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THE DISENCHANTING OF PRINCESS CERRIDWEN

by

Angela Korra'ti

Later, much later, memory brought back the night of fire and thunder, when the Change rolled over the city and the people fell writhing beneath its might. But when morning dawned, he woke knowing only that his mind was dark with unsettling dreams, and his very being felt unfamiliar. Insubstantial. Wrong.

With sluggish effort, he recalled the strength of his hands--yet he found himself certain that they were larger than they should be. His chest was muscled, his legs long and lean, but the garment he must have slept in clung to him in strange places, as though meant to fit someone else. When he tried to disrobe, his limbs screamed in pain, blinding him to all but a memory of light and mocking laughter.

He must have howled, for his older brother Athred burst into his chamber as if expecting a plague of demons of the Boundless Dark. "Ciaran! By the gods, brother, what's amiss?"

Ciaran? "Is that--" He caught himself, for his voice too was unfamiliar. It was not unpleasant, deep and clear with a roughness like sun-warmed leather, but it was the voice of a stranger. He could barely speak another word. "Is that my name?"

"Of course," Athred said. "What other name would I give you? Are you well?"

The name sounded as though it should fit him, and yet it did not, like the too-tight tunic. "I dreamed," he rasped in panic, rising on legs that seemed too long and ungainly to bear him, while the room reeled. "Dark dreams. I must be ill."

"Not you too," Athred breathed. "I need you hale, brother. Father needs us. The Clan needs us."

"What's happened?" Ciaran's fractured thoughts whirled, piercing his chest with sharp-honed claws as he studied his brother's face.

"Magic," said Athred grimly. "A curse has befallen the city; Father has called a council. Can you be there? If you're ill, if this night's madness has touched you too--"

Ciaran fought to stand upright, for even in his confusion his duty to his kin was clear. "It

is nothing," he said. "Let me dress. Then I will come with you to Father's side."

* * *

Even before they reached the Great Hall, Ciaran heard the woman screaming. Yet he could not see her through the press of bodies in the chamber, and only when he followed Athred onto the low dais where their father Athmar's throne stood did he finally glimpse the captive. She writhed upon a table in the center of the room, bound in sturdy chains; iron rang against oak with her every frantic movement.

And when Ciaran heard what she shrieked to the throng, a chill and a shadow fell across his heart.

"Gods damn you all! I made these chains with my own two hands! How can you not know me? I am Alain!"

He should know that name, Ciaran thought. It conjured images of one who might have been the captive's brother, for her slender arms had surely never wielded a hammer. Even possessed of a frenzied strength as she thrashed within her chains, she seemed far more suited to the weaving of cloth than the taming of molten metal. Nor did any in the chamber appear to believe otherwise, for her cries drowned beneath a tide of protests.

"What madness is this? You are no blacksmith, woman!"

"The curse has taken her!"

"Confine her before she changes and kills us all!"

Surging to his feet before his throne, Ciaran's father Athmar roared orders for silence. At his gesture, Athred jumped forward to join those who fought to still the woman's struggles. Nefis, youngest of the Clan chieftains, seized her from the other side while iron-haired Torrik, second oldest of the chiefs, clamped his palms down upon her feet. But Ciaran held back. Fire and laughter raked through his mind, a still-fresh pulse of pain throughout his frame, and the woman's terrified visage seared his sight. Frantic though she was, there was no madness in her eyes. Something in him believed her.

So did one other, he saw. A slender figure in a gray cloak lingered near the outer doors, and with anguished eyes took in the turmoil around the captive. Grief was a raw wound across her face as she fled into the open air. None but Ciaran saw her go. And none saw him hasten back the way he'd come with Athred, so that he might follow and find her.

Footsteps light and fleeting were his guide through the corridors, for the gray cloak vanished into shadows not yet banished by the morning. But it was the sound of weeping that led Ciaran to his quarry at last. She stood upon the south battlement, arms wrapped around the merlon before her, her head bowed forward to the stone. Yet she froze at the tread of his approach, and even without turning knew that he was there.

"Whoever you are, I cry you mercy. Leave me to my sorrow."

He knew her, though her voice was shattered now. Jumbled though his recollections were, she stood tall within them, steady of voice and sturdy of frame. "Damhnait," he said, and her name felt strange and right upon his tongue.

She whirled, her cloak's hood falling back from her dark hair and baring her features to his view. Tears gleamed on her cheeks as her features stilled into wariness. Inclining her head, she inquired, "Do I know you, my lord?"

Did she? Surely she must; the memories were there. Ciaran knew her ruddy cheeks and hazel eyes, knew the smile that could blossom like spring upon her face. "Damhnait," he

repeated, clutching at the name. It felt far more familiar than his own. "The woman in the Great Hall... is she your mother?"

"My father," said she, with a dread that Ciaran could not fathom. "Felled and changed, like others in the city, or so it seems."

"What do you know of it?" Ciaran said.

"I think the question is, my lord, what do you? How do you know me? Who are you?"

