



*Gawain  
and  
Niniane*



Published by Jennifer Wherrett

[www.thelady.com.au](http://www.thelady.com.au) (Gawain & Niniane)

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*The wisdom of transcendence*

## 1. *The Riding Incident*

(**Note:** the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake*, for those following the characters and storyline, falls in Chapter Nine after, or following, Part I, and takes place just after Merlin and Arthur have left for their tour of the land of the Britons.)

Niniane loosened the reins, tightened her hold on Arondiel with her knees, and urged the horse into a canter first and then, as Arondiel found her rhythm, into a gallop. As the grassy terrain whooshed past them, Niniane barely managed to contain a whoop of pure joy. She revelled in the freedom and the exhilaration of the ride, and in the wind that took her hair and whipped it back from her face. She could feel the weight of it lightly pulling at her scalp with every galloping stride. Even her cloak was obedient to the urgent, demanding tug and pull of the wind. She made a mental note to sit on it for the return ride. The pressure on her throat as it billowed out behind her was slightly choking her. But it didn't matter. The sheer pleasure of the ride overrode all else.

Arondiel knew where she was going. This was a routine set when the two had first arrived back at Luguwallium. Niniane had wasted no time in finding a place Arondiel could ride out safely at full gallop: no unexpected holes, no roads, no fallen trees – actually no trees at all – and, hopefully, no people. But the route they took was also not so far that they both lost sight of the town. And the ride ended in a grassy rise high enough so that Niniane could look out over the landscape for leagues in every direction.

They slowed as they neared the grassy hill, and then, once they topped it, Niniane slid from Arondiel's back, slipped the bridle from the horse's head, and allowed Arondiel to munch contentedly on the grass. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she looked to the south. It had been almost a whole week since Merlin had left with Arthur to court the local kings and chiefs, to seduce them with the idea of Arthur as High King, or to impose it if needs be. She wondered where they were. A week was not enough time to have reached the first point of their

predetermined journey. The kingdom of Ebrauc was first on the agenda, followed by Rheged, Gwynedd, and Luttcoyt – just names on a map as far as Niniane was concerned. But Merlin was convinced the western kingdoms like Gwynedd and Rheged were crucial to their plans. If these kingdoms withheld their support or, worse, actively opposed Arthur, Merlin's plan would be in grave danger of disintegrating before they'd even begun to implement it. Thank the Lady, Merlin knew the kings of the western kingdoms well. He was impressed with their characters, and was, as such, confident of their support.

But still, one never knew until one actually knew . . .

She sighed as she turned towards Arondiel, bridle ready. There was no point worrying, for there was naught she could do to help. As she slipped the bridle over Arondiel's head, she silently told herself Merlin and Arthur would either succeed or fail, and there was nothing she could do now to tip the balance in their favour. It would, therefore, be in her best interests to let it go and stop thinking about them.

But some things were far easier thought than accomplished.

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The sound of Arondiel's hooves against the stones echoed loudly under the gate as she and Niniane re-entered the town.

"Ere, Lady." One of the soldiers waved them to a stop and sauntered over. Niniane knew him. She had made it a point to get to know all the soldiers posted on duty at the entrance to town. If anything should ever happen to her whilst out on the ride, these men could prove the difference between life and death. Not that anything was likely to happen, but she was not naïve nor was she a fool. She knew the risks she took in riding out alone.

She tugged gently on the reins, and Arondiel came to a complete stop under the gate. "Hello, Marcus," she said, looking down at the soldier from the lofty heights of Arondiel's back. "Is everything all right?"

"Thought it best to warn ye, lass," he said, "Gawain's been 'ere asking after ye. 'N he weren't real happy when we told 'im ye'd ridden out on y'own."

"Did you tell him I ride out regularly?"

"Aye, tha' we did. Not sure it helped, though. Might've made things a tad worse methinks."

"Oh . . ." she sighed quietly, biting her bottom lip, " . . . dear." Surely he would not try and stop her. Surely he would not make that mistake. She straightened in the saddle and smiled down at Marcus. "Thank you for the warning. I appreciate the heads-up . . . if a heads-up is what is needed."

"Any time, lass," he replied affably. "Good luck then," he added as he watched her urge Arondiel forward.

She was grim as she turned Arondiel away from the gate. Damn him, she seethed silently. The pleasure of the ride had all but evaporated.

A short distance from the stable, she slid from Arondiel's back and walked towards the entrance. Gawain was waiting beside the gate of Arondiel's stall. Even through the dim interior of the stable, Niniane could see the set of his jaw and the tautness of his limbs. He was angry.

"You're angry?" she asked him mildly, feigning indifference, as she led Arondiel into the stable and towards the stall where he awaited them, arms crossed, one booted foot resting on the bottom rung of the gate.

"And you know why," he responded, tight-lipped, unfolding his arms. "I asked you once if you were brave or foolish, do you remember? You told me you were not a fool, but I'm beginning to think otherwise. Riding out alone, especially for a woman, is just asking for trouble. Gods, Niniane," he said, running an exasperated hand through his hair, "what if you fell and hurt yourself? Or worse . . ."

"Gawain," she sighed, interrupting him, "I've been riding alone for years. The whole purpose of riding is, in actual fact, to *be* alone. I've never run into any trouble. I know the risk I'm taking, but it's a calculated . . ."

"You've been back here for . . . what?" he asked harshly, her interruption fuelling his anger. "A few months. And you think you know this place?" He gestured expansively to indicate the entire town. "This is not the temple, Niniane. *We* never know from one day to the next who we'll come across either in the town or outside of it, so how can you expect to? People aren't always as nice as you've been led to believe, and sometimes desperate people do desperate things."

"You think me naïve?" she asked him, now equally as tight-lipped and taut-limbed as he.

"Not naïve. Foolhardy. Sometimes you don't think . . ."

"I beg your . . .!"

"Look," he said harshly, "I refuse to argue with you about this, so I'll make it really simple for you, Niniane. Either you take one of my men with you when you ride or I instruct the men at the gate not to let you pass. It's your choice. You can let me know tonight."

Shock robbed her of the chance to immediately respond, and then he brushed past her as he walked away so that she lost her chance completely. She turned to watch him walk away and did so until she could see him no longer. Anger defined his every step. She could see it.

So, she thought with slightly bitter satisfaction, his ultimatum had done little to alleviate his anger – anger that pointed, she knew, directly to his fear. And it wasn't hard to hazard a guess as to just what that fear might be.

"He and I need to have a serious talk," she said to Arondiel. "Don't we, eh?"

Although it was to Arondiel that she spoke, her eyes never left the spot where she'd last seen Gawain before his angry strides had taken him out of sight.

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She found him, much later, sitting on a stool under the veranda outside his old room, running a stone over the blade of a long sword. She stood over him in silence for a moment so that her shadow fell on him in the fading light, but he

neither acknowledged her presence nor slowed the movement of the stone as he ran it over and over and over the blade.

Finally, she squatted beside him. "Thinking of running me through?"

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced at her but refrained from replying.

"There's more than one way to lose me, Gawain," she said.

He ceased his movement, and then put the sword across his lap and leaned his elbows on his knees as he looked at her. "Meaning?"

"Meaning . . . I have worked long and hard to free myself of my own fears. So hard, in fact, that I'll be damned if I'll now become entrapped by yours. You fear loss. It's why you became so angry today. Like a festering wound weeping pus does your fear give rise to your anger. 'Tis an innate truth about anger, and there are *never* any exceptions. But instead of using your anger to see and acknowledge your fear, you directed it at me, and blamed me for arousing it within you. You blame *me* for the way you felt, but they're *your* feelings, not mine. Besides, I did you a favour. Now you know the fear is there, you can deal with it."

She took a deep breath as she looked away from him.

"I have a fear too, Gawain," she said without looking at him. "I fear being controlled, especially by men. So," she said, turning to look at him once again, "we are a perfect match in more ways than one, you and I, for we are a perfect mesh of fears. I arouse your fear of loss so that you feel the need to control me, and that, in turn, arouses my fear of being controlled. But I do not want that, Gawain. I do not want to be locked in fear with you, nor do I want our fears to become a barrier between us. I want only to be in love with you."

She stood then and looked down on him.

"As much as I love you," she said gently, softly, "and I do love you, if you try to control me, you will create what you fear most, for I will walk away from you. I will take myself far out of the reach of your control, and you *will* lose me. That is not a threat. It's a warning."

This time it was she who walked away and he who watched her go.

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Once again, she leaned on the stones of the town's wall, feeling the cold even through her cloak, and watched the clouds drift, pushed by an unseen hand across the light of the nearly-full moon. She loved coming up here on the nights when the moon's light was strong. There was no better place to be alone with one's thoughts.

