

One

Reagan could remember vividly the day he met Archer for the first time. It was during the Garlanding ceremony at Beltane at the end of Reagan's fourth year. His original idea was to create something based around the maypole, but his mother had been quite dismissive. 'Don't be silly Reagan, if you start doing things like that, you will never win.'

'But why can't it be a maypole? It is a traditional symbol of Beltane and I could twist ribbons ...'

'Reagan. I won the garlanding for my year, so I know what I'm talking about. A garland has to be a cross or a hoop and that's the end of it.'

But he wasn't prepared to give up and had approached his father, telling him about the idea.

'That sounds original, I don't think I've seen anything like that before in the winners in the council building.'

'Are they all crosses or hoops?'

'I remember one that looked like a bonfire, and there was one in the shape of the handfasting arch.'

'You see, I knew mother was wrong. These are all symbols of Beltane and ...'

'Why, what did your mother say?'

'She said that it had to be a cross or a hoop, but ...'

'And you thought you would ask me even after your mother had said no? You know that's not how we do things in this house. If your mother says no, I will always say no. If we didn't support each other, there would be no harmony in the house. I'll hear no more on the subject.'

Being a dutiful son who always tried to please his parents, Reagan had done what his mother wanted, even though he knew his maypole idea was good. His mother was unbearable when he won the prize. 'See Reagan, I told you so. Mother knows best. Mother always knows best.' She ran a practised hand over his hair, something he always hated, but he forced himself not to flinch. It was evidence of her disapproval of the way he looked as the coppery hair refused to submit to any order, no matter how she tried to flatten the wayward locks.

'Let the boy be Alaina, you're always nagging. Well done son, you worked hard for that, it was well deserved. I'm proud of you.'

‘Well yes, of course I’m proud of you too.’ She gave him a hug, but it was brief and superficial, almost as though she was putting on an act of being a proud mother for the benefit of anyone watching. Reagan was too used to her constant criticism for his mother’s hastily added praise to be meaningful. While his father’s words sounded genuine, Reagan knew they were an automatic reaction, it was part of his job to make people feel valued; to ensure everyone was happy in their work and felt they were making a useful contribution to the society.

When his father had asked him what gift he would like as a reward, he had asked for a notebook. As usual, his mother had something to say about that.

‘A notebook? Do you think we are made of money? I thought you would want a new leather jacket like the one you admired so much on that boy Finn.’

You mean the one you admired so much. ‘It would not fit me in a year, the money would be wasted. I’m quite happy with the one uncle Jeffrey gave me.’

She sniffed with disapproval. ‘Only because your cousin grew out of it. I want you to have something new. Something you can be proud of.’

Something you can be proud of more like. Reagan lowered his eyes in case the second unworthy thought showed on his face.

Two

Professor Cathair announced they would spend the next few weeks preparing for an important initiation ritual and their homework was to find five facts about Imbolc.

Reagan's research started reasonably well, there were many references to the fact that the feast day fell between the Midwinter Solstice and Vernal Equinox, or Yule and Ostara feasts and that it was also known as Candlemas, a festival of fire. As he looked in the books at the library, two girls from his year, Amiera and Rowena came in. They were both shy and studious and always treated him kindly, unlike many of the other magi girls.

'Hello Reagan. It looks like you've got the same idea. Have you found anything out about this initiation thing?'

'Not so far, just things we already know, like wearing white or green and lighting candles in every window.'

Amiera looked at the top shelf and he stood up to help. 'If there's anything you can't reach, I'll get it for you. But you're welcome to share the books I have – we'll find out more if we work together.'

'Thanks. But my cousin was saying that the rites are different for girls and boys, so we may not be able to.'

'Oh. It was just an idea. Never mind.' He was about to sit down when she put her hand on his arm. 'But I would be grateful if you could reach that big blue book.'

Stretching up, he fetched the huge reference book, with the title "Fire Festivals, a complete guide".

Returning to the book of ancient folk lore, he copied down the sayings about how Imbolc was used to predict the weather for the next forty days. An old German tradition talked about Badger Day. *"If the badger sees her shadow there are still six more weeks of winter, but if she doesn't see her shadow, spring is only six weeks away."*

Half an hour later Amiera asked if he'd found anything about the initiation

'No, there's nothing in these books. Have you?'

'Just that the word Imbolc comes from the word Oimeic, meaning "ewe's milk".'

‘And that it’s also the feast of Brighid, the Spring Bride, who is a Celtic goddess of poetry and healing and smithcraft.’ Rowena was keen to share her research and she returned to the book, obviously looking for something.

