

BOOK THREE OF THE CELTIC PROPHECY

ORACLE'S CURSE

by

MELISSA MACFIE



Can't Put It Down Books

Oracle's Curse
Book Three of The Celtic Prophecy
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*This book is dedicated to my children, Elizabeth and Donald.
Remember that it takes sheer force of will to affect change in life.
Take a chance, experience new things, and breathe.*

I love you.

“I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.”
—*W.E. Henley*

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Prologue

Death had come for her in its beautiful magnificence. Time slowed. Not in the usual self-contemplating way, though that was true enough; it slowed from Finvarra's working. The Oracle raised her eyes and saw a bird suspended motionless in the sky. *So this is how it ends.* She recognized it now. Arrogance and self-aggrandizement built slowly over the centuries bolstered by outside worship of her abilities had made her forget the fact that all things must come to an end, even her. Her death was the first of her premonitions, before even the official bestowal of the sight by Aerten, the goddess of prophecy.

She looked down at her open hands. Her gnarled, swollen joints made it impossible to extend her fingers. They were old hands, spotted and trembling; still useful in a perfunctory way, the yellowed nails embedded with dirt. How long had they been like that? She seemed to remember a point in her life when appearance meant something. Images of dainty hands, with clear, rounded, and most importantly, clean nails, that used to be hers. She reached up to her damaged eye, wiping at the constant tearing. She didn't need to see it; she knew what it looked like. A milky, yellowish-white cornea almost indistinguishable against the sclera, if anyone bothered to look, was the brand of the seer, a lesser gift from Balor, the god of the Fomorians. It was praised as the seers' protection. No one would dare do harm to a seer whose powers lay in divination. Truth was no one dared to touch a seer at all. It was a lonely life. She had had to squash all hope for a family and children early on. She was venerated and ostracized.

Yet as the Oracle spent the last few moments contemplating her life's choices, a small part of her rebelled at the thought of fate and its importance. Hadn't she spent a large portion of the latter part of her life struggling against it? If anyone was going to have a shot at circumventing fate, shouldn't it have been her? She was there when Aileen had given her unborn child to the universe, an unprecedented move; it shouldn't even have been possible. The Rite of the Phoenix

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always had two willing participants for the sole purpose of perpetuating the faith.

Now, at this moment she hesitated. She wanted to simultaneously grovel at the feet of her gods begging for their beneficence and forgiveness so she'd be allowed to bask in their terrible beauty while at the same time standing defiantly as her lungs were robbed of their very breath, and she, all at once, was tried, convicted, and executed for heresy.

She looked at the priestess, the woman called Brenawyn, kneeling beside Aerten, touching her. The sight hardened the Oracle's resolve. Here was the so-named priestess, who hadn't been raised in the Ways, knew nothing of the lineage of the Druids. She was ignorant of the customs, rites, and hierarchy, and here she was touching the goddess of prophecy! The audacity!

With a harrumph, she stood taller and made her decision. The Oracle's interlace grew brighter as she chanted.

*I curse ye, priestess
In the name o' Belanus, god o' healing
May he turn his face from you.*

*I curse ye, priestess
In the name o' Epona, goddess o' fertility
May she not hear yer silent empty-armed suffering.*

*I curse ye, priestess
In the name o' Danu, goddess o' the land
May ye never find a home.*

*I curse ye priestess
In the name o' Taranis, god o' the dead.
May ye live forever.*

*I curse ye, priestess
In the name o' Cernunnos, god o' the hunt
May ye never find what ye seek.*

*I curse ye, priestess
In the name of Blodeuweld ...*

Chapter 1

Present Day

The pain abated as long as Maggie Harris remained utterly still and didn't breathe. That was a problem. Even in shallow breaths the pain radiating from her lower leg was excruciating. The way she laid on the floor she couldn't reach to explore the unseen damage, and to move to sit up—she'd rather not vomit again. She fluttered her eyes trying to clear her vision of the maroon blobs as soft flakes drifted to land on her cheeks. Dry blood. Assessing for lesser injuries, she found she had bled from a head wound at some point. There was an underlying throb, the real soreness of which was probably masked by the acute pain in her leg. She reached up to gingerly explore and found more dry blood covering half her face. It pooled around her head drenching the hair underneath. It was brittle, flaking away easily. How long had she been here?