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled it. Did everyone encounter these little snags at the beginning of a new relationship? She and Gawain had been alone, unattached, for many years. Well, actually, she silently corrected, for all of their lives until now. They were sure to arouse different feelings and fears in each other, weren't they? They were bound to run into a few difficulties as they adjusted to having each other around . . . weren't they?

She breathed in again and closed her eyes. She knew her own fear. She could feel it like a pain moving through her body, making her limbs feel heavy. Being controlled by another was, to her, a form of suffocation. She was, in truth, a little surprised it was still there. She thought she'd worked hard to disempower it. But then, she thought, smiling slightly in the moonlight, she'd never been this close to anyone before . . . this intimately connected . . .

"You're just as afraid as I am. That *was* your point today, wasn't it?"

She half turned towards Gawain's voice, and he moved in the darkness to stand in front of her. His face was half lit and half shadowed by the moon's light.

"Yes," she said softly. "That was my point."

They looked at each other silently.

"All right," he said after a long moment of silence. "I am afraid of losing you. I feel like I've waited a lifetime for you . . ."

He stopped and ran a hand through his hair.

She frowned. There was more going on here than she was aware of.



"I *did* nearly lose you," he said, lowering his hand and touching her cheek lightly with his fingers. "And I still have nightmares about it."

Her frown deepened. "When?" she questioned. "When did you nearly lose me?" And then realisation hit. "Oh," she breathed. "You're talking about what happened with the bishop."

"This close you came, Niniane," he said, holding up his thumb and forefinger to indicate a tiny amount. "This close. What would've happened if we hadn't been there?"

The Lady have mercy! She really had aroused his fears . . .

"Gawain," she said on a sigh. "There's something you need to understand about what happened with the bishop. The Lady asked me to face him, not just for me but for another. What happened that day happened *because* you were there. Or, more accurately, because Arthur was there. He needed to break free and stand on his own, apart from the Empire and its legacy . . . the church. And I could only stand before the bishop and say the things I said because She promised me I would not be hurt."

"But you *were* hurt."

"Not for long."

He pulled her towards him and held her against him. "No, not for long," he said, his lips against her forehead. "But still . . . I guess I figured that if I direct some of your more wayward choices, I might get to keep you around a little bit longer."

She laughed softly against him. "I can see how you would think my choices are wayward. But they are not. There is always a good reason for what I choose." And then she pulled away so she could look at him again in the moonlight. "Will you promise me something, Gawain? Whenever your fear of losing me is aroused or triggered by anything, will you look it full in the face and recognise it for what it is? I do it with my fear. I had to do it again today because you aroused my fear of being controlled. And I recognised it because you

angered me too. So I'm not asking you to do anything I'm not prepared to do myself. If we both dissolve our fear, what's left will be the purity of love."

"Fear can be dissolved?"

She nodded. "It can. Every time we look it full in the face and choose not to let it control us, we take just that little bit more power from it. And if we do it enough, the fear will eventually become powerless."

"I see," he said. "Not giving in to fear. I know a little about that. All right, I promise I will try to do what you ask."

"And will you allow me to ride out alone?"

"Don't push your . . ."

"Gawain . . ."

He smiled as he stroked her lips with his thumb. "Will you allow me to come with you sometimes?"

"Yes."

His thumb stilled on her lips. "A lot of the time?"

She smiled reluctantly. "Yes. But you still haven't answered my question."

"All right," he said. "I will allow you to ride out on the condition you tell the men at the gate where you're going."

"I always do."

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## 2. *Gawain's Request*

(**Note:** the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake* falls in Chapter Nine after Part III, and takes place the day after the battle.)

"How many did we lose during the night, Philaeus?"

Niniane awaited the answer, and when none was forthcoming paused, unconsciously lifting the cool cloth from the forehead it was pressed against as she turned and looked over at the two men. Philaeus, Arthur's chief surgeon, seemed not to have heard Gawain's question but was, instead, looking closely at Gawain's face. In fact, he was studying Gawain with a frown of intense concentration.

Niniane gasped involuntarily and brought a hand to her mouth. "Lady preserve me!"

She'd healed Gawain's injuries that morning, completely forgetting about the fact that many people had seen them, including Philaeus.

After a lengthy silence, Philaeus found his voice. "The last time I saw you, Gawain, the whole side of your face was purple, your eye was nearly swollen shut, and your arm was wrapped in a bloodied bandage. Or am I mistaken?"

Niniane willed Gawain to look at her so she could shake her head at him, but he steadfastly ignored her. "My injuries were superficial, Philaeus. All I needed was a warm meal and a good night's sleep." He shrugged. "And my bruises were more dirt and ash than actual bruising. My injuries are not what concerns me right now. I need to know how many men we lost during the night."

Philaeus looked at Gawain for a moment more, suspicion in his eyes. But he accepted Gawain's explanation without protest and allowed the topic of conversation to be steered in another direction. "We lost three, Gawain, and I'm very worried we'll lose at least another two before the day ends."

Niniane wasn't aware she was holding her breath until she released it. But her heart was thumping an uncomfortable beat as she turned her attention back

to the wounded soldier lying on the bed in front of her. She dipped the cloth in the bowl on the floor at her feet, and as she wrung it of excess water she chastised herself. How could she have been so stupid? Maybe Gawain was right about her after all. Sometimes she just didn't think. She would have to be more careful in the future. Already, too many people knew of her ability to heal. Marghad's words rang in her ears as if Marghad herself was standing beside Niniane whispering a warning, "Ye need to be careful who sees ye when ye heal. No' everyone will accept it as readily as I . . . We can protect ye here in the temple bu' no' beyond it."

"Show me the two, Philaeus," Gawain said, drawing Niniane's attention again. She looked at the two men, and this time, Gawain looked at her and held eye contact for a moment before he turned and followed Arthur's surgeon. Niniane got the message, and she watched as Philaeus led Gawain first to one bed and then to another. She watched as Philaeus gesticulated, obviously explaining the nature of the injuries the wounded soldiers were suffering from. When Philaeus finished his explanation of the second man's condition, Gawain nodded briefly, put his hand on Philaeus' shoulder, and said something Niniane could not hear. Then he turned and walked towards the infirmary's entrance, but as he passed Niniane where she sat beside yet another wounded man, he walked towards her, leaned over as if to kiss her but whispered, instead, directly into her ear.

"I don't want to lose any more men, Niniane."

She sat alone when he left, silently battling her own thoughts as she held the cool cloth on the burning forehead of the man on the bed in front of her. The soldier on the bed was burning up, muttering in his delirium, his head turning restlessly on the pillow. Gawain did not know what he was asking of her. How could she possibly help just two men because they were hovering on the edge of death, and not this one who lay ill and injured in front of her? She simply could not. It was all or none, one of the main reasons for keeping her healing ability

secret, for how do you choose one over another? How do you bear the responsibility for not helping the ones you chose against, especially if they take a turn for the worse . . . ?

Her mind made up, she looked at the cloth she was holding, realising she had in her hands a perfect excuse for visiting each and every man lying in the infirmary. And a good mask it was, too. It allowed her to touch them without arousing suspicion. She closed her eyes briefly, steadied her breathing, and summoned the healing tingle. Then she laid tingling fingers on the forehead of the man in front of her, picturing him at rest and cool, not hot to the touch. She released just a small amount of the energy, watching as the wounded man's restlessness vanished so that he lay still, calm, and deeply asleep on the pillow. She sat with him a moment longer, keeping her hand on his forehead, and then, satisfied, she dropped the cloth into the bowl of water, picked up both, stood, and moved to the next bed and the next wounded soldier.

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Lying on Arthur's bed with her eyes closed, Niniane was so drained of energy she was unable to move. Her body still tingled, but her limbs felt so heavy she found it impossible to lift them. She wanted to roll on to her side, longing for the sweet oblivion of sleep, but she was too tired even for that. She turned her head on the pillow and moaned softly. The gods alone know how she'd managed to walk back from the infirmary. She'd needed every reserve of strength and energy she'd still possessed. She'd also needed the support of the buildings she'd passed, sometimes leaning against a building for long moments before pushing herself off and taking just a few more steps. She knew even as she was touching the last of the wounded men lying in the infirmary that she'd reached the end of what she had to give. But she had to finish, for she knew not when or if she would be given another opportunity. And somehow she'd found the energy to help the last of the wounded men, and had, then, made it home. When she'd reached Arthur's room and his massive bed, she'd flopped down

upon it and lay now in the same position. She'd never laid her hands on so many people in such a short amount of time. She didn't mind the price she was paying, though. It was worth it, for Philaeus would, she knew, lose no more soldiers.

