah and that she is the daughter of a powerful goddess Lugh seeks revenge upon." A look of realization entered Rhiannon's eyes. "The rumors are true then, she is your daughter."

Ceridwen released Rhiannon's arm and fell back into the chair, wishing she had killed Lugh long ago. "Rhiannon, I will give you refuge against your father. I will also send a dispatch to Pwyll immediately arranging for the two of you to be wed this very day. You do still want to marry Pwyll, do you not?"

"Yes, more than anything."

"You and Pwyll must also vow your allegiance to Cernunnos and myself, and not notify your father or anyone else of your plans. I want no chance for Lugh to interfere in this matter. Did anyone know you were coming here to me?"

"Yes, Goddess, I understand, and no, I told no one I was coming to see you."

"Good. This time, Lugh has gone too far. I will destroy him if tis the last thing I do."

"Please be careful, Lugh has more allies than you or Cernunnos realize. Does your husband even know of the coup being plotted against him?"

Ceridwen thought about that question for a moment and wondered the same thing herself. "There is very little Cernunnos isn't aware of, my dear, but have no fear, Lugh will soon be defeated before his battle is even waged." Ceridwen stood and gestured for her servant to come forward and escort Rhiannon away. Ceridwen reached out to the young

woman and took her hand within her own as a motherly gesture. "Do not fear, I will see to it you are united with the one your heart desires."

Rhiannon impulsively reached out and hugged Ceridwen. "Thank you so much." Tears shimmered in her eyes as she looked at the goddess of knowledge. "I know my powers are nothing compared to yours, Ceridwen, but should you ever require my assistance, you have but to ask."

Ceridwen reached out and gently stroked her delicate face. "You have nothing to fear, you are under my protection now, and this fight is between Lugh and me."

Rhiannon couldnt hold back the question consuming her since she realized Lugh held the daughter of this goddess. "Why would Lugh seek to take your child?"

"To control me. I refused to wed him long ago and sought love in the arms of a mortal man. A man who was kind, noble, and full of life. One who gave me my greatest treasure, my daughter."

Rhiannon nodded her head in understanding. "I, too, understand how very precious love is. Tis not something to be sold or bartered for power. I will keep your secret and try to help in anyway I can to ensure your daughters safety."

Ceridwen smiled and ushered her toward the doors of the chamber. "You can help me by seeking happiness with the man you love."

After Rhiannon left, Ceridwen sought the solace of her cauldron of knowledge, for if ever she needed wisdom, it was now Zahinahs life hung in the balance.

Chapter 1

Fall, 577 AD

The stench of the room was overpowering, as was the damp chill that permeated the air around her. For days she had been held in this dank room with little light, chained to a cold, stone altar. The priests surrounding the altar were all chanting their spells, which reminded her of the buzzing of a thousand bees. And like a hive of bees, they followed the lead of the queen, or in this case, their priest.

Blood pulsed in her ears as High Priest Duartar began chanting the spell that would forever change her life. He again raised the goblet to her lips and poured the pungent liquid down her throat, spilling it onto her chin and neck. Trying to fight the numbing effects of the potion, she forced herself to retch it up and gained small satisfaction as she spit it onto Duartars immaculate white robe. Her long hair tangled as she thrashed back and forth trying to fight him off when he brutally grabbed hold of her breast in a small, fat fist. There was a moment of stark terror that came over her when he pulled a wicked looking dagger from his robes and split the front of her gown, exposing her full breasts.

Zahinah knew she had to fight him, yet the potion he had force-fed her rendered her magic useless. Impotent rage welled within her as he began to suckle from her breasts. With one last show of defiance, she muttered a spell which would send his manhood withering into absolute uselessness. She gained a moment of satisfaction when she heard the little

toad curse and begin fumbling with his robes. "Not so powerful when it shrivels up like wilted fruit on a vine, is it, Duartar?"

"You filthy little whore." He grabbed the goblet of potion again and forced her mouth open pouring more of the concoction down her throat. "I do not have to use my penis to tear your virgins skin. There are many other ways although my magic is much stronger than yours and I ache for you. I will make you mine, daughter of the gods."

Zahinah feared that statement more than his threat to rape her by other means. She wasn't afraid of being raped, but she was terrified of what his magic could do to her. She turned her head and watched as he walked over to his table and began mixing herbs and potions into a golden goblet, which he filled with red wine and drank. Walking back to where she was tied, she couldn't help but notice his erection growing larger than it had been before. Where were the gods and their protection now that she so desperately needed them? This could not be happening to her. This was not to be the method of her death.

In absolute futility, Zahinah thrashed about as much as her bonds would allow. Zahinah watched as Duartar climbed the altar, then reached out and tore her gown completely off her, exposing her long lithe body, large full breasts and the raven curls at the juncture of her thighs. As she lay exposed for all the priests in the room to gaze upon, she watched as many began to stroke themselves through their robes, some even pulling their stiff members from their confinements to rub and push into their hands in imitation of the sex act.

Zahinah lay there with a blinding rage building within her. With her magic gone, she was unable to stop Duartar from rubbing her and himself as he chanted an ancient spell that would give him her powers once he took her virginity and then her life.

Zahinah thought with irony that had she known she would be taken this way for her powers over the elements of the earth, she would gladly have given herself to Azhaar as he had begged her. Now, she would never know real passion. She would never experience the feeling of a virile, strong, young man taking her, moving within her, or what it would feel like to climax. She would only know the cold touch of an impotent little man who resembled a toad.

Zahinah could feel the effects of the potion Duartar had forced her to consume; she was powerless to fight the wetness pulsing from her woman's opening as Duartar stroked her. She knew her time was close to ending when he noticed how wet she had become. Sliding his fingers inside her, he began to mimic entering her. Against her will, she began to moan, and her womanly bud began to throb with his stroking, there was an aching need building within her. It was useless to fight him, and she was beginning to surrender to the spell he had cast over her body, but not yet her mind.

A smile of satisfaction she wanted to slap off his face came over him as he whispered into her ear, "Your will to resist is gone, Zahinah. You are wet for me, beg me to enter you and give me your powers." Climbing the altar, Duartar coaxed her as he mounted her young, strong body with his small and fat form. His erection was thick and throbbing at her entrance.

She knew in order for him to gain what he desired, she would have to willingly take him inside her.

Zahinah tried to fight him, to find the words that would deny him his goal, but it was useless. His magic was overcoming her powers of resistance. She was going to say the words that would seal her death. She cast one last glance at the other priests in the room and her eyes landed on the only one who wasn't stroking his stiff erection, the one with the golden eyes. There was a power in him she could feel, even over the effects of the potion. Her eyes met his and she suddenly wanted him to take her. Zahinah looked back into the cold black eyes and soul of Duartar and smiled. "I will take him inside me and give him what you crave." Zahinah nodded toward the priest who was watching her intently.

Duartar turned just in time to watch as the hooded priest changed from a man into a beast of the forests. Zahinah had no time to think as the animal lunged for Duartar, knocking his naked form from Zahinah's body and effectively preventing him from entering her. The animal swiped a paw with claws bared across Duartar's chest and face, laying him open and bleeding. Zahinah began to quake with fear as the animal then turned its golden gaze upon her and slashed the ropes binding her. There was no protest forthcoming as the great animal again changed back into the man she had noticed before and slung her over his shoulder. He leaped onto the window ledge overlooking the watery deep surrounding the temple. Then he jumped into its black depths below, leaving Duartar and the other priests behind, who could only stand there in shock and watch as they made their escape.

Chapter 2

Ceridwen watched from her vantage point in the realm of the gods and was outraged the little priest dared touch her daughter. What reason could Lugh have for wanting to give Zahinahs powers to the vile little priest?

As Ceridwen watched him chanting over her daughters prone body, she hoped the emissary she sent to rescue Zahinah would arrive in time. Ceridwen knew it was forbidden for the gods to interfere in the lives of mortals, but this time was different, this was her daughter. Cernunnos had enacted a decree, which prevented any god from harming and interfering in the lives of mortals, in an attempt to protect Zahinah from Lughs wrath, but apparently, Lugh had discovered a way around her husbands commands. Well what was good for one, was good for another. If Lugh was going after her daughter with a mortal, Ceridwen would have a mortal stop him.

Ceridwen knew if she became involved in her daughters life, she would be putting Zahinah in danger, but doing nothing would surely mean her death. Watching from her cauldron, Ceridwen waited for the moment her emissary would act and wondered what was taking him so long. Already the priest had torn her gown asunder and was nearing the completion of his chant. Ceridwen held her breath in anticipation, when suddenly, her arm was grabbed from behind and she was whirled around.

* * * *

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Cernunnos walked into his wives richly decorated chambers, saw her standing over her cauldron of knowledge casting a spell and wondered what she was scheming now. He was still amazed that after all their years together, she could still stir a response in him. With her hair unbound and hanging past her hips in black waves, he wanted nothing more than to take her to her bed and claim what he had long been denied as a husband. Cernunnos was certain she would take her love for her dead mortal husband with her into eternity, never allowing him any place within her heart.

He watched as her breasts swung back and forth through the sheer white silk of her gown. The fire beneath the cauldron illuminated her from behind and he was able to see the creamy pale skin of her buttocks and thighs. Cernunnos wanted nothing more than to pull her gown up to her hips and plunge himself into her creamy depths, taking her from behind as he often fantasized doing.

Her voice enchanted him until he heard the name Zahinah tumble from her sensuous lips. "What in the name of all that is sacred do you think you are doing?"

* * * *

Ceridwen jumped and whirled around. Finding herself staring into the glowing amber eyes of her husband, she was at a complete loss for words. She had purposefully kept news of the coup from her husband. Lugh was her problem and she was done hiding behind the god she had married. "What do

you mean?" Ceridwen stammered, trying to stall until she could concoct a believable story.

"You know exactly what I mean. Are you interfering in your daughters life? Do you know the danger you put her in by conjuring her?"

"Well tis a little late to be worrying about that now. Look for yourself, Lugh has found her."

Cernunnos opened his mouth to speak, but then quickly closed it. Moving past her, he stood over the cauldron and peered into its depths. What he saw had him sending up a string of curses in the name of every god he knew. Turning, he glared at his wife. "When were you going to mention this to me?" His voice held an accusing tone that demanded an answer.

Ceridwen took a deep breath and prepared herself to withstand her husbands wrath. "I wasnt. Lugh is my problem. I will not hide behind your protection any longer. My cowardice has cost me too much. I lost my husband and my only child."

Cernunnos opened his mouth, then closed it again. Running a hand through his hair, he glared at her. "You lost your husband? Have you ever once considered *me your husband*? Or was I just a convenience for you?" Cernunnos raised his hand to halt any comments from her. "Hide behind me? How, Ceridwen, can you hide behind me when youre never near me?"

This time, it was Ceridwens turn to be at a loss for words. To deny his statement was to lie to both herself and Cernunnos. She had never given him a chance to be a

husband to her. The grief she had felt over losing her first husband and then her daughter had left a void in her heart she had refused to let him fill. Knowing when to admit defeat, she conceded the argument, "Maybe I did refuse you in the beginning, but you quit trying to be a husband to me. You turn your back on everything offering you the slightest challenge."

"Such as?" There was a deadly calm to his voice.

Ceridwen had known this argument was inevitable, but this was the worst time possible to discuss the problems in their marriage. "You turned your back on me and your son. You've never shown the slightest interest in the boy. Do you even know what kind of man he grew into?"

Cernunnos took a long look at her, then stepped away, putting some distance between them and spoke through clenched teeth. "I never turned my back on my son. But what would you have me do? Should I have raised him among the controlling and manipulative gods here? Better yet, I could have favored him among mortals, so all would know his parentage? That way, he would be challenged every time some mortal wanted to make a name for himself. Would that prove my love for my son? And let's not forget you, every time I tried to be a husband to you in truth, you turned me away and grieved for a dead man. No one, man or god, can be turned away time after time and still be expected to keep coming back for more rejection. My heart can take no more of your grief. I did not take them from you!"

Cernunnos walked up to her in his rage and pulled her against his body so she could feel just how much she aroused

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his desire. "Do you feel my erection? Do you feel how I still desire to plant my rod in your body? I may turn my back on everything as you accuse, but you, my darling wife, have refused to ever feel again." With those words, Cernunnos abruptly shoved her away from him and walked to the door of her chamber.

Turning, he spoke in a tone that brooked no argument. "You will cease your spell and meet me in the great hall in thirty minutes. I will put the demons of your past behind us once and for all, and then you, my wife, will see I am done turning my back."

She felt a moment of panic when he thrust her away from him. It had been too long since he had tried to hold her, too long since she had felt the power of his presence. Maybe with finally putting the threat of Lugh to rest, she would be able to live again into love again.

Chapter 3

Zahinah's body hit the water with such force, she was unable to move for several seconds. Fear of drowning, however, motivated her to pump her legs in an attempt to reach the surface of the water. Just when she felt she could fight no more and was willing to surrender to the comforting embrace of death, strong arms reached out and firmly began pulling her toward the open air.

Zahinah reached the surface and began to cough and gasp, filling her lungs with refreshing, life-giving air. It felt euphoric to be released from the dank castle and its sacrificial altar. Yet as she began to offer blessings of thanksgiving to the gods for having released her, she became aware of the man treading water next to her. Again, there was a sense of barely bridled power emanating from him. It at once excited and terrified her.

Xanthos looked at the raven-haired witch and reached out a hand to her. "Are you able to swim?"

Zahinah, unsure whether to trust him or not, quickly decided that if he had wanted to do her harm, he would have left her to the tender care of Duartar. "I can swim, but not far. I have been through a great deal the last few days." Zahinah, still unsure of his motives, thought it best to come right out and be up front with the man. "I am grateful for your rescuing me, sir, but why have you done so?"

"I will explain all as soon as we have put some distance between us and that druid priest." Xanthos reached out his

hand to her and stroked her hair away from her face. "If you can swim I have a ship anchored just around that cove," he said, pointing to an outcropping of rock about two hundred yards away.

Zahinah feared what would become of her if she could not make it to the ship. It was either risk the unknown with the handsome stranger, or the known awaiting her at Duartars hands. Deciding to put her life in the strangers hands, she nodded her head in the direction he indicated and eagerly swam.

Less than five minutes later, she was seized by a painful ache building between her legs. She had hoped she would be able to make it to his ship before the effects of Duartars potion took full control, but she was not to be that fortunate. She only prayed the stranger would not choose that moment to turn and check on her progress.

A good twenty feet in front of her, Xanthos noticed she had fallen back. At first, she had been able to keep his pace as he swam, but as he turned to check on her, there was a marked distance between them. "Are you unwell?"

Zahinah wanted to die of mortification. Naturally, he had chosen that moment to turn and call out to her as she began to stroke herself to ease the ache almost excruciating in its intensity. Refusing to give into the embarrassment over satisfying her sexual needs, she met his gaze directly. "The potion the priest gave me has left me in need of a man. I am in a great deal of pain and must find release now."

Xanthos quickly swam back to her and took her hand in his. "Place your hand on my shoulder and do not let go."

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Without another word of warning, a sleek dolphin suddenly appeared before her. This creature of the sea quickly covered the distance to his ship.

* * * *

When the men onboard spotted them, a rope ladder was quickly lowered, and Xanthos, again in the form of a man, quickly assisted her on the ship and to the captains quarters. Laying her down on the bed, she began whimpering and thrashing about in obvious need and pain. Zahinah, unable to stand the pain for another moment, began to stroke herself feverishly in an attempt to ease the ache. With one hand, she began to stroke her bud and with the other, she inserted her fingers into her opening, trying to find the release her body demanded.

Xanthos stood and watched the way she thrashed back and forth as she stroked herself. There was a moment of indecision written on his face and then with a muttered curse, he striped free of his tunic and leggings and covered her body with his. "Zahinah, do you want me to help you?"

Zahinah, barely conscious of him speaking to her, arched her back and began rubbing herself against his erection. "Ineedthe pain to endplease, help meplease" Her moan was cut off by her sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

Animal instinct overcame him as she bit him and without further comment, he thrust into her and began to stroke her. Once, twice, three times he thrust inside her and she screamed out her release, her fluids covering him. There was only a moments hesitation before he came within her.

Silence filled the area as they both laid there on the captain's bed. Xanthos watched in silence as tears rolled down her cheeks.

At a complete loss as to what to say to her, he said the first thing that came to mind. "You will cease your crying now, this instant."

Zahinah looked over at the man who had rescued her and wanted to kill him with her bare hands. Who in the name of the gods did he think he was to tell her to cease crying? She had been tortured, fed the gods only knew what potions by Duartar, threatened with rape and lost her virginity to a complete stranger. If anyone had the right to cry, she did.

Rage overcoming common sense, Zahinah leaped from the bed completely naked. "*You, insufferable blight.* Who do you think you are to tell me not to cry? Do you have any idea the terror I have gone through the last seven days?" As she raged, clouds gathered and the ship began to list to and fro as the waves increased in turbulence.

Not noticing the change in her mood coincided with the turbulent weather, Xanthos met her rage with a calm demeanor as he spoke. "I am the man who rescued you. By order of the gods, I will be your husband, and soon. Do you know you are part of a vicious plot by the god, Lugh, in an attempt to control humanity and the forces of nature? Are you aware of the powers you possess, Zahinah?"

"I am, but what would you or Lugh want with me?" There was disbelief written on her face as she tried to consider of what use her powers would be to mortals. "My powers cannot

be given to a mortal. They cannot ever be given to anyone, mortal or not."

"You forget, you can share your powers. That potion Duartar gave you allows the one who takes your virginity to strip you of your powers."

Zahinah looked at him as if he had begun speaking in a foreign language. "My powers can only be shared with my husband and even then, the marriage has to be of my choosing in a union blessed by the gods. Tis true that I chose you, but only because of the potion Duartar gave me. It must be a choice of my heart and my powers can only be shared with a god." Zahinah gave a bitter laugh as she looked at him. "I am afraid you misjudged the ease with which you would be able to control me or my powers. One, you are mortal and two, you are very much not the choice of my heart."

Xanthos countered her smug smile with one of his own. "Do you know who Cernunnos is?"

"He is the god of all wild things."

As he spoke, he rose from the bed and sauntered over to where she stood and reached out to stroke her breast. "Cernunnos is also the god of wealth, animals, and the element of Earth, love, luck and fertility." When there was no comprehension on her face, he drew the obvious conclusion for her. "How is it you think I was able to transform into a beast of the forests or into a dolphin? Cernunnos is my father, my mother was mortal."

Zahinah slapped his hand away in rage. Fed by her anger, the tempest outside grew in intensity with a large wave

slamming into the side of the ship. Not caring one whit that she was no longer in control of the elements or that the storm was feeding on her rage, she unleashed her fury on the man before her. "Even if you are the son of a god, you must still be chosen by me and believe me, the stars will fall from the heavens before I ask you to my bed again."

Aware of the two storms, one raging outside and the other of rage that gripped the woman before him, Xanthos roughly grabbed her by the arms and pulled her against his naked body. "Has the potion Duartar fed you left your body yet, or do you still need the touch of a man?" Without waiting for her answer, he crushed his lips against hers as he ground his erection against her abdomen.

Powerless to fight the potion still coursing through her body, Zahinah responded to his touch. The urgent demands of his mouth and hands had her wrapping one leg around his thigh as he pushed his erection against her flesh. Bending her back over his arm, he pulled a taught nipple into his mouth and began sucking on it.

Zahinah felt her fluid releasing against his leg where she rubbed against him. With maddening clarity, she knew he was aware of the fact she did not want to respond to his touch. As he suckled on her breast, he pulled her off the floor and against his body. "Wrap your legs around my waist," he commanded as he walked to a table in the center of the area.

"Zahinah, do you want me?" he asked as he braced her against the table and thrust his erection inside her.

Zahinah wanted to scream at the top of her lungs against the gods who had allowed her to be brought to this point in

her life. Her mind told her not to react to his touch, but as he withdrew and thrust into her, she was helpless to deny the need in her body. "Take what you will, tis not my heart that wants you, tis only my body."

With the roar of a feral beast, he thrust into her repeatedly until she screamed out her release. Feeling her cum flow over him, he gave one last thrust while spilling his seed into her warm and pliant body.

Exhausted, Zahinah collapsed against Xanthos chest, all the fight leaving her. The only thing she wanted now was sleep and to pretend her life was as it had been before Duarte had shown up on her tiny island and took her from her home.

With the utmost of care, Xanthos picked her up, cradled her in his arms and carried her to his bed, where he laid her down. As he covered her body with blankets, she turned her head toward him.

"Are you going to kill me?" Zahinah knew even as she asked that he had no desire to harm her.

Xanthos looked at her for a moment and wondered if his stepmother was in her right mind wanting to see him take this woman as wife. "If I had wanted to harm you, I would never have bothered rescuing you from Duarte."

"I want to go home," she said on a breathless sigh as she closed her eyes. "Please take me home."

Xanthos reached out his hand and stroked the hair away from her face. "I will take you home," he whispered to her as her eyes closed, then turning from her, he left.

Chapter 4

As Xanthos emerged, his second-in-command greeted him in an agitated state of mind, pacing back and forth.

"We should arrive at the castle within five days." Davon looked in the direction Xanthos had come from, then turned back to his friend. "So, have you found your future bride to your liking?"

Xanthos looked at him and a wry grin came across his face. "The lass could drain a man of all energy in her present condition." Xanthos thought back to the exhilaration he had felt upon first entering her. It was not often, in fact, it had been years since he had touched a virgin. Virgins were something he had avoided since his first, until his stepmother had asked him to take her daughter and make her his wife.

"Had the priest touched her before you were able to get to her?"

Xanthos recalled the rage which had suffused every part of Duartars face when Zahinah cast her spell upon him and shriveled his erection before the eyes of all present. "He tried, but she was able to effectively stop him."

"I thought she had been rendered powerless, unless your stepmother lied to you." Davon was suspicious of anything to do with the gods.

"She was powerless, but Zahinah has great strength and fought as well as any warrior I have seen." Xanthos knew little of the woman he had promised himself and his protection to, but from what little he had seen of her, she

possessed great courage and, thanks to Duartar, great passion.

"Do you intend to wed her on the ship before you reach the castle? It would lend strength to the fight you are about to face."

Xanthos had been considering this issue for some time. It would not be easy to get her to agree, her rage could well kill all those onboard should she use the power of the elements against them. On the other hand, if he chose to wait until they reached his stronghold, he ran the risk of Duartar reaching them and taking her away from him. Though it was unlikely his stronghold would be taken, he still had to bear in mind it was not just the priest he fought, but also the god of war and revenge, Lugh.

Lugh was not a very forgiving god when it came to having his plans thwarted. Or so Xanthos father, Cernunnos, had discovered when he'd taken away Lugh's chosen bride, Ceridwen.

Xanthos knew firsthand what hell it was to be a child of the gods and considered different. It was not an easy thing to explain that he could shape shift into an animal, much less to witness it firsthand. Xanthos had learned people feared things they did not understand, which often led them to try and destroy him and those like him.

This time, though, it was not fear that put Zahinah's life in danger, it was the desire for the power of the gods. Duartar wanted Zahinah's power to control the elements of the earth and Lugh wanted revenge against Ceridwen for choosing a mortal over him.

"Xanthos, are you listening to a word I speak?" Davon asked.

Lost in ruminations, Xanthos pulled his attention back to his friend. "Im sorry, I wasnt listening." Xanthos clapped his friend on the shoulder. "I was just wondering what mess Ive gotten myself into this time by aiding my stepmother."

Davon looked out over the churning waters of the ocean. "I said, you failed to mention the fact this woman you are to marry is able to control the weather with only her thoughts."

Unaware his friend had realized Zahinahs powers, he gave Davon his full attention. "I had not intended for you to find out. What made you realize her power?"

"It didnt take much intelligence to figure it out. The gods could have heard her screaming her rage at you. For a certainty, everyone on this ship did. The louder she got, the more turbulent the weather became." Davon sighed and turned his attention back to the placid waters through which the ship sped. "Half the men are already in fear of her and her powers. How do you intend to assure her safety from the men and ours from her?"

Xanthos had been tossing that question around in his mind for some time. If the men onboard the ship were in fear of her, it could keep them from touching her. On the other hand, though, that fear could lead them to throwing her overboard. While he had secretly considered throwing her over himself, he had to admit, she was a pleasing tumble.

He could feel himself grow hard just recalling what a pleasant sensation taking her had been. She was fire, passion and beauty. Xanthos realized he was looking forward to his

next encounter with the woman who was to become his reluctant bride.

Not noticing the sudden change in the weather, Xanthos was startled when Davon pointed out the darkening sky. "Xanthos, prepare yourself, we are either heading into a fierce storm, or you will need to tend your woman again."

No sooner had the words left Davons mouth, than a very nude and very enraged woman made her appearance. Zahinah stood there in all her naked glory, the wind whipping her raven hair around her body as lightening split the sky and thunder boomed so close, it nearly splintered the ship.

Looking at her lithe, young body, in Xanthos estimation, she was indeed perfection. Zahinah was tall, with long legs capable of wrapping around and holding a man fast as he plunged into her. She had a small waist and large, full breasts that begged for a mans touch. As his gaze traveled up her body, it rested on her face. There was the evidence that she was indeed the daughter of a goddess. Her complexion was pale ivory with high cheekbones, full, sensuous red lips and her eyes were the most extraordinary green he had ever seen. Her eyes reminded him of the lush green hills of his homeland.

Watching her unleash the power of nature made him wonder what it would be like to have that passion set free on him. Xanthos wanted her with a primal instinct he had never experienced before. He must remember to thank his stepmother, he thought as he sauntered over to his unwilling bride.

* * * *

Ceridwen sat upon her throne next to Cernunnos in the Great Hall and wondered what it would cost the two of them if they waged war against Lugh. Before he convened this assemblage of the gods, Cernunnos had confided to her that he had known for some time Lugh was planning to make a move against them. However, Cernunnos never thought Lugh would go so far as to ignore his direct command by interfering in her daughters life.

Lugh had been a thorn in their side for some time, always there to taunt Cernunnos decisions and cause problems among the other gods, kings and chieftains who ruled. Cernunnos told her in the privacy of their chambers he could handle being taunted by Lugh, it was nothing new, especially since Lugh was nothing but a braggart. But hurting Ceridwen was the last straw. With a purpose she had not seen in her husband for many seasons, he announced the time had come for them to finally be free of Lugh once and for all.

Ceridwen cleared her head of thoughts of Lugh when he had finally decided to appear before them. She watched Lugh approach and realized nothing about him had changed since the last time she had seen him. Lugh was as tall as Cernunnos and as powerfully built, but that was where the resemblance ended. Where Cernunnos hair hung in long golden waves about his shoulders, Lugh's was blazing red. Lugh's eyes lacked any warmth and were almost obsidian in color. Though he was powerfully built, Lugh didn't have the same commanding presence as Cernunnos, but rather a threatening and intimidating aura. Rather than drawing

people to him with his leadership as Cernunnos did, Lughs personality and demeanor evoked a fear of him in others, which he seemed to enjoy and thrive on.

Not only was Lughs demeanor threatening and intimidating, but so was his attire. Those who had accompanied him into the great hall appeared in a similar fashion. It was common knowledge among all the gods that the Great Hall was a place where petty differences were put aside. No weapons were ever brought into the Hall either, but Lugh carried his sword and was covered in leather armor and skins. His men were adorned in much the same manner, almost as if they were seeking a fight. It was abundantly clear to Ceridwen there was not a chance of peace between Lugh and themselves. Ceridwen also realized war would encompass everyone as they chose sides, either Lughs or her husbands.

Lugh strode into the great hall with a smug look upon his face. His body language spoke of his confidence, as if he knew he finally had Ceridwen where he wanted her. Ceridwen knew if he thought her daughters life hung in the balance, there was nothing either she or Cernunnos would do to stop him.

Walking up to the dais where Cernunnos and Ceridwen sat, Lugh addressed them with nothing but contempt in his voice. "I assume there is something you would like to discuss with me?"

The disdain in his voice set Cernunnos temper to blazing. "Lugh, there is a rumor circulating that youre planning to begin a war among the gods to try and have me overthrown. Is there any truth to this rumor?"

