

PROLOGUE- CALEDONIA AD 60

The smoke roiling from the once proud city of Londinium turned the bright day to night. The ululating battle cries of Queen Boadicea's army echoed across the plain. Edana and her small group of raiders watched the others charge the broken walls to finish off the survivors. Glory would come to those who fought closest to their beloved Queen, Edana was the leader of a small raiding party of women known only as Edana's Reivers.

As niece to Queen Boadicea, she should have joined the royal family to celebrate their victory. Edana had never been comfortable with the intricate dance of court life.

Every tribe large enough had a band of "reivers", a band of men and women who lived and trained together and acted as hunters in peaceful times, providing the bulk of the tribe's sustenance. In war times the reivers were also used as scouts and led small raids against the enemy.

Edana had risen quickly through the warrior ranks and attained the rank of "huntress" at the age of 17. She was assigned to the Reivers and within six months had challenged and won against the lead Huntress. Defeating the Huntress Illara in honorable combat had put to rest the hated rumors that her rank and success was due to her royal blood and not her skill. When Londinium fell, more than just the Romans were angered at the arrogance and presumption of a bunch of "unwashed barbarians". The Roman Gods turned furious eyes on the united tribes and whispered curses slipped through the watch fires, sickness and dissension were stirred and when Queen Boadicea marched on to her next conquest, her army was less than half of what she had united against Londinium.

Edana's tribe stayed behind. Less than a year later they received word that their beloved Queen had fallen ill and rather than be captured, had taken her own life. Funeral pyres were lit by each of the tribes in honor of their fallen Queen. Edana found herself wondering from time to time if the tribes had stayed united, would Boadicea still have felt the need to take her own life? The death of the Queen should have satisfied the Roman Gods thirst for

vengeance, but this would be a much shorter story if it had.

In a secret council of Gods, Crypticus Egyptian god of flatulence and sewers, Viduus “the separator” “who divides the soul from the body after death, and Antevorte Goddess of the future came together to discuss how to make a proper example of the Caledonian tribes.

Antevorte pulled her silk woven shawl closer about her pale shoulders as she stared at the floating image before her. Antevorte’s luxurious dark hair was coiled at the back of her head and held with azurite combs. Beside her, Crypticus huddled in his malodorous robes and grinned at the image before them. Viduus sat drinking wine from yet another amphora, the many empty vessels at his feet telling of how long they had been combing through the ranks of the honored Caledonians to find the perfect one to make the example of. “Come on already Vort, pick one and let’s get on with it.” Antevorte had once found Viduus mysterious and charming and had tarried with him in the shadow of the laurel groves in the past.

Since he had been spending time with Crypticus (an Egyptian God ostracized by his own pantheon and who had taken to dressing in the robes of a Greek priest to “fit in” with the few of her pantheon who associated with him) he had become sullen and petulant and his once charming voice now grated on her nerves. “I despise that name you have chosen for me and you well know it Viduus, my name is Antevorte not ‘Vort.’” With a drawn-out sigh, Viduus stood swaying for a moment before tossing the nearly empty amphora into the nearest corner with a loud crash. “Fine then, can we please choose a victim to punish already my sweet sultry Antevorte?”

Bowing over her hand, he pressed his lips against the back of her hand in a gesture that had once made her swoon, now her eyes flicked past him to Crypticus who stood staring at the exchange with naked lust blazing in his pale eyes. When he saw her looking, he tore his eyes away and went back to staring at the vision floating in the

air. Taking her hand back she suppressed the urge to wipe her hand on her peplos. Walking to the floating vision, she waved her hand and images of Caledonian and Pict men and women flitted past too fast to get more than an impression of their visage. As if at random the pictures halted, and the image of a beautiful Caledonian Huntress stood framed in the air.

Antevorte nodded as she stared at the stoic red-haired leader “She’ll do, but we must have a solid reason for her punishment or face censure ourselves from the Celtic pantheon, not to mention our own. Give me proof of something I can punish her for and you have my word I will aid in her punishment as we discussed.” Crypticus stepped forward and stared at the now frozen image of the beautiful red headed Huntress. Viduus gestured and expanded the vision, behind the leader stood two pre-teen children. One girl resembled the leader to an extent that left no doubt of her relationship to the leader.

The same long red hair and promise of similar curves. The other was taller and of thinner stature, long mahogany curls fell to her waist. Rather than the fair skin of the others, hers reminded Viduus of dark honey. Tearing his eyes from the dark-skinned woman child he noticed the look on the other girl’s face. Supreme loathing and avarice as if here stood all that she hated in the world with more than a spark of jealousy. Viduus smiled, his brain kicked into gear and rapidly burned through the comfortable wine fog. “This one will be punished” His unsteady hand pointed at the darker of the two girls. “but this one will be our instrument.” Viduus moved to point at the red-haired child similar in age. Antevorte studied the two girls silently and nodded. “We need to make sure the punishment fits the crime and we will have to find a way to coerce the “instrument” to help us in a way that will not be disputed. Crypticus stood and approached the vision, his eyes never straying from the dark-skinned girl. “I know a way...” One hand lifted to stroke a black rimmed nail in a caress down the cheek of the frozen image. Antevorte barely suppressed the shudder that ran through her at the look on the foul Egyptian God’s face. When the trio dispersed moments later it was with great misgivings that Antevorte realized she had given her word to aid her former lover in whatever their plot...A goddess can

never go back on a vow.

CHAPTER ONE-CALEDONIA 79 AD

Edana's heart was full to bursting as she led the returning Caledonii over the hill. The sight of their permanent camp was a welcome one after so many days at war. She knew word of their arrival had already spread to the encampment, they had passed many sentries posted high in the trees or nearly hidden amongst the brush and bracken fences. Those left behind quickly left their thatch roofed homes and joined the throng making their way toward the returning warriors. Edana smiled and nodded at the warm welcome, her eyes flicking from face to face as if searching for someone in particular, with a quiet sigh she realized he had not come. Sliding off her mare, she nodded and smiled until her face ached with it as she slowly made her way to her own Taigh. Her mare was taken from her and released into the fields with the others, Edana nodded her thanks and stepped inside her home, only when the wooden door was shut firmly against the world did she sigh with relief. With the feeling of finally coming home bringing a true smile to her face she sat upon her bed, a wooden platform covered in thick woven blankets and pelts. The idea of sleeping on a high wooden box and storing things beneath it had seemed ridiculous when Cerun had first brought the idea up to her. The other Caledonii with the exception of their Ban-cheannard, slept on piles of pelts and furs over a woven mat made from rushes and reeds. Granted the extra storage gave the Taigh a larger feel and kept things from getting under foot, but she nearly felt like one of those decadent Roman women in their lofty beds as she lay so high above the floor.