Movement and noise brought her out of a light sleep. She moved her head on the pillow. The room was darker. She must have dozed. Her eyes dropped closed again. She couldn't keep them open. But just as she was sinking back into the blessed abyss of sleep, she felt the bed depress beside her, and strong hands wrapped around hers.

"Thank you, Niniane," Gawain said softly. "Thank you."

She gave him the smallest of smiles in lieu of a verbal response.

"Philaeus is well pleased," he continued, "though he is at a loss to explain it – how well his patients are doing. And he is confident now we will lose no more men." He paused and then asked her, "Did you help them all?"

"How could I not?" she whispered. "For how do I help only two and not the rest?" She took a couple of measured breaths and then asked, "What did you say to Philaeus when he told you?"

"I slapped him on the back and complimented him on his skills as a surgeon. He told me he could not take credit for miracles, but I assured him he could."

She smiled at that.

Gawain leaned over her and touched her lips gently with his own. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"Hope so," she whispered.

She felt him move, felt the bed shift as he stood up. And a moment later he lay beside her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight against him. She tried to shift to make more room for him, but her limbs were still too heavy so she abandoned the effort. Instead, infused with Gawain's warmth and strength, she fell into a deep sleep.

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Moaning softly, she shifted her position on the bed. And then she opened her eyes. Dazed and groggy, she sat up. The room was full of warmth and light courtesy of the healthy fire that burned in the fireplace on the other side of the room. She was alone and, she noted, fully dressed. She frowned in confusion, and then remembered the events of the last two days – battle, healing Gawain, working in the infirmary, and then . . . Gawain's request. She sighed as she flopped back against the pillows and closed her eyes again.

She lay for a while thinking about the last few days, and then, becoming restless, she sat up again. Someone – Sarie no doubt – had put a bowl of water, a jug and some cloths on Arthur's chest of drawers. She smiled as she noted Gawain's weapons strewn haphazardly on the floor, obviously removed from the top of the chest of drawers to make way for the bowl of water. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she stood, pausing to measure the strength of her limbs. Although her body still felt inordinately heavy, she gauged her energy levels to be much improved, and so walked to the chest of drawers, picked up the bowl and took it over to the fire.

Much later, she was standing in front of the chest of drawers, loosening her hair of its many pins, and running her fingers through it to comb it out. The door opened quietly, and Gawain walked in with a plate of bread, cheese, and fruit.

"Ah, good. You're awake."

He put the plate on the chest of drawers, and stood behind her to push aside the curtain of her hair. As he kissed her neck, he slid an arm around her waist.

"How long did I sleep?" she asked, breathing in the scent of him. He smelt good. He smelt of soap, and his hair was damp. She could feel it against her neck.

"You slept," he answered her with his lips against the skin of her neck, "all night and nearly all day. You slept deeply. Not as deeply as after the battle, thank the gods, but still . . . when you sleep, Niniane, you really sleep."

She turned in his arms.

"Do not ever ask me to do that again."

He looked at her for a moment and then he nodded. "I won't. I promise. I should have known you could not stop at just two. I didn't think. That's usually your province."

She refrained from dignifying that last comment with a reply. After seeing the look on Philaeus' face as he inspected Gawain's non-existent wounds, she couldn't, in truth, deny it. "And so," she said, changing the subject, "I've a need to know. Did you do as I asked . . . as you promised? Did you look your fear full in the face when I slept the sleep of the dead?"

"I had little choice. It was unavoidable. I've never felt fear like it."

She nodded. "But still. Did you recognise it for what it was?"

"You expect me to stop and think about my fear of losing you when you rashly and ridiculously throw yourself into the heart of one of the bloodiest battles I've been involved in, and then fall into a sleep so deep you hardly have a heartbeat and cannot be roused?"

"A promise is a promise, Gawain. And," she added before he could interject, "fear is fear regardless of the physical context . . . or any justification you think you might have for letting yourself off the hook in any particular instance. That's the way it works, more and more intense circumstances to bring the fear in you to the surface bit by bit by bit where it can be seen . . . ."

He moved so fast she had no time to defend herself. He picked her up bodily, and took her over to the bed. "I'm beginning to think you *want* to die," he ground out harshly as he pinned her to the bed with his body.

She lay underneath him, her body pinned by his, and her hands held above her head by one of his. She tried to move, but he was too strong. So, instead, she looked him in the eye and said, "So I guess this is not a good time to tell you the soldier who was standing but an arm's length from me on the wall was felled by an arrow through his throat?"



Gawain growled.

"I healed him of course," she continued as if he'd made no noise at all. "But what does *that* do for your not-so-little fear, eh? Besides, it's all right for you to go off to battle leaving me to worry about whether or not you'll survive, but when the boot's on the other foot . . ."

Gawain growled again. "Gods woman you push me to my limits."

"And yet," she said a little breathlessly as his free hand moved up her leg taking her nightgown with it, "that's one of the things you love about me."

"Aye," he muttered, "but a little predictability every now and then wouldn't go astray."

She gasped as his fingers moved over her body. "Predictability I can do," she murmured, ". . . occasionally . . ."

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### 3. *Tristan's Story*

(Note: the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake* falls in Chapter Nine after Part III, and takes place a couple of weeks after the battle.)

"Galahad," Sarie said with a smile as Galahad pushed open the kitchen door and stepped into the warmth of her kitchen. "Come, join us," she commanded, indicating with a sweep of her hands the kitchen's table. "There's plenty of food."

Galahad smiled in response, for Sarie had, in his opinion, significantly understated the matter. The table was covered in plates of food. "Thank you, Sarie," he responded with a slight bow. "I don't recall ever seeing so much food in one place, so I will take you up on your kind offer. First, though, I've a need of Niniane's unique gifts. Do you mind if I steal her away?"

"What is it?" Niniane asked as she followed Galahad through the house. "Is someone hurt?"

"You could say that. To be honest, though, Niniane," he said as he stopped and turned to look at her, "I'm not sure what's going on. Tristan's not been the same since you laid your healing hands on him." He smiled at the look that flickered across her face. "And," he continued as he bent and lifted the back of her hand to his lips, "that's not in any way meant as a criticism, so put any such thought from your mind. Tristan should've died that day. He and I both know that. But I think you did more than heal a battle wound when you put your hands on him. Would that be right?"

She sighed softly as she retrieved her hand. "I should warn people," she told him. "But what is one supposed to say? While he slowly bleeds to death, am I to sit there and explain that things might be a little different if I save his life and heal his wound? And then what? Am I to give him a choice he barely understands?"

Galahad didn't reply. Instead, he looked at her in silence and without moving. She raised her eyebrows at him, wondering what he was thinking. And then he said, "None of us are ready to die, Niniane. There was no choice to make. But . . ." he narrowed his eyes at her, "with you, I've discovered things are never quite what they seem. And that, by the way, is a compliment. So, tell me, just what the hell else goes on when you lay your hands on a person?"

She smiled into his eyes. He had such an expressive way of stating matters. "A wound of the body," she told him, "is never *just* a wound of the body. A wound of the body is also a wound of the deeper mind."

"Ah." They stood facing each other in the entrance to Arthur's house. "Is that so?" he asked slowly. "That is . . . interesting indeed." And then he turned once again towards the front door, and Niniane could tell he was deep in thought. She smiled affectionately, for she knew he would contemplate this new piece of information for days to come. Such is the mind of Galahad, she thought.

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"So," Galahad explained, not bothering to lower his voice, "I virtually carried him out of the mess. 'Twas no easy feat let me tell you, Niniane. He was incapable of standing, let alone of walking or of navigating his way back to his room."

Niniane and Galahad stood side by side in Tristan's room, looking down at Tristan as he lay sprawled on his stomach, passed out and fully dressed, on top of his bed. Normally perfectly groomed, his hair had come free of its ribbon so that it partially hid his face like a curtain. Niniane could see stubble on his chin and knew it must have been days since he'd felt the sharp edge of the barber's knife.

"He hasn't moved since I left him," Galahad said, and glanced at Niniane. "Contrary to popular opinion, Tristan never gets this drunk . . . never. He believes the drink causes a man to lose his dignity, and dignity is very important

to Tristan. He preserves it with something akin to religious fervour . . . usually. Tristan is usually the one carrying the rest of us back to our rooms."

She nodded, understanding. She knew Tristan would be none too pleased about her, a woman, seeing him in such a state, and she also knew he would be none too pleased about the inkling she had as to what had suddenly triggered this need to escape into the oblivion of ale-induced stupor. She squatted beside Tristan, putting one knee to the floor for balance, and laying tingling fingers on his forehead.

