The Widening Gyre

Book One of
The Unbroken Circle

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Author’s Note

This is a sequel of sorts to the Arthurian legends. If you know the Arthur story, you’ll start to recognize patterns and characters pretty soon. If not, don’t worry. You’ll be able to follow along well enough. For example, Arthurian enthusiasts will almost certainly guess the identities of the three characters we meet in the prologue. The rest of you will simply know that they are very old, that they share a common history that has often been bitter, and they are privy to a great secret. That’s enough, at least in the beginning. After all, most of the main characters don’t know the Arthur stories either. You’ll learn as they do, as the story moves along.

A problem with writing a sequel to a story that’s been told and retold so many times is obvious—which version is this book a sequel to? That’s a tough one.

The truth is, there are many versions that I love dearly, and I’ve tried to at least acknowledge as many as I can—from the Welsh poems and the Vulgate cycles all the way through Mallory and the modern novelists. For example? In a “memory” chapter, Sir Cei calls Arthur the Wart, which I mean as a tribute to T. H. White, author of *The Once and Future King*, the first Arthur book I fell in love with all the way back in elementary school. The opening paragraph of the first chapter narrated by the character Susan Myers is a deliberate homage to Marion Zimmer Bradley, author of *The Mists of Avalon*. The character Phyllis Ann Twelvetrees is named for Phyllis Ann Karr, whose *Arthuriac Companion*, a guidebook to the legends of Camelot, was an invaluable resource. When in doubt about a name, I always deferred to her preference, even when it was one she coined herself. The character Madeleine is named for Madeleine L’Engle, whose wonderful *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* first introduced me to Prince Madoc and his journey to Mobile, Alabama.

But it’s impossible to be faithful to the continuity of both *The Once and Future King* and *The Mists of Avalon*, not to mention *The Spoils of Annwn*, *The Hollow Hills*, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, *The Idylls of the King*, and all the hundreds of others. So I’ve tried to at least pay respect to as many as I can, and I hope the fans of any one version won’t be offended too terribly much. I hope there will be enough resonance to please everyone at some point or another. By the way, I’ve tried to “hide” the titles of some of my favorites, like *The Hollow Hills* and *The Sword at Sunset*, in the text of the story itself. See how many you can find.

As for the names, I have followed one simple rule when choosing which spelling to use—I used my favorites. In most cases, I went with the most familiar, or the ones in Mallory. However, I happen to like Cei for Kay and Gwenhwyfar for Guinevere. On the other hand, I prefer Morgan le Fay and Mordred to other variations. I’m afraid there’s really no more rhyme or reason than that.

Speaking of names, some of the characters are named for friends of mine, many of whom I lost contact with long ago. Alas, the characters bear little resemblance to the people they’re named for. But I wanted a way to remind them of the love we shared and to say thank you one more time.

This book was written before the events of September 11, 2001. In the original
manuscript, I referred to terrorist attacks on the New York stock Exchange and the Pentagon that were factors in the creation of a new cabinet position, which I originally called the Secretary of Internal Defense. I later modified the manuscript to reflect history, and the Secretary of Internal Defense became the Secretary of Homeland Security. However, I’m sure that the real Secretary and the individuals under his command will be much less ominous than the ones presented here. No offense or criticism is intended. This is fantasy, after all.

Needless to say, a book of this size requires a great many “thank yous,” far more than I can express in a few short pages. I am so very grateful to my family for their love and heroic encouragement.

I placed a few early versions of the opening chapters on my Web site (http://www.johnadcox.com), and many, many kind Internet surfers took time to write me with encouraging words and criticism. They were a constant source of energy and inspiration.

I am most especially grateful to James Lock, Michele A. Cappel, Keith Winkler (who read the entire manuscript in a day), Charles de Lint, MaryAnn Harris, Missy Lee Cox, Leona Wisoker, Bill Bridges, John Bridges, Jolie Simmons, Gillian Doran, Ilana Halupovich, Susan L. Graham, Andrew Greenberg, John Burnet, Jim Summers, Caroline Dunn, Philippa Burges, Brad Kushner, and most especially to Carol Bales. Thank you all so very, very much. I couldn’t have done it without you.
For Clif Murphey
The Second Coming
By William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
Taliesin:

Twilight faded slowly to darkness. Cold fingers of fog crept across the park, but the pale flickering glow from a low street lamp provided enough light for the gray man to see his newspaper. I wondered if he was actually bothering to read it. I doubted it. It made a good enough mask without the effort. I could tell he sensed my presence, that he felt me watching, but he made no sign. So be it, I decided. We'll wait then, together, for a bit.

No one could have read his age, obviously considerable, in the lines and shadows on his face. Not even me, who saw more than most, and who knew him better than anyone. His features might have been handsome, even dashing, had there been anything, any hint of color or life, to break the monotony of the gray that clung to him like the swirling blanket of heavy winter mist itself. After all the years, nothing had changed.

He wore a silk tie and carried a neatly folded handkerchief in his jacket pocket, both intricately patterned, both gray. He seemed strong and fit, and he still sat tall in spite of the weight of time. His powerful and callused hands hid wrists crisscrossed with thin white scars.

His hair, precisely groomed, showed no hint of either black or white, merely gray, very nearly the exact shade of his perfectly tailored wool suit and overcoat. That much at least seemed different; I remembered his hair being a brilliant, flashing white in the old days. So perhaps even he changes after all. And with his kind, appearance is less a function of years or an accident of physical characteristics than the state of the soul. Oh, how that thought pierced me like cold iron.

My guitar, a good twelve-string worn smooth by age, hung heavy on my back, so I slung it down. Not to play, just to hold. My fingers touched the silver strings, so familiar like those of a harp, and I found the contact comforting.

Thanks, old friend.

