



Lady

of the

Lake



Published by Jennifer Wherrett

www.thelady.com.au (Lady of the Lake)

Copyright © Jennifer Wherrett, 2011

The moral right of the author has been asserted

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales, is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved
Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book



The wisdom of transcendence

A word of warning:
Should you wish for your life to stay as it is,
Then do not read a single word of this book –
Not a single word.
But if you would welcome a little change,
And if you are unafraid to walk in new territory,
Or even if you are just a little curious,
Then take my hand and let us go there together.

Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	5
<i>Part I</i>	
<i>Chapter 1. Otherworldly</i>	16
<i>Chapter 2. Healer</i>	52
<i>Chapter 3. Guardian</i>	113
<i>Chapter 4. Confrontation</i>	170
<i>Chapter 5. Kiss of the Unicorn</i>	248
<i>Part II</i>	
<i>Chapter 6. The King's Daughter</i>	297
<i>Chapter 7. Revelations</i>	316
<i>Chapter 8. Love's Reflection</i>	408
<i>Chapter 9. Intercession</i>	472
<i>Part III</i>	
<i>Chapter 10. The Army That Slumbers</i>	526
<i>Chapter 11. The One to Whom She Speaks</i>	615
<i>Chapter 12. Awaken</i>	673
<i>Epilogue</i>	707

*Fear not my children,
For I am come.*

Prologue

Vivienne straightened up, sat back on her heels, and rubbed the ache in the small of her back. Smiling ruefully, she silently acknowledged the fact that her body was not as supple as it used to be. When had the suppleness of youth deserted her? It couldn't have been sudden or she would have noticed. In fact, now that she thought about it, she felt the weight of every one of her forty years. Mentally shaking her head to rid herself of the thought, she chided herself. What was the point of going down that road? There were still plenty of good years left in her yet.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to seek the silence and solitude of her small herb garden. Or perhaps, she thought as she surveyed the results of the morning's labours, what was needed was more time here, alone with her thoughts, not less. There was no denying her garden suffered from neglect, and she wondered if there was some deeper metaphorical meaning in the fact. Resembling a mass of unkempt, tangled hair, its appearance this morning had shocked her into the realisation that she couldn't remember when she'd last made time for herself. All her garden had needed was a solid morning's devoted work to restore some semblance of order. The large pile of weeds beside her was, now, the only testament to its former unruly state. She wasn't so sure about herself. It would be nice, she thought cynically, if all it took to treat the symptoms of her neglect of herself was a morning's solid labour. Shrugging off the thought, she took off her gloves and removed a wayward strand of hair from her eyes, silently vowing not to leave her garden neglected for so long next time.

Although never stated explicitly, everyone knew Vivienne was not to be disturbed when she worked in her garden. Her time there was inviolable. Usually, this unspoken rule was rigorously respected and honoured, so when she

saw Luned, one of the novices, half running directly towards her, she watched the girl approach and waited in a state of mild irritation. Suppressing another stab of irritation, she watched as the younger girl struggled with her bulk. Really, she thought irritably, the girl is much too young to be hampered by so much extra weight. This was Marghad's doing. Luned was absorbing far more from Marghad than just a simple knowledge of cooking. A frown of disapproval formed on Vivienne's normally serene features as she wondered, not for the first time, about the wisdom of allowing the girl to become Marghad's apprentice. Resolving to have a word, she recognised, even as she thought it, the futility of that little exercise. She would, she knew, sooner stop the sun from rising than persuade Marghad to curb her passion for food.

Luned stopped beside Vivienne, her ample chest heaving with the effort of filling her lungs with air.

"Lady," she gulped, "sorry to disturb ye, bu' ye'd best come."

Vivienne felt another stab of irritation.

"Luned dear," she said, keeping the irritation out of her voice with an effort, "I've asked you to call me Vivienne."

The priestesses were affectionately and collectively referred to by the local villagers as the Ladies – a reference to one of their most important functions of maintaining the sacred well of the Lady, the goddess they served. For Vivienne, as High Priestess, this collective title had been collapsed into the simpler version of 'Lady'. The villagers never referred to her as anything else, and they certainly never used her given name – an unfortunate habit the younger priestesses had adopted as well, despite a continuous and concerted effort on Vivienne's part to have them call her by her proper name.

"Never mind," she said quickly, dismissively, deciding not to pursue the issue, knowing the effort to be futile. Shielding her eyes from the morning sun with her hand, she looked up at Luned. "What is it that is so urgent it cannot wait?"

Luned was doubled over, hands on knees, still trying to recover her breath. "Ye'd better come," she said breathlessly.

Feeling the irritation rise again, Vivienne picked herself up off the ground. Blessed be, she cursed silently, seething with frustration. The day had begun well enough but now seemed to be turning into one large exercise in futility. She gave her garden one last wistful glance, thinking she had, at least, had some success in restoring it to its former glory. Following Luned, she made another mental note to keep her distance from people. In this mood, she was likely to snap someone's head off. The older priestesses, more used to her infrequent bad moods, would not be overly affected, but the younger girls could take weeks to recover. Vivienne was well aware they were a little awed, even intimidated by her. Normally, she was very careful not to take advantage of that, nor to do anything to exacerbate it. Today, though, she recognised the potential of shattering a fragile ego – probably Luned's, she thought, as the girl again heaved and puffed with the effort of half running back towards the Long Hall.

"Slow down, Luned," Vivienne ordered, struggling again to hide her irritation. "You'll do yourself some damage. Nothing can be that urgent."

But Luned hoisted her skirts and quickened her pace. Vivienne frowned heavily. She was never ignored, especially by the younger girls, and she realised, at last, that the girl's hurried manner was, in point of fact, barely-contained excitement. Curiosity replaced irritation, and, silenced, she followed Luned without uttering another word.

As soon as she walked around the kitchen she saw a group huddled in front of the well, all talking at once, animatedly, and noted at a glance that every priestess and all the novices were amongst the group. Although unceasing in its chatter, the group shifted as Vivienne drew closer, the girls and women separating like courtiers parting for their queen to allow her through. Once they parted, Vivienne saw what it was that had so captured their attention and aroused their excitement. Lying on the grass in the centre of the group was what

appeared, at first, to be naught but a tight bundle of fine white cloth. But as she observed it, the bundle moved, and Vivienne realised the cloth swathed a squirming object, like a little pupa trying to break free of its protective cocoon. She knelt on the grass beside it and leaned over to lift the edge of the cloth. The tiny face of a newly born child turned towards her, and the child's clear green eyes locked on to her own.

Vivienne could not look away. She sucked in a quick, involuntary breath. The eyes of the child held hers, and she knew, she just *knew*, those eyes were seeing her in a way no one else's ever had. Or, she thought briefly before she dismissed the thought, seeing *into* her in a way no one else ever had, as if she was suddenly made of transparent glass. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she brought her hand involuntarily to her throat – an unconscious gesture of unease. She could not tear her eyes from those of the child. Fear seared through her like hot water through her veins, tightening her chest and throat. Silence surrounded and enveloped her. The scene around her blurred, and then all movement was suspended. Only she and the child existed in this space, in this moment.

“What is this?” she whispered involuntarily to no one in particular.

And then, as suddenly as it receded, the chatter of the group once again intruded, and the scene around Vivienne righted itself. The moment passed. She released her breath, although her heart continued pounding in her chest. As she regained her equilibrium, she berated herself for her foolishness.

“Just a babe,” she whispered silently. “Just a babe.” Leaning over, she lifted the child into her arms. “Where have you come from, little one, eh?” she asked the child. “Why have you appeared here?”

The girls pressed close, peering over Vivienne's shoulder to get a closer look at the child, and their incessant chatter aroused her now-familiar irritation.

"The child can't have been here long," she said crisply, cradling the babe against her as she stood. "Search the woods, girls," she commanded. "See if anyone is close by."

The group around her did not move nor did the incessant chatter lower its pitch, so Vivienne lost her patience and did something entirely out of character. She stamped her foot and raised her voice.

"Go, girls! Now!"

Girls scattered in all directions.

Vivienne turned to the older women who had rightly assumed they were not included in the command.

"Angharad, could you go and ask Mahaude to come? She's still suckling her little one. I'm sure she won't mind sharing some of her milk with us. Briga, Gwyneth, Luane, go and ask around in the villages. See if anyone knows anything." And then, as an afterthought, she added, "And for mercy's sake, be discreet."

"Where do you s'pose he's come from, Vivi?" Marghad asked her. "Who would leave such a tiny tot, 'n why?"

"I do not know," Vivienne replied, moving towards the kitchen and the warmth and comfort of Marghad's large, open hearth fire. "I do not know," she said again as she sank on to a stool in front of the fire. "They know the child will be well taken care of here. But still, they must have been desperate to have left it." Feeling the warmth of the flames, she unwrapped the swaddling and laughed softly. "I do believe your little boy is actually a little girl, Marghad."