‘So we have to write a poem about healing blacksmiths. That’s not so difficult.’

‘No silly. But there could be poetry. Or you might have to make something in metal. Or heal someone.’

Rowena finally found the right place. ‘Here it is. It says that there was an old Celtic belief about Brighid being "bathed in milk" drawing the two concepts of "lactating" and "washing" together.’ She stopped reading and smiled up at them. ‘That sounds like fun. Maybe we all get to bathe in milk like Cleopatra.’

‘What do you think you’re doing, talking to a boy about taking your clothes off? What will mother say? Or father for that matter.’ Edlyn appeared suddenly from behind the shelves, making them jump. ‘Mother sent me to find you. Wait ’til I tell her what you were doing.’

‘Nothing wrong, we were just researching Imbolc.’

‘Who gave you permission to speak? You’d better not cross me or I’ll teach you a lesson in how to respect your elders and betters.’

Reagan backed down and started walking away, he was no match for the older boy. But he heard Rowena protesting and saw the bully grabbing her arm roughly. He couldn’t stand that. ‘You’re hurting her Edlyn. Let her go.’

‘Or you’ll what? Run and tell someone? She’s my sister and it’s none of your business.’

‘It is my business when you hurt a girl. That’s not how boys are supposed to behave.’

‘How dare you think you can tell me how to behave? I am a senior and you’re just a junior.’ He let Rowena go and grabbed the front of Reagan’s shirt, pulling him up so that their noses were almost touching. ‘You apologise right now.’

‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’ Reagan turned to the girls. ‘Rowena, you need to go home now, your mother is waiting.’ He was pleased that his voice didn’t show the fear he was feeling, Edlyn was the worst sort of bully. He would only hurt someone if there was a gang backing him up. ‘Could you ask the librarian for some help, I’ve forgotten where some of the books go?’

Amiera understood his coded message as she pulled Rowena’s arm. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

‘Wait for me, I haven’t finished with you yet.’ Edlyn was not impressed that he had lost his unwilling audience and the opportunity to terrorise his sister, but he could not stop them. You little brat, how dare you interfere with my family business? You’re going to suffer for that.’

Reagan was sure he would, but maybe not today if he was clever. ‘I’m sorry Edlyn, I didn’t mean to interfere. I’m sure you didn’t realise you were hurting her.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Just that I know you’re not the sort of person who would deliberately hurt a girl, you know that’s not how magis behave.’ Reagan was careful to keep his expression and posture humble and submissive.

‘Is everything all right boys?’ As the librarian spoke, Edlyn let go of Reagan’s shirt like it was on fire.

Reagan gave her a reassuring smile, dismissing any thought of what she might have seen before it began. ‘Yes it’s fine, Edlyn was just helping me with some research on Imbolc.’

Eight

‘Niall approached with a serious look on his face. ‘Reagan, I’d like a word if I may.’ The trainer led him to the pile of test papers, with his own paper on the top, the numbers and symbols standing out clearly as though they were somehow thicker than the rest of the writing.

‘I’m sorry sir, I didn’t mean to do that, I don’t know what happened to me.’

‘It’s all right Reagan, sit down. You’re probably still feeling a bit shaky. You’re not in trouble, Malduc told me this might happen. Apparently you went into some kind of trance. As you probably know it’s two days before the full moon so you are beginning to be susceptible to its power.’

‘Of course. And this is the most potent time.’

‘It is important that you start using the willow wand again, starting tonight. You need to get a new wand. Can you get to your special tree before sundown?’

‘Certainly, it is just down by the river.’

‘Go there now. Take someone with you just in case.’

Amiera and Rowena were waiting outside, but he knew they would slow him down so he ran past. When he reached his special tree he could feel her pain and distress and he could tell the boys there were harming her. ‘Stop. You can’t just do that, it’s wrong.’

‘Well well, the mighty Reagan. Still thinks he can tell me what to do. I thought you learnt your lesson last time.’

Reagan froze at the familiar voice, but his disgust was too strong. ‘You must know the rules about trees. We don’t cut branches off without asking permission first.’

‘They weren’t cut off. They were broken off.’ Edlyn indicated four boys by the tree and smirked. ‘By them.’

As they came closer Reagan realised the boys were fifth years, two warriors and two from the outil clan.

‘They wanted to know what would happen at the Imbolc initiation, so we thought we’d show them.’

‘But you can’t do that, there’s a reason for the secrecy. You mustn’t break the sacred laws.’