We'd come together in Woodruff Park, near Five Points in the stilled urban heart of Atlanta. I didn't like the place; I never had. Atlanta is a city of greenery and life; its hills teem with tall oaks and wildflowers, lush, sleeping azaleas and stately magnolias, and those beloved, ubiquitous, southern dogwoods waiting for spring to display their subtle and fleeting beauty, breathtaking and gone in a wink. For some reason, though, most of this park had been paved over with bricks, leaving only a few begrudged patchwork squares of neatly kept grass and stunted trees. This was not a park where people lingered, except to wolf down hurried bites of unsavored lunch before fleeting moments of a stolen break bled away. It was a place people passed through, hurrying, shoulders hunched and heads down. It was a between place, like twilight.

The cold night seemed strangely still and quiet for such an early hour in the city. Distance and mist gentled the noise of the first boisterous New Year celebrations from nearby Centennial Park and Underground Atlanta. But of course it would be so. A car passed, and then the early evening fell silent again. I shivered.

There came gentle footsteps, closer, closer still, one more hesitant step, and then more silence. The gray man didn't turn, but I did. A woman watched him from several yards away. She had changed too; she wore an older woman's face. Older, but still, well, alive. That's the word.
Moist with emotion, her eyes showed fear or anger maybe, or even joy. Perhaps all three.

She wore colour about her; something, a dress or scarf, flashed blue beneath the great woolen coat that rested about her shoulders like a cloak. Her hair, white now but still streaked with red-gold, glowing embers, reminded me of a time when it burned, red and flowing, soft fire. A time when we two together, our blood singing with wine, ran naked in the shallows where the sea touched the land—

But that was long ago, a secret smile between old friends.

The grey man felt the woman's presence and she knew it, but he made no sign, so she shrank back, swallowing, her fists pale and tight. With that, I felt a sudden flash of anger at my old teacher rising like fire from a deep place in my gut. \textit{Damn him and damn him all over again!} He had waited for this moment, this beginning place, as long as we had. He himself had whispered the prophecy, so very, very long ago. Long even as we count the ages. I let myself scowl. Could he really be so unfeeling?

And yet, he had come. A thousand million places to be, and he waited here. But of course the Pattern would pull him. On this night of all nights, overflowing with so many expectations, how could it be otherwise? The woman swallowed and, taking a deep breath for courage, stepped forward.

\textit{Well, it's come to this at last.} The flame inside me cooled, and I, too, walked slowly toward the circle of dim, cold light.

The grey man lifted his gaze as we approached the park bench; if his face wore any expression at all, it might have been challenge. He acknowledged me first with a single word.

“Bard,” he said.

I nodded and met his gaze, hoping my eyes conveyed all the feeling that filled my heart. They might have for all I know, but the grey man gave no sign.

I think the woman and I both expected, maybe even hoped, to see the brilliant blue fire we remembered from the Old Days spark once again in his eyes. But no. They stared cold and empty, the colour of dead iron. “Nimuë,” he said to the woman, calling her by her secret name. The ice in his voice frosted my bones. “Do you come as the Goddess to bless this union, or does your Circle wish to tie strings to the child even at the moment of his conception?”

“I came to see,” she said quietly, her voice barely a whisper. His carelessly cruel words had cut her, and I could see in her eyes that she wanted to remind him that he had been as much or more a manipulator in the past, that his schemes were the ones that had fallen to ruin. But he had left feeling behind him long ago, when the fire in his heart chilled to ash, so she didn’t bother. She shivered, and pulled her coat more tightly around her. Instead, she said simply, “I had to know it was \textit{real}. We’ve waited so long, so very long—”

The grey man turned his gaze on me then, and oh, the void, the wasteland there, hurt so much more than all the centuries of empty despair. I don’t think he saw me flinch, though. “I tell tales,” I said, “and I remember. It is my province to be present at beginning places.” On another day, I might have smiled; my words sounded like one of his own answers.

The grey man nodded. “And what after the beginning, I wonder?” he asked. “Have you his whole life planned already?”

The woman closed her eyes and took a breath before answering. “We will watch him, surely. As we must, to keep him alive. He will live his life in constant peril.”

I nodded. “We will be vigilant.”

The grey man’s eyes narrowed. “Is that all, then?”

The woman shook her head. “We will leave him alone, as much as possible,” she said. “He and all the others. And for as long as we are able.”

Anyone who didn’t know him well would have missed the grey man’s near silent snort of derision. I nearly did myself. “And what then?”
“When the time comes, when the enemy moves at last, we will bring him to us. So that he can do what he must. What he is born to do. But not until we must. Not until there is no other choice.”

“Why not take him now then, and save yourself the bother?”

The woman allowed herself a smile. “A lesson we learned from you, I think. Long ago. He must fall in love with the world, if he is to save it.”

The grey man regarded us for a few moments longer, then he turned back to his paper. “Sit then. Wait. She’ll be here soon, and then he’ll follow, as he always must. Your Goddess’s turning Circle is a harsher prison even than your crystal cave.”

Again his words stung the woman, as he’d meant them to. The cave.

“So he could still feel something, if bitterness that survived centuries after other feeling died could be called emotion.”

“What will happen?” she asked.

“You know that as well as I do, Lady of the Lake. If the Sight has left you, memory suffices, or you would not have come.” He sighed. “She will come, he will follow, and they will be together tonight. The child will be conceived.”

“And will you interfere?”

The grey man shook his head. “There is no need. There is no Duke Gorlois this time to stand against their love. Your cruel Goddess has spared him, at least. No castle walls surround her; he will not need a wizard’s magic to win her bed.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she growled, “and you know it.” She frowned as the hope in her eyes dimmed to night.

The grey man gave no answer. For a long moment he remained silent. No sound troubled the still night. “I will not interfere,” he said at last, “unless it is to spare him the things I guided him to before. If I can give him peace, I will. When the sword comes to him, I will urge him to leave it be, trapped in stone or drowned in water, if I am able. For all the love we once shared between us, I will spare him the inevitable pain if I can.”