"Well now, so she is," Marghad replied, peering over Vivienne's shoulder. "'N wha's this then?"

The child was naked except for a beautiful, finely worked silver snake coiled protectively around her right leg, the head curled upward and the tail curled down towards the child's knee. Each one of its scales was intricately engraved in exquisite detail, and its eyes sparkled with two beautifully cut green emeralds.

Although too large for the tiny leg, the snake was not bothering the child. Her little legs kicked the air as if unaware of its presence. Marghad slid the circlet of silver off the child's leg, and held it up for a closer inspection.

"'Tis beautiful," she breathed. "Look at the workmanship. I've no' ever seen the likes . . ."

Her words were whipped from her as a brilliant flash of colour and light – white, violet, green, and turquoise – filled her vision. A musical feminine voice shimmered in the air around her, filling her mind with a breathy whisper.

"Fear not my children, for I am come."

Staggering slightly, Marghad blinked as her vision cleared. "Did ye see tha'?"

"See what?"

"Tha' light . . . 'n the voice."

"What *are* you talking about?" Vivienne asked, throwing Marghad a look of mild irritation.

Marghad did not see it. Instead, she peered down at the child. "She spoke to me," she said, sounding bewildered. "I swear she spoke to me."

Vivienne raised her eyebrows. "Marghad . . ."

"I tell ye true," Marghad said, unperturbed by the warning tone in Vivienne's voice. "'Fear no' my children, for I am come'. Tha's wha' she said. 'N this," she continued quickly and defiantly before Vivienne had a chance to comment, holding the silver snake up between them, "is humming. Feel it, Vivi. It's humming like a bee."

"Don't be absurd . . ."

"Look at her eyes," Marghad breathed. "They're the colour of the emeralds. I've no' ever seen green eyes in a babe this young before."

"So what's your point?"

"Great Mother," Marghad exclaimed breathlessly, "could it be?"

Vivienne sat tight-lipped, waiting, with raised eyebrows, for further explanation, and, when none was forthcoming, asked irritably, "What in the Lady's name are you talking about?"

"She's a Holy One, Vivi."

Vivienne's eyebrows remained raised, her expression reflecting both her dislike of the territory into which the discussion had wandered and her suspicion that she would like what was coming even less.

"The folk o' the otherworld," Marghad clarified. "Ye know . . . the forest dwellers . . ." and then, as Vivienne's eyebrows remained raised, Marghad sighed, "also called faerie."

Enlightenment dawned. "Ah!"

Vivienne had heard the stories as a young girl, so she was well aware of the villagers' superstitious belief in the otherworld. She'd rather liked the stories but had never really considered the possibility of its actual existence. She was too practical and had too much to contend with in this realm to be concerning herself with any other.

"Marghad," she explained patiently, "the otherworld is folklore - tales told to children to stir their imaginations, or to scare them into behaving themselves."

Marghad clucked her tongue in disagreement. "'Course the otherworld exists! Ye might no' believe in it, Vivienne, bu' tha' does no' mean it does no' exist. It just means it does no' exist for ye. This," she said, holding the coiled snake out for Vivienne's inspection, "is their workmanship just as sure as I know my way 'round this kitchen."

"We see jewellery like this all the time, Marghad," Vivienne snapped. "I could easily name a number of high-born women with bracelets exactly like this. The child obviously comes from wealth, and they've left the silver as payment." This talk of otherworlds was beginning to arouse the now-familiar irritation. Taking a deep breath, she continued more calmly, "As I said, the child's come

from a wealthy family. People like that can afford luxuries you don't see every day."

Marghad lifted a tiny hand with one of her fingers. "If she comes from wealth, then why 'as she been left 'ere? Why do they no' take care o' her themselves?"

"They have their reasons," Vivienne replied, the tone of her voice indicating she'd had enough of the conversation. "Maybe they wanted to keep her birth a secret. Who knows?"

Marghad folded her arms over her ample bosom and gave a harrumph of disagreement. "The otherworld has to be respected, Vivienne. We ignore it at our peril. Why do ye think this land is in so much turmoil? 'Cause we no longer pay heed to the true nature o' things, 'n now the land mourns. Well, we may 'ave forgotten them, but they obviously 'ave no' forgotten us." She unfolded her arms and bent to lay a hand on the tiny forehead. "The Holy Ones do no' make a gift o' their own for no reason. There's a purpose in it. Ye'd best keep tha' in mind."

Vivienne plucked the silver snake from Marghad's fingers and slipped it into the pocket of her skirt. "You keep those stories to yourself," she said, giving Marghad a stern look. "Promise me, Marghad. You'll only cause trouble if you go spreading stories around of faeries and otherworlds. This child is as human as you and I, so don't you go saying otherwise."

"Aye, Vivi," Marghad sighed in defeat, straightening again and putting her hands on her hips. "Ye're free to think as ye like, as am I. I'll promise to keep m' thoughts to m'self if ye promise me ye'll give tha' back to her when she's grown." She waved her hand to indicate the snake now hidden in Vivienne's skirt. "It's hers. It's a part o' her somehow."

Vivienne's features softened as she looked down at the babe on her lap.

"All right," she said softly, "I promise I'll give it back to her when she's older." She held a little hand with her own and smiled when the tiny fingers

closed around one of her fingers in response. "You're right about one thing, Marghad," she whispered. "She is a gift. She's a gift from the Lady." And the answer to my prayers, she continued silently to herself. At forty, she knew she would not now conceive a child of her own, and knew, after all these years, she was incapable of having a baby. But that had not stopped her praying to the Lady for a miracle. Now, it seemed, the Lady had answered her prayers.

Marghad's voice penetrated her thoughts. "No matter wha' ye think, Vivi, this child is unique, 'n her destiny will reflect tha'. I know it as surely as if the Lady Herself confirmed it in person. We should prepare ourselves for tha'. She may be different from the others."

"She won't be different," Vivienne said, making it clear she would neither consider nor allow for the possibility. "I'll make sure of it."

Marghad shook her head at Vivienne. "Have it yer way, Vivienne," she finally said and then added, "'N just wha' is it Merlin's always sayin'? Ah yes." She answered her own question, "*Ye canno' fight destiny 'n win.*"

"Destiny!" Vivienne scoffed. "Her destiny is here with us. She *will* be one of us, Marghad. I'll train her myself, and who knows, she may even follow me as High Priestess." Then, ignoring Marghad, she picked the child up and pressed her lips against a soft cheek. She already knew the girls would find no sign of anyone in the surrounding woods. Nor would any of the villagers know anything. The child was a gift - her gift - the long-awaited answer to her persistent and patient prayers. This child was the Lady's reward for long, devoted, and faithful service. Vivienne knew it as surely as night follows day.

Well, well, she thought, smiling to herself. The day had not turned out so badly after all.

She felt her irritation dissolve like a dawn mist dispelled by the gentle rays of the morning sun.

~~

Part I

*The Lady has had to become
That which She is not,
So that She might become
That which She is.*

Chapter 1

Otherworldly

I

“**M**arghad, have you seen Niniane?”

It wasn't the question that caused Marghad to pause, her palms pressed firmly into the lump of dough on the table in front of her, it was the sense of urgency in Vivienne's voice. Marghad, covered in flour and flushed from the exertion of kneading, noted that Vivienne, too, was slightly flushed.

“She wasn't at breakfast this morning,” Vivienne said, concern forming furrows of anxiety on her forehead, “and now she hasn't shown up for lessons. It's not like her to miss lessons, not like her at all.”

“I've no' seen her since early this morning, Vivi,” Marghad responded, trying unsuccessfully to remain unaffected by Vivienne's concern. Normally so unflappably calm, Marghad rarely saw Vivienne this flustered.

Vivienne took her bottom lip between her teeth and walked back through the kitchen into the Long Hall.

“I'm sorry to interrupt,” she said and paused briefly to ensure she had the full attention of the group of girls. “Does anyone know where Niniane might be?”

The silence that followed told her all she needed to know, and had she not been so preoccupied, she would have noticed the girls exchanging silent, knowing glances and known even more. Some rolled their eyes; some raised their eyebrows, pursed their lips, or shook their heads in silent condemnation, though none were brave enough to give voice to their thoughts. They would not have dared to miss lessons save for the gravest of illnesses. This flagrant

disregard for the sanctity of learning – a rare privilege for such as they – was the latest string in the bow of Niniane’s eccentricities. It wasn’t that she was strange . . . exactly, she just wasn’t the same as everyone else, and, as far as they were concerned, she made no effort to fit in.

Only one girl remained motionless, refusing to return the looks of the other girls. Vivienne’s gaze fell upon her for a long moment, and the girl returned her look without blinking.

“Sienna,” Vivienne asked quietly, “do you know where she might be?”