Panic set in even though she knew that head wounds bleed profusely. She had never seen, or rather felt so much of her own blood. She jerked, and a bolt of lightning shot up from her leg. She screamed, reaching down to cradle her knee. The change of position opened the wound on her head and she felt a trickle of new blood ooze at her hairline. At this angle she could see the damage to her right leg. A memory of the life-sized skeletal model from anatomy class came rushing into her mind. Her tibia looked...odd. The weight of her jeans was almost too much to bear; to press on the fabric to get a better look at the shape of her

leg required more courage than she had at the moment. She registered that the leg was broken.

Scuffling sounded from the room beyond, drawing Maggie up short. "Whose there?"

A slip of a girl appeared at the doorway, almost drowning in the huge pile of folded cloths that were clutched to her chest.

"I see that you're awake. That's good. I was beginning to worry."

At the muffled words, Maggie brightened, "Please, you have to help me. I've been kidnapped and taken I don't know where."

The moving pile of fabric stopped and teetered as the girl looked back. "He wouldn't like it."

"He's here? Near here? Where is here? Where am I?" The questions tumbled out of her mouth, each one pitched in a higher voice than the last. She stopped, realizing she was spooking the girl, who wavered, then ran to the corner, out of reach, and put the folded fabric on a wood chest in the corner. "Someone will be coming soon. I told him you needed a doctor. He didn't like that, but I think he's sent for one anyway."

"How long ago was that? Where am I? What does he..." the questions tumbled out of Maggie's mouth again; she couldn't stop them once panic set in. Once again, the girl looked afraid, Maggie realized, noting her own panic reflected in the girl's eyes just before she skittered out of the room. There was real fear there.

Maggie's position was dire. She needed to think. He needed her alive for now, he'd not have taken her if that wasn't the case. What did she know? What did she have that he wanted?

Maggie's thoughts were cut off as soon as they began by the rushed thump-thump of multiple feet on stairs beyond her vision. In her pain-addled mind, a memory flashed of when she was eight. *The reverberation of the circus elephants' weight hit the arena's floor after being forced to do tricks for the audience. She was awestruck and scared at the enormity and power of the animals, and disgusted by the whips and bull-hooks the trainers*

held. She felt the revulsion emanating for her mother's newest boyfriend as she tried to hide her eyes...

Two men entered the room, followed by the slip of a girl again. They rushed her, and Maggie tried to cower away as much as her leg would allow. They had the advantage of being of sound body, and persisted, subduing her with little effort; a man pinning her shoulders as the girl pressed her hips down. The other man took his time searching in a black bag. He must be the doctor that had been sent for, Maggie thought.

He pulled out a syringe and a rubber-capped injection vial. "Relax. The pain will be better momentarily." He inserted the needle, pulled back on the plunger, and then tapped the barrel to rid it of any air bubbles. He gave a slight smile as he approached, possibly as an attempt to look less threatening, but Maggie wasn't having it. He had to know the circumstances, or at least could guess them given she was lying on the ground in a dirt floor basement. He couldn't be trusted. He wouldn't help her. She struggled even knowing her abysmal odds. She wasn't mobile, and even under the optimal conditions of a sterile hospital emergency room or an orthopedist's office to get a cast, she would only be partially so. Yes, she knew her odds and didn't like them a bit. At the moment she was completely at the mercy of her captors.

The smile on the man's lips disappeared as he knelt down on her side extending her right arm in a punishing grip. "You will cause yourself more pain if you continue to struggle."

