

Wave Hunter

1 * The Howling *

It was the morning after Samhain, in the valley of the river Tamesis. The dead had come from Tir na nÓg to visit the living the night before, leaving the bright autumn world crisscrossed with a multitude of spirit footprints.

To the east, beyond the hills and forests, the demon ached for its lost prey. Without the eyes, hands and feet of a human host, its non-corporeal shadow spread like a lost wave across the bare, frosted earth: sniffing, licking and groping for its quarry. But those tracks had faded with the morning dew.

The demon searched as light and dark came and went. The full moon waned to a nail paring. Then, on the first winds of winter, the demon caught the faintest scent of *her*... But it was smothered by the dreaded stench of iron: earth-blood that had been heated and smelted, forged and turned to the will of the accursed smith-god. The ground still faintly trembled with a thudding, rhythmic beat, long gone. An image of a white horse formed in the demon's thoughts. Its prey had been riding.

The demon's emptiness and hatred tangled into a knot that swelled and grew, then burst into a low howl that keened across the land.

As the cry spread, it mingled with the ashy heart-wrenching sobs of those who had lost loved ones in fire and fighting.

Feeding on their anger and pain, the demon gathered strength. Its howl swelled and was answered, again and again...

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Tegen shuddered as the eerie cries echoed across the chilly sweep of bare-topped hills. Her mud-coloured hound ran to her side, the wiry hairs bristling along his spine, his tail curled tightly between his legs. 'What's out there, eh Wolf?' she whispered, rubbing the back of his neck and trying not to shudder. She must not be afraid. The Goddess would defend her, whatever was coming.

The dog looked up at her with dark, soulful eyes, pulled back his lips and whimpered.

Tegen stood and sniffed the chilly air. No snow yet, so what were wolves doing in the open? She closed her fingers around her iron ring of protection. It was hot, warning of danger. She closed her eyes and listened for the wisdom of the Goddess in her mind. There were no words spoken, but she

understood the Lady's warning.

It was not hungry animals keening in the wind. Something evil was on her trail. She hoped it wasn't the ghost of Admidios – Shadow Walker, worker of dark magic and servant of the demon that loathed her.

Tegen knew she could neither out-run nor hide from a spirit, but come nightfall, she'd sleep better with solid walls at her back and a roaring hearth-fire by her feet.

'Come, Epona,' she said, tugging at her horse's reins. 'Let's get over this ridge.' Quickening her pace she trudged up the chalky grass slope towards the top, where silhouetted against the skyline, a lanky boy was waiting for her.

'What's that noise?' he called out nervously.

Tegen hurried in his direction. She was unsure of what was after her, and didn't want to scare the boy. Kieran was in no danger; he wasn't the quarry. *She* was.

'Someone's hunting with dogs, I'd guess,' she lied cheerfully as she puffed up the last of the climb. 'How far is it to your Da's house?'

'Not far.' He waved his arm towards a bare-branched beech wood. 'Beyond them trees the track meets the drover's road, then it'll be downhill all the way to the Roman town of Corinium. Two more days, then we cross the Rearing River, then it's the same again to my Da's home in Y Fenni.'

The thought of a proper bed cheered Tegen, and the afternoon sun warmed her back, dispelling the memory of the howl. But she knew she hadn't dreamed it. It was a warning to hurry. For a quarter of a moon she and Kieran had been trudging westwards and a little north as Goban the smith had instructed her. Now the demon had found her trail, her need to get to the druids' island was even more urgent. 'Then how much further to Mona?' she asked.

Kieran shrugged his bag higher up his shoulder. 'Depends on the weather – and the Romans, of course.' He spat and pulled his cloak tighter. 'Take my advice and winter with Da and me.'

'Thank you, but I can't.'

Kieran tossed his head irritably. 'So we ain't good enough for you?'

'Don't be like that. You know I must help Mona's druids raise the Great Spell to oust the invaders.'

Kieran made the sign against the evil eye. 'Magic's dangerous stuff. Don't like it.'

'Without it, you'd still be a slave to Admidios, or your ghastly aunt Caja,' Tegen retorted. 'Or maybe burned to a cinder at Sinodun? Anyway, what if your Da doesn't want a hearth-guest?'