"Ciaran, son of Athmar," he said. The sharp flare of shock in her eyes made him tremble, and he heard himself adding, "Or so my brother has told me. All my memories are clouded."

The maiden whispered, "But you know me."

"I know you," Ciaran agreed, reaching toward her, not quite daring to touch. "I remember you vital as the rain upon the fields, welcome as summer's warmth on a face too long cold. Tell me I remember truly. Tell me you know who I am!"

Her face went white with terrible comprehension. "The gods are cruel this day," she breathed. "First Father... now you..."

"You do know me!"

"I know only this: Chief Athmar has but one son."

A great fear rolled through Ciaran; his blood pounded in his ears. "I am of the blood of Athoden," he said, though to his ears the words were a prayer. "I am Athmar's child!"

"You are. But you are Cerridwen, his daughter."

All thought stopped as the name pierced him through. That was the source of his confusion, why he felt changed beyond all knowing, why he no longer knew his own voice or the shape of his own form. Ciaran's head spun, and on unsteady legs, he stumbled backwards. Had he shouted? He could not tell. Through the buzzing in his ears he heard only the crash of the door behind him, felt only the grip of his brother's hands upon his arms.

Then Athred spun him around, and with desperate eyes, he searched Ciaran's face. "What has she done?" he demanded. "What has this woman told you?"

"She says that I am Cerridwen," Ciaran said, and the truth of it pounded him from within like a thousand hammers. "She says that I am your sister."

Horror spread then across Athred's face. "Forgive me," he begged before Ciaran could speak again. "It will be most merciful this way."

Then his big hand struck like a stone across Ciaran's jaw. Pain and panic joined to hurl him down into darkness, blotting out his brother, the morning light upon the battlements, and Damhnait's stricken face last of all.

* * *

"Bear him with care. Afflicted he may be, but he is still a lord of the Clan of Athoden, and my son."

No, thought Cerridwen. Not your son. Your daughter.

Then she was awake, conscious that Damhnait's truth had rooted within her. It was fragile, almost buried beneath the weight of jumbled memory and the terrible change in her father's grief-scoured voice, yet it was growing stronger. She groaned, and only then discovered the ache that filled her skull and the chains that bound her hand and foot. Unyielding oak was beneath her, straw thatching and beams of fragrant cedar above. Seeing these, she knew she lay, like Alain before her, on the table in her father's hall.

Six ashen faces surrounded her: her father, her brother, and the other four Clan chieftains.

Before she had barely marked them; now their features were all too clear. A band of bloodstained linen swathed Nefis' brow. An empty pit gaped where Eirin's right eye should have been, and pain etched new lines across her weathered face. Yet her father Athmar was most stricken of all. He stood with shoulders bowed, as haggard as though he'd aged a dozen years in a single night.

"Do you know me?" he asked.

"You are Athmar, son of Athoden, High Chief of the Athoden Clan," she whispered.

"And you? Name yourself before this council," demanded Eirin, harsh and cold as winter's frost.

"I am..." Damhnait's truth shaped her words for her even as she uttered them, and though dread filled her, she could not hold them back. "I am Cerridwen, daughter of Athmar."

"Lord Athred spoke aright," Nefis intoned.

"The madness has claimed our young lord," mourned Torrik. "Alanna's daughter must be found, if this curse comes from her."

"No!" Cerridwen cried, straining at her bonds. Laughter echoed in her mind, but it was not Damhnait's. Of this, she was sure. "I beg of you, Damhnait is not to blame!"

Hollow as a horn of bone, her father spoke.

"The gods' mercy has withdrawn from these halls and this land. Put him with the others and find Alanna's daughter. We begin the sacrifices with tomorrow's dawn."

* * *

They brought Cerridwen, in chains, to the slaughterhouse on the city's outer edge. All her screams of protest went unheeded. Athred and Nefis bore her between them, with the strength of steel; her own could not overcome them. With the key to the makeshift prison, her father locked her away in shadows tainted by the stench of blood.

When she had howled her throat raw and torn the skin upon her too-large fists by pounding on the door, voices whispered to her in the dark.

"Another one. Why does he get to be handsome?"

"A stranger among us in this accursed place!"

"Not a stranger. That's Lady Cerridwen."

"Rilke," Cerridwen rasped. "Has this curse struck you too?"

At her call, the waif came forward. She'd seen Rilke born four summers past; gods in their Shining Lands, she'd helped bring the child into the world with her own two hands. Her tiny, sun-browned form and her soft red-brown curls were the same. But her eyes had changed. They were darker now, too old for so young a face. Two sat higher and smaller upon her brow, and all four swiveled up to study her in sorrow.

"I see more now," she said, her voice turned ancient too.

Eleven forms edged out of the shadows behind her, each of them familiar, all of them people of the Clan. Yet like Rilke, all of them had changed beyond Cerridwen's recognition. A second head, twisted and withered, rode upon the woodcutter Oldrin's shoulders. Olmer his brother bore snake's scales upon his face; a forked tongue protruded through his colorless lips. Thick fur covered three of the city's young boys--Eirin's sons, now with lupine faces and awkward paws for hands. Two crones huddled in the corner, wizened faces whorled with bark, twigs sprouting from their tangled hair. And there was the blacksmith Alain, with a woman's shocked eyes searching Cerridwen's features.