Lugh looked completely innocent. "Tell me who has started such a vicious rumor and I will have them destroyed immediately. I could no more wage war against you than I could harm a mortal, Cernunnos."

Cernunnos turned toward his wife and took her hand within his to give Lugh the impression they were united. Turning back to Lugh, he spoke with a calm that clearly belied the anger flowing off him in waves. "I did not think you would be so foolish as to *try* to take over the heavens. Why, someone even mentioned you had captured a mortal and were trying to harm her by using one of your priests to do your dirty work. Is there any truth to this?"

Lugh visibly blanched. "Tell me whos spreading such lies to you. Why, you yourself decreed that no gods were to have any contact with mortals. I would no sooner harm a mortal than I would you, Cernunnos, or your lovely wife."

"That is what I thought." There was a note of derision in Cernunnos voice.

"Who is this mortal I am supposed to have harmed?" Lugh questioned.

"My daughter," Ceridwen spoke with an unmistakable hatred in her voice.

"You have a daughter, Ceridwen? I wasnt aware you had one with Cernunnos."

Ceridwen stood and walked down to Lugh. "She is the daughter of my mortal husband, the one you had killed. Do you remember him?"

A smirk played about Lughs face. "I do recall that you took a mortal to your bed in an effort to anger me, but I do not

recall having him killed. Mortals are not worth the effort. *What was his name?*" Lugh injected a note of curiosity into his voice to mock her.

There was a look upon Ceridwen's face that told all in the Great Hall of her desire to kill Lugh where he stood, but in order to discover all who were against Cernunnos, they had to allow Lugh the opportunity to reveal his plans. "His name need not be spoken by you. You had him killed when I refused you and now you seek to hurt me through my daughter. Know this, Lugh, before you hurt either my daughter or my husband, I will personally kill you."

Lugh laughed in her face. "I thought you said I killed your husband. Make up your mind, woman."

"When I said husband, I was referring to Cernunnos. I *will* stop you from hurting my daughter."

Completely dismissing Ceridwen, Lugh turned back to Cernunnos. "So she now considers you her husband? Have a care, Cernunnos, I do not take kindly to having lies spoken about me, nor will I be threatened by your woman." Lugh walked up to where Cernunnos sat and knelt close to him as he spoke. "If you threaten me again, I will kill you and the bitch you call wife." Then Lugh stood and walked to Ceridwen and spoke in an undertone so only she could hear him. "I killed one husband for you, and I will gladly kill another. You will be mine, or you will see all your treasure destroyed."

Pulling his sword from its scabbard and pointing it toward Cernunnos, Lugh turned to face him before leaving the Great Hall. "There will be a day of reckoning between you and I, Cernunnos."

In The Hands of the Gods
by E.L. Hutchison

"I shall look forward to that day, Lugh."

Chapter 5

There was a primal look about the man who claimed to be the son of a god that set her nerves on edge. This was not one of the young boys of her village she had toyed with so often. This was a man who would not take no for an answer. Extremely tall, his powerfully muscled body was a dark bronze color from a great deal of time spent in the sun. Long, golden hair hung in waves about his powerful shoulders, his eyes were a dark golden brown, fringed by long black eyelashes and thick dark brows, which gave her the uncanny feeling of being his prey.

As Zahinah watched him approach her, her mouth went dry with longing as she recalled how he had covered her with his powerful body and thrust into her, satisfying the ache Duartars potion had caused. She could not help but remember how wonderfully erotic it had been to feel his powerful erection sliding into her, filling a void she had been unaware of until his touch. This man held a power over her body she didnt know could exist.

Completely aware of the looks being cast in her direction, she raised her head and faced him with the full force of her fury. Deciding she needed to keep her wits and powers about her, she whipped up a water spout just off the bow of the ship to take her mind off his body and the memory of how it felt to have him buried deep inside her body.

Raising her hands, Zahinah looked at Xanthos and asked, "Do your men fare well the fury of the sea?" There was a

glimmer of satisfaction in her eyes as she watched him whirl away to see what had caused such an uproar among his men.

A look of rage crossed his features as he turned back to her. "Zahinah, do you wish to be killed this day?"

"You wouldnt dare!" she bellowed against the roar of the wind.

"Not me, you little fool! The men, do you not see their fear?"

Zahinah turned to see the men staring at her. There was a look of fear on some faces, but it was those gently touching their swords that caused her to lower her hands.

"I am glad to see you are not a complete simpleton!" he shouted as he tore his cloak from his shoulders and wrapped it about her, shielding her naked body from his men.

Zahinah allowed him to steer her away from the hungry and fearful eyes of his men by walking her to the opposite end of the ship. With great effort, she managed to hold her temper until they were well away from anyone who might overhear them speaking. Looking out over the waters, she sought the right words to convey her unwillingness to become his wife.

Composing her face into an unreadable mask, she turned away from the peaceful waves.

"What is your name?"

"Xanthos."

"Why did you come to me? Who sent you, was it my uncle?"

"I do not know your uncle. I was sent by your mother." Xanthos watched her carefully as he spoke.

Standing there in shock, she had no idea how to respond to him. "You lie. My mother died giving birth to me. Who sent you?"

"Zahinah, your mother is very much alive. Has your family never told you from what source your powers originate?"

Narrowing her eyes, she wondered what he was trying to accomplish. "I have been told they were a gift from the gods. Do you know something I do not?" Her voice was laced with sarcasm.

Xanthos smiled tenderly as he spoke. "I understand what tis like to be different. There is always the temptation to use the powers against those who make fun of them. Have you ever experienced that temptation?"

Not sure what to make of his drastic change in conversation, she decided to go along with him and see where it led. "You have no idea." She recalled with delight the day she had focused a snowstorm over the home of her childhood tormentor for a sennight. All the begging of the young girls family could not make her remove the storm, it was only with the young girls apology that she finally relented. "I once created a snowstorm over the holdings of a young girl who took great pleasure in making fun of me. Her lands were in a deep freeze for a sennight."

Xanthos laughed outright. "Considering your personality, I can see you taking great pleasure in such an act. Were you punished by your family?" Xanthos wondered if her life had been as brutal as his had been as a child.

Zahinah smiled as she remembered her uncles version of punishment for her reckless behavior. "My uncle was never

good at punishing me. He took away my desserts for a fortnight and made me apologize to her family for their suffering. Then I had to spend everyday of that fortnight accompanying my uncle as he cared for the people he ruled." Zahinah looked at Xanthos with a wistful smile on her face. "I learned more from my uncle in that fortnight about how to care for people and use my powers for their benefit, than I ever did in all my years growing up."

Wondering how best to tell her she was the child of a goddess, Xanthos decided on honesty and forthrightness. "Zahinah, the gods cannot just give powers away to mortals. These powers are a birthright." Xanthos sought for the words that would make her understand from whence her gift came. "Take my father for example, his powers encompass many things. He is known by many as the god of animals. At any given moment, he can assume the form of an animal. This is where my ability to shape shift comes from."

There was a look of stunned belief in her eyes as she recalled the legends told her as a child of the gods sometimes taking mortal lovers and conceiving children. There was no denying he had been able to change at will into whatever animal he chose at any given time, she herself had witnessed it twice. "If you are the son of Cernunnos, what other powers do you possess?"

"I am only able to shape shift, I gained no other powers from my father. My mother was a mortal he had desired and took to his bed. From their union, I was born."

Zahinah was utterly speechless as she considered the importance of his revelation. It could not be easy to be the

child of a god and a mortal, for one never truly belonged to either world. She had often felt as if she did not belong to anyone or anywhere because of her powers. She was different, though, she thought stubbornly, she was not the child of a god.

"I believe you. You are wrong about me though. I am not the child of a god."

Growing tired of her refusal to see what was so plainly before her very eyes, Xanthos decided to try a different tactic. "Have the bards of your little island ever told you the story of Cernunnos and his wife, Ceridwen?"

"My uncle forbade anyone to relate the stories of the gods. He said they were petty and selfish and only sought to harm those they watched over."

"Well, your uncle and I agree on one thing then. The gods are petty and selfish, but Ceridwen is not. She fell in love with a mortal, his name was Rainold of the clan Shane, and he was also your father."

"You lie." Even as she spoke the words, Zahinah could sense he was being truthful.

"I do not lie." There was a rough tone to his voice as he spoke to her. "Ceridwen was promised to the god Lugh. Your mother possesses the power to control nature and since Lugh is the god of war, their joining would have had a great impact on the mortal world. Lugh would have effectively been able to completely control the tides of battles between mortals as he saw fit with your mothers ability. Your mother though, being the willful goddess she is, wanted none of his power-hungry scheme. She refused him and secluded herself with your

fathers people. It was there she took your father as husband and there you were born."

Zahinah sank to her knees as he told her the story, which explained why there was never any mention of her mother or the gods in her home. She remembered once asking her uncle to tell her of the gods. He had responded by shouting at her, forbidding her to ever speak of them again.

"Why did she leave me?" There was a hollow sound to her voice as she asked him the question foremost in her mind. "If she loved my father, why did she leave us?"

"Lugh is a very vengeful god, he eventually found her hiding among your people. Lugh also found her lover, young Rainold. Lugh threatened to kill your father and all those under his protection if your mother did not return with him and become his wife. Your mother knew he meant it and agreed. Lugh never knew of your existence. If he had, he would have killed you. Trying to protect both you and your father, your mother went with him."

"I was told as a child my father was killed in a battle caused by the gods. Was it Lugh?"

"Lugh sent an army to destroy your people behind Ceridwens back. He wanted to assure himself she would never return to your father, or to the people who gave her refuge. When she eventually found out about Rainolds death, she asked my father for his help. The only way my father could protect her from Lugh was to marry her himself. Their marriage is not one of love."

"So Ceridwen is your stepmother? She sent you to protect me?"

"Yes, Lugh recently discovered you are Ceridwens daughter and he wants to destroy you. If he cannot have her powers, he will have yours, for you are almost as powerful as your mother."

"So that was why Duartar wanted me. If Duartar could gain my powers, Lugh would be able to control him." The implications of what Xanthos revealed to her made her ill. All her life she had known there was a secret surrounding her parents but she had never thought it was this. She was merely a victim in a power struggle between the gods.

Looking up from where she sat, tears flowed from her eyes as she spoke. "How do I fight the gods, Xanthos? I am not as powerful as they think. I do not know what to do." The last was spoken on a sob.

With great tenderness, Xanthos gathered her into his arms and held her close. "Zahinah, I know how frightening this must be for you. I myself have never fought the gods, but if you will trust me, I will protect you to the best of my ability."

Balking at needing protection, she quickly dried her tears and asked, "Why do I have to marry you to ensure my safety?"

"If we are united in marriage, Lugh will have to leave you alone." Xanthos gently stroked her hair as he spoke in a calming voice.

Zahinah had always been able to understand people, to see the inner person within. In Xanthos, she sensed nothing but honesty. He was willing to offer her his protection. He had risked his life protecting her from Duartar. "Why are you doing this? Why do you want to help me?"

In The Hands of the Gods
by E.L. Hutchison

"Your mother is a goddess of great kindness and compassion. When my mother was killed, Ceridwen made sure I was cared for and trained as a warrior. My father had forgotten about me, but Ceridwen saw to it I was raised to be a compassionate man and to offer my protection to those in need." Xanthos looked down into her moss green eyes.

"Zahinah, will you let me offer you my protection?"

As she was about to answer him, a shout rang out from the watch. "A ship, and she carries the flag of Clan Alfrik."

Chapter 6

Zahinah looked in the direction the man was pointing and was able to see they were being pursued by another ship flying the flag of Clan Alfrik. She knew beyond a doubt it was Duartar directing the ship toward them. For as long as anyone could remember, Duartar had been advisor to the clan chieftain, Alandir, and the man followed Duartars every word.

Without taking her eyes from the fast approaching ship, she asked, "If we are the children of the gods, is there not something we can do to stop him?"

"If you cast a spell, you run the risk of frightening the men onboard this vessel," Xanthos shouted at her to be heard above the roaring of the wind and ocean.

Looking at him with her mouth agape, she asked. "You mean to tell me they have no knowledge of your powers?"

"I learned long ago tis best not to reveal my true self to others."

Zahinah sighed in frustration. She would be damned if Duartar would catch her again, he almost killed her the last time. Taking matters into her own hands, she cast him a defiant look. "I have no desire to be raped this day, nor any other."

Xanthos watched as she raised her hands toward the heavens and brought a wall of water up between their ship and the one following them. Then spreading her arms wide, a gust of wind overtook their sails, placing a great deal of distance between the two ships.

When she was certain the other ship would not be able to follow, she brought her arms down and gave Xanthos a sheepish look. "What good does it do me to be the daughter of a god if I cannot use my powers?"

Muttering under his breath, Xanthos grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back to his quarters.

Once he managed to get her inside, he shoved her toward the table. "What possessed you to pull such a stupid stunt?"

"Stupid? How dare you!" Zahinah could not believe he had the nerve to yell at her. She had prevented his men from being killed by Alandir and his clan. "Do you have any idea what Alandir of Alfrik is capable of?"

Crossing his massive arms, he leaned back against the door of the cabin and with a careless air, said, "No."

His casual response irritated her more than his yelling. "Well, let me enlighten you." Overcoming her momentary shock over his ungrateful attitude, she sat on the edge of the table, inadvertently knocking maps to the floor. "Alandir is brutal. He takes great pleasure in torturing those he conquers. While you and I might be safe from him, your men would not."

"So you were thinking of the men just now when you scared them half to death?" Xanthos asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Yes, I was. I have seen firsthand what atrocities Alandir is capable of committing. His clan led the raid against my father. Alandir killed my father and has led raids on the villages of my uncles holdings for years. What he wants, he takes, and what he cannot take, he destroys. I have seen the

bodies of his victims, the widows and the orphans left behind to bury their men. Believe me, he would not hesitate to brutally murder everyone onboard this ship."

Against her will, images flashed through her mind of the burnt cottages, the bodies of the women not fortunate enough to hide from the invaders, raped and tortured before their deaths, the slain children and men who did not receive even a hint of mercy. Alandir had once been so bold as to lay siege to their stronghold. The only thing preventing his overthrow was the fact she had nearly drowned his men in a torrential flood. Alandir was like Duartar, both hungry for riches and glory and both men coveted her powers. She would do anything to ensure the men on this ship escaped the bloodshed sure to come if Alandir attacked them.

"That may be true, but do you think me an incapable fool, Zahinah?" Xanthos began to stalk her. "Do you think I need to hide behind a woman, that I need the powers of a mere woman to save me from a raiding killer?"

Zahinah saw a predatory look in his eyes. Leaping from the table, she hastily put it between her and the man stalking her. Not wanting to show any fear, she stopped her retreat and faced him. "Well, the last time I checked, you were only able to shape shift. Are you going to whip yourself into a great beast and take on an entire ship by yourself?" Sarcasm laced her every word as he continued his slow approach toward her.

Xanthos stopped in front of her, just close enough so he could smell her nervous fear. "Do you feel no regret in using

your powers against mortals, or do you just simply lack any self-control?"

"I feel no regret in using my powers to protect those in need!" The gall of the man to question her self-control, she had plenty of control. "As for self-control, you evil-eyed lout, I have plenty! If I did not, you would have been carried off by not so favorable winds."

"Oh, really?" he asked, standing close enough so his breath stirred the hair at her temples.

"Yes really! Who do you think you are to question my motives in trying to prevent the loss of lives? Do you not even care for those you command?" Zahinah stood toe-to-toe with him, venting her rage.

"Did the thought even enter that pretty little head of yours that they did not know you were on this vessel? I laid anchor well out of the sight of that stronghold. For all you know, they could have been going anywhere."

"Tell me you dont actually believe that?" The man was daft, Duartar was a sorcerer, he knew where she was to be found.

Xanthos gave her a chagrined look and admitted the obvious. "No, I am pretty sure he knew you were here." Xanthos turned away from her with an exasperated sigh. "We will continue on our path. The men will go forward to my stronghold and tonight, you and I will jump ship. That should throw Duartar off our trail for a while."

If only that were possible. There was little chance Duartar would be fooled for long. "That plan will save the men on this

vessel, but it will not keep him from us forever. Do you have any idea of what we are to do when he catches up to us?"

Just as Xanthos was about to reply, Davon burst through the door, his face completely ashen. "Xanthos, come quickly."

"What is it?" Xanthos asked as he reached for his sword.

"There is an entire fleet out there, right off our port bow and they are moving into position to block our advance. Not to mention that little ship you managed to keep away from us," Davon said, looking directly at Zahinah in an accusing manner. "Shes gaining on us."

"By all thats holy, how many ships do you count?" Xanthos asked with a sense of urgency in his voice and worry lines clearly etched across his face.

"There are at least five ships, but I swear, it looked like they were multiplying." Davon cast a dubious glance Zahinahs way. "They are after her, are they not?"

"Without a doubt. Do you think we can at least keep ahead of them until night falls?"

"Why, what are you thinking?" Zahinah asked, remembering none too fondly her last foray swimming.

Xanthos grabbed her by the arm as he yanked her toward the door. "We fight them until we can make our escape overboard under the cover of darkness. There is a storm gathering in the north, I saw signs of it earlier, we will head toward that. It should give us enough time to escape." Xanthos reached the bow of the ship and looked out over the waters at the massive array of ships he faced. Whatever their number had been when Davon first saw them, it was clear there were at least twenty ships all bearing down on him.

Turning to Davon, he spoke, "Davon, once Zahinah and I escape tonight, we will send word to you if we have need of you and the men."

Once Zahinah caught sight of the opposition they faced, her blood froze in her veins. It was simply not possible Duartar could have amassed such a force against her so fast. Beyond a shadow of doubt, she knew there were more powerful forces against her than she realized. "Xanthos, how could Duartar have accomplished this? He is behind us, where in heavens name did they come from?"

"Lugh," was his very calm reply.

Zahinah cast a quick glance at Xanthos and was shocked by the hatred lacing his voice with that one word.

Knowing Lugh was behind this new threat sent a cold shiver of fear running up her spine. She could fight and elude Duartar. "How do we outrun him?"

Xanthos looked at her, and choosing his words carefully, said, "Zahinah, you have been raised as a druid priestess, do you know any of the ancient arts?"

"Yes, but how can my magic fight a god? The ancient arts are a gift from them," Zahinah shouted at him in frustration.

"Well I have just discovered a new use for their gift. Those men on that ship are mortal, use your powers."

"Have you completely lost your mind? Were you not just lecturing me about using my powers against mortals?" Zahinah knew that to use her powers against the gods could cost her life, but not using them would surely cost her more.

"Zahinah," Xanthos said, grabbing her arm. "If you do not use your magic, all the men you see before you will surely perish this day. Now do what you were born to do!"

Raising her arms in a wide arc above her head, Zahinah spoke the words sure to seal her fate. "Great Mother Goddess, giver of all life and executioner of justice, hear my words. Guide us in our quest for justice; give us your infinite wisdom. Take those who seek to stop us and blind their eyes to our course. Let their hands not rise against us and cause harm to those onboard this ship. Guide our course, and let those who seek to harm us be met with your justice."

Zahinah took Xanthos dagger from the scabbard at his waist and dragged it across her open palm, then she began making a circle with her blood. Once that was accomplished, she brought her hands down, spun in a circle, then flung her arms out toward the ships that dotted the horizon.

Xanthos and all those onboard watched in fascination as a great mist enshrouded the fleet of ships. Turning to see if Alfrik still pursued them, she perceived their ship was also enshrouded in a thick mist. Acting quickly without speaking a word, Xanthos gave the signal for his men to turn their eastern course and head north. It would not give them much of an advantage, but by the time those pursuing them emerged from the mist, they would be at least several leagues north.

Xanthos turned to Zahinah with a look of concern. "How long will you be able to keep them enshrouded in the mist?"

Zahinah cast him a dubious glance. "A while, why?"

"Are you able to command another wind like you did before?"

There was a note of concern for her in his voice that gave her a start. Since meeting the man, all he had done was order her about, call her irresponsible, take her virtue and yell at her. His concern for her was something she wasn't prepared for. Not wanting to question it though, she gave a quick flick of her wrist and a gust of wind overtook the sails.

Davon glanced from Xanthos to Zahinah with a look of stark fear. "Xanthos, if tis the witch they are after, why do you not just let them have her and be done with it? Why risk your mens lives for her?"

Xanthos stood with a regal bearing, his long golden hair whipping about his shoulders. Xanthos looked directly at Davon and spoke in a furious undertone. "Why would you sacrifice an innocent?"

Davon gave him a startled look. "Innocent? She is a sorceress. She has brought the gods rage down upon our heads with her magic. She will surely be the death of us all, including you, my friend!"

"Davon, because you are my friend, I will forgive your questioning *methis time!*" Xanthos braced his hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes flashing golden fire. "I am not in the habit of sacrificing women and children to avoid a fight." Xanthos glared at him. "And I did not think you were either."

Davon had the good grace to look ashamed. "I am sorry I questioned you, but she has brought the wrath of the gods upon us."

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Xanthos gave an exasperated sigh and once again turned to the rail of his ship and looked out over the waters as if searching for an answer within their depths. There was an exhaustion in his voice that told Zahinah his soul was tired. She wondered what it was that caused him to sound so old and tired as he spoke to his friend.

Xanthos leaned over the rail and hung his head down. "She is not the one causing this. Tis the greed of the gods to blame, Davon. If they can command her powers, then Lugh can control mankind's wars. If that happens no one is safe from the wrath of the gods."

Davon visibly shuddered. "We are fighting Lugh? The god of war? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Chapter 7

Zahinah stood at the bow of the ship, allowing the breeze and rolling motion of the waves to calm her. Since she had cast her spell, she remained in that same spot, not relenting for a moment in her concentration. There was no way on this earth she would allow her spell to falter for so much as a second, too many lives were at stake. She hadn't fully realized the implications of what she and Xanthos confronted until she saw the worry and stress etched into every contour of his face and body as he looked out over the ships and men they had confronted earlier. He was worried and she could sense it, yet he refused to give into his fear and with great courage, was prepared to face whatever the gods threw at him.

She didn't know Xanthos well, but already she knew he had the courage of the gods. He was willing to do whatever it took to save her, and for that alone, she owed him her life. Regardless of what she thought about his high-handed manner of informing her that she would marry him, which she absolutely refused to do, she would do whatever was within her power to help him defeat Lugh.

Zahinah looked out over the waters, wanting nothing more than to sleep. It was taking all her strength to keep the ships surrounded by the mist, not to mention the wind required to keep Xanthos' ship on its northern course.

Zahinah gave a squeak of alarm when Xanthos came to stand silently beside her at the railing. He didn't speak for several moments, just watched her in his predatory manner.

Silently, she thought she could know the man forever and that look would still set her nerves on edge. She wondered why he still had not told her of their exact destination. The only information he had provided her with was that they were headed to his stronghold within a sennight. Wherever that was.

Zahinah was waiting for him to speak with his cloak billowing about her body and her hair whipping about her waist. Finally unable to bear his intent gaze a moment longer, she broke the silence. "Is it time for us to leave now?"

Xanthos smiled into her warm green eyes. "No, not yet, but soon. It will be dawn in three or four hours. You will need to rest for at least two before we leave." Xanthos reached out and covered her cold hand with his warm one as she stood at the rail.

"Zahinah," his voice barely above a whisper, "you can release the mist now. You have given us the distance we need. By the time Duartar finds this ship, we will no longer be on it."

Zahinah thought of nothing but how they would be able to avoid Duartar and could only come up with one solution the standing stones. "Xanthos, I know of a way to keep him from us for a while, even Lugh won't know where we are."

"Where?" Xanthos asked

"How far do you think we are from Britannia?" Zahinah asked, a plan taking root in her mind.

Xanthos gave her a questioning look. "At most, maybe a day. If you are thinking of hiding in Britannia, forget it. That

is the first place they will search. Nothing comes onto that island from the coast without being noticed."

"But therein lies the solution." She gave him a smug look of satisfaction. "There is an abbey of monks near a circle of standing stones at Deorham Hill. We will be able to hide there."

"Do you realize how far away that monastery is from where we are now? Tis miles inland." Xanthos looked her up and down, his eyes lighting on her face. "They are sure to remember a woman wearing next to nothing traveling with a golden-eyed warrior."

"Yes they would, but no one will take notice of a crippled crone traveling with a wolf."

Xanthos knew where she would find the wolf, but had to question where the crone would play into this scheme of hers. "Well I know where the wolf will come from, but how do you propose to make people think you are a crone?"

"There are more to my powers than the ability to control the elements. As you said yourself earlier, I am a druid priestess and skilled in the ancient arts." Zahinah smiled at him and turned her face back to the ocean. "We must leave this ship before we reach land, though."

Zahinah stood there watching the waves undulate in their calm manner, wishing she still had her pouch of herbs to cast her spell. How on earth was she going to get the herbs she needed in the middle of the ocean? When she had been captured by Duarte and his men, the little grizzled bat-fouling gull-catcher had destroyed her pouch full of herbs, which she always carried with her. Some she had used for

healing and others, she used for her spells, now she was left with nothing.

Xanthos stood there in silence watching the play of emotions across her expressive face. "Of what are you thinking so hard?"

"I was just wondering where I could get my hands on herbs in the middle of the ocean. Duartar destroyed mine when he captured me and I need them to cast my spell."

"What herbs do you need?"

Once Zahinah had given him the list of herbs she required, she secluded herself in Xanthos quarters to rest. When the moon began to touch the horizon, she would need to focus all her energy on her spell in order for it to succeed in fooling Lugh and Duartar.

After Zahinah rested, she arose and placed a blanket over the portal window to darken the small area. Then she managed to burn small bits of wood in a pewter bowl, and upon obtaining enough ashes, poured them out in a circle. Zahinah then went to the center of it with a single taper candle. She was almost ready for the herbs when Xanthos requested entrance.

* * * *

Once he heard Zahinah bid him enter, he did so, shutting the door quickly behind him.

Inside the room, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit smoky interior. Finally able to see, his chest constricted at the sight of the woman before him. Xanthos watched her in fascination and was hit with such a blinding

jolt of desire, he wanted nothing more than to grab her and carry her to his bed.

Zahinah was clad in one of his linen shirts, which barely reached her mid thigh. She sat in the center of the circle with both feet crossed over her thighs. Her eyes were closed and her head was thrown back with the palms of her hands raised in supplication as she whispered words he could barely hear. Her body became more animated as she chanted the ancient spell. As she arched her neck back further, her nipples strained against the thin linen of the shirt. Her long glossy black hair fell in a silken curtain down her back to lie in a pool behind her.

Standing there watching her, he was enchanted. If ever there had been any doubt in his mind about her being a daughter of the gods, it was instantly dispelled as he stood there. Zahinah radiated a mystical sensuality as she moved her body in rhythm to her chant.

Xanthos could feel his erection straining against his leather breeches as he watched her. Closing his eyes, he could feel himself plunging into her silken, wet channel. As he stood there waiting for her to speak, he silently prayed the gods would give him the strength to wait until she was through with her spell before he took her.

Slowly opening her eyes after she had finished the last verse of her cleansing chant, she looked directly at him. "Were you able to find the herbs I require?"

Xanthos cleared his throat as he approached the small circle she sat within, holding out the requested herbs. "Yes,

although the men are grumbling about having to give the witch their herbs. They hope you are worth the effort."

"They are not alone in hoping I am good enough." There was weariness in her voice as she spoke.

Xanthos got the feeling she would rather have been doing anything other than what she was now forced to do. Perhaps she was like him and raged against the forces that sought to create them and their powers. Being a child of the gods was a responsibility he had never wanted.