“I do not know where she is,” Sienna responded as quietly. “I haven’t seen her today.”

Vivienne’s penetrating gaze stayed on the girl for a moment longer, her narrowing eyes reflecting her suspicion that Sienna was not being entirely truthful. But Sienna did not flinch as she returned Vivienne’s gaze, and it was Vivienne who broke eye contact first.

“Very well then,” she said softly as she turned towards the kitchen again. “Dear me,” she said to herself, “then where is she?”

Angharad, the girls’ tutor, sensing Vivienne’s distress, offered assistance. “We’ll help you find her, Vivienne.”

And so the group of girls and women spilled out of the kitchen and into the courtyard that separated the kitchen from the sacred well. Vivienne’s usual calm efficiency reasserted itself now that she had help, and she wasted no time in organising them all.

“Leda, you and Dindraine search the stables and the visitor huts. Niobe, you look in our rooms. Angharad, would you mind going to the cider mill to see if she’s up there? Allora, you go with her. Drusille, you and Tali go to the small village, and I’ll take a walk through the woods to the larger one.” Marghad emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her huge white apron.

“Marghad, could you search the gardens and the bee hives?” Vivienne paused,

again chewing her bottom lip, trying to think of anywhere else Niniane could be. Frowning in concentration, she said absently, "If she's not there . . ."

The group of priestesses turned as one, the same thought occurring to each simultaneously in response to Vivienne's last comment. There was only one more place Niniane could be if she wasn't located elsewhere. They each looked at the forest beyond the orchard. Even from here, the tall, ancient oaks were visible. The forest was dark, the oaks intimidating, and the girls had no need of being told to keep away. There was a feeling of ancient energy about the forest that everyone, by unspoken mutual agreement, felt was best left undisturbed.

"I'm not searching the forest," Leda said flatly, giving voice to their collective thought.

"The Lady forbid!" Angharad exclaimed. "If she's in the forest, we'll never find her."

"Oh for goodness sake," Vivienne said sharply. "She's not in the forest. She knows that's forbidden. She would not disobey me on that." The tone of her voice made it clear she would brook no argument. "She's probably visiting again and just lost track of time."

But even as she said it, she knew it wasn't true. Niniane had never missed a lesson or failed to complete her chores. It distressed her when she aroused the displeasure of others, particularly Vivienne's. If she had not turned up for lessons, something was wrong.

"Let's get a move on," Vivienne commanded the group around her. "The sooner we find her, the sooner we can all return to normal."

~~

The group dispersed in several directions, leaving a lone figure standing beside the well. Sienna had hovered at the back of the group, making sure she'd escaped Vivienne's attention. Now that the group had dispersed, she took a couple of slow backward steps, glancing around her to make sure no one was

watching. Only when she was certain no one else was in sight did she turn on her heel and run towards the orchard.

~~

Vivienne walked quickly, purposefully, following the wide and well-worn path through the woods. She knew she was being ridiculous. Niniane was no longer a child. But though she knew it to be irrational, Vivienne could not ignore the feeling of heavy uneasiness in the pit of her stomach – a knot of anxiety that accompanied a sense of something having clicked out of place in her ordered, calm world. Something had changed, as if the solid ground under her feet had shifted and she no longer knew where she was walking. The feeling had persisted all morning and become so intense she'd felt the urge to seek Niniane out, if only to reassure herself that everything was as it had always been. But Niniane was not to be found.

Vivienne slowed her pace, lost in her thoughts. It was impossible not to recall a similar, panicked walk to the larger village through these same woods, for both the feeling and the circumstance arousing it were identical. Then, Niniane, barely three summers old, had gone missing just as she was now, and Vivienne had felt the same dread of something having shifted in her familiar world. But when the door of the hut closest to the track opened in response to her knock, she'd seen Niniane perched at the end of Mahaude's table, her little legs swinging innocently back and forth as she piled a chunk of bread into her mouth, and Vivienne had known the feeling was naught but a product of her overactive imagination. That was so many years ago she'd forgotten about it . . . until today.

Bringing her awareness back to the present, she resumed her purposeful stride.

"And so will it be again," she whispered out loud, chiding herself for allowing an irrational feeling to consume her to the point of distraction. "It's just

a stupid, irrational fear," she told herself, "with no basis in reality. No one can, or will, take her from me. She is the Lady's gift."

Stopping at the edge of the track, she surveyed the many front doors ahead of her. "Please Lady, let her be here," Vivienne silently begged.

The door of Mahaude's hut, the one closest to the track, opened immediately in response to her knock.

~~

Niniane sat cross-legged, a thick layer of leaves forming a natural cushion against the hard ground underneath her. One hand rested lightly on the little furry body pressed up against her leg. She smiled as she looked down at him, loving his liquid brown eyes, his long ears – both slightly too big for his small head – his coarse fur, and his tiny, budding antlers. He'd trotted into the clearing not long after she dropped, cross-legged, on to the leaves that covered the forest floor. Expecting him to become alarmed at her presence, he surprised her by trotting over, folding his legs underneath him and sitting beside her. Watching him settle comfortably against her leg, the thought had crossed her mind that he knew she would be here and had come to see her. But she'd dismissed the idea as ludicrous, knowing it to be impossible.

So they sat companionably in the middle of a clearing edged by thick, tall, dark trees whose branches spread over them like giant, benevolent arms, covering the clearing in a canopy of green leaves. Niniane closed her eyes and tilted her face skyward, seeing through her closed eyelids the mottling of light and dark where the sunlight struggled to penetrate the abundant layer of leaves. She breathed deeply, inhaling the silence and tranquillity of the forest, feeling it soothe her. The air was pure, carrying a hint of the forest's smells and the silent welcome of the ancient oaks.

The other priestesses held the forest in great awe, refusing to go near it, let alone set foot in it. Niniane understood their fear. The forest was vastly different from the woods that separated the temple from the villages that bordered it. The

woods were light, airy, and open, giving the distinct impression they had nothing at all to hide, while the forest was dense and dark and hid its many secrets deep within its depths. But she was not afraid of it. Normally, she stood at the edge of the orchard, as close to the forest as she dared go, longing to venture into it, wondering why it was forbidden. But today, merely looking into the forest had not been enough, and the lure of the tall trees had, finally, proved too strong, overshadowing even her fear of arousing Vivienne's displeasure.

A disturbance in the leaves on the ground nearby prompted her to open her eyes. A tiny squirrel stood regarding her for a moment, his bushy tail curled up behind him, his front paws hanging in front of him, whiskers twitching as he sniffed the air. Then, his curiosity satisfied, he scampered away and disappeared under the bracken on the other side of the clearing.

Niniane took another deep breath and sighed as she expelled the air from her lungs. Her little companion tensed at the sound but relaxed again as the echoes of her sigh disappeared. She had never before, in her short life, broken a rule, disobeyed, misbehaved, or, in any way, displeased Vivienne, but today, she had committed two unforgivable offences: she had missed lessons and sought refuge in the one place that was strictly forbidden. What madness had taken hold of her? She had awoken that morning thinking the day would be just like any other. But even as she pulled the blankets back and put her feet to the floor, she became aware of a strange feeling within, as if she had stepped through a doorway from a room that was comfortable and familiar into a room where nothing was recognisable. Thinking the feeling nothing but an echo of her strange dreams, she tried to ignore it, but, rather than dissipating, the feeling had grown stronger, making her feel vulnerable and fragile – too fragile to contend with the derision of the other girls. So she escaped to the one place she knew they would not find her.

"You will only experience who you are if you allow yourself to go beyond."

The words floated around her like a dry whisper on the soft breeze. Niniane tensed, alarmed, looking at the clearing around her. But she was quite alone apart from her little companion, and not even by the slightest tensing of his body did he give any indication of having heard anything.

“Go beyond?” she asked out loud.

Silence and the tensing of the little body beside her were her only response.

“Sorry, little one,” she whispered softly when he raised his head and looked at her.

“Go beyond what you think you know. Go beyond what you think you believe. Go beyond who you think you are. Go beyond what you have been taught.”

Niniane tensed again as she listened, and then sat perfectly still, waiting for more. But silence filled the clearing. She glanced around her again, just in case, and then sighed softly. What a strange day this was turning out to be. Her thoughts drifted to the lessons she was supposed to be attending, and she bit her lip in distress. Angharad, the girls’ tutor, had made it clear she considered Niniane’s curious, searching mind a symptom of arrogance and rebelliousness. Niniane didn’t intend to be rude when she questioned, nor did she intend to offend, but Angharad chose to take offence and responded with disdain to her questions. And now the other girls, with one exception, had begun to take their cue from Angharad. The signs of their dislike had been subtle at first – a change in the atmosphere when she asked a question as their intolerance, contempt, and even condemnation filled the air around her; or an irritable shifting in their seats when she made a comment. But then their expressions of derision had become more overt, and they were taking their toll. Niniane had become overly conscious of what she said and of how she behaved around the other girls, remaining silent, trying to hide, fearing a disdainful response, and she felt herself closing up and withering like a flower in need of water.