"You see where I am. The circumstances, even if they aren't clear to you, you know, *you know*, I am not here willingly. How can you be an accomplice to kidnapping? You're a doctor! Doesn't that go against your oath, or something?"

He sat back on his haunches, "The Hippocratic Oath? No, there's no correlation. Plus, you aren't going to be harmed in my care. You're not going to die. This," indicating the syringe, "is only a local anesthetic so I can realign your bones. Unless," he shrugged his shoulders, "you want to suffer without. It will be much more painful. I wouldn't suggest it myself, since we have

meds in abundance now. I shouldn't have liked to be a doctor in the past, setting bones, amputation..."

"Amputation? You're going to take my leg?"

"No, no, certainly not. It's a messy break—compound fracture from the looks of it, but I won't know until I take a better look. Will you allow me to take a look before I give you aenesthesia to put your mind at ease? It will only take a moment."

Maggie found herself nodding agreement, and the pressure eased on her lower body as the doctor instructed the girl to retrieve his bag and extract the trauma shears. A few more instructions and a breathless, room-spinning moment the leg of her jeans was cut away.

"If you would, sir, please help her to sit up a bit."

Maggie was elevated, but the movement and the sight of the bone where it pierced her skin was enough to make her vomit on herself. The girl looked away, heaving in reaction, while the doctor looked on unconcerned, patiently waiting for her to stop. The only sympathy was from the man who helped her to sit. He moved behind her head, so when she finally eased back it was to rest on his upper legs. He brushed her bangs off her forehead, but stopped midway to yank back his hands as if caught doing something he shouldn't. Maggie looked at him for the first time. He was young, her age if she had to guess. Lanky, and wiry strong, and with a short scruff indicating a week's worth of beard growth. Underneath that however, was skin that hadn't exactly resolved itself of pubescent acne. She tried to memorize his face, holding him in her stare as long as possible, letting him see the tears that spilled from the corners of her eyes. She had to make an impression, for this boy might be her only help.

"Despite the look of it, the break is clean; and I'll leave you with a couple of blister packs of antibiotic. You aren't allergic to penicillin, are you?"

Maggie nodded, "I get hives."

"More and more people are developing allergies." He said more to himself than her. "Any more that I should know about?"

She shook her head. “Very well. I am prepared in any case. Keflex should knock out any infection that starts.” He took the syringe back from the young man, and flicked it again for good measure. “Shall I give you the local now?”

Maggie came to sometime later in the basement, but things had changed. Gone was the dry blood, and there were fresh stitches at her hairline. There was a cast on her injured leg and she was divested of her jeans, all of her clothes in fact. Someone had taken the time to wash her, comb her hair, and dress her in a loose linen dress that skimmed her calves. She lay on an army cot that smelled of disinfectant and she was covered with a thin, hospital-issue knit blanket.

She startled when someone cleared their throat. She turned her head to find the young man balanced on a spindled chair against the wall. Her stomach growled at the sight of the folding snack tray laden with food and bottled water next to him.

“You’re awake. Do you want some water? You must be thirsty.”

She nodded and went to sit up. As her feet brushed the ground, a wave of dizziness hit her and the floor rushed up to meet her. She was saved by two strong hands steadying her back on the cot. “Are you okay?”

Maggie sighed deeply, unable to focus. “I’m...fuzzy-headed.” She looked down to his hand still clutching her shoulder. She could feel the warmth of him through the fabric of her dress, could almost count the nerve-endings set off by the tingly, pins and needles under his touch. His hands were large, with big knuckles; she reached and poked his index finger. “Do you crack your knuckles? My mother always warned me not to because I’d get large knuckles.”

“You’re not making any sense, lie back down.”

“What did he give me? I feel...floaty.”

“Enjoy it, because the meds are wearing off and the pain will come back soon enough. He’ll want to see you then.”

“He? Oh yeah...him. Cormac Mc-something or other.”

“Yes, and he's not happy.”

“Probably still angry at me for hitting him in the nuts with a bat.”

