

## 'The Battle of the Trees': from medieval Welsh legend to modern fantasy

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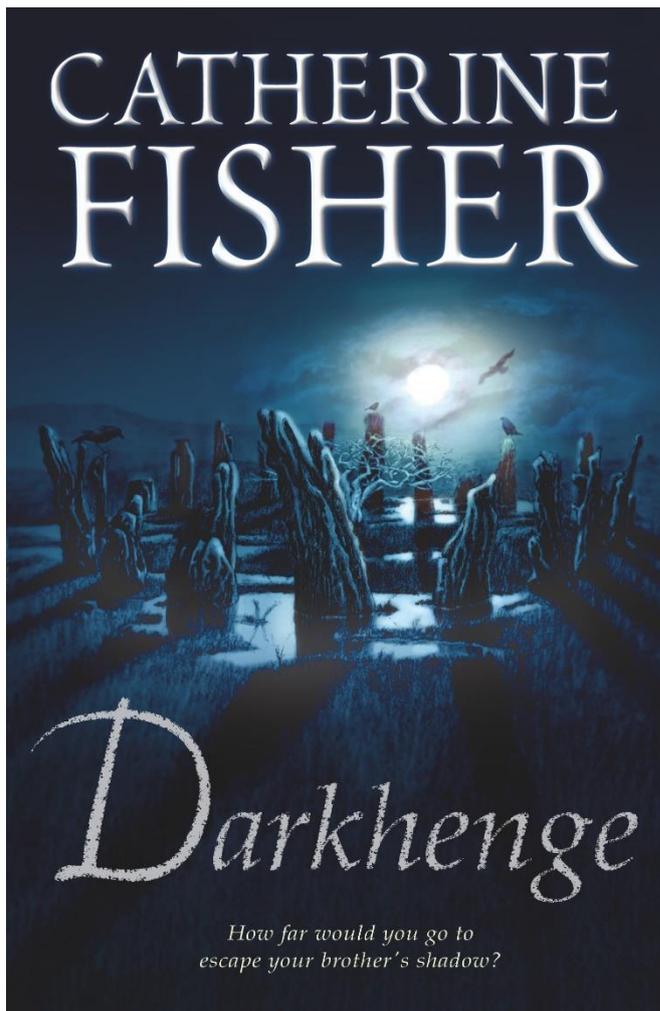
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1. Cad Goddeu ('The Battle of the Trees'):

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/t08.html>

2. Extracts from Catherine Fisher's *Darkhenge* (2005)



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Author's Note

About the Author

Also by Catherine Fisher

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### **Extract from B. BEITHNE: BIRCH**

*'EAT,' HE KEEPS saying. 'Eat,' but I won't. If I do I may be trapped here for ever, and I'm not even hungry. He leaves me alone if I scream at him; he doesn't like that. Outside the door of the room are endless corridors. I've explored them for miles. At least I think I have. They all look the same – stone-flagged and cobwebbed. Empty. There are sounds in the building. They echo distantly, but I don't know what they are. Sometimes I come across a window, and scrub dirt off tiny leaded panes to look out. It's hard to be sure but the sky here seems a sullen, dim twilight. It never gets darker or lighter, but there are faint stars in strange constellations, billions of them.*

*What scares me most, though, are the trees.*

*There are trees everywhere. Tangly and green, pushing right up against the walls, tapping and knocking.*

*As if they wanted to get in.*

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### **Extract from L. LUIS: ROWAN**

*I speak what no one else can speak.*

The Book of Taliesin

[...]

Rob looked round. Everyone else had gone. Apart from him, Avebury was empty.

Spots of rain began to darken the red cover of his sketchbook; he thrust it into the bag. He realized he was waiting around in curiosity to see no druid appear, to see the rainbow group's disappointment. The red-haired girl glanced over at him; then she and the others joined hands, crooning a low chant of three notes, over and over.

They were like people who predict the end of the world, he thought. Always sure, always waiting. Part of him smirked. But part didn't. The part that was desperate for a miracle since the accident.

Rain pattered. He pulled out his waterproof and dragged it on, but the Barber's Stone kept the wind off, so he crouched there. There was no sign of the moon, just an ominous grey expanse of cloud, a wind flinging rain. The downs were blotted out. The night would be stormy.