"There is naught I can do for him at the moment," she told Galahad. "Not in this state. He must bear the consequences, I'm afraid. He will be ill tomorrow, of course, so make sure he drinks water and keeps it down." She stood then and looked at Galahad. "But when he's well enough, tell him I know a little about what is bothering him. I *can* help him, but only if he will allow it." She lay a sympathetic hand on Galahad's arm. "I'm not sure he will want my help, though, and if not . . . ." She shrugged, indicating there would be little she could do if not. "I've a feeling Tristan doesn't make himself vulnerable to women all that often."

"An understatement if ever I heard one," Galahad commented mildly. "I will tell him, Niniane," he said sombrely. "This is the third night he's been like this. He'll do himself damage if he keeps it up." And then he added as an afterthought, "Certainly in terms of reputation if not in health."

A smile flickered across Niniane's face in response to that comment. "Is he courageous, Galahad? I know," she said, pre-empting his response, "in battle or in a fight, you are all courageous. Of that I have no doubt. But there are other, different, types of courage? Does Tristan possess the courage to look into the wounds of his past, do you think?"

Galahad was silent as he thought about Niniane's question. He stood looking down at his friend, thoughtful. Finally, he shook his head. "I do not know. He never speaks of his past. But then, none of us do."

"Well," Niniane said, "he *will* need that sort of courage, Galahad. You might want to let him know. I think," she added softly, "Tristan's past just caught up with him."

~

"Before I answer your questions, Tristan, I've a need to know if you're all right."

"You mean you've a need to know if I'm still seeking solace in too many mugs of ale."

Niniane smiled. "Exactly."

"I've managed to abstain these past nights, but only because I couldn't face the thought of being so cursedly ill the next day. 'Tis not worth the trouble I've discovered. I don't know how they do it, front up night after night, only to wake each morning with a blessed hangover."

"They get used to it, I suspect."

They were both sitting on the front step of Arthur's house. Niniane was wrapped in one of Sarie's shawls for warmth, and she leaned back against the doorframe for support. Tristan was leaning against the opposite frame, his long legs stretched out in front of them both. The darkness around them held the sounds of night – a dog barking, someone closing a window, the clinking of plates being cleaned, an occasional laugh, sounding overly loud in the silence of the night, and the muted sounds of a myriad of different conversations. The moon's light partially illuminated and partially hid their faces. It was a clear night, a beautiful night. A good night for sitting under the stars to talk, Niniane thought.

They listened to the sounds of night in silence for a while, both surprisingly comfortable with the silence that had fallen between them. Niniane would've been content to continue sitting in companionable silence, but she knew there were things that needed to be discussed, so she broke the spell of silence that had descended upon them.

"I should've warned you when you brought me back to Arthur's house on the day of the battle. I should've told you it was possible memories from your past might come back to haunt you. I'm sorry, Tristan. I could've prepared you if I had warned you, but I was . . . not in my right mind that day."

"That battle was no place for a woman, Niniane. Battle-hardened men were traumatised that day. You've no need to apologise. And before we continue, I want you to know, I was not ready to die that day. 'Til the day I do die, I will not forget what you did for me, and I will be in your debt, no matter what you say. I've a need to know, though. Why, in healing me, did you bring back memories of a past I thought I had long ago left behind?"

Niniane took a deep breath. Here goes, she thought silently. Now, where to begin . . . .

"First of all," she said, "we think we can outrun the past. But the truth is, we cannot. It catches up with us, one way or another, sooner or later. Nor can we escape it. So you might think you buried the past and put it behind you. But as I once said to Gawain, if you try to do that, it controls your present and dictates your future. Really, if you think about it, it makes sense. The past shapes us a lot more than we realise.

"Second," she continued without pause, "a wound of the body is never just a wound of the body. The body reflects what is in the mind – the deeper mind, I mean. So if there is a wound in our deeper mind, the body will eventually reflect it. This means that when I heal, I heal the wound at every level – body *and* mind. In your case, when I healed you, I saw in the vicious nature of the physical wound an element of self-punishment, but I also saw the deeper wound – the wound of your deeper mind. And I saw that it occurred in your childhood and has, therefore, been with you for many years."

She paused to give Tristan a chance to respond, but he stayed silent, so she continued.

"I know you more by reputation than I do personally, so forgive me if I'm wrong. But I know how you seduce women. I know how you make women fall in love with you, and then leave them wanting more of you . . . or more from you. Maybe you see yourself as a lover of women, but what I see in the way you treat women is more about revenge and punishment and control than it is love." She paused again, but still he remained silent. "Am I right or is that an unfair judgement?"

After a moment, he answered her. "I've never thought about it that way. All I know is that when I was much younger, I realised women liked the way I looked. And I also realised I could turn that to my advantage. So I learned more about what women really want, the way they like to be touched and treated. I paid attention. Most men don't. They just take what they want. Not me. I give them what they want. But I also vowed at the same time I would never allow a woman to be in control of anything I did or said or thought or felt. No matter what, I would always remain in control."

"So if you felt yourself falling in love with a woman," Niniane asked, "what would you do about it?"

"Walk away. Sever all contact. But I've never even come close to falling in love, or not that I can recall anyway."

Niniane nodded her understanding, and silence again became their companion, but, again, it was not an uncomfortable one. She could sense Tristan's eyes on her, and realised the silence held an edge of anticipation. Anticipation of what, though? Answers or seduction?

"Would you seduce me now if you could?" she asked him.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I feel something for you I've never felt for a woman before, and it . . . stays my hand, you might say."

"What is it you feel?"

"Respect. And not just because you healed me. I respect your faithfulness to Gawain, and I also respect the courage you showed when you stood before the bishop."

She was surprised, and took a brief moment to recover. "You've never respected a woman before? Obviously not," she answered her own question. "All right," she said softly, "I've a need to know, Tristan. You've come to me for help, and I admire *your* courage. But you need to make a choice now because if I do help you, you will change. So if you want to stay as you are – a seducer of women, I mean – you'd best leave now and we will speak of this no more. But if you are willing to change, then answer me this." She leaned towards him in the moonlight. "What happened to you when you were but a boy? What happened to set you on this path you walk?"

Tristan was silent, and she watched as he put his head back against the doorframe and closed his eyes. "You must know, a part of me wants to stay as I am now," he said. He raised his head and looked at her again. "But I would have you answer a question of mine before I answer yours. Can you take away this pain that has become my constant companion since you laid your hands on me?"

"I can do better," she replied. "I can help *you* take the pain away. But . . ."

"But?"

"But it may not happen overnight. And it may require a little effort on your part."

She sensed his smile rather than saw it. He shifted position, sitting up straighter and pulling his legs under him. She laughed softly in the moonlight. Tristan, it seemed, had made his choice.

"I was the second of seven children," he told her. "We didn't have much, and we all fitted somehow into a single-roomed hut. I don't know how old I was when my father left. Nor do I know why, except for what my mother told us."

"What did she tell you?"



"That he had gone off to become a soldier, fighting in some war or other. I have no real clear picture of my father, but what I do remember is that after he left, my mother struggled to put food on the table, and there was no more laughter in our small hut."

Tristan stopped talking and, as the silence lengthened, Niniane tightened Sarie's shawl about her and decided to give him a helping hand.

"Tristan," she said softly, "you are afraid of the memories because they cause you pain and hurt. That's what you're escaping and trying to run away from. But if you pay no heed to your fear, as you've no doubt learned to do in battle, and let the memories come, you will give yourself an opportunity to see them through the eyes of an experienced adult – no longer through the eyes of a boy. And this I can promise you. You will see your past from a different perspective. Then, you will make some remarkable and probably insightful discoveries that will help you. But first, you have to let the memories wash through you like a flowing river. Don't resist them."

He nodded, but it was a moment more before he continued. "I was barely nine summers old when my mother asked me to come with her. We walked for leagues in silence, and I had no idea where we were going. We must have walked a good half a day, but, finally, we walked up a long avenue – a beautiful avenue lined on both sides with tall trees. The old house at the end of the avenue was beyond anything I'd seen – grand, impressive. We were expected, I think. We were taken to the kitchens at the back of the house, and my mother was given a small pouch of coins. Then she left. She left me there. I never saw her again, and she never said a word, not one single word."

Niniane closed her eyes against the pain his words stirred within her. She saw him so clearly in her mind's eye – a frightened, bewildered little boy, watching his mother walk away with nary a word, leaving him in a strange place with strange people.

Tristan laughed without humour. "The first thing they did was give me a bath. I'd never had a bath before, so how was I to know what was their intent? I thought they were trying to boil me."

Niniane smiled. "So no doubt you fought them?"

"No doubt. I fought them like a god-damned wild animal, which was probably what they thought I was." He leaned forward, towards Niniane, and she knew he was finding it easier to be in the past. "I was with that family for many, many years, Niniane. It was a good life I had with them. They were good people, kind people. And the longer I stayed, the less like a servant I became. If anything, they treated me like their own son. I learnt to read and to play the harp. I learnt to ride and to wield a sword. But no matter what I did, I could never completely banish the image of my mother walking away from me. *That's* why I vowed no woman would ever again hold the power to hurt me the way she did. I cried myself to sleep for many, many nights after she left. And then, one night, I decided to stop crying. And so I did."

