

1 - Unknowing

She sat up, tears in her eyes, taking her hand from my chest. "Rider, you are all-powerful. A powerful warrior able to ride an organic Doomsday machine, whose power is beyond comprehension, and yet you say you cannot control your own destiny?"

"Elain. Please forgive me. I can control and choose my own destiny, it is mine to do that. I cannot change yours. It would destroy you."

"You are destroying me now. I love you. Please, please stay with me."

I stood up. "Please get dressed. I have something to show you." She looked bewildered but did as I asked. I dressed quickly and we walked out to the barn.

Cilla was awake and waiting, her tail flicking the straw behind her. I paused, and then said.

"I didn't want to hurt you. I wanted to fulfil my mission here, but I am beguiled by your love. Now I must tell you the truth, and the only way is to show you things - things that may make you afraid. Are you ready for that?"

She nodded, tears still in her eyes.

I led her to the beast. "Take my hand and touch her with your other."

She did so, without hesitation.

We stood on the dusty road, just her and I, the inn before us.

"Where.." her voice was trembling.

I squeezed her hand. "No harm can come to you. Just look at the inn."

She turned and looked.

The solitary inn had gone. Instead we were near the sea, and a group of houses stood on a quayside.

She reeled back in terror.

"Be calm. Grasp the band on my arm. Cilla is beside you, no-one

can hurt you."

She did as I asked and seemed calmer.

"Watch again."

This time we stood in a rolling savannah, with grass 3 metres tall and no buildings in sight.

I said quietly "Have you seen enough?"

She nodded.

We were back on the dusty road and she collapsed into my arms.

Back in the barn, I dabbed cold water on her brow.

She looked around. "Am I dreaming?"

I smiled. "No. This is my fault, I wouldn't have involved you directly but I needed more information."

"Go on." she said softly, not sure where it was leading.

"You understand slavery?"

She nodded. "Yes, but that was abolished a long time ago."

"In this world – yes."

She looked at me her eyes widening. "Those places you took me. They are different worlds?"

I nodded. "Yes, and some of them have very few people in them."

I waited, and she didn't disappoint. "The taken ones! My husband?"

I nodded "Possibly."

She stood shaking her head. "That place by the inn, you said it was dangerous?"

I nodded. "A doorway into other worlds."

"But? Who can control them?"

"They are powerful travellers, who seek power and wealth through enslavement in other worlds."

"They are like you?"

I laughed. "I wish they were. I am an enforcer, bound to hunt them down, and try to return stolen lives to their families."

I paused. "But yes, they can move between worlds, as I can."

I stood back from her. "I sincerely apologise Elain, you were not meant to fall in love with me."

She moved forward and wrapped herself about me. "But I have, and whatever happens I'm glad that I did."

She paused. "I forced myself on you – despite your wishes to the contrary. I am deeply sorry."

"I had not countenanced one so beautiful as you, I am weak in your presence." I said softly.

She nodded. "Now I know you are doubtful about his being alive, or

indeed finding him if he is."

"Yes." I said. "I cannot promise his return, but there is hope."

"How?" she said. "How many worlds are there?"

"More than you could ever imagine, then that many again."

She laughed, a little bitterly.

"But we have Cilla." I said.

"How can Cilla help you search a million worlds for my missing man? It is beyond comprehension."

"Did you notice her sniffing at that place on the road yesterday?"

She nodded.

"She can sieve the scent of all of those worlds in the flash of an eye, and your husband's scent is still strong here."

She shook her head and looked across at the beast.

"She isn't a machine, is she?"

I laughed. "She is as alive as you or I. It is what she represents that matters."

She nodded slowly. "I think I'm beginning to understand."

She reached up to touch my cheek. "Where does she go to when I can't see her?"

"Not far. She moves as I do, seamlessly through space and time, and fast enough to not register a presence in any world, if that is required."

She stood back and looked me up and down, smiling. "I have fallen in love with you Rider, despite being aware that I know not what you are."

"Can you understand why I cannot promise myself to you?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I do now."

2 - Hosteller

I dismounted and walked slowly across the square, Cilla's reins in my left hand. To one side of the line of staring village folk, a small group of women stood, each with a wicker basket. As we neared them, I turned to the beast and whispered. "Cofiwch y arogl gan harddwch? Arwain ni i hi."