The young man snorted in agreement.

“It was a really good swing. Haven't played since high school. Do you think I would have had more power if it was aluminum rather than wood?”

He leaned in, “Jesus, girl, shut your mouth, he's looking for payback. If you want to make it out alive...”

She grasped at him, “Please help me. He took me. He's keeping me here against my will. Won't you help me get away?”

“Hush now, close your eyes.” He laid her head on the pillow and swept up her legs up, “Just sleep,” he said, covering her with the blanket.

“What's your name?”

“I'm Andrew. Andy. Call me Andy.”

All Maggie could do was nod and lie there, mollified by the comforting weight of the blanket. She concentrated on her breathing, fascinated by the rise of her chest as air filled her lungs. She held her breath and then exhaled slowly, delighting in the ease of pressure. It seemed a difficult task, the inhaling, such labor to force air in, to expand—what if she forgot to breathe? In her relaxation, her body just gave up?

What had the doctor given her? It was time to get off the loopy train. She had enough...but it was just so nice to just...be.

She should concentrate on something else. Rafters, planking of the floors above, what was significant about this? Something was missing. She wished she knew what. Insulation. Shouldn't there be insulation? Was there typically insulation on the ceiling of basements? Or would it invite mold? She suddenly wished to be more observant. She certainly would have seen it in the basement of Leo's shop. That was a couple hundred years old at least, but it was updated, now that she thought about it. Mr. Callahan updated it for his wife, all except the still room. That had been left purposely untouched. She always thought it was funny

why Leo had wanted it that way, but she never asked why. There's that unobservant bit again, or maybe she considered it unimportant or just crazy eccentricities of an old woman. She never asked, though with the happenings of the last couple of weeks, she should have asked if its untouched state had anything to do with the existence of magic. Maggie wondered if she'd ever get a chance to ask now.

Going down that road seemed dangerous considering her addled state, best to think of something else—ooh, pretty spider! The bright yellow and black spider stuck out against the dark backdrop of the aged rafters, busily finishing its enormous web anchored at several spots along the jagged walls of the corner, it stretched across two ceiling beams. The spider looked huge, as if Maggie reached out she could pluck it off its web. The color and pattern were extraordinary, and almost made her forget her revulsion for the arachnids in her desire to look closer at it.

A stray memory of her ex-boyfriend laughing as she stood in the hallway throwing shoes into her kitchen hoping to squash the spider on the floor. It seemed ridiculous now; how accurate did she think she was going to be throwing random shoes, rubber boots. She thought she even remembered a soft-soled slipper, from ten feet away? She wouldn't even step into the kitchen. It was Tommy who had saved the day, or he would have if he hadn't dropped it down her shirt afterwards. He swore that it was dead, but who does that regardless? He was always a little shit. She felt itchy. She located her yellow nemesis in the same spot it had been; her skin crawled just from the memory. And to think, she wanted to touch this one. Euck!

Maggie woke again, this time to a deep ache in her leg and a throbbing from her forehead. The pain helped to sober her and allowed her to think straight. Her wounds had been seen to at least. Whatever Cormac had in mind surely he needed her at least for the time being, else why would he have her injuries seen to? People were in a cast from four to six weeks. The more time he needed her alive, the more time she had to think of a way to escape. She

certainly couldn't expect to get away quickly in her current state.

The chair back creaked at her back, "Maggie? Are you awake?"

Her heart leapt in her chest and she felt the anxiety rise; no, she needed more time to think. Andy seemed like he was a compassionate sort, and it was a good bet to take that he'd let her sleep some more. Although he was mixed up with Cormac, so he clearly couldn't be trusted. She wished she had a better bead on what was happening. She lengthened her breathing, feigning sleep and banking on the fact that it would stave off the inevitable confrontation with Cormac himself.

