

***WITCH ON THE WATER* - Sample Chapter**

Circa 1422 A. D., London, England. In a cathedral, surrounded by a mob transfixed with reverential awe, Fiana stood staring at another disappointment. On the dais before her, a bishop, chanting in Latin, held up a fragment of wood.

It was not the one she was searching for.

She wove her way through the unwashed throng towards the exit.

As she turned onto the cold, darkened London streets, failure weighed down what was left of her fractured soul. She had been searching for centuries, but she found only dead ends. She had recently returned to the island where her homeland lies to the far north for the first time since she left it over eight hundred years ago. Needless to say, it had changed.

The world had changed, and so had she. The one thing that remained constant in her life was her quest for her imprisoned husband. Rowan was still in that wand somewhere, and she wouldn't stop looking until she found it. After all, she had given up her life for this. She wanted to stop, to rest, to be at peace, but there would be no peace until Rowan was released. She had lain this geas upon herself, and now she was trapped by it.

Fiana stopped, suddenly overwhelmed by the truth of it. Every so often, her age would become too real for her to handle. Although she still looked forty, she was nearly nine hundred. She had spent most of that time as a creature of the night, as they say. It had been the only way to remain "alive" and continue her quest. Her own magic had failed her after a short two hundred years. She had no choice. Become a moroi or give up and die.

Perhaps she should've given up.

Leaning against a stone wall for support, Fiana wiped her mouth with a cold, pale hand, trying to erase the dryness from her lips. The thirst. But there was only one thing that would quench her thirst. Blood. She hadn't fed in nearly two weeks, so she was weak. She always tried to go as long without blood as she could stand it. She didn't like having to scare people or hurt them. Still, her powers enabled her to make them forget most of the time. She held them spellbound when she could, suspending memory altogether, but if they resisted too much, then the traumatic memory couldn't be erased completely. In those instances, she did her best to alter the memory into something more pleasant. The entire thing was exhausting. She had been living—well, existing—like this for seven hundred years.

She wanted to stop all of it. Despair had overcome her, and she couldn't even think about what to do next. She needed some time alone, some time to herself, some time to gather the strength she would need to continue her hopeless quest.

She needed to feed.

Gathering up her will, she trudged on. Perhaps she would come across a creature more pathetic than she.

She really needed to feed.

Her thoughts wandered back to the wand and her beloved Rowan. She no longer had a trail to follow. Any trail there had been was lost in time and false leads. For now she was reduced to tracking down any and all bits of wood reputed to have magical properties. This had taken her across Asia and down into India and the Middle East. It was while there that she caught wind of a story called The Golden Legend, written by a bishop about a century ago. This legend stated that the origins of the True Cross predated Christ and even Judaism. It all started with a tree that grew up out of Adam's corpse. The Tree of Life, of course, for he was buried with a seed in his mouth.

She was not unfamiliar with the Tree of Life. It was tattooed on Rowan's chest and quite prevalent in their own mythos. It symbolized the cycle of life with its branches intertwining with its roots, but the Christian version of Tree of Life was quite different.

Going over their legend in her mind always brightened her spirits. It was just so absurd.

This new Tree of Life that grew out of Adam's grave was eventually chopped down and made into a bridge, over which the Queen of Sheba once crossed. She felt the power of the former tree and fell to the ground, worshipping it. She told King Solomon about the bridge and said that it would bring about the destruction of his people. Fearing that, Solomon had the bridge torn down and buried. It remained buried until some Roman soldiers happened upon it and built a crucifix out of it. Yes. The very same crucifix upon which their Christ was nailed.

Fiana laughed to herself.

"What people will believe," she said to the night.

She understood how legends work and shift and change. She had seen her husband's story go from the wizard trapped in the wand to being the man in the tree. After just a short century, Rowan and the Green Man were synonymous in many circles. Some had even merged them both with Cernunnos.

Such is the stuff of legends and myths. They grow and change, being what the people need them to be. Christian myths were no different. The Christian Church in Rome had become dangerously powerful across all of Europe and into the British Isles. Even her homeland of Caledonia, which they now called Scotland, had been overcome by it. She had watched the followers of this religion go from arrogant thugs beating and torturing people who didn't believe to hordes of people worshipping the supposed bones of the saints and the splinters of charlatans.

She even visited a church that claimed to have the brain of St. Peter.

Her task was not made any easier by the tendency for every Christian church or monastery to claim possession of a piece of the True Cross. Even the merchants along the streets hawked these relics, shouting into the streets stories of the miracles each had performed. The teeth of John the Baptist. The milk of the Virgin Mother. Back in Europe, the monks of Charroux had even claimed to have Christ's foreskin! All fake. People will truly believe anything to make their lives more bearable.

Fiana understood. For she still believed, after all these centuries, that she would find Rowan. It made her existence bearable.

For nearly two decades now she had been searching out these fragments and rejecting them one by one. Having seen so many of them, probably more than any Christian had, she was surprised both by how many of them came from different species of trees, and also how many came from what she could tell was the same tree. Whether or not their human god was killed on it, she could not tell. She did detect blood on some of them, but not always from the same person.