‘Who’s going to stop us, you? I don’t think so.’

Reagan tried to appeal to the boys. 'Look, you will get into big trouble if anyone finds out that you know. You should go home now, before it's too late.'

'It's already too late, we've told them.' Edlyn winked at his cousin Godryk and turned to the boys. 'Now who wants to go first?' One of the warrior boys stepped forward. 'And who is going to test him?' The other warrior stepped up. 'Right, you know what to do.'

Reagan watched in concern as the first boy took off his tabard, tunic and under vest, turning his bare back to the other boy who raised the willow whip in his hand.

'Stop.' Reagan tried to stop him but Edlyn must have expected it, pushing him toward Godryk who held one of his arms while Edlyn restrained the other. Reagan watched helplessly as the boy's hand completed its downward arc and the branch whipped across the other boy's back. There was a gasp from the outil boys who wore expressions of horror that reflected Reagan's own.

'Remember, if you make a sound it will have to start again until you have done three without a murmur. Again.'

Reagan could not stand by and let this atrocity continue. He tried struggling to free himself, but they both had a wiry strength and tightened their grip, digging their fingernails into his arms. If he couldn't stop them physically, he would take the only other option. 'Stop it. This is wrong. The initiation ceremony is not ...'

'Careful what you say.' Edlyn hissed in his ear. 'You know what would happen if you told them the truth.'

Reagan could tell the outil boys would not need much persuading to see sense. 'They're lying. You do not whip each other in any part of the ceremony.'

The first boy endured his three lashes without a sound and Edlyn swaggered over to direct them to swap places. Reagan saw his chance. Seeking the worried faces of the two outils, he put every ounce of command he could into his instruction, 'Go home now. This is wrong. You will be in serious trouble if you continue.' Somehow neither Edlyn nor Godryk heard him and weren't aware of the boys moving back until they reached the willow tree who seemed to shield their escape.

'Stop dreaming, Reagan. You're missing all the fun.' Edlyn's oily tone broke through his concentration.

'You find this funny? I find it appalling. You enjoy watching them hurt each other. That's worse than doing it yourself.'

‘Hardly. I don’t get all hot and sweaty and the end result is the same. It’s more satisfying because I can watch the expressions on their faces as they try not to call out.’

‘You are nothing more than a coward and a bully.’

‘Why thank you. I’m sure I could think of a few names to call you, but there’s work to do. Godryk, I thought I told you to get those miserable outils.’

His cousin emerged from the trees. ‘They’ve gone, I’ve looked everywhere.’

Edlyn grabbed Reagan, shaking him violently. ‘This was your doing wasn’t it? You’ll pay for that.’

‘They’ve probably gone to tell one of the professors.’

‘Unlikely. Well boys, how about some extra practice? Grab a whip each. Godryk, you know what to do.’

Reagan struggled as Godryk pulled off his tabard and it took both of them to remove his tunic and vest.

‘Come on boys, see if you can’t draw a little blood.’

The warrior boys looked at each other uncertainly, but Edlyn was a senior and he kept reminding them that his father was an important member of the council. So the first boy raised his whip and brought it down over Reagan’s back.

Fifteen

‘I cannot do this any more, Kalen, I simply can’t.’

‘There’s no such word as ...’

‘Stop there. If you knew how much I hated that expression you would never use it again. I hate it because people who use it are so smug, but mostly I hate it because it so obviously is not true. There is a word can’t, it’s a diminutive of the word cannot which is the negative of can which is from the verb to be able to. And I am simply *unable* to do this any more.’

‘I am duly chastised and humbled by your command of the English language and your ability to express yourself so eloquently. But I assure you that you can do it and will do it if only you will allow yourself to.’ Kalen responded with similar verbosity.

‘I didn’t say I couldn’t do it, just that I can’t do it any more. I need a break. I need to recharge. Forty five minutes may not seem much to you, but I cannot keep up this level of concentration for that long. You told me to listen to my body and mine is shouting. Very loudly. Things like “*Are you trying to kill me?*” Or worse.’ The speech was delivered with the same expressionless monotone that Kalen used when he was trying to teach Reagan the importance of staying detached and objective.

Kalen laughed. ‘If I didn’t know better, I would think it was me speaking. You have a good mimic’s ear Reagan, maybe you should be on the stage. What am I saying? If I continue to admire your abilities, your head will swell and you will believe that there is nothing you cannot do. Then you will become arrogant like me.’