He watched in silence as she crushed the herbs into a small wooden bowl. Then she dropped a dollop of candle wax into the center of it and stirred the concoction with the blade of a dagger. With the grace of a cat, she stood in one fluid motion and raised the bowl to the east. "Air of the east, which brings creativity and wisdom, I beseech you to witness and bless this ritual." Turning to the south, she again raised the bowl. "Oh fire of the south, giver of passion and strength, I beseech you to witness and bless this sacred ritual." Turning to the west and again raising the herbal mixture, she said, "Water of the west, you who bless us with emotion and change, I beseech you to bless and witness this ritual." Turning to the north, she continued, "Oh mother earth of the north, giver of solidity and prosperity, I beseech you to witness and bless this ritual. I call upon you, great goddess, let this incense be my gift to you, may we walk together on this path I have chosen. Hide us within your protective embrace; let our true image be shielded from the eyes of those who seek to harm us"

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Xanthos watched in fascination as she finished casting her spell. He waited in silence until she extinguished the candle and pulled the cover she had placed over the portal off, allowing the full light of the moon to enter the cabin. She then turned to him and with a look of resignation, and said, "We need to leave the ship now, are we close enough to Britannia to swim?"

Xanthos smiled and reached out taking her small trembling hand in his. "Dont worry about being able to swim. I can shape shift, remember?"

Chapter 8

On the deck, Zahinah watched in silence as Xanthos gave Davon the final details of where and when they were to meet. The anticipation and fear of what lay ahead had all the men, including Xanthos, nervous. That nervous fear permeated the atmosphere and seemed to almost be a tangible thing, as if it was a living, breathing entity.

She herself was not immune to the fear engulfing the ship and Zahinah desperately wished she could just go back to the days of her childhood, back before she realized what the powers she possessed could do. What was worse, the older she became, so too did her powers increase in strength. Since growing to maturity, she had been pursued by men desiring her powers. No one ever wanted her for herself.

Looking at Xanthos, she couldn't help but wonder if maybe this time it would be different. He was here because he sought to protect her, her powers didn't seem to be important to him. In fact, it appeared he did not want her to use her powers at all. It was only logical that it would not matter to him, because he, in fact, was just as powerful as her. He, too, was a child of the gods. He had even seemed reluctant to take her virginity. Zahinah suspected that had it not been for Duartars potion and its effects on her, he would never have touched her.

From under the veil of her lashes, she watched the way Xanthos spoke to those he commanded. He was not in the least overbearing; he spoke to them as equals, but with an

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air of authority, not domination. The longer she was in his company, the more she realized he was a man of honor, he was the son of a god and she wanted him.

* * * *

Xanthos caught her watching him and again wondered exactly what she was thinking. Her deep green eyes unnerved him, they were completely unreadable. Even from this distance, Xanthos could smell her anxious fear and he wondered if she was thinking about the last time she had been forced into jumping into the water to save her life. Unbidden, the memory of her swimming entered his mind's eye. He remembered watching the water caress her creamy, white breasts, her nipples jutting out. He remembered seeing the look of rapture on her face as she had stroked herself, bringing herself to release. He also remembered the look of mortified humiliation that had come over her lovely face when she realized he had caught her. Zahinah had been embarrassed he had become instantly rock hard with his need for her. The feeling of need was becoming all too familiar to him when he was in her presence.

Not trusting his body's reaction to her, he quickly turned away and finished speaking to Davon.

"At the next full moon, I will meet you and the men at the abbey in Silchester." Xanthos turned and looked at her while speaking to his long-time friend. "With a little luck, she will have married me by then."

Davon looked over at Zahinah and then back at Xanthos. "You don't sound positive she will marry you. I, for one, am

not nearly as certain as you are that marrying her is a wise decision."

There was laughter in Xanthos voice as he turned back to Davon. "Had you bedded her, you would have no doubt as to the wisdom of my decision."

"Desire is one thing, Xanthos, but you can bed any maiden. Why is this one so special?" Davon gave him a thoughtful look and as he spoke, his voice was laced with doubt. "Surely tis not because of her powers? You do not desire them do you?"

"No. Not her powers, I desire her."

Davon shook his head in disbelief. "I cannot imagine why. A person would have to be deaf not to have heard her fighting with you."

Clapping his friend on the shoulder, he said, "Thats exactly why. Shes hell in bed and out. The woman doesnt give an inch, nor does she give a damn that I am a child of the gods. She actually even scoffed at my powers." A smile stole across his face remembering how she had insinuated that his shape shifting ability was nothing to brag about. "She is fire and passion and she is mine!"

Seeing the look of barely controlled desire on Xanthos face, Davon walked away, muttering to himself about insanity and witches.

Quickly crossing the deck to where she stood, Xanthos walked up behind her and pressed his body against the length of her back as he placed his muscular arms around her. Pulling her against him, he stepped onto the rail with her as he leaned over and whispered into her ear. "Zahinah, tis

time." He felt a shudder run through her body as his lips gently touched her skin. Unable to resist the primal instinct rushing through him, he gently bit the tender flesh of her neck.

Zahinah began to visibly tremble with desire and an urge as old as time itself; he pushed his erection against her, savagely growling in her ear. "I can smell your desire, Zahinah. When we reach land, you will again know what it feels like to have me buried deep inside you."

* * * *

Before she had the chance to respond, he lunged forward, plunging them into the watery depths below.

Kicking frantically, Zahinah reached the surface of the water cursing with every breath she took. "May the gods have mercy on his evil soul, because his miserable, accursed hide is mine!"

"See, I knew you would eventually see things my way," he said, smugly treading water only a few feet from her.

She wanted to murder the man. How dare he say something like that and then toss her into the ocean, again, and without any warning? The man was a merciless, fitful, full gorged dogfish. "When we reach Britannia, I am going to turn your miserable arse into a toad!"

"You can do that?"

There was a note of wonder and doubt in his voice that had her smiling, despite her anger. "No," was her muttered reply.

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Smiling to himself, he reached out, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from the ship, the faces of his men leaned over the rail watching her show of temper. "Come on, witch, we only have a short swim. I think you'll survive it."

She watched in silence as his lithe, muscular body cut through the water and wondered if it would be possible to drown the miserable wretch.

* * * *

For the hundredth time since he dumped her into the ocean, for the second time since meeting him, she cursed Xanthos, Duartar and Lugh as she was again seized by another muscle cramp that forced her to once more float on her back and awkwardly massage the ache from her calf. Had this been any other time, she would have enjoyed being able to float upon the water and gaze up at the stars, but this was different, she had been swimming for what felt like hours with absolutely no relief and no sight of the land Xanthos kept telling her was just a little farther away.

"I thought you said it was only a league away?" Zahinah shouted at the back of his head.

"So I was off in my calculations. If you do not cease your complaining, I will leave you out here in the dark on your own."

"I am not complaining!" she shot back. "And if you do, I will for a certainty make sure you remain in a deep freeze for the rest of your cursed life!" She truly wasn't complaining. She was tired, cold and hungry. Not to mention tired of being wet.

Zahinah heaved a sigh and muttered to herself. "Aye, Zahinah, you are complaining."

"So you admit I am right?"

Startled, she screamed plunging beneath the water when he popped up beside her. Kicking to the surface, she spit out a mouthful of ocean and in a fit of temper, raised her hand, bringing it down on the surface of the water with a resounding clap. The result of her tantrum was an enormous wave that came crashing down on Xanthos, plunging him beneath the surface of the wave and thankfully, out of her sight. "Serves you right!" she shouted at him.

Realizing the mistake she made by using her magic against him, she quickly put as much distance as possible between herself and where he had gone under. Each stroke she took in the water became easier. Realizing she could hear the waves crashing against the shore, she knew she was near land and with a renewed sense of purpose, pushed herself to the limits. Soon, she was able to touch the rocky bottom with her feet.

Standing, she made her way through the crashing waves onto the beach and sat upon a rock, holding her head in her hands trying to catch her breath. Having the feeling she was being watched, Zahinah raised her head and looked around her. She saw nothing other than the dark shapes of seals dotting the shore. Zahinah looked out over the waters searching for Xanthos. Not yet seeing him, she wondered if he had managed to outrun the wave she had sent crashing down upon him. She knew he would be fine because he could shape shift into anything he chose. Wisdom would dictate

under those circumstances, he shift into something capable of handling the water.

Yet, as her eyes scanned the vast ocean, she still caught no sight of him. Feeling the first twinges of panic begin to rise within her breast, she stood, raising her hand and passing it across the sky in a large arch. Parting the clouds, she revealed the moon, which gave her enough light to see the surface of the water. Even with the added light from the moon, she was still unable to find Xanthos, or any evidence he had come up from the depths of the ocean.

Panic nearly choked her as she waded out into the water, calling out to him. She truly had not meant to hurt him. Zahinah turned back from the water with tears streaming down her face, hurting Xanthos was the last thing she had meant to do.

Intending to go back to shore, she turned away from the water and found her way blocked by an enormous male seal. Normally, she would have thought the animals placid creatures, but this one began to charge at her barking. No matter which way she turned, the animal blocked her path, keeping her in the water. Zahinah was just about to direct a bolt of lightening at the damnable creature when she noticed its eyes changed from a soft brown to a golden color. It almost seemed as if a fire burned within their depths. As she gazed into the creatures eyes, she knew without a doubt she was looking into those of Xanthos.

Zahinah unleashed all her fury at him for letting her think he was dead. As she began to rage at him, clouds gathered in

the heavens above her and lightening rent the sky, giving an unearthly glow to her features.

"Show yourself, you curse of the gods." She watched the miraculous transformation from animal to man in fascination and marveled at how he was able to change with such ease.

"You witch! You nearly drowned me. You" At a complete loss for words, Xanthos reached out grabbing her by the arms and threw her over his shoulder, stomping all the way to shore.

Zahinah thought he would stop once he reached land, but instead, he carried her further inland, where he dumped her onto a grassy embankment. When she looked into his eyes seeing the barely controlled desire, she made to escape him, but became entangled in her wet clothes. As she gained her footing and stood, Xanthos pulled her by her hair down onto the grass, quickly covering her body with his. With swift movements, he rendered the ties holding the front of her shirt together, exposing her heaving breasts.

She opened her mouth to scream but did not get the chance. He covered her mouth with his, plunging his tongue into her warm, honeyed depths.

There was a predatory gleam in his eyes as he took possession of her mouth sending a lightening bolt of desire through her body so intense and powerful, she began to climax. Zahinah thrashed beneath him, giving in to the pulsing of her core, silently begging him with her body to take her.

Xanthos needed no further encouragement from the witch beneath him as he pinned her arms above her head with one

hand. With his free hand, he managed to free his erection from his leather breeches. Parting her thighs with his leg, he looked into her eyes as he rubbed his erection against her center, already slick with her fluids. "Look at me, witch," he commanded.

Dazed from the intensity of her climax, she opened her eyes as he held himself back, not yet entering her. "You have me, Xanthos, what else is it you want?" she asked, fighting to control her rapid breathing.

"To know that you feared for my life That you thought I had perished in your fit of temper."

Where the words came from she did not know, but she knew he needed to hear she was concerned for his safety. Zahinah looked into his eyes and saw the same need she held buried deep inside her soul. The need to know beyond a doubt there was someone out there who cared for her, who understood her. It was a feeling she was very familiar with. But she did not know if it was something she was prepared to say to him. What would it hurt though, to admit the truth to him, to admit she had feared for his life due to her fit of temper?

Moaning as he placed the tip of his erection within her, she looked into his eyes. "I am sorry for the wave" Zahinah cried out as he pulled his cock out of her aching core. "I feared for your life."

With a roar, Xanthos plunged into her again and again, slapping his testicles against her wet warmth. As he pushed himself fully into her, he rained small, gentle kisses over her

face. Working his way down to her slender neck, he began to suck and gently bite her sensitive, delicate skin.

Zahinah felt as if she would perish from the sheer pleasure of his touch. Wanting to inflict the same erotic torture on him, she began raking her long nails down his back to his firmly muscled ass, at once clawing and caressing him. As she clawed her way down his body, she raised up pressing her breasts tightly into him, biting his shoulders and neck.

"Witch, do you feel my need for you?" he asked, panting against her heated, quivering flesh as his tongue flicked out to lick a rose colored nipple.

"Tis no greater than my need for your touch," she boldly countered.

Never before could she remember experiencing such exquisite pleasure. When he had taken her before, she had only felt the effects of Duartars potion. This time though, she could only feel Xanthos and the sensations his touch fired within her hungry body.

"Zahinah, do you want me?" he growled against her ear as he increased the urgency of his thrusts into her.

"Yes," she panted, raising her hips to meet him, taking him deeper into her body.

Lost to the rhythm he created, she felt an intense pressure begin to build in her lower abdomen with each thrust of his hot, slick flesh. Panting and undulating her hips beneath him, she screamed out his name as she climaxed.

With her scream of pleasure, he grabbed her hips lifting them as he pushed yet deeper into her pulsing body. He found his own release as she scored his back with her nails.

"You are mine, witch," he triumphantly cried out as her juices flowed hot and wet. With one final thrust, he spilled the last of his seed into her womb while gently kissing her.

Zahinah lay there for moments afterward enjoying the feeling of complete peace and lethargy that overtook her body as he pressed her down against the cool earth. Slowly opening her eyes, she was completely unprepared for the tender smile he gave her.

Leaning over her, he brushed his soft lips against her swollen mouth. "Did I hurt you?"

Still unsure what to think, she was unprepared for his gentle touch or concern. The passion they had just shared had started off with rage and ended with complete tenderness. Leaving her satisfied, dazed and confused.

"I am fine." Her voice was a breathless whisper even to her own ears.

Smiling like a mischievous little boy, he rolled over, pulling her onto his chest while still buried deep within her warmth. Reaching up, he gently brushed her soft, raven black hair from her face. Gently cupping her face in his hands and looking into her eyes, he asked, "Do you have any idea how very beautiful you are, Zahinah?"

Seeing the sincerity of his words reflected in his golden eyes, she was rendered speechless. All her life she had been erecting walls around her heart to keep from being hurt. Yet despite her resolve to feel nothing for anyone, this man was beginning to touch something deep inside her soul. She knew she would never marry him, but for one night, she wanted to banish the loneliness that had become her mantle and

shroud. For one night, she desperately wanted to feel whole, to feel like she belonged somewhere and to someone.

It was pointless she knew, but she wanted one memory to hold close to her heart for the rest of her days on this earth. To hope for a future was too much for her. A future was something she could never have, a normal life was not within her reach. To have happiness meant she could lose everything and everyone she cherished and held dear. And that was not something she was willing to do. She would not allow Xanthos to sacrifice his life protecting her from those who coveted her powers.

Knowing she needed to say something to him as he looked expectantly at her, she could only manage, "Am I?"

"More so than the heavens above," he said as he gently pulled her face toward his and captured her lips in a kiss.

Zahinah thought his kiss would be demanding and urgent as it had been before, instead his touch was feather light as his tongue traced the outline of her bottom lip. A whimper escaped her lips as she opened her mouth to him, allowing his tongue to tease, caress and suck hers deeper into the warmth of his.

With extreme gentleness, he pulled her wet cloak from her shoulders, never taking his lips from hers. A shudder of desire racked her body as he began pulling the shirt she wore up over her hips caressing and massaging her heated flesh. He pulled his mouth from hers only long enough to pull the wet garment completely off her in a slow and tantalizing motion.

Trembling with desire and anticipation, Zahinah wanted to feel his naked body against her and began unlacing his shirt,

kissing every inch of skin she exposed. A feeling of raw power overcame her as she felt his manhood harden within her.

Xanthos pulled her thighs up next to his hips and sat up with her still impaled on his shaft and allowed her to completely remove his shirt from him. Everywhere she touched him, his skin blazed with heat.

Not caring what he might think, she pressed her mouth against his, pulling his bottom lip between her teeth to gently bite him. There was no thought as to what was right or wrong any longer, only the need she felt to be with him.

"You are going to have me spilling my seed if you do that again." His voice was thick with desire as he wrapped his arms around her pulling her tightly against him.

Smiling with the satisfaction of a woman who knew she was pleasing her man, she wiggled her bottom against him, wrapping her legs around his waist, driving him deeper into her body. "I want to feel your hot releasenow"

With a roar, Xanthos flipped her onto her back pulling his wet and throbbing erection from her swollen, wet flesh. "Not yet. This time, we go slower."

Pinning her arms above her head, he ran his wet tongue around her ear, gently pulling on the lobe with his teeth. Working his way down her jaw to her neck, he placed wet, searing kisses across her collarbone to her full breasts. Gently stroking one breast with his hand, he took the other into his mouth and began sucking on it.

Zahinah felt as if she were being consumed by fire as he trailed a wet path from her breast to her navel with his

tongue, sending lightening bolts of desire to painfully throb between her legs.

"Now please Xanthos." Begging him, she raised her hips up to brush against his swollen erection.

"Not yet, little one."

With exquisite tenderness, he placed a feather light kiss on her woman's curls, soon followed by his tongue invading her wet, slick folds to stroke her hidden nub. The first touch of his tongue had her thrusting her hips against his face for more.

Quickly answering her body's need, he pulled her legs over his shoulders and tenderly bit her nub, pulling it with his teeth. When she neared climax, he stopped and began to lick her wet center, sucking the nectar from her body.

Crying out as the climax overtook her body, she grabbed his hair in her fists, holding his head against her as she thrust her hips against his mouth, bathing his lips, tongue and chin in her fluids.

Waiting until her breathing returned to normal, Xanthos pulled her legs from his shoulders and wrapped them around his waist. Leaning over her, he looked deeply into her passion-filled green eyes. "Look at me, Zahinah." His voice was infuriatingly tender. "You are my woman. You were chosen for me and from this moment on, you are mine. I will cherish you mind, heart, soul and body. I will give you my protection and honor."

The walls that had begun to crumble from the moment she thought he had perished in the ocean completely disintegrated, leaving her totally exposed and vulnerable to him.

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"Do you want me?"

After what he had just given her, she didnt have the power to deny him anything. Looking into his amber glowing eyes, there was no denying the truth, to either him or herself any longer. "I desire you as I have wanted no other."

Without further comment, he thrust into her warm, willing body. Neither of them noticed as lightening rent the sky and the earth shook beneath them with the force of their climax. And neither noticed the shower of stars that rained down on them from the heavens.

Chapter 9

They stayed there for a few moments wrapped in each other, a tangle of arms and legs, neither of them having the energy to separate from the other. Zahinah sighed as her breathing returned to normal, wondering what it would be like to have a man like Xanthos as her husband. What it would be like to spend the rest of her days with him, raising their children. It was not often she fantasized, wondering what it would be like to be mortal without the gift the gods had cursed upon her. But as she turned her head and looked at his closed eyes, she realized there could never be a future for them. There would always be someone hunting them for their powers. If they ever managed to have a child together, what powers would he or she possess? Would their child be hunted as they now were? She would rather be lonely and barren than to ever put an innocent child through what she now faced.

Rolling away from him with a sense of purpose, she stood and tried to pretend she felt nothing for him. She only hoped she would be able to convince him that she no longer wanted him.

"We should leave. I am not sure how long my spell will be able to keep Duartar at bay."

Xanthos made as if to reach out and touch her, but she quickly sidestepped him and went to the waters edge to wash away the remnants of the passion they had shared.

Walking up behind her, he cupped water in his hand, bringing it up to wash between her legs. "Zahinah, we need to talk."

Nearly jumping from her skin when he touched her, she silently cursed her mother and father for ever having met. At her fingertips was a man she could so easily come to love, but such a passion could only result in heartache. Stepping away from him, she put a cold edge to her voice she did not feel. "There is nothing to discuss, Xanthos. What just happened" She paused, searching for the right words to keep him at a distance. "It was only a moment of anger and passion. One I do not wish to repeat."

"You are lying to yourself and you know it. It meant more, we are destined to be together. It is the will of the gods." He reached out and gently touched her hair. "It is the will of our bodies."

There was such tenderness in his voice and on his face, it made her want to weep. No matter what path her life would take, a part of her would forever belong to this warrior of the gods. Stepping out of his reach, she gave him a glacial glare. "If we do not leave soon, we could well be discovered. Please, can we leave now?" She turned to look at him, hoping he would do as she asked.

Looking into his eyes, she saw confusion and wanted nothing more than to take back her words, but could not. There was no point in giving him false hopes there could ever be more between them, more than they had already shared at any rate. Stepping from the water, she walked up the grassy embankment where only a short while ago, they had

shared the comfort and passion of each others bodies. She began the long walk to the monastery where she would be safe from Duartar.

She sensed rather than saw Xanthos and wondered how long they would be able to walk in silence before he asked the questions surely in his mind. It was more than obvious to her there was something between them a connection. She had felt it after the affects of Duartars potion had worn off. She felt a soul deep bond with him. She wondered if he felt it too. Was their connection the result of the sharing of their bodies, or was it something deeper? Perhaps it was just the gods interfering with her life yet again. No matter, her life would take the path she chose, not the one the gods would have her take.

* * * *

Ceridwen stood over her cauldron of knowledge, which was situated in the center of her chambers, and wanted to weep for her daughter. At Zahinahs hands was the opportunity for love and happiness, but instead of embracing it, she was stubbornly turning her back on it. Ceridwen realized now how much anguish she had caused so many by running from Lugh all those years ago. Had she stood and fought him, she would have never met Zahinahs father and put her through the hardship of being a child of the gods. Then again, she never would have had Zahinah and the child had been everything to both Ceridwen and Rainold.

Turning away from her cauldron and walking toward the massive fireplace, Ceridwen stood there staring into the

flames when she heard Cernunnos enter. Ceridwen steeled herself against the censure she knew was sure to follow. Cernunnos felt that by conjuring her daughter, Ceridwen was placing her flesh and blood in more danger, but Ceridwen was helpless to stop herself. She needed to know her daughter was safe for the moment. The constant anguish of knowing her only child was being hunted down had her awaiting the worst. Now her husband had caught her yet again and he was sure to rage at her, however, he did not and she was very unprepared for his question.

"Does Zahinah fare well?"

Ceridwen wondered what had changed his mind about her keeping an eye on Zahinah. She also knew this was not the time to inform him that she had sent his son to save her daughter. Taking a deep breath, she answered his question with a calm she was far from feeling. "She is angry, frightened and determined to take it out on the man I sent to protect her."

"Who was it you sent to her?"

There was something about the calm manner in which he asked the question that told Ceridwen he already knew the answer. "Can I keep nothing from you?" There was frustration in her voice as she spoke. She wanted no secrets between them.

Cernunnos gave a derisive snort as he walked up behind her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he turned her around to face him. Gently taking her face in his hands and looking into her emerald eyes, he spoke, "The only thing you have ever kept from me, Ceridwen, has been your heart."

Knowing now was as good a time as any, she said, "Only pain has followed every time I gave my heart. I have withheld it from you out of fear."

Cernunnos stepped back from her with his mouth hanging open in stunned disbelief. "What of Rainold?"

Unable to look away from the god she had married for protection and desired for so many years, she spoke the words within her heart. "Rainold died so long ago, I barely even remember his touch. He was a boy with a kind heart who foolishly fell in love with a headstrong young goddess. But you have always known me, always challenged me in everythingeverything except my heart."

"How did you want me to challenge your heart? I gave you the time and space you needed."

"What I needed was you. I had just lost my husband and daughter. There was no one to whom I could turn."

"Every time I tried to approach you, Ceridwen, there was a vacant look in your eyes. You longed for your dead husband and I couldnt bear to watch you aching for a mortal man I could never replace in your heart."

"That wasnt grief for Rainold, but longing for my daughter." Ceridwen looked away from him, unable to confront the confusion she saw reflected in his eyes. "When eventually you turned to others, I couldnt bear the thought of you touching me."

"What others?" There was a look of stunned confusion on his face. "Since the day I wed you, there have been no others."

Ceridwen stared at him in disbelief. "But I heard the rumors. I saw the women going into your chambers."

Cernunnos reached out and pulled her into his arms and stroking her hair, he spoke in soft, gentle tones. "Those were my subjects receiving counsel, there were always others with me. I was never alone with any women in my chambers. Had you ever gone into them, you would have known that. As for the rumor that is all they were, rumors. There is no one, mortal or goddess, who can compare to you, Ceridwen."

There was a trace of laughter and derision in her voice as she spoke through the tears choking her. "How can two such foolish gods rule the heavens?" Ceridwen wondered how she could have let rumors and stubborn pride keep her from the man she had loved for so long.

"I think it is time we stopped being foolish. We have our children to consider. It seems as if your daughter and my son are about to make the same mistakes we have."

"So you do know he's the one I sent to her, do you not?"

"Not until a little while ago."

"How did you find out?"

"The earth trembled with their joining." With a predatory gleam in his eyes, he pushed her from him and tore the sheer gown she wore from her body. "I say, wife, that now we make the heavens tremble." With that, Cernunnos picked her up and carried her to the bed and showed her exactly what he meant.

Chapter 10

Zahinah and Xanthos had been walking for what felt like hours without speaking or seeing another person, village or farm. Zahinah wondered how long the man could manage without speaking to her. What reason did he have to be angry with her? She was the one who lost her virginity because of a demented priest and a magical potion. The man had nothing to be angry or sullen about.

Tw'as then her conscience decided to remind her tw'as not Xanthos fault. When she gave herself to him last night, there had been no magic involved. Just an overpowering desire to feel him touch her, her desire to be shown what passion was between a man and a woman.

There was a strong physical attraction between them. But for her, physical attraction would never be enough. Zahinah was certain physical attraction had been what her father felt for her mother and look where it got him cold and in the grave.

Wanting to break the silence becoming unbearable between them, she finally asked, "How much longer do you think it will be before we reach a village?"

In clipped tones clearly indicating he was in no mood to talk, he said, "It should not be too much longer. Why, are you in a hurry?"

"No, I was just trying to make conversation."

"Well stop trying."

"This is not my idea of a good time either. I would much rather be at home and enjoying the comforts of my family

than traipsing through the country." Zahinah knew she sounded petulant, but she cared not a whit.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Xanthos stopped and took a deep breath. Looking off into the distance for a moment, he finally said, "Zahinah, this was not what I had planned either. I never imagined I would feel such a strong connection to you. The last thing I wanted when I agreed to rescue you was to complicate matters by bedding you. But I did, and I know I want you for now and always. So what do we do about it?"

Zahinah looked at him, not sure what to say to that. Somehow, she had always envisioned that when a man told her that he wanted her, it would be because of love, not a physical reaction. His declaration only solidified her determination not to allow a physical attraction to cloud her judgment. She wanted more; she wanted a family, children and love. For her, there had to be more she demanded more. "I agree with you, there is a strong physical connection between us, but that is not enough for me. Do you seriously want to be encumbered with a wife?"

Avoiding her eyes, Xanthos begrudgingly admitted the truth to her. "Honestly, no. I had not planned on the attraction I feel for you either. I would not dishonor your mother by bedding you and then refusing to marry you. I do, nevertheless, feel we are destined for something together."

"What makes you think it includes marriage?"

"I am not sure, I cannot explain it."

"Well until you can, I do not want to hear another word about marriage. And honoring my mother is most certainly not a good reason to offer me marriage."

Xanthos looked at her with incredulity. "Most women would be screaming for honor, what if you are with child?"

Zahinah gave him a devastating smile and answered him as she walked away. "I am not interested in misplaced honor, and I can quickly remedy any unplanned child."

Xanthos shock over her hastily spoken words quickly turned to rage. Running up to her, he grabbed her by the arm in a viselike grip, whirling her around to face his wrath. "Do not ever again threaten the life of an innocent. If you are with child, you will not kill it, do you understand me?"

Shocked over his unexpected rage, Zahinah was even more stunned he would think her capable of killing an unborn child. "That was not what I meant. I would know if I was with child! I would never kill my child, regardless of its father. As for knowing there will be no child we create together, we will simply not have sex again." With that said, Zahinah tossed her raven mane over her shoulder and jerked her arm from his grip and sauntered off, leaving him gaping at her retreating form.

* * * *

Zahinah and Xanthos had walked for another two or three miles when they began to see sheep dotting the fields. Knowing they were nearing people, Zahinah feared they would soon have to come up with an idea to disguise themselves or risk discovery by Duartar and whoever else Lugh might have sent after them. Pointing toward the field covered in sheep, Zahinah asked, "Do you think it wise for us to just walk into the village?"

"I see no other choice. Though I fear being discovered, there is little that can be done to disguise you." Xanthos gave her an assessing look. "Is there any way for you to disguise yourself more?"

Zahinah looked down at the cloak covering her naked body and almost laughed outright. "I do not think there is. If I had access to herbs, I might be able to cast a spell, but I have none."