She snickered, and her great head dipped momentarily.

We walked along the line of women. On their faces, the fear in their bellies, along with the visible wishes to be of service. Cilla stopped. In front of us a tall red-headed beauty, by her side a diminutive fair-haired boy. The beast lowered her head to the woman, and drew in a long breath, then sat down in front of her.

That the hosteller was terrified, I have no doubt, and I stepped forward. But she held her ground despite her fear and, dipped her head slightly before speaking.

"Greetings Rider. I have clean, vermin-free lodgings, with clean straw, stabling, and pasture for your beast."

I reached out my right hand, and she held hers forward. I took it and kissed it. There was a low murmur of surprise from the gathered crowd.

I lowered her hand, and letting go I said. "Your kind offer is accepted with pleasure, fair Hosteller."

I took five gold quarters from my waistcoat and handed them to her. "Is this sufficient?"

For the first time she smiled – a smile of thanks and relief. "More than enough Rider. My name is Elain. Come, I will shop, while Caradoc shows you the animal feed store."

As we moved forward, the crowd separated, but a hand tugged at my right arm, and a fruity voice bellowed.

"My apologies Lord, my deep and sincere apologies for my tardiness. I have lodgings arranged for you.."

His voice faded away as I turned, gripping his hand, and removing it

from my arm.

I stared at him, but said quietly. "Fiscal, your lateness is of no inconvenience." I paused, and a weak smile resumed upon his lips. "But I have already accepted the offer of good lodgings with this lady Hosteller."

I turned away, but he persisted. "But Lord, I insist. I have.."

This time my stare lit his face in a ruddy-red glow. "Fiscal, I do hope that both your deafness, and your addiction to flagons of cheap red wine, prove to be temporary afflictions, and that your health improves soon. I bid you Good Day."

He backed away in terror, and we resumed our walk across to the small row of provisions stores.

She spoke quietly to her child, then walked off. He looked up at me. I kneeled down and spoke gently. "Caradoc, would you like to take her reins and show us to the feed store? Do not be afraid. She would never hurt you."

He nodded slowly, and I handed him the reins. I walked slowly on, slightly behind them both. He spoke shyly to the beast, and she burbled softly in return.

At the feed store, I emptied the remains of a previous drink onto the ground and pumped clean water into the trough. A small miserable-looking man eased his way out of the door and I asked for two bags of his best oats.

Cilla was finishing her drink when he returned with the bags.

"One now, and one to carry." I said.

He slit open one of the heavy bags and poured it into an empty feed trough, then held his hand out. "One quarter please, Rider."

I looked at the feed in the trough, then reached in and took a handful.

"I asked for your best."

He tried to look at me and failed, his feet shifting nervously on the dusty ground."

"That is the best, Rider."

I turned, my hand held high, and offered it to Cilla. "Mae hyn yn dyn yn dweud fod hyn yn ei Cilla grawn gorau. Beth yw eich barn?"

She moved her head forward and sniffed my hand. Then she

snorted.

The oats exploded into a fiery shower, as they were swept from my hand by Cilla's incandescent breath.

The trader fell backwards over a box. I waited for him to rise.

"She doesn't like them. Maybe you have mislaid the best feed? I could ask her to help you find it in your store for you perhaps?"

He supplicated himself in front of me. "Forgive me Lord, these are desperate times. I will get my best provision, and it shall be free."

I held out my hand. "Rise. I know these are bad times. I understand you. But you must ask the price you need – and I will pay."

He returned inside his shop and I heard a footfall beside me. I turned. She shook her head. "He tried to cheat you?"

I nodded. "He is but a poor fool, but one that may not make the same mistake again."

She looked down at the still-smoking feed remains on the ground. "A demonstration only." I said softly.

The trader returned with two more bags. He cut one and poured the contents into another trough. I pumped more water, strapped the second sack of grain to the saddle, then we stood as Cilla demolished the contents of the trough.

Most of the crowd had gone, and I turned to the trader. "Ask your price."

"One and one-half, please." he said.

I gave him 3 quarters. "Can you supply tomorrow?"

"Yes Lord."

"Then accept this as pre-payment."

She walked by my side up the dusty street and out of the village. The child walking alongside Cilla, both quietly chattering.