‘That is neither true nor likely.’ Reagan stood up and stretched. ‘I need a change of pace. My body is crying out for some action. And I don’t mean your torture chamber.’

The first time Kalen demonstrated the techniques for training the mind to resist its natural responses to external physical stimulate, Reagan had dubbed the small room the torture chamber. ‘You’re right, a change of scenery will benefit us both. We can come back to the difference between a mental whisper and a mental shout later. I’ve got something to show you. Can you run to Silburgh mound?’

‘I think I can manage a couple of miles.’

‘I’ll see you there in fifteen minutes.’ He darted out of the room before Reagan realised he was being duped. There was no sign of Kalen after sprinting the first mile, so he tried pushing his legs

faster. He was well over his normal limit for this distance and would be lucky to make the last half mile. *“There’s no such word as can’t. If you think you can, you can.”* Kalen’s words bombarded him from all sides and somehow gave his mind the will to ignore the signals coming from his legs that were saying *“we can’t”* and his lungs that were protesting that there was no more puff left in them. The small voice in his brain was repeating the chant, *“if I think I can, I can”* and before he knew it, he was level with Kalen. They reached the small hut at the bottom of the hill at the same time, bending over and panting. Reagan recovered first, but Kalen wasn’t far behind. ‘Not bad for someone than twice your age.’

He knocked on the hut door but there was obviously no one in. There was a shout from the top of the hill and they climbed the hill. As they approached the man Kalen said in a low tone. ‘Please show this man more respect than you show me. He deserves it.’

Kalen clasped the big man’s paw then turned to make the introductions. ‘Thearl, this is Reagan, my troublesome student. Reagan, this is Thearl, my very dear friend and the best painter you are ever likely to meet.’

‘Don’t be giving the poor lad the wrong idea. We are barely acquainted and I am most certainly the best painter anyone will ever meet.’ He laughed at his apparent lack of humility. ‘Or not.’

Reagan was drawn to the amazing aerial view of Aveburgh henge on the canvas. It was surrounded by Glastonburgh tor to the bottom left, the cathedral at Winchester in the bottom right and in the top left was the abbey at Gloucester. There was a space in the top right. On a sketch pinned to the top of the painting, he had written Uff or Oxford? Reagan knew straight away.

‘It can’t be Uffington. It has to be Oxford.’

‘You seem very sure. We’ve been puzzling over that for a while. What makes you so certain?’

‘The symmetry and the distances. Those four towns are on a circle centred at Aveburgh.’

‘Really. You’re sure about this?’

‘Absolutely. I’ve been studying maps ever since I saw a similar picture in the council hall. It had the northern portal stone with Uffington and Westbury horses, but it needed something opposite Stonehenge to balance it.’

‘That was a commission for the council. I wasn’t happy with it. Did you think of another solution?’

‘It’s not obvious, the Cherhill horse is too close.’

‘I did think of that. Or there’s the Seagry horse but I’m not fond of her, she faces the wrong way for a start.’

‘So does Uffington.’

‘But she is so elegant, it doesn’t matter. Unfortunately the Seagry horse is small and not well sited.’

‘Nor well maintained. It’s almost as if she wants to sink back into the ground.’ Kalen spoke for the first time.

‘No. That’s not possible is it?’

‘It is. They re-cut the Westburgh Horse because the first one was not quite right.’

‘And the Ham hill horse. Didn’t they decide they’d used the wrong hill or something? I can’t remember exactly.’

‘It’s something we could look into. If one of them was in the wrong place, it could be causing a problem with the earth energies. Come on, we could call in on the librerie on the way back.’

‘Or just drop into Malduc’s office, I know he has a book there.’

Sixteen

Reagan's spirit guide Blaise had visited the white horses in the order they were created, suggesting there was something important about the dates but Kalen could not find a pattern. 'There's some information missing. Are there any other books or records that might give details?'

Malduc thought deeply. 'A Marlburgh smith was the local expert after the great fire. He wrote that book.'

'Could we talk to him?'

'I'm afraid not. He was three score and ten when he started writing the book. He spent years visiting places, interviewing people and making sketches.'

'But that's just what we need, it would save so much time if we could get the rest of the information.'

'When he died his son published the notes and drawings, there are copies in every librarie from Oxford to Glastonburgh, it's a really successful book.'

'Do you think this son would talk to us? How could we get in touch with him?'

'If he still has all the notes it could save us weeks in repeating his work.' Reagan was keen to try.

'We might not even be able to, many of the people he spoke to could have passed on by now.'