“Are you, then, to measure your acceptability by those around you? You do so at great cost, for it is ignorance that determines what is and what is not acceptable to them. Are you, then, to be thus defined, and therefore reduced, by ignorance?”

Niniane opened her mouth as if to reply but closed it again. The words resonated within her, soothing and calming her almost as much as the tranquillity of the ancient forest. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“Niniane!”

Sienna’s voice ripped through the forest, shattering the silence and slicing through Niniane’s thoughts. Her little companion bolted up on to his legs and bounded away in a blurred flash of brown. Niniane, too, jumped up, her heart pounding out a panicked rhythm. To be caught here would incur a harsh punishment indeed. She ran through the forest, bursting out of it and running through the orchard towards the sound of Sienna’s voice.

“What is it?” she asked breathlessly when she reached Sienna.

“What is it?” Sienna echoed incredulously. “You missed lessons, N’ane. Vivienne was worried, and now everyone’s out looking for you. What were you thinking?”

Niniane looked at the ground at Sienna’s feet, her shoulders slumped despondently. “I know, I know.” She looked up and shrugged her shoulders, a picture of resigned defeat. “I couldn’t face them all today. I just couldn’t do it.” She sounded like a person who was well aware of the consequences of their actions but powerless to do otherwise.

Sienna looked at her friend sympathetically. Unfortunately, she understood Niniane’s avoidance of lessons and the other girls all too well. Trying to give what little comfort she could, she wound her arm through Niniane’s in an effort to console.

“Let’s collect a pile of apples so you can pretend you’ve been in the orchard the whole morning,” she said. “It’s weak, but it’ll do.”

“How do you know I wasn’t in the orchard?” Niniane asked.

“N’ane,” Sienna said, rolling her eyes, “you’ve been eyeing off that damned forest for as long as I can remember. It was only a matter of time before you succumbed.”

Niniane smiled sheepishly.

“Although,” Sienna added, looking at the tall trees over the top of the orchard’s apple trees, “I’m damned if I know why. The forest has an eerie feel about it. You will be careful in there, won’t you?”

~~

Standing on tip-toe, Niniane emptied her skirt-full of apples on to the large wooden table that dominated the kitchen. The apples immediately rolled everywhere like errant children running amuck, and both Niniane and Marghad were forced to try and round them up. Some of the apples managed to elude them, rolling off the table and landing on the floor with a thud.

“N wha’s this then, poppet?” Marghad asked as they both stood up, satisfied they’d stemmed the rolling of apples.

“Well . . .” Niniane began shamefacedly, “I thought you might like some,” she finished weakly. Marghad was no fool, a fact Niniane was only too well aware of. Trying to muster even a small amount of sincerity, she tried again. “I thought you might like some for a pie or for apple sauce. I know how much you love apple sauce.”

Marghad crossed her arms over her ample bosom and levelled a steady, penetrating gaze at Niniane over the table. Knowing how lame she’d sounded, Niniane dropped her eyes. The knowledge that apple picking was quite an event in the yearly calendar of the temple – an event everyone participated in – hovered unspoken between them too.

“Well thank ye, poppet,” Marghad said after a prolonged silence. “I do love apple sauce, an’ I’m very glad ye thought o’ me.” She picked up an apple, making a show of inspecting it more closely. “O’ course,” she said, looking at Niniane and holding the apple up to emphasise her point, “these apples are no’

ripe yet, so I'm no' quite sure wha' I'll do with them, but it's the thought tha' counts, is it no', poppet?"

Niniane felt heavy with guilt. She could only bring herself to mumble "Mmmm" in reply, still keeping her eyes lowered, afraid to encounter Marghad's all-seeing, all-knowing look.

Marghad struggled to keep her smile hidden. "Might feed 'em to the chickens," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger either side of her chin in mock consideration of what to do with the gift of apples. "Probably give 'em a bellyache, bu' they'll get over it."

Niniane smiled in spite of herself. When she looked up, the smile still in her eyes, she saw it reflected in Marghad's dark eyes as well.

"Ah, tha's better," Marghad said warmly. "Go' m' girl back."

Niniane visibly relaxed. At that moment, the other girls returned from their various searches, trudging silently through the kitchen and into the Long Hall. Marghad and Niniane stood equally as silently, facing each other across the table, watching the girls walk past one by one in a parody of a funeral procession. Not one made eye contact, and not one spoke to, or acknowledged, either Niniane or Marghad. Niniane felt a surge of anger which, try as she might, she could not contain.

"Did someone die in my absence?" she asked Marghad loudly.

"Here, poppet," was Marghad's gentle reply, "help me take these outside."

"The Lady help me," Niniane said a moment later as they stood among the chickens, "now I've done it. If there was even the remotest chance they would like me again . . ." She shook her head to indicate the impossibility of that sentiment.

Marghad didn't reply, and the two stood in silence, watching the chickens scratch and peck at the apples strewn on the ground around them. Chickens always seemed so content as they went about their business. Their contentment was even contagious, their clucking comforting, as they tested the under-ripe

apples with their beaks, stabbing and pushing them this way and that. Niniane envied them in this moment. She wondered if Marghad was serious about the stomach aches.

“Don’t worry about it, poppet,” Marghad said matter-of-factly, “they can eat anything,” and then as an afterthought, “anything, tha’ is, ‘cept egg shells.”

“Really?” Niniane asked, surprised.

“Really, poppet. Causes them to gain an unhealthy interest in their own eggs, ‘n we would no’ want tha’.”

Niniane’s mouth formed a silent ‘O’. Marghad was full of these useful little titbits of information.

“Think I might know where ye’ve been, poppet,” Marghad said quietly. Niniane opened her mouth to reply, but Marghad held up a hand to forestall any comment. “No, don’t tell me. I’ve no wish to lie, so if I don’t know for sure, ‘twill save me the trouble.”

Niniane slowly nodded her understanding.

“Thing is, my sweet,” Marghad continued, “sometimes some of us feel an’ say an’ do things tha’ make us different from others. ‘Tis important to remember tha’ being different is no’ wrong. ‘Tis our differences tha’ make us unique, an’ ‘tis our uniqueness tha’ makes us special.” She turned Niniane to face her, placing her hands on either side of Niniane’s face. Niniane could only look at her, eyes filling with tears, as Marghad continued, “Ye are who ye are, N’ane. Don’t ye let those small-minded girls,” she inclined her head at the Long Hall to indicate the other novices, “stop ye from being who ye are. ‘Twould be a terrible thing indeed if they managed to turn ye into one o’ them.”

Niniane gave a watery smile at that last comment. Marghad returned the smile as she tilted Niniane’s face towards her and kissed the top of her head. “Ye will remember tha’ won’t ye, N’ane?” she asked.

“Hope so,” Niniane replied as a tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. Marghad wiped it away with her thumb. “I might need reminding every so often,” Niniane said, a wry smile acknowledging her weak attempt at humour.

“I’m happy to oblige, my poppet,” Marghad responded. “Now, come ‘n help me inside. I’ve a treat baking that’ll cheer ye right up,” she said brightly.

~~

Niniane sat perched on a stool, watching as Marghad placed a couple of large, freshly baked loaves of bread on the table. The aroma of baking bread filled the kitchen, and Niniane’s mouth started watering in anticipation of the first bite. Coupled with the deliciously sweet honey from the bee hives, Marghad’s bread was irresistible, to be savoured in silent homage, and the aroma of it never failed to summon the priestesses.

“How’d you know, Mar?” Niniane asked, watching as Marghad began to cut the bread into thick slices.

Marghad paused as she sliced the bread and put her finger to her nose. “Ah,” she said, “this nose always knows.” They exchanged smiles. “I’m no’ a fool, poppet. I see wha’s going on. As for the other . . . well,” she shrugged, “I just know.”

“I’d never make the mistake of taking you for a fool,” Niniane said fervently. She was, in fact, well aware of Marghad’s ability to see, to sense, and to know things others did not.

The priestesses came, as Niniane knew they would, filling the kitchen with their chatter as they waited for a slice of honeyed bread. But the chatter subsided and fell into a heavy silence as Vivienne stepped into the kitchen. Her eyes widened slightly when she saw Niniane sitting at the end of the table and then narrowed, her mouth tightening as an intense stab of relief was swiftly followed by cold anger. Having enough insight into her own feelings to know the intensity of her anger was proportional to the depth of her fear, she fought the urge to berate Niniane for missing lessons and causing such disruption to their

daily routine. Now was not the time. With an effort, she remained calm as she walked over to Niniane, perfectly aware of the dozen or so pairs of eyes watching with intense curiosity. Leaning over, she gave Niniane a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” she said softly. “We’ll talk tonight.”