The Cauldron people looked cold. They kept up the chant, but the wind whipped out their hair. Two of the kids gave up and ran off towards the tents. The red-haired girl looked again at Rob.

He met her eyes; she glanced away, spoke to another woman, who turned and stared at him too.

The church clock began to strike seven.

The group stood, expectant. He saw they had planted pennants and flags with symbols in the grass: a crescent moon, three cranes on a bull's back, a leaping salmon. A lot of the tribe were looking over at him now; Rob grabbed his bag and scrambled to his feet. Suddenly he was alarmed. Surely they couldn't think ... Did they think it was him?

He turned, but the red-haired girl said, 'Wait! Please!'

Rob froze. He spun round, embarrassed, wanting Dan. They were coming towards him, the tousled children, the man beating the drum, the frowsy women, even the dogs.

The red-haired girl was anxious, her voice taut. 'We're waiting for someone. A being of great power, from far away, born again from the Cauldron. We know he's coming here, at this time, when all the stars are in alignment. There is a word we'll recognize him by, a secret word.'

'It's not me!' Rob stumbled back. He raised his hands, shook his head. 'Sorry. I don't know anything about stars. Still at school, me.' He sounded stupid. He *wanted* to sound stupid.

Four strokes of the clock.

The people studied him. For a heartbeat he knew they despised him, doubted him, weren't sure. If Dan was here it would have been all right. Dan would have made it all into a huge joke. But the girl's look was desperate with hope. 'Please look into your heart,' she whispered, coming up to him. 'Look into your heart and choose a word. Any word. It might be the one we know. No one else is here but you. It could be you, without your knowing.'

It was crazy. He licked his lips, rain running down his hair. There was nothing to say, no word, no sound he could make that would satisfy them, but he had to say something, get away, break this circle of rain and faces and the insistent, terrifying clock crashing out the chimes, so he made himself whisper a word and the word that came out was '*Chloe*'.

The girl looked startled.

The name fell into huge silence. The bell stopped, and the drum. The only sound was the storm, stinging them all with its horizontal rain, whipping the girl's skirts, a gale that roared over the downs and hurled itself at the high grass banks, streaming in through the ancient gateways, around the leaning, silent stones.

And as if blown here by its fury, a bird fell from the sky.

It plummeted, a tiny swallow, exhausted, crashing into the grass beyond the top of the bank, and straight after it, talons down, a hawk shrieked, but the rain blurred and the bird was gone and the claws grabbed only mud.

The girl gasped. 'It's him,' she breathed. '*He's coming!*'

Wind roared. Out of the flattened grass something shot like a bolt. Rob saw a hare hurtle along the top of the bank, its great back legs thudding, and out of the place where the hawk had come down, the rain re-formed into the swift outline of a slim dog that solidified as it streaked in arrow-straight pursuit.

The hare's eyes were wide with terror. Remorselessly the greyhound sped after it, teeth snapping.

The girl turned. 'He's in trouble! Make the horseshoe!'

The hare leapt. It flung itself down the crippling slope into the ditch, falling and tumbling. Behind it the dog-shape skidded, sending chunks of chalk flying.

The girl pushed Rob. 'Help him!'

He had no idea who she was talking about. The group formed a hasty semicircle round the stone, open ends facing the deep ditch. They clutched hands; the drum began a rapid patter, and two men dragged the coloured pennants up and rearranged them frantically, thrusting the pliant sticks into the ground, the thin silk flapping and slashing into streamers, red and gold as flames.

The hare crashed into the bottom of the ditch. Rob threw himself on his stomach, wriggled to the edge and looked down.

The ditch was flooded. Through its rain-spattered surface he could see grass, weeds, an object that became a fish. The fish dived deep with a flick of its tail; in the same instant the dog entered the water with an almighty splash.

Its shape streamlined with bubbles, lengthened, shivered. An otter sleeked by, its round head glistening.

'Now!' the girl screamed.

Rob scrambled down the slope; flung his hand into the water.

He caught something. Cold and slithery, scaled and slippery.

A fish.

It flexed, tightened, slid into a cold, soaked grip.

*Fingers.*

To his astonishment he realized a man was looking up at him, struggling out of the water. Rob held tight, clutching the grass.

