

Ela wondered, as she blinked away the rain, if her bare-arsed prayers to a dead Iceni queen and a Celtic goddess in the middle of a spring thunderstorm would send her to hell. Father Harold might think so—not that she had any intention of confessing her folly. Her teeth chattered. Mayhap the old goddess was too far back in time to care about the descendents of Boadicea.

Imagining her nieces trapped solidified her purpose. Unless she risked everything this night, *they* would always be tied to the damned curse.

Ela struggled to her feet in the mud and threw her arms parallel to her body. Her hair lashed at her raw skin as she shouted against the wind. “Andraste! Boadicea! Our family honors the gifts you’ve given us. If there was a debt owed, surely it has been paid.” Ela bowed her head, offering the one thing that made her whole as a worthy sacrifice. “If not, then let me return my gifts to you, if you will but grant freedom to the rest of my kin.”

The notion of not being able to read auras made her physically nauseous. Putting her hand over her bare belly, she thought of her family. They’d be well placed under King John if she swallowed her pride, along with a good deal of bile, and wed Thomas de Havel. For certes, the Montehues would be much safer in this new regime once she wed a member of it.

Ela spluttered as a fat, foul-tasting raindrop landed on her lip.

Her father was a strong warrior. In these turbulent days, that wasn’t enough. It couldn’t matter that the price of her family’s safety was her magic. Ela raised her voice

so that it could be heard over the thunder and beyond time. “Andraste—you can’t ignore me all night!”

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Osbert Edyvean leaned over the neck of his steed, his eyes intent on the swishing tail of the horse in front of him.

“Come back, fool.” Os clenched his jaw, determined to stay in sight of the disappearing horse’s ass. He was at a disadvantage, since the man on the horse in front of him obviously knew the dark, winding roads, whilst he was a stranger to these lands.

A year into the quest for his liege, Os was not fond of wet, dark roads or inhospitable peasants who were loyal to their lords. He much preferred the toads who spit information after an ale or two.

Rain slashed from the sky while thunder boomed and lightning lit the area around him in a single flash before turning the night black again. His horse stumbled, and he had to slow or endanger Bartholomew. “Pox take you,” Os muttered to the man’s back.

The sound of the horse’s hooves grew fainter. Usually clear of head, Osbert’s spurt of temper back in the village had now gotten him lost in the middle of nowhere during a ferocious storm. Sir Percy had taught him that emotion led to mistakes, and again his mentor had been right.

He could either stop or end up in a ditch. He might deserve a spill for being an impatient sod, but his horse had earned better. He patted Bartholomew’s mane. “Sorry, boy.”

It was too late to bother the lord and lady of the manor. Mayhap the innkeeper would rent him a room even though he'd chased one of her patrons from the inn. Or he could sit in the rain and get drenched. He was not without options.

A flash of lightning briefly showed a worn trail off to the left. Os yanked at the reins, wanting to find his prey—and answers. Bartholomew somehow managed to keep his footing as they dove forward into the dark night. Os ducked beneath oak tree limbs and slashing foliage.

Had he thought this a trail?

It wasn't even a footpath.

Suddenly a shaft of moonlight illuminated a hill ahead. A peal of thunder covered what might have been hooves in front of him and Os patted the neck of his steed. "Hurry. Over the hill, and we'll have him, by God."

With the confidence of one who has rarely lost a fight, Os charged the hill and drew his sword to confront the peasant once and for all. He needed to find Robert Montehue, and his lady wife Deirdre. A year was a long damned time to be searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Os reached the crest and immediately yanked back on Bartholomew's reins. The horse protested softly as he regained his footing. Osbert's jaw dropped, and he rubbed his eyes in disbelief. He blamed the ale he'd drunk at the inn as he fell from his saddle to the slippery grass. Cautiously righting himself, he leaned against the heaving flanks of his mount.

He blinked in the sodding rain.

He wiped his eyes.

*She* was still there, a vision in alabaster and crimson. Curling hair flowed down the nymph's naked back, her bare arms lifted to the moon in supplication. Sparks lit from one finger to the next as she shouted something that sounded . . . primitive.

*Andraste*. Familiar, though he would swear he'd never heard the name before this night.

Os was struck with a deep yearning that caused his armored heart to ache with sadness, regret, and desire.

His groin pounded and it hurt to breathe. Os wanted her in a primal way—savage. His loins tightened and he imagined her beneath him in the throes of passion. Her eyes would be green, her laughter warm. *Impossible*.

It felt like a memory.

He wanted her now. Yet he'd sworn an oath to remain chaste until marriage. And he wouldn't marry until he had his own land.

Yet . . .

Dedicated to God, church, and kingdom, Osbert Edyvean quickly crossed himself in the downpour of rain.

*I've been damned by a flame-haired witch.*