Xanthos thought a moment about his options, then looking off into the woods surrounding the road they traveled, he quickly pulled her into the underbrush. "I will go find the farmer and assess the situation. If it is safe, I will come back for you."

"Do we not stand the chance of your being recognized as well?" she asked.

Xanthos smiled at her as he bowed his head and transformed himself into a magnificent black stallion with golden eyes. Unable to resist, Zahinah walked up to him and gently stroked his muzzle. "Be cautious, my friend, so attractive a stud could be caught, gelded and turned into a plow horse." Ignoring the glint in the golden eyes, she gave his rump a resounding slap sending him off at a gallop.

Zahinah watched Xanthos canter off down the road and when he was finally out of sight, she turned her attention to her surroundings. Everywhere she looked, she saw nothing but thick forest and dense underbrush almost impossible to traverse. Zahinah knew she was far enough away from the road so no one would be able to see her. Hoping to find a stream from which to drink, she walked further into the

woods. Discovering an animal trail, she followed it, hoping it might lead to a source of water.

Zahinah had walked a good distance and worried she might have wandered too far from the road when the trail abruptly ended. The view from where she stood was stunning. Before her lay a glorious pond fed by a gently cascading waterfall, which tumbled from the cliffs above her. The pond swirled in a white froth below the waterfall and fed into a gently gurgling creek which obviously flowed into the ocean . Surrounding the pond was a thicket of brambles, bushes and other shrubbery which shielded it from view.

Wanting desperately to wash the crust of saltwater from her skin, Zahinah looked to see if there were other means to gain access to the pond. Once assured there were none, she quickly made her way down to the waters edge. Cupping her hands, she lowered them into the pond and drank from the refreshing water. Having drunk her fill, she made her decision and quickly discarded the cloak she wore. Standing there naked, she slowly walked into the cool water.

Gasping as the water brushed against her thighs, she was relieved to discover the water was not too terribly cold, having been warmed by the sun. In one swift motion, she dove beneath the surface and swam toward the waterfall. Zahinah swam underneath the falls for a while, then glided through the water to the shore in search of soapwort with which to wash her hair and body.

Soon rewarded with some, she quickly turned her attention to the late berries growing on the surrounding bushes. Standing on the shore naked, Zahinah used the cloak she had

worn to gather them. Knowing Xanthos would no doubt be as hungry as she was, she picked enough for the both of them. Once she had gathered enough, she again plunged into the water. Swimming over to where the water cascaded from the cliffs, she crushed the bulbs and leaves of the plant against the rocks, rubbing them through her hair and over her body.

The water washing over her gave her a sense of euphoria she had not experienced since being captured by Duarte. Zahinah wanted desperately to forget all she had endured at the hands of the priest, but could not. Even in her little haven of nature, reality somehow managed to creep in upon her and destroy the little peace she had managed to find.

As she thought of Duarte, her mind drifted to the man who had risked his life to save her. She knew Xanthos was a man of honor and great passion, but beyond that, she had little knowledge of him. What was it that drove him to risk so much for a woman he knew not at all? Why, after knowing what he faced defending her, did he continue to assume the role of her champion? There was so much about the man that confused her. Only knowing him for the space of a day, he had stood by her side, defending her. He had shown her passion, anger, compassion and offered a friendship to her that she was sure she would never again find in this lifetime. So why after he had risked so much and given so completely of himself, did she wonder about his intentions?

Trust was not a thing which came easily to her, but there was something about the man who became her self-appointed champion that screamed for her to do just that trust him completely. There was a lifetime of honor and integrity in

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him, there was nothing about him which led her to doubt his motives. If ever there was a time for her to begin to learn to trust, it was now, with the man who was the son of a god.

"Are you ready to come out, or should I join you?"

Zahinah quickly spun around and looked at the man who had filled her thoughts completely since the moment she had laid eyes on him. "No, I will come out, but first you must turn around."

Smiling to himself, Xanthos turned his back to her and closed his eyes.

Chapter 11

Xanthos never imagined he would be fortunate enough to come upon her bathing, but he was certainly glad he did. The sight of her washing her onyx colored hair was enough to give him a raging erection. Everything about her was sheer perfection. Her body glistened as the sun caught the little drops of water trailing down her thighs. In a blinding flash of desire, Xanthos wanted to trail his tongue after the elusive droplets. The taste of her nectar was still fresh in his mind and it was enough to drive him to his knees with unbridled desire.

He watched as she trailed sudsy hands down her full breasts and firm, erect nipples. Xanthos envisioned running his tongue over her dark nipples, biting them until she screamed out with need. As he stood there watching her, his erection pressed painfully against his breeches, throbbing to be inside her. The torture of watching her was more than he could bear.

Xanthos knew that if he spoke, it would break the sensual spell she had cast, but if he stood there much longer watching her, he would drag her from the water and take his fill of her body. With a strength he did not know he possessed, he asked, "Are you ready to come out of that water, or should I join you?"

The startled look on her face told him he was correct in warning her of his presence, but his body claimed he was a fool. Either way, with a heavy heart and throbbing erection,

he turned his back to her. Xanthos could hear as she waded over to where he stood. He envisioned her walking to the shore, rivulets of water running from her full breasts down her flat stomach and clinging to the triangle of curls covering her sweet treasure. It would be heavenly to drink the water from those curls and run his tongue through the lips covering the entrance to her soft body.

With a groan, Xanthos watched from the corner of his eye as a milky arm reached out and pulled the cloak from the bush. Knowing her body was now covered and it was safe for him to face her, his breath caught in his throat as he looked at her. Standing there covered in his garment, her feet were bare and her hair a wet curtain hanging down her body and covering the luscious swells of her breasts. Never in his life had he seen a more beautiful woman. Xanthos was not a man to believe in love at first sight, but this woman was causing him to question that belief. There was a natural beauty about her that called to him in a way never occurring before. It was at once frightening and potent in its intensity.

"Are you going to stand there staring all day?"

Clearing his throat and praying for the strength to keep his hands off her, he replied, "I cannot recall telling you to wander off into the woods."

"You cannot?" There was a look of innocence about her face. "I cannot recall having asked your permission either. Hmm." Zahinah pointed to the pile of berries lying on a large leaf. "If you are hungry, I am willing to share. There is a condition though."

Knowing she was baiting him and not caring, he met her challenge. "What is the condition, my lady?"

"You must promise not to assume you can command me. I am my own person and have not answered to anyone in a very long time."

Unable to resist the sensual pull of her body, he reached out and grabbed the front of her cloak pulling her toward him and into his arms. "Mayhap it is time you learned."

There was a look of desire in her eyes as her tongue wet her full lips. "I have no desire to answer to anyone, now or ever."

"Pity, being commanded *can* be fun." With a swift motion, he quickly put her from him. "So where did you get the plants to bathe?"

"They grow on the other side of the pond. Why?"

"I think I need a bath myself." Xanthos began stripping before her as he made his way to the water.

* * * *

Zahinah stood there in disbelief as Xanthos began unlacing his shirt. The man was enough to drive a woman to madness. She wanted nothing to do with him, but yet she could not take her eyes from his glorious form. With grim determination, she turned from him and began gathering twigs for a fire.

Trying to avoid the man was nearly impossible. Whenever he was near her, she felt a pull in her soul. Whatever her mother desired from her, a marriage to this man would not be it. If their powers were ever combined, they might as well

have targets painted on their foreheads. What purpose would it serve her mother to see the two of them united? Nothing good could possibly come from such a union.

With a flick of her wrist, Zahinah set the gathered twigs to blazing. She stared into the flames listening to Xanthos splashing in the water. There had to be a way to avoid Duartar and Lugh without wedding Xanthos. There was said to be a gathering of followers of the Christian God, which diminished the power of those the Celtic people worshipped. If she could seek sanctuary within the place of worship for the Christian God, renouncing all devotion to those worshiped by her people for so long, maybe Lugh would be powerless against her.

Zahinah was so deep in her thoughts, she did not notice Xanthos standing naked above her until he flung droplets of water on her. "So what are we thinking so hard about?"

"I was just wondering if I were to seek refuge with the Christian Gods people if Lugh would still be able to find us."

"I have wondered the same thing. But it would be a big chance for us to take without the binding of a marriage between us."

"Why must you continuously claim that we need to be married to fight Lugh?"

"Lugh is indeed powerful, but even he must honor the bonds of marriage, bonds that have been in place since the gods came into existence."

"What do you mean came into existence?" Zahinah questioned as she watched him drape his now clean clothing

over the bush next to the fire. "It was my belief the gods always were. Have they not existed since the beginning?"

Xanthos sat down, seemingly oblivious to his state of undress. Zahinah tried to keep her eyes on the flames of the fire to avoid staring at his glorious body. If the mans clothes did not dry soon, she would be forced to jump back into the pond to cool down the raging inferno of desire building within her, threatening to consume her. Though her mind rebelled, she commanded it to focus on his words.

"Yes, gods have existed since the beginning of time. But your mother told me they are much like us. They are born, possessing unique qualities and when they have proven themselves worthy, they inherit their powers from others leaving the realm of the gods. In time, their powers diminish and are granted to others waiting to become gods. Thus, the circle continues and will endure long after we are gone."

"So what, they are gods in waiting?"

There was sarcasm in her voice, and this caused him to smile. "Yes."

"Why would they have to honor a marriage, but nothing else?"

"Because the gods have given humans the freedom of choice. They must honor the choices of humans. They cannot interfere, to do otherwise would remove that choice."

That made sense, but it also confused her. "If choice is all that is involved, why can I not choose to be left in peace, without having to marry you to accomplish it?"

"Once a spiritual being is appointed a god, it cannot be undone." Xanthos put a twig into the flames. "You see, Lugh

has not betrayed his appointment, but if he breaks our bond of marriage, he will go against the laws governing both humans and gods. That is why he cannot allow you to marry."

"How do you figure that? Would not trying to control me by using potions and the magic of his priest count as interfering, or at the very least breaking some godly command?"

"Lugh is seeking authority and control of a mortal, he has not betrayed the laws governing the heavens. If we were married and he tried to interfere in that marriage, then he would be going against the laws."

Zahinah thought about that for a moment and was left wondering if insanity also reigned in the heavens as well. "So it is acceptable for him to control a mortal?"

"You are not all mortal," Xanthos reminded her.

There was no way she could argue that point with Xanthos, so she changed the subject. "Did you discover anything in the village?"

"Yes, the farmer and his wife who found me want to own a horse." Xanthos laughed. "I imagine he will be wondering for a long time how his newly acquired stallion managed to get loose from the barn."

Zahinah looked at Xanthos and saw something in his eyes that gave her the impression he was not telling her everything. Cursing her curiosity, but aware it was better to know what was coming than to be surprised, she looked him in the eye and demanded, "What are you not telling me?"

Xanthos took a deep breath, ran his hand through his hair and looked her in the eye. "When the farmer found me, he took me into the village to see if someone lost a horse. While

I was there, I saw Duartar and his men. They are still looking for us. How long do you think that spell you cast on the ship will work to disguise you?"

"That spell was to shield us from mortals, it will not work against Duartar." Zahinah sighed, wishing she were anyone else. It might just be better to end her life now than to continue trying to outrun a god and a high priest. "Xanthos, maybe it would be better to end it now. There is no escape. No matter where we go, they will find me."

Xanthos flashed her a look of indignant rage. "Do you think for one moment I would just stand by and allow them to take you?" Xanthos stood and began pacing back and forth in agitation. "Fool, I will not let you sacrifice yourself to those animals so they can finish what they started when I found you."

Zahinah's ire was extreme now. "Do not call me a fool again. And I was not thinking of surrendering to them, I was planning on killing myself."

"I will not call you one if you will cease acting like one." Xanthos pulled her against the hard planes of his naked body. "And neither will I let you end your own life."

Zahinah tossed her head back and glared at him through tears of fear and anger. "It is my life and I will determine on what terms it ends."

"So are you such a coward you will not even attempt to fight?" There was a challenging look in Xanthos eyes as he glared down on her.

"I am not a coward!"

"Then stop talking like a fool and help me find a way to fight them."

Zahinah's chest heaved with frustration and anger. She was not a coward, but neither was she a fool. She knew there was little chance she and Xanthos would survive the fight they faced. Zahinah raised her head and gave Xanthos a tentative smile. "Le cu'namh De'."

Xanthos laughed at that comment. "Which gods help is it you plan on seeking?" Xanthos smiled and put her from him. Sitting down again, he tried to cover most of his nakedness by folding his hands over his lap. "Sit here by me. We need to devise a plan of attack."

Zahinah looked down on him from where she stood and thought the man completely mad. "Plan of attack?"

Xanthos reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her down to him. "Not an actual attack. What I meant was we need to figure out a way to avoid him until we reach the abbey. On the west side of the river are the standing stones, we should be safe there."

"How are the stones going to protect us? Duartar is a druid high priest, those stones practically call to him. He belongs within their circle." Zahinah wasn't sure Xanthos knew *what* he was doing.

"Within the abbey, we will have the protection of the Christian god. Neither Lugh or Duartar will be able to gainsay what a man appointed by that God says or does."

"And *exactly what* is it he will be saying?"

"That we are united." Xanthos gave her a look filled with divine patience.

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"I am not going to have this conversation again." Zahinah wanted to beat the man over the head with a large stick, but she doubted she would be able to pound any sense into him, so there was no purpose in trying to argue the point. "Is there not a church near this village we could turn to?"

"There is one just east of the village, the Aergol Abbey, but I think that is why Duartar and his men are here. They must have thought that because your uncle raised you with no knowledge of the gods, you would seek out the Christians." Xanthos grabbed a stick from the ground and began to scratch a crude map of the village into the soft earth they sat upon.

"There are farms all around and Duartar and his men are ensconced within the village proper. My plan is to avoid the village and the farms by heading along the coast until we reach the Roman fort of Dinas Powys, then we will cross the inlet and head to Silchester Abbey."

"How long do you think it will take us to reach it?"

"It should only take about eleven days, providing nothing goes wrong. We will stay here the rest of the day and leave early in the morning. Now I suggest we rest."

"Might I also suggest you put your clothing on?"

Chapter 12

Once Xanthos was dressed, Zahinah wrapped herself in her cloak and tried to concentrate on sleeping for a few hours. She felt as though she had not slept in days, but with Duartar and his men in the village, she found sleep elusive. She looked across the fire at Xanthos and wondered how on earth the man managed to sleep with their enemy only a breath away.

Heaving a sigh of frustration, she rose and made her way down to the waters edge. She looked into its depths trying to understand the events of her life. Until her twentieth birthday, her life had followed a predictable pattern. Once Duartar entered her uncles holdings, everything changed. Duartar had given her the answers to the longing deep within her. She wondered now if the longing and emptiness she felt was the result of having never acknowledged the other half of herself, the part of her that was a descendant of the gods.

Zahinah had always known she held magical powers, and in her youth and immaturity, had used them without knowledge or training. Duartar had come to her in the guise of a mentor to show her how to use her powers, how to command them. He had taught her of potions and herbs, and showed her a power she had not known she possessed. In a way, she supposed she should be grateful to him for helping her to understand herself.

It was Xanthos, though, who had given her more than any other. For so long, Zahinah had wondered how a mother

could just abandon her child. There were always so many women around her with their children as she grew up, and one thing she had always noticed was their devotion to their offspring. Once, during fierce storms, a cottage in their village caught fire. She had run into the village to offer her help, but it was too late. The mother had made it out alive, but her children were still trapped inside. Without hesitation, she had rushed back into the burning dwelling to try and save her children. In the end, they had all perished. It was then she finally understood the love a mother was supposed to have for her child. A love she thought her mother had never possessed.

"Zahinah, you will never know how much it hurt to leave you behind."

Zahinah whirled around seeking the person who had spoken to her. Seeing nothing, she looked back over at the pond, and from its depths walked a vision of beauty with raven hair and sparkling green eyes the exact color and shape of her own. Without being told, Zahinah knew she was looking into her mothers eyes.

"Then why leave me?" Zahinah watched with trepidation as the woman approached her. Stepping back from the waters edge, she waited as her mother approached her.

Ceridwen reached out and gently stroked the face of the daughter she had so long ago given over into the care of her husbands brother. "You were never far from my heart, Zahinah. I did what I thought was best for you. Please try to understand."

Zahinah closed her eyes as she leaned her face into her mothers gentle caress. It had been so long since she wondered what her mothers touch would feel like. Zahinah opened her tear-filled eyes and gave her mother a hesitant smile. "The woman standing before you understands, but the child she was could never comprehend it."

Ceridwen smiled and let her hand drift down her daughters arm to her hand, which she took within her own. "I can never make it up to the child you were, Zahinah, but I hope to become friends with the woman you have become. You are strong, Zahinah, and everything a mother could wish for in a daughter."

Zahinah wasnt sure she ever wanted to let go of her mother, but there was a question pressing down on her and she needed to hear the answer. "You have never come to me before, so why do so now?"

"Never let it be said you are not direct." Ceridwen laughed and released her hand. "I have come to you to offer you my assistance and guidance. You understand your powers, but you do not yet know how to use them to their full potential."

Zahinah wondered what her mother was talking about. If there was more to her powers she was unaware of, she was not sure she wanted to find out. "What more? I thought I could only control the elements and cast spells?"

"You can, but your powers are not yet at their full strength. When you turn one-and-twenty, they will gain their full strength, you will then become the woman you were meant to be."

"What are you talking about? I am who I am."

Ceridwen again reached out and touched her daughters raven hair. "Sweet child, you are meant to marry a god on your birthday to balance the world. On Samhain, the day you were born, you must either share your powers, or they will destroy you."

"By they, do you mean Duartar?"

"No, by they I mean your powers. Zahinah, your fathers mother was a powerful druid priestess. Combine that with the powers you obtained from me and you will become almost invincible."

"Then why should I worry? With my full powers, I will be able to defeat Duartar and Lugh." Things were beginning to look up for her if her powers would gain in strength.

Ceridwen smiled at Zahinah and spoke with the patience of a mother. "It doesnt work that way, darling. The gods decided you would become too strong and your powers needed to be tempered with anothers so the abilities you possess do not corrupt you."

"What does that mean?"

"They decided with the temper you possess"

Zahinah felt her ire rising by the moment. Who were the gods to dictate her lifes course? "What temper? I do not have a temper!"

Ceridwen looked at her daughter and laughed. "Yes, my dear, you do. And you tend to sometimes let that temper control you. Or have you forgotten the child tormentor you buried in snow?"

Zahinah had the good sense not to argue that point, but she disputed the fact she allowed her temper to control her.

"So you know about that one?" Zahinah looked her mother directly in the eyes. "That one incident changed my life, though. I have never used my powers since against another human."

"Yes, darling, you have. What about those men onboard the ships which pursued you?"

"They were trying to capture me, what should I have done? Stood there and let them take me, killing all those onboard Xanthos ship?"

"No, honey. I understand your reasons, but the gods worry about the mortals around you." Ceridwen reached out to her daughter and taking her hands into her own, she spoke in a loving tone meant to soothe and comfort her. "They wanted your powers tempered with the power of love and free will. That is the reason you must either marry on Samhain, or be banished from this world forever."

"Why banish me for something I have not done?" Zahinah was fast losing her patience. It was not right her choices be taken from her at every turn. "There is not a single man in this country I would wed! If that is the gods idea of free will, marry or leave the world I know, they can forget it! I will not have my life dictated by the gods, or the mortals of this world for that matter."

Ceridwen smiled at her child and squeezed her hands in a reassuring gesture. "When love takes over your heart, you are powerless to stop the affects it has on your will."

"Are you speaking from experience?" There was a note of derision in her voice.

"Yes, I am and I do not want you to make the same mistakes I have."

"What mistake is that?"

"Throwing the love of a lifetime away based on arrogance and pride." Ceridwen pulled Zahinah into her arms hugging her. "It is not how you find love, my darling daughter, that counts, what matters is that you do find it."

Zahinah felt the fears and worries she had faced only moments before wash away when her mother embraced her. Hugging her mother back, Zahinah spoke with tears in her voice. "Can you stay with me, for just a little while? There are so many things I want to know."

"No, sweetling, I have to leave before Lugh realizes I have left the realm." Ceridwen kissed her daughters cheek. "I will be there when you have need of me." As she spoke, a mist began to envelop her from the ground up, leaving her scent and a trace of her voice in the air . "Remember always, my child, you are never alone."

Zahinah stood there in silence looking at the spot her mother had stood with tears trailing down her face. She did not know Xanthos was behind her until she felt his arms circle around her waist. He said nothing, just held her while she silently wept. Zahinah had waited a lifetime to feel her mothers arms around her, and it was everything she had dreamt it would be. It was not fair she not be given the chance to get to know her mother. She had lost too much in her life.

When Xanthos felt her shuddering sobs cease, he leaned forward and gently spoke into her ear as he would a frightened colt. "Are you going to be fine?"

"I will be fine the day I destroy Lugh and Duartar."

"What happened to the woman who just a little while ago wanted to give up?"

"She realized she is fighting mad. The gods think they can tell me what to do. You keep insisting on what I should do. When is the choice ever going to be mine again, Xanthos? When did what I want cease to matter to anyone?"

"It matters to me. I will never again treat you as if you have no opinion. I will honor your choices."

Zahinah turned in his arms and looked into his eyes. "Do you truly mean that?"

"I just realized how I would feel in your position. I agree, what has happened to you is unfair, but the time has come to stop bemoaning your fate. It is time for you to take control of your destiny. Whatever you choose, I will help you."

"Thank you." At that moment, Zahinah did not care what happened as she laid her head against Xanthos chest. She just wanted to take the comfort he so easily offered her.

Chapter 13

It had been two days since they left the little waterfall and pond and the relative security it offered them. Though Xanthos did not bring it up, Zahinah continued to replay her mothers words in her mind. To remain in the world she knew, she needed to marry on her birthday Samhain which was quickly coming up. Though she knew it was necessary, she still was not pleased about it. However, after spending seven days and nights in Xanthos company, she found herself entertaining the possibility of what a marriage to him might be like.

Spending so much time with him, sharing their days and nights, she found him to be compassionate, thoughtful and he made her laugh at herself. In Zahinahs opinion, his ability to make her laugh was the most important quality he possessed because there was far too little laughter in her life. Though she did not believe in love at first sight, or even in fate, she did accept the fact there was something between them, a deep connection both physical and spiritual. What she wanted now, before she would even consider a true marriage to him, was an emotional connection. Her mother had given up everything she cherished for love and Zahinah would take no less. If she married, it would only be for love.

"What are you thinking so intensely on?"

"Actually, I was thinking about you."

A smirk crossed his chiseled features. "Good thoughts, I hope." Xanthos glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Mind if I ask you what exactly about me you were thinking?"

"Just the type of person you are." Zahinah continued walking beside him, looking off into the distance at the rays the setting sun was casting around them. Zahinah tried to gather her confused thoughts before she spoke. "Are you always so kind to people you are unfamiliar with as you have been to me?"

"Usually, yes." Xanthos looked at her and smiled with a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Though you are the only one I ever bedded moments after meeting."

Zahinah had the good sense to blush. "You know" she stammered with embarrassment. "About that"

"What about it?" Xanthos teased her, knowing he was making her uncomfortable, but curious as to what exactly she would say.

"I never did thank you for helping me. The potion Duartar forced down my throat was quite painful once it took effect." Zahinah looked down at her feet as she walked. Gathering her courage, she looked at Xanthos and began to blush. "I meant to say, when we were on the beach, I treated you coldly afterwards and I wanted you to know my reaction had nothing to do with you, it was more out of fear. I didnt even know you and you were talking about us marrying. After everything I had been through, I really had no desire to please the gods, nor do anything they wanted or expected of me."

"I understand having the gods dictate your life is not a pleasant experience." Xanthos reached out and took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Zahinah knew when Xanthos took her hand in his, he meant it to be reassuring, but the sensations it stirred within her left her breathless. Where his callused hand touched hers, there was a pulsing energy that trailed up her arm and caused her breath to quicken.

Zahinah looked down at their joined hands and then up into his face. What she saw in his eyes caused a fluttering in her abdomen and a heavy sensation to settle between her legs. She began to feel a throbbing between her legs with the memory of his touch. Zahinah could see the same longing reflected in his eyes. As her gaze traveled down the length of his body, she could see his shaft was engorged and more than ready to take her.

Zahinah did not care about being pursued or of what the gods were demanding of her. She wanted Xanthos with a burning need that made her cast aside all but her desire to possess him and be possessed by him. Looking around the wooded glade they were walking through, Zahinah assured herself they were alone. Then bringing up her free hand, she untied her cloak revealing her naked body to him. Then taking the hand that held hers, she brought it up to her bare breast.

Zahinah felt a tremor of desire go through him as his hand began caressing her breast, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She watched his facial features go from confusion to surrender, then to complete rapture and his

breath quickened. Zahinah did not wait for him to speak, but pressed herself into his body and reached out to caress his face.

The moment she touched his skin, Xanthos opened his eyes. "Zahinah, do you know what you do to me?"

A wanton smile crossed her features as she took her free hand and caressed the bulge straining against his leather breeks. "I think I have an idea."

"You keep that up and I will not be able to stop myself from taking you."

"Did I say I wanted you to stop?" Zahinah asked as she began pulling at the laces on his breeks enclosing the thick rod she wanted to feel inside her.

Zahinah had just reached into his open breeks when all manner of confusion erupted around them. Leather-clad warriors in full battle regalia emerged from the trees. On one side, Zahinah recognized the tribal garb and markings of her Celtic brethren. From the other side of the wooded glade erupted several other warriors on horseback, brandishing all manner of weaponry, including battle axes, swords, and wood and leather shields. Not recognizing the markings of the other warriors, Zahinah knew they were foreign to the shores of Britannia.

Zahinah had no time to consider fear as she watched the hardened warriors scream their battle cries and charge toward them. She and Xanthos stood in the center of what was sure to be a blood bath. Before she could react to the surreal scene unfolding before her very eyes, both bands of warriors began charging one another. Zahinah felt and heard

the ground rumble beneath her feet and then felt the overpowering force of Xanthos body knocking her to the ground.

"Stay down, they are shooting arrows."

Xanthos voice roared in her ears as his body shielded hers. Zahinah could barely breathe as Xanthos pressed her into the ground with an almost superhuman strength. All around her, she could hear the sounds of men screaming and swords clanging. Zahinah wasn't aware she had begun screaming until Xanthos jumped up from her body and began pulling her toward the shelter of the trees, yelling for her to stop.

Panic and bile rose in her throat as she looked around. Every way she looked, men lay bleeding, some still battling with limbs dangling. Standing there in the center of the melee, Zahinah was suddenly aware Xanthos was no longer pulling her along with him. Turning to find Xanthos, Zahinah screamed as an enormous warrior grabbed her by the hair of her head, bringing the blade of his blood encrusted sword against her throat. She looked for Xanthos, hoping he was safe. As she scanned the battleground, she saw him and looked into his eyes. Zahinah knew his face would be the last thing she saw in this life.

As Zahinah looked at Xanthos, she smiled knowing she would see him again. Closing her eyes, a battle cry tore from the warrior who held her. Zahinah opened her eyes to look one last time upon Xanthos and stark terror flooded her body as he began fighting his way toward her, sword in hand.

Xanthos wore a maniacal expression as he fended off blade and blows from the warriors surrounding him. Just as Xanthos

was about to reach her, the warrior holding her noticed the man approaching him covered in blood. Zahinah began to struggle against her captor, knowing Xanthos risked his life to save her. Zahinah tried to free her arms to claw at the brute holding her, but he brought the hilt of his sword up and slammed it into her head causing her world to go dark.

* * * *

"Shes a woman!"

"You are right, my friend, look at that body!"

From somewhere off in the distance, Zahinah could hear the voices of warriors. Knowing she should awaken, she moaned and tried to open her eyes, but they refused to obey her minds command. As Zahinah lay there with the warriors discussing her state of undress, she was aware of the fact she no longer heard the sounds of clashing swords. Despite the fierce pounding in her head, Zahinah forced her eyes to open and found herself staring into eyes as blue as the sky above her.