"The beast – she understands him?"

I shook my head. "No – not his words, but she feels his emotions."

"But you talk to her."

It was a statement but needed an answer. "She understands the old tongue."

"You understand her?"

I laughed. "I am your first Rider?"

Her voice was hushed. "I'm sorry Lord, I meant no offence with my questions."

I looked at her. "None taken, and no, her twittering is meaningless to me, but I in turn understand her emotions."

There was a silence between us as we walked further up the road. Only the sound of the child and Cilla broke the late afternoon air. Then I felt it.

I stopped, then turned around. Cilla's head was high, her nostrils sieving the air, her long tail twitched in the dust.

The boy too, became quiet, looking sadly at his mother.

I looked around. A small inn stood by the side of the road. Other than that, it was unremarkable.

"What is it?" she said.

I turned to her. "This is a dangerous place - let's move on."

We walked a little further. She asked again. "What is it? Why is it dangerous?"

I stopped and turned to the boy. "Caradoc. Did something happen there? Something bad?"

His face became solemn. "My father went into the inn with that Fiscal man, and never came out. I never saw him again"

She turned and screamed at the boy. "Stop it! Stop it! Do you hear?" her admonishment tailed off into a wail of despair.

I laid my hand on her arm and she turned to face me, tears pouring down her cheeks.

She looked at me imploringly. "Lord, I am deeply sorry. He has no right to involve you."

I took my handkerchief and handed it to her, then said softly and gently "He has every right, Elain. I asked him the question. Your apologies are not needed."

We walked a little further, then turned off the road onto the small-holding.

A small cottage stood backed by a large thatched barn, the whole surrounded by a paddock sown with sweet-smelling grass.

The boy ran forward and opened the barn doors, and he and I led Cilla inside. Elain nodded at me, and said quietly. "I will prepare supper."

I unstrapped the grain, then the heavy saddle and luggage rig from Cilla's back, and removed her bridle, placing all the leatherwork on a large table.

"Come." I said to the boy, "Let's walk her outside, and she will dance for you."

His eyes lit up, and I gently patted Cilla's cheek and whispered in her ear.

She turned and walked out into the middle of paddock, with the boy and I following.

She stretched her mighty wings and flapped them twice, rearing up on her back legs, her tail allowing her to stand almost upright. The boy fell backwards against me in awe as she faced us, bowing and dipping her head before turning gracefully around.

Finally she fell back on all-fours, nodded to us, then again opened her wings, flapping hard, this time to rise vertically into the air, and disappear over the trees, only to re-appear circling around the house and barn, before eventually disappearing into the distance.

The child was shaking with excitement. He tugged my arm. "Where is she? Is she coming back?"

I nodded, laughing. "Yes, she'll be back. Meanwhile, would you like to help clean her leatherwork with me?"

We walked back to the barn, and I took the doings from my pack and we set to work, cleaning and polishing the hide and buckles. Only when we had finished did the flapping of her wings take the boy running to the barn door, shouting excitedly as she landed.

I pumped sweet, clean water into the trough, and Cilla walked into the barn. She drank heavily, then sank down on all fours on the sweet fresh straw.

I took lanolin from my pack, and rubbed it into the trace marks on her hide. The child watched, then started on her other flank, copying me.

He chattered to Cilla and she snickered and burbled replies, occasionally turning her head to blow straw over him.

Finally I sat back and watched them play together. Then I dozed.

3 - Opening Circle

A soft voice woke me. "Do you have a name?"

I looked up at her. "I've been called many things, but my proper name is Laomedon. What would you like to call me?"

"Laomedon.." She savoured the sound. "Do you like it?"

I laughed. "It smacks a little of pomp and puffery."

It was her turn to laugh. "I like Rider."

"Then 'Rider' I shall be."

"The beast – she is called Cilla?"

I nodded.

"Your daughter?"

I sat up in surprise. "You know the old stories?"

She nodded. "Some of them." She paused thoughtfully. "Your relationship is more than keeper and beast?"

I nodded. "Much more."

"Would you tell me about her?"

I nodded. "I will try answer your questions, perhaps I should start by telling you that she is what you might understand as a metaphor."

She sat down beside me in the straw. "So she represents something other than what she appears to be?"