And with that, she turned and, just as calmly, walked out of the kitchen.

Niniane sat frozen, looking at the space in the doorway through which Vivienne had disappeared, trying not to be aware of the undercurrent of disappointment that suddenly pervaded the kitchen. Eventually, she glanced over, and Marghad, glancing back, briefly shook her head, urging Niniane to stay silent.

Only once they had the kitchen to themselves again did Marghad offer Niniane a word of advice.

“I’ve no’ seen her tha’ angry for a long while, poppet. Will ye do me a favour, love? Will ye tell her honestly wha’ ye feel? Ye won’t hurt or disappoint her, N’ane. Rather, I think ye’ll find she’ll understand. She’s no fool either, is our Vivi.”

~~

Lying in bed with her hands clasped behind her head, Niniane watched the shadows dancing among the rafters in time with the flickering flame of the candle beside her bed. Sleep eluded her, but then, she wasn’t trying to sleep. She waited, knowing Vivienne would come. Usually, Niniane looked forward to their time together in the evening, but not tonight. Tonight she felt nervous – something she’d never before experienced in the context of her relationship with Vivienne.

Trying to distract herself from her nervousness, she thought about the strangeness of the day. Something had changed today, but she could not say what. She had never before even considered the possibility of missing lessons, though many times she had longed to. So why had she today? And who was it

who had spoken to her in the forest? *Go beyond*. How do you go beyond . . . and go beyond what exactly?

Vivienne interrupted Niniane's thoughts by walking in and sitting on the edge of the bed. While Niniane sat up in preparation for a potentially unpleasant discussion, Vivienne wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Where were you today, N'ane?"

Niniane hesitated for long enough to remember Marghad's advice, deciding honesty was the best option. Vivienne would find out the truth soon enough anyway.

"The forest. But, Vivi," she continued quickly at Vivienne's sharp intake of breath, "it's beautiful there. I know the others are afraid of it, but there's nothing to fear. Come with me and see."

"I don't care how beautiful it is," Vivienne snapped. "You know it's forbidden . . ."

"But why is it forbidden?"

"Because it's dangerous and . . ."

"It's not dangerous," Niniane interrupted again. "Who said so? Have they been there?"

"Enough," Vivienne said firmly. "It is forbidden, and that's the end of it, Niniane. I cannot believe you so blatantly disobeyed me."

A heavy silence fell between them, and Niniane struggled to hold back her tears.

Blessed be, Vivienne thought, silently admonishing herself. Why did you not give her a chance to explain? She bit her lip, distressed. She knew her inability to conceive children of her own was a circumstance that facilitated her role as spiritual mother to the priestesses here at the temple and also to the people who came seeking the Lady's blessing and guidance. But she also knew it wasn't until Niniane had come into her life that she'd been able to experience the more personal and intimate aspects of motherhood, and she had cherished every

moment. This child, she admitted in a rare moment of brutal honesty, had added colour to an otherwise colourless existence. So was she, then, to let the child down at the first sign of trouble? Only the deepest of upsets, she knew, would have caused today's failure to attend lessons.

"I'm sorry, my love," she said softly, leaning forward and putting her hand gently on Niniane's cheek. "I promised myself I wouldn't do that. Let's put the forest aside for a moment. Tell me why you missed lessons today? I thought you loved lessons."

Niniane sniffed back her tears. "Loved?" she echoed in surprise. "Nay, Vivi, I hate lessons. They're intolerably boring."

"Really?" Vivienne was genuinely surprised.

Niniane nodded, and Vivienne laughed despite the gravity of the moment. Why was she so surprised? After all, she, too, found Angharad intolerably boring.

But her amusement evaporated at Niniane's next words.

"Something's happening to me."

"What do you mean, N'ane?" Vivienne asked, feeling a chill start at the nape of her neck and ripple down her spine.

"I don't know," Niniane replied. "I woke up today feeling weird, like I'd woken up in a strange place and I didn't recognise anything."

"Maybe you had a disturbing dream."

Niniane smiled tremulously. "I always have disturbing dreams, Vivi," she said. "Sometimes they do make me feel strange, but the feeling never lasts, not like today."

"And do you feel it now?"

Niniane nodded.

"And it was this feeling that caused you to disobey me and go into the forest?"

Niniane nodded, ashamed. "I'm sorry, Vivi. I just couldn't face them all today. I went to the forest because I knew no one would find me there."

Vivienne was silent.

"Why is the forest forbidden?" Niniane asked quietly.

Vivienne looked at Niniane for a long moment and then looked away. How could she explain that a comment made nearly eighteen years ago – a comment about otherworlds, fairies, and forest-dwellers – had wormed its way into her subconscious so that she had, many years ago, ruled the forest out of bounds? How could she explain the irrational fear she had that if Niniane walked into the forest, she might never walk out again?

"What is your fascination with the forest, N'ane?" she asked in lieu of an explanation. "Why do you feel you need to go there? If you want to go walking, why not just walk through the woods?"

"I don't know," Niniane replied, shrugging her shoulders. "The forest is mysterious and beautiful. It made me feel welcome today and . . ."

"And what?"

Niniane had been about to say she had made a friend but stopped herself, knowing instinctively Vivienne would not accept anyone could befriend animals. "And it soothed me," she said instead.

Vivienne regarded her again for a long moment. "Is that all?" she asked at last.

Niniane nodded.

"You didn't . . . meet anyone there?"

Niniane was surprised by the question. "Who would I meet there?"

"I'm not sure," Vivienne answered, shaking her head. What was she thinking? Gracious me, she thought, I need a good night's sleep. "I think this feeling you've had today will pass," she said, her practical nature reasserting itself, "so do not let it worry you, my sweet. And I'm sorry lessons are boring. I did not realise. You are nearly ready to make your vows, N'ane. After that you

will not need to attend them any more. Can you just endure them until then . . . for me?"

Niniane nodded.

"And, N'ane," Vivienne added as she stood, "you must not go into the forest again. Do you hear me? I need you to stay away from it."

"But why?"

"Because I said so."

"But . . ."

"Please, Niniane," Vivienne said, looking down at her.

Niniane nodded again, struggling to hide her disappointment. Vivienne bent down and kissed her goodnight.

"Sleep well, my love," she said.

"And you, Vivi."

Niniane watched Vivienne walk out. Still remarkably beautiful, Vivienne moved with an innate grace and elegance that heightened her beauty. Tall and slender, she always wore her long hair, once black and lustrous now liberally streaked with grey, in a single, tidy braid that swung down her back. But it was her clear blue eyes that truly reflected the beauty of her nature – eyes that normally held affection, compassion, and, sometimes, laughter, but had tonight held something else – something that unsettled Niniane almost as much as the events of this strange day. Fear. What was Vivi afraid of? Niniane lay down in bed, looking at the flame on the candle. Without intending to, she had said nothing about the voice in the forest. Could Vivi's fear have something to do with that? But the voice had helped. There was no need for Vivi to be afraid.

Niniane watched the flame for a while, thinking. 'Twas a pity Vivienne had not understood about the forest because now, Niniane knew, she would be forced to disobey

Leaning over, she blew out the candle.

~~

*If you think, when I look upon you,
I see kings and soldiers,
Serfs and farmers,
Or noblemen and servants,
Then you are wrong.
If you think, when I look upon you,
I see wealth and power,
Or beauty and fame,
I do not.
I see you,
Many strong,
Some weak,
Most ignorant,
But all unique.*

II

The forest was darker today. But then, it was dark everywhere, courtesy of the blanket of thick, black clouds that covered the sky, effectively blocking out any hint, or hope, of sunlight. All day, the air had been heavy with the threat of a storm, but, so far, it had failed to materialise. Anticipating a downfall, everyone had stayed indoors, but it was now early afternoon, and Niniane had grown tired of being inside. Heedless of whether or not she would be missed, she had decided to risk a potential drenching and was sitting, once again, in the clearing edged by the ancient, tall trees.

She was not alone. He appeared, her little companion, at almost the same time she arrived in the clearing, and now he sat beside her as if it was entirely natural for a girl and a young deer to sit together in companionable silence.

She laughed as she looked down at him. "How do you know?" she asked him. "How do you know when I'm here?"

He didn't answer.

Looking away from him as other thoughts intruded, she breathed deeply and let the air out on a sigh. The week just gone had been a rather momentous one and, yet, at the same time, had been a week just like any other. A few days ago, she had turned eighteen or, rather, had celebrated the eighteenth anniversary of her discovery by the well. And this morning, she had made her vows to the Lady.

She was a priestess now.