Against the far wall were the final three victims. None of them rose with the others, and Cerridwen's heart went cold as she saw why. They slumped together in a mass of flesh, three bodies melted together as one, like iron in the forge.

"Gods of the Shining Lands," she breathed.

"Do not mention the gods!" snarled Oldrin.

"They have turned their backs upon us," hissed his brother.

Her voice thin and brittle as dead twigs, a crone called, "We are cursed! We die with the coming of the dawn!"

"We are cursed!"

"We are cursed!"

The bitter litany stole through the darkness, and Cerridwen, breathing in despair along with their prison's reek, almost joined the dirge. Yet Alain's eyes, so like Damhnait's, were on her. "Tell me what happened to you," she said instead, her gaze lingering on the blacksmith and the child.

"From the look of you, you know as well as we," said Alain, soft and gruff, Damhnait's own voice made older, spare. "The fire caught us all, twisted and changed us."

She did know. As each of the prisoners answered her, one by one, she knew the shape and substance of their muttered words; they echoed in her own altered flesh, giving the lie to the Ciaran-wraith that still tried to mold itself to her being. Cerridwen slumped against the door behind her, chains rattling upon her wrists. "I know not how to mend this," she said, "or how to make our people know us anew."

"Damhnait will help," piped Rilke.

Cerridwen knelt before the child, whose four eyes considered her, guileless and knowing all at once. "They must have captured her by now," she said, but the uncanny clarity of Rilke's eyes made her doubt.

"Damhnait still remembers. She'll come and get us out."

"She keeps saying these things," Oldrin said.

Lifting her eyes to the others, Cerridwen asked, "Do you believe her?"

Hope glinted in Alain's eyes. "The child said that you were coming, too," he said, and Rilke bobbed her head.

"For what good it will do you," whispered one of the tree-crones. "For what good it does any of us. Our memories will haunt us while our own people cast us into the flames."

* * *

In the end, as the day crawled through lengthening shadow, there was nothing to do but wait.

Cerridwen longed to do more. Yet memories jangled like cracked bells within her; she could still hear the name of Ciaran echoing, drowning out the one that Damhnait had given her. Whatever else she was, a shieldmaiden or a captain of men, Athmar's son or Athmar's daughter, she'd sprung from the blood of Athoden. As hours passed in thirst and hunger, she stalked along each wall of the slaughterhouse, seeking some sign by which she might save them all. Yet no loose stone revealed itself, no chink in the mortar through which they might dig to freedom. No words of comfort for the others, no songs, no prayers to the heedless gods came to her. She could not even meet her companions' eyes, for among them all, only Alain had fared as well as she; only they were still normal of seeming.

In the end, she sat at the slaughterhouse door and waited for death. What came instead, in the night's deepest hour, was a hammering above her head.

They were all slumbering, huddled against one another for the scant consolation of touch. Rilke had curled against her side, and as Cerridwen snapped awake, she held the child protectively tighter. The others began to wail around them, but Rilke turned a silent, considering gaze to the door.

Beyond it, something tugged at Cerridwen's ears. "Quiet!" she hissed, so that she might hear.

"Cerridwen! Lady Cerridwen! Are you within?"

Damhnait's voice, strange and dearly familiar all at once, drove Cerridwen to her feet. Setting Rilke behind her, her heart turning over in her breast, she called back through the door, "I am here."

The words were hoarse, and she doubted that the one outside had heard. Then metal clanged against sturdy wood, flinging the door open wide. Damhnait stood at the threshold, an axe in her hands and the mangled remains of the door's lock at her feet. She was pale and fell in the moonlight, her sun-reddened face and the dark braids that framed her cheeks leached of all color. Fire was in her eye; she looked like an avenging spirit. In that moment, in Cerridwen's sight, she was the most beautiful creature that had ever walked in the lands of the Athoden Clan.

"Cerridwen!" she called. "Father!"

"Here, child," said Alain, rushing forward to enfold her in his arms. He had once towered over his daughter; now they were almost of a size.

"Gods' mercy, what are you doing here?" Cerridwen cursed the words that came out in her deep stranger's voice, cracking with fear and strain. "How did the guardsmen not find you?"

"How did you escape the change-fire?" Oldrin demanded.

"She's come to help, like the child said," barked Alain, and Rilke almost smiled.

"My brothers and I rode in this morning to visit our father here, and found him changed," she said to him. "For more than that we have no time. My brothers wait with horses at the gates. How many are here?"

"Thirteen," said Oldrin. But before he could ask more, before Damhnait could beckon them all out to freedom, Cerridwen caught her by the arm.

"Why did you come for me?" she asked. "What am I to you?"

Just enough moonlight touched Damhnait's face that Cerridwen clearly saw her expression, sad and sorrowful and furious all at once. "High Chief he may be," she said, "but I will not let Athmar kill his daughter."