"And what of that image now?"

Tristan shrugged and relaxed back against the doorframe again. "I've not thought of it in years . . . until you healed my battle wound. Since then, I've thought of little else. It's very irritating to be thinking of it again. As I said, I thought I'd finally laid that ghost to rest."

"Well, in a way you had," Niniane said, "but not in any way that was good for you. The hurt was all still down there, buried, but not gone. That's why it's all coming out now. Hurt that's buried like that festers, too, so when it does come out, it's not pretty." She paused to allow him to digest her words and then she asked him, "I have a picture in my mind's eye. Can I describe it to you?"

"Go ahead."

"I see a woman whose appearance is dishevelled and unkempt, and even perhaps a little dirty. And from her first waking moment until her last, she is bent over chore after chore after chore, so much so, in fact, that eventually she

forgets how to stand straight and tall and proud. She is weighed down by the burden of life, and so there is no longer any reason to laugh. There is, perhaps, a small spark of love left in her heart, but even that is extinguished when the man she thinks she loves leaves her alone. And seven children have taken their toll on her body. She is tired, Tristan. She is so tired she drags her body around as if it is a great effort to do so. Does that sound familiar?"

He nodded. "Aye," he whispered. "That's her. That's my mother."

"You have to find a way to forgive her, not for her sake, but for yours. So look at her again with fresh eyes, and try to understand what she became, and why she did what she did. For with understanding, forgiveness follows naturally. In fact, forgiveness without understanding can tend to be naught but a trite cliché and, as such, is rarely beneficial or genuine. Forgiveness brings with it a unique freedom, and *that* is why, if you can forgive your mother, your attitudes and behaviours where women are concerned will be different.

"It seems to me," she said slowly, "that she had nothing left to give you, so she did the one, the only thing she could. She found you a better life. And maybe the only way she could find the strength to go through with it was to let you go without a backward glance. Who knows? Only she can know that. But still, it's worth considering, don't you think?"

This time, Tristan did not respond.

~

Lying on his back in the dark with his hands under his head, Tristan contemplated the darkness. He wasn't afraid anymore, so he allowed the memories to come. It was as if someone had unbolted and opened a door into the past, and he had walked into an old, familiar room. He found himself smiling and then sobering over things, the smallest memories, long forgotten but now remembered – things enjoyed and things not enjoyed. He remembered his mother, trying to picture even the tiniest detail of her as she moved around the hut. He realised she would not have been so old when last he saw her. How

curious, then, he thought of her, even now, as an old woman. He remembered his brothers and sisters, and wondered what had become of them. And as he remembered, a slow, dawning realisation crept into his awareness like sunlight creeping slowly along the ground with the rising sun.

And then he knew.

Of them all, he was the fortunate one.

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## 4. *Mae's Necklace*

(**Note:** the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake* falls in Chapter Nine between Parts III and IV whilst Merlin is on his tour with Arthur, a couple of months after the battle.)

Niniane opened the gate of Arondiel's stall, and laughed softly as Arondiel immediately lowered her head and nudged Niniane's hand with her muzzle.

"Are you glad to see *me* or are you more interested in the tasty morsel I *might* have brought with me?"

Arondiel paid no attention, and Niniane, still laughing, opened her hands and held them out.

"This is the only time you show a slight tendency towards aggression, my beautiful girl," she told the horse as the sound of crunching apple filled the air around them, sounding overly loud in the quiet of the stable. When the pieces of apple were gone, she stroked Arondiel's muzzle with one hand and ran her other hand down the velvety smoothness of the horse's neck. "'Tis a good day for a ride, my beautiful," she said quietly as she stroked the horse. "Where shall we go today, eh?"

"Hello, beloved."

Her hands stilled on Arondiel's coat, and she stood as though suddenly turned to marble. Her heart picked up its beat, thudding wildly in her chest, and she swallowed nervously, breathed deeply, and dropped her hands by her sides before slowly turning around. Mae stood in the centre of the stable, a short distance from Arondiel's stall. She wore, again, the silver-threaded white gown and the blue cloak she'd worn when first she'd appeared to Niniane. The hood of the blue cloak was pulled over her hair, and in the dim interior of the stable, Niniane could not see her features, just a dark shadowy void where her face should be.

They both stood looking at one another, neither making any attempt to speak. The quiet of the stable surrounded them. Even Arondiel, her dark brown eyes

fixed on Mae, made no sound but stood as still as Niniane. The silence stretched between all three, and Niniane wondered why Mae did not speak. Finally, knowing it to be completely unnecessary, she gave voice to her thoughts.

"It was easier being with you when I thought you were the Goddess I served as a priestess at the temple."

"But that is exactly what I am."

"True," Niniane said. "Yes, that is true. I mean," she changed tack, "when I thought you were separate from me, above me; someone to whom I paid homage."

Mae smiled, and Niniane sensed it. "Even as the Goddess you served at the temple, I was never separate from you, beloved."

Mae's words were true. Niniane could think of no rejoinder, so she fell silent, and Mae, again, made no attempt to break it. She simply stood, unmoving, in the middle of the stable. Niniane felt uncomfortable as the silence lengthened, and so, again, felt compelled to voice her thoughts.

"You have not appeared to me since Merlin told me the truth about what you are."

"Is that a statement or a question, beloved?" Mae asked gently.

Niniane's lips twitched and a smile sparkled in her eyes. "I thought never to see you again. I wanted to see you, for I have missed your visits, but I thought it would be . . . superfluous, unnecessary once I knew the truth."

"You have had a lot on your mind, Niniane," Mae said simply.

"Aye," Niniane agreed, "that I have."

"And you've needed time to process it all. I was never going to abandon you. Indeed, I cannot. Nor was it ever my intention to cease our talks." Mae held out her hand. "Come, beloved," she said softly, "let us make use of the bales of hay. They make such comfortable seats, and I do so love the smell of hay."

Niniane opened the gate of Arondiel's stall and followed Mae through the internal opening that connected the stables to the shed of hay. Mae sat on a

single bale, removing the hood of her cloak as she did so, and Niniane smiled at the now-familiar elegance of Mae's movements. Following suit, she sat on a hay bale opposite Mae's.

"You are the truth of who I am," she said.

Mae smiled so that her eyes sparkled as though filled with a thousand burning lights. "So I am, beloved."

"I have enormous trouble reconciling you and me. I have had ever since Merlin told me who you were."

"I know," Mae said. "But you do not have to reconcile the two of us, beloved. You need only be. And at the moment, you need only be with me."

Her words penetrated and Niniane felt herself relax. "That I can do," she said. In truth, the warmth of Mae's presence, like the caress of the warm sun on a chill day, eclipsed all Niniane's fears and doubts, making it impossible to dwell on them.

"The questions you hold within you, Niniane, no longer arise out of ignorance, but are, instead, born of your desire for knowledge. And since it is knowledge that will bring you and I together as one, I have come this time, at last, to answer some of your questions. You want to know, for example, why I incarnate at all. Why put myself, and you, through the pain and hardship? Why not just appear as I am?"

"Yes," Niniane confirmed. "I do want to know that. I think I have an idea, but I would hear it from you."

"There are many reasons I incarnate, some of which you already know, for they are the reasons for *your* incarnation. In some incarnations, I come to do one or a number of specific things, and once done I leave. In those lives, remembering the truth is either not a necessity or it simply does not serve the Purpose of that particular life. So in lives such as these, there is not the pain of your life, beloved, for it is not necessary to be awakened. 'Tis the awakening process that is so extraordinarily painful, as well you know.

"As for the lives during which it *is* necessary for me to remember the truth of who I am, who you are, I endure the pain because those lives are of great importance and significance. You must remember 'tis the transformational/transcendent process that, in and of itself, serves Purpose and, as such, forms an intrinsic part of the destiny of those lives."

"So you don't necessarily transform in every life? Or undertake an initiation?"

"No, beloved, although I do tend toward some sort of spiritual function in the lives I live simply because it is closest to the Truth. One could say it is my preferred option.

"One of the most important reasons I incarnate, though, is to be *identified* with humans *as* a human. Remember, to be *identified* with the human experience, beloved, one must *become* fully human. To take on, fully, the burden of fear and ignorance that pervades the third dimension, or the physical, material existence, one must *become* fully human. To become the opposite of what you are; to become the opposite of what *is* – that which humans have now become – one must incarnate, for only the illusion of the incarnated character-identity can exist in separation, Niniane. I cannot experience nor create what is not Truth, for it is not my Nature, and I cannot go against my Nature. So," she finished, "I incarnate, and human society does the rest."