So, she thought, frowning in consternation, shouldn't she feel . . . what . . . more wise or all-knowing . . . more mature . . . more like the Lady Herself? Instead, she felt absolutely no different. Even her appearance was the same since novices and priestesses did not dress any differently. She looked down at the little head draped over her leg and at her hand resting on his dappled fur. He

didn't seem to think she was any different. Maybe there was something wrong with her.

Drawing another deep, sighing breath, she thought about the voice that had, months before, whispered to her here in the clearing. She'd not heard it again and, associating it with the forest, had come hoping it would speak to her today. Surely the voice would know what she was doing wrong. And maybe, at the same time, it would explain to her why she still felt strange. Vivienne had been wrong about the feeling passing. It had not. If anything, it had grown stronger and, to make matters worse, was now accompanied by a feeling of restlessness, as if, in not realising or recognising it, there was something she was failing to do.

So she waited and listened . . . and hoped.

But aside from the clamouring of her own chaotic thoughts, the only sounds she heard were the sounds of the forest.

~~

"What troubles you tonight, my love?" Vivienne asked, making herself comfortable on the edge of Niniane's bed.

"How do you know I'm troubled?"

Vivienne gave a snort of amusement. "You have to realise something about yourself, N'ane. What you think and feel is written all over you." She smiled at the look of concern on Niniane's face. "You're easy to read, my love."

"That's not necessarily a good thing," Niniane said, sounding worried.

"It is what it is, N'ane. Do not be concerned. Now," Vivienne said, shifting her position on the bed, "what troubles you?"

"I'm a priestess now . . ."

"That you are," Vivienne confirmed.

"Well . . ." Niniane hesitated, not quite sure how to put into words what she was feeling.

Vivienne waited patiently, hiding both her smile and her curiosity.

"Well what, my sweet?" she encouraged.

“Well, I don’t feel any different. Shouldn’t I feel special now or something? I mean, shouldn’t I see things differently or have more answers than questions . . . I don’t know – something – anything but feel exactly the same?”

Vivienne laughed. “You think making your vows today has been one big anti-climax, don’t you, my lovely?”

Niniane nodded.

Vivienne laughed again, leaned over and gave Niniane a kiss full of affection.

“You don’t need to feel different,” she explained. “In fact, I would be worried if you did. You already serve the Lady just by being who you are, N’ane. Making your vows to Her today was really only a formality, so I wouldn’t expect you to feel any different. Besides, I’ve seen many a novice puff themselves up with false pride after making their vows. That kind of arrogance has no place in the heart of a priestess. I want you to remember something, my sweet. There are priestesses and then there are priestesses.”

Niniane raised her eyebrows. “That’s very profound, Vivi, but . . .”

“You see,” Vivienne clarified, “some priestesses profess to serve the Lady. They look like they do. They act like they do. They say all the right things. But they are concentrating on trying to be who they think a priestess should be. They have an idea or an image in their heads, and they work hard to maintain that, or to be that ideal. But these people fail to grasp the deeper meaning and, therefore, they fail to radiate the Lady’s true essence. And then there are those who genuinely serve Her, deep in here.” She laid her hand over her chest, indicating her heart. “Those priestesses don’t have to try to be anything other than who and what they are. They realise they serve the Lady out of the uniqueness of who they really are, and so they radiate Her presence like a lantern radiates light. You have to know which of these you are, N’ane, and then just be it. Either you *are* a priestess or you work hard at trying to be one.”

Niniane smiled involuntarily, responding to Vivienne's words like a flower opening up to the sun after a prolonged absence of light. "Are any of our priestesses trying to be priestesses instead of just being one?" she asked.

"Of course," Vivienne confirmed. "And I won't bother telling you which is which."

Niniane nodded. "You are genuine and so is Marghad," she said. "Maybe Gwyneth too, but as for the others . . ." She left the statement unspoken.

"Mmm, interesting." Vivienne was non-committal. "It is a sad fact that those of us who serve the Lady with our whole hearts are the exception rather than the rule. Now," she said, her tone indicating a change of subject was on its way, "does that clear things up for you, N'ane?" When Niniane nodded, she stood up.

"I've tried to convince myself you are still a girl," she said solemnly. "But this week you celebrated two very significant events in a woman's life - you turned eighteen and you made your vows to the Lady. It pains me to admit it, my love, but you are a woman now, and as such, I must honour a promise I made many years ago."

Niniane didn't understand and was about to voice the question that hovered on the tip of her tongue, but Vivienne walked out of the room. "I'll be back," she said as she disappeared through the door.

She returned moments later, carrying a small white bundle. Niniane's curiosity got the better of her, and she sat up as Vivienne resumed her position on the edge of the bed and handed her the bundle.

"When we found you as a babe, N'ane, you had only two things with you. Marghad made me promise to give them to you when you were older. Well, my love, you are older now, and I think the time is right."

Niniane took it, fingering the cloth curiously. "This cloth is like web, Vivi. So fine, so soft. Where does it come from?"

“We do not know. We can only surmise, but it seems obvious you came from a wealthy family. The workmanship of that,” Vivienne said as Niniane unwrapped the cloth and held up a circlet of silver, “is exquisite.”

Niniane inspected it closely. It was a coiled snake, the silver exquisitely worked so that every scale was depicted in vivid detail, and its emerald eyes sparkled with the light from the single candle that burned beside the bed. “Are you sure they didn’t leave this as a kind of thank you?” she asked without taking her eyes from the snake.

“No, I’m not sure, not at all sure,” Vivienne replied. “But Marghad felt it was a part of your heritage, and she made me promise to give it back to you.” She shrugged her shoulders as she continued, “And you know, N’ane, something inside me agreed with her. This belongs to you. I feel it. It does not belong to me or to the temple. Besides,” she said with shining eyes, “we didn’t need payment to have you here. You are a gift – given to me and to the temple. You *are* the thank you.”

Niniane raised her eyes from the snake to smile at Vivienne.

“Now,” Vivienne said brusquely, “I will leave you to think, as I know you will. If you have any more questions, we can talk again tomorrow.” She rose and walked towards the door but hesitated, turning again to Niniane. “N’ane?”

Niniane looked up.

“We’ve never talked about it, but do you ever think about who your parents are or who your family might be?”

Niniane thought for a moment and then answered, “No, Vivi. Honestly, I don’t. I don’t know why, but I don’t. You and Marghad and Mahaude and Sienna are the only family I will ever need.”

Vivienne smiled. “All right, my love. But you know if you ever want to talk about it, I will talk.”

Niniane nodded and then, left alone, turned her attention to the two items sitting on her lap. She ran her fingers over the cloth and over the tiny, intricate

scales of the snake. They felt strange. She felt strange, as if one part of her had no idea what was happening but another part of her knew.

She leaned over and held the snake to the candle, marvelling at the way its emerald eyes glistened in the candlelight, and catching her breath at its beauty. Then she tentatively put the bracelet over her right hand and let it sit on her wrist. Her heart was thumping a nervous rhythm, but it skipped a beat with disappointment. The bracelet was too big for her. Frustrated, she pushed it higher up her arm until it hit her elbow. And then a curious thing happened. The snake uncoiled slightly, just enough to allow her to slide it over her elbow and further up her arm. Once there, it coiled itself around her arm, hugging it perfectly. She stared at it for a long moment, wondering if her imagination was playing tricks on her. But when she tried to push the snake back down her arm, it was immovable, as if attached. And it should've been tight, but it wasn't, nor was it hurting. So she left it there and turned her attention to the cloth. Holding it against her face, she closed her eyes to concentrate on the feeling of softness, and then she leaned over, blew out the candle, and curled in bed with the cloth against her face.

Lying in the darkness, she became aware of the feeling of a wrong being made right, as if she was a puzzle unaware that a piece of herself had been missing, and, now it had been returned, she felt complete. Tears filled her eyes, and she dabbed at them with the cloth. Laughing softly, she felt slightly embarrassed, for she had no idea why she was crying.

~~

They are all here, gathered, as usual, under the pale, luminous light of the full moon; surrounded by the lush green vegetation and the ancient tall trees of the forest. The moon's soft light bathes them, warms them, nourishes them so that they glow with the vitality of Her brilliant luminescence, radiating from each one present, dazzling in its splendour, illuminating the clearing, blinding in its magnificence.

They are a funny mix, these beings gathered in the moonlight - as varied and as diverse as the creatures in the forest, the songs of the birds, and the dreams of humankind. Some are tall, slender, and graceful with long, flowing hair, vividly coloured eyes - blue, green, violet, brown - and beautiful faces; some are winged, their bodies tiny and their features fine and delicate; some are short and squat, their little legs belying their speed and agility, with chubby, red cheeks and large, bulbous noses; others are human-like, children who play their musical instruments with their hands while they dance on their deer-like hoofs; yet others appear as little men and women with flaming red hair, green tunics and trousers, and a glint of pure mischief in their eyes. And then there are the white ones - the ones who carry the tall ones - breathtaking in the purity of their luminous beauty, their single horn spiralling to the heavens. They toss their thick, white manes and stamp their feet, obedient to the silent communication of their masters astride them.