'Reeve, I think the name was. Or Reid possibly.' Malduc finally remembered. 'There's probably more than one smith in the village. You could ask at the librarie.'

'Can we go tomorrow?' Reagan's eyes were shining at the thought of an adventure. 'That's awesome.'

As Malduc suggested, there were several smiths in the village, two of them with workshops on the same street but neither of them were the son of the smith who had written the book about the white horses. The second smith, a giant of a man with a huge belly covered in a leather apron directed them to a street on the other side of town, past Merlin's mound. 'If you head for the white horse, you won't miss it, the workshop looks out onto the hill.' Before returning to his task he winked at them. 'Tell Reeve that Blackie sends his regards.'

Reagan spotted the white horse in the distance. They heard the clang of the smith's hammer, but it stopped as they reached the stall in front of the workshop displaying some of the wares for sale. Reagan was fascinated by the elaborate patterns in the beautiful, hand crafted furniture.

Kalen peered through into the darkness beyond, when a pretty young woman came through to ask how she could help them. She was drying her hands on a small cloth as though she had just left a busy kitchen and there was a smudge of what looked like flour on the end of her nose.

‘I wonder if I may speak to your husband, I have some business with him.’

Her tone was wary as she replied, ‘I have no husband.’

Kalen tried to peer past her into the darkness beyond. ‘Your brother then.’

Again the same wariness. ‘I have no brother.’

Kalen took in her slightly negative stance, both arms bent, her fists resting on her hips. He tried to make amends. ‘I’m sorry to pull you away from your baking, but I’m trying to find Reeve, the son of the Marlburgh smith. If he’s not your brother or husband, I can only assume you’re his cook or housekeeper. I heard him working earlier on and wondered if we could have a word with him. I’d like to buy him some lunch because I think he has some information that would be useful to me. Us.’ He gestured to include Reagan who had been watching with interest her amusement at his mentor’s clumsy attempts at introduction.

Reagan wondered what he could do to fix this misunderstanding without upsetting Kalen. But one look at annoyance that was threatening to creep onto her face convinced him that there was only one way he could redeem this. He picked up the intricate pot stand he had been studying. ‘You must be Reeve, I’m Reagan and this is Kalen. You’ll have to excuse him, I think his brain is a little addled by the lack of food. Did you base this design on one of the crop patterns?’

She took the heavy trivet, sweeping her glance over Reagan with an intensity that made him glad he was wearing his good tabard and best canvas breeches. He felt his face warm under her scrutiny but she had moved on and was studying the lines of the pattern, following them with her strong, brown fingers. ‘Yes. Barburgh hill fort’.

‘But you had to give it the symmetry. You didn’t make the three circles on the corners different like they were on the original. Which must make it more stable.’

‘You are much more astute than your father.’

Kalen protested, ‘I’m not his father,’ then laughed out loud. He held out his hand and stepped forward. ‘I’m so pleased to meet you Reeve and I’m sorry to have been so dull. But if you will go around wearing flour on your nose, I think most people would jump to the same conclusion.’

All the time he was talking, she was looking at his hand as if deciding to take it. She hesitated a moment too long and he bent on one knee, trying one last tactic. 'I humbly beg your pardon for being an addle-brained simpleton with poorer manners than a squire and the sensibilities of a knave. Even my apprentice has more wit to recognise a master craftswoman when he sees one.'

Smiling, she offered her hand which he kissed most gallantly, then held onto it for a second as he added, 'And Blackie asked me to tell you that he sends his regards.'

She snatched her hand away with a giggle. 'That rogue. I can see his handiwork in this.'

Twenty Five

‘Are you sure we’re still on the spirit line?’

‘Yes and no.’ Reagan mimicked Kalen’s ambiguity.

‘What do you mean?’ His mentor was not impressed.

‘The line we were following stopped at the top of this hill. There is another line here but it’s different.’

‘How do you mean different?’

‘It’s hard to describe. It’s as though the vibrations have a different colour. No, that’s not it.’

‘Do you mean they sound different?’

‘Not exactly. I don’t really hear them, although I suppose of all the senses, that is probably the closest. It’s as though I’m feeling it – no that’s the wrong word. I’m detecting it with all of my senses at once so it looks, sounds and feels different to the other line.’

‘What you can’t taste or smell it? Shame on you.’

‘Strange you should say that, I do get a slightly metallic taste in my mouth for this one, like the Old Sarum one yesterday. It’s a lot more powerful. Have a go.’

As Kalen held his hazel twig over the ground, Reagan followed the line to the edge of the small wood. Peering into the distance, he smiled in recognition. They didn’t get much more powerful than this one.