I nodded. "Emphatically, yes. But what she is, takes a metaphor to define it also, so you could say she is beyond a metaphor, or a meta-metaphor."

She looked sideways at me. "You play with words?"

Her face was serious, a little doubting. I reached up and touched her cheek.

"Please do not be offended. I will try to show you what I mean."

She nodded, and I spoke again. "Look at your child and Cilla playing."

She nodded. "She is both terrifying, and at the same time hauntingly beautiful."

I nodded. "Good. Her appearance is part of her role. Now look again."

She turned back to see only her son, chattering and touching the empty air.

I felt her shudder beside me. "Bring her back, please."

I did so, but said softly. "She never went away. Caradoc could see

and touch her, even though you could not.”

She shivered, and I lifted my cloak from the pack and placed it around her shoulders.

“She could hurt him?”

I shook my head. “She cannot hurt him. That rule is immutable. She cannot hurt the innocent, neither by intent nor accident.”

“How can there never be an accident?”

“She will alter circumstances so as to regain control.”

She turned to me. “I felt fear of you and of your beast when we first met, but as you expand your explanations, although my fears diminish, my awe increases by the hour.”

She took my right hand and held it up, turning it. “I saw the white heat of her breath incinerate the oats in your hand, yet your hand remains soft and beautiful. How can she do that?”

I was failing. I needed to let her have time to think. What she needed most was reassurance, more questions could come later.

“When we met in the market place – yours was the only face that, although you were afraid, was both brave and proud. There is nothing wrong with feeling fear, it has probably saved your life several times already. Forgive me my poor words Elain, and even more demonstration might give no further insight. Cilla and I are one inseparable entity. Neither her nor I, could or would hurt you or your child. Our role, our very existence, is that of protector.”

She turned to me. “Thank you, and forgive my endless questions. You understand I am curious, curious even more so since my husband was taken. I feel, somehow, that you have already given me some information about that, but sadly, I'm not clever enough to understand your patient answers.”

She put her hand to my shoulder, then kissed me lightly on the cheek.

“Are you hungry? A stew is ready.”

Lamps were lit in the cosy parlour, and the big bowls of stew and chunks of brown bread were consumed in near silence, washed down with rough cider.

Immediately the boy was finished, he left, and made his way back to the barn. I helped clear plates, but she would not allow any further help.

“Go Rider, and walk off the meal. I am heating water should you wish to bathe, it will be ready in about one hour.”

I picked up my cloak and walked. Out onto the road, and back down towards the town, pausing beside the inn, before entering.

The evening was still early, but there were a sprinkling of steady drinkers, and nothing much else. The prickling I felt was stronger inside the inn, but I saw nothing and no-one which aroused suspicion. It could wait until morning. I drank a small cider and left, mainly because my presence made the inmates distinctly uncomfortable, though they tried hard not to show their fear.

4 - Fear & Love

A large tub was set in the bedroom, and I helped her pour jugs of scalding water from the boiler near the fire. She tested the water, added some cold and left me alone.

I was sat soaking in the beautiful all-encompassing warmth, when her hand lay on my shoulder. "May I help with your back?"

I leaned forward as she soaped, then washed my back, her strong hands massaging away the grime of my journey. I gripped the rim of the tub in front of me, and closed my eyes, loving her touch.

As she washed me there was one brief moment when her hand investigated the raised band of hide around my right bicep, but she said nothing.

Then she soaped and washed my hair, before rinsing me with warm fresh water.

She stood aside and held out the large towel, averting her eyes as I left the tub. Only when I was covered did she look at me.

"Thank you Elain." I said. "You do me proud."

"I am proud to have you as my guest Rider, very proud."

She moved forward and touched my cheek, then pointed to the bed.

"There is a large clean thick gown."

I dried myself as she emptied the tub, and with the gown around me I wandered out to the barn.

The child sat nestled against Cilla's chest, his head resting against her neck. He was fast asleep.

I walked across the straw and patted Cilla's cheek.

I whispered in the old tongue. "Does he remind you of anyone?"

She dipped her head, then moved it gently from side-to-side before looking directly at me, her huge gold-brown eyes unblinking.

I laughed softly. "Yes, I remember. How could I forget, beloved one?"

She rumbled, deep in her throat.