They come, as usual, this motley crowd, to celebrate, to be together . . . to be. But tonight, there is no music, no dancing, no laughter. Tonight, there is a hush of expectation, never seen before in the clearing, never before witnessed by the watching forest. Tonight, there is no movement, only silent, breathless stillness as if they are sculptured out of the earth's flesh. Those who attempt to break the silence are told by those around them to "shhhhhh", fingers to lips. The intensity of their expressions communicates the significance of the moment. Tonight, every one present holds his or her breath with anticipation, and the fervour of hope weaves its way around and through them, infecting and affecting them all. Hands are clasped tightly together; eyes are shining with barely suppressed excitement. They wait. They listen. They sense.

Will She choose? Will She go beyond? Will She grasp the deeper meaning of Herself?

"Hush now . . . shhhhhh . . . wait . . . She begins to see . . ."

Suddenly, as one, they erupt in a cacophony of cheering. They clap their hands in ecstatic, euphoric glee; they dance and prance in celebration, whirling and twirling arm in arm; they laugh and cry, overwhelmed with their joy; and they sing over and over and over again,

"She comes, She comes, the Lady She comes."

III

“What news do you bring us, Melus?”

“Well, Vivienne,” Melus replied, shifting on the bench and placing his forearms on the table as he leaned forward, “I wish I could say I bring good news, but, alas, I do not.”

It was late evening, and only a few people remained in the Long Hall after the evening meal. The fire was nothing more than a few glowing, smouldering logs, and the candles burned low on the tables and in the sconces on the walls.

Despite the late hour, Niniane felt no desire for bed or for sleep. She was enthralled, and more than a little awed, by this giant of a man, or so he seemed to her. He cut such a dashing, romantic figure, like one of the heroes in Merlin’s epic tales with his blond-grey hair, swept back and held in place with a black ribbon, his beard neatly trimmed, the fine cut and quality of his clothes – his woollen cloak, linen shirt and trousers, his solid leather boots – and, not least of all, the impressively large sword he wore belted to his hip, all of which attested to his personal wealth. But it was the aura of power surrounding him that fascinated and captivated Niniane. He wore it like a piece of comfortable clothing. Of course, his clear blue eyes and impressive physique only added to his heroic appeal, as did his passionate intolerance for injustice, his vehement opposition to tyranny in any form, and his willingness to act on his convictions by fighting for those who could not fight for themselves. He did not carry a sword merely for the look of it. He was a man who fiercely defended those under his protection and even some who were not – a man who did not hesitate to use his sword when circumstances required it.

“I’m not surprised,” Vivienne responded to his comment. “Tell me,” she urged, putting her mug of mint tea on the table in front of her. “I want to hear it all.”

Normally one of the first to retire in the evenings, Vivienne had remained in the Long Hall to speak to Melus. Her days were too full to allow her the luxury of relaxed, in-depth conversation with visitors, and so her evenings provided the only opportunity to indulge, and Melus was an old friend.

“The Romans are all but gone,” Melus elaborated on his earlier statement, “and the land is more vulnerable than ever. The barbarian invaders breathe down our necks from all directions.”

Vivienne nodded her understanding. He was not really telling her anything new. The steady stream of pilgrims, visitors, and travellers who passed through the temple every year brought with them gifts and offerings. The poorer among them left simple gifts, while the wealthier, like Melus, brought gifts of coin and cloth. Regardless of their wealth or lack of it, though, the pilgrims and visitors all brought with them something far more valuable than even the most precious of jewels – news of the world outside temple boundaries. Vivienne was aware that Rome had been withdrawing its legions over many years like the subtle pull of an outgoing tide and that, in their wake, the legions left a land in a state of instability, unrest, and vulnerability to attack and invasion from all sides. Only a remnant of Roman soldiers and officials remained, somehow managing to keep the invaders at bay. But no one was sure how long this state of affairs would last. Already, visitors brought with them rumours of factions forming within and among the tribes of the Britons. Meanwhile, the Picts and the Scots were showing greater boldness in their attacks on the Roman wall in the north, and the pagan Germanic tribes, now settled along the southern and eastern coasts, were inexorably pushing their way westward. The potential for in-fighting on the one hand and the threat of invasion on the other formed a precarious balance that could tip one way or the other, either direction catapulting the land into chaos or even war.

“But what worries me most,” Melus continued, “is the potential for strife from within. There are some who fancy themselves capable of stepping into the

void left by the Roman administration, but not, of course, for the good of our land. They lust for power and see only an opportunity to have the rest of us bow at their feet. I fear it is really only a matter of who will cripple us first – the foreign invaders or the greed of our own kings.”

“Is it really that bad?” Vivienne asked.

Melus nodded solemnly. “Our land is in a state of upheaval, Vivienne,” he confirmed, “increasingly torn apart by conflicting interests and by the uncertainty of our future. The legions no longer keep order. There’s no longer any semblance of centralised administration. No one knows just who, or what, will replace the might of the Roman Empire. I think the best we can hope for at this stage is a land divided into separate kingdoms as the old tribes fight to re-establish their own areas of rule. And then we can only pray this will satisfy them because if they start to covet their neighbour’s territory, well . . .” He shrugged his shoulders, reluctant to contemplate such a possibility.

Niniane listened with avid fascination. All she’d known so far was the unhurried, predictable routine of temple existence. The seasons came and went, alternately bringing with them the ripening of the apples in the orchard and the snows that covered the temple in a blanket of white. The warmth of the summer sun was always followed by the chill of the winter rains. Lessons, chores, visits to the villages, the changing seasons, the warmth and comfort of the open fire in the Long Hall, the rich aromas of Marghad’s cooking, all weaved together to form the fabric of Niniane’s existence. But Melus’ words were opening her mind to other possibilities, and she longed to know more. It seemed to her as if he spoke of another land entirely.

“Dear me,” Vivienne said sadly in response to Melus’ last words. “Why can they not see they make us more vulnerable with their insistent disunity? Why are they not far-sighted enough to see we would stand a much better chance of resisting invasion if we could but stand together? Why are they so blind, Melus?”

Melus shook his head in resigned frustration. "They are blinded by their own selfish ambitions, Vivienne, and so they see only what they want to see. They see only what they *want*. 'Tis human nature, is it not?"

"Human nature?" Niniane repeated softly. She wasn't aware she'd spoken out loud until Melus looked directly at her and answered her softly-voiced question.

"Aye, Niniane, human nature," he said. "Not all people are as good as the folk you've known here at the temple and in the villages, lass. Some people care for naught but their own selfish desires, and they will do whatever it takes to get what they want, not caring who they hurt in the process or who suffers as a result. Such people are ruthless. They have very little respect for human life, and they certainly do not give a damn about this land and its people. I hope you never have to meet anyone like that."

Niniane listened in wide-eyed fascination. The pilgrims and visitors who constantly passed through the temple were as different and as diverse as the trees in the forest. Their different personalities and moods; their diverse beliefs, interests, opinions, and attitudes; and their range of talents and gifts coloured the landscape of her otherwise predictable life. But she had never met anyone like the people Melus was now describing . . . that she was aware of anyway.

"What will you do, Melus?" Vivienne asked him, drawing his attention away from Niniane, much to her relief.

"Nothing I can do, Vivienne, except keep going. All I can do is defend my own lands and the people under my protection. But I will pray to the Lady and hope She can provide us with a miracle. Because, believe me, nothing less than a miracle will bring peace and stability back to our land."

~~

Wandering slowly among the apple trees in the orchard, paying no attention to her surroundings, Niniane was deep in thought. Deliberately avoiding the hectic rush of preparations for dinner, she was hiding among the trees, knowing

she wouldn't be seen unless someone came looking for her . . . and no one would come looking. The visitor huts were full, so the Long Hall would be packed tonight, and Marghad would be frantically occupied with preparing enough food to feed the larger group of people. No doubt she would be flushed and flustered, for she loved to exaggerate the immense stress placed upon her when required to feed this many, but Niniane knew she thrived on it.

Groaning inwardly, Niniane dropped to her knees under one of the apple trees. She would be required to make polite conversation with the temple's guests at dinner – something she normally enjoyed but was not in the mood for tonight. Toying with the idea of pleading illness and giving dinner a miss, she realised she couldn't be bothered with explanations. Moreover, she hated lying, especially to Marghad who always saw through her anyway. What she really wanted was to continue thinking about the people and places Melus had spoken of the night before. Despite his forebodings and his fears for the future, she thought his world sounded exciting, full of potential and possibility, certainly a far cry from the safe, secure, mundane routine of sheltered temple existence. What she would give for just a glimpse of what lay beyond

A small pile of grey feathers fluttering in the breeze on the ground caught her attention, and she cocked her head to the side as she studied them. The feathers were twitching in such a way that could not be fully accounted for by the breeze, and, her curiosity aroused, she crawled over on her hands and knees for a closer look. A bird was attached to the feathers, and it appeared to be struggling with an injury. One wing was folded under it at an awkward angle, and it struggled to get up off the ground. While Niniane watched, it put in a concerted effort, kicking its legs and flapping its uninjured wing vigorously, and then stopped, rocking slightly with the effort expended. Niniane became distressed as she watched its struggle. Desperately wishing there was something she could do to ease its pain and fright, she leaned over and gently scooped it up in her hands.