This was not the only amenity that her lover Cerun insisted on, thick carpets covered the floor and several low wooden stools and tables were against the walls and made meals more convenient than going to the taigh-coinneimh and sharing a common meal with the rest of the tribe. A bucket of wash water stood nearby and Edana began to strip her off her armor and rid herself of months of unwanted filth. Her hands froze as a pair of large calloused hands gently pressed on the knotted muscles in her shoulders. The door had remained closed so it could only be Cerun who dared now to lay hands upon her. Smiling she turned in his strong arms and smiled up at him. Edana had always been taller than most of the women in her clan but her beloved Cerun made her feel small and delicate. Reaching up she placed her hand against the side of his face. Cerun's long dark hair fell in a silken sheet to his waist and eyes as green as the deep forest. Those same eyes that had always sought her out where ever she was, were lit now with a deep flame of desire. "Welcome home my Huntress..." His voice slid across her skin and warmed her to the core. With a smile, she stepped back from him. "Yer welcome is appreciated but I fear I have the dust of road and battle clinging to my skin, I will need to be clean before ye can give me a proper welcome aye?"

Knowing her need to come to him clean, he nodded and lounged atop the platform bed and watched. Edana quickly stripped her prized leather cuirass she had relieved from a fallen roman officer and then started on her tunic and braccæ. Cerun remained a silent witness to her disrobing until he saw her reach for the rag and harsh soap near the wash bucket.

"Wait my bràmair, I can offer something finer for your bathing pleasure." Cerun had been Edana's lover for nearly three years now and although he refused to allow her to acknowledge him before the clan or tell her his true name...he was especially adept at performing miracles when they were alone together. As always, Edana secured the bolt on the door lest anyone enter and disturb their time together. When she turned back toward him, a large copper tub stood in the center of the chamber. Had he not done similar magic in the past she would have felt afraid and

run out of the hut screaming perchance, instead she felt her heart constrict with that strong emotion that both felt but neither would name.

The tub was clearly large enough for both to bathe together and swirls of scented steam rose from the hot water. As Edana stepped nearer, she eyed the tub in appreciation, carved knot work and runes made it not just functional but beautiful as well. Cerun had slid one of the low wooden stools up to the tub and gestured for her to precede him. With another smile, she stepped up onto the stool and gingerly stepped into the tub. The heat of the water started to work immediately on the sore muscles in her thighs and back. A low shelf had been built inside the tub and she found she was able to sit down and be covered up to her shoulders in the steaming water.

The water threatened to escape over the lip of the tub as Cerun joined her. Edana's heart was in her eyes as she turned to face her lover, before she could say what was in her heart to say, he gently turned her away from him and with a pale bar of lavender scented soap and a clean cloth he began to scrub the filth from her back and shoulders. Edana's body began to respond to Cerun's skillful ministrations as knots of tension released in her back and shoulders. With gentle pressure he let her know to immerse her head in the water. Edana submerged herself in the steaming water and it occurred to her to ask later how he kept the water from cooling as hot water usually did when sitting out in the drafty Taighs of her clan. The taighs were sturdy to be sure with strong stone walls and the thickly thatched roofs kept the fiercest of storms and winter rains from finding a way inside, but the drafts of air that found their way in stole heat quickly and made thick blankets not a luxury but a necessity. When she re-emerged he immediately began saturating her hair with something foamy and white that like the soap smelled faintly of crushed lavender. Cerun always claimed it was her hair that he had taken notice of first, it was his request that he be allowed to brush it when they were alone together and since this was a necessary chore that Edana detested, she was all too happy to relax and allow him to pamper her in this way. Even now with her hair squeaky clean, she could feel him untangling the untidy twists she kept her hair in and fanning the deep red strands across her back and shoulders. His long fingers stroking her hair and massaging her scalp drew a satisfied sigh from her. This time when she turned in his arms he merely smiled at her with that emerald flame of desire burning in his eyes to match the amber flames in her own and captured her lips in a passionate kiss that left them both breathless.

Dark twisting tattoos wrapped around his forearms and biceps, upon his chest a stag with an impossible breadth of antlers stared out from the center of his chest. Edana traced the head of the stag with one finger, tracing the chest and forelegs until her hand dropped below the water and curled around the hard proof of his desire. Cerun let out a hiss of pleasure at the feel of her hand wrapped around him. Bringing his hands to her waist he lifted her slightly and while staring deep into her beautiful brown eyes he slowly lowered her onto his lap, it was Edana's turn to hiss with pleasure as he slowly filled her and began to move. Reaching behind him to grip the edge of the tub she raised and lowered herself, the feel of him sliding deeply in and out of her made her groan and bite down on his shoulder to stifle her cries. She kept the pace agonizingly slow until with a fierce growl he gripped her hips and began thrusting hard and fast into her.

Edana's nipples tightened as they rubbed against Cerun's chest and as if he knew her thoughts he lifted first one and then the other and laved the dusty tips, taking the hard buds into his warm mouth. Edana's cries of pleasure muffled against his neck as she began to pant. "Please Cerun..." Grinning he nuzzled her shoulder as he whispered to her. "Tell me what you what my huntress, command me." Edana cried out in dismay as he slowed his strokes, teasing at the entrance to her

core. "Please Cerun, I need you so badly, please..." Standing with her in his arms, he wrapped her long limbs about him and stepped from the tub, water running down their bodies. Taking her to the bed he laid her upon her back and gripping the bed near her head and shoulders, he began to thrust fiercely inside her. Her cries loud and explosive in the small taigh. Cerun's eyes seemed almost to glow as he looked down upon Edana's sweat covered body beneath him. Closing his eyes, he laid full length atop her as her climax seized him tightly within her and moments later he joined her in ecstasy.

It was much later as they lay beside each other, the sweat cooling on their bodies, that speech returned to them. Edana found herself once more tracing the black stag tattooed on Cerun's muscular chest. She knew she should tell him what she had seen at Inverness, her hesitation was more due to him keeping his identity a secret from her for so long and less what it would mean for them both. Bracing herself for what she believed would be rejection, she sat up, the blanket pooling at her waist. Cerun's eyes fastened immediately on the dusky nipples beginning to harden in the cooling air. "Cerun, I must speak of something with you, a thing I have seen and one which answers a question you have long denied me answer to." Cerun's playful gaze sharpened and his eyes met hers. "What have you seen my Bràmair?" Edana looking about the small taigh as if for an answer, wondered silently if losing him would truly be the death of her. "I have seen the image of Cernunnos at his temple in Inverness...your image...your temple." The silence was absolute, and she turned quickly expecting him to have vanished. Cerun stared her with eyes shining with golden light. "And what will you do with this knowledge, will you brag to your women that you kept a God in your bed for three long years?" Edana's face went hard. "If ye think I am as feckless as that then you have known me not at all, I told you what I know so that there will be no more secrets between us." Sitting up he pulled her gently down and laid her head on his chest. "I meant not to start a fight my sweet Edana, my beautiful Huntress, you own my heart, I feared only of losing you if you knew truly what and who I am." Edana turned and stared into his eyes, her own threatening to spill tears upon his chest. "For all that you are a God, do you not know the words that beat in my heart...tha mo ghion ort!" Smiling he replied in her own tongue "tha gaol agamsa ort fhèin". He then proceeded to show her just how much he loved her.