The young man's shape that held her was too new, too treacherous; Cerridwen did not trust it. Yet as its throat tightened and its broad shoulders trembled she almost did not mind, not when she felt the first thin stirring of hope in too many benighted hours. "My father will see you burned with us if he catches you setting us free," she warned.

"Then we must make haste. Here. I have brought you these garments from my brothers."

Damhnait thrust a bundle of clothing into Cerridwen's hands, and with it, hope sparked to life in Cerridwen's heart. As she tugged on the tunic and breeches and boots, she urged the others out into the open air. "Deliverance is at hand," she called. "Seize it while we may!"

Eirin's sons bolted first, their furred shapes passing Cerridwen and Damhnait in a blur as they dashed on lupine feet out of the slaughterhouse. Oldrin and Olmer came next, and Olmer slunk past their rescuer without meeting her eyes, hissing abashed thanks as he went. But Rilke clung to Cerridwen's knees, and Oldrin stopped before her, his eyes still grim, though now also

grieving.

"The others won't come," he said. "They can't. Megred and Angwen... they've grown roots. The others..."

Cerridwen's heart chilled at the words he left unuttered. "Go," she urged him even as she stepped to the slaughterhouse's far wall. "Go before they hear us."

Oldrin fled without another word, leaving Cerridwen to approach the two old women intertwined in the corner. In the light from the door, she saw the truth of the woodcutter's words. Only beneath a thickening veil of green leaves could Cerridwen still make out the shapes of human women; only with creaking, hesitant slowness did one of them turn to study her.

"You should take your own advice, lad," that one said. Megred, Cerridwen thought, though it was harder to tell with her features coarse and hardened, more like a carving of a face than truly living flesh. Her voice too was slower, drowsy and deep.

"Lass," murmured the other. Angwen, whose face was immobile now, save for the slightest movement of her lips.

"Lass," Megred agreed. "It is too late for us. We are rooted now. We..."

"Grow," breathed Angwen.

"Grow." The single word was Megred's last as she and Angwen went still and silent, their faces settling into lines of peace.

Then, from the other corner, came a wavering plea.

"Send us on, daughter of Athmar."

Cerridwen shuddered and then turned to face the other corner, where the lump of flesh that had once been three of her people still lay. She could not tell which of them had spoken, or which of her people they'd once been. But the one who'd called must have sensed her drawing nearer, for the voice sounded again, gurgling and mangled through a ruined throat. "Give us one last mercy. Free us."

"Free us."

"Free us."

The other two voices were weaker than the first, mere echoes of the words that had come before. Yet Cerridwen needed no other prompting. When Damhnait pressed her axe into her hand and then bore Rilke away, the chieftain's daughter was grateful beyond words. No matter what else might have befallen them all, the little one did not need to see what she did next.

When she'd driven the axe into each of the mutilated faces, between each pair of desperate eyes, she spun and followed those who yet survived out into the night.

* * *

Escape was easier than Cerridwen expected and harder than she hoped. Reaching the village gate was no difficulty; her changed form unnerved her to its blood and bone, but it was strong and swift. It bore Rilke without effort as she ran, Damhnait and Alain at her side, to reach those who awaited them. Damhnait's brothers Shann and Gerred started at Cerridwen's hail, pitched hoarsely to carry no further than their ears.

"Lord Athred?" Shann called uncertainly back.

"Lady Cerridwen," Damhnait corrected, taking the child when Cerridwen hesitated, and placing her upon one of the restive horses. "Changed like Father and the others."

"Gods strike me," said Gerred. "You are the very image of your brother."

"Pay it no heed," Cerridwen said, distressed; she sounded like her brother too.

Grimacing at his own awkward motions, Alain clambered onto another mount. "Hold council later," he ordered. "Ride now."

His color was high, Cerridwen saw, and he did not quite meet his children's eyes; she thought she fathomed why. That they were both hale was a kind of mercy--whatever curse had struck the Clan had not maimed them or turned them inhuman--but they were still changed. And that was no mercy at all.

Yet the blacksmith had spoken wisely, she thought, swinging into the saddle behind Rilke. They could seek the truth of what had happened to the Clan when they were safe.

Eirin's sons, Shann and Gerred reported as they rode, had fled into the forests; so too had Oldrin and Olmer, hastening for the woodcutter's cottage not far outside the city walls. Cerridwen despaired that the others would not survive alone, but there was no time to pursue them. Damhnait and her brothers had already risked much. She could not ask them to do more.

And when they reached the hills that ringed the city, when they heard the horn that called the people to arms behind them, they had no time to do anything but ride.

Swift horses were the pride of Athoden Clan, and those that Damhnait's brothers had brought were true to their breeding and blood. Yet the horses of Cerridwen's own kin were finer still. All the warhorses of the city seemed to thunder behind them in the darkness, a slowly but steadily oncoming storm.