"I see your eyes are open, how fares your head, fair maiden?" There was a note of humor in the warriors voice and Zahinah could see nothing but kindness in his eyes.

Zahinah groaned and raised her hand to tentatively touch her head. As she did, she winced pulling her hand away with her fingertips covered in blood. "Is it as bad as it feels?"

The unknown blue-eyed warrior made a great show of looking at her head, probing it gently. "Not too bad, I think. You shall yet live. Do you think you can stand?"

Zahinah nodded her head in an affirmative manner and groaned as the warrior hauled her to her feet to stand before him. Weaving about for a moment on unsteady legs, Zahinah closed her eyes for a instant hoping she would not lose her noon meal. When the sensation of movement passed, she opened her eyes and saw the warrior before her, holding her arm to steady her.

Once she regained her sense of balance, she looked around at the wall of warriors which surrounded her and realized none of them were Xanthos. When last she saw him, he had been valiantly trying to reach her. Grabbing the leather breast plate of the blue-eyed warrior, she spoke with a note of panic in her voice. "Xanthos, where is he?" Frantic to spot him on the battlefield, she whipped her head around trying to catch sight of him among the dead and wounded.

"I do not know, my lady." A look of confusion crossed his features. "Was he one of the Celts we fought?"

"NoI meanyes."

"Which is it?"

Frustrated, Zahinah tried to shove past him, but the man was an impenetrable wall of flesh. "He is my" *My what, my friend, my lover?*

"He is your what?" the warrior asked, grasping the hands that still clutched his leather armor.

"He is my betrothed." *Which wasnt too far from the truth.* "I am promised to him in marriage. My father has signed a marriage contract." Pulling her hands from his, she quickly ducked past him.

"Does your father know you go about with him dressed as you are?"

Mortified by the resounding laughter of the warriors surrounding her, she looked down at herself and realized the front of her cloak gaped open revealing her nakedness. She desperately wished at that moment she could have cast a spell to blind him and the others who were gawking at her.

Gathering as much dignity as she could, she pulled her cloak closed and raised her chin. "We were on our way to be married, when our ship was overtaken by a storm. We were washed overboard and were making our way to the monastery where we are to be wed." Zahinah decided it would be wisest to stay as close to the truth as possible.

She cast her eyes about her, hoping to see past the warriors and find Xanthos. But it was useless surrounded as she was by a wall of thickly corded muscles attached to fierce looking warriors.

"By right of conquest, all on this field belongs to me, that includes you, my lady."

Zahinah's head whipped around to stare at him in utter disbelief. With a raging fire of anger building in her, she gave him a challenging look. "So by right of conquer, you plan to leave the wounded here to die?"

"Why should I bother with inferior people who cannot manage to drive an invading army from their lands?"

"If that is true, why bother owning what is left?" Zahinah glared at him, hoping her powers wouldn't explode with the rage she tried desperately to contain. Here he was, surrounded by a field of death, and he held only contempt for

the warriors who died defending their land and families.

"Would it not be more helpful if instead of conquering and oppressing, you chose to show compassion?"

"I was not aware there could be compassion in conquest." Sarcasm dripped from his expression and words.

"You could set a precedent." An equal note of contempt for him was in her voice and she cared not if he knew it. Zahinah turned her back to him and began looking among the body-littered battlefield for Xanthos.

Zahinah hadn't walked three steps before the blue-eyed warrior was at her side. "Do you have any suggestions on how I am to accomplish this compassion? These Celts seem more interested in death."

Zahinah stopped walking and stared up into his unreadable eyes. "Do you jest?" Her voice was incredulous as she spoke. "Look around you, must I be forced to tell you to care for not only your wounded men, but for the Celtic warriors as well? And before you even say anything, Xanthos was not a part of this battle. We had no idea what was happening until you and your men drew your swords."

"I noticed. We watched from the trees for a while before we attacked." There was a smirk on his face as he looked at her. Then she saw a considering expression enter his eyes. "If I help you find your man, what will you do? What if he is dead?"

Zahinah hadn't thought of that. *What if Xanthos was dead and not merely wounded?* The thought of him dead caused a sharp, shattering pain in her chest, which threatened to consume her entire being. Zahinah's eyes met those of her

enemys and with courage and determination, she said, "I will not think of him dead. He is alive and I will find him. Now either help me, or move out of my way."

Much to Zahinahs amazement, he walked along with her turning bodies over for her to identify. When he turned over a wounded Celtic warrior, Zahinah knelt down next to the man and clasped his hand within her own while pressing her other hand to a gaping wound in his shoulder. "Does it pain you terribly?" she asked in a hesitant voice.

"A warrior allows no pain." The mans response was hardly audible and his face was etched in pain, but as he looked past her to his enemy standing slightly behind her, a look of grim determination entered his eyes. "Stand back, my lady, and give me my blade. I will defend you."

Zahinah looked over her shoulder and then back to the fallen man. "No, the battle is over. Tis time for you to heal. This man is now the chief of these lands and will care for those he has conquered." Zahinah looked over her shoulder and into the eyes of the warrior who had defeated the men on this field. "Have your men bind his wound and take him to the nearest village."

The blue-eyed warrior looked down on Zahinah as if she had lost her mind. "And if I do not?"

Zahinah tore a strip of cloth from her cloak and bound the fallen Celts wound, then stood to face the unknown warrior. "You will do it because it is easy to conquer, but difficult to lead. The true test of a man is in how well he cares for his people. Now will you lead, or merely conquer?"

Without taking his gaze from Zahinahs face, he motioned for one of his men to come to him. "See to it that this man and any others who are wounded are brought to the village for care." He turned to Zahinah. "Do you know anything about healing?"

As much as Zahinah wanted to deny him her help, she nodded her head. "Yes, I know of herbs and healing."

"Good, now I think we need to find your warrior."

Zahinah and the blue-eyed warrior searched for what seemed to her an eternity and finally, on the outskirts of the battlefield, she found Xanthos. Turning him over, she realized his breathing was shallow and that he not only had a wound across his chest running from his collarbone to his ribcage, but he also had one from his thigh to his knee. As Zahinah examined the wounds, she realized it would be a miracle if infection did not set in and kill him.

"Is he alive?"

She gently touched her hand to Xanthos head feeling for fever and was shocked to find none yet. "He is alive, but will die unless I tend his wounds immediately. Can you please take us to the village at once?"

"Under one condition."

Zahinah looked up into his eyes and noticed they had become harsher, the color of a storm-tossed sea with little warmth. She realized for Xanthos well-being, she would do whatever it was he asked of her. "What do you want of me?" Though she tried to hide it, there was a slight tremor of fear in her voice.

"The village healer died when we raided the village, there is no one here to tend the injured men. My younger brother is wounded, if you can heal him, I will help you care for your man. Do we have a deal, my lady?"

Caring for his brother would not be a grave imposition and it would certainly be better than warming this warriors bed, which is what she thought he would demand of her. "I will care for all who are wounded. Where is your brother?"

"He has been taken back to the village." The warrior again raised his arm and a young boy came running up to him, pulling along two horses. Without comment, the blue-eyed man reached down and picked Xanthos up tossing him over the smaller of the two horses, then he mounted the other and reached his hand down to Zahinah. "Come, do not fear me. We need each other, I will help your man and you will heal my brother."

Zahinah hesitantly reached her hand out to him and was quickly lifted into arms the size of small tree trunks. "For someone you consider your enemy, you have a lot of faith in my abilities. How do you know I will not kill your brother?"

"Because if he dies, so does your man."

There was no threat in the mans voice, his statement was spoken in a matter-of-fact manner and it sent a quaking terror through Zahinah unlike anything she had ever experienced before. Xanthoss life depended on her skill as a healer. Gods help her, there was no room for failure.

Chapter 14

Once Zahinah and her companion rode into the village, she was shocked by the sheer devastation before her. Very few dwellings still stood. There were a number of women and children who stopped where they stood to watch the warrior ride into their midst. It was clear by the expressions on the villagers faces that he was not welcome, but no one voiced opposition. Zahinah saw only five huts still standing, the others were either still smoldering, or a pile of ashes.

"Here we are."

Zahinah could not keep the anger from her voice as she spoke to him. Her rage was palpable. This could have been her village, her people decimated by an invading army. Had she been here, she would have stopped the destruction. "I suppose you are proud of what you have done here?"

"No, this was not what I wanted. The villagers did this to their homes and ran off into the woods."

"I suppose you thought they would welcome your army with open arms?"

The man had the gall to laugh in her face as he handed her down to the ground. Once he dismounted, he turned to Xanthos and pulled his prone body from the other horse. "Do you ever hold that tongue of yours, woman?"

"No. You would be amazed at the amount of trouble it causes."

"I hope your man is capable of silencing it. If not, I could show you how I would keep you quiet."

There was an undercurrent to his words she neither wanted to acknowledge or think about. Her only concern now was for Xanthos. "Where can we lie him down? His wounds need to be cleansed."

"There is a cottage I have been occupying, I will take him there." With that said, he tossed Xanthos over his shoulder and started walking off, leaving Zahinah to follow like a lost puppy.

Zahinah looked around at the villagers they passed and saw hatred for their new leader reflected in their eyes. It would take more than simple compassion for this warrior to earn the respect of his new people. It would take a small miracle. When she looked into the faces of her Celtic brethren, she saw confusion and bewilderment in their eyes directed toward her. It was obvious from the cloak she wore and the brooch that kept it closed she was of Celtic descent. It must be puzzling for them to see her calmly walking with their enemy. It was puzzling to her as well. It was true this warrior with the blue eyes had conquered their land and homes, but Zahinah sensed in him a desire to unite with the land and its inhabitants. From the conversations she had engaged in with him, Zahinah found him to be intelligent, unyielding and compassionate. Wherever he hailed from, it was clear that he and his men were here to stay.

Zahinah followed him to a dwelling not as large as those on the isle where she had grown up. The outer walls of the dwelling were made of stone in various shades of gray. The roof was the typical thatch, which was so common among her people. Walking through the doorway, Zahinah saw that a fire

burned in the center of the dwelling. On one side sat a scarred table with crudely built chairs. On the other was a sleeping platform and a straw pallet with skins covering it. Zahinah looked up and saw in the rafters of the roof there was meat hanging to smoke from the fire. It was common practice for her people to hang meat in the rafters of roofs, because the smoke from the main fire caught there and could only escape under the thatch and eaves.

Zahinah directed the blue-eyed warrior to lay Xanthos on the sleeping platform so she could examine his wounds more closely. Taking a candle, she lit the tallow in the burning fire and brought it close to Xanthos, holding it next to his wounds. Though no internal organs were showing in the chest wound, it was clearly the more serious of the two. Zahinah turned to the warrior and spoke with an air of authority that brooked no argument. "Bring me boiling water and place a large blade into the fire to heat. I need to clean and then seal his wounds immediately. Are there any women who know of herbs here?"

"I am unsure, but I will find out. Before you tend to him though, you must heal my brother."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"My men will bring him in. Where do you want his sleeping platform?"

Zahinah looked around the dwelling and decided the best place for it would be along the same wall as the one Xanthos occupied. "Have them place it here next to this one. Also, have your men find me some more clean furs to cover them."

"Fine. I will send in one of the village women."

With that said, he departed. Zahinah had just finished adding more wood to the already burning fire when a large cauldron was brought into the dwelling along with several large stones. The men placed these stones in a circle around the smaller one encasing the fire, and then the cauldron was placed on it. There was enough room under the cauldron to allow for more movement of air and to feed more wood into the fire so it would not burn out. Once the cauldron was placed over the fire to heat, the men left the dwelling, returning with buckets of water which they poured into the pot. As they left, more men entered with the sleeping platform, along with a straw pallet and several furs. They quickly set up the area, then left, returning moments later with the warriors wounded brother.

Zahinah had not been sure what to expect, but the man, or rather child, she was greeted with was a shock. Though clearly dressed as a warrior, he could not have been more than thirteen summers old. His skin was an ashen color, made even more dramatic by his light-colored hair, which so clearly matched his older brothers in color. Zahinah walked over to the child and began unlacing his leather breastplate from his shoulders. Once removed, she realized he had no injuries to his upper chest. Turning him onto his side, she examined his back after removing the leather plate and noticed he bore no wounds there.

Once she had his chest and back bare, she set about removing his breeks. It was a difficult task until the child's older brother returned to the hut and helped her remove them. What she saw once his breeks were removed was a

sword slash that ran from his outer hip to his knee, exposing bone and muscle. There were many things she was able to do as a healer, but she doubted her ability to keep the child alive with a wound so deep. Quickly praying to the gods for divine intervention, she laid her hand across the child's head and noted he was already burning with fever.

Zahinah turned eyes etched with pain to the child's brother. "What is his name?"

"His name is Henrik. He is the last of my family, all the others were killed."

"Where are your people from?" There was a sadness in his eyes as he gazed down on his brother. Whatever he was, it was clear to Zahinah that he loved his little brother.

"We are Saxons, he was but an infant when our parents and other siblings were killed."

"I am sorry for your loss. I, too, lost my parents in battle. 'Tis not easy to grow up without them." Zahinah looked back at the child whose life was entrusted to her skill. "What do they call you?"

"I am called Gondan. I am the chief of this tribe." There was hesitation in his voice as his large hand reached out to stroke his younger brother's hair. "Can you save him?"

"Honestly, I am not sure, but I will try."

"You will succeed." Without another word, Gondan left her to consider his departing words.

Zahinah brought a wooden bowl filled with steaming water over to the platform where Henrik lay and bathed his wound with scalding water and linen, then waited for the woman promised to her who knew of herbs. Fortunately, it was but a

few minutes before she arrived. When Zahinah looked up from cleaning the dirt and debris from Henriks leg, she was shocked. Instead of the woman she expected to greet, she found a child not much older than Henrik standing before her. "You are the healer?"

The young girl laughed and shook her head sending a cascade of blond curls bouncing about her slim shoulders. "No, my mother was the village healer. She died in childbirth three days ago. I am all there is."

"Oh, child, I am sorry. Did you bring any of your mothers herbs with you?"

"No, I will not use her herbs on these animals. They are the reason my mother is dead."

Zahinah closed her eyes and prayed for patience with this child, who had obviously been through a great deal. "But if I do not heal this boy, then that Celtic warrior will also die." Zahinah pointed at Xanthos. "Gondan has promised to spare Xanthos life if his brother lives."

"Is that your mans name?"

"Yes." Zahinah hoped the child would be willing to help her.

"What makes you think Gondan will honor his promise? Is he not the reason your man lies there in the first place?" There was no defiance in the childs voice, merely a consideration of the facts as she saw them.

"I have to believe Gondan will honor his word. He seems to be a man of honor, one who wants peace."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Zahinah nodded her head, then looked at the boy laying before her. "Besides, he is only a child about your age. Could you let him die without trying to help him?"

The young girl looked thoughtful for a moment, then spoke. "If he would do what his countrymen have done here, I certainly could. But, as you said, it will be worse for us if he dies." Heaving a heartfelt sigh, she looked from the wounded Henrik to Zahinah. "My name is Ludmara, what herbs will you need?"

A wave of relief washed through Zahinah as she told the young girl the herbs she would require, along with various other ingredients needed to make poultices and teas for the wounded men. Zahinah's main concern was in saving Henrik and Xanthos, once she tended them, then she would see about the other wounded needing help.

Zahinah spent the next few hours making poultices, salves, tinctures and syrups. Then she began tearing linen cloth into strips to use as bandages. Once she finished her preparations, she took a deep breath and stepped out of the dwelling for a breath of air, looking for Gondan. Now that she was ready, she would need him and other men to hold Henrik and Xanthos down so she could finish cleaning, cauterizing and stitching their wounds.

Closing her eyes once she was outside, Zahinah let the cool refreshing evening air blanket her in its embrace. Her solitude, however, was short-lived as Gondan made his presence known to her.

"Have you finished yet? How is my brother?"

There was a definite note of worry in Gondans voice. "Your brother is feverish, but seems no worse for wear. I have cleansed his wounds, but now I need help in cauterizing and stitching them up."

"What else do you need?"

"I will need men to hold your brother and Xanthos still while I tend their wounds. Cauterization is not a pleasant experience, or so I am told."

"You shall have it, my lady." With that said, he left her presence and quickly returned with the required men.

Zahinah prayed her efforts would not be in vain. Retrieving the red glowing blade from the fire, she placed it against his wound, trailing it down the length of his leg. Once the stench of burnt flesh dissipated, she stitched his wound closed. She then placed a salve of alder, blessed thistle, figwort, lavender and Solomons seal against the wound, then covered the mixture with tree sap to seal it and keep it from infection. Once the wound was cared for, she began steeping a tea made of lavender, slippery elm and blessed thistle to spoon into his mouth. Making a poultice of the same ingredients as the salve, she placed it against the wound and wrapped it up snugly, praying it would work and the child would live to see another battle.

Once Henrik was resting calmly and secured in his furs, she then turned her attention to Xanthos. Though his wounds were grave, he still showed no signs of fever as did Henrik. Zahinah quickly decided to cauterize Xanthos's wounds and treat him in the same manner as Henrik, only she softly chanted a healing spell for him under her breath. Not

stitching Xanthos wounds, Zahinah covered them with salve and tree sap, then bound them.

Once she had completed treating both Henrik and Xanthos, she settled herself onto the hard-packed earth by the fire with a cup of herbal tea. Zahinah knew her day was not yet over, but having shown Ludmara what to do for the wounded with Henrik, she sent the child off to tend others in need of care.

"You are tired, you will need to rest."

Zahinah looked up from the flames she had been staring into to see Gondan scrutinizing her closely. "When was the last time you ate, woman?"

"When was the battle?"

"Yestereve." Gondan walked around the fire to place a wrap of furs around her shoulders. "You will eat." He thrust out a bowl of meat and broth for her.

"I am too tired to eat." Zahinah refused the bowl he handed to her.

"You will eat or both of them will die. You cannot care for them if you do not first care for yourself."

Knowing he was right, Zahinah took the bowl from his proffered hand and ate. Once she had consumed the contents to his liking, he laid a fur next to her on the hardened ground. Without hesitation, Zahinah lay her head down and was instantly asleep.

Chapter 15

Not sure what had awakened her, Zahinah sat up with a start when she heard moaning. Looking around, she realized the noise had come from Xanthos and quickly went to him and placed her hand on his head. The moment she touched him, she could feel the fever burning through him. Taking a moment to check on Henrik, she saw that he, too, was feverish, though not thrashing about like Xanthos.

Quickly going to the table across the room, she began to sort through the dried herbs and powders Ludmara had left for her. Gathering hot water from the cauldron over the fire, she began to steep water dragon, devils herb, wolfsbane, blessed herb, willow and bruise wort. While she let the herbs steep, she left the dwelling in search of Ludmara. Once Zahinah located her, she asked Ludmara to bring several buckets of cold water for bathing the injured men.

It was an arduous process getting the foul concoction down the wounded men, but she accomplished it with the help of Ludmara and Gondan. Once her patients were resting, she began making more of the herbal remedy for the rest of the wounded in the village. The combination of herbs she used on Xanthos and Henrik would keep their wounds from becoming putrid and ease the pain and fevers they and others were experiencing, it would also help them to sleep.

For five days, Zahinah bathed Xanthos and Henrik when they became feverish, spooned meat broth and herbs down them, trying to get their fevers to break. In between caring

for them, she would help Ludmara tend the wounded villagers. When not caring for the wounded, she would find a moment to rest and if she was lucky, to eat. Yet for all her care, there was no improvement in Xanthos condition.

On the sixth day, Henriks fever broke and he awoke with a ravenous appetite. Against vehement protest, he agreed to partake of the broth she fed him. Knowing his brother would be seeking information about his condition, Zahinah turned to Ludmara, who was bathing Xanthos with cool water. "Would you please go and fetch Gondan and tell him his brother is awake?"

While Ludmara left to do her bidding, Zahinah turned her attention to Xanthos. It was not easy for her to watch his failing health, knowing she was the cause of it. Bathing his head with linen, she paid no attention when Gondan walked into the room, her attention focused solely on Xanthos. What Zahinah needed most was privacy so she could concoct a potion and spell to speed his healing along.

Since she had been sequestered in the dwelling with Ludmara with Gondan appearing whenever he chose, she had no chance to use magic to heal Xanthos. What good were her powers if she could not use them to heal the man she loved? Somewhere between cleaning his wounds and caring for him on a daily basis, she realized how very much she loved him. Zahinah would not wait much longer before she used her magic in front of the entire village. Xanthos life was hanging by a thin thread, and she would risk her life to heal him.

Zahinah wasn't aware Gondan and Ludmara stood next to her until they spoke her name in unison. "Zahinah."

"Zahinah."

With a start, Zahinah turned to them. "Yes?"

Gondan took her hand within his own, "You need rest, you cannot keep going like you have been."

"Are you telling me this because your brother is now healed?" There was a accusatory note in her voice and a defiant glint in her eyes.

Gondan gently took her by the shoulders and looked her directly in her eyes. "No, I tell you this because I can tell you have lost a great deal of weight, you hardly eat and you have dark circles about your eyes." Gondan released her shoulders and a sigh escaped his lips. "You are my friend. I do not want to put you in a grave next to him."

"He is not dead!" Zahinah raised her voice, refusing to believe anything other than Xanthos walking away from this village.

Gondan nodded his head in assent, refusing to argue with her. "Is there anything else you might need to speed his healing?"

That was something she had been considering for days. The only thing at this point that could save him would be the magic her people had practiced since the beginning of time. "There is something, but it may not work."

Not working wasnt exactly the problem. The moment she used her magic, she would leave an opening for Duartar to find her. Regardless of the risk to herself, though, she would not sit here in this dank hovel another day and watch Xanthos fade further away from her.

"What do you need of me?"

"It is not something I need of you, but of Ludmara."

"Anything, my lady. You need but ask."

"Your mother was the village healer, correct?"

A look of apprehension crossed the child's face and she cast a quick look at Gondan before she answered. "Yes, you know she was."

"Who taught her the art of healing?"

Ludmara's face blanched noticeably as she backed out of Gondan's reach. "The old women of the village. I am sure they are just like the ones who taught you."

Zahinah smiled knowing her mother had not only been the village healer, but also their druid priestess. The healing arts were a gift passed from one priestess to another. "Then you will know how to gather the herbs I need. I will need white oak, corn silk, mullein leaves and flowers, sage and wormwood. Do you know how to gather these?"

Ludmara nodded and scampered out of the dwelling to find the required items. Turning to Gondan, she spoke. "There is a putrid stench in this dwelling, is yours ready yet?"

"Yes, why?"

"It will be better for your brother. Henrik needs to be where he can heal without having to be in the same dwelling as Xanthos. If what I do for Xanthos doesn't work, he will not make it." Though she embellished the truth somewhat, it was true his brother would be better served by being away from someone still fighting infection. Not to mention the fact she did not think it would go over too well with Gondan if she used her magic to heal a sick man, and gods knew she did not need anyone else coveting her powers. For centuries, her

people had kept the magic of the Celts a secret, not even revealing their power to the Romans. She would be hanged if she revealed her secrets to a Saxon.

If she were to continue the line of healing and magic, it would need to be within the confines of her own people. Though Ludmara was young, she needed to learn the spell she would cast tonight. With her mother dead, the village needed Ludmaras gift of healing, for it was only passed down from mother to daughter.

* * * *

When Ludmara arrived, it was nearing dark and fortunately, Gondans men had already removed Henrik from the room. Now it was up to Zahinah to remember the ancients and heal Xanthos. As she had done so many times before, she filled a bowl with hot water and set it on the scarred work table in the room. She then took the oak branch and stripped it of its leaves, placing them in the bowl to steep.

After that was done, she took the corn silk and the branches of oak and placed them around Xanthos prone body. Next, she took the stems from the mullein, soaked them in beeswax and placed them in an outer circle not touching the oak, then she lit them. Her family had often referred to them as "hags tapers".

While the tapers slowly burned, Zahinah had Ludmara begin placing the sage and leaves from the oak into the bowl of hot water, while she set the wormwood to burn near Xanthos head.

"Are we ready yet for the spell?" Ludmara asked in a reverent voice.

Zahinah looked at the child who had come to mean so much to her in such a short time. Gently reaching out to stroke her blond curls, she spoke in hushed tones, "Yes, it is time for the spell. Would you like to say it with me? It would help to have another healer chanting it."

A look of disbelief entered Ludmaras eyes. "But I am not a healer, my mother was just beginning to teach me the properties of herbs."

"We are born healers, it is not just something we learn. It is a birthright. Come." Zahinah led her to Xanthos side and handed her a piece of smoldering wormwood. "Now you must concentrate, see his wound healing, and repeat these words three times:

*Energy bright,
Giver of light,
End his dark night
Heal his wounds
Make him right*

While you are saying them, remember to wave the wormwood over his wounds. Can you do that?"

Ludmara gravely nodded her head and with her eyes as round as the moon, she and Zahinah began chanting the spell that would hopefully heal Xanthos.

* * * *

Zahinah awoke to the sound of groaning. Slowly opening her eyes, she was met with Xanthos golden-eyed stare.

Quickly jumping up from the sleeping platform Henrik had occupied only the day before, she placed her hands on his head to feel for fever. Looking into his eyes, she was relieved to see they were no longer glazed over.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I died. Where are we?" Xanthos's voice was barely above a raspy whisper.

"We are in the village of the men who attacked us."

"Quickly, help me up. We need to leave."

Zahinah had to press his shoulders back against the straw mattress, and with little effort, he relented. "You are not going anywhere, you almost died on *meseveral times*."

"We cannot stay here, unless we are their prisoners."

There was a questioning note in his voice as his eyes searched her face.

"No, we are not prisoners here. Gondan has cared for this village and us."

"Who is Gondan and why are you speaking his name?"

Zahinah looked at Xanthos and smiled. "He is the new chief of this village and I speak his name because without his assistance, you would be dead."

"Without his assistance, I would not have been wounded. Or had you forgotten?" There was an accusatory tone to his voice. "Just how friendly are you and this Gondan?"

Zahinah would have laughed over the jealousy she heard in his voice if he didn't sound so serious. His worrying about Gondan was the least of his problems. Yes, Gondan was attractive with his sky blue eyes and long golden blond hair, but he was not able to shift into any form he chose. Gondan

couldnt possibly hold a candle to the power and strength that radiated from Xanthos. No, there was no need for Xanthos to worry, Gondan was her friend, but it was Xanthos who held her heart. Though she had yet to make him aware of that fact.

"Gondan is the reason you are alive, that is all there is to it." Unable to resist goading Xanthos, she asked in a voice laced with charm, "You are not jealous, are you?"

"Of course not." There was a note of petulance in his voice as he looked past her. "I just want to know if I should sleep with a sword under my blanket. You can do as you please, but ask yourself this, can he protect you from Duartar and Lugh?"

"I have been thinking about that. It is strange, is it not, that they have not yet found us?"

"Are you tempting fate by daring to ask that question?"

"No, I am just wondering what they are up to." Zahinah sighed, knowing she would have to deal with that problem soon enough, but Xanthos health was still her main concern.

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished, how long have I been ill?"

"Nearly a fortnight." Zahinah smiled down on him and touched his forehead checking for any signs of returning fever. "You rest while I go and get some meat to make you a broth."

"I would prefer the whole animal, not the broth." There was a note of frustration in his voice as he spoke.

"Well, try the broth and we will discuss handing you a carcass and a knife later." With that said, she turned and left

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him.

Chapter 16

Zahinah stepped outside the hut, which had more or less become home, for a moment of fresh air before she went in search of food for Xanthos. Looking around her at the villagers and warriors working together, she could still see a hesitation on both sides, but for the moment, there was a hesitant peace which had settled over the little village.

It was obvious to anyone who dared to truly look that these people had been conquered before. It was something they were beginning to accept. For over a century, the Celtic people had to live under the domination of the Romans. Now that they were finally gone, the Celts were faced with the Saxons. There was no doubt in her mind that her people would never recover to what they had been before the Romans came, but maybe, they could survive the Saxons.

Looking up, Zahinah caught sight of Ludmara approaching her with food in hand. "Zahinah," Ludmara said with a smile. "Is Xanthos awake yet?"