Cerun had brought many gifts to Edana over the years, some sensible and more often than not something beautiful to look at but hardly practical to work or hunt in. One night the tribe had looked to the sky in the south and saw clouds streaked with blood. A storm black with the anger of the Gods hovered distantly in the south. The tribe had decided that they would all spend the night in supplication and everyone retired early, the doors bolted, and family gathered close. Later as Edana was climbing into her bed, she heard a fierce storm start up. The rain pounded like a thousand hammers on her roof and the wind tore at the bolted doors and windows as if seeking to strip the taigh from around her. It was with troubled thoughts that Edana drifted off to sleep, her arms wrapped around her swelling middle as if to guard the child within.

Sometime later Edana jerked awake to the muffled sound of a weeping child. Sweeping the dark room with sleep-fogged eyes she located the source of the sound and saw Cerun, mute and soaked to the skin. Cerun stood in his usual corner, but in his arms was a child of no more than 4 years. The child was dark of skin and wrapped in what appeared to be a silk garment. Edana slipped

from the bed and went to her lover, when she touched his arms, they were cold as death and the eyes that looked down upon her were filled with pain and lacked the warmth she was used to seeing.

“The Romans have destroyed my temple, my High Priestesses....” Edana pulled him into her arms, the child pressed between them. Stroking his hair, she murmured soft words and waited for him to speak. Stepping back, he lifted the child to her and laid the whimpering girl child into her arms, for girl child she now saw it was. A young girl of no more than four with skin like the darkest ebony and eyes like spring. Already the small girl had a hair of loose curls that framed her face. Even with dirt and tears streaking her face, Edana could see the promise of great beauty. “She was found in the broken rubble of my temple, her mother was my high priestess, I ask you to take her and raise her as your own.” Edana smiled at him with tears in her eyes and laid her head atop the sniffling child in her arms. “Of course, I will, she will be raised as a sister to our own child, two heirs to rule our people.” Turning back to the bed, Edana began humming softly and gently removed the blood-stained garment from the child, wrapping her in soft blankets, she set her in the center of the bed and laid a kiss on her soft forehead as the small girl gave one last sniff and drifted off to sleep. Edana smiled down at the sleeping child and turned back to Cerun. His corner was empty as if he had never been. Though she could not know it, that was the last time she would ever see Cerun.

Months had passed since the night Cerun had left the weeping child in Edana’s arms. Try as she might Edana could not understand the child’s speech and so what should have been a time of bonding became a time of irritation for mother and child. Edana’s advanced pregnancy caused her to be short tempered and often cruel to the bewildered child, and though she later felt remorse and apologized for her poor treatment, she never knew how much the child actually understood. Edana resented that Cerun had left the child without out a name or any clue as to her background, the child was a complete mystery. Not knowing what the child had been called before, she had renamed her Cailleach. To further give the child a place in the clan, she had gone against the advice of her council and formally named ‘Callie’ her daughter and heir. The council had cautioned her to wait until the mystery of the child had been solved, but Edana had no reservations about trusting Cerun’s decisions.

Edana found herself handing the strange child more and more into the care of her second in command Galene. Galene was battle-scarred and a stern taskmistress, her duties included teaching the younglings use of bow and blade. Edana knew Galene would be hard on the child but surely the child would be bent to the task of adapting to life here and not broken. The child sat at the end of Edana’s bed chattering away in her nonsense language, none of the clan could recognize nor speak whatever language this child claimed as her own and so it was assumed to be a child’s babble. Edana smiled and tried again to communicate with the girl. Pointing to herself she slowly enunciated “Edana Caledonii”. Pointing to the child she again smiled and spoke slowly “Cailleach Caledonii.” The child shook her head and let out a string of unbroken syllables that sounded like nothing Edana had ever encountered. A sudden sharp pain ripped through Edana’s abdomen and a gush of fluid soaked the blankets below her. Gasping she slid weak and boneless off the bed and fell to her knees as another sharp pain ripped through her. The child began keening and rocking on the bed, the sound cutting through the fog of pain. Edana crawled, one hand on her belly to the door and flung it open. Galene stood outside on guard.

“Galene, take the girl, my child comes. Bring Aletha...” Edana’s eyes fluttered closed as she leaned against the door frame. Galene lifted Edana from the floor with a burst of panic fueled strength and carried her back to the tall bed. “Useless child! Get out of the way, can you not see your mother is near to birthing?!” Callie may not have understood the words, but the gestures and tone made her leap from the bed and run to the corner where she was far from the bed yet able to see what was going on. Huddled in fear that yet another mother would be taken from her, she watched as the scarred woman ran to the door and yelled orders.

Callie was glad the scarred one had seemingly forgotten her presence others appeared and rushed around caring for her ailing new mother. The scarred one who she spent so much time with seemed to always be angry with her. Callie was constantly poked and pinched if she did not do what the scarred one wanted. It would be easier if they spoke a true language and not the harsh guttural speech that they insisted on using. Callie could no longer remember the face of her true mother, in dreams she smelled incense and heard the chime of bells that she somehow knew her mother had worn at wrist and ankle.

Hands with skin darker than her own, with fair-skinned palms touched her face and shoulders and whispered a mother’s words of love. These same arms cradled her and sang softly as she was rocked to sleep. Hard as Callie tried she could not remember a face to go with the singing or laughter of her mother, nor the face of the man she was sure was her father. Of her father she remembered only a symbol of a stag on his chest and soft tones that spoke of love and affection. Callie watched as her new mother was stripped bare, her knees bent as she was sat forward. As if this was a signal, the woman kneeling at the apex of her mother’s legs glanced over and caught Callie’s eyes. The old woman and the scarred one spoke rapidly, and their voices raised briefly in argument as they gestured at her. With what sounded like a curse the scarred one grabbed Callie’s arm in an iron grip and dragged her from the hut. Callie was secretly glad to be outside, the air was crisp, and the village had been decorated with bright flowers. “Will my mother be okay? Can I see her soon?” The scarred one frowned at her and pinched her arm hard enough to make tears spring from Callie’s eyes.