I turned to see Elain, standing quietly watching us. She smiled at me and I beckoned. I took her hand and we sat together between Cilla's front legs. Elain reached out, gently removing a piece of straw from her son's face.

Then she noticed the band on Cilla's right front leg and her eyes widened.

"You share a mark with the beast?"

"Touch her leg." I said softly.

She laid her right hand on Cilla's leg band, then slowly her eyes closed. I watched her softly sway as if in a trance. Her lovely face glowed with pleasure as the beast bathed her in gentle love. It was dark and the shadows had disappeared, before she finally opened her eyes, her arm dropping to her side.

She leaned forward and kissed Cilla's neck, then turned and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you Rider. My mind is at peace."

The child stirred, and she raised him and left to make up his bed.

I waited awhile and finally patted Cilla and left the barn, taking my bedroll with me into the parlour.

I was preparing my bed, when she appeared in the doorway.

"Rider? What is this? My bed is yours and ready for you."

I stood up. "Fair lady, there is no need - I will sleep well enough here."

She walked across the room and stood in front of me, her face a mixture of doubt and surprise.

"It is your right, and what is expected, I am your hosteller."

I swallowed, wishing I could explain.

She unloosed the toggles on her gown and thrust it back over her shoulders, standing naked and proud before me. "Do you not find me attractive?"

I moved forward and bent down to pick up the gown, again wrapping it around her shoulders.

"Elain, you are very beautiful, and truly irresistible, but you owe no duty to me."

She held both of her hands forward, looking directly into my eyes. "I want you. At this moment I want nothing else. Please Rider, do not make me beg."

I took both of her hands and placed them on my shoulders, then lifted her and carried her into the bedroom, her kisses falling on my face as I walked.

There was little sleep. Some slight resting between our lovemaking, and then the dawn's light was peeping sideways into the room. She lay in my arms, her lovely leg across my belly, and she spoke softly,

her forefinger caressing my cheek.

"Your eyes, when you look at me now, are soft and brown and warm with love. Yesterday, the fiery golden glow from them nearly ignited the Fiscal's face."

Suddenly she giggled. "Not that he wouldn't have deserved it."

"He is a fool." I said simply. She had found levity at last, and I wanted her to enjoy her mood, so said no more.

She began to hum. A gentle soft murmuring not unlike Cilla's. As she hummed she stroked and touched every part of my body, breaking her song occasionally to kiss me. Having aroused me again she sat on me, grinding her groin into me slowly, savouring each agonisingly beautiful contraction that racked through her body. I waited until she was near finished, then thrust myself harder and harder into her, as she buried her face in my shoulder to stifle her screams. We finally came together and she collapsed at my side.

After a little while her voice came at me from the ceiling, seeming a little far away, as she lay on her back.

"How long are you staying?"

"I leave today."

"Must you?"

"Yes. I cannot stay."

"Would you, if you could?"

"You know that I would."

"How can I make it so?"

"You cannot."

"I love you."

"Yes. I know. You love me now, later, that may change."

She rolled over and kissed my lips. "It wouldn't."

I reached up and ran my fingers through her beautiful red hair.

"I would love you too, but you are not mine."

She looked intensely at me. "He is gone forever. You are here. Even if you go today, can you not return?"

I took her hand and placed it against my heart. Looking into her pleading eyes I said softly "Whatever happens, I will come back and see you again, I promise."

I reached up and touched her cheek. Her eyes closed for what might have been an instant.

Then she kissed me again, and said thoughtfully. "Then I hold onto that thought with my heart."

5 - Dragon Ride

The child helped me saddle up Cilla, and he walked her out into the early morning sunshine, to the centre of the paddock.

Elain had said a tearful Goodbye at the barn door, and I felt her gaze upon me as I followed him.

Finally, near the centre of the field, he stopped and turned to me. "Just one short ride, please Rider." He looked up, his eyes pleading. "You must ask your mother."

"She will say no."

"You cannot be sure of that. You would disrespect and ignore her care for you?"

He hung his head.

I reached across and tousled his hair.

"Go and ask her, and live with her wishes, for if you will not, then it is certain you will *not* ride, whereas you might be pleasantly surprised."

He looked up at me and nodded slowly. "I will ask her."

"Good," I said, "and I will wait for your return."