"Yes, his fever has finally broken and he awoke this morning. Are you well?"

Ludmara looked around her with a critical eye at her people working with the Saxon invaders to rebuild what had once been a thriving village. "I am as well as can be expected under these circumstances. It is not easy to see my people working with my enemy. Nor, for that matter, is it easy to care for my enemy while my family and friends are dead."

Zahinah gave her a look of sympathy and understanding. "I cannot imagine it would be. Is Henrik well?"

"He is fine enough to complain about having to be cared for by a witch, who will, no doubt, kill him in his sleep." Ludmara gave a derisive snort. "If Henrik only knew the half of it." Ludmara held out her hand and gave Zahinah the bowl of food she had brought.

Zahinah gratefully took it from her outstretched hand. "Thank you for this."

"It is my honor to serve you, my lady." Ludmara smiled at her. "Do you require anything else?"

"No." Zahinah watched for a moment as Ludmara walked away, then she turned and reentered the small dwelling she shared with Xanthos.

When Zahinah walked into the dim interior, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lack of light and the smoke. When she could finally see clearly again, she saw Xanthos had his legs dangling over the side of the platform and was attempting to rise.

Zahinah calmly walked over to the table and placed the bowl of food on it and then turned to glare at Xanthos. "Would you like for me to run you through with your sword now, or would you prefer to die slowly from infection?"

Her words were spoken in such a neutral tone, Xanthos almost missed the point she was trying to make. "Neither, what I would prefer is to rise from this dank hovel and be on our way to the abbey and standing stones."

"Well I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings ... but if you get up before you are ready, you will end up with a very slow and painful death."

"Is that the pleasant version, or is there a worse way?"

There was anger and sarcasm in his voice, but she knew it wasn't directed at her. "Xanthos, be reasonable, if you get up now, you will reopen your wounds. I almost lost you once; I would rather not go through that again."

His head snapped up at that comment. "You almost lost *me*?"

Too late, Zahinah realized her blunder. "What I meant to say was yes, I almost lost you, and if I did, what do you think would become of me? Or of the world should Duartar get his hands on me?"

Xanthos gave her a doubtful look, but decided to argue semantics with her later. Swinging his legs back upon the platform as best he could, he turned to her and with the look of a mischievous little boy asked, "Do you think you would be willing to share that broth with me?"

* * * *

It had been almost seven days since Xanthos had recovered from his fever and his wounds were healing faster than any Zahinah had ever seen before. Unfortunately, he was also rapidly becoming unbearable to be around. Xanthos was as irritable as a caged animal. Nothing she did was right. On the second day, Zahinah had given up on keeping him on a liquid diet. The last time she had tried to feed him broth and bread, he had hurled the contents of the bowl at the door

and demanded the hunk of meat she was eating. She could understand his frustration with being confined to the cottage, but his unreasonable attitude every time she left to get him food or water was nearing frenzied proportions.

If she was out of Xanthos sight for longer than a few moments, he began to bellow for her, demanding to know why she was gone so long. Then there was his unreasonable attitude toward Gondan. Every time the man came to the cottage, Xanthos nearly bit his head off. The last time Gondan had thought to enter the cottage without asking for permission to do so, Xanthos has begun to shape shift into a bear until Zahinah had stopped him. If the man wasn't well enough to travel soon, she would gladly walk to the standing stones by herself and Duartar could do with Xanthos as he pleased.

Zahinah looked up from the stew she was making to see whether or not he slept. Thankfully, he was, so she decided now would be a good time to escape for just a few moments of fresh air.

Standing outside the doorway, she took a deep breath of air, then pulling the bucket from the peg next to the door, she began walking toward the creek for fresh water. Just the simple act of walking gave her time to think, time to consider why Duartar had not found them yet. True, she had cast a concealment spell, but her little spell would not be enough to conceal them against Duartar's magic.

Walking back from the creek, Zahinah looked up to see Gondan standing outside the door to their cottage. Though Gondan had overtaken the village, it was obvious from the

way he worked with the villagers, he was desperately trying to make life better for them and their families. Rumors of the Saxons invading Celtic lands had been circulating for many years. It was apparent that her people were weakened by the Romans. For so long her people had prayed for the Romans to leave, and when they finally did, the Celts were beaten and almost defenseless. Zahinah often wondered why their gods had abandoned them to the brutality of the Romans and now to the Saxons.

As she got closer to Gondan, he stepped away from the wall of the cottage and awaited her approach. Zahinah only hoped he was truly seeking to make things better for her people, for they were already nearly beaten to death.

"How fares your man today? Is he still complaining about being tied to the bed?" Gondan's voice held nothing but friendship and kindness as he spoke to her.

Walking up to him carrying the water, she raised her head and smiled at him. "He is well enough to complain constantly, as does any man who is slightly injured. How is your brother faring?"

"He is well. Young Ludmara refuses to leave his side, I am not sure Henrik knows what to make of it."

"Tell him to be patient. She is only trying to please her new chief."

Gondan reached out and took the pail of water from her hand, then gave her a considering look. "Zahinah, there is something I would like to discuss with you." Gondan ran a hand through his hair, set the pail down by the door and then turned to her. "Why is it you Celtic women are so fascinating

to my men? Already, there are several demanding village women for wives, and some are just taking them, whether or not the women are willing."

Zahinah wasn't sure why he was bringing this problem to her. She wasn't responsible for the actions of his soldiers. "I was not aware we were fascinating to you Saxons."

Gondan looked into her eyes as he spoke. "I am quite fascinated by you. Not once have you cowered before me. You have the courage of a queen, even though you are Celtic."

"Yes?" Somewhat confused as to which direction he was going with the conversation, she decided to just let him speak.

Gondan was clearly uncomfortable with whatever he was trying to say. "It would be good for the people here if I joined with a Celtic woman, one who is respected." Gondan reached out his hand to stroke her hair, but it fell short as she stepped away from him.

Too late, Zahinah realized what he wanted of her. "I consider you a friend, not an enemy. What reason should I have to fear you?" She sought frantically for the right words that would not enrage him over her refusal of his offer to become his wife. "Your words honor me, but I am not free to marry. There are many complications, which I cannot explain. Nor am I of this village, I am as much of a stranger to these people as are you. You would be better off taking a woman such as Ludmara to wife. She is a powerful healer among her people, and they respect her."

Gondans eyes sought out Ludmara among the working villagers. "Her mother was the village healer, was she not?"

"Yes, and her daughter has won the respect of her people by working alongside her enemy while remaining faithful to her calling."

"How old is the child?"

Zahinah looked at Ludmara and hoped she would forgive her one day for setting her enemy at her door. "She is seventeen summers, much older than I had first thought." Zahinah turned back and looked at Gondan. "You must promise me though, that if you seek to make her your wife, you will not force her into anything. She has been through much in her life. Do you know anything of my people?"

Gondan turned questioning eyes on her. "I know little of your people. Only what my king has told me."

"And what has your king told you?"

"That you are a people who do not honor our gods or our ways. That you use magic and potions against your enemies, and that if my men wanted to live through battles, they should not trust any of you."

"I appreciate your honesty, but what do *you* think of my people?"

"I think they are now my people. I do not pretend to know your ways. I think along with your healing herbs, you have used other means to heal your man. I think Ludmara knows of your ways, but I have not once seen either of you trying to harm any of the Saxons among you. I think I would like to learn from you before I condemn you."

"I think, Gondan, that you will make a fine leader for my people. And that in time, Ludmara will make you a fine wife."

Gondan looked at her again. "Seventeen, you say?"
Gondan turned his considering glance back to Zahinah.
"Should you ever change your mind about my offer, you have only to seek me out."

"The lady will not be changing her mind," Xanthos spoke with barely veiled hostility.

"Then I offer you both my best wishes." Gondan tried for a neutral tone of voice.

Zahinah watched as Gondan walked away from them both, then she turned on Xanthos with a look of frustration. "Have you completely lost your mind?" Helping him back to the furs, her movements were jerky, clearly conveying her anger to him. "At any moment, he could decide to kill you, and do what he pleases with me. He does have that right."

"Like hell he does."

Standing, she glared down on him. "And just what would you do to stop him?"

Quick as lightning, Xanthos grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her atop him. "I will let no one take you, do you understand that?"

There was a possessive tone to his voice that set her heart racing wildly and her breath fanning out across his face in little bursts. Trying to raise herself, she scolded him, "You should be careful of your wounds or they will reopen."

Xanthos wrapped his arms around her, effectively stopping her from moving away. The look in his eyes caused her to still her movements and focus her full attention on him.

"I mean it when I will say no one will take you against your will. I have sworn to protect you and that is what I shall do. I will not let that warlord take you, do you understand?"

There it was again, his not so subtle reminder that she belonged to him. "I understand that you would kill yourself trying to stop him." With a frustrated sigh, she pushed herself off his chest. "I also know you need to have a care when speaking to the man. He is trying to make things better for the people here."

"I am beginning to understand very well, you want him. He is everything you have always wanted he is mortal." There was no denying the anger and jealousy in his voice and his face.

Zahinah whirled away from him and was about to launch into a verbal war when a loud clap of thunder shook the stone cottage. Before she could say anything, Ludmara shoved the animal skins covering the doorway aside, and entered the little cottage.

"My lady, I must talk to you immediately."

One look at Ludmara told Zahinah the news wasn't good. "Slow down and tell me what it is you must tell me."

Ludmara took a moment to catch her breath. Claspng her hands in front of her in an effort to stop their trembling, she spoke with a quiver of fear in her voice. "Last night, I was given a vision of a man dressed as a high priest. He was in the robes of a priest, but he committed horrible acts of violence against our people. He set fire to the village and the warriors with him began killing women and children. There was so much blood and the screaming of the women and

children" Ludmaras voice broke on a sob as she found the courage to continue. "Gondan was killed by the priest, and this priest took you after killing Xanthos."

Ludmara fell to her knees where she stood sobbing and holding her head in her hands willing what she saw from her minds eye. Finding her courage, she again looked up at Zahinah with the eyes of a young woman. "Do you know what this vision means? I have never before had a vision of the future."

Xanthos sat up with a curse. Pulling his sword from underneath the furs, he brought it up, laying it across his lap. Looking at Ludmara, his voice stern, he asked, "Did you see from which direction they came into the village in your vision?"

Ludmara looked at him for the first time since entering the cottage. "They came from the south, many of them, in numbers too great to count and too many to fight." Ludmara began to visibly shake with alarm.

Xanthos turned to look at Zahinah and seeing her immobile with dread, turned his attention again to Ludmara. "Stop your quaking, girl, and show courage for your people. Quickly, you must get Gondan and bring him here, along with all your mothers herbs and potions."

Once Ludmara left to do his bidding, Xanthos rose and walked over to Zahinah. Taking her face between his hands, he forced her to look at him. "Zahinah, focus, look at me." When he was assured he had her attention, he gently kissed her cold lips. "Think of a spell that might conceal this village so we can save these people." When he was sure she

understood him, he pulled her into his arms and spoke in a soothing tone as if he was comforting a small, frightened child. "Focus your anger and fear and cause a storm to gather, but not too quickly, we do not want him to know you are near. Do you understand?"

"Yes." With numb legs, she walked over to the cauldron and began to chant.

Once Zahinah saw Duartar and his army, she was shocked at the formidable force they had amassed, no doubt thanks to Lughs interference. As she conjured them in the water, she began to chant a spell to cause a storm. One which would roll inland off the ocean and settle over Duartars army. Though she was certain Duartar would figure out she was the one behind the storm, it might at least make him think they had gone back toward the coast to meet up with Xanthos ship and his men.

Chapter 17

"Ludmara told me something was amiss, what is it?" Gondans voice held a note of hesitation, but there was no mistaking the battle regalia he was wearing, which told Xanthos that Ludmara had at least told him something of what they were facing.

"Gondan, I havent the time nor the inclination to explain what you are about to face. But I warn you, if you stay, you may die."

"By the hand of the man Ludmara says is hunting your woman?" Gondan inclined his head in the direction of Zahinah.

"Among our people, she is a powerful priestess, the daughter of a goddess." Xanthos turned his head at Ludmaras quickly indrawn breath. "These men covet her powers, which are formidable to say the least. If you stay, Ludmara has foreseen your death, but if you leave, these people will most surely perish. Choose now the path you will take and I will know the kind of leader you intend to be."

"I do not believe in your gods, nor in the powers you say they wield. I am the chieftain of this village, and these are now my people. How can I help you defeat your enemy?"

"Ludmara is destined to become a priestess and spiritual leader of this village, so she must be by your side. I will go and try to find out from which direction they are coming and the exact number of their forces."

"Let me ready some men and we will go with you." Gondan was striding toward the door when Xanthos voice stopped him.

"It will be impossible for you to follow me. Come with me outside." Xanthos turned toward Ludmara. "When Zahinah has finished her spell, the two of you will need to conceal the village and people. Whatever you do, do not let your guard down and warn the villagers of this danger. They are your people and will follow your lead. You are their priestess."

"Yes, my lord."

Xanthos and Gondan quickly walked from the cottage, or at least as fast as Xanthos wounds would allow. Once outside, Gondan's loyal men were ready to fight, but Gondan turned to Xanthos and awaited his orders. Xanthos wasn't too sure how it would go over with the Saxons taking direction from a defeated Celt warrior, but Zahinah's life was once again hanging in the balance and he would not fail her.

"There is a great force of men coming this way. If they reach this point, they will kill all here. I need your most fierce warriors at every entrance to the village. Some of the others should gather the women and children in the largest dwelling and conceal them there. The rest of your warriors need to take to the woods and watch. Should this army reach the village, there will be no survivors."

Xanthos turned to Gondan then and with trepidation, spoke words he never thought to utter, "Should I not return, it is vital you keep these men from Zahinah. There are standing stones and a Christian abbey nearby in the village of

Silchester, take her there. Should these men follow, you must kill her."

Gondan gave a start at that comment. "You speak easily of killing the woman you are betrothed to. Why would you take such a drastic measure?"

"If I cannot see her again in this life, I will in the next. And I would rather her die at the hand of a friend than an enemy who will not make her death easy. Can you give me your word?"

Gondan reached out and grasped Xanthos hand. "To my last breath, I will protect her until I know there is no other way. Her enemy will not touch her."

Xanthos turned and stretching out his arms, began to run toward the creek shifting into the form of a great hawk and quickly left the stunned villagers behind.

Xanthos headed toward the south, which was the direction Ludmara had seen them coming from, but the father he traveled in that direction, the more he questioned her vision. A priest as powerful as Duartar could surely make someone dream the visions he desired. With his energy depleting fast, Xanthos decided it would be more prudent to circle out from the village. With that thought in mind, he flew east and then toward the north, which would allow him to approach the village again from the east. After reaching the village with still no sign of Duartar, Xanthos was even more certain the dream Ludmara had been given was commanded by Duartar.

Xanthos forced himself to stretch the limits of his endurance, and he continued north until he caught glimpses of metal arms flashing in the sun. It was obvious the army

was approaching the village from the east. But as he soared above the armed men, he saw no sign of Duartar. Xanthos could feel the strain of every movement from his injuries and knew that if he didnt rest soon, he wouldnt be able to maintain his animal form. Soaring higher, he caught a wind which blew him ahead of the approaching army. Taking a moment to rest, he settled in a large tree affording him a good view. Xanthos hoped he would be able to catch a glimpse of Duartar.

It wasnt long until he was rewarded with seeing the little toad, but he wasnt flanked by armed men. Short, fat and balding, the high priest moved like the mist toward the village. Xanthos vowed as he watched him that he would kill the manand soon. Once Zahinah was safely bound to him in marriage, he would enjoy killing Duartar for having ever dared touch her.

Xanthos watched from his perch as the little priest placed roots and plants into a pouch slung over his shoulder. As Xanthos was about to take flight again, Duartar looked up from his task. Twas a look Xanthos knew well, the priest knew he was being watched. Turning his head from one side to the other, Duartar scanned his surroundings but never looked up. Xanthos knew Duartar could not see him concealed high up in the tree.

As Xanthos watched him further to see what he would do, he saw a look of fear cross the mans face. Though he commanded the ear of Lugh, Xanthos finally realized the priest feared Zahinah. Knowing that could prove to be in their

favor. A man afraid was more likely to make mistakes, which could prove fatal for him and Lugh.

Waiting patiently on his perch, Xanthos did not move until Duartar returned to the invading force, and even then he waited longer than necessary. Once Xanthos was certain it was safe, he returned to the village. As he took flight, he prayed to the gods Ludmara and Zahinah were prepared, if not, they were all as good as dead.

When Xanthos reached the village, he was glad to see it was readied for the battle to come. Quickly seeking out Gondan, Xanthos guided him and his advisors into the cottage where Zahinah was preparing her herbs for the spell she would cast with Ludmaras aid.

Not wasting time with polite conversation, Gondan asked, "Have you determined the numbers of our enemies forces?"

"Yes I have, and they are many. They are also coming from the east, not the west as Ludmara saw in her vision. Your vision was sent by the priest, he controlled what you saw, so there can be no guarantee of its truthfulness."

Gondan heaved a frustrated sigh and began pacing back and forth around those seated near the fire. "Then how are we to determine the threat to the people here?"

"The threat is not to your men or people, Gondan, the threat is to Zahinah." Xanthos was loath to tell this manan enemy of the Celtic peoplemore than he should, no matter what Zahinah thought of his intentions. "Zahinah is a powerful priestess among our people. This man, Duartar, is a high priest who wants to control her powers."

"And if he does?" Gondan asked.

"Then things will not end well."

It was then one of Gondan's advisors spoke up. "Gondan, why even consider putting our men in harm's way? Clearly, this is between these people. Why should we risk our lives to save them when they are weak and cannot even manage peace among their own tribes?"

Gondan turned a hard-eyed stare toward his men. "I consider it because these people are now ruled by King Ceawlin, and 'tis our responsibility to hold the village and lands for him. These people are now our people. Would you have me abandon your women and children to a tyrant who seeks to control a woman of great power?"

Gondan, desperately wanting to reach the hearts of his warriors, continued, "If this woman is powerful enough to hunt, we need to protect her. She has done naught but help our men when they were wounded. We have a blood debt to her, and she will have our protection." Gondan ended his speech with a Saxon war cry holding his sword high above his head. Before it ended, it was being echoed by his warriors, swords in hand, vowing to protect the Celts with their own blood.

When Gondan lowered his sword and the cries of his men died down, there were questions from some of the less exuberant soldiers. "How do we know her power will not be turned against us? What if saving her destroys the very people you seek to save? We all saw his power, if hers is greater, what danger will she bring to us?"

Gondan stopped for a moment and looked into the dancing flames of the fire, then he looked at Zahinah. "What exactly are the powers you possess this priest covets?"

Zahinah sent a questioning look at Xanthos, who merely nodded his head toward her. "I possess the ability to control the elements and to cast spells."

"What kind of spells?"

"Spells my people have kept secret for centuries. What I am doing now is for concealment from my enemies."

One of Gondan's men piped up in a tone of barely controlled anger, "The concealment spell is fine for you, but what about the rest of this village?"

Zahinah glared at the man, and took several deep breaths before she spoke. "This spell will require the power of two druid priestesses. Ludmara is a priestess, as was her mother before her. Together, the two of us will be able to conceal this village from my enemies. Once they have seen there is no village or people here, they will leave and continue to search for me elsewhere."

The man still not satisfied replied with, "How do we know we can trust these women and this Celt?"

Before anyone could utter a word, Ludmara responded, "Harm you? Harm you?" Ludmara came to stand before the man and began poking him in the chest as if he were a misbehaving child in thorough need of scolding. "You are the ones who came to this village with death in your hearts. You are the ones who slaughtered the men of this village, and have taken the women you chose against their will. Do not think for one moment I do not wish every last one of you

dead. But have I once done anything to bring about that death?"

"No, you healed my cousin."

"Then I would be silent if I were you. As a priestess, it is my responsibility to heal and care for all the goddess creations, including you murdering Saxons." Ludmara turned from the warrior who towered over her at least twice over, and then stood before Gondan. "You are my leader and where you lead, my people and I shall follow."

Gondan stood there looking at the glaring young woman, who when he first saw her was his enemy, and now before all present swore to follow wherever he would lead both his people and hers. "Enough." Gondan's voice shook with authority but never did his eyes stray from Ludmaras. "We will believe in the power these priestesses hold. We will defend this land for our king to the last man standing."

Chapter 18

Zahinah and Ludmara were finally ready to begin their spell. Again, Zahinah looked up toward the doorway of the cottage and could see Xanthos and Gondan, swords in hand, standing guard over the village to try and protect it from their enemy. Looking at Ludmara, Zahinah noticed her head was bent and her lips were making the motions of a chant, but she could not hear the words she spoke. "Is it a spell your mother taught you?"

Ludmara quickly looked up at Zahinah. "No, tis not a chant. I pray to the goddess and the gods of Gondans people. I figure we can use all the help we can get."

"Well the potion has been poured into a circle around the village and is on the doorstep of every dwelling. I think we are as ready as we are ever going to be." Zahinah grasped Ludmaras hand and smiled. "Are you ready to begin?"

Ludmara merely nodded her head in assent. Before they could begin, Zahinah felt a warm breeze stir the air next to her and noticed a mist floating down from the rafters of the cottage. Before she realized what was happening, her mother appeared next to her. "What are you doing here? I thought twas forbidden for you to interfere?"

Ceridwen looked at her daughter and smiled. "Cernunnos and I are done merely observing and watching, we are finally ready to be the parents we should have been long ago." Ceridwen inclined her head toward the door.

Looking toward the entrance, Zahinah noticed a warrior she had never seen before. "Is that Cernunnos?"

"Yes, and we are here to help."

Zahinah didnt even think of refusing, they would need all their powers combined to stop Duartar. Shaking Ludmaras hand, she finally received the young priestess attention. It wasnt everyday that the goddess you prayed to showed up to assist in casting a spell. Zahinah smiled at the young girls awed expression. "Alright, blessed berepeat after me."

Mother goddess, father sky

Hear my cry

Take these people and hide their land

Keep them from evils hand

Let them not be found

To the veil of mist let them be bound

From divination and dark magic keep them hid

From evils hand I forbid.

Together, the three of them chanted the spell three times. Then Zahinah walked over to the table and gathered the herbs she and Xanthos would need to conceal them from Duartars army. When she was finished, she turned and saw her mother talking with Ludmara and suddenly realized all she had missed as a child. Though she was grateful for her mothers aid in casting the spell, she could not help but question it. The last time she had seen her mother, Ceridwen told her twas forbidden for the gods to interfere in the lives of mortals.

Walking over to her mother, Zahinah reached out and took her hand. "Mother, there is something bothering me about

your presence here. I thought you said twas forbidden for the gods to interfere in mortals lives. Why are you here helping me?"

"Cernunnos and I are no longer going to stand by and let Lugh have his way in this matter."

Of all the things her mother might have said, that was not what she was expecting. "No? I was not aware you could just arbitrarily break the commands of the gods not to interfere in the lives of mortals."

Looking into the fire with a wistful expression, Ceridwen spoke as she watched the flames dancing. "We talked to the council of gods, and they agreed with us that twas for the best we interfere this time. Lugh has finally gone too far. I was once young and in the same position you are now in. I know the struggle you are facing."

Completely at a loss for words, Zahinahs mouth hung open until Ludmara spoke. "You were once hunted for your powers as well?"

"Yes, and by the same god who now is hunting my daughter. This is the reason my husband and I are now interfering, the gods cannot agree on a course of action to take against Lugh and Cernunnos and I are tired of the petty bickering among them. I was once willing to risk everything for the love of a human, who gave me a child of such beauty." Ceridwen looked at her daughter. "I want to enjoy the wonder of your life as you discover who you are, Zahinah. I want to be the mother I should have been long ago and for that reason, I am interfering."

"But will Lugh not be able to find you, to find me now?" Though Zahinah was loath to ask such a coldly calculated question, she feared even more having Lugh and Duartar find her.

"No, my child, because I and Cernunnos have the protection of the council in this matter, he cannot track me."

"The gods are willingly agreeing to this? Why?" Zahinah asked.

"Yes, because they have seen what a pure and good heart you have, Zahinah." Ceridwen pulled her daughter into her arms. "Do not fear, all will be well. There are changes coming to the heavens, my child, it has been seen. The gods are losing their influence with our people. They are adopting the gods of the invaders, which is why Lugh is trying so hard to obtain your powers. Trust me, all will be as it should be."

That was easier said than believed as far as Zahinah was concerned. After all, she was the one being sought for her powers she would prefer to live without. However, there were possibilities in what her mother told her. If Ceridwen could go to the council of gods and have them allow Ceridwen and Cernunnos to help her and Xanthos, Zahinah wondered if she might be able to convince them to remove her powers once and for all. It would at the very least save her from Duartar and a marriage she was not sure she wanted.

Turning away from her mother and Ludmara, Zahinah went to the entrance of the cottage to inform Xanthos they were ready to leave. However, when she looked out past the entrance, she saw a force of armed men unlike any she had

ever seen before. Though they obviously were not able to see the village, they could walk through it. One armed soldier built like a stone statue walked by her and brushed against her skirt. Zahinah quickly drew herself away from him and took a deep breath of air, but before she could release it, a large callused hand descended upon her mouth cutting off any attempt of noise.

Light as a whispering breeze, Xanthos said into her ear, "They cannot see us, but lets not test whether or not they can hear us, hmm?"

Nodding her head in assent, he removed his hand from her mouth and pulled her against his side in a viselike grip. But it was too late, the soldier that had brushed against her skirt, turned and looked toward her, and then began to reach out his hand as if to touch her. If it was possible to do so, Zahinah melted further into Xanthos embrace and held her breath waiting for the man to move on.

Much to her dismay, he did not, but continued to look directly into her face. Though she was certain the man could not see her, she was aware he sensed something. As the man stood there staring at her, she could feel the heat emanating from his body, along with the sour odor of filth and decay. It took all her strength not to retch at the mans feet, but moving was not a problem since Xanthos was crushing her to him.

"Olor, what are you doing? We are to be searching for the witch and shape shifter, not gawking into the distance." Another vile smelling warrior came up to the one practically

nose to nose with her and kicked him in the back of his knees, causing him to go down on all fours.

"Touch me again, Boram, and I will be dining on your heart for my evening meal. There is something here, I can feel it. Did not the little buggler who cannot get his prick to stand say she was a powerful witch?"

"He did, but I think the man is daft. Every time he tries to fuck a whore, his shaft wilts and he can do nothing with it. I think it more likely he tried to bed the witch and she cast a spell on him. It would explain why he is forever muttering her name." His friend reached out his hand to help the warrior up. "Come, the others have already moved on. You do not desire to have the priest wilt your rod, do you?"

Without another move toward her, they moved on, leaving Zahinah to breathe an audible sigh of relief. Though they left, Xanthos continued to maintain his grip on her, refusing to let her move away from him.

"I think you can release her now, son," Cernunnos said with a note of humor in his voice.

"I have never seen such a thing," Gondan muttered in disbelief. "They were close enough to touch and yet, they never even saw us. I suppose if you wish something to remain hidden, it is best to put it in plain sight."

Gondan reached out to Zahinah, grabbed her up in his arms and spun her around in a circle, then set her at Xanthos feet again. "Thank you, my lady. You have saved many lives this day, and I am sorry I questioned your integrity."

Zahinah smiled up at him. "A priestess is sworn to value life, not see it taken."

Gondan gave a derisive snort at that statement. "Then someone should have mentioned that pearl of wisdom to the little priest."

"You have no idea," was Xanthos very cryptic reply.

"Xanthos, I have the herbs ready, if you are ready to leave now." Zahinah pulled her cloak tight about her shoulders and looked off in the direction Duartar and his army had gone.

Before Xanthos could respond, Cernunnos spoke, "Xanthos, if I might make a suggestion, I think that it would be wise to wait until nightfall. It would give you added protection."

"Quite honestly, I was planning on waiting until nightfall before you offered your unwanted advice." Xanthos gave his father a searching look, which was none too friendly. "What are you doing here? I thought you gods could not be bothered with the petty problems of us mortals?"