What to do now? Maybe if she took it back to the kitchen, Marghad would know what to do. But no, Marghad would be too busy, and the noise and bustle of the kitchen would only add to its fright. Not knowing what else to do, she gently stroked the little bird with her fingers, trying to soothe and calm it and to communicate comfort.

And as she gently ran her fingertips over the bird, her hands began to tingle.

At first, she thought the tingle was somehow coming from the bird, but then, with a stab of anxiety, she realised the sensation was gaining momentum, becoming more powerful. She almost dropped the bird, wanting to shake and flex her hands to rid them of the tingling, but she resisted the urge. And then the tingling turned into humming and spread through her whole body, as if a river of water was flowing through her limbs and over her skin, or as if the note of a plucked string on a musical instrument was vibrating deeply within her. She stilled, concentrating on the sensation, her heart pounding a beat of fear within her chest. Where was it coming from? And in the instant she silently asked the question, she felt something click into place within her and knew what she had to do. Cupping the little bird gently with her humming hands and fingers, she closed her eyes, saw the bird whole and healed in her mind's eye, its wings spread wide in flight, and felt a surging release of energy flow from deep within her and out through her hands.

She opened her eyes. For a breathless moment, everything was still and silent. And then the bird seemed to realise something had changed. It flapped its wings as if testing them and then, raising itself on its feet, spread its wings wide and launched into the air. Niniane watched it disappear from sight and then sat looking down at her hands still cupped as if the bird remained. What just happened? She couldn't think, couldn't make her mind work, and she felt utterly spent. A wave of nausea washed through her, accompanied by a feeling of light-headedness, so she lay on the grass, rolling over on to her back to look up at the darkening sky. Gradually, the nausea passed, so she sat up carefully, and

then slowly, tentatively stood up. Her legs felt shaky. She wasn't entirely certain they would carry her back to the kitchen.

"Are ye all right, poppet?" Marghad asked her as she stepped through the kitchen door and walked slowly, carefully, to the stool at the end of the table. Pausing mid-stride when there was no answer, Marghad added, "Ye look awfully pale."

Despite her large bulk, Marghad moved about the kitchen like a dancer. Constantly on the move, she skipped from one chore to another, one detail to the next, one evolving creation to another. Normally, Niniane loved to watch, but tonight she focussed on the vegetables piled in front of her, grateful for the excuse to avoid conversation. Her mind refused to work, and she could still feel the after-effects of whatever it was that had happened in the orchard.

"Poppet?" Marghad asked again, not so busy she failed to notice Niniane's silence. No, not silence, Marghad thought, concerned, more like stillness. She'd seen that sort of stillness often enough, for cooking wasn't the only talent for which she was renowned among the priestesses and the villagers. She was also known for her skill as a healer. Illness or injury, malaise or malady, ache or pain, she'd tended most in front of the kitchen's large open fire or, if necessary, with her bottles packed, by visiting the huts and villages around the temple. And she'd tended enough injuries in her time to recognise the numbness of shock when she saw it. She expertly ran her eyes over Niniane, failing to find any physical reason for the girl's pallor.

"Poppet?" she asked again when Niniane still failed to respond.

Niniane looked up and smiled. "I'm all right, Mar," she said simply and focused again on the vegetables in front of her. But her smile failed to reach her eyes and disappeared almost as soon as it appeared. Marghad reluctantly let it go, turning her attention to the preparations at hand, but she made a mental note to pursue this with Niniane once the meal was served and the buzz of activity had quietened down.

The conversation flowed around Niniane at dinner that night. Initially, she responded when asked a question or when comments were directed her way, but her quiet, withdrawn demeanour did nothing to encourage conversation, so her dinner companions left her to her own thoughts. She toyed with her food, pushing it around her plate in a feeble pretence of eating. In truth, her belly was too tight with tension to even consider food. She felt as though she was failing to grasp something of huge significance – something that played at the edge of her mind – and although her thoughts were now a whirl in her head, she couldn't seem to focus on any one in particular.

As people finished their meals, some retired for the evening, while others stayed and lingered, enjoying the company and the conversation. Niniane didn't notice. She sat staring into the empty hearth from her seat at the end of one of the benches. The night was warm, so there'd been no need of a fire, but Niniane stared at the empty hearth as if the flames danced upon it. She felt as if she'd suddenly become a stranger to herself, but her stubbornly insistent mind still refused to work properly, precluding understanding, although she desperately tried to think it through. Was this what the feeling of strangeness was all about – the feeling of unfamiliarity that had persisted despite Vivi's reassurances?

“Thy judgements of thyself are like shackles that bind thee to the image thou hast learned to foster of thyself. Thy condemnations of thyself are like whips of punishment when thou dost dare step outside the bounds of the image and which thou dost use to keep thee restrained. Thus are the condemnations of the other girls naught but a reflection of thy condemnation of thyself. Let go thy judgements, beloved, for these serve thee not. Let go thy image of thyself with which thou hast been taught to think of thyself and behind which thou dost hide. Let thy Self be . . .”

Niniane sat up straighter as her back stiffened with shock. The voice . . . but she wasn't in the forest . . . How can that be . . . ? Judgements . . . ? Images . . . ? What did that mean?

A gentle hand on her shoulder brought her awareness back to the Long Hall. The bench creaked, and she bounced slightly as Marghad sat beside her. The briefest of smiles crossed her face as she shifted to make more room.

"I should've known you'd not let it rest," she said, still smiling and grateful for the distraction. "You're like a dog with a bone if ever you sense something amiss."

"Aye, poppet, tha' I am," Marghad replied. "Now tell me wha' has happened 'cause I know something has. 'N do no' think ye can fool me with one o' those barely-there smiles."

Niniane smiled again and put her head on Marghad's shoulder, sliding her hand into Marghad's for comfort.

"So then?" Marghad prompted gently when Niniane said nothing.

Niniane raised her head, biting her lower lip as she tried to find the words to describe what was happening within her. She felt as if she was teetering on the brink of a huge discovery, her mind poised like a delicately balanced see-saw that could tip one way or the other depending on . . . what?

"Poppet?" Marghad prompted again.

"I think . . ." Niniane faltered. "I think . . . maybe, I'm not quite who I thought I was." She looked at Marghad uncertainly. "I think I'm not who I've been taught to be."

And with the words came a flash of realisation. The possibility and potential she had glimpsed in Melus' description of his world outside the temple was symbolic of the possibility and potential within her on the one hand while, on the other, the safety and security of life here at the temple represented, symbolically, all that she knew of herself.

Choice.

That was *it* . . . choice.

That's what would tip the see-saw one way or the other. She had to make a choice.

And, somehow, she knew instinctively the choice she made would dictate the path of her destiny and would, therefore, determine her future. Did she have the courage to step beyond what she knew of herself into something entirely unknown? Was she brave enough to choose the path of new experience or would she stick to the path she knew – that of sameness and safety? Would she allow her mind to open up to the potential within her or would she choose to keep it closed, resisting her potential out of doubt and fear – fear of being different, or of being wrong, or of appearing weird; fear of being disappointed or disillusioned; fear of failing or of discovering she really was nothing special at all? Would she allow herself to discover and experience who she *could* be, or would she remain the person everyone believed she was – the same as them? If she chose to go beyond, there would be no precedent, no rules, no established modes of being, unlimited possibility. The only limit to what she could become was the limit of her own imagination and, as such, existed only within her.

All of this, she saw clearly, and in the instant she saw it, she made her choice. Her face lit up, and she turned to Marghad with a smile blazing in her eyes.

Marghad returned her smile. “I know, poppet,” she said. “I’ve always known. There’s a whole lo’ more to ye than the way people see ye ‘n the way they’ve tried to make ye be. Ye must know ‘n experience all o’ wha’ ye are, my poppet, or ye will suffocate ‘n die.”

Niniane nodded. “You’re right, Mar. I feel it. ‘Tis a little like being in a prison cell, trying to be who everyone else wants me to be. I cannot do it anymore.”

“Aye, poppet,” Marghad breathed on a long sigh, putting Niniane’s head back on her shoulder and holding Niniane’s hand tightly. “I know,” she said quietly. “I know.”

~~

End of Excerpt