The woman and I exchanged a glance. “Then you doom us all,” she said, her voice soft with, what? Relief? Sorrow? Resignation? She didn’t speak for the moment it took to gather her thoughts and collect her strength. Then she took a deep breath. “Please,” she began. “The Dark will come. We need you. Can’t we heal—”

“Quiet,” said the grey man, interrupting her. “She comes.”

We turned and saw a young woman walking alone across a square of park lawn. She looked much as she had, pale and golden, in that other long ago lifetime. Her hair caught the dim, flickering light so beautifully, hair like the sun and a dress the color of moonlight. The distance and the fog and the muted city lights beyond made it look as though she wore a crown, a circlet of twelve stars. She paused, and even at the distance I knew that her blue eyes shone like drops of rushing water when they catch the light of the full moon.

So very like before, like long ago.

She looked around her, a graceful movement like a dancer’s, but I don’t think she even noticed us. No wizard’s glamour, that. She watched only for her lover.

He came to her moments later, and the unexpected shyness in so large a man moved me. They touched, fingertips to fingertips, and I saw him tremble. They spoke gently, lovers’ whispers, there in the lantern light. I played then, my fingers on the twelve strings of silver, slow and soft, an old, old song of love and loss and time. And then they were gone.

We watched them disappear into the fog and shadows, and we felt the weight of time shift around us. As the last day of the last year of the Twentieth Century dimmed gently to night and a new millennium waited to be born, we felt the Pattern take a new shape around two shining threads joined in love. I can’t speak for my companions that night, but I, Taliesin, found myself
moved and shaken by the power and overwhelming significance of the moment. We marked it together, that moment, and then it faded into the mists, lost.

The woman gave me a gentle smile before she turned and left, and the effort touched me. *Ah, Nimuë, the years have not been kind to you, either, dear heart.* I tarried a bit, there in the park, remembering, my melodies twisting one into another.

At last I too rose, slung my guitar over my shoulder, and turned to leave. The grey man made no sign, and so I didn't speak. Gods, what could I have said? But as I walked, I took a last glance over my shoulder and saw a single shining tear in the grey man's eye. For joy or sorrow? Who can say? But at that moment, a sudden wild hope leapt and sang in my heart.

What a fragile, fading, fatal thing hope is.
Twenty-five years later
Part One

Black Friday
October 23 — October 31, 2026
Chapter 1

*Green Knightmare*

Mark McBride:

I am in the crowded hold of a wooden sailing ship where everything stinks of salt and piss and fish and vomit. We’ve left behind a land devastated by plague and blood, heading for battle and almost certain death. For most of us, anyway. *Except for seven, none returned* .... That’s what the goddamn prophecy says. But we go because we have to, and because there’s something, I think, in all of us, something deep in the blood, that aches to see the rocks and hills of Britain again, even a Britain scarred and changed by the ravages of fifteen centuries.

But no. Jesus. That’s not where this begins.

My fingers are raw and blistered from holding this damn pen, and there’s enough wadded up paper at my feet to light a bonfire that would burn for a month. I am *not* going to start over again, dammit.

Tom’s the one who wanted us to write all this stuff down. He said records are important, especially for the friends we’ve lost. Figures. He’s the one who’s good with words and stories. Me, hell, I never even got my stupid sales reports written on time. But deep down inside, I know he’s right. For so many, many reasons. Besides, there’s nothing else to do on this cramped and smelly ship. At least not now that there’s nothing left in my guts to puke.

The problem is, I have absolutely no idea where to begin. When we were born? Jesus, I’d never get finished. When we all met? I’m not even sure I can remember anymore. I’ve known Daniel Corwin since third grade Sunday School. I think Daniel met John Fitzroy in a college philosophy class at Georgia State. And did Daniel meet Tom Lewis through John? Or did it happen the other way around? Somehow, it seems like we were always together, the four of us, living in that grand old house we called the Castle. I wish we could all be together now, tonight, one last time.

I’m sitting here in a dark room on this damn boat with my thoughts and my memories and my idiot sheets of white paper, dealing out moments of my life like cards from a deck, gazing at the patterns like a fortune teller, hoping to recognize a beginning place in one of them. The air is dank but the salt dries my throat and nostrils. As I fumble my way through this, Tom’s sitting nearby, playing that old twelve-string guitar. He’s playing softly, trying not to disturb me, but the music is a comfort and I’m grateful for the company. His rhythm matches the gut wrenching damn rocking of the ship.

Now where was I? Oh, right. Moments of my life.

I remember the joy of finding out I had brothers, a family.

I remember finding a town in central Georgia where everyone had died. Jesus, even the kids. The corpses had already begun to rot where they fell by the time we found them. We didn’t have time to bury them, so we carried them all into an old wooden church and burned it to the ground. God, the stench! We stayed and watched until the last ember had faded to ash, because we couldn’t offer them any more funeral than that. I said a prayer as we rode away. I can’t start there. God no. That memory is still too fresh, too raw.

I remember the bloody, broken bodies of friends. I feel hot, splattered blood on my face.
again and smell the stench of opened entrails.

I remember betrayal, its bite never dulled.
This ain’t gonna be easy.

Moments. The problem is, looking back at them like this, the moments that stand out are the ones that still make me want to cry. And you know what? I do want to cry, and I want you to cry with me, because then you’ll know. Crying’s not always a sad thing. When the tears leave, some of the pain leaves with them. Enough, I hope, that we can go on living. To hurt again, sure. But maybe, God, maybe to feel joy again, too. And maybe that’s enough. What else can you do except hope that the shining moments of joy, cherished away deep in the heart’s secret places, are enough to make the moments of anguish worth it all in the end? Well?

But I’m not sure I’m ready for that. Not yet anyway.

Which leaves me right back where I started. Dammit, Tom! I’d be all caught up with this thing if I didn’t have to keep starting over.

Tom’s playing a different tune now, this way old folk song we both love. Circles, by Harry Chapin. Do you know it? It’s the one that says, “All my life’s a circle” and “there’s no clear cut beginnings, and so far no dead ends.” Just moments. Times and places.