‘You’re right, this one is a lot easier.’ Kalen followed his gaze to the long, straight track. ‘Oh heavens. Is that what I think it is?’

‘The Fosse.’

‘One of the longest Roman roads in the country.’

‘But it doesn’t cross the spirit line we were following.’

‘I think we’ve gone as far as we need to in this direction, we can start heading back to Slaughterford.’

‘People won’t like a horse with slaughter in the name.’

‘Well it might not be named after the nearest town. A lot of them are named after the hill they are on.’

‘We need to stop and check the sight line on the way back. No point having a way marker if you can’t see it.’

‘Good point.’

‘I think there was an inn at Biddeston that would make a good sighting point.’

‘I’m beginning to see how this works. It’s not just about how sacred the site is, but the geographical and economic considerations as well.’

‘Perish the thought, young Reagan. But there’s nothing wrong in ensuring the best possible positioning to benefit the most people. And if the view of a sacred horse will attract a few more customers to the inn I don’t see that it would cause any problems.’

Reagan looked sceptical. ‘You wouldn’t be after a free ale or two, would you?’

‘Not at all. You may notice that there are quite a few inns within the sight lines of the white horses. It’s not a bad thing to keep people in touch with important things like prayers even as they relax with an ale.’

‘But if the innkeeper showed his gratitude you wouldn’t refuse.’

‘Not at all. I have never knowingly refused free ale.’

Reagan grinned. He enjoyed spending time with the man he was beginning to regard as an extra uncle. Or older brother. Even if he did behave like a younger brother at times. Like now, flirting with the innkeeper’s daughter as she took their orders.

‘You are terrible. What about Reeve?’

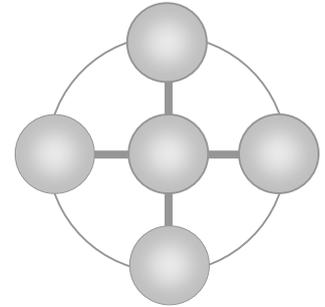
‘Is she here?’ He pretended to look round, his face the very picture of innocence. ‘I’ll get her a drink too.’

‘Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Would she be happy if I told her what you were doing with that girl?’

‘Ordering food? I’m sure she’d approve.’

Twenty Eight

The next morning saw a big stir in the village. A new crop pattern had appeared overnight in a field next to the river. Reagan was caught up in the excitement as the news went round that it could be seen from the top of Silburgh hill. As he reached the top it seemed that the question in his dream had been answered. It was five equal sized circles arranged in a perfect cross with one of the circles in the centre. There were thin lines which joined the diagonally opposite circles, and an extremely thin line which was probably only a few stalks wide which cut through the centre of the four outer circles. Five. He was right and Malduc was wrong.



POSSIBLY. The thought came through quite clearly as though he had shouted the word and Reagan's eyes were drawn to the centre of the circle where a solitary figure stood, looking directly at him. Malduc. *Come down here Reagan. The marshal will let you through.* This time the thought was not shouted, but Reagan's heart was beating fast even before he started running down the hill.

Approaching the circle, he felt the vibrations coming off it similar to the spirit lines, but strikingly different. Whereas the spirit lines spoke to him of an aged, calm life force, these were buzzing with the energy and restlessness of a small child. When he entered the first circle, it felt different again. The grand, sweeping layer of corn stalks that formed the base, curving round in perfect unison sang a song of peace and unity. He stood on the edge of the flattened circle, reluctant to walk across for fear of damaging the delicate stalks. *COME.* The voice commanded and his feet obeyed, walking as lightly as he could. There was a small hole in the centre, no more than six inches in diameter. *STOP.* With no more prompting he sat cross-legged above the centre, closed his eyes and let his mind and body fill with the vitality of the corn.

After a few minutes, he opened his eyes, but now his feet no longer crunched down on the corn stalks. Although he was still walking on them, it was as though most of the weight of his body had disappeared. He knew without counting that the number of stalks that had been flattened to create the thin ring connecting the circles was five, but he checked just to make sure. The radius of each circle was five paces and the thin channel to the centre circle was about five inches, just wide enough for his feet. It was exactly five paces long and a further five paces into the centre of the circle where Malduc stood, with eyes closed and impassive features.

‘What was the question you asked?’

‘Five or six.’

‘Well now that you have measured it all out, you will no doubt have your answer.’