"Moulds, shapes, and teaches you as the young, newly incarnated consciousness to be fearful and ignorant you mean?"

Mae nodded. "Yes."

"But the pain of separation . . . the darkness of ignorance . . . how do you keep doing it?"

"I am a Guardian. 'Tis my Nature, and yours, to do what is needed, when it is needed, how it is needed, and where. And as I said, beloved, not every incarnation is as painful as yours. It depends on the Purpose underlying the incarnation. Yours has been particularly painful because it is your destiny to



remember who you are, to transform your consciousness, and to transcend both the human experience and this material, physical dimension. 'Tis an arduous and painful path you tread, my love. But there are rewards, are there not?"

"One or two," Niniane concurred with a wry smile.

Mae returned it.

"In one sense," Niniane said, becoming serious, "you are my greatest reward. 'Tis towards *you* that I walk. And while there have been many motivations within me before now to continue the journey, you are becoming my only reason to continue."

Mae did not respond but looked, instead, at Niniane steadily. After a moment, She stood, walked over to Niniane, leaned over, and placed Her lips softly on Niniane's forehead. "And you shall have your reward, Niniane," She whispered. "That is my solemn promise to you.

"Now," She said, picking up the thread of their conversation again as She returned to sit upon Her bale of hay, "there is another reason I incarnate, an important one. In the days of old, my love, many thousands of years ago, humans were not as ignorant as now they are, and so they were not separated nor disconnected from Truth. In those days, many things were different because humans knew the truth of their multi-dimensionality. Even if they did not remember it specifically in a lifetime, human society was such in those days that each person knew of it generally. And because they knew of it, they paid heed to and honoured the soul. The priests and priestesses in the ancient temples, in particular, were well trained and properly prepared and so could handle the energy radiation of the higher dimensions. In other words, my love, they were able to commune directly with the gods. So if an individual was not ready to be in the presence of a higher-dimensional being, or if a person was not ready or able to commune directly with their own higher-dimensional Self, the priests and priestesses could do and did so in their stead and on their behalf. Unfortunately, this is no longer so.

“Because humans are no longer aware and knowledgeable as once they were, my energy, my essence in its purest form, could potentially damage the untrained and unprepared human mind, particularly if that mind has not been trained in other lifetimes. So, my love, if I walked around appearing to different people, I could potentially leave a trail of damaged minds in my wake. I would not want that.”

“No,” Niniane commented, smiling, “‘twould be counter-effective.”

“Indeed, it would. Unfortunately, Niniane, you will experience for yourself that humans cannot handle the energy radiation of the higher dimensions. The more you transcend, beloved, the more you go beyond the physical and become who you are, the more you will radiate my essence, and the more you will find that you have to withdraw from human society. Of course, the more you transcend, the more you will find human society intolerable, so you will not mind withdrawing.”

Niniane nodded unconsciously. “Aye,” she said. “I know already from my own experience you speak the truth, Mae. The way humans live on the surface of themselves, pursuing only what they want, paying no heed to their Truest Nature, their soul, nor to destiny; the way they take no responsibility for their emotions; the way they refuse to face and conquer their fears; the way they seek only to escape, usually through addiction; the way they reject knowledge, resist and ridicule it; and the way they allow others to dictate and capture their focus so that their minds are numbed, even dead, like the zombies of Merlin’s stories, ‘tis becoming impossible to live among them. A butterfly cannot explain what it sees to a caterpillar even though the two be of the same species. Surely,” she added with a wry grin, “that is why butterflies and caterpillars do not hang around together.”

“Indeed,” Mae agreed, smiling. “‘Tis a perfect metaphor, beloved. The transformed Butterfly Consciousness is so far beyond the experience of the untransformed Caterpillar Consciousness that the two cannot relate. The

perspectives of the two do not match, and so there is no point of connection between them . . . none at all, I'm afraid."

"So how am I to be here then – a butterfly among caterpillars?"

"You must remember you are not here for the Caterpillar Consciousness, beloved. Do not focus on it, or the world in which it exists. Pay it no heed beyond the recognition that from it you have transformed. Even if you focus on it only a tiny amount, it will pull you down and trap you. Focus beyond and go beyond. Allow yourself to leave it fully behind." She raised her hands and undid the tie of her cloak so that it slid from her shoulders to fall around her in a pool of blue fabric. "I have a gift for you – something that will help you maintain your focus, Niniane."

Around her neck, Mae wore a necklace of such exquisite beauty it accomplished the seemingly impossible – it drew the eye and stole Niniane's attention from the beauty of Mae's eyes. Mae reached up behind her and unclasped the necklace. Then she stood, walked over, and placed it around Niniane's neck.

"The priestesses I spoke of," She explained as She fixed the clasp, "those highly evolved souls who came, or incarnated, to guide, support, and encourage humans along the paths of their destinies, both individually and collectively, wore this necklace, Niniane. The stones hold a powerful symbolic significance. The dark blue stone, lapis lazuli, is the stone of higher wisdom. The light blue stone, turquoise, is the stone of surrender, higher service, and servitude. The clear stone, moonstone, is the stone of deeper consciousness. And each stone is bound to the next with gold, symbolic of the purified, transformed conscious mind. You have worn this necklace in many lifetimes, Niniane, and you may now wear it in this one."

Niniane felt the necklace with the tips of her fingers, closing her eyes to hone her focus. She wished she was wearing one of her finer gowns . . .

The thought disintegrated. It mattered not what she was wearing, for the necklace was not worn as an adornment, but, rather, as a powerful means of focus, like the talismans of old, and as a symbol of one who walked in the realm of higher consciousness. It was as if the necklace held the powerful essence, the experiences, and the knowledge gained in each of the lives of the priestesses who had worn it, all of whom were, of course, one and the same. And, each stone held the power of the particular aspect it symbolised – a power that wrapped around Niniane and infused her, becoming a part of her.

“Unfortunately,” Mae said as Niniane opened her eyes, “no one around you will know its significance nor its meaning, Niniane. Unfortunately, my love, in this life, the necklace is for you and you alone.”

~

Gawain hesitated inside the stable door, surprised to see Arondiel in her stall. Either Niniane was back far earlier than usual or she didn’t go riding as planned. He frowned. She never missed a chance to ride Arondiel out, especially if that chance was afforded her by a clear sky and bright sunlight. Something had detained or distracted her. He turned to go, trying to dispel the niggling thought that something was wrong . . .

Stopping mid-stride, he cocked his head to listen. Two distinct but muted feminine voices were coming from the direction of the shed of hay, both of which he recognised. A chill started at the base of his spine, prickled his scalp, and caused tiny goose bumps to raise the hairs on his arms. He’d told Niniane that he left the gods alone and they, in turn, left him alone. But the truth was somewhat more complicated. Although he’d never confessed it to Niniane, he did believe in the power of the old gods. In fact, he privately believed the gods of the ancient, pagan religions were genuinely powerful, far more powerful than the new Christian god. The Christian god was, he thought, more about the power, greed, and corruption of men than it was about any god, just as Niniane had told the bishop when she’d confronted him. But though he believed in the

power of the pagan gods, in his experience they did not look with favour upon the affairs of men. And if they chose to interfere . . .

He shivered unconsciously. He should just go and leave Niniane to talk to her goddess alone. But instead of turning around and walking out of the stable, his legs took him through the opening that connected the stable to the shed of hay.

Niniane was sitting on a single bale of hay facing, and talking to, a woman of such exquisite beauty Gawain could not, try though he might, remove his eyes from her. Niniane saw him first, since it was she who faced the stable's entrance.

"Ah, so finally you meet," she said softly as if she was talking only to herself. "Gawain, this is . . ."

". . . your goddess. Yes, I know. I recognise Her voice."

Mae stood but made no move to touch Gawain. "Hello, Gawain," She said gently in Her musical, lilting voice. "'Tis a great pleasure to meet you in the flesh. Please, will you join us?"

Gawain did not move his feet but he brought his hands up and hooked his thumbs over the waist of his trousers. His wariness combined with absolute reluctance and resistance and perhaps a little awe was clearly etched on his face.

"Niniane told me," he said, "you are the wisdom that speaks through her when the snake moves on her arm."

Mae inclined her head. "Indeed, so I am."

"Is that why you seem so familiar?"

"No," She answered him gently, shaking Her head for emphasis. "I am familiar to you because you see me in Niniane, for she radiates my essence the way a star radiates light. My presence is her presence, my energy her energy. I am her Truest Nature and, therefore, your truest reflection."

"That," he commented, glancing at Niniane, "is impossible to get one's head around."

"Well yes," Mae agreed, smiling her light-filled smile at him, "I would agree."