Arrows from the archers, that storm's leading edge, soon overtook them. Wan moonlight and the cover of the trees kept them safe at first, and for a time Shann and Damhnait, the best riders among them, led them through the shielding glades. But in the night's deepest hour light was but a breath from shadow, treacherous to those who fled as well as those who pursued, and even the trees turned against them. When Cerridwen's band burst without warning into an open meadow, arrow-fire threw Gerred from his horse and dropped Shann's beneath him. Alain went down next, still too clumsy in his smaller form to stay ahorse. Rilke shrieked, and Cerridwen very nearly joined her. Pride and frantic worry made it a roar to Damhnait instead.

"Go back to your kin! Maybe they will spare you!"

"My choice is made," Damhnait said, "and my family honors it! Ride, beloved! Ride!"

The words were lightning, bathing Cerridwen's thoughts in flame. All else faded away: the whine of the arrows, the droning of the hunting horn, even the distant bellow of her father's voice. There was only Damhnait in that moment, her face ablaze, riding as though driven by the gods. Amazed, Cerridwen pressed her mount to keep the pace.

They almost made it back to the haven of the trees.

Half of those behind still pursued; the rest, circling around the meadow, broke out of the oaks before them. Cerridwen's horse screamed and reared, almost throwing its riders, and only by pulling up hard upon her reins did Damhnait remain in her saddle. A thicket of brandished spears closed in around their mounts, driving them together.

"Halt and hold," her father boomed.

Cerridwen's heart sank. Yet she pulled Rilke close, shielding her against the sting of any arrows, while she sat as tall as she could upon her skittish beast. "Father, let us go," she said. "We have done no harm to any of the Clan."

"Not we, at least," Damhnait whispered, glancing back to the unmoving forms of her brothers and father.

Nefis pulled his mount forward abreast with Athmar's. "We cannot trust their words, my lord, if they have been bewitched."

"I have never lied in my life!" Cerridwen shouted.

When Nefis would have replied Athmar slung an arm out to forestall him, his eyes never leaving her. "Then speak this to me. Are you bewitched?" With a glance like a sword unsheathed, he considered Damhnait. "Is this the witch that stole my son?"

The witch. The words snared Cerridwen, flooding her thoughts with recollections as pungent as spells. It had been magic, surely, that drew her eyes to Damhnait's lithe stride, sorcery that had limned her hair with sunlight. The body she wore now reacted to that memory, powerfully enough that she wondered whether her father and brother were right--for surely so strong a pull in her blood and bones proclaimed her Ciaran--

Then a deeper memory surfaced, lit like a bonfire by the word that Damhnait had called her: that single word breathed in anguish into her ear, when they'd stood entwined in one another's arms in shadow, afraid to embrace in the light. Fury filled Cerridwen that the woman who loved her, who had freed her at the price of her own kin, now faced death along with an innocent child.

"Does it matter how we answer?" she demanded. "What could we say that would keep you from shedding our blood?"

"The words to lift our curse and give us back the favor of the gods!" said her father.

"A foul curse it is," Damhnait said, "to make you forget your noble daughter! Have mercy, my chief! Open your eyes!"

Silent upon his blood bay stallion, his face an unmoving mask, Athmar sat. Then he pulled his arm away from Nefis and commanded, "I claim the right to release my son from his affliction, but take the others. Begin with the witch."

Cerridwen howled in protest, ready to leap from the saddle and knock Damhnait to the ground to shield her from the spears. Yet before she could move, before Nefis could take aim with his weapon, a blast of frigid cold seared the air around them all.

"She's coming," murmured Rilke, her small face craning skyward, all four of her eyes opened wide.

"If it is a witch you desire, humans, then a witch you shall have."

Like knives, the words slashed across Cerridwen's hearing; like a thunderclap, they boomed across her thoughts. Horses screamed, and Cerridwen's bucked again, pitching her and Rilke to the earth. Damhnait landed beside them, writhing. Cerridwen had just enough time to cover them beneath her broader form before the numbing frost exploded into fire.

Charred in lurid flame, riders and mounts fell in lifeless heaps; even the trees ignited, becoming skeletal torches that ringed the meadow in light. The stench of burning flesh and the cries of dying men besieged Cerridwen's senses. She held Rilke and Damhnait close, praying that the frenzied horses would not trample them into the ground.

But she could do nothing against the wordless presence that ripped through air and mind alike. Resentment and disgust were the first wave: how dare the humans call upon their impotent deities? Then wild, delirious joy: such power, unbridled in its strength, was the equal of any god. And then with that last, as though the flames themselves were speaking, the scathing, shrieking voice returned.

"This magic is mine alone! Mine! Fall upon your knees before me and despair!"

A second eruption split the night. Before Cerridwen's astonished eyes a column of fire swirled into being in the meadow's center, driving back her father's remaining men in a panicked wave. In its light Athred crawled towards Athmar's crumpled form; the sight pierced her through. She nearly leapt up then, flame and frost and dying wails be damned, yet before she could spring to her feet Damhnait held her down.

"They would have slain us all this night. Let them die!"

Cerridwen's own terror counseled the same, for in the tower of fire a figure coalesced, with eyes of molten amber and hands limned in roiling light. A girl, she realized in shock, slender as a river reed, yet roaring with words of thunder.