'Only trying to be friendly,' the boy grumbled as he strode along. 'You've got to stay somewhere. You've got no chance of getting through before the snows, see. Even with a horse.'

Tegen patted Epona's withers. 'She's not an ordinary horse. She'd take me to the Otherworld and back. If I press on, I'll get to Mona before the solstice.'

Kieran sneered. 'Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. After fourteen years of trailing up and down them roads after Ma and aunt on their salt cart, I've met all the flood-spirits and snow-ghasts that lurk along the way. You want to keep going north? Do what you like – but *I* ain't taking you. Not till

spring, anyway.’ Then he strode on in silence.

A loud honking overhead made Tegen look up. It was a skein of geese flying due west. Was it a warning not to go north? Or were they simply on their way somewhere? Not every bird is a portent, she reminded herself. I wish I could make wooden wings like the king in the story and soar away. If only! If we druids don’t succeed, then our stories will soon be replaced with Roman lies.

As Kieran promised, the countryside beyond the trees was spread out before them like a tumbled blanket. Tegen paused to catch her breath and take in the view. To left and right, the chalky hills were steeply curved and wooded valleys opened to wide, fertile uplands, rich in pasture. From the arrow-straight roads and square, tiled-roof buildings along the way, she could tell the swaggering invaders had made themselves very comfortable.

‘Do you know why the Romans hate us druids?’ Tegen asked.

The boy shrugged disinterestedly.

‘Because we inspire warriors to keep fighting.’ She spread her hands wide. ‘Without us, Britain would have fallen years ago.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Kieran sneered. ‘My Da can wipe out a whole platoon of Romans just by sneezing.’

Tegen laughed, and the boy glowered at her. ‘Don’t mock. You never met him.’

Bowing her head contritely, she replied, ‘It’ll be an honour I’m looking forward to, but I really cannot stay.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Kieran shrugged. ‘You’ll be on your own.’

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As night fell, they chose an empty sheepfold for their campsite. While Kieran was fetching water, Tegen groomed Epona and Wolf with teasels. As she worked, she whispered into their ears: ‘Am I just being edgy, or is something following me? You both heard the howl, didn’t you?’

Epona snorted through her nostrils and stamped.

‘I thought so. I’ve got to know for certain whether it’s that awful demon, or just some mischievous goblin.’ Tegen turned Epona loose to graze while Wolf bounded after a rabbit in the dusk, then she searched the hedges for a heap of carefully chosen woods. ‘Holly, bring me brightness and truth,’ she prayed as she stacked the branches into a mound. ‘Rowan, defend us from evil, but show me what is out there...’ As she stretched out her hands, bright flames leaped and spat, and the bonfire roared.

At that moment, Kieran returned with a duck he had pinched from a farm that had refused them hospitality. He averted his gaze from the magical flames and sat a little too far away for comfort while he plucked, gutted and skewered the bird. Wolf was less worried. Fire was fire and food was food. He swallowed the offal Kieran tossed to him, lay down in the warmth, and snored.

Tegen ignored her own rumbling stomach and the smell of cooking. She threw dried herbs onto the hot ashes and breathed their smoke until her head swam. She watched the flames dance and spit as the dripping duck fat sizzled. Deep in the red and gold embers, an image was forming, something that shifted and shimmered, but wouldn’t quite take form...

It was ghastly. It was familiar. Tegen flinched and turned away. Fighting the chills that crept across her skin, she thought of Goban the smith who, now she came to think of it, had taught her more about fire magic than Admidios had done.

'If you ever need an answer, look for it in fire,' Goban had said. 'Remember, fire protects from magic, but it also leads you into the deepest part of the mysteries. Fire will lead you to your innermost soul, and bring you out into the world again... Be careful. Always use fire to drive shadows away, never to summon them.'

Tegen hesitated. She was summoning shadows now. But I have to understand my enemy to know how to fight it, she told herself firmly.

She glanced under her lashes towards Kieran, his face red and black in the flickering firelight.

With a small gesture she wove a spirit shield around them both. Kieran shivered.

Concentrating on the flames, Tegen lowered her head and whispered:

Show me your form, dark or bright,

Spirit of hope, or shadow of blight!

The fire crackled and spat, sending sparks everywhere. Wolf jumped up howling. The roasting duck crashed into the ashes, and Kieran swore.