With a curt gesture, Callie understood she was to be silent. When they reached the cleared field in the center of the village the scarred one chose a stump to sit on and gave no further indication that she knew nor cared what Callie was to do now. Callie stood doing nothing for long moments waiting to be told what to do. When the scarred one pulled a knife and a small piece of wood from her pouch Callie quietly sighed and wished for the thousandth time that she understood these strange people and their stranger language. Looking about, Callie noticed the cleared field was no longer empty, there were no less than four strangers with filled wagons plying their wares to the clan. Callie looked back at the scarred one as she moved closer to one of the wagons, the scarred one’s eyes flicked to her and to the merchant then back to her work. Taking that as permission she walked cautiously through the wagons, looking at the bright cloth and beads, exotic food and goods that were on display.

It seemed by the excitement that these merchants had been anticipated, maybe that explained the decorations that had been carefully arranged throughout the village. Of the four wagons, the last was the most interesting. The wagon was pulled by a pair of horses as were the others but the creature resting near the wagon was no horse. The creature had a friendly face set on a long woolly neck and two large bumps covered by patterned blankets adorned its back. As she came closer the strange animal stretched out its neck and let out a loud noise like a burp that

caused Callie to giggle. The merchant and his assistant came around the side of the wagon with a gaggle of other children following close behind. The children Callie recognized as belonging to other clan members. The merchant dressed in loose-legged pants the color of a cloudless sky, his shirt was cut to the waist and showed a tan muscular chest and stomach. What surprised her most was the wrapped fabric of dark blue that adorned his head and covered all but his face. Callie vaguely remembered seeing this style before but was not sure where. No one in the village dressed this way.

The assistant was similarly dressed and after checking the beast disappeared again around the wagon with the chattering children following him. The merchant gestured to the woolly beast and spoke the clan's harsh language and Callie's heart sank. Once again, she would not know the meaning of the words spoken to her. Callie shook her head and turned to go, the merchant's hand on her shoulder stopped her. Callie turned back and found him kneeling near her. Again, he spoke her new clan's language and again she shook her head to let him know she did not understand him. The merchant looked past her and spoke to someone else, Callie followed his eyes and saw the scarred one standing near the wagon and fingering a bright blue length of fabric.

Ahram was well traveled and this child of no voice puzzled him, turning, he addressed her guardian "The child is mute?" Galene turned towards the merchant, her hand dropping from the beautiful but impractical fabric. "The child is the clan chief's foundling, her parentage is unknown, and she does naught but child babble in no language that is known to us, perhaps it is no language at all." Galene turned back to the fabric knowing that as impossibly soft and beautiful as it was it would hardly withstand a day in her duties and truly where would she wear it? Seeing the guardian's attention drawn back to the blue silk bolt on his wagon, a thought occurred to him and he studied the child more carefully. The child's hair and eyes spoke of mixed parentage.

Too dark for a Celt, not dark enough for an Egyptian. Perhaps light mixed with dark to produce such a flawless and darkly exotic skin. He mused. Switching to Coptic the language spoken in the land of the pharaohs he spoke to the child. "Do you understand me now child?" Again, the child shook her head and again Ahram silently studied the child. As Ahram changed from one language to the next always the same phrase, the guardian's consternation turned to surprise at the many strange sounds the merchant spoke to the silent child. "You waste your time merchant, the child is brain addled, her language is the babbling of an infant." The more languages he tried, the more the child's eyes teared up in frustration. Finally, on a long shot, he tried Sumerian and watched as the child's eyes lit up. A torrent of words poured from the child, broken and childlike but recognizable words. Laughing Ahram responded to her in kind. "Where are your parents and why are you here with those who do not speak your language?"

Callie's eyes seemed to be filled with an endless supply of tears and the tense knot in her chest and let loose as she heard real words and not sounds coming from the merchant. He was speaking to her. "There was a storm and men with blades and fire in the temple. My mother pushed me into the cistern. I was cold and wet and the noises..." Callie shuddered, and her voice cracked. "The burning smell... mother never came, my father, he took me from the cistern, he told me my mother was gone, he brought me here." The merchant hugged the child close as she shook from remembered fear. That she could remember so much was a miracle and a curse, no child should remember such a horrific event. "Your mother's name child?" Callie felt a sob wrenched from her, "I don't remember, I can't remember her face!" Callie's sudden wail startled her guardian who stepped forward with an angry look on her face as if to reprimand the child but Ahram waved her

away as he turned back to the child and tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear.

“Your father then, do you remember his name?” Callie thought very hard, somewhere in the depths of memory she heard her mother whisper her father’s name during a moment of passion, a moment when Callie should have been fast asleep. “His name was Ningirsu.... he had a deer...” Callie tapped the merchant's bare chest. Ahram sat back on his heels. Either the child’s father had been arrogant and claimed a name far above himself or the child was the progeny of a priestess and Ningirsu...Sumerian God of the hunt.

Standing, Ahram smiled at the guardian as she looked from the merchant to the child. “You understand her speech?” Tugging a curl playfully Amram spoke in Sumerian once again to the beautiful child. “You are Sumerian sweet child and not of this region, the world knows that the most beautiful and desirable women in the heavens are Sumerian, for the Gods themselves are known to lose their hearts to such. Go to the wagon now and choose a gift for yourself, all beautiful women should be adorned with treasures.”

Giggling Callie raced off to the wagon leaving Galene staring at the merchant angrily. “What nonsense is this? I can no more understand that language than the barking of dogs.” Determined to keep his temper with the unwashed barbarian before him, he gave her his most charming smile. “The child is Sumerian, or at least the language she speaks is from that region.” Turning his head, he saw Callie had found the hand carved jewelry boxes and was reverently peering into each one in wonder. “Her mother was a priestess though she cannot remember her name and her father.... was a hunter.” Ahram was distracted as he stared at the wonder and happiness that changed the child’s face from interesting to truly stunning. The promise of great beauty was plain for anyone with eyes to see. Even as he spoke to Galene, his thoughts were on the woman the child would become raised in a society so far from her own. “I told her that the most beautiful and desirable women in heaven or earth can be found in Sumeria, that the Gods themselves are known to lose their hearts to such women as are found in her country.”

Turning back, he found himself taken aback by the black look of loathing and disgust on the woman’s face. “Sumerians are barbarians, godless and cowardly...we faced them at Londinium. Gutless bastards fought with the Romans against us.” Ahram found himself startled into a derisive laugh. This flame-haired woman who dressed in filthy animal hides and feasted on the flesh of unclean animals calling Sumerians barbarians was laughable indeed. “Sumerians are barbarians....” Gesturing to the round rock-built homes and thatch roofs, the fenced yards where pigs and goats could be seen milling in dirt and filth. “The Sumerians are barbarians....and you are not?”

Ahram allowed himself a second laugh as he turned with raised eyebrow back to the now furious woman before him. Shaking his head, he left her standing in indignant silence as he strolled to his wagon where Callie was gesturing excitedly at him. “What treasures have you found in the depths of my wares little priestess?” Callie laughed at his teasing, it had been a long time since anyone had looked at her with anything other than irritation and anger and longer still since she had a reason to laugh and smile.