It’s funny how things take you back. The smell of the sea still reminds me of my first vacation with my family, back before my folks divorced. I couldn’t have been more than three or four, but sometimes when I catch even a hint of salt in the air, like now, I find myself flooded with memory, and it’s like I’m there again, running across the sand to show Mom a shell that Dad and I found. To this day, the smell of strawberries reminds me of the first girl I made love to, both of us shy and trembling, trying so desperately to be quiet, because we could hear my mom bustling around downstairs. Why strawberries? That’s how her hair smelled. You know?

Sometimes it’s nothing in particular, or something as simple as the way the light slants in through a window, but suddenly I’m overwhelmed by memory.

It’s like that now. Sitting here, listening to Tom play Circles. Me and my beautiful, empty sheets of white paper. It’s winter now, and it’s so damn awful cold. Especially on this dank, swaying ship. But I’m thinking of another season, of autumn, and it seems so immediate, so real, I can almost, almost taste it. In the fall, there’s a scent in the air, the smell of smoke and evergreens and dying leaves stirred and pushed along by the north wind. Maybe it’s more a feeling than a smell. Do you know what I mean? About how autumn feels?

Sound does the same thing, especially music. It awakens the other senses and points them to memory. Something in Tom’s music cuts through the reek of wood and sea and fills my nose with autumn. And I’m finding it takes me back to autumn, last autumn, and to one particular Friday afternoon. Was it really so recent? Jesus. It feels like another life. I should know. Anyway, I’ll start there. It’s as good a place as any, I reckon.

Oh! Of course! Circles Tom played Circles that day. Coincidence? Or is good old Tom giving me a little bit of a hint? Either way, it’s my beginning place. Thanks, buddy.

On that Friday afternoon, I tried hard to focus on work. I settled for looking busy in case my boss wandered by. The clock on my screen read a little after three, and five-thirty might as well have been Christmas for the way it took its time coming. That’s when my phone chimed. Even before I touched the screen to answer, I knew it would be Daniel Corwin. I took a quick sip of coffee and grinned a little as I took the call.

“Equipment Leasing, this is Mark McBride.”

“Hey, man!” I didn’t need the screen to see Daniel’s goofy smile; I could hear it in his voice.

“Danny Boy!” I took a quick peek to make sure nobody was lurking near enough to see into
my cubicle, then leaned back and plopped my feet on my desk. “What’s happening?”
“Up to anything tonight?”
“Um, don’t think so,” I said. “What’s up? Stunt of the week?”
“Mark!” he said, not really even trying to sounding innocent. “You wound me. What makes you think that?”
I felt a grin of my own spreading. “It’s Friday. You’re Daniel.” All part of the ritual.
“Aw, I’m just thinking a little fun, if you follow me.”
“Into quicksand on several occasions,” I said, rather proud of the line. “Dude, you’re totally pulling a stunt of the week.”
He smiled again. “Am I that predictable?”
I snorted so hard I spilled a little coffee on my tie. Fortunately, I’d chosen a bright and loud Hawaiian one with palm trees and hula girls, so it didn’t show. Not much, anyway. “After about the tenth or eleventh time, I clued in to the pattern,” I admitted. “And that would have been—what? How many years ago?” No answer. Just Daniel breathing. “So, uh, wanna tell me the rest?”
I prompted.
“Not especially. But since you’re gonna make me . . .”
“Yeah,” I said. “I pretty much am.” Without clarification or preconditions, and with Daniel involved, I could find myself in another state with just my underwear and an empty liter of rum, and no memories clear enough to be helpful about how I’d come to be there—or who the girls were, and whether or not the cute one was mine. Or on stage at some redneck Florida bar singing backup to an all-girl Western swing band. Or being auctioned off at a sorority fundraiser. Or passing my Braves cap around to take up a collection in a night club parking lot while Daniel gave an impassioned speech announcing his candidacy for Governor. Or playing strip poker in the club car of a train bound for New Orleans. All of which, just let me point out, had happened. A stunt of the week. Pretty much every Friday. Like clockwork.
“I just need to borrow the wireless card for your Mac.”
Whoa. “Dude,” I began, smile fading. “That’s for official bank business only. Do you know what kind of trouble—?”
“It’s an unmonitored connection,” he interjected. “No one’ll know. Right? I just need to send one fast email. No bank fraud. I promise.”
I don’t know,” I admitted. I didn’t really think Daniel would cause any real trouble. High crimes and even serious misdemeanors weren’t really his style. But mischief? Yeah, I’m pretty sure what the words Daniel Corwin mean that in some language somewhere. “I’m really not sure I want to risk my job for one of your stunts of the week.”
“No stunt. Honest. One fast email. One I’d kinda like to send on an unmonitored connection. If you follow me.”
“Remember what I said about the quicksand?”
“No sand,” said Daniel. “Not even the plain old slow kind.”
“What kind of message?” I asked.
Daniel changed the subject. “Um, listen, Mark. I’m kind of in a hurry. Can you pick John and me up at school? Around seven, maybe? We can head out afterwards. I’m thinking we can all use a little Friday night R and R.”
“You can say that again. Yeah, sure. I’m in. See you in Professor Huckleby’s office at seven.”
“You’re the shinin’ speed, m’man.”
I hit the delete key to end the call. Then I shut the Mac down and popped it in my pocket, grabbed my coat, and headed for the door. I didn’t have to meet Daniel till later, but what the heck. For once, the lame off-site meeting excuse actually worked.
I made my way through the cubicle maze. As I waited for an elevator, I noticed a man in a dark suit standing on the other side of the fourth floor lobby. I frowned. Security downstairs is tight. We don’t get visitors. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen someone I didn’t recognize above the first floor. I got an odd feeling, a sort of shiver along my spine.

He was watching me.
When I looked, he turned away. The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. As I stepped in, I saw him pull a phone card from his shirt pocket and speak a number. The doors slid shut.