Soaked, breathless, the man heaved himself up, his eyes dark with exhaustion. He coughed, grabbed tighter. 'Is that you, Prince?' he whispered.

The sleek rain-slashed pelt of the otter leapt. Its snarl was ferocious.

'Into the circle!' the girl yelled at Rob.

Rob pulled. The man made a desperate scramble and flung himself up the sheer wall of grass. He almost slid back; then Rob was stretching, hanging on with both hands. The stranger grabbed, a firm wet grip; Rob hauled and the man dug his feet in, clawing at the tussocks of grass. Above them the streamers crackled and burned; now they really were flames, their smoke whipped away by the

wind, and the otter shape curled and slithered back down into the ditch, the sparks of the burning falling on it, making it yelp and howl.

'I've got you!' Rob gasped.

The man looked up at him. 'I know,' he breathed. 'I know you have,' and Rob saw his shape was strengthening as he coughed and climbed, the mud making him slip, the ditch wall a treacherous rampart, smooth and running with rain. And then he was at the top; he grabbed Rob's shoulder and dragged himself upright and stood breathless in the opening of the horseshoe, the banners on each side of him subsiding to streamers of silk and orange. He didn't look back.

But, scuffed and sore, his hands hot, Rob did.

The otter was watching. It looked up at him, its eyes blue. Then the rain blurred over it, and for a second Rob saw it shiver into a human outline, a woman's slim shape, her face spiteful and strange.

*'Tell him I'll be waiting,' she whispered. 'At the foot of the tree.'*

Rain blurred the grass. When he'd blinked, the ditch was empty.

The stranger rubbed mud from his face. He looked worn, and all at once a little wary. 'Thank you for bringing me in,' he said, his voice oddly husky.

Bewildered, Rob shook his head. 'Those animals—'

'There were no animals. Forget what you saw.' He turned to the group.

The red-haired girl was in the centre of the horseshoe. Without unlinking her hands she gave a nod, and the people of the Cauldron stepped forward slowly, the children nudged by their parents. The ring closed around Rob. He and the stranger were trapped inside it.

It worried him, but the tall man seemed not to care. He folded his arms, as if preparing himself. His clothes were dark and unremarkable, but his face was narrow, his hair long on the nape of his neck, and touched with silvery-grey, as if he should be old, though he seemed no more than thirty. A peculiar star-shaped scar slid over the end of one eyebrow, and his eyes were dark and quick, taking everything in. Around his neck, half hidden inside his coat on a green cord, hung a small bag made of what looked like leather.

The girl stepped forward. 'You're the one, aren't you?' She sounded awestruck.

The man smiled. Then he said quietly, *'I have been in many forms. A blue salmon, a stag, a roebuck on the mountain. The foam of the ninth wave. A moth in a lantern, a harpnote on the wind. Before I was born I lived. After I die I will be born.'* He glanced around at them, their intent faces. 'I'm a poet. Is that what you're waiting for?'

They eyed each other. Uneasily, Rob thought. He edged a step away from the stranger.

'Tell us your name,' the girl said.

The man shivered, glanced down at the grass, the tiny plants growing at the foot of the stone. 'I have many names,' he said. 'Why not call me Vetch?'

'That isn't the word we're waiting for.'

'Word?' The stranger's calm eyes considered her.

The girl was impatient now. 'Don't you know? Nine of us dreamed of a letter. Or it came in some way, in the ashes of the fire, in the whorls of wood. We put them together, rearranged them. They made a word. If you *are* the one we're waiting for, you should know it.'

Vetch sighed. He was soaked and shivering uncontrollably, his arms wrapped round himself, the wind flapping his hair and coat. 'I do know it. The word is the reason I've come, and that you're all here. The word is the time and the place and the danger.' He looked around at them all, at Rob, at the darkness closing beyond the stones. Then he said wearily, 'Couldn't we go somewhere a little drier than this?'

'First we need to know,' the girl insisted. No one moved, or unlinked their fingers. Rain dripped relentlessly down Rob's neck.

The stranger coughed. 'Poets know that words can be deceptive.' He lifted his chin and, with an effort, drew himself upright. 'But the word you want,' he said quietly, 'is *Darkhenge*.'