He ran off and I turned to Cilla. I took out the small felt hat I'd retrieved from the chest in the bedroom and held it out to her. "Beloved one, this bears the mark of the boy's father?"

She lowered her head, breathing in the space around the hat, then she nodded and fixed her golden-brown eyes upon me.

I placed the hat back in my pocket and moved close to her, my arms around her neck, and only broke away after hearing the sound of the child's excited voice, as he ran across the field to us.

Elain followed more slowly, and I ignored his excitement until she stood before me.

"Cilla will take us up, and circle, always in your sight. Are you sure about this?"

She smiled nervously and moved close to me. "I trust you with my life and his Rider. Go, and I will watch and wave."

Cilla sat down on all fours, and I hoisted Caradoc up onto the

saddle, and climbed up behind him, my arms either side of him as he gripped the large saddle pommel.

Elain stepped back and Cilla unfolded her wings, flapped twice, and we rose into the air, the child shouted excitedly, as Cilla set off east towards the sun, sweeping over the trees. She circled around several times, and the boy waved excitedly at his mother far below us in the field, before we finally landed again.

I dismounted and lifted the boy down, his face glowing with pleasure.

I took Cilla's reins in my hands, and Elain moved forward, her intention clear.

Quietly and gently I said "Look around Elain, before you kiss me. The rest of your life depends upon it."

Whether my words, or the intensity with which I spoke them, I know not, but she stopped and turned.

A stranger stood just outside the barn doors.

Elain stood stock still, her back to me, and I heard her catch her breath.

Then she said softly "Morgan?" then moving forward and into a run. "Is that you? Morgan! Morgan!"

She ran across the paddock and hurled herself into the stranger's arms.

Caradoc was transfixed in his surprise, looking first at his father, then turning to me.

"Go!" I said. "Go to them."

I watched him run, to join in their embrace, and then whispered to Cilla. "I believe we are done here, Cilla."

As we rose in the air, I looked down and three faces looked back up at us. I waved, and three hands waved back.

6 - Outlander

She slid off the stool and stood in front of me, tall, and very beautiful.

"Hi stranger. Will you buy me a drink?"

I smiled. "I would like to, but perhaps another day?"

I made to move to her right, but she blocked me. I could see over her left shoulder that he was aware of me, but trying to pretend he wasn't.

"Why not now?" she smiled. She was good. Very good, and very attractive, but I had other things on my mind.

I smiled again. "Step aside Advocate, I *will* talk to him."

Her smile vanished.

"State your business, outlander." she said coldly.

"To him - not you." I said.

She dropped her head to one side. "He has my protection."

"But where is yours?" I asked softly, and stared at her.

At first, there was disbelief on her face as she looked into my eyes, then the first recognition of searing pain. She closed her eyes, and lowered her head. "Forgive me Lord, I wasn't aware.."

"Leave." I said quietly. She needed no prompting. She didn't look across at him, but walked a little stiffly to the exit.

He wasn't going to wait, and made a dash for the door, beating her to it.

The seated occupants stared, wide-eyed at the events unfolding feet away from them. I turned to them, nodded and smiled, then followed the pair outside. She was running up the road, as fast as she could, not looking back.

He stood facing Cilla, rooted to the ground in sheer terror, her face only inches from his.

"Say 'Good Morning' to Cilla, Mr. Carthowen."

He said nothing.

"Ah. I see. Grim reality has gripped your throat. So you already know what serious stuff dragon breath is?"

I walked around to the saddle bag and removed a polished metal ring, offering it to him. "Be so good as to slip that over your head, would you?"

He turned to me, a new terror in his eyes. "No!"

I shrugged. "You prefer immolation? We do that also."

He turned again to the baleful glare in Cilla's eyes, then reached out and took the ring from me, passing it over his head. He knew what to expect. The ring shrank in size, tight to his neck, but not enough to choke him.

"Climb aboard Mr. Carthowen. We are taking a ride."

He shook with fear as we rose from the ground, and didn't stop shivering until Cilla landed a few minutes later.

I walked the short distance from Carthowen's overblown mansion, it's grotesque kitsch borrowed from the styles of a hundred different worlds.

Morgan was working in the vineyard, a heavy sweat on his face, in the strong sunlight. He looked up as I approached. He was apprehensive.