I had a little time to kill, so I went home to the Castle, the big, rambling old in-town Victorian place John Fitzroy, Tom Lewis, Daniel Corwin, and I called home. To be honest, the place didn’t look anything at all like a castle, but everyone on the block called it the Castle when we moved in. The name kind of stuck.

It had been a long week, and it looked like I had a long night ahead of me. I decided a quick nap was in order. As I slept, I dreamed a dream, an old nightmare that returned to trouble me again.

In the dream, I wandered alone though a barren landscape. My feet sank into moist soil, and I nearly choked on air thick with the stench of rot and decay. Rocky crags cast eerie shadows in the dim, fading sunlight, and wicked wind tore at me with invisible teeth. I shivered and my stomach growled. Weariness made my legs lead-heavy.

I fought for every step. I had to find something, a place I’d been seeking for a long time.
At last I came upon it: a wooden building hung with moss and green garlands that stood against the mouth of a cave. Standing stones, etched with strange markings all but weathered away by time and ice and bitter wind, guarded the entrance. It had the feel of an ancient place, desolate and fearsome. Nonetheless, I went forward. Whatever I sought, it waited inside.

The entryway opened into a kind of chapel, though I dared not imagine what hideous gods might be consecrated there. An altar stone rested against the far wall. I crept toward it with slow dream steps, heavy and inevitable.

Fear sickened me and every instinct screamed, *Turn and run!*
I didn’t.
The dream never changed.
And then I became aware of another presence.
A creature stood in the entrance, a giant with hateful blood-red eyes, limbs like the trunks of ancient, gnarled trees, twisted and hard like stone, darkness against the last, fatal light. His shadow turned the dusk to midnight.
The monster stepped inside. His skin was a dark, loathsome green, except where a ring of white scar tissue circled his neck. He carried a great ax, half again as long as me, its edge sharper than any knife. A ghastly smile, arrogant, humorless, and mocking, cracked his green face.

My terror grew beyond panic, but I didn’t run or try to fight.
Instead, as always, I dropped to my knees and placed my head on the altar. I felt its cold, rough stone rub against my cheek.
And then I heard the terrible sound of that great ax whistling through the air as it rushed down toward my bare neck.
I awoke with a scream, my body drenched with cold sweat.
That was exactly one week before Black Friday.
Chapter 2

Hidden Treasure, Lost Secret

Daniel Corwin:

Professor Ian Huckleby smiled at John Fitzroy and me. “To earn your thesis credit, and the money the university so generously pays you, I shall require your company on an archeological dig. You, my young friends, are going to join me on a quest to solve a very ancient and mysterious puzzle.”

John and I grinned at each other. “O-kay,” I said. “This ought to be good.”

Ian nodded and held a finger to his pursed lips. “I am going to tell you a very great secret. A dangerous secret, one that involves a lost treasure.” He smiled his best showman’s smile. “Buried treasure, no less. It was hidden here, in North America, by Europeans, centuries before Columbus dirtied his first swaddling. It was priceless—so much so that it was protected by mechanisms so cunning that, to this day, they have not been breached. The treasure remains hidden even now.”

“It must have been something pretty special,” said John. “That’s a lot of trouble.”

“Oh yes.” Ian’s smiled faded and he nodded solemnly. “It was more than mere wealth. It was a secret so profound that it could shake the very foundations of all the nations and empires of the world.”

And that’s where the tale begins for me. I remember it all in such rich, vivid detail. The colors, the light, the smell of chalk dust and musty pages. I had on a bright ski sweater over a knit polo shirt, jeans and leather shoes, old and comfortable. John wore his usual—black jeans and boots, a midnight blue dress shirt, and a dark vest. He’d folded his black woolen overcoat neatly on the desk behind us. I can close my eyes and see it; I’d tossed my brown leather bomber jacket on top of it.

Ian sported his usual attire; if you’ve seen his specials on the History Channel immersives, you know what I mean, don’t you? The white shirt, paisley tie, sweater vest, and the blue-gray wool jacket with the suede patches on the sleeves. He kept his dark hair long for a professor, short for a student. He didn’t smile all the time, but his eyes always twinkled like he might at any minute. He held a pipe between his mustache and neatly trimmed goatee, and the drifting smoke caught the dim light like a halo floating gently and golden over his head. In some ways, that long-ago room seems more real to me than the tiny space in this cold observatory where I’m writing these words. Even now, after everything, yeah, I can see it all, undimmed by time or distance. Sometimes, I relive those moments with such anguish that for a time I find myself unable to breathe, so acute is the loss.

John and I were meeting with Ian in the auditorium he called an office. Wait. Hang on one. I should tell you about that. See, most of the classrooms in the General Classroom Building at Georgia State University are the usual ones you’ll find on any college campus across the country—smallish, uniform in color, white board at the front. But each of the fifteen floors also had one monster classroom, a 200-seat auditorium. We called them double-naught rooms in the South, because the room numbers ended with 00. Once upon a time, the university had decided to paint Ian’s office. Ian protested the two-week eviction, complaining he couldn’t possibly survive
even one week without an office. The famous Dr. Huckleby was, to be polite, formidable. The Dean of Arts and Sciences, hoping to avoid a fruitless argument and still get the department painted, suggested he find an empty classroom and take it over for a few days.

The dean meant one of the small, seldom-used graduate workrooms on the top floor. Ian Huckleby had another idea. He took over classroom 700, one of the auditoriums. The dean never protested. Why bother? It would only be a week, two at most, and well before classes started. Three years later, Ian was still there. “Finally, after all these years,” he’d told me once, smiling with smug satisfaction, “the University has seen fit to give me a decent-sized office.”

Every so often, the university still tried to get him to move. It never worked. By the time he taught John and me, they’d pretty much given up. The place was Ian’s.