Niniane saw him visibly relax. He unhooked his thumbs and came to sit on the ground at Niniane's feet so he could lean against the same bale of hay she sat upon. She put her hand on the back of his neck for comfort.

Mae looked at them both sitting together. "You belong with each other more than you can possibly know," She said quietly. "Long and hard has your journey been, for you have journeyed apart, each of you longing for the other. 'Twas the very great sacrifice you knew you had to make. At times, you have been here together, for you are always drawn to each other whenever you come here at the same time. But always, you have been parted each from the other, usually by death, for it was not time for you to be together. The separation of the death experience has taken its toll, and now you both, but especially you Gawain, fear that loss. Face and acknowledge this you must. But this is my promise to you both: in this lifetime you will not be parted. In this lifetime, you will be *together*, and you will *be* together. You will be what you truly are – two halves of the same powerful whole."

She leaned forward and looked directly at Gawain.

"You are more knowledgeable than you know, Gawain. You have but to remember . . ." And She smiled gently at him as She leaned back. "You fear the power of the gods. But 'tis not the gods that cause all the calamities of humankind. 'Tis humans themselves that cause those calamities, for they do not understand their own creative nature, so they remain ignorant and unaware of the truth: that they create in their realities what they most fear. They accuse the gods of punishing them, and never more so has a god taken on this characteristic than the Christian god. He is, indeed, a punishing god, but not because the Divine Itself is so, but because the Christian god is naught but an expression and a fabrication of the human ego. In other words, 'tis humans that punish themselves.

"In truth, Gawain, we, the gods, do not speak a language of judgement and punishment. So these concepts are not in our vocabulary. We know, though, the

nature of cause and effect, and we know this is not limited by birth and death. So do not confuse us and our guidance with the consequences arising out of the choices of a wounded human psyche. Do you understand that?"

"I'm not sure," he said slowly, obviously thinking. "Are you saying my mother created the circumstance of her abuse at the hands of my father out of fear and self-punishment?"

"Yes," Mae confirmed. "But there is even more to it than that, Gawain. She never told you, did she, about her father who beat her for the slightest of offences? He was vigilant, was her father, your grandfather, for he took pleasure in those beatings. Thus, it was a pattern of belief put into your mother – embedded in her psyche as a matter of fact – from a young age. She believed, in the depth of her subconscious mind, that she deserved such treatment. Thus was the fear fostered in this lifetime, and thus did she create what she feared most. She thought marriage to your father was a means of escape. But one cannot escape oneself, Gawain. One must transcend – grow beyond one's fears. She has carried this fear over many lifetimes and will carry it over many more.

"But this, too, must you know, Gawain. Her fear began for her because of a life she lived during which she abused both her people and the power she had over them. In that life she was like a queen . . . or a king to be more precise. In a subsequent life, it was, then, necessary for her to experience the consequence of that abuse. She needed to know what she had done to others. And that is when her fear began. Such are the consequences of choice, and yet humans pay such little heed to their own choices and actions. If they but knew what would come of their choices, they would not make them so lightly, methinks."

"And such," Niniane added, "is the book of the soul's existence. We see only this single page and think we know how it is. But we know nothing really because we are unaware of the pages that have come before this one, and so we remain ignorant of our own story."

“’Tis so, Niniane,” Mae agreed. And then she looked again at Gawain. “Does that knowledge help you, Gawain?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, it does.”

‘Then this, too, will help you. When humans hold deep within them powerful fears such as the one your mother held, it is impossible for them to Love. Fear obviates Love, Gawain, neutralises it and stoppers its expression. Fear turns humans into black holes such that Love cannot escape nor radiate. That your mother did not Love you was a sad and wounded truth, but it was not because of *you* that she did not Love you, it was because of her. She was not capable of it. She will have to live many lives before she finds within herself the capacity to Love. In Niniane, you have created the opposite in your reality, for Niniane is capable of the greatest, deepest, most profound Love. And she Loves you.”

Niniane looked at him to gauge his reaction. Although she could not see all of his face, she could see he had dropped his eyes, and then he bowed his head.

“Gods blood,” he muttered. “Do I really believe that?”

Mae and Niniane both smiled the same smile. Niniane leaned down and whispered in his ear, “Yes, my love, you really believe that, hence,” she added in a normal tone of voice, “the injuries to the left side of your body when we fought the north men. I saw it when I healed you. Just by being with you, I am bringing that fear to the fore. And it does so nicely dovetail with your fear of loss, don’t you think?”

Gawain grunted. “Such a stupid thing to believe . . .”

“Belief that has its roots in fear is never rational, Gawain,” Mae told him. “Such beliefs are a form of insanity, and they greatly distort the psyche . . . and, therefore, one’s perspective . . . and, therefore, one’s reality.”

Gawain raised his head and looked at her. “And yet we do not know they are within us.”



"You have forgotten how to know," Mae responded. "But there are ways. Emotions are the link between the soul and the ego – that which Niniane and Merlin refer to as the character-identity. Emotion, the very thing that makes humans human, is the gift given to provide the means by which humans may navigate the labyrinth of their own psyches. Emotions point the way. You have but to learn the uniqueness of your own emotional language to unearth each fear that resides deep within. Ironically," she said, looking at Niniane and Gawain in turn, a smile sparkling again in her eyes, "Love is beyond emotion."

Niniane returned Mae's smile. "Makes perfect sense," she said, "for Love is beyond the ego."

"Indeed, my beloved, so it is. And now," Mae said as She stood, "with that, I will leave you."

Niniane tensed and a look of near-panic flickered across her face. "Will I . . .?"

"Ah, beloved," Mae interrupted, "of course you will see me again. Of course. You have but to call and I will come. But even if you do not call, I will come."

~

"So much for your convenient little arrangement with the gods."

"My 'convenient little arrangement' was always in jeopardy whilst ever I bedded a priestess – one who has direct and physical contact with the gods."

Gawain and Niniane lay facing each other in Arthur's bed. They had discussed their encounter with Mae at great length, long into the night, so that the candle burning beside the bed was little more than a wick sitting in the middle of a pool of melted wax. They had discussed his fears, and she had told him of hers. And she had told him of what she had learned both from Mae and from Merlin about the nature of humanity, the human experience, and of reality. She was exhausted, but her exhaustion held within it a deep satisfaction and contentment. Gawain, on the other hand, was showing no signs of tiring. The more he knew, it seemed, the more he wanted to know.

"Well," she said in response to his last comment, "it was more than I could've hoped for, having you meet Her and talk to Her."

He laughed softly. "I tried hard not to meet Her, but my legs would not obey me. They have a mind of their own it seems."

She smiled. "They obey your deeper mind, not your conscious one. 'Tis just as well."

"Aye, perhaps you are right. I am glad of the experience." He hesitated and then added, "When She was talking to me, I could listen to Her words, and it was as if I was having a normal conversation with a normal person. But when She spoke to you, it was very, very weird. It was like having you on both sides of me. You are the same. I mean, really. Mae referred to it as a presence, and that is probably the best way to describe it. But 'tis spooky."

"We are the same?" She shook her head on the pillow and rolled on to her back so she could look up into the darkness beyond the candle's light. "To me She is still the Lady, the goddess I serve, even though I know I am becoming Her. She is so beautiful. Her beauty is bedazzling . . ."

"As is yours."

She looked at him in the muted light and smiled. He slid a hand across her stomach and she put hers over his. "But how am I to reconcile the two of us?"

"I suspect the best way is simply not to think about it."

She laughed softly. "That's pretty much what She said."

The candle sputtered and went out, shrouding them in darkness.

He moved in the dark to lay his head on her breast. "Must be right then," he said, at last sounding tired.

"Must be," she echoed as she wrapped her arms around him. "Must be."

~

## 5. *Vision*

(**Note:** the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake* falls in Chapter Nine between Parts III and IV whilst Merlin is on his tour with Arthur, and takes place a few weeks after Niniane's last meeting with Mae (see *The Messiah Perspective: The Atlantean Priestess*.)

Gawain jerked awake and lay looking up at the darkness, although, in truth, he saw not the darkness but the images of his dreams that clung to him despite having awoken. After a while, he sat up and swung his legs over the bed, his movements slow and careful so as not to disturb Niniane. He reached down and felt on the floor for his trousers, and then, standing, he tied them and walked on silent feet to the fire at the other end of the room. Crouching in front of it, he placed a handful of twigs and a couple of small logs onto the red embers, stoking the fire back into healthy life. Then he sat in front of it, seemingly transfixed by the flames. In truth, though, the flames that filled the space around him with a flickering orange glow brought to vivid life in his mind's eye the images of his dreams once again. Powerless against the clarity of the images in his mind, he could only watch, once again, as the scene unfolded in his mind's eye.