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**Extract from T. TINNE: HOLLY**

Rob watched the two of them as they looked down at the henge. Rosa stared at the ring of timbers, dark and ominous, rising out of the ridged soil.

She let out a breath of awe. 'It's *amazing*. What is it?'

'Clare says an enclosure.' Rob was watching Vetch. 'A ritual site.'

The poet had not moved. He was very still, the light catching his eyes, the glittering spray pattering round him. He stood with his arms around himself, a dark figure against the darkness, and there was a tension about him that made them both fall silent. Now, without speaking, he made his way round the timber ring to the entrance, the narrow gap that Marcus had spent all day trowelling. Climbing through, he went to the centre of the henge, knelt and, to their astonishment, turned his head and crouched so low that his ear was pressed to the ground. His hands spread on the surface, feeling it gently, as if it was softest fleece. 'Have they found anything here?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'They will.' He raised his head. 'I hear the voices of the trees, calling me back. The Trees of the Summer Country, of the Region of the Summer Stars. I hear the birch and the oak, the elm. The forests of the Unworld.' He gazed down, propped on his hands, as if the peaty soil was the opening of a well, a transparent glass floor he could stare through. For a moment he seemed lost in that vision. Then, a little stiffly, he climbed to his feet, brushing soil from his fingers. 'The way down will be here.'

'Down?'

Vetch turned his head. In the darkness, rain glinted, caught in the hooded glow of the torch. Vast shadows flashed and slid over the dark timbers. Concerned, they saw he looked worn and tired. He caught hold of the henge with one hand to support himself, and the fine mist of the sprays that kept it wet fell on him in the torchlight like a million minute stars.

'I told you,' he breathed. 'The way to Chloe.'

Suddenly Rob's patience snapped. Not caring if anyone heard, he yelled, 'I should never have brought you here! Get out!'

Rosa said, 'Rob—'

'Look at him! Using me! Getting at me through Chloe. It's sick – *I'm* sick for sticking around with you.' He was shaking; he clenched his hands.

Vetch straightened and came up to him. 'We can help Chloe.'

'You can't. No one can.'

'You and I can. There is a way to find her.'

'Shut up. *Shut up!*' He turned, groping for the gate, blind.

Vetch moved gently round into his way. 'You want her to die, is that it?'

Rob's head whipped up. '*What!*'

'You want her to die. That would end it, tidily. It would be over.'

'You pathetic—'

'Your parents would mourn, but even for them it would be a secret relief. They would be free to remember Chloe as she was. After a while, all their attention, all their love, would come back to you. It would be just you, and them.'

Rob's fist swung in a blow of fury, but before it slammed home Vetch had gripped his wrist. His grasp was surprisingly strong. He said, 'It's hard to hear it said aloud. But there is a place inside you that feels these things.'

'*No.*'

'It's there, Rob. Dark as coal, a ring round your heart, like this henge. But maybe inside that, deeper and darker, is something else, and it would emerge if you let it, if you scraped at it and dug away at it, let all the creatures of your imagination come out of it, birds and beasts from depths you have no knowledge of. That's where Chloe is, Rob.'

Water spray hissed in the silence. Bats flitted over the trees. By the gate Max made a small snuffle as he laid his chin on his paws. Rosa stood watching, her eyes wide and scared.

Slowly, Rob pulled his arm away.

He felt shaken, exhausted. As if some barrier had been scrambled over, some resistance broken down in him. 'All right.' He looked up. 'Find her then. Show me what to do. I'll do whatever you say.'

Vetch said, 'What we do is wait until the henge is fully exposed. In the meantime, you take me to see her.'

Rob stared. 'In the nursing home?'

'We can go secretly. Your parents needn't know.'

Rob shook his head. He felt bewildered. The bats dizzied him, swooping after invisible insects. 'The nurses will tell them.'

Vetch smiled his rueful smile. 'Say I'm a friend.'

'Can you ...?' he hated to ask it, loathed himself, had to get it out. 'Do you mean you can wake her?'

'I don't know. It depends how many caers she's entered, how far in she is. I will certainly try.' He jerked his head at Rosa, and the girl clicked the torch off, quietly.