What an astonishing, cavernous room! He’d filled every nook and corner with the most amazing stuff you can think of, and plenty more besides: a cigar store Indian, an Egyptian sarcophagus, magician’s equipment that had once belonged to the famous Dr. Twilight herself, statues, an Arabian astrolabe, dinosaur bones, hats, paintings, telescopes, a full-immersive TV and sound system, broken pottery from cities long dust, old stage props, and art and artifacts from every corner of the globe. And books. Millions of books. I should know; I’d borrowed dozens of them myself. Ian’s desk dominated the front of the room where the speaker’s podium should be. I had no idea where he’d found that gilded monstrosity (I’d always suspected that he’d hijacked a delivery meant for the University president) but it suited him.

“How now,” he added with a wink, “how does that sound?”

John and I grinned again. He had us hooked.

“I’ll bite,” I said. “What kind of treasure?”

“It begins,” said Ian, “with a family called the Sinclairs of Scotland, and an organization called the Knights Templar.”


Ian looked at me and quirked an eyebrow. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “yes.”

“The movie star?” John looked at me, surprised. I shrugged uncomfortably, wishing suddenly that I hadn’t blurted the question out.

“The actress,” Ian confirmed with a nod. “Although these that I speak of would be her ancestors from several generations back. Centuries, in fact. Hers is a very old and important family. Why do you ask?”

I found myself shifting in my seat, and hoped neither of them noticed my flush. A change of subject seemed in order. “Um, those other guys. Knights who?”

“Knights Templar,” John echoed. I’ve read about them, although I can’t for the life of me remember the context. I seem to recall them having something to do with the Crusades, but I’d swear I also remember them connected to Scotland somehow.”

“Right on both counts,” Ian said. “The Knights Templar were formed in the Holy Land around the time of the Crusades, and, became one of the wealthiest and most powerful organizations in the medieval world. And one of the most mysterious. Their might and influence rivaled kings, and even the church itself.”

“Wow,” I said. “They sound fascinating.”

“I glad you think so,” Ian said. “Reading up on them is your assignment. Tell your cohort here what you learn, why don’t you.” He wandered back to a bookcase and selected several volumes. “Start with these,” he said. Ian plopped the books down on my desk. “Three men named Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln wrote the top one, The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail. Another was a binder of printouts, a translation of an ancient Gnostic Christian document called The War Between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness.”

“I will,” I promised.

“Good man.” Ian went back to his desk and stuffed more tobacco in his pipe. “Now then.
In the meantime, to make a long story short, the Knights Templar rose rapidly to rival the great powers of their day, church and state. They possessed great treasure, unimaginable wealth. Surprising, for a group sworn to poverty. One of their many mysteries, as you'll discover. This mysterious military and religious group was established during the Crusades—as Mr. Fitzroy pointed out. For their headquarters, they chose the site of the original Temple of Solomon, a place where they’d apparently discovered a great secret. This secret is said to be greater even than the sum of all their treasure."

“Jeez,” said John. “What was it?”

“You,” said Ian, “are interrupting my lecture.” He took a moment to relight his pipe.

“Sorry,” said John, grinning.

“Anyway,” said Ian. “As I mentioned, the Templars grew to be one of the wealthiest and most powerful organizations in the known world, until King Phillip the Fair and his puppet pope managed to dissolve the order.”

“Why?” I asked, curious.

“That,” said Ian, “is a very great puzzle. One I mean for you to explore in your reading. Oh, they found some excuse or another. Blasphemy. Rumors of Satanic ritual. That sort of thing. Also, King Phillip the Fair owed them a great deal of money. To continue. Their mighty order dissolved, the Templars were hunted down and slaughtered or imprisoned. Some of them managed to escape, however, and the treasure—or secret—they were supposed to have possessed disappeared.”


“As you just guessed,” said Ian, “the surviving Templars hid in Scotland, where they helped Henry St. Clair—an ancestor of the object of young Daniel’s infatuation, Miss Madeleine Sinclair—build the Rosslyn Chapel, a mysterious structure we’ll be learning more about. The descendants of Henry St. Clair became the Grand Masters of the now-hidden Templar order. But danger circled all around them. They needed a new center, some place safe. Someplace secret.”

“Where did they go?” asked John.

Ian grinned again. “Glad you asked. The Sinclairs wanted a new land to set up the perfect Templar government—and to hide their great and secret treasure. So, with the help of two brilliant Venetian sea captains, the Templars sailed to Nova Scotia in the 14th Century—nearly one hundred years before Columbus.”

John and I both gaped appreciatively.

The professor smiled and went on. “Like another European, a Welsh prince named Madoc.”


“I’m glad you asked that, too,” said Ian, pointing at John with the stem of his pipe. “Because reading about Prince Madoc is your assignment.

John chuckled. “Madoc. Check.”

“Please educate your roommate when you’ve finished. Now then. Back to Henry Sinclair and the last Templars. With some three-hundred colonists, they sailed to North America.”

“Before Columbus!” said John. “Is there evidence of that?”

“Indeed,” said Ian. “For example, they built a tower in Nova Scotia. They raised similar towers in New England, the most famous of which is at Newport. But it’s widely believed that they hid their treasure at the Nova Scotia location—a place called Oak Island.”

“Ah ha!” I exclaimed. “So we get to the treasure at last.”

The professor nodded again. “So we do. And here, my friends, we find a mystery—one no one has yet been able to solve, not in all the long centuries since. Let me tell you a story. It begins
in the year 1795, when a young man found the mysterious so-called ‘money pit’ on Oak Island. This pit is an elaborate, manmade vault that hides ... something. For more than two hundred years, no one has been able to excavate it. Six people have died trying.”

“Good Lord,” said John with an amazed laugh.

“Just listen,” Ian said, his blue eyes shining: “In 1795, the young man I mentioned went walking through the trees of Oak Island. Suddenly, he came across a roughly circular depression in the ground. He noticed a tree standing above it with one branch that had been cut. It seemed to have been used as a pulley. Now, rumors whispered that the island hid buried pirate treasure. Can you imagine how excited this poor lad must have been? Needless to say, he ran off to fetch friends and shovels!