Shyly she placed two beautiful cedar boxes carved with exotic flowers into his hands. Lifting the lid on the first he smiled, she had chosen a simple strand of rare pink pearls that he had gotten in Greece. “A fine choice sweetling, rare pearls for a rare child.” Callie was shaking her head at

his misunderstanding and hoping he would not be angry.

“I wanted to give this one to my sister, my new mother is birthing her now in the hut.... I thought maybe I could have this one...” Ahram raised his eyebrow and smiled, his teeth white against his tanned skin. “How can I say no to a gift for a new baby, you are sure you are not a merchant in disguise, looking to swindle me of my finest treasures?” Callie giggled again and shook her head, her eyes sparkling with happiness. Too long had she felt alone with no one to talk to and now this man not only spoke a true language but teased and played with her as well. Ahram took the second box and slid the wooden lid off it. Nestled in a bed of saffron-colored silk lay a plain piece of green amber carved in the shape of a curling leaf. The amber pendant was strung on a plain leather cord. Ahram had forgotten he had this piece, neither truly rare nor expensive it had been examined and passed over for many a season. People wanted jewelry that called attention and proclaimed the wealth and prestige of its owner.

A simple pendant would never do in such a case. “Are you sure you want something so plain little priestess? I have necklaces much more....” Callie was already shaking her head. “It looks like my father’s eyes, the color of trees.” Silently Ahram agreed that the color matched her own eyes as well, the color of long forgotten places deep in the forest. An apt place for a God of the Hunt to dwell. Extending his hand, Ahram helped Callie to leap from the wagon and handed her the two wooden boxes with a bow. “This little one has earned my admiration and as I told her, a child of such beauty should not be deprived of adornments.” Galene scowled at the child. *Just wait until Edana finds out her mystery lover has left her with his Sumerian whore's brat.*

Callie had tucked her sister’s gift under her arm and was staring down at the beautiful amber pendant unaware of the words flying above her bent head. “You have solved the mystery of the child’s origin and for that we thank you, but there is no need to fuel the child’s vanity with gifts.” Galene made as if to jerk the boxes from Callie’s hands but was stopped by Ahram’s sudden grip on her forearm. “The gifts are mine to give and as I have had providence to sell so many wares on this trip, I lose nothing in the giving...surely you are not jealous of a small child’s gifts.”

Judging by the sudden flush of red creeping up Galene’s neck and causing her scars to stand out blotchy against her fair skin he knew he had hit on the answer. “Perhaps a length of the sapphire silk you were admiring earlier...” For a moment she was tempted but seeing his smug smile she jerked her arm from his grasp and spit at his feet. “Keep your gifts, you are no better than the Romans with your gifts and flattery!” Grabbing Callie’s arm once again in a bruising grip she jerked the child after her and seethed as she led the way back to Edana’s taigh. Aletha stood outside the hut with the others of the council as Galene dragged Callie to the door. “Galene why do you return with the foundling so soon, you know that time between mother and child is sacred so soon after birth, you will bring bad omens upon the clan if you intrude.” Galene shoved the midwife out of her way and shoved the door open.

Edana’s head jerked up as the door was swept open. The room was warm and scented with calming herbs burning in the nearby brazier, Aletha had assured her that these herbs would help her to heal quickly and keep bad spirits from the fragile child she had labored to bring into the world. Brona, child of her body, Daughter of Cernunnos. Through a fog of pain and exhaustion, Edana heard Galene speaking and gesturing to where Callie stood clutching two wooden boxes, tears flowed freely from fear filled eyes. Edana looked back and struggled to comprehend the reason for the anger and smug satisfaction on Galene’s furious visage.

Callie clutched her gifts to her chest and stared at the angry faces and raised voices of those around her in confusion. *The merchant gave them to me, he told me they were gifts, did I do wrong.... why are they angry?*

Edana pulled her eyes from Callie once again and forced herself to focus on Galene. "... Whore!" Sitting up straighter she blinked several times at the last word Galene had spoken and grit her teeth at the sudden pain of movement. "What did you say to me?" Galene growled in frustration at having to repeat herself and tempered her fury as she silently acknowledged the fact that she was speaking to her ban-cheannard. "I said that one of the merchants has solved the mystery of your heir's origins, it turns out she is the child of your mystery lover and his Sumerian whore!" Edana shook her head even as she thought back to the night Callie had been left with her, was there guilt in his eyes as he handed the child to her? *Would he have been with another while professing love to her and her alone? Cerun would not do that to her, she loved him, she trusted him.*

Edana was exhausted and her brain felt fogged and weary. As if drawn by a will not her own Edana's eyes searched and found Callie's and through her pain and fatigue she was struck by recognition. *How many months have I sat by this child and looked into those eyes and never saw what was in front of me? Her emerald eyes.... CERUN'S EYES!* The love and weary happiness at the birth of her daughter that had lit Edana's face and had shone from her eyes was suddenly snuffed like a taper. Replaced by loss and the fury of a scorned woman she pulled herself up to her full height and in a voice filled with barely reigned anger she jerked her arm in Callie's direction startling a loud wail from Brona. "My heir will not be a Sumerian whore, get that from my sight!" The council surrounded the bed seeking to calm their ban-cheannard before she harmed herself or her new daughter. Galene's triumph was short-lived as Aletha turned her full fury down upon her.

"You have disturbed what is sacred and brought news that could have waited to a woman bone weary from bringing forth life, so help me if mother or child is harmed by your actions today I will flay the skin from your bones and damn your soul to walk the earth as a wraith for all time." Callie was shoved into Galene's hands, the wooden boxes falling to the floor and kicked to the side as the small hut filled with bodies and the intruders were cast from the room. Looking about Galene spotted her daughter Dara and shoved Callie into her arms. "I wash my hands of this foundling, she is neither daughter nor heir anymore, take it and teach it our language and ways and if it cannot be taught, kill it and let the ravens pick its bones." Galene never looked back at the weeping child as she stormed off in self-righteous fury.

It would be many years before Callie was able to understand how one man's kindness and good intentions had damned her for all time in the eyes of those who should have been there to raise and protect her.

CALEDONIA-93AD

Ten years had passed since that night and although Dara had become both friend and mentor to Callie, she did not replace the mother that Callie badly yearned for. Callie had learned

the language under Dara's patient tutelage and barring occasional incidents Callie had even learned to act like a full-fledged member of the clan. The sadness when Dara looked at Callie spoke volumes, Callie knew how to speak and act like a true child of Caledonia, but she would never be accepted as one. The words that Galene had spoken in the presence of the council so many years ago had relegated Callie to the lowest position in the tribe.