Cernunnos gave his son a look full of pain and regret. "That used to be true, but Ceridwen and I thought it best if we left the realm to protect our children."

"I knew it, there is always a woman involved in what you do. This was her idea, was it not?"

"No, I wanted to offer you my help."

"Huh, she wanted to protect her daughter. You could care less what happens to us."

"Xanthos, please, give your father a chance," Zahinah pleaded with him. After all, both god and goddess risked much to help them, at least his father deserved his gratitude.

Xanthos whirled on her with a hurt look. "Give him a chance? This man put me through hell and allowed me to

suffer immeasurably. He will get nothing from me but my animosity and pity. Only a man so self-absorbed could abandon his son to ridicule and violence, which is exactly what I suffered as *his* son. He is worthy only of pity." With that said, Xanthos stomped off from her and his father.

Gondan, looking everywhere but at her and Cernunnos, turned away and muttered something about seeing to his men as he walked away. Zahinah only wished she could have done the same. She understood Xanthos anger all too well, it was not easy being a child of the most powerful gods. At least she had the love and kindness of her uncle, Xanthos had been completely alone in the world. To be a child alone in the world was a horrible thing; add to that having powers unfathomable to most humanswell, that was inexcusable.

Looking off in the direction Xanthos had gone, she turned back to his father. "Could you please tell my mother that I will return in a little while? I do not think he should be alone."

"Why can you forgive your mother for abandoning you, but he cannot forgive me?"

"The actions of my mother are understandable, yours are not. Maybe someday you should give your son the reasons why you abandoned him." Zahinah wanted to defend Xanthos actions out of loyalty and friendship, she only hoped she did not provoke his father to wrath.

Cernunnos looked at her for a long moment and then gave her a smile she was sure he used to melt the heart of many a mortal woman. "You are very much like your mother. Go to him then, when he is ready, maybe he will listen."

Chapter 19

Not sure what direction he had taken, Zahinah decided to look for him near the creek. As she approached, he remained hidden from her sight until she neared an area not visible from the trail. For a moment, she just stood there watching him and was in awe that he had almost completely healed from his wounds. Thinking back to that day, she realized, without a second thought for himself, he had risked his life for her. Xanthos was a hard man to understand, but she was beginning to. He was a man of honor and integrity, passion and fire, friendship and loyalty. But it was his passion and honor which caused her to look at him differently. He was a man who would risk everything for those he cared for, and it was clear he cared for her. In their time together, she had come to rely on his strength and friendship, she needed him. As she looked at him brooding over being confronted by his father, she realized he needed her this time. It was her turn to give him the friendship and trust he had given her.

Approaching him slowly, she sat next to him on the banks of the creek. There was nothing that needed to be said between the two of them. She understood what he was going through, she had experienced the same confusion when she met her mother for the first time. Only for her, it was different. Xanthos had been there to assure her that her mother had always cared for her. His words had made the abandonment easier for her to understand, to accept. She

could not give him any such reassurance, she did not know his father.

They sat there for a long time in the silence of the creek and woods with peace and friendship between them. It was understood by both that words were not needed to understand what the other one was feeling.

"Did he send you?"

There was pain and anger in his voice. Unfortunately, there was no easing the pain he was going through, regardless of how much she wished she could. "No. I thought you might be in need of a friend. Are you?"

"So you now consider us friends?"

Zahinah was not sure what he was asking of her, but there was an urgency in the question that made her realize her answer was quite important to him. "Yes, I have considered us friends for a while now."

Xanthos looked at her with an unreadable expression on his face. "Do you know why they are here?"

"I think they are trying to correct their mistakes. In my experience, the gods are slow to understand what we mortals need."

"Do you think your mother is the reason they are here?"

"At first, I would have said yes, but I think they both want this. Do you know what reasons your father had for abandoning you?"

"I had always assumed it was because he had grown bored with the goddesses of his realm. My mother was just a convenient diversion for him."

"From what my mother has said, the gods were once spiritual beings and once their abilities are determined, they are moved into their positions. Now knowing that and what they have risked by coming to help us, I think they are truly trying to correct their mistakes." Zahinah sighed and tossed a stone into the water and watched the current carry it downstream. "My mothers abandonment was to protect me and keep me safe from her enemies; maybe your father was trying to protect you in his own way."

"Protect me from what?"

"From the corruption power brings. The gods are a corrupt lot, Xanthos, even you must admit that. What would have become of you if you had been raised among them?" Zahinah reached out and took his hand within her own and began to slowly stroke the back of it with her thumb. "We each have to live with our decisions, Xanthos, and the results of them. What will your decision be concerning your father?"

"I do not know. I do not trust him."

"Then at least think about it before you say or do anything. He is now living with the choices he made long ago, and he feels regret. Learn from his mistakes."

"Since when did you become so wise?"

There was humor dancing in his eyes as he spoke, which made her heart soar. Xanthos was not the kind of man who would brood easily over something. For him to be as sullen and silent as he was, there had to be something serious weighing on his mind. It made her happy to be able to bring him a little peace. "Do you not know? We priestesses are above the petty emotions of most humans."

"Oh, really?" In a flash, Xanthos grabbed her hand, pulled her against his chest and turned, pinning her beneath his body. "Do you priestesses ever experience true passion?"

Before she could respond, his mouth descended upon hers and claimed her with such passion, she was left clinging to him in breathless wonder. With his body pressing into hers and his mouth and hands claiming her as his, she gave into the excitement he was awakening inside her. Zahinah responded to him from her heart, telling him without words all she felt for him.

With a soft whimpering sound, she brought her hands up and tangled them into his hair, pulling him to her. With wild abandonment, she began biting and licking his lips, chin and neck. Untangling her hands from his gloriously silky hair, she began to tear at the lacings of his shirt, touching and running her lips and tongue over his chest and thick shoulders. In a fevered state of passion, Zahinah began pressing herself against his erection. She wanted nothing more than to feel his long, thick rod sliding into her pulsing wet center, to feel him possess her body as he had her heart. She just wanted to feel him.

Zahinah could feel a frenzied abandon in Xanthos as he pushed her gown up her thighs, touching her womans opening. Already wet for him, it was easy for him to run his fingers through her fluids and push them inside her. Looking up from her swollen wet opening and staring into her eyes, he began to lavish the tops of her exposed breasts with his lips and tongue. The torture was exquisite but still he did not expose her breasts, Driving her mad with passion, he bit and

suckled what was exposed over the bodice of her gown. But soon, that was not enough for either of them, and he began unlacing the front of her dress, exposing her distended nipples and swollen breasts. Taking exquisite care with her, he slowly exposed one breast at a time, taking a moment to suckle and bite every glorious inch of her.

Zahinah, not to be bested in this contest of sexual torture, began unlacing his breeks. But her hands were useless under his sexual assault, she was too carried away and her body refused to obey the commands her mind was giving. She gave up all together on pulling his throbbing rod from its confinement when he bit down on her nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth.

Arching her back with a moan, she rubbed her exposed wet folds against him, clawing at his back and shoulders. Soon, the torment was more than he could tolerate, and he pulled his engorged manhood from his clothing, rubbing its swollen wet tip against her nub. Screaming out, she bit into his neck.

Zahinah needed to feel every fleshly inch of him against her skin, yet Xanthos pulled away from her and stood, taking his time as he removed his shirt and breeks. When she rose to a sitting position and began pulling her bodice from her shoulders, he effectively stopped her by again covering her body with his own. Taking her hands within one of his, he stilled her movements and began removing them himself. His motives for doing so were clear because as he took his time, he had her writhing with desire before he finally gave her what she so desperately craved. Covering her mouth with

kisses, Xanthos pressed his erection against the wet juncture of her thighs.

Zahinah could feel her climax nearing but before she could reach the heaven he was offering her, he began another assault on her senses by trailing his lips and tongue everywhere his hands touched her. With a feather light touch, he caressed her forehead, following with his lips. Then his hands trailed further down her face to her lips and chin, followed by little bites which were almost painful, but only succeeded in arousing her further. His hand trailed down her neck and collarbone, where he began to bite and suck her harder, leaving little red marks. His hands and lips followed a trail down her breasts to her stomach. Then with an abandon she did not know he possessed, he buried his face and hands into her curly mound. Taking his time with her, he rubbed the stubble of his unshaved chin against her, inhaling her scent, while plunging his fingers into her wet folds and rubbing her anus at the same time he sucked her swollen nub of flesh.

Screaming, she arched her hips. Her response only fueled his raging passion. With a growl, she felt him run his wet tongue around her swollen bud and lips. Thrusting his tongue into her, he bit and suckled her release from her.

What Xanthos was doing to her seemed unimaginable. Everywhere he touched her, her blood pulsed with liquid fire. She screamed out his name and began trying wildly to buck her release against him. Somehow though, screaming out his name seemed insufficient for the wonderful climax he had just given her. But it was not yet over for her, because while still in the throws of her release, he pulled away from her,

rolled her onto her hands and knees and plunged his throbbing manhood into her.

Xanthos took her from behind and she could not believe how wonderfully erotic it felt. He was hot and hard and throbbing inside her. Pulling her hips tightly against him, he rammed into her and began pinching her bud. Zahinah could feel her fluids flowing over him and his slick sack rubbing against her thighs as he pushed into her, heightening the experience. But that was not enough, she wanted to see his face, so when he pulled his thick member from her, she rolled onto her back.

Pulling her legs up around his hips, he encouraged her to come again. Grabbing her hips, he lifted her off the ground and drove into her with the force of a man near the edge of sanity. Thrashing her head back and forth, she saw him watching her intently as he pushed into her. He seemed fascinated with watching her large and swollen breasts bounce every time he rammed into her. When her movements became frenzied beneath him, she began clawing at his buttocks, pulling him further inside her. When she again screamed out his name, it was his undoing. Xanthos could no longer hold back. He shoved deeply into her flooding her with his seed.

Chapter 20

Together, they just laid there close to one another, neither sure what to say about the experience they had just shared. Xanthos pushed himself up on his elbow propping his head on his hand and gazed down on her, while his free hand made lazy circles across her breast. Not a word did he speak, he just watched her and touched her in the most tender of ways.

There were so many emotions trailing across his face and within his eyes, she was unsure of what he would say to her. Words were not necessary for her. She had realized while tending him she cared far more for him than she should far more than was wise.

"What will you do once you reach the abbey, Zahinah?"

"What do you mean?"

There was a pause, then he asked, "What I mean is what is your plan once we get there? Before, the plan was to marry and secure your safety, but now, I am not sure what you wish." Xanthos now refused to meet her eyes. "I told you before I would honor your choice, that I would not force you into anything."

"You did not force yourself on me, I wanted to be with you as much as you did."

"I was not talking about what just happened, I was talking about the fact we must wed to save you from Lugh and Duartar." Xanthos sat up and ran his hand through his hair. "I still want to marry you, if you will have me."

Have him? Zahinah almost laughed at that comment. Of course she wanted him; there was an incredible passion between them. It was always there near the surface, and when they were near one another, the very air tingled with it. At first, she had felt it was due to the fact they were children of gods, but now she knew there was more to it. Love fueled passion like theirs could only be supported by love. But he had never once mentioned how he felt about her. The only times he had ever come close to telling her was when he was either in a rage in which case he would tell her what a petulant child he thought she was or when he was in the throes of passion when he would say nothing at all, just show her. There were several things Zahinah wanted out of her life. She wanted a love that would defy the bonds of time, she wanted children, and to find peace within her heart.

Xanthos was not ready to tell her that he loved her, that much she knew. Until he was, in good conscience, she could not marry him. If he thought he was marrying her for honor or because of an edict by the gods, he would one day regret his choice and he would learn to despise her. And that was something she could not bear to live with.

"Xanthos, why do you want to marry me?" Zahinah looked at him as he stared off into the distance. "Is it to protect me?"

"Of course it is, I swore on my honor I would keep you safe and that is what I am trying to do."

"Then the answer is the same as it was the first time you asked, no."

"No?"

"Yes, no." Standing, she began to lace up the front of her bodice. "Honor is not a good reason for marriage."

"For the love of the gods. Mortals marry for far less noble reasons, such as land, money and wealth. What I offer you is my life and friendship."

She took a long look at him, knowing her next comments would hurt him deeply, but having to say them nonetheless. "It is not enough."

"My life is not enough for you?" There was a note of incredulity to his voice as he glared at her.

"I want more."

With an angry huff, he stood and pulled his breeks together and threw his shirt over his arm, stomping away from her. But before he went back toward the village, he tossed back over his shoulder. "The only *more* you will get is an early death at the hands of your enemy."

Zahinah watched him stomp away from her and wondered if she had just chosen a path from which she could never turn away. Looking at the setting sun though, she knew she didn't have much time to consider the matter for when he reached the village, he would be ready to leave. That was fine with her. Because unless he admitted he loved her, she would remain within the walls of the abbey. She would rather risk death than a marriage he felt forced into.

As she had expected, Xanthos was more than ready to leave the village after quickly gathering their meager supplies. For her, it was not that easy. It was hard saying goodbye to Ludmara and Gondan. Although Gondan had started off as her enemy, he had showed her people honor

and integrity and for that alone, he had earned her friendship. Their parents, seeing the tension between them and knowing the danger Duartar and his army posed, chose to remain behind to ensure the safety of the village in case of Duartars return. Upon their departure, Gondan had offered them a horse, but having to ride clinging to a sullen and silent Xanthos had driven her to opt for walking alongside him.

* * * *

For over three hours, they had been walking and still Xanthos said nothing to her. It was almost unbearable after the passion they had shared, but it was expected.

Unable to bear the silence for another moment, she asked, "When do you think we will arrive at the abbey?"

"It will take three days on horseback to reach the abandoned Roman fort of Dinas Powys. There is supposed to be an abbey there, but Gondan told me it was abandoned when his men came through." Xanthos stopped the horse he rode upon and looked down at her. "It will take much longer to reach though, unless you ride upon this damn horse with me." There was a hint of rage in his voice and hurt in his eyes as he spoke to her.

"Do not take that tone of voice with me, you arrogant blight! You are the one who has not spoken a word to me since we left the village." She glared right back at him, daring him to deny it.

"What would you like me to say?"

"Anything, just stop rebuffing me. I would rather have you raging at me than endure your silence another moment."

"Fine then." Xanthos reached his hand down to her and offered to help her onto the horse. "We will agree not to fight or speak of marriage again until we reach Silchester Abbey."

"Why then?" There was apprehension in her voice as she grabbed his hand.

"Because then, my darling daughter of the gods, you will finally be forced to choose between me and what awaits you at the hands of Lugh and Duartar." Without another word to her, Xanthos kicked the horse into a trot.

All through that night and day, Xanthos pushed them, only stopping for an hour at the most to rest the horse. There was no pause for them though, while the horse cooled off and walked, they would amble alongside the animal. By the time Xanthos had called a halt at sunset, she was ready to drop where she stood. Never in her life had her backside and feet been so sore. She was sure if she could see herself walking from behind, her legs would be bowed into the shape of their mounts back.

Zahinah sat and watched as Xanthos removed the saddle from the horses back and begin rubbing him down with dried grass and twigs. She knew she should do more than just watch him, but she was too sore and tired to move a limb. If he wanted water, he could just walk over to the stream they camped next to and dunk his head in. From the ground surrounding her, she gathered twigs and dried leaves with as little movement as possible. Then with a flick of her wrist, had a blazing fire going.

Once she could feel the heat from the fire, she pulled her cloak tightly about her, laying as close to the warmth as

possible. Zahinah prayed that sleep would overtake her before the pain from riding that damn horse did.

* * * *

Snuggled into the comfort of her blankets, Zahinah had no desire to wake up, but the lumps in her mattress were extremely uncomfortable forcing her into consciousness. She was determined that once she was fully awake, she would set her uncles servants to stuffing new straw and feathers into the mattresses of the keep. Rolling onto her back, Zahinah stretched her arms above her head and groaned as she opened her eyes.

Looking up into a sky still covered in darkness, she could see up into the trees towering above her head. She now understood why her mattress was lumpy. She was not at home, but sleeping on the cold, hard ground. Before she could bemoan reality too much, her stomach decided to remind her how long it had been since her last meal. Rolling her head to the side, she looked over at the smoldering embers of the fire and could see Xanthos roasting some sort of meat on a spit over the hot coals.

"I was wondering if you would awaken before dawn." Pointing at the roasting meat, he smiled at her. "The meat is almost done, go wash up. There is a stream right through those trees behind you."

Zahinah sat up and gasped as pain engulfed every bit of her body. She was certain every single muscle in her body was aching. She turned her head with as little effort as possible and looked off in the direction Xanthos had indicated

and mentally calculated the amount of effort and pain it would take to rise up and walk to the stream. Looking back at him with a grimace of pain, she asked, "How far that way?"

Xanthos laughed at her, then stood and walked over to her holding out his hand. "Come, Ill help you up and walk you there."

Zahinah looked at his outstretched hand and thought of refusing his offer, but her uncles adage about pride coming before a fall came back to her. There was no doubt in her mind that if he did not help her up, she would indeed fall flat on her face.

Taking his hand, she pulled herself into a standing position with a whimper. "It is not necessary for you to walk me there, just point me in the right direction."

Taking her by the shoulders, he turned her in the right direction and gave her a little shove. "When you are done, the meat will be ready to eat and then we can leave for the Roman fort."

"Oh, good." Sarcasm dripped from those two little words, because the last thing she wanted to do was get back up on that horse and ride.

When she reached the stream, she noticed two large boulders blocking a portion of the flow causing water to form a pool large enough for her to bathe in. Looking at the water, Zahinah wanted nothing more than to immerse herself in its depths and soak her aching body. She only wished it were a hot steaming bath, the kind she used to indulge in when she lived in her uncles home. If only the water were hot, then

maybe she could find the strength and fortitude to continue their journey to Silchester.

Zahinah knew of only one way to get the comforting release of pain that she sought. Casting caution to the four winds, she muttered an incantation, then stretched out her hand, making a sweeping motion over the water. When she completed her spell, steam and bubbles rose up from the surface of the water.

Stripping down completely, Zahinah stepped into the warm comfort of the water. Finding a flat looking rock hidden beneath the surface, she picked it up and placed it at the base of one of the larger boulders. Sitting down, she leaned against the larger rock leaning her head back and sighed as the warm water washed over every aching bit of her body. As she sat there, she could slowly feel the pain and exhaustion seeping away. Unsure of how long she sat there, she opened her eyes after a while and noticed the sky above her head had turned a blood red color as the sun began to make its way over the horizon. Zahinah sighed as she realized it was time to leave her little cove of heaven and complete the journey she had started so many days ago. With reluctance, she stood and stepped from the water and dressed, braiding her hair as she walked back to camp.

Standing up, Xanthos held her food out to her. "Here, take this while I tie the rest onto the horse."

Taking the food from his outstretched hand, she watched him finish the final preparations before they broke camp. "When do you think we will reach the old Roman fort?"

Chapter 21

Xanthos watched with fascination as her perfectly white teeth bit into her food and negligently licked his parched lips. "We should be there by dawn tomorrow."

Looking at him incredulously, she said, "You mean we will not be stopping tonight?"

"No, we will push onto the fort and rest there for a few hours, then continue onto the standing stones. We should be there in another days time."

Walking over to the horse, she allowed him to lift her onto the saddle. "Are you afraid moss will grow under your feet if you travel like a normal person?" There was sarcasm in her voice as she spoke, but she cared not at all, she was too sore and tired.

"No, but the longer we take getting there, the better chance Duartar has of catching up to us." Xanthos gathered the horses reins and then swung up behind her. "Besides, I thought you were in a hurry to get rid of me?"

"I could not get rid of you, even if I tried." Zahinah turned in the saddle as she spoke to him. "I have been thinking, if my mother and your father could go to the council of gods and be allowed to assist us, why can we not go to them and have our powers removed? Ask them to become fully mortal?"

"Who said I wanted to have mine removed?" Xanthos gave her a thoughtful look as he considered her question. "How would you get them removed?"

Zahinah thought for a moment and realized she had no idea how she would accomplish such a task. It was not as if she would be giving back an unwanted gift, she had her powers since birth. "I am not sure how I would do it. I am still trying to think this through. My mother mentioned how the gods were getting fed up with the fighting amongst themselves. Since I am to become even more powerful, mayhap they would rather have me become mortal rather than corrupt like the rest of the gods. They would be better off removing my powers than allowing a child of the gods to run amok among mortals. Do you not agree?"

"It does make sense, but have you considered what you would do without your powers? They are as much a part of you as your hands or legs. If you renounce your powers, you will have to learn to live without them and the protection they give you. Can you do that?"

Without a second thought, she answered him. "I most certainly can. After all, look at the mess I am in now having powers. It cannot be much worse without them, now can it?"

"Consider for a moment what you would be giving up, Zahinah. This is not something you can change your mind about later. Your powers are your defense. Last night without a second thought you flicked your wrist and had a fire to warm you. This morning when you awoke sore and in pain, you muttered a spell, waved your hand and had a hot bath. I think it is easier for you to say you can live without them than to actually do so."

Zahinah wanted to choke the man. Finally, she had an idea on how to become normal, to become mortal and here he

was, stomping it to death for her. She gave a grunt of frustration, but knew there was some truth to what he said. Using her powers was as natural to her as breathing. Losing her powers would not be easy, but being hunted for them was less so. If giving up her powers meant her life would be free of the gods, she could learn to adjust.

Throughout the day, she and Xanthos spoke very little, there was just too much on her mind. The silence between them was a comfortable one. Zahinah enjoyed watching the passing countryside, finding beauty in the gently rolling green hills that reminded her of home. Though Britannia resembled the land of her birth in some ways, her emerald isle was greener. There was a heartbeat to her homeland not present here. Her uncle had often told her the emerald isle was the cradle from which her people had been born.

Zahinah cast a look over her shoulder at Xanthos and wondered what he was thinking. Since they had left at dawn, they had spoken not a word and touched each other as little as possible. It was too difficult being this close to him. Every time his hand brushed against hers, she craved more of his touch. If she did not know any better, she would have sworn she was under a spell. It was disconcerting being as close to him as she was atop the horse and remaining ramrod still to keep from touching him.

By nightfall, her shoulders and back ached from trying to keep from touching him anymore than was necessary. There was just too much left unsaid between them. It was just too hard for her to be so close to him, touching him without knowing he felt as she did. Just the contact of his hand set

her heart to racing, causing her entire body to tingle in anticipation of his touch. Exhaustion won over, however, and at dusk, she leaned back against his solid strength and fell asleep in his arms.

* * * *

Xanthos heaved a sigh of relief when she finally relaxed enough to drift off to sleep. Though he ached from head to toe from pushing them both so hard, having her in his arms relaxed him and gave him a sense of peace he had not felt since the last time he held her. He looked down on her face as her head lay against his shoulder, and watched the beams of moonlight give her an ethereal beauty. Xanthos realized he could live forever and there would never be another woman who could make him feel what this one did. She was everything a man could ask for and so much more. She never shrank from danger, but met it head on with the courage of a warrior. As he held her in his arms, he realized life with her could be peaceful and pleasant, something to look forward to everyday.

With a start, Xanthos gave himself a mental shake. *Where had that thought come from?* His life had been anything but peaceful since meeting her. She was headstrong, petulant and temperamental, and as he looked at her, he realized the most desirable woman he had ever known. He chuckled softly over the irony of that, he desired her more than any other woman, but she refused him at every turn. No woman had done so before. Every time he asked her to marry him, she turned him down. Xanthos knew he would never allow

another man to touch her again. She belonged to him. He wanted to be the only man to ever hear her laughter. He had known since she cried at the waterfall what he felt for her was more than just mere desire. He wanted more than anything to be the man who would make her smile, laugh and chase away the demons haunting her beautiful eyes.

If he had to give what he felt for her a name, it would be love. Which shocked him to his core, he had never wanted to love her. Their relationship was a bargain between him and her mother, he owed Ceridwen. He would not be alive today if not for the kindness Ceridwen had shown him. As partial repayment of his debt to her, he had agreed to watch over her daughter, Zahinah. Xanthos needed Zahinah as he needed air to breathe.

Roused from his thoughts by the oppressive silence around him, he looked up to discover they had finally arrived at the Roman fort of Dinas Powys. Looking at the wooden structure in the moonlight, Xanthos could see it was falling apart. It was obvious, even in the dark, no one had occupied it for sometime. Xanthos found that strange, considering it would have made a formidable fortification for the Celts who inhabited this region.

Xanthos looked around. It was a bit unnerving that he could hear no sounds coming from within the walls of the fortification. The doors to the fort stood open, almost as if in sinister invitation to enter its darkened depths. As Xanthos and a sleeping Zahinah entered, he could see the parapets were crumbling and the roofs of the towers were caved in. As he rode further inside, it was obvious the Romans just up and

left. Why his people had never entered to collect what the Romans had abandoned was a mystery to him.

Everywhere he looked he could see barrels overturned and broken, some obviously having contained grain and who knew what else. The ground was littered with arrows, bows, shields and lances. It almost looked to him as if the Romans had just dropped what they had been doing and ran from the place, leaving everything behind. With a growing feeling of apprehension, Xanthos stopped the horse and listened for any sound of danger, for without a doubt, they were surrounded by it. With each passing moment, his feelings of apprehension increased, warning him but he quickly dismissed it. Regardless of his uneasiness, neither they nor their horse could go any further without rest and sustenance. They had no choice, they would have to rest in the fort for the remainder of the night.

Xanthos gently shook Zahinah by the shoulder and leaning close to her ear, whispered, "Zahinah, wake up." Xanthos pushed her up into a sitting position. "We have reached the Roman fort."

Zahinah slowly opened her eyes and gasped when she began looking around. "This is the fort?" There was disbelief in her voice as she took in the chaotic state of their surroundings. "Not much to look at, is it?"

"No." Xanthos dismounted and then held up his hands to help her.

Following his example, Zahinah walked a few feet away and began stretching out her protesting and aching muscles,

willing them to work. "It looks almost as if they just dropped what they were doing and left, does it not?"

"Something just doesn't feel right about this place." He spoke as much to her as he did to himself. "I have not seen nor heard a single animal since entering these walls."

Zahinah looked around at her surroundings and then back to him. "Is there some great import in that fact?"

"Anytime something is abandoned, two things happen, nature and animals overtake it. I see the hand of nature in the rot and vines climbing all over, but not a single animal."

Xanthos looked around them again and felt something akin to evil beginning to envelop them. Without hesitation, he grabbed Zahinah by the waist and unceremoniously tossed her back onto the horse. "Stay on that horse and do not move."

There was a note of urgency in his voice which made her comply without her usual refusal. "What is wrong?" She looked around them again, still not seeing what could possibly be making him so nervous.

"I am not certain, but I will find out." In the blink of an eye, Xanthos downed his head and transformed into a great cat of the forest and bounded off into the shadows.

Xanthos roamed about looking into shadows and buildings, finding no sign of the life presence he felt within the fort. It was obvious they were physically alone, but he could not shake the feeling of evil surrounding them. Every instinct he possessed screamed danger, but until he knew its source, he would have to sit and wait.

When Xanthos returned, he found Zahinah standing near the entrance looking at something hanging over the doors.

"What have you found?"

Zahinah jumped at the sound of his voice, then turned toward him. "I know why you are so sensitive here." Zahinah pointed to the bundle of dried plants hanging above her head. "There is a curse on this place. Did you find any remains in the buildings?"

He had not planned on telling her, but he had found several and from the armor which covered the skeletons, they had been Roman officers. "I found several, I think they were officers."

"This curse was put here by a druid with great power. It would have killed their leaders."

Xanthos was at a loss for words. At least he knew why the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end. "Why would they just kill the officers?"

"If they killed those in charge, there would be panic among the foot soldiers, who would then have ran for their lives. Whoever put the curse on the fort was very powerful and knows the old ways."

Xanthos looked again at her and then at their surroundings. "Are we in danger here?"

"No, but we should leave soon. The spirits that rest here are cursed and none too happy about it."

Xanthos gave her a look of surprise. "You commune with spirits as well?"

"No, but as my powers get stronger, I can sense them. There are many here and they suffered greatly. We need to leave soon."