“The next day, the young man and his comrades returned, tools in hand. The digging must have been easy, at least at first. Just a few feet down, their shovels struck rock. As they cleared the dirt away, they found a neatly arranged layer of flagstone covering a circular area some thirteen feet in diameter. Quickly, they pried the stones out, expecting riches.

“What did they find?” John asked eagerly. I shifted eagerly in my chair.

“Only more dirt,” Ian answered. “So they began again. After another eight feet, they hit wood. ‘This is it!’ they must have cried. But they scraped away the dirt only to find a platform of oak logs. They pulled out the logs and resumed their digging. Ten more feet and still nothing. Finally, they hit wood again. But as they cleared the area, they found only another level of oak logs.”

“Oh good God,” John said, laughing. “Now they had to know there’s something good down there!”

Ian ignored the interruption. “Our friends dug another ten feet. Another set of oak boards. They’d now dug thirty feet below the surface. Disappointed, they realized they couldn’t go any further alone.”

“Did they come back?” I asked.

“Yes,” Ian said. He smiled and blew a smoke ring.

“Did they find anything?”

“No,” Ian said. He wandered over to a bookcase on the wall and spun the old moon globe that rested there. The motion raised a little cloud of dust. Ian stroked his goatee thoughtfully, and his eyes held a faraway kind of look. I’d seen him strike that pose before. God, how many times? That is how I’ll always remember him.

“Now,” said Ian, “more than two and a quarter centuries have passed. The pit has been explored to more than 150 feet. The secret it hides is still there, protected by an ingenious booby trap that floods the pit with seawater anytime someone gets close. This is the same sort of engineering found at the Temple of Solomon and, later, the Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland.”

“Wait,” said John. “People are still looking? Even now? And nobody’s found the treasure?”

“Neither strength of arm nor application of technology have been able to beat this puzzle of the money pit,” said Professor Huckleby. “Even the famous Professor Phineas Reilly and his Challengers tried. They failed, just like all the others. Six lives have been lost and millions of dollars have been spent. All for nothing. No one knows what lies at the bottom, or who built it, or why.

“What’s there? What secret is so cunningly concealed?” He grinned. “That, my young friends, is the mystery of Oak Island.”

I whistled. “That is just too darn speed.”

“It seems incredible,” said John, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “How in the world could they have accomplished such ... such an amazing feat of engineering? I mean, way back then?”

“As you will learn,” said Ian, “the Templar Masons were master builders, keepers of the secrets of the mystical construction of the Temple of Solomon itself. Later, I will tell you about
the well and the tunnel systems at Rosslyn.”

“So you think the Templar treasure is there?” I asked. “In this money pit thing?”

Ian puffed his pipe and nodded. “I’m almost certain of it. Arcane symbolism of rocks laid out in the form of a cross marked the spot, a veritable signature of the Templars. Also, Henry St. Clair’s journey is surprisingly well documented, although most of those documents are hardly public. Still, as you shall see this semester, a little historical detective work may reveal some surprising facts.”

John grinned. “And you’ve done the detective work?”

“Some of it. You, my friends, are going to do the rest.”

John laughed again. “Great.” I heard a note of sardonic wit in his tone, but Ian and I both knew him well enough to hear the sincerity behind it. This kind of puzzle was just exactly John’s mug of beer.

“One last question,” I said.

“Quickly,” Ian said. “We still need to discuss the ‘work’ part of this work/study arrangement.”

“What is it? What’s the treasure? Is it the same one that this Madoc dude brought?”

“It is not the same,” the professor said simply.

“What is it, then?” asked John.

“You’re familiar with Wolfram von Eschenbach, aren’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.” John nodded. “From undergrad World Lit. Right? The author of one of the first Holy Grail romances.”

“Just so,” said Ian. “In his great work on the Grail, written in the early 13th Century, he seems to refer, in a sort of code, to secret Templar rituals. We’ll discuss that later on this semester, too. He had a guess about the secret treasure, and I believe he had it right. The lost treasure of the Knights Templar is the Holy Grail itself.”

I sat bolt upright in my seat. For a second, John and I just stared, eyes wide as Frisbees, jaws in our laps. Then we both spoke at once. “Wait a minute!” I said.

“You can’t be serious!” said John.

“But,” Ian said, “we will talk about that later.”

“But—”

“Later,” the Professor said firmly.

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “You can’t leave us hanging like that!”

Ian smiled. “I certainly can. Now then. This semester, the two of you will accompany me on an archeological expedition. We will endeavor to prove the theory correct, that Europeans did indeed visit America long before the time of Columbus.”

“Way fast!” I said. “Are we going to find the secret of the treasure?”

“Oh Heavens no,” said Ian. “Not that one, anyway.”

“Wait a minute, this isn’t about that Oak Island mystery?”

“Of course not. We’ll pursue another secret—albeit one that may well be connected. We’re going to Mobile, Alabama.”

I shook my head. “Mobile? But you said—”

“These are different Europeans,” Ian explained. He puffed his pipe and blew another smoke ring. “The Welsh, in fact, as I mentioned. Not the Scots. Madoc. And he may have hidden a very different artifact.

“So, my boys, are you ready to become treasure hunters?”
Chapter 3

*Dreams and Nightmares*

Susan Myers:

_label me what you will: priestess, lover, warrior, healer, goddess, traitor, enemy, witch. Whatever. I've been called all these and worse things besides. Perhaps they are all appellations that, for better or for worse, belong to me. If you know me at all, it is by another name, a name that belongs to the past. I shall not speak of that now; I wish you to know me first as Susan. Then you can choose whichever you deem appropriate. In the end it doesn't really matter, I think.

Nonetheless.