:

Kalen declared a race and flew off like a teenager with Reagan galloping after him. They were too busy to notice the band of fierce looking men who appeared from nowhere and surrounded them. Reagan did the most sensible thing he could think of, obeying their curt directions as they herded the two of them together.

DO NOT SHOW ANY FEAR. Kalen’s command was loud in his head.

No need to shout. Reagan’s response was whispered and somehow he understood for the first time how to use the technique Kalen had tried to show him many times. ‘Well, well, well, what ’ave we ’ere? Two fine gents laden down with goods. Off for a day out are we?’

DON’T TELL THEM ANYTHING.

Please stop shouting.

Try not to look so obvious. As he sent the whispered message, Kalen controlled every muscle to present them with the cold face.

What do they want?

‘What do we want? What indeed young master? Our normal toll for passage over Highway ridge is food enough for a meal or the price of a meal.’

It took all Reagan’s will power not to display shock at the renegade’s words. Had he mind-linked accidentally?

No. He was about to say it anyway. Kalen commanded Reagan’s mind to be silent as he addressed the leader, offering his bag. ‘We have no money, but you are welcome to half of our food.’

‘Half you say. I don’t think this bag’s going to hold enough for two of us, let alone all six.’ He looked in the bag and shook his head. ‘As I thought. This would barely feed two of the young uns.’

‘In that case, we’ll just find another path to take where there is no toll.’ Kalen held his hand out for the bag.

The man gave a wolfish grin. ‘Got a smart one here lads. Fancy talk says he’s been to the university.’

He sat back in the saddle looking as though he was expecting some sort of reply, but Reagan could tell that it was some kind of signal by his next thought which was, "*Just an airy-fairy magi. He'll soon give us the money from his purse if we threaten the lad.*"

'Are you Hereward's men?'

The looks on several of the men's faces showed their stunned reaction as many of them repeated his name. The leader focussed on Reagan for the first time. 'Maybe we are. Do you know him?'

'He is well known in my village. Archer was only telling me the other day'

'Archer? As in Archer, son of Sedge?'

'The very same. He said that ...'

'Archer, son of Sedge is a friend of yours?'

'Much more than a friend. He and I are working on an extremely important project together. And this man is one of those who taught Archer his warrior skills.'

'Is that true? You have taught Archer, son of Sedge?'

Kalen inclined his head, looking very impressive in the manner of a wise professor.

'You are in charge of this important project.'

'I am.'

'And might we know the names of these two friends of Archer son of Sedge?'

'I think it's better that you don't know our names.' Kalen was playing along nicely with Reagan's idea.

'I see. A couple of highly educated men, friends of Archer, son of Sedge who make a secret of their names, working on an extremely important project.' He looked at each of his men in turn, rubbing his chin as he considered the idea. 'I don't suppose you would be able to tell us more about the nature of this mission, would you?'

Kalen echoed his action, meeting the eyes of each renegade while Reagan's face sported a worried look. Finally, he met the leader's eyes with a cool gaze. 'I could tell you more about it,' he paused dramatically, 'but then I'd have to kill you.' Looking round at the others, he added, 'All of you.'

The man's face twitched for a second as though he knew and appreciated the game that was being played out here. He looked at the boy. 'Could he do this?'

Nodding gravely, Reagan shook his head as though anticipating the carnage. 'Easily. With his bare hands.'

Thirty One

Kalen had spread out a large groundsheet on the side of the hill. The edges were bound with small wooden stakes to keep it in place while they checked it from a distance. As they travelled back towards Aveburgh, he explained how he had checked it from the other side while Reagan was still asleep, recovering from the previous day's collapse.

'So you definitely think the horse should face away from Aveburgh?'

'That would be my recommendation. But I want to check it from this side.' He looked backward. 'This will do nicely.'

Reagan turned his mare to look where Kalen was pointing. 'Oh, it's smaller than I thought it would be.'

'That groundsheet only has four cow hides sewn together, it was the biggest one I could find.'

'So how big would our horse be?'

'The four hides together are about five paces long and three paces high. The body of the Marlburgh horse is about fourteen paces long and five paces high.'

'About five times bigger then, that's 20 hides just for the body assuming it is done in the style of the Marlburgh horse. It's quite thin and artificial like Uffington'

'The body does look thin but that's because of the perspective.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm not an artist. Thearl could explain it better than I could. But I have seen quite a lot of that horse recently...'

'Because you've been seeing a lot of Reeve.'

Kalen ignored the tease, explaining how he'd studied her father's measurements of the horse and drawn it to scale and it actually looked very like the Pewsey horse. He had shown the picture to Thearl who explained about the foreshortening effect of the shallow hill.