No accomplishment would erase that and there was no hope of redemption. Callie did perfectly well in all her classes including weaponry...unless Galene and Brona were present. Galene went out of her way to praise Brona for the slightest accomplishment and harshly punish Callie for the smallest infraction. Galene seemed to be unknowingly breeding hostility between the girls and Dara had heard rumors that Brona had already started using her status as Heir to get out of unappealing chores.

Dara returned her eyes to the field where Callie's class took turns shooting targets with child-sized bows in a test of skill. Each child would need to hit the red area on the target three times to pass their class. The red area got smaller as the children grew and advanced in skill. The targets had been set a mere 8 yards back. Dara had seen Callie hit this distance true on numerous occasions but now Callie's hand shook as she waited for Galene to give her the command to fire. At fourteen years of age Callie already stood taller than most of her peers, unlike the other girls her age who had begun to show early signs of maturity, Callie was tall and thin, her body childlike. Galene towered over the child and smiled as Callie's arms shook with fatigue from maintaining tension on the string. Finally, the command was given, and all eyes followed the path of the arrow as it sailed past the target and into the piles of bracken set up as a backdrop. Galene's stick was lightning quick as it struck Callie across the shoulders. "Useless child! Again!"

Callie brought the bow up again and plucked an arrow from the quiver at her waist. Again, the arrow went wide, and Callie's eyes swam with tears. Why can't I do anything right when Galene is near and why always when Brona is watching?! Callie saw Brona smirk and jerk her head in Callie's direction eliciting derisive laughter from her circle of sycophants. Brona was everything that Callie wanted to be. At ten years of age, she already started showing signs of the form she would grow into. Suddenly a warm hand was on her shoulder and Dara leaned close. "You can do this Callie, slow your breathing, see the target and naught else.... concentrate and loose!" On the word loose, Callie had released the taught bowstring and watched the arrow thunk into the heart of the red area. With Dara between her and Galene, Callie regained her confidence and with each successful shot, Callie felt the weight lift from her shoulders.

Callie hugged Dara, and both turned to War mistress Galene, a title given her after the council had decided her interruption on that fateful night had saved the entire clan from the embarrassment of having an 'Orphaned Sumerian whore' as their heir and future ban-cheannard. Instead of the praise and admiration shining from Galene's eyes as it would have been had Brona been making the shots, Callie and Dara saw only loathing and disgust. "Pitiful, if the child were any slower her enemy would be on her before the second shot was fired. Let's pray that her skills improve so that she will no longer be a useless burden to her clan." With a sneer of contempt, Galen turned to the next student and the criticisms began all over again. Dara led Callie off the field where they could talk and not be heard but still watch the other trials. Callie wished again that Dara had been her mother or that she could remember her birth mother, but the Gods were silent and would not grant her wish. "Why does she hate me so much Dara?"

Dara followed Callie's eyes to Galene's back where she bent over yet another struggling student and berated their ineptitude. "She does na hate you truly love, she hates that you are better 'en she was at twa your age." Callie laughed and hugged Dara tighter as Dara handed her a bruised apple. "Last of the fall apples, soon the chill will be upon us and it will be longer the huntresses will be away to find game." Callie's eyes lit up as she thought about the freedom of being a huntress. "Dara, could I become a huntress?"

Dara took the apple from Callie's slack grip and bit into it with a sigh before handing it back. "This is what I have been training you for aye?" Callie leaned against Dara with the warmth of happiness bubbling up inside her. "Now wee huntress let me tell you about mean Galene at your age as my da told me in secret." Dara proceeded to tell outlandish stories of Galene's failures at Callie's age until Callie's sides hurt from laughing.

Adulthood trials were meant to be hard and test you to the limits of your endurance and skills, depending on the season your trials fell on, some trials could be more difficult than others. For girls, their trial was scheduled after their first menses and for boys, it was when their mentor deemed them ready. Not everyone passed their Trial the first or even the second time, rarely did someone fail to return at all but it had been known to happen. Those who ranked highest in their survival and weapons training (taught by Warmistress Galene) were given the option to choose the season their Trial would occur in. Spring was the season of choice, food, and young game would be plentiful and only the heavy rains would make the Trials difficult. Those who scored lowest were doomed to perform their Trial in the depths of Winter when survival was least expected.

The only other option was to abstain from the Adulthood Trials and be seen forever after in the eyes of the clan as neither child nor adult but as a simpleton capable of performing only simple tasks and having no decision or vote in the matters of the clan. In recent years more than a few had chosen this path, demeaning though it was, it was better to be thought simple than to die trying to find food and shelter during a Winter Trial. During Adulthood Trials each petitioner would be sent out within a week of each other and expected to survive for a full cycle of the moon armed with a small knife, bow, the clothes on their back and three days' worth of dried meat. If you returned after nightfall on your final day or returned early, you would fail your Trial and your fate would be in the hands of the council.

Brona was Galene's star pupil and as expected chose to have her Trial in the spring. Edana could be seen pacing the perimeter of the camp during the days of Brona's absence and secluding herself in her taigh at night. The moment Brona appeared at the edge of the tree line, the scouts began sounding the alert, a low undulating tone caused by blowing through the hollowed horn of a bull. For having spent the last month foraging for food and shelter, Brona looked none the worse. In fact, it was a testament to her skill that oddly enough she appeared to have gained a few pounds. Edana rushed out to Brona and called for her guards to take Brona's things and lead Brona to the ban-cheannard's Taigh for a hot bath. Callie wanted very badly to be a part of the welcoming party surrounding the ban-cheannard and heir but had long ago realized that any gesture of friendship or affection would be rebuffed. Brona spent the day cloistered with Edana in her Taigh, the message was passed that a celebratory feast would be held in the taigh-coinneimh at dusk. Dara helped Callie dress in her finest hunting leathers and braid her unruly hair into hundreds of tiny braids with bits of bead and feather braided into the ends. When they both stood before the bronze mirror,

Callie laughed. "I feel like a true huntress dressed like this."

Dara laughed and smoothed an errant braid back from her face "You look like a creature of the wild my little one." Turning Callie from the mirror, Dara looked into her eyes with pride and love shining from her suddenly moist eyes. "Tonight, we will honor your sister and this winter you will take your own trial and makes hers look like a bit of nothing, after all anyone can survive in the season of plenty, it takes a true huntress to survive in the season of death." Callie hugged Dara tight before hurrying to finish up the tidying of their small taigh.

The feast was all that could be expected. Platters of savory meats filled the long tables, vegetables and herbs toasted and raw sat in neat piles on wooden platters near at hand. The hand-carved pitchers were filled with wines and meads and cups were kept full. The hall itself seemed to have been decorated with every bit of blooming plant and sparkling piece of quartz for miles around. Not even Brona was exempt from decoration as Edana placed a flower circlet atop her head. Brona's hair had been washed and oiled so that every lantern and torch caused her crimson locks to shine with golden highlights.