My mother died when I was very young, and my memories of her are vague at best; warm, gentle butterfly images kept safe in the heart's glass jar. My father, a Presbyterian minister and a Jewish mother (if you'll forgive my use of stereotype as metaphor), did his best raising me on his own, and if I felt suffocated in his care, I lacked for neither love nor sustenance.

As I became a woman, our relationship grew strained; my need for freedom conflicted too often with his need to nurture and protect. The final wound came when I last rejected his religion. I still grieve that I never managed to heal that rift before he died. I have always been a great one for recognizing wounds, but never for healing them. I have Sight, but no hands. Oh, the irony! But the Mother's Wheel spins, so perhaps the Circle will bring us together again, that he may know his daughter's love. This is my prayer, a time for mending.

I first explored the Old Religion in college. I majored in Women's Studies and psychology at Emory University. Fired by my newly discovered ideas of feminism and the mysteries of philosophy, comparative religion, and mythology, I accompanied a roommate to a Wiccan ceremony. She was no pagan, not much of one anyway, just a child experimenting, playing at being a witch. Me too, I suppose. We giggled like schoolgirls for all our snobbish pretensions of enlightenment and intellectual rebellion. They welcomed us anyway. Everyone smiled when we introduced ourselves.

I will not speak of their ritual, for its secrets are theirs to share or not share, not mine. I will say that we gathered by a lake in a wood at midwinter, surrounded by bare trees dense enough to mask the sounds and light of the city around us. The Wiccans brought candles and music, and a full moon blanketed us with gentle silver light. The singing rang sweet and elegant and soft and powerful; what it lacked in polish it made up for in joy. The song of mystery and celebration touched me deeply. At one point, I heard the sounds of drums, a harp, and a low wind instrument, but I never saw the players.

What happened next? Even now, I find it difficult to describe.

It came slowly, not suddenly, but at some point I became aware of, well, a *Presence*. A Presence that surrounded and embraced me, and filled me with a sense of wild, quiet joy, of peace and wisdom, of power and of deep and abiding love.

The Presence (oh, if only I could find a better word!) seemed to me ancient and wise, kind, and definitely female. I opened myself, as best as I could, to this Presence and as I looked out at the lake and my friend and the Circle, I felt something move, awaken and arise, in a secret place deep in my heart. In that moment, I knew what it meant to have a soul.

The leader introduced herself by her Craft name, Lady Raven. When I left, she embraced
me.

That same night, I dreamed of a sword and a cup, both surrounded by golden light. I dreamed of other items as well: a spear, a stone, a cauldron, a dish, a knife—thirteen treasures in all. And yet, all seemed to be reflections of these first two: the spear and knife simulacrums of the sword, the stone and cauldron of the cup. Such is the peculiar logic of dreams. Even then, I knew them to be artifacts of great power, and I knew they held special significance for me. But at the time I understood little of dreaming or the Second Sight, and so I learned nothing else.

I met Elaine Verner in school; Lady Raven (by then, I knew her as Brenda Carter) introduced us. Brenda, for everything, but for this especially, I will always love and bless you.

Elaine taught an undergraduate class called *Comparative World Religion and the Feminine Identity*. By then, I had committed myself to practicing the Pagan religion. I briefly explored various Pagan sects and Circles, Wiccan and otherwise, trying to find the one that felt right for me. Some were large, some were very small and intimate. Some welcomed both sexes; some were women’s Dianic Circles. I learned much from all of them, but for the most part I felt most comfortable on my own.

Until I met Elaine.

How can I tell you what an impact this class, and this woman, wrought on my life? Every session brought the gift of a new defining moment, every class reaffirmed the woman I was growing to be, a celebration of fire and intellect and heart and spirit. I read all her books with wonder and amazement. I went to every single one of her classes in person, never even once settling for merely downloading the immersive. Here I found someone who understood, a kindred spirit, a guide. Here I discovered things I’d long sought without even understanding what I longed for.

What a grand, glorious time! To me, Elaine Verner became … what? Second only in love and wisdom and impact to the Presence I’d encountered by the lake on that cold, moonlit Midwinter’s night. She filled the roles of teacher, mentor, friend, mother, hero, and so much more. When the semester ended, we remained friends.

Autumn is the saddest time of year for me. The colors are so vibrant, but they are the colors of death; everything is dying and I can’t help thinking the violent reds and desperate yellows are a kind of silent scream. The sun is pale in an ashen, lifeless sky. My mother died in autumn.

In another autumn long after, I dreamed a dream, one I had the strangest feeling I had to tell my teacher about. I woke in a panic. I had to talk to her. Right away. I can’t really explain why. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

In the dream I stood by the shore of a lake, again under the gentle, mystical light of the full spring moon. On that holy night, the wind tossed my robes, blue gray like the twilight, whipping them around my body. I’d never seen the lake before, at least not in the waking world, but in the land of dream it felt familiar for all its mystery. It was a place I thought of as home.

Two other women stood with me, one on either side. One wore white, the other black. Others were there as well, but they stood away from us, hidden in the mists on the far shore. The
only sound in the still night, distant music, came from those others. I do not know the song they sang, but I knew it to be a hymn of praise. I felt its joy and holiness resonate in places deep inside me, trembling, deeper than even a lover can reach.

Silent motion broke the stillness. A small barge floated quietly across the lake toward me. Two women in gray robes rowed while another, clad in brown, sat alone at the fore of the barge, as still and straight as she could, given the gentle motion. A cowl and veil covered her head so I couldn't see her face. But in the dream, I knew her well.

When the boat touched the shore, the woman in white moved forward to help the brown-clad woman to the sandy shore, then stepped back to where I waited with the woman in the midnight robe. The new arrival stood alone.

“Come forward, my child.” The voice rang unfamiliar in my ears, but somehow I knew it belonged to me. She obeyed, and when she came before us, she opened her robe and let it slide from her white shoulders. Nude, she knelt at my feet, her head bowed as if in prayer. How young she looked! How small, and how lovely.

“Lady of the Lake,” she said, “I have come.”

“