Although the images in his mind were vivid and powerful, he still felt Niniane come and stand beside him. And then she, too, sat on the thick rug in front of the fire.

"What are you seeing?" she asked him.

He turned his head to look at her and smiled. She looked beautiful in the light of the fire. The orange glow of the flames bathed her as it did him, and her hair was a dishevelled mess – a halo of brown fire around her face. Her eyes looked darker in the orange light, and they glittered at him as she looked at him, awaiting his answer.

"I dreamt of you," he told her. And then he searched her face with his eyes. "Only, you looked different. You had black hair, and your face was different. But I knew it was you." He looked back at the flames, and answered her

question. "We are standing on the steps of a great temple, and in the distance, in the absolute blackness of the dead of night, we can see an orange glow, and we know the city is burning . . . or parts of it at least. We can hear screams of indescribable agony and fear, and we know it is the screams of the priests and priestesses who are being torn limb from limb by the mob. We know the mob has become like a wild beast – savage and out of control, rampaging, committing the most heinous acts . . ." His voice petered out, and he frowned as he looked deeply into the flames.

Niniane bit her lip as she listened in silence.

"But they are burning far more than the priesthood this night," Gawain continued after a moment. "They have emptied the libraries of the temples, and they have built a giant bonfire out of the books and scrolls and parchments they pillaged, some of which, we know, are very old, written in an ancient tongue by an ancient hand." He looked at her again. "The people of the city have risen against the temples of the gods, incited to violence by an unseen, malevolent presence – one that has taken up residence in the city."

Niniane nodded slowly. "They are burning the wisdom . . . destroying it . . ."

"You know then," Gawain asked her, "what it is I see?"

She nodded silently but said nothing verbally.

"In my dream, you are standing on the edge of the steps with your arm around one of the columns," Gawain told her, "and you turn towards me with the most profound sorrow on your face. You ask me if there was more we could have done, and I tell you we have done all we can. No more can we do than that."

Niniane remained silent as she looked towards the flames of the small fire. She was seeing the images in her mind's eye – the images evoked by Gawain's description – because she, too, had dreamed the same dream many times. Unlike Gawain, though, she knew exactly what she was seeing, courtesy of the visions given her by Isadore, and some helpful and informative discussions with Merlin.

“Why am I seeing this, Niniane?” Gawain asked her, his voice harsh, the tone expressive of his deep upset, for the images of his dream had deeply disturbed him, and he liked it not.

She took a moment to answer him. “Do you remember the visions given to me by my unicorn – Isadore – when you, Gareth, and Bors were taking me back to the temple?”

He narrowed his eyes in concentration and nodded.

“There are some things that happen in human history that are pivotal. That is, there are some events or incidents that are so profound in their lasting effects that they set us on a different path, or change the direction we walk. And this applies both to individuals and to the collective, or to groups of people. The images you’ve seen in your dreams tonight are one such time. Isadore showed me these events. And you are right, Gawain. Far, far more was destroyed that night . . . or will be, because I’m not even sure these events have happened yet. ‘Tis the death of the honour paid to an ancient wisdom. ‘Tis the death of humankind’s veneration of knowledge. ‘Tis the death of the beautiful energy of Khem that still infused the land of Egypt, and gave it beautiful life. And it was, or is, at this time that Egypt truly dies,” she told him. “Egypt – the mother of us all,” she said sadly. “Egypt – the land that birthed the current human experience in more ways than one. After the events you see, Egypt will be naught but a land of dry bones and dust, a land of tombs, a land of death,” and she shook her head for emphasis, “not of life.”

Gawain looked at her for a moment longer and then turned to contemplate the flames once more. “So, how is it we are watching the city burn?” he asked her without looking at her. “Were we there . . . or will we be there?”

She shrugged and shook her head. “I do not know. I know we watch, but I’m not sure we are incarnate there?”

He looked at her, turning his head quickly. “Meaning?”

"Why do they not come for us, the mob? We know they are tearing the temples and the priesthood apart. We know they are destroying the wisdom . . . utterly and irrevocably. We were . . . are," she corrected, "an intrinsic part of the wisdom, so why do they not come for us?"

Again, Gawain looked at her for a moment longer before turning back to the flames as he absorbed her answer and tried to process it. "What did we do that prompted me to say to you we'd done all we could?" he asked her without turning to look at her. "What was it I was referring to?"

Niniane worked her lip between her teeth as she thought about the answer to that question. "We did what we could to preserve the wisdom, I think."

"How?"

"We hid it."

He turned again, then, to look at her.

"But in hiding it from the malevolent presence that sought to destroy it," she continued quietly, looking at him, "we also hid it from humanity. And rightly so," she said, "for do not the images of your dream show you they have proved themselves unworthy of it?" A silence fell between them, and she allowed it to linger before adding, "Would you give a room full of gold to someone who knows nothing of its true value?"

Although he continued to look at her, he made no effort to answer her rhetorical questions. She watched him closely, knowing this conversation was affecting him deeply. And then she cocked her head to one side. "You dream these dreams often?" she asked him.

"Occasionally," he replied. "I have dreamed of things before they happen, and I have dreamed of things *as* they happen, although I usually do not find out until much later. What's funny?" he asked her, catching the glint of amusement in her eyes.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "You are a battle-hardened, tough warrior who has visions and dreams of inner sight. That's somewhat of a contradiction,

do you not think? I assume," she continued, not giving him a chance to respond, "the others know nothing of this ability of yours."

"Of course," he replied. "And I would prefer it stayed that way."

"Of course," she echoed.

"Come," he said, rising and leaning over her to help her to her feet. "This conversation is too strange for this time of night."

She laughed at him as she stood. "But this is the perfect time to have this conversation."

When she was, once again, curled against him as they lay in Arthur's large bed, he tugged at the material of her white nightgown in annoyed frustration. "Why are you wearing this? Take it off."

She laughed softly as she complied, wriggling free of the material, bringing it over her head and throwing it over the side of the bed. Then, naked, she curled against him once again. She thought he was, like her, relaxing towards sleep, but he pressed his lips against her forehead and asked her, "Is there no hope for us?"

"By 'us' I assume you mean all of humanity. There ought to be," she said. "Without hope, there is only a suffocating blanket of dark despair, and that is, indeed, dangerous territory to find oneself in." She propped herself on one elbow then so she could look down at him. "If humans were in control, I would say no, there is no hope for us. But I know differently now. Humans are *not* in control. And the darkness that now governs this existence only *thinks* itself in control. So, yes, there is hope. There is hope for us all. The gods did not abandon us, Gawain. We may have abandoned them, but they have never abandoned us. And the darkness that governs this existence only does so with their permission, which," she said as she lay her head back on his chest and once again curled into him, "is even now being withdrawn. Trust me, I know."

He didn't respond for a moment, and then she heard and felt his soft whisper against her forehead. "I trust you." And then, after another moment, he added, "And I know you know."

## 6. *Marriage*

(**Note:** the fit of this story into the chronology of *Lady of the Lake* falls before Chapter Twelve, after Chapter Eleven, before the first meeting of Arthur's council in the room of the round table.)

Gawain took Niniane's hands in his own. "The celebration of this, our marriage, is an acknowledgement of the truth that we walk together in all things. Your hopes are my hopes, your dreams are my own, your concerns are my concerns, and your Work is my Work. May it forever be thus."

"May it forever be thus," Niniane repeated.

"Let this ring symbolise the union of our two hearts – two hearts that beat as one."

He slipped a solid silver ring over the third finger of her left hand and then curled her fingers into his own.

"May it forever be thus that our hearts beat as one," she said.

Merlin wound a silken ribbon around Gawain and Niniane's clasped hands.

"Gawain, do you take Niniane to be your wife?"

"I do."

"And will you honour her as your wife, just as you honour yourself, forsaking all other priorities and all other loyalties?"

"I will."

Merlin looked at Niniane. "Niniane, do you take Gawain to be your husband?"

"I do."

"And will you honour him as your husband, just as you honour yourself, forsaking all other priorities and all other loyalties?"

"I will."

"Then let the binding of this ribbon symbolise the binding of the sacred union of marriage, the union of two hearts, two souls. Thy destinies are entwined and now, as husband and wife, you walk a single path of destiny hand in hand. That



which your souls have ordained and which today we consecrate and celebrate may no man tear asunder. You may seal the covenant you have made this day with a kiss if that be your wish."

Niniane smiled at Merlin, acknowledging the mischief she heard in the tone of his voice, and then turned to Gawain, her husband, and smiled into his eyes briefly before he leaned forward to touch her lips with his own thereby sealing the covenant of their marriage.

Merlin waited for them to pull apart before saying, "I do declare you, Gawain and Niniane, to be husband and wife. You are one. Indeed, you are One."

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