Truly this feast looked more like a wedding than a celebration of adulthood. Dara and Callie laughed behind their hands as each of the council members sought to outdo one another with long-winded speeches and prose detailing the magnificence of Brona's trial (which none of them had been present for since that would have invalidated her trial), her great beauty and charm and even the great things she would do once she was Ban-cheannard. Several of the clan had brought out little-used instruments and singing and dancing commenced. Servants weaved among the celebrants and refilled cups and took empty platters from the tables. Platters of fruit and cheese and bowls of fruit smothered in honey and cream took the place of the cleared meats and herbs. Dara had only finished her third glass of mead and was starting to weave a bit in her seat when a glass of wine was placed before her.

Both Callie and Dara looked up, but the servant had disappeared amongst the press of the crowd. Shrugging, Dara took a deep drink of the wine and they laughed as one of the councilmen attempted to juggle some empty cups and proving he had far more to drink than he was accustomed to. The cups and councilman both fell to the floor with a clatter and crash and took several bystanders with them. Callie was so absorbed in the festivities that she did not realize anything was wrong until she felt Dara's wine spill across her forearm and over the lip of the table staining the leg of her hunting leathers. "Dara are you alright?" Dara nodded holding her head. "Thinking that I had a bit too much fun for tonight and mixing of mead and wine should ne'er be done by one with no sense such as I." With a laugh that produced a groan of pain, Dara stood swaying on her feet and held to the table for a moment before smiling down at Callie. "You stay my heart and enjoy the feast, I'm to bed and I'll leave a lamp lit for you when e'er you come home." Callie nodded, her eyes filled with worry but knowing that if she pressed Dara it would lead to hurt feelings. Dara swayed a bit more but managed to make her way out the door with no more incident than the others.

Callie turned her eyes back to the dancing and festivities and nibbled at some honeyed apple slices. Hours later the celebration seemed to be coming to an end, those who had not succumbed to drink and were able to stand made their way to the flower bedecked throne that Brona currently lounged in with heavy eyes.

Clearly, she too had been deep in her cups this night. Edana stood like a silent sentinel beside her daughter's throne and smiled benevolently at her heir. Callie felt a lump form in her throat as she stepped into line to congratulate Brona on her way to the door. *If only Edana would look on me with the same love and adoration that she showers on Brona, doesn't she see that her love means nothing to Brona? I would never take her love for granted, I would never use my position as Heir to gain luxuries and advantages not given to the rest of the clan.* Looking directly at Edana and meeting her eyes for the first time tonight, she willed and prayed that this once Edana would hear her thoughts. *I would be your most loving and loyal daughter if only you let me, please give me a sign mother!*

Perhaps Edana did indeed hear her thoughts and for a moment warmth filled Edana's eyes, then like a candle flame snuffed by the wind, her eyes went cold and she turned her head and stared off across the hall. It took a moment for Callie to realize she now stood in front of Brona. Brona sat up straighter and a malicious smile twisted her full lips. Callie started to speak, and her voice caught in her throat as she noticed for the first time, the jewelry adorning Brona's wrists and throat. A shortened strand of rare pink pearls adorned each of Brona's wrists and a pendant of green amber in the shape of a curling leaf hung at the base of her throat. The simple leather thong had been replaced by a gaudy silver chain, the pendant seemed diminished and the color pale and unflattering against Brona's pale throat. As if sensing the source of Callie's interest, Brona reached up and toyed with the pendant. "I see you have noticed my new jewelry, just some junk mother found lying around in a corner of our taigh, some peasant probably brought it as tribute and dropped it in the corner." Callie's eyes sought her mother but Edana seemed carved of stone as if she was deaf to the conversation. Callie looked back at Brona and saw the gloating in her eyes.

"They are very beautiful, and they complement their owner well Brona, I only wanted to congratulate you on your victory in your trials." Brona waved Callie's congratulations away as if bored and adjusted the pearls on her wrist. "Since you have not brought me any gifts to augment your pitiful congratulations, maybe you should go check on your mentor, it appears she has over indulged in her drink yet again." Laughing derisively as Callie stumbled back as if slapped. Callie bit back all the things that sought to emerge from her suddenly sharp tongue and turned to the door. Brona made sure her last comment was pitched just loud enough for Callie to hear as she hurried from the room. "Truly mother, living with a Sumerian whore is starting to have an adverse effect on poor Dara."

Callie hurried back to the taigh she shared with Dara. Many of the other celebrants were still weaving along the paths between the taighs as if in confusion. Callie found the lamp unlit when she pushed through the wooden door. Scuttling about in the dark she grabbed flint and lit the lamp hanging near the door. Dara had collapsed on her bed still dressed and seemed to be fine though her snoring was apt to keep Callie from sleep tonight. With care and tenderness, she stripped Dara's belt and boots off her and tugged the blanket over her. Sometime around midnight Dara's snoring quieted and Callie fell in to a fitful sleep filled with images of fire and the fear of being shoved into a cold dark place by someone she loved.

The light coming through the thatch shutters brought Callie instantly awake and with a groan she managed to pull her lids open and sit up. It felt as if she had barely laid down, her body ached, and she felt as if she could sleep another month or two easily. Dara was normally an early riser but

a peek at the bed showed Dara still deeply asleep. Callie bent over the bed, Dara's skin was pale and clammy, and her breathing had become slow and shallow. Lines of worry crossed Callie's forehead as she wondered what she should do. If this was just the affects of too much drink Aletha would be upset with Callie for disturbing her but if it was more serious Callie would have done her duty to her mentor by bringing the healer to tend to her. Callie struggled with anxiety and indecision before deciding that even if she spent the week shoveling the pig offal, it was still worth it to have Dara looked at. Changing into her work trews and tunic, she made her way quickly to Aletha's Lighiche-Taigh.

Knocking on the wooden door hung with a ram skull and drying herbs, Callie waited shifting her weight from one foot to the other until the sound of shuffling feet signaled someone approaching the door. Callie stepped back as the door was wrenched open and Aletha appeared in the doorway, upon seeing Callie standing outside her expression became pinched and angry. "Spit it out why I should be interrupted from my work by a useless twally." Callie swallowed hard, she had once mentioned that Aletha looked like the illustration of the crone in the holy texts that Callie had been forced to study while Dara was teaching her the religion of the clan. Dara had laughed and agreed that perhaps the artist had angered Aletha and chosen her as his model. The similarity was truer now as Aletha gazed at her with eyes slitted in anger than ever before. It took a great effort to make her voice work as she tried not to stare into those beady eyes.