And Rob stared, because there was light in the henge, and it was seeping from the ground, the faintest phosphorescence, like trapped starlight. And the bats were pouring from a cavern where the soil had collapsed, tens and hundreds of bats, a whirling cloud of darkness that flapped and twisted and split above the treetops into blurs and zigzags. Their high squeaks punctured the night.

Vetch stood in the curtain of spray, and looked up at them. 'Let them fly, Rob,' he said.

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### **Extract from U. UR: HEATHER**

Fisher, Catherine. Darkhenge (p. 226). RHCP. Kindle Edition.

Rob turned away. His mind was blank; he had no thoughts. There was only a cold dread that had started to creep in, like the tendrils of fog that were rising in the chamber of trees, the damp clouds of his own breath.

Finally he whispered, 'What story?'

'It seems she was writing a lot of them.' Vetch turned the pages. 'Poems too, I'm glad to see, and very good for her age. Imaginative. Spirited. She seems to have been collecting them together.' He paused, reluctant. 'Then there's this – no date:

*'I will never, never forgive him.*

*'It was lying on the kitchen table, all ready. Mac had said he wanted to read some – I'd told him part of the plot, and I'd put it there ready. When I heard them all come in I ran down. He'd propped a painting on top of it. They were all standing round admiring it.*

*'I stood at the back and didn't say anything, and then when they'd gone I pulled out my notebook and there was paint on it. Dark green paint. On the cover and soaked into the first three pages, so that you couldn't read them.'*

Helpless, Rob rubbed his hands through his hair.

*'All the words were lost.'* Vetch's voice sounded quietly appalled. Through his misery, Rob shivered. *'All the sounds and meanings, all the words, so carefully chosen. Words that could never fit together again just like that, ever, ever again And when he came in and saw me crying he said, "Oh, sorry, Chloe. Did your notebook get messed up? I'll get you another one, don't worry." Another notebook. Another girly, pink, fluffy notebook with giggly girly guff inside. That's what he meant. That's what he thought—'*

*'All right. All right—!'* Rob jumped up and slammed his palm against the bole of an oak. *'But I didn't know! How could I know? She never said. She never told me she was writing anything important, anything that meant something!'*

Vetch closed the book. *'Paintings are easy to see,'* he said after a moment. *'Open, presented flat to the eye. Words are not easy. Words have to be discovered, deep in their pages, deciphered, translated, read. Words are symbols to be encoded, their letters trees in a forest, enmeshed, their tangled meanings never finally picked apart.'*

In the silence that followed they heard how a soft wind had risen; it gusted and creaked the branches. Rob came and sat down, and put his head in his hands. Vast shadows of himself huddled over the tree trunks.

Finally he said, *'You mean this is why she doesn't want to come back.'*

*'Surely.'*

*'All the time. All these years!'*

Vetch put the notebook carefully in the crane-skin bag. Then he warmed his hands at the candle. *'Listen to me, Rob. You're at fault, yes, for not noticing, but so is she, for not saying. Your gift is the artist's gift, of looking, and it failed you. Hers is in words and she didn't speak them. Your parents may not have wanted to see. But Mac must have known.'*

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**Extract from OI. OINDLE: SPINDLE**

*'She's totally useless.'* Chloe folded her arms in fury. *'Twice now she's supposed to have stopped you, and yet here you are.'*

Vetch nodded mildly. *'It's gone on longer than you think.'*

*'And you brought Rob here. Of all people!'* Without waiting for him she turned and marched into one of the looped openings, holding Callie's harness tight. The horse's bulk was warm and comforting, her flank steaming slightly after the swift ride, but even behind the thud of hooves Chloe felt Vetch's presence stride after her like a shadow.

‘You won’t slow me down,’ she said angrily. ‘I’m going to the Chair. I’m going as far in as I can get.’ She glanced back and saw how his dark eyes watched her, irritatingly calm. ‘I could kill you,’ she said. ‘I could make you die, just by wanting it.’

‘Perhaps you could,’ he said. ‘But you won’t.’

She walked faster, but he was tall, and kept up easily. Ducking under skeins of the flecked ceiling, she said, ‘Out there I was small and weak. Have you any idea what it’s like to be a little girl? I didn’t have any power, but that’s different here. The King told me about the Chair. Whoever sits on it holds all the power of the Unworld. Was he lying to me?’