"All things change and burn by my will! I am your new goddess, you wretched round-eared children of filth!"

Desperate prayers and curses screeched in broken voices burst forth around the blasted meadow. Athred surged to his feet before Athmar's unmoving body, hurling a spear towards the figure in the flames. But his bellow of rage trailed off as his weapon dissolved into ash--and as the figure's fiery gaze swung toward him.

"Athred!" Not even Damhnait could keep Cerridwen from springing upright then, screaming her brother's name. She had no armor, no helm or shield to guard her altered body from harm, but she snatched up a sword from one of the fallen warriors and charged to Athred's side.

This was the one. In her blood and bones she knew it, for her muscles sizzled with remembered pain, stronger with every running step she took. This was the sorceress who had cursed the Clan, who'd warped the bodies and minds of her people and trapped her in a form that was not her own. What battle cry she chose Cerridwen never afterwards recalled. She knew only that she gave voice to fear and fury as she swung her stolen blade above her head, forward and down into a lethal slice aimed for the figure wreathed in flame.

Her blow never fell.

The night blazed white, cutting off all sight and hearing, breath and thought. When the incandescence faded Cerridwen found herself on her knees, gasping, the sword's point dropped to the ground. Both her hands still gripped the hilt, so fiercely that her fingers were numb. When she cast frantic glances round her, she saw that those still living among her father's party were similarly stricken--and that she who had tormented them was in turn overcome. Two more figures flanked her now, hurling clean, clear light from their outstretched hands and bowing her down to the earth beneath its weight.

Women, Cerridwen thought, thunderstruck. Then, as their unearthly faces and tapered ears registered in her awareness: Elves.

She rose as Damhnait and Rilke reached her, the maiden with a dagger drawn and the child flinging herself at her knees. All around them men stumbled back, their weapons brandished in unsteady hands, their faces haggard with renewed fear.

"The elves! The elves have come!" Nefis cried.

"She was one of them! They brought the curse down upon us!" shouted Torrik, and at his cry, a dozen voices surged in anger.

"Hold your positions!" Athred thundered over them all. "By my father's blood, I tell you hold!"

"Behind me, child," Cerridwen hissed, stepping before the little one to drive her order home. Oh, aye, the Clan had always known of the elves, and many of her people had coveted their richer garb, their lordlier horses, the weapons surer and keener than any forged by human hands. Yet this power to reshape flesh and thought was new--and she could only wonder what other fires the elven mages might unleash upon them all this night.

As she watched in dread, a cloud-gray horse galloped towards them. It leapt past fallen men and mounts without effort, and even before it halted, its rider vaulted from its back. This too was an elf, black-haired, azure-eyed, his bearing weary and his garb unkempt from wind and

weather. Anguish scored his face, growing keener as he stepped towards the mage-women and the captive they held between them in the light.

"Gyllerah! Lady Brendalah! Do you have her contained?"

His voice rang like a horn of silver, clearing Cerridwen's mind and heart. "Who are you?" she called.

No older than her brother did the elf appear, and yet he seemed aged past all bearing in his exhaustion. "Do you command these children of men?" he asked, gesturing to the warriors.

"I do," shouted Athred. "I am Athred son of Athmar, High Chief of the Athoden Clan! Who are you, and who is this witch who has cursed my people and slain my father?"

His head seared along one side, his clothing and armor charred, Nefis staggered forth to stand at Athred's right hand, while two more warriors flanked the new High Chief from the left. Several more flinched as the captive howled, but bows with arrows nocked snapped up nonetheless. Spears pointed outward, held in arms that trembled and then steadied as their wielders marshaled their strength.

The elf watched them all, his ageless visage impassive--save at the howl. Then his eyes pressed shut, and when he opened them again, they had darkened with sorrow. "I am Janlec Valràen, son of Nivarrè, Queen of Starhame," he said. "My companions are Brendalah, Lady of the Moonwise, and Gyllerah, also of that order. They are the foremost mages among my kind."

"And the other?" Athred challenged, while the captive let fly one final wavering shriek and then collapsed in the radiance that bound her.

"She is Merawen, an awakening mage. Her power is out of control; it is driving her mad." Janlec Valràen's eyes grew darker still. "We have pursued her for the last two weeks."

"Your mad mage nearly destroyed our people!" Nefis bellowed. Shouts of agreement rose all around him; swords and spears rattled in a dozen hands. Steel-eyed, Athred lifted a hand of his own to check his men as he called, "Stand aside, lord of the Children of the Moon! Clan Athoden claims the blood of this transgressor!"

"The magic also altered the High Chief's daughter and this innocent child!" Damhnait shouted. "Will the shedding of this witch's blood restore them?"

Athred began, "Daughter of Alain, do not think to save yourself from your own punishment--"

"Wait."

That murmured word fell like cleansing snow upon the ravaged meadow. Without lowering her shining hands, the speaker lifted a cloud-gray gaze, far older in seeming than that of the prince, to survey the humans who stood now on the verge of a charge. "We have her," she announced. "She will sleep until we release her from this spell. What is your will, my prince?"