Thinking back to when the blinders were peeled from her eyes just weeks ago with glowing orbs, resurrections, shape-shifting, not to mention time slowing, dirt monsters, force fields, and fucking gods! Her heart was beating fast and panic was surging. It was harder to concentrate to keep her breathing relaxed. It hardly seemed possible that she was still sane and alive, but magic was real.

Magic was real.

Nothing was going to be the same again.

She could use a little of that magic now to get out of her current predicament. Before Cormac showed up would be preferable, but it was unlikely to happen. She saw Leo and Brenawyn raise Alex from the dead, but here her captors had to call for a doctor to fix her broken leg. Healing must not be a common ability, or whatever they needed her for wasn't pressing, or they didn't want to expend the energy to heal her through magic—too many questions. Quite honestly, it was a path she didn't want to go down, she had no family outside of Brenawyn and Leo, and she wasn't sure where either of them were, if they were even still alive. If they were able they would call the police to report her abduction; but what would they tell them? Leaving out details would certainly make them look suspicious, but they couldn't tell them what actually happened. That would result in a 72-hour stint in the psych ward.

What did the police tell families of abductees? The first twenty-four hours was crucial? She didn't know how much time had passed but she was at least a couple of days in and that speculation was built on the time she was conscious enough to notice the light in the grimy cellar window.

She had angered him in the forest. She took a chance and it hadn't worked out. He was clearly rattled by the turn of events in the clearing and the decision to take her was a rash one. She thought she could use that. Make herself hard to kidnap, and perhaps he'd think better of it. She tried to gouge his eyes, and stomp his instep, she managed to get away for a moment. It was a mad dash through the underbrush, but he was better equipped, with rugged boots and jeans, and he overtook her almost instantly. Crashing with her to the rough ground, crushing her, before both of them took a tumble down a short decline. She was winded but in one piece, but he was quicker. A sharp pain at her temple and she drifted off thinking this is where she was going to die.

Now that she was conscious, and the meds were wearing off she needed to compose herself. The time was coming when she would need her wits about her. It wouldn't be good to further anger Cormac. He had no compunction about causing pain. The next time might be more greivous. She didn't know how she came to be here, but she could be observant from here on out. There might be something that she'd recognize, not so much in landmarks, but towns and people. People were nosy; less apt to get involved in a situation they knew nothing about, but there might be an opportunity.

That brought her thoughts back to what she already knew about her situation. Maggie had seen the doctor, the girl, and Andy. The doctor wasn't going to help. He'd made that clear enough, and the girl was too scared. That left Andy. She knew she could exploit his nature, manipulating him into helping her but she had to be sure that she was right about him. She had to establish a rapport with him. He had been sitting vigil in the room while she slept and had food and water, offered the latter to her already.

That's where she would start; ask for basic needs to be met. She was thirsty.

Chapter 2

Tir-Nan-Og

Alex wasn't physically chained as he was led from the forest clearing by Cernunnos, God of the Wilderness, Lord Master of the Wild Hunt, but he was compelled to go nonetheless. He was bound to it as the hunted. He had never much minded until now, when it felt as if each step toward his destiny was a step away from the last chance of his happiness. He watched Brenawyn for as long as he could, walking backward through the veil surrounded by slaughts, the hounds of the Hunt. He had no faith, nor trust in the gods; he had been warned specifically by one of them, but he was forced to leave Brenawyn in their care. He was afraid that this would be the last time he'd see her, that she wouldn't make it off the field, but have her heart's blood drain into the earth, and never feel the weight of their child grow heavy within her. She should know happiness at least.

He wanted to rail against the forces that be, scream to the cosmos how unfair it all was, but they were uncaring as time itself. He had to muster hope though, at least until Samhain, the date she was to surrender herself to Cernunnos. Alex would rather die a thousand more deaths or become a gancanagh than subject her to whatever torments awaited her with the god. Cernunnos was the father of her soul, but the deity had no capacity for love beyond the hedonistic desires of the mortal realm. What he wanted with her,

Alex couldn't imagine.