‘If this world is yours,’ Vetch remarked, ‘you could make such a chair, couldn’t you? *If* it is. But have you thought, Chloe, that in fact it may not be?’

She stopped, dragging Callie round. Vetch was a little breathless, but then so was she. ‘No I haven’t! I don’t believe that. You’re full of tricks and lies and stories. You never tell the straight truth.’

He smiled ruefully. ‘Now that’s unkind, coming from you.’ Taking a step forward, he put his hand on Callie’s slender neck and smoothed her mane. The horse whickered, nestling up to him. ‘Because you never do either, do you? You pretended, but you were bitter in secret. Rob, your parents – you never really told them how you felt.’

He was looking down at her; she felt humiliated. ‘What was the point? I couldn’t explain.’

‘Then how can you blame them for not knowing?’

‘I do! I blame Rob.’ She wished she was older, taller. She wished she knew how to argue, how to be logical, how to use words back at him. Tears choked her; she swallowed them, turned, marched on.

The thick wool grew tangled. She had to step over it, duck under it, draw Callie round vast impenetrable knots that blocked the way; she strode fiercely through openings and gaps, taking any way that seemed open, and all the time Vetch came behind, silent, as if he was bidding his time.

She wanted to race away from him, but the castle tripped her and snagged her; it looped round wrist and ankle. Denser now, it closed in, growing colder, as if she was forcing her way to the heart of the mesh. Small things began to scuttle past, always running outwards; they looked like mice and spiders and beetles, and once a snake, wriggling in panic. And the tunnels weren’t still either. Sometimes they rose under her feet, or twisted, or even rippled, so that she and Vetch and the horse all lost their footing and staggered against the stretchy, yielding threads.

And then Vetch began to talk.

His words were quiet, and though she wanted to block them out, she couldn’t.

‘It’s not easy, is it, to find your way through? Yet it should be, if this Unworld is yours. But have you thought, Chloe, that it’s you that’s hindering yourself?’

‘Shut up,’ she snapped.

'Tripping yourself up, tangling yourself? That we're struggling deeper into your own doubt? That secretly, far down somewhere inside, you don't want to get to the Chair at all. You want to be stopped. You want to be made to go back, to wake up safe in your bed and see Mac leaning over you, and your mum and dad crying with joy. You want to make it up with Rob. You want it to be all right.'

'I said, *Shut up!* You don't know anything! Rob's dead.

*I've killed him.*' She turned, hot and hurt and desperate not to hear him, flung out a fist at him. He grabbed it, and his hand was cool, the marks of his theft three red coils on his pale skin.

'No you haven't.'

'What do you know?'

'I know about the struggle with words. *About the Battle of the Trees.*'

For a moment she just stared at him. Through him. Saw a white room full of nurses, Mac in the background looking sick and old, a broken window where the ivy was creeping in. Felt a small cool kiss on her forehead.

For a moment she was there and wanted to be there.

And then she saw the painting. It was on the wall, behind Mac. It was brilliant, it was beautiful, it was hateful. It was her own face, the portrait she'd always wanted Rob to paint, which he must have done since she'd left; it looked down at her with that light, mischievous grin she fell into sometimes, when things were good, when she could forget about being their Chloe, and be her own.

It hurt her. It stung tears into her eyes.

Vetch recognized the change. He looked dismayed.

She shook his hand off and stabbed a finger at him. 'That's enough! No more words!'

Red rope dropped round him; he dragged it from his lips. 'Don't! Chloe, wait ...'

Around his neck, another loop. It tightened; he choked, tore at it, but his arms were held, his wrists dragged back.

She stepped up close to him. 'No more words, Vetch. Now you're the one who's tangled. See how you like being speechless. I'm going on.'

She turned Callie and strode away.

Vetch fought. He struggled and pulled at the red-flecked ropes but they held him and slithered round him and crushed his chest. He was suffocating in them; as she climbed up on Callie's back, Chloe said without turning her head, 'That's enough.'

The threads were still.

Vetch tried to loosen them. He said, 'You know I'm right. My words will go with you.'

She smiled at him kindly. 'It'll take you long enough to get out of there. Goodbye, Vetch. I'm sorry you won't see me reach the Chair. Any of you.'

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