Janlec cast a long look upon the fallen mage, but what tales his eyes might have told were beyond Cerridwen's ken; she could fathom only the resolve in the words he uttered. "Merawen's blood is not Clan Athoden's to spill, Athred son of Athmar. It will win you nothing, and until her power's taint is cleansed, it will curse the ground where she is slain. The spirits of your kin will not be laid to rest."

"What pledge do we have that you will not unleash another witch upon our people?" Athred demanded. "What are the elves to us, that we should surrender our justice to you?"

"Hawks in flight, above the heads of voles," murmured Damhnait, though only Cerridwen heard her. And Cerridwen was not so sure. Janlec Valràen gazed upon her brother with a look she knew, for she had seen it upon the faces of her people: pain and loss. What had it cost him, to hunt down and bind the witch? She could not tell, but she could gamble at least that

he was not about to command his mage-women to destroy them all.

"Give Clan Athoden a ransom in her stead," she called, swallowing down her fear as all eyes turned to her.

Hope flared for only an instant in the eyes of her brother; it vanished swiftly behind a cloud of doubt. "Can you lift the curse upon our people?" Athred said to the prince, and at his question, the two mage-women frowned.

"It is not beyond us," said Gyllerah, never diverting her gaze from her captive, "but not tonight." Her voice was raw.

"Can you give me back my brother?"

The plea snared Cerridwen and held her fast; all else but Athred's drawn face fell away from her awareness. "What of Rilke?" she asked. "Of Damhnait?"

"The witch and her witch-spawn need not claim you anymore, Ciaran! You could take any woman in the city to wife!"

With a dull clang of iron, the sword she'd forgotten she still held fell from Cerridwen's hands. Her eyes turned to Damhnait, who stared back at her with stoic resignation; she could remember, now, those eyes filled with vibrant warmth. "No," she said then, newly resolved, "I cannot." Over Athred's roar of protest, she added to the elven prince, "But nor will I speak against my people. If you are able, I beg you, help them."

As one, Janlec, Brendalah and Gyllerah looked to Cerridwen, who grew cold beneath the combined acuity of their stares. She felt unarmed and unarmored, stripped to her very skin, all that she was or might ever be laid bare before their eyes. "Name yourself, if you would," said the prince.

"I am Cerridwen daughter of Athmar, sister of Athred, shieldmaiden of the Athoden Clan." The words sounded strange in her young man's voice, yet Cerridwen stood taller as she spoke them, lifting their truth before her like a shield. Her blood kin and Clan had named her madman. She was not at all assured that she would leave the meadow alive. Yet in that moment she was almost glad to have endured it all, just for the sake of the sudden martial light in Damhnait's eyes.

Denials thundered forth from the men of the Clan. Athred was the first to step forward, with rage and confusion intermingled upon his face, and Nefis and Torrik flanking him. With Rilke clinging to her neck, Cerridwen could only reach for Damhnait's hand--but the press of palm to palm was a blessing she would cherish for however many more hours the gods would grant them. Thank you at least for this, she thought, bracing herself for her brother's charge.

Athred strode close enough that she saw disconsolate wetness glinting in his eyes. But he surprised her, whirling at the last minute back to the elven prince and crying out in demand and prayer alike, "Then what can you possibly offer me, if I have lost all of my blood kin this night?"

"A fair blood-price for every one of your people slain, "and artisans and builders to mend any dwelling destroyed," Janlec said, without flinching and without inflection. Cerridwen wondered anew what he had lost; the numbness of his voice matched that which pressed down upon her, Damhnait at her side or no.

Silence fell. In the heart of its echoing Athred bowed his head and then turned away, striding back fiercely the way he'd come. "Bring envoys to our village in seven days' time, Prince of the Moon," he hurled over his shoulder as he went. "We will settle the terms of the ransom at that time. Take your witch and leave us in peace to build pyres for our dead."

In syllables that flowed like starlit water the prince murmured something to the mage-women. Gyllerah, her strained features showing the first faint shimmers of sweat, replied in the

same speech--and then, along with the one called Merawen, abruptly vanished. That left Brendalah, whose bearing did not ease as the white light faded from her hands, and who turned her searching eyes once more upon Cerridwen and her two companions. "What of these three others, chieftain of Athoden Clan?" she called.

"They are dead to us," Athred returned in words of stone. "Take them if you wish."

No surprise was that damning verdict to Cerridwen, yet her throat still tightened, and wetness still prickled at her sight. That a faint brave smile curled Damhnait's mouth was no comfort, for the same tears gleamed in her eyes.

Then everything around them went strangely still.

Athred froze in the act of mounting his horse. Warriors stopped in the midst of sheathing their swords, in turning to one another to see how many of their number lived. Transfixed with their riders, the horses stood in poses of nervousness and exhaustion. Even the flames lashing along the trees halted in their consumption of branch and bough and leaf.

Cerridwen started, and found that she could. So too could Rilke and Damhnait; the child clutched Cerridwen's neck more tightly, ill at ease despite her unearthly new wisdom, and Damhnait's hand tightened in Cerridwen's own. It took no great effort to guess what had happened, for Brendalah's shining fingers finished the last of a strange and complex gesture, and then the two remaining elves turned to face them.