Not that she thought it mattered. To her all wood and indeed everything in the world was a divine creation, not only touched by divinity, but an integral part of it. She realized that what the Christians called "God" was the oneness of everything. To her everyone and everything was a part of "God." Therefore every piece of wood she saw, whether revered or not, was magical in some way. But none of them were the particular piece of a rowan tree that held her long lost husband.

She felt lost, too. Lost and alone. No longer a part of the world. She needed to find some forest lands to reconnect and heal her shattered spirit. Tears of frustration dampened her face.

This city would not end. She continued walking down its ever winding narrow streets, bracing herself against the autumn wind. The stench in this city was almost intolerable. Filth and urine and feces and other horrid smells filled every alleyway she passed. Pigs, tethered to homes and businesses, rolled in the muck thrown out of household windows. Those pigs would make a nice blood meal, and she was so hungry. But they do have a tendency to squeal. She certainly didn't need an angry mob on her tail, so she would have to wait a little longer to eat.

The curfew bell rung out from various places around the city. She picked up her pace.

Up ahead in the darkness, she could just make out the Boar's Head sign hanging above a door. Finally, the Inn where Moody waited for her. She felt something close to panic at the thought of facing the crowd of people who were sure to be filling the common room. The entire city was in mourning over the recent loss of their King Henry V. And they were all buzzing about the new king, an infant. She didn't want to listen to drunken toasts to the former king and theories about what would happen to the country in the hands of Glouster and Bedford until the infant king came of age. What she needed was solitude. So she slipped into the crude lean-to which served as a stable. The only inhabitants she could see were a pair of oxen.

Food, she thought. She held her breath and listened intently to her surrounding, making sure she was indeed alone. She heard some snuffling sobs issuing from the straw pile. So she wasn't the first to come here for a good cry. Somehow, knowing someone else was in pain made it easier to deal with her own. Helping others pushed her own misery into the background.

"Come out of there lass," she said gently. "Tell me your troubles, and we will see what can be done."

The snuffling stopped abruptly as if breath was being held.

Fiana waited patiently.

After a moment, the dirty tear-streaked face of a scullery maid peeked out from behind the straw to examine her. Fiana submitted to the examination with poise.

"Who are you?" the girl finally asked.

“Someone seeking respite from her own despair by listening to the troubles of others. Come, tell me your tales of woe, and we will see if there is aught I can do for you.”

The girl of about thirteen or fourteen years emerged hesitantly, then looked down at her dirty feet sadly. She wore

nothing more than rags for clothes, but beneath the dirt, Fiana could see that she was comely.

Fiana waited for the confession, but none came. The girl just stood awkwardly with her head bowed and her hands clasped tightly together.

“Do you work here?” asked Fiana to get her started.

The girl nodded mutely then looked up with sudden defiance. She finally spoke, and it all came out angrily at once. “It is my Inn. My father left it to me. His brother runs it now that he’s dead. He was my guardian before I came of age, but now he’s going to force me to marry him so he can get ownership.”

“Surely the relationship is too close for a legal marriage,” Fiana said.

“He bought a dispensation from the bishop. Now I have no choice.”

“There is always a choice. Let us put our minds to the task and see what we can come up with. What is your name?”

“Sara,” the girl said.

“Well, Sara. I am Fiana. Come, sit near me and we shall think of something.”

Inside, the tap room was quite busy. Patrons who had traveled far to see the fragment of the True Cross within the cathedral crowded the benches. But now that their holy duty was done they wanted to relax with a pint of weak beer.

The tapster was in a foul mood. Normally, he would be pleased at the full room since it had a sympathetic effect on his coffers, but the disappearance of his niece left him without a serving maid. He was himself nearly forty and of substantial girth. All this running back and forth with trays of beer was hard on his knees. Finally, exasperated beyond endurance, he called Molly from the scullery to take over for him while he went to look for Sara.

When he stepped forth into the cool night to look around, he beheld a beautiful woman with flowing red locks sitting on the edge of his well, idly playing with a polished stick, almost as if telling a rosary. Sara sat beside her.

“Get yer tail inside, you ingrate. There’s work to be done,” Thomas shouted.

Sara stood up with her head bowed low. The woman touched her hand and smiled.

Sara lifted her head up high and strode past Thomas with a confidence that he had never seen.

But Thomas could not move. He stood transfixed by the beauty before him. She looked up at him with green eyes that invited him to come closer. He did without hesitation. She stopped him at arms length with the strange polished stick, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t stop looking into her eyes. Those magnificent green eyes.

“This is a very pleasant spot,” she said. “But a little too exposed. What it really needs is a tree to shade and protect it.” She pushed the stick into his belly, slightly denting the fat and letting him know she meant business. “Just like your niece Sara needs someone to protect her. Would you do that for me?”

Thomas tried to open his mouth and let her know that he would do anything she desired of him, but was unable to. She seemed to hear him anyway, for she nodded and smiled.

“That is good,” she said getting to her feet and slipping the polished wood into her sleeve as she walked past him and into the stable. He tried to follow but his roots had sunk too far into the earth. He was as immovable as the tree he had become.

Later, Sara fetched a cup of red wine for Fiana and a pint for her jolly companion. They toasted to Sara's good fortune and success.

Back in the stable, the oxen used their tails to brush flies away from the fresh puncture wounds on their necks.