"Dara had something to drink last night and now she will not wake, please if you will.....please come and look at her...I beg you great lighiche." Callie had wondered if she had overdone it as she bowed her head and stared at her feet. A tense moment passed and then another, but Callie had no courage to look up and see what expression now found a home on Aletha's visage. Finally, Aletha cleared her throat "very well since it seems Dara has taught you a bare scraping of manners I suppose I should reward her in this. Run ahead and tell her I come presently." Callie's thanks tumbled over themselves as she quickly thanked Aletha and stumbled over her own feet in her haste to be away.

Callie skidded to a halt in front of Dara's bed. Brona had been leaning over Dara's bed as if examining her or whispering to her and now stood to her full height and smiled condescendingly to Callie. "I merely came by to check on your mentor and found her drunk and abed, a sad role model for an impressionable child." Aletha pushed past Callie and seemed to find nothing amiss at Brona standing over the bed of her patient. Nodding respectfully to Brona, she began poking and prodding at Dara's inert form. Callie watched her listen to Dara's chest and pry her eyelids open to look into her eyes. "This one has had more than wine that ails her, she is ill and should be kept from others."

Brona quickly moved away from the bed and closer to the door as if afraid of catching the ill humors that kept Dara abed. Aletha noticed Brona's actions and nodded as if she had the right idea. "I'll stand a guard outside to keep the curious at bay, you girl will tend your mentor, I will leave purges and medicine at the door and you will be kept with Dara and not be about in the clan until she is well, and you are both cleansed of illness and bad spirits." Callie nodded that she understood, her heart in her throat as she looked at her suffering mentor and wished with all her heart that she could trade places with her. Brona and Aletha left to pass the news of the illness to Edana and the council and within the hour shifts had been set up to ensure that no one came near and Callie did not leave the confines of the taigh.

Food was delivered twice a day along with medicine and purges, and although Callie never saw who delivered the food and medicine she could tell by the lack of seasoning in the food that it was not one of her all too few admirers. To make matters worse, the spring rains were worse than ever and some of the crop had been ruined before it could be harvested. Several of the sows had become sick and died from a mysterious illness and with Dara sick, everyone was turning their eyes to Callie as the source of the ill fortunes. Dara's illness seemed to stretch on and on unaffected by Aletha's medicines. Purges elicited no changes and even the council chanting and burning sacred herbs above her bed seemed to do no good. Always after each failure to affect a response from Dara, the eyes of the healer and council would turn on Callie with speculative gleams in their eyes as if wondering if she were to blame for Dara's continued sleep. Each day Callie was forced to watch her mentor grow paler and weaker, her breathing becoming raspy and weak. Callie cried herself into an exhausted sleep, it had been a week since the last prayer session and the taigh was filled with the sharp and pungent scent of burned herbs and the oils and unguents that Aletha had covered Dara's clammy body with.

Callie awoke with a start, sitting up she held her breath and listened. The rain pounded on the roof above as it had for the past week, the cough of the guard at the door sounded loudly but otherwise the night was silent. Callie laid back down on her bed and started to let herself drift back to sleep when suddenly she realized what was missing. Throwing herself off her pallet she stumbled to Dara's bed and placed a hand on her cheek. Dara's skin was no longer clammy but cold, her eyes had opened and were covered in a film of death, her pale skin had given way to a grayish pallor that told Callie Dara's spirit no longer resided in her physical body.

No more would Dara comfort and hold Callie when she awoke with screams of fear trapped in her throat. If never, Callie was now truly alone in the world. With pain in her chest she found herself at the door and with a throat nearly closed with unshed tears she asked the guard to fetch Aletha, that Dara had.... Callie could not say the word but her emotional state told the guard all that needed to be said and with a nod and a warning not to leave the taigh, the guard rapidly departed into the rain. Callie returned to her pallet and wrapping her arms around her knees she waited for Aletha to arrive. Aletha and the council arrived in various states of undress and the taigh was now full of pressing bodies.

Aletha expelled the onlookers as she called for the sacred herbs and oils needed to send the spirit of the deceased on to their final destination. Brona slipped in as others were being herded out and looked with what seemed like amusement at the shrunken body of Dara. Her eyes searched the room until she found Callie huddled in the corner dry eyed and shaking with emotion. "So, killed another mother, have you? And you wonder why Edana will have nothing to do with you!" Callie felt a sob wrenched from her and with a burst of emotion fueled strength she threw herself from her pallet and through the door, shoving and pushing her way past the gathering crowd. She had no direction in mind only the need to be free of the sounds and smells of death. Callie had discovered an oak in full bloom near the washing stream during her walks with Dara and it was to this tree she found herself running. Callie was out of breath and her side on fire by the time she laid hands on the thick bark of the trunk. Gripping the bark with rough fingers she felt nails tear free as she scaled the trunk and found sanctuary in the thick limbs above. Invisible from below and sheltered from all but the most tenacious of raindrops, she finally allowed herself to weep until the knot in her chest eased and throat was raw from the sobbing. Once again it was exhaustion that touched her with soft hands and lured her into oblivion.

The sun was golden and the morning fog just starting to burn away when Callie jerked awake. The sound of voices below her and the slap of wet fabric against the rocks told her she was no longer alone. Shifting a bit to the right she was able to peer between the laced branches and see the two women below her washing their garments in the stream. Their voices drifted like smoke up to her hiding place and she sat back and listened to the news of what was occurring within the village. "And then she went and ran off, didn't even stay long enough to help poor Aletha prepare Dara's body for the pyre. Good thing Brona was there to help her." Callie could almost imagine the sigh and shaking of their heads as if Brona was such a kind-hearted person and Callie the daughter of darkness itself.

Why was it so hard for everyone to see Brona for who and what she was? Callie's thoughts were interrupted as the second women replied. "That one better pass her womanhood trials or there will be no way the council will let her stay. Truth to tell though, not sure how safe I would feel even if she did. It's not right raising a Sumerian amidst good clan, its common knowledge these troubles are all because of her." Callie glanced down again and saw the first woman nodding and quickly gathering her clothes. "Best we get back, the brat is sure to show up soon if she shows at all and Aletha will have something to say to her then." Callie waited until their voices faded as they made their way back to the village before clambering down the far side of the tree. *Could they be right? Could everything that had happened be because of me?* Dara would say the only thing those women need worry about is becoming too thick headed to walk upright. Thinking of Dara's cynical humor made Callie smile. Callie was halfway back to the village before her legs started shaking and something cold took root in her stomach.

The events of last night came back to grip her mind with fierce claws that drove her to her knees. Callie forced herself to breathe through the pain in her chest. Dara was not here anymore. There would be no more painting Galene's face on targets in secret and celebrating each perfect shot. No more stories about how hard Dara's own trials had been and gleaning knowledge from her success and failures. *Perhaps Brona was right, yet another mother had been taken by the Gods for doing no more than bestowing love upon me. Am I cursed to be forever Alone?*