"Do not fear," Brendalah said. "I have but pulled a single moment's veil across us. Your clansmen are unharmed."

"What do you want of us?" Cerridwen asked. Her voice cracked, which shamed her, but she could not find the strength to care.

"These others have abandoned you," Janlec said, gesturing with an angry hand at the silent tableau around them, "and for no other crime than falling prey to Merawen's wild magic. Do you wish to return to them?"

"You speak as though we have a choice." The words were a wolf's bark in Cerridwen's throat.

Brendalah stepped closer, her gaze flickering over them all. Power pulled at Cerridwen's awareness--not the power that had changed her, but one nonetheless that her altered flesh recognized as magic. At that sensation, the mage-woman turned and considered her. "Merawen's power is great," she murmured, "but she is not unmatched among our people."

"Can your people restore Rilke's face, or Damhnait's lost kinsmen? Can you make Clan Athoden remember as we do?"

"Can you restore Cerridwen to her proper shape?" Damhnait added, barely a breath after she had finished speaking.

Soberly Rilke put in, in the wake of them both, "She can't do all of it."

Brendalah released a sigh, the barest breath of a spring breeze, and then held out her hands in invitation. Rilke reached without hesitation for the she-elf; with reluctance, Cerridwen shifted her into Brendalah's arms. A smile like sunlight warmed the mage's face, echoed in the child's transformed features, though the light dimmed again as Brendalah looked up once more.

"This young one is correct," she said. "I cannot tell how Merawen has harmed the minds of your people, not without looking within them all, and I risk further hurt if I send forth unwitting magic where wilder force has already burned. Nor may I turn back the flow of time; I may only halt it for a moment. I cannot erase that which has already been done."

A shadow fell across the face of Damhnait, and her hand shook as it gripped Cerridwen's. "Then you cannot help us. You cannot help her."

That Brendalah did not answer. Instead she gazed upon Cerridwen, long enough that the daughter of Athmar felt a sweat of nervousness upon her brow, and said, "Merawen left you not unlovely, and yet you find this no mercy."

"If she had taken the sun and placed it in the vessel of the moon to shine at night," Cerridwen bitterly replied, "then there would be light, yet it would still be wrong."

"Your companion in this shape could make you a husband," Brendalah said to Damhnait then.

"I want no husband." At these words, Damhnait's hand grew steady. "I want the shieldmaiden Cerridwen, whom I love."

For the first time in the long night Rilke beamed; the elven prince canted his head, his gaze alight with interest. Brendalah offered no smile, though a certain peace eased her features as she shifted Rilke onto one arm and held forth her other hand to Cerridwen. "Let me see, then," she murmured, "if I may recover her."

Her heart speeding in her breast, Cerridwen took the hand that was offered.

When their palms touched, Brendalah breathed words of liquid silver. Syllables fell like rain upon Cerridwen's head and frame; she closed her eyes, lifting her face skyward in sudden yearning, as though it rained in truth. The words sustained her, for her flesh flared in pains great and small, nearly dropping her to the earth in a blind and breathless haze. But Damhnait clung to her one hand, the mage-woman to her other, and between them both Cerridwen felt herself begin to change. How long it took there in the veil outside of time, she did not know. A lifetime of agonized anticipation, stripped down to five scant indrawn breaths, passed before the working was done.

Then Damhnait, a smile like dawn ascending upon her face, was pulling her into her arms. Cerridwen could not tell which pleased her more: her hands at their proper size cradling the other maiden's face, or the joy ablaze in Damhnait's steadfast eyes. She had always thought them fair. Now they held beauty beyond her meager skill to tell.

"One joy at least will come of this night," Damhnait said.

Brendalah smiled now, as did Prince Janlec beside her. "Thank you," Cerridwen said. She was exiled and kinless, but she was alive, she was herself again, and Damhnait, loyal and brave Damhnait, had helped to bring it about. Gratitude too seemed beyond her skill to express, yet these, she thought, were words that needed speaking.

And so to Damhnait she said, "So great a debt you've laid at my feet... I do not know how to discharge it." Her hands quivered as she smoothed loose strands of hair back from Damhnait's ruddy face, but as she spoke, her touch and her words alike grew sure. "But I pray you will give me the chance to try. I pledge myself to you, daughter of Alain. No husband can I be, but I will be instead the friend of your body and spirit."

"A treasure I accept with all my heart," Damhnait said, "though we may wander alone in wild lands unclaimed by men."

"You need not wander," said Prince Janlec. "No mage of the Moonwise am I, but I offer this. If you need a home and hall, Starhame will shelter you." To little Rilke he inclined his head, adding, "And with you, this child, until we see what Merawen's magic has wrought of her. Will you come with us?"

No surprise was in Rilke's face; her four small eyes seemed almost as ageless and knowing as those of the elves. And she needed no glance to Cerridwen or Damhnait as she said for them all, "We will."