Xanthos ran a hand through his hair wanting nothing more than to leave this place. "Well the horse can go no further without food and rest and neither can we." Xanthos gave her a considering look. "Are you willing to stay until dawn? It will give us a few hours of rest. If you are uncomfortable though, we could try to find another place further on."

Zahinah looked at him and smiled. "I know the spell used here, we are safe. But we should leave at dawn."

"You will receive no argument from me."

Together, they walked back toward the center of the fort. If Xanthos had to camp here for the night, he wanted to make sure he was where he could see if anything were coming. Grabbing the pack containing their supplies, he put some grain out for the horse. While it was eating, he pulled the saddle and blanket from its back and began rubbing the animal down with straw he had found in one of the abandoned buildings. Their routine having been set the last time they stopped for rest, Zahinah went about gathering bits of wood from broken barrels and with a flick of her wrist, had a blazing fire going. Having seen to the horse, Xanthos grabbed their waterskin and went in search of water. If he knew the Romans, there would be a water source within the fort somewhere, he just had to find it.

* * * *

Zahinah decided that while Xanthos went searching for water, she would get their bedding ready. Sleeping on the cold hard ground was not her idea of enjoyment, but she tried to make the best of it by placing the wool blanket from the horse on the ground. She placed it close enough to the fire so they could feel its warmth, but maintained enough distance so a stray ember could not cause it to catch fire. Next, she pulled out their pouch containing their food, meager amount it was. Zahinah was grateful for the small portion of bread and cheese Ludmara had packed for them, along with the meat Xanthos had snared and cooked while at their last camp. They at least had a satisfying meal.

"Counting the stars, are you?" Xanthos asked her while placing the waterskin near her head.

Zahinah gave a squeak of alarm, but realizing it was Xanthos, she calmed down immediately. "I was just looking at the stars, wondering about the gods who created them."

"And?" he prompted.

"I was just wondering what they are like. Why they bothered to create all this if we are nothing but a game to them." Zahinah moved over so he could sit next to her on the blanket and handed him some food. "Do you ever wonder about why they created all this?"

Xanthos sat down with a grunt, taking the food from her hand. "I try to avoid thinking about them and I try even harder to have nothing to do with them."

"Wise choice, I think."

"Zahinah," Xanthos paused. "I have been thinking about what you said about asking the council of gods to remove our powers I think it is a good idea."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Actually you, without a second thought, you are willing to give up all you know for the chance of a normal life. I realized I want the same thing myself, to live free of the gods once and for all."

"It is a liberating thought, is it not?" Looking at him, she smiled. "At least we could learn how to do it together."

"Yes, well we should rest, we only have about three hours till dawn." Xanthos stood and placed more wood on the fire and together, he and Zahinah lay down to try and sleep before they finished their journey.

Chapter 22

Zahinah awoke with a scream, which sent Xanthos from the blanket with sword in hand, ready to battle whatever demons they faced. Looking around, he realized they were still alone in the fort and Zahinah was trembling all over. Kneeling down beside her, he gathered her into his arms and began rocking her back and forth. "Hush, you are safe, what has upset you so?"

"It was a dream" She gasped for breath, willing the trembling to stop. "Duartar is coming, he is not far from here. He knows our destination."

Unprepared for this news, he stopped rocking her in his arms. "Do you know where he is?"

"He found our last camp, he is less than a day behind us." Terrified, she clung to his solid form willing his strength to become her own. "What should we do now?"

Xanthos stood and began kicking dirt over the embers of their fire. "We leave now, and we do not stop until we reach Silchester."

"But that is yet three days distance, the horse will never make it that far." This time, it seemed Duartar would catch up to them.

"Then we take the horse as far as it will carry us." Xanthos picked up the wool blanket from the ground and put it on the horse while she packed what meager supplies they still had. "Is there a spell you can use against them that will give us some time?"

Thinking, she realized their concealment charm must still be working or Duartar would have found them already. He was still searching in the proverbial dark for them. As long as the spell held, they should still be able to evade Duartar. "The concealment spell is still working or he would have found us. He knows our destination, but has no idea where we are now. There is still time to get there ahead of him."

"But not enough time to lose your powers. Samhain is but three days hence, we will be lucky to get there before the festival begins. Time is running out for you, Zahinah."

"I know." There was a silence between them after that as each knew what was at risk.

* * * *

Traveling so fast left little time for conversation between the two of them and for that, Zahinah was grateful. Having seen Duartar in her vision so close to them sent her into a panic. She kept remembering being taken from her uncles home, and her subsequent imprisonment with the constant threat of rape and murder hanging over her head. With each passing mile, they only managed to evade Duartar for another day. He was still there in the shadows, still hunting her. Though Xanthos said nothing about it, there was worry in the set of his jaw, which told her far more than mere words ever could.

Finally at dusk of the third day, they managed to walk into the little village of Silchester. On a hill in the distance they could see the stone structure Gondan had told them of, the abbey. Standing only a few hundred feet away from it were

the standing stones, long considered sacred by the Celtic people. Zahinah was not sure how they managed to make it to the abbey without Duartar catching them, even though most of the journey had been on foot. When they arrived at the doors to the abbey, she was not sure what she had expected to find, but the stone structure which loomed over her seemed imposing to say the least. Approaching the doors, she and Xanthos looked at each other with trepidation. Before they could consider what to do next, the doors opened and two gentle-looking men in long brown robes greeted them in their own tongue.

She was more grateful than ever Gondan had told them what to expect at the abbey.

"Well met and welcome to our abbey. May we help you?"

Not hesitating to speak, Xanthos said, "Yes, we are looking for the monk in charge of this abbey. We are in urgent need of his assistance."

As Xanthos and the monks spoke, she had a moment to watch them and gauge their personalities. Zahinah saw nothing in the men but kindness and good will. Once they learned she and Xanthos were there to wed, the monks beamed at them, ushering them inside the walls of the abbey. As the monks guided them through the entrance, Zahinah saw it opened into a small courtyard. From the courtyard were several doorways leading off in different directions. The little monk guided them through a archway that led into a large stone structure somewhat separated from the rest of the building. Once inside, she looked around and saw thousands of candles burning. Along the back wall stood a

large altar with a statue depicting a young woman holding a small child in her arms. Kneeling in front of the statue with his head bent was a balding heavysset man, who she assumed was the monk in charge.

In reverent tones, the man who had led them into the building spoke, "That is our Orders abbot, Brother John. He is engaging in his hourly prayer. If you will wait but a moment, he will speak to you. Afterward, we will provide you with food and a place to rest from your journey."

Zahinah and Xanthos stood there near the door with the little monk, awaiting the man who knelt and prayed with such fervor. It was obvious to anyone who entered these walls that this was a place of worship. Where her people worshiped their gods in the open fresh air with chants and rituals, these men prayed within a building with silence and a devotion she admired. It was as if they had a personal relationship with their god.

Wondering when the man would finish, she was rewarded with her answer when his head came up from its bowed position and he stood. Making some sort of gesture across his chest, he turned to them. Again, this man was dressed in the same manner as the others they had seen. He wore long flowing robes of brown and his head had been shaved. The only worldly thing he wore was a silver cross fashioned from a Celtic knot. The craftsmanship of the medallion was extraordinarily simple, yet elegant. With a jovial smile, he took her hands within his own.

"Ah, visitors. It is a pleasure to welcome you to our humble abbey. Have the brothers seen to your needs? Have you been refreshed?"

"Father, we have come to ask if the Christian God will marry us."

Xanthos made his request without giving Zahinah so much as a glance. If he had, she would have refused him, which she was still considering. As she watched Xanthos, she was unprepared for the monks hesitation or his question.

"My son, are you not Celtic? Why would you seek the blessing of the Christian God?"

"I am, I mean we are Celtic, but we are no longer willing to worship the gods of our people. We wish to worship the Christian God."

"Why?" There was no malice in the mans question, merely curiosity.

"Because a Saxon king will one day soon rule this land, the way of our people is all but gone, the gods we worshiped do not hear us any more." Xanthos reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I would have our union blessed by your God."

"Have you already taken this woman as wife?" Zahinah blushed at the direct question of the abbot, making it abundantly clear that Xanthos had. "Well, we best waste no more time in performing the wedding vows then." The abbot turned to the younger monk standing in the shadows. "Brother Peter, please inform the others there is to be a wedding and they are requested in the chapel immediately. The abbot then turned again to Xanthos and Zahinah. "Before

I can wed you, I must ask if you are willing to dedicate your lives to the Christian God. Are you willing to pledge your lives and those of your children to him?"

Without hesitation, they both answered in unison, "We are."

"Then we will be most pleased to join you together in holy union. This is a first here at our little abbey, most of your people still marry in the old ways."

Zahinah smiled at the abbot. "We have chosen a different path."

"Good, good. Maybe more of your people will follow your example. Would you like to freshen up first?"

"Yes, thank you."

Without another word, the abbot led them from the chapel and into a long narrow hallway lit with torches. Zahinah was not sure why Xanthos was pushing for the wedding ceremony, but she was not able to question him in front of the abbot. In truth, she wanted very much to become his wife, and was even more thrilled he was willing to give up his birthright as a son of the gods, but she could not understand why.

The abbot directed them into different chambers to prepare. As Zahinah looked out the narrow window slit, she realized there was not much time left. Already the sun had set and the moon was beginning to rise in the sky. If the moon reached its zenith before they were wed, she would lose her life in this realm, and living among the gods was even less desirable than being captured by Duartar.

Entering the small chamber, she was comforted by the warm glow of a fire and a large tub filled with hot, steaming

water. Looking at it, she groaned aloud in anticipation of sinking into its heavenly warmth. Along the far wall of the chamber was a sleeping platform with a straw pallet covered in wool blankets. Lying neatly across the bed was a fresh change of clothing for her. In her opinion, the monks of this abbey were most efficient.

Quickly removing her soiled and travel-stained clothing, she walked over to the fire and stepped into the bath. Taking her time and enjoying the simple luxury of bathing indoors, she sank into the warmth of the water. When she was finished, she sat before the warm glow of the fire and brushed her hair until the heat from the blazing hearth dried it. Zahinah again looked over at the bed and the dress draped across it and wondered if she would actually be able to go through with a wedding Xanthos did not seem to want. Though he had asked her again, she still was not sure if he was marrying her because he cared for her, or from an obligation he owed her mother.

Walking over to the bed, she looked down at the clothing and picked it up, then held it against her naked body. Deciding there was only one way to finish this journey forced upon her, she took her fate into her own hands and pulled the white linen underdress over her head. The dress flowed down to her ankles and fitted her narrow waist snugly. The dress had a square neckline. The sleeves were long, flaring out at the wrists. Next, she put on a finely woven wool overgrown of forest green. The overgown dropped down past her ankles fitting her form like a second skin, the sleeves came to her midarm flaring out in much the same manner as the

underdress. Placed beneath where the dress had rested on the bed was a narrow leather girdle, which draped over her hips. The girdle was finely crafted with a Celtic designed etched into the leather. Once the entire outfit was on, the result was stunning and fit her lithe body perfectly. Deciding to marry in the tradition of her people, she left her hair down and brushed it to a fine sheen, reaching her hips to hang in raven colored waves. Without seeing her reflection, she settled for what she could see, and determined she looked at least presentable.

Walking back to the chapel with Brother Peter, she halted in midstep when she caught a glimpse of Xanthos awaiting her at the altar. Slowly walking toward him, she took in every nuance of his appearance. When she looked into his eyes, she realized she had enough love for the both of them.

Standing there before her, he wore snug fitting breeks that outlined his muscular thighs. Hanging in a billowing wave was a white tunic that covered the thickly corded muscles of his chest and arms and was cinched in with a Celtic designed leather belt fashioned in much the same way as hers. His hair was brushed and still damp from having bathed and hung loose in golden waves about his shoulders. His face had been shaved clean, much to her disappointment, making him look much more civilized. If she could have had things her way, she would have left him unshaven, casting his face into the appearance of a rugged-looking avenging warrior.

Greeting her with a smile, he stretched out his hand to her. She readily took it, placing not only her hand in his, but her heart as well. The abbot stood before them in his simple

brown robes, and began chanting in a language she had never heard before, and then dipping his hands into a golden bowl of water, made a mark upon their foreheads and their joined hands.

"We bring before you, God, your children, Xanthos and Zahinah, who are vowing to pledge their hearts and lives to each other and to you, oh Lord. Grant them peace and walk with them as they pledge their lives to one another"

Zahinah listened respectfully as the abbot intoned the vows that would unite them in marriage before the Christian God and all others for eternity. But as he was about to ask them to pledge their vows to one another, a monk she had yet to meet burst through the doors of the chapel. "Abbot John, there is an army of Celtic soldiers coming this way. They sent an emissary who bids entrance." Looking at both Xanthos and Zahinah, he spoke to them, "He is demanding the Lady Zahinah appear before him immediately. He says he is your husband by Celtic and druid law."

The abbot stopped the wedding in midsentence and gave her a look that had her blushing from the roots of her hair to her toes. "Abbot, this is not true. This man had once taken me against my will and Xanthos risked his life to save me from him. Please, do not grant him entrance, he will harm all within these walls."

The abbot gave her a considering look and then looked back to the brother who had interrupted him. "Tell him there is no one here and bar the doors for as long as possible."

Zahinah, confused beyond words the abbot could so easily be swayed by what she had said, spoke, "Why do you bar the doors? Why do you believe me?"

"I had a vision, granted to me by God, warning me of this day." Taking a deep breath, the priest looked to Xanthos and asked, "Will you take this woman to wife, protecting her, clinging to her in sickness and in health, honoring her with all you are and have?"

Xanthos took a moment to look into her eyes and answered in a strong and sure voice. "I will."

The abbot still looking at Xanthos, asked another question neither of them was prepared for. "Do you love her with all your heart and soul?"

Xanthos whipped his head around at the abbot so fast, she would have sworn it snapped from his shoulders, then he smiled at him. "I have from the day I was sent to her."

Speechless, Zahinah numbly listened as the abbot asked her the same vows he had asked of Xanthos, "Will you take this man to husband, protecting him, clinging to him in sickness and in health, honoring him with your heart and body, obeying him as your lord?"

Wanting to balk at the obeying portion of the vows, she decided she could live with obeying so long as it was to Xanthos she pledged her heart and soul. "I will."

The abbot smiled at them both, then binding their hands together with a silken cord, spoke in reverential tones. "Then I join you together before God as husband and wife. Let those who have been joined in love and honor this day never be parted by the hand of man." Untying their hands, he looked

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at them both. "Now I suggest you dispose of your demons."

Chapter 23

Standing together before the entrance to the abbey, Zahinah and Xanthos clasped hands and nodded at the brothers to open the doors. When they opened before them, the pair was greeted with an enraged Lugh and Duartar. Walking from the sheltering walls of the abbey, Zahinah faced her hunters with a courage born of the knowledge she had evaded her enemy and had the final victory.

"What is the meaning of this? By druid law, you are mine," Duartar raged at her.

"I no longer honor druid law, nor the gods of my people." Zahinah trembled with fear, but her voice carried with it the strength of her beliefs and love for Xanthos. She would not dishonor him by trembling before their enemy.

Lugh gave them both a calculating assessment and said, "I bring with me the armies of the chieftains Coinmail, Fairinmail and Condidan. We will decimate this little village should you refuse to come with us, Zahinah. Not to mention what I will do to your mother."

Before either she or Xanthos could speak, the abbot replied from behind them, "On the hill and in the valley of Deorham are the armies of Ceawlin and his son, Cuthwine. Will you fight them over one woman?"

"Quiet, you worthless little man! This one woman possesses the power to control the world. I will have either her, or the blood of all who shelter her."

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Zahinah was about to comply, when Xanthos grasped her hand in his squeezing it. Looking at him, he nodded his head toward the heavens and she looked up. Seeing what he was trying to tell her, she noticed the moon had reached its zenith and was moving toward the horizon again. If her mother was correct, then she and Xanthos were now powerful enough to fight the god of war.

With a control she was unsure of and a courage she doubted, she closed her eyes and silently prayed to the God she did not know. Opening her eyes, an inner peace settled over her as she spoke with confidence while clinging to Xanthos hand for dear life. "If you want me, Lugh, come and get me." Then bowing her head, a mist enveloped her.

When the mist cleared, Lugh frantically began looking around for her. When he saw no sign of her, he looked toward the hill of Deorham and amidst the Saxon forces, he saw her, standing alongside Xanthos with sword in hand. "So be it, daughter of the gods, we will fight."

* * * *

Xanthos watched Lugh and Duartar mount their horses and ride back in the direction they had come, and then he looked toward the tree line and saw the Celtic forces emerge with torches blazing in their hands. With the light from the full moon, they were able to clearly see the number of warriors Lugh had brought. Xanthos turned to Zahinah as they saw the army approaching them at a slow gait. "Are you ready to face your enemy this day?"

"Today, I face my enemy and tomorrow, our future."
Zahinah stabbed her sword into the ground. She then took his face within her hands and brushed her lips across his in a gentle whisper. "I meant my vows, Xanthos. I love you."

Pulling her roughly to him, he crushed her in his embrace holding her tight against his heart. "And I meant mine, wife, tomorrow we live, tonight we fight."

"If you two are done pledging your eternal love to one another, could we dispatch your enemies?"

Xanthos and Zahinah both turned to look into the laughing countenance of Gondan and some of his most trusted soldiers, who stood next to Davon and the men who had, on more occasions than Xanthos could count, risked their lives at his command. "Where did you come from?" Xanthos asked with a growl, still not trusting the Saxon, but grateful to see both him and Davon.

"I followed the stench of the little priest. I could not have you two enjoying yourselves too much. Ludmara would never let me hear the end of it if I left you to fight that one alone."

Xanthos stretched out his arm in a gesture of friendship and clasped Gondans. "Welcome then, my friend."

Davon not being one to miss the occasion to point out the obvious, took a casual pose while seated upon his borrowed stallion and casually inclined his head toward Lugh and Duartar. "So I hear the two little blighters over there on that hill have had the two of you running for quite a while. Yet you still manage to marry, how did you ever find the time?"

"Davon, my friend, it is good to see you again. Thank you for standing with me this day." Xanthos's voice was laced with friendship and warmth.

"Would never think of being anywhere else. 'Tis not often I get to thumb my nose at the will of the gods." Davon looked toward the forces they faced and then turned to Xanthos. Raising his sword, he smiled. "Today is a good day to die, but tomorrow, a better day to live."

Before anyone could say more, Ceawlin and Cuthwine dismounted from their horses, ordering the other Saxons and Celts to do the same. In unison, all the warriors gave their mounts a solid whack to their flanks, sending them off in a thunderous gallop toward the approaching Celtic warriors. Ceawlin, Cuthwine, Gondan, Davon and Xanthos all stepped forward in unison and began marching toward the ensuing battle. It was evident they would not allow for cowardice and with their advance, the Saxon warriors followed their example keeping in step behind them.

* * * *

Zahinah refused to leave Xanthos's side and marched alongside him. The warriors all raised their shields in unison, marching down the slope of the hill of Deorham. The Celtic forces stood on a knoll and directly behind them stood Lugh and Duartar. She had no doubt they would let their men do the worst of the fighting without a second thought to the lives that would be lost this night. Raising her sword and with the battle cry of her people, she rushed into the fray with

Xanthos, aiming her rage at the two men responsible for all the agony and pain in her life.

All around she saw and heard the clashing of swords and the cries of fallen men and still she and Xanthos found the strength to press on. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a warrior approaching her. At the last moment, she dodged out of the way of his sword. Turning, she brought her sword up in an arch, bringing it down across the warriors lower back. The resounding thud of connection jarred her arm so hard, she felt the blow rattle her teeth. Mercifully and quickly, the man fell with blood oozing in a steady stream from his gaping wound.

Not being deterred from their goal, she followed in Xanthos wake, who moved, punched, jabbed and slashed at warriors blocking his path to Lugh and Duartar. As she watched for attack from all sides, she caught sight of Lugh and Duartar. Both quickly began backing down the knoll trying to make their escape before the battle reached them.

Casting her hand in a wide arch across the sky, Zahinah abruptly stopped their retreat with a wall of flames. Panting like a crazed animal, she and Xanthos reached Lugh and Duartar at the same time. Without saying a single word, Xanthos slashed out with his sword making a solid connection with the one Lugh held. The resounding clash sent a jarring blow up Xanthos arm to his shoulder, almost causing him to lose his grip on his blade.

"So it is an equal fight you want, son of Cernunnos?" Lugh taunted.

"Unless you think yourself incapable," Xanthos shot back at him, raising his sword and lunging for Lugh's throat.

Lugh quickly avoided the attack and lunged at Xanthos with his sword making contact with the leather armor covering Xanthos' chest. "I will enjoy killing you."

"Then by all means, try."

Zahinah stepped back from the two of them keeping one eye on Duartar and the other on Xanthos and Lugh. It was as if a strange silence settled over her as she watched the two men battle for dominance. Holding his sword in both hands, Lugh spun and in a sweeping motion, lashed out trying to catch Xanthos in the legs. Quickly escaping the lethal blow, Xanthos jumped and rolled out of his reach. Dropping his shield, Xanthos swung at Lugh's sword arm and missing, brought up his fist and punched him in the temple.

The blow momentarily knocked Lugh to the ground giving Xanthos the chance to slash at him again with his sword. With a sickeningly crack, Zahinah saw Lugh's left arm bend at an awkward angle, obviously broken from the blow. With Lugh momentarily incapacitated, Xanthos took advantage of the situation and brought his sword up again, knocking Lugh from his hand. Lugh had a dumbfounded look upon his face as Xanthos ran him through with his sword. With a groan, Lugh hit his knees, falling dead at Xanthos' feet.

Breathing heavily and covered in his enemy's blood, Xanthos turned his head and smiled at her. Zahinah, however, saw the smile die upon his face as he looked from her to Duartar. Before Zahinah could register the warning Xanthos shouted at her, she felt a piercing pain in her side.

Putting her hand to the area, she pulled it away and saw it covered in blood. Looking at Xanthos, she tried to call his name but a cold darkness engulfed her, taking her away from him.

* * * *

Xanthos saw Duartar pierce her with his ceremonial dagger, but was unable to get to her in time to prevent it. Pulling her from the ground and into his arms, Xanthos watched the priest run from the battle. Holding her body in his arms, Xanthos felt an uncontrollable rage building within him. Raising his head to the heavens, he shouted a war cry and looked toward the retreating form of the priest. Knowing he now shared Zahinahs control over the elements of the earth, he stretched out his hand as he screamed Duartars name. Before Xanthos realized the power of his actions, the heavens roared and lightening rent the air, striking a tree in the priests path. Without remorse, Xanthos watched as the tree fell on top of the druid, killing him instantly.

Looking down on Zahinahs face, he realized he did not care. He was glad he had finally been able to free her of the priest, even if it was in death. Xanthos pulled her closer and stood, taking no notice of the battle still raging around him, he walked back to the abbey carrying Zahinahs lifeless body in his arms.

When the abbot saw him approaching, he quickly ran to Xanthos side. Though Xanthos knew the abbot was talking to him, his mind refused to listen to a word the man spoke. He just continued to walk into the abbey carrying the body of his

wife. Walking past all the brothers standing there watching him, he carried her into the chapel and walked toward the altar. Laying her down gently on the cold stone floor, he knelt next to her body and began screaming like a mad man.

Xanthos was unsure how long he had sat there, but when he felt the hand of the abbot touch his shoulder, he pulled his blade from his belt and standing grabbed the monk by the throat holding his blade to it. "Talk to the Christian God, tell him to save her. Tell him to give me back my wife. You tell him." Xanthos raged at the man with tears streaming down his face.

"That is what I have been trying to tell you, my son." The monk calmly looked Xanthos in the eyes and then down at the body of Zahinah. "She is not dead, she is in a deep sleep. Let us take her and tend her wounds." The priest laid his hands over the one of Xanthos holding the sword at his throat. "My God gives us free will, he does not take the lives of humans."

Xanthos stood there in mute silence as he watched the monks move forward and pick Zahinah up, carrying his life away with her, praying the monk was telling him the truth.

Xanthos had no notion of how long he sat in the chapel looking for the strength to go to her, but it felt like an eternity. Finally, when he thought he could take no more of reliving the battle in his mind, wondering what he could have done differently, he felt a presence behind him. Turning, he saw his father standing there in all his resplendent glory. "What do you want?" Xanthos barked out.

"Ceridwen and the monk sent me to find you. Zahinah is alive and so is the child."

Xanthos looked at his father dumbfounded until the words he spoke registered in his grief-filled mind. "The child?"

"Yes, and she is asking for you." His father turned and Xanthos followed him with his heart soaring higher by the moment with the news that the woman he loved was alive and carried his child.

When Xanthos entered the chamber, he could see dawn just beginning to lighten the horizon. Looking at the pallet Zahinah laid upon, he noticed she was as pale as the driven snow of his home. Approaching slowly, he watched her for any signs of distress. When he finally stood next to her, he saw the steady rise and fall of her chest and knew she would be fine.

Opening her eyes slowly, she gave him a weak smile. "So I think that I shall live," she said as she took his hand within her own. "Did you truly mean the vows you spoke?"

Of all the things he had been expecting to hear when he entered the room, that question was not it. "Of course I did, I thought I would die when he stabbed you. I thought I had lost you."

Smiling at him, she pulled his hand to her stomach and laid it across her abdomen. "Then we want you to take us home."

"To the isle of your birth?" Xanthos asked.

"No, our home is wherever you are, Xanthos. Please, take us home."

Epilogue

Xanthos paced back and forth in the hall before the door to the chamber he and Zahinah had shared since returning to his island stronghold. Looking to his father, he sought the answers of a man who knew more than he did. "How damn long does this take?"

Looking no better than Xanthos, Cernunnos glared at his son. "How should I know? I was only there for your creation, the rest I left to your mother."

Xanthos began stomping back and forth again muttering under his breath about the uselessness of the gods. "It should have been done by now! She has been in there screaming all night. Something is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong, Xanthos," Davon reassured his friend. "My mother and sisters have brought more children into this world than you can count. The first always takes longer."

Though Davon's words were meant to reassure him, when Zahinah screamed out again, he threw caution to the winds and burst through the door. Walking over to his wife, he looked down at her sweat-soaked face and saw the pain of birthing their child constrict her features. "Cease your screaming, woman, and push."

Zahinah looked up at Xanthos and her face contorted with a mixture of rage and pain, which she directed entirely at him. "Cease screaming?" she asked in disbelief. "*Get the hell out!*"

"I will not, that is my child and I demand you push."

"Ordering me to push will not make this child come any faster, you blight." Zahinah screamed out again as another pain tightened her body.

"I demand you at least try, I do not like you being in pain," Xanthos muttered as she screamed out again.

"You push, you miserable bastard of the gods. When was the last time you brought a child into the world?"

"Never, but God willing, I will have more." He smiled down into her scowling face right before he placed a gentle kiss upon her brow.

"Never! You touch me again and I will turn you into a toad!" Zahinah screamed as the urge to push again overcame her.

"Xanthos, stop harassing her or leave," Ceridwen admonished. "And you, Zahinah, stop making idle threats, you gave up your powers, remember?"

Zahinah would have replied, but at that moment, another pain overcame her body along with a strong urge to push, which she did. With a strength she was unaware of, she pushed her child into the waiting arms of her mother. Ceridwen pulled the babe from her body, wiping it off. As she cleaned the baby, it let loose a bloodcurdling scream and at the same time the child shrieked, a bolt of lightning rent the sky close to their chamber.

"You have a daughter," her mother proudly announced, holding out her first grandchild to Xanthos.

Xanthos looked from the swaddled bundle of baby to Zahinah and wondered if she noticed the timing of their child's scream and the burst of lightning from the heavens. Smiling,

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he looked at Zahinah taking his child from Ceridwens arms. "You do not think she had something to do with that, do you?" he questioned as he kissed his daughters red forehead.

Zahinah stretched out her hands to take her daughter into her waiting arms. "Who knows? For now, we will just leave it in the hands of the gods."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am wife and mother of four daughters and have lived in Washington State most of my life. For as long as I can remember I have wanted two careers; one in medicine and one as a writer. I have both.

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