The atmosphere changed as darkness fell over Tir-Nan-Og. The temperature dropped and the trees grew closer, with moss-laden entwined branches and thick bracken underneath. The slaughts drew closer together, but there was a tension in the group, a sense of heightened anticipation. They bumped his legs, and he could feel that tension in their muscles, a strained hesitation to leap at him, tearing with their teeth; they were waiting for the call to begin.

Their gait quickened, nipping and growling at each other; they were excited. Alex knew that sound. They sounded much like dogs before the bugle signaling the fox hunt. He had heard it too often, the sound of the slaughts gearing up for a chase. Only the slaughts wouldn't retire at night in front of a fire or in a heated, cushioned bed nestled at their master's feet. No, the slaughts were immense by comparison, large like a black bear, with two rows of canine teeth so large they couldn't close their mouths, leaving them always slavering, yearning for something they would never get, no matter how many hunts they ran. They had been human once, foolish enough to strike a bargain with one god or another, but when payment came due, they couldn't pay. This was their punishment.

Even though Alex knew from whence they originated, he couldn't spare an ounce of pity for them. Being ripped apart by those teeth and claws were reminders enough that they were so far gone it mattered naught that they were once men. They were demons now, and demons they would remain for the rest of eternity.

The long straight back of Cernunnos sitting on his steed, outdistanced them for most of the journey, but at last he stopped and turned to wait for Alex. When Alex gained on him, the slaughts were jumping and baying, eager for the commencement, but with a hand signal, the demons calmed.

"Reliquary, ye ken I made a promise ta the priestess, no' ta let danger come ta ye 'afore Samhain. I plan ta keep my word, but I need yers in return. For ye see, the Hunt has been awakened, and

t'will be difficult ta stay their hand e'en temporarily."

"Aye, what dae I need ta dae?"

He dismounted and approached. "Any show o' dominance will be kent as aggression." The slaughts melted from his path as he circled Alex. Cernunnos tapped his shoulders, "Slouch," and kicked the back of his knee, "and kneel, eyes cast down a' all times. Mumble minimally in response only when spoken ta. Make yerself as small as possible, the object is no' ta look like a worthy adversary. These—they ken ye. They'll be eager."

"Aye. That I ken well."

"This defiance o' the Hunt has ne'er been attempted 'afore. I must ponder the ramifications."

"T'is no' like I'll be killed in the process. Let me run the course. T'will be done and o'er 'afore the priestess is due, with her none the wiser."

"A promise made is a promise kept. Ye will keep in the meantime. Another will be called up in yer stead. Jan Tregeagle, methinks, would make a good substitute. He is hated in equal measures with how yer prized."

"Doonae flatter me, t'is just the same in the end, death then resurrection."

"Reliquary, ye are unique ta this forum, distinctive due ta yer office—ye are the sole mortal that can lay claim ta being gifted from the gods each time."

"Aye, I am just better prey."

"Tregeagle cannae claim as much."

Alex knew what Cernunnos was saying, but he still thought Tregeagle had the better deal. In his limited, albeit, wily ways, the magistrate should know that there was no hope of victory against the gods. He may have been a king among mortals, but he was a maggot in the midst of the gods, to be squashed without a thought.

It was true what Cernunnos said though, Tregeagle was hated, and the only other who was called up as much to run the Hunt. On occasion, Alex was paired with him for the gods' amusement. He knew firsthand the conniving man couldn't be trusted, he'd have

sold his own mother to earn an advantage, but it was his ambition that insensed the gods, ambition that drove him to aspire to more than his mortal station.

Each took their pleasure in crushing the life from Tregeagle's lungs and in the moment of death, resignation was the only thing reflected in his eyes. But in Alex's case, every time he came back, it was to be stronger, faster, infused with magical abilities, and with it hope that one day he'd best the Hunters, even Cernunnos himself. That was Alex's true punishment, because that hope was unfounded. To delay the inevitable was torture because the Hunt for him was his drug. He craved its high, the resurrection, the awakening to when all things were new again in the instant before ability was born.

Cernunnos motioned, "Och, here they come. Be ready."

Alex assumed the position of captive as the group approached like mist settling over the hills. From his lowered gaze he recognized Gwyn ap Nudd, with his red-eared white hounds, Wild Edric, the rebel Saxon, and the antlered helm announced Herne the Hunter. Arthur Pendragon was present as well as others who had earned their place in the company at great personal cost.

There was movement from the back and the company parted to reveal Ruadan, the Formorian spy. He was an arrogant bastard, a cruel and determined Hunter, one who wouldn't accept defeat. A warrior from birth, a true Colossus in his time, now made impotent by the Covenant. He was relegated to the Hunt, a compromise that probably would have seemed fitting to those who drew up the contract to his history and honors. They might have seen it as befitting a warrior, but it was a death sentence to one so gifted. The Hunting Grounds were his golden cage.

Ruadan stopped in front of Alex, addressing Cernunnos. "Good, brother, ye ha' brought a worthy opponent. T'is been some time. Shall we commence?"

"Nay brother, no' this time. He is bound in the terms o' parley that ha' been granted."

"Unacceptable. Those bound ta the Grounds cannae be

bargained with. Ye ken this. The rules cannae be broken or amended. They were made 'afore us and will remain e'er afterward."

"I decree it."

"Ye cannae defy fate, e'en if I were ta agree."

"All the same. Ye will yield, and call another ta sate the desires o' the Hunt."

Ruadan' nostrils flared and he moved so his feet were planted shoulder width apart, hands hung at his sides loosely but his knuckles flexed. He was a head shorter than Cernunnos, but wider in the shoulders and more stockily built with a blacksmith's forearms and biceps knotted with muscle. "Perchance t'is time for a change in leadership?"

"Och, and yer the one ta dae it?" Cernunnos looked around at those assembled. "Does anyone else agree?"

Looking hesitant, they nervously looked away, Alex noticed. These were the wildly rash, deadliest predators who managed to make the cut to be in the most elite group of hunters, but they still thought it best to keep out of the power struggle unfolding before them.

Ruadan made up his mind as he exhaled, and ran at Cernunnos who braced for impact with his antlered head lowered. Ruadan was quick and swerved to avoid being skewered. He came away with a scratch to his cheek, but managed to get his hands around Cernunnos' neck, relying solely on the strength of his hands to choke him into submission, for death was impossible even when god was pitted against god. All either could hope for was a tap out after exhaustion took hold at the end of a very long struggle.

It was clear from that moment though, that Cernunnos wasn't interested in a drawn-out battle of wills; he employed a compression blow to Ruadan' ears, unbalancing him, and followed with a head butt to break his nose. Ruadan' hold broke as he cradled his injured face, allowing Cernunnos to spin him around and slip his arms underneath his armpits and lock his hands behind his head. Cernunnos applied pressure, pushing his head toward his

chest and using the advantage of the height difference to lift Ruadan off the ground. With the restriction of air flow from the broken nose and the additional pressure from the submission hold, the fight left Ruadan quickly and he slumped in Cernunnos' arms.

Cernunnos held on though, probably from experience with his opponent, Alex thought. This was for all ostensible purposes, a mutiny, and Cernunnos had to show strength or else have his authority tested at every turn here after. How many times had this happened, he wondered, if not from Ruadan, but others in the group? He looked about, all assembled were formidable, some former mortals like Pendragon who had gained admittance through improbable feats; others were lesser gods, not physically capable of overpowering Cernunnos. There might have been murmurs of discontent, but not many contenders beyond Ruadan in the group. A thought occurred to Alex at that moment. Was the entire group in attendance?

Cernunnos threw Ruadan' body to the ground and sneered at his prone form before striding toward his horse to get the curved ram horn strung over the pommel of the saddle. He looked at Alex with a slight smile and then at Ruadan, "Come, ride with us. For tonight, ye are a Hunter."