'I wondered if it was the slope. So if the hill was a bit steeper, it would look more natural, with a fatter body.'

'Exactly right. That's why I've taken measurements of the motte to work out what the slope is so that we can adjust the measurements when we cut the horse.'

They crossed the river Avon and Kalen looked back every 15 minutes. When they were about halfway, the motte disappeared completely for a while behind another hill, so he was happy he had made the right choice. As they continued, he talked about his experiences at a scouring party.

‘I’ve heard about them but I can’t remember what they are.’

‘Every horse is looked after by a small team of people from nearby villages. They have the task of making sure the horse is scoured every seven years.’

‘Of course. It’s where they get rid of all the weeds that start to smother the chalk and re-cut the edges where the turf is trying to grow back.’

‘That’s right. The trouble is it can be difficult to see where the lines should be. The Westburgh horse changed a lot from the original design which didn’t have the eye in the wrong place or the two front legs joined together.’

‘Because you can’t tell when you are close to it what it would look like from a distance.’

‘Exactly. They usually have someone at a good vantage point, shouting instructions through a voice horn. Most of the village turns out and it end up with a big party where plenty of ale is supped.’

‘You seem to know a lot about it.’

‘I went to a scouring party when I was young. It was the first time I drank unwatered ale. I was very sick that night. And most of the next day.’ He shuddered at the memory. ‘I vowed never to drink ever again.’

Reagan’s look said how often that vow was broken.

Thirty Seven

Saturday gave the perfect opportunity to test out Kalen's drainage channels, it rained from sunup to sundown. Malduc had sent along a carpenter and a couple of wagons with the dais and paraphernalia necessary for the ceremony on Sunday. It was to be one of the biggest events in the area for decades and many craftsmen had been gathering there all week. They brought along carts with their wares, hoping to sell keepsakes of the event. The likeness of Hengst soon appeared on beakers and earthenware, plates and even clothing. Reagan couldn't believe how quickly artisans had made copies of Thearl's design or that he would be pleased, but he was more than happy to endorse the ones he approved of with a signature, for a small consideration. The stall then put up a notice "As signed by the artist" and could charge a little more.

Sunday morning brought a new influx of vendors, this time selling food that they had been preparing for several days. The field in front of the motte was soon awash with gaily coloured pavilions as the local innkeepers vied to advertise an ale named for the special occasion. Reagan's favourite was "Hengst, the ale of champions". The gods obviously approved of the event, Saturday's rain left the countryside clean and shining like a new pin, but the gentle morning breeze and strong sunshine dried the ground ready to take the many thousands that thronged to the unveiling.

Reagan's mother had brought along a brand new tabard and breeches for him, she was filled with pride at the prospect of sitting up on the platform with the honoured guests, not even the council members had that privilege. The ceremony passed all too quickly, Malduc was very generous in his praise of the efforts of Kalen and Thearl, leading a long and vigorous round of applause. Eventually, he held up his hand for silence.

'There have been many other people along the way, without whom today would not be possible, but I'm sure you would rather be getting to the ale in the pavilions than hear me read out a long list of names.' There were a few cheers and scattered applause, but he ignored them, continuing, 'I know that you will feel that this new horse is a welcome addition to the Hengist stable and that you will all come to love him as much as you do his brothers and sisters. But although this horse belongs to all of you, it would never have come about if it wasn't for the exceptional talents of one young man. I give you, Reagan.'

As he stood and bowed, Reagan was overwhelmed by the strength of feeling coming across from the field. It was almost as though every single person in the crowd wanted personally to shake his hand, pat him on the back or give him a kiss. It was several minutes before he could recover from such a huge outpouring of approval. Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath and raised his fist in a victory salute. Every single right hand in the field echoed his salute and the clapping stopped as if by magic. He took the opportunity to speak.

‘Dear people of Hengist, I would like to introduce you to your latest horse, a powerful stallion called Hengst.’ He turned and pulled on the rope and Kalen and Thearl pulled on the other ropes attached to the hides that covered their creation. The crowd went wild in their appreciation and he was surrounded by people hugging and kissing him, shaking his hand and slapping him on the back. The rest of the day passed in a happy mix of good food and drink, music and dancing, happy reunions with his family and a few stolen kisses with Amiera.

Travelling home with his family the next day, that should have been the end of it all, but as they passed through the village, it was buzzing with the news. During the night, thirteen sheep had dropped down dead in a field near Highway. It was all starting again.