"Is your name Morgan?" I asked quietly and politely. I already knew. We had passed silently and invisibly, only feet above his head, and Cilla's nostrils didn't lie.

He nodded, leaning on the hoe, and brushing the sweat from his eyes.

"I've come to take you back to Elain and Caradoc." I said simply. He let go of the tool, and his expression was a mixture of terror, doubt and hope.

I passed him his hat. "This is yours?"

He nodded, taking the cap from me and turning it between his hands.

He looked directly at me. "How.."

I smiled. "You must have a million questions, but they can wait. The man who kidnapped you is now my prisoner, as you shall see. Let's go."

I turned, and he followed me back to the house, halting suddenly when he saw Cilla and the hapless Carthowen, tethered by his neck ring to the rear of the saddle.

I laughed. "Don't be afraid of her. She is here to protect you and take you home, so climb aboard."

I waited until he was in the saddle then climbed up after him, and whispered softly to Cilla "Sbwriel yn Anwylyd, er ei fod yn rhoi

drosedd i syllu arnynt."

She turned her head to face the house and drew breath.

When she had finished, all that was left of Carthowen's monstrous folly was a pile of incandescent rubble, and his anguished whimpering behind me.

I made no comment as we lifted into the air.

7 - Reckoning

I stood before the Fiscal's door, Morgan by my side. I knocked heavily.

There was no response. This time I used the back of my boot.

The door was flung open, and his fat, overfed face glowered at me, before recognition tempered his response. He glanced at Morgan, and I caught the shifty guilt in his eyes. He spluttered "Lord... a pleasure.. do, do come in."

We followed him into the spacious and well furnished hall, then he led the way into his reception room. Everything was of the very best.

"Some refreshment Lord?"

I shook my head. "This is not pleasure Fiscal, but business, specifically the business you are running alongside your duty as law-giver."

He knew that it was all over for him, but that didn't stop his attempting to bluff his way out of it. He started blustering.

I waved my hand. "Shut up!" I turned to Morgan. "Is this the man who sold you to Carthowen?"

Morgan nodded. I turned to the now visibly shaking Fiscal. "Your records - now."

"Records Lord? Records? I have no.." His blustering was halted suddenly as there was a loud crash and rumbling, then the far wall of the room collapsed, to reveal Cilla, covered in dust, and thrusting a large cabinet toward us with her head. The blue sky could be seen above her head through what had been the roof.

The Fiscal's hand went to his head "My house! What have you done?"

I turned to him. "Fetch bags, and load your papers into them, but before you do, here's something for you to wear."

I took a neck ring from my belt and handed it to him. He didn't look at me, knowing the price, but silently slipped the ring around his neck.

8 - A Promise Kept

She stood in front of the barn, scattering corn for the chickens. Her hair now a silver grey.

She looked up on hearing the flapping of wings. Cilla landed a hundred or so metres away, and sat down, looking directly at her. She stared in disbelief, looking around. Cilla seemed to be alone. Slowly, she approached the beast, who snickered encouragement, and finally she stopped, directly in front of Cilla.

"Cilla. You are alone?"

The great golden eyes blinked at her, and then Cilla tapped the ground in front of her, the band on her front leg flashing briefly.

"Is this the end for me?" Elain asked softly.

Again, Cilla tapped the ground.

Elain moved forward and sat down between Cilla's legs.

She reached out and touched the band.

She dreamt. She dreamt of a time now long past, of a fearsome enforcer, one who had returned her beloved Morgan to her, but who had left a yearning in her heart that had never been fulfilled.

She cried out to him. "You made a promise to me. Morgan is now dead, I am all alone, and now death is chasing me!"

I said her name softly "Elain".

She opened her eyes. "Rider!"

She leapt from between Cilla's legs, and her arms folded around me. Her voice desperate, she almost shouted. "I love you. I love you, but you are too late, I am dying."

"Let us walk to the house. " I said softly, and holding her hand, we walked in through the barn, to the parlour.

I stood her in front of the mirror.

Shock overcome her, and I held her tight.

"How? Is this a dream?" she managed to ask.

"You are now, as you were, when I made my promise, now so long ago. You have a choice. Ride with me, and be my everlasting love, as is your right, or wake, and finish your life normally."

She turned her beautiful face to me. "Rider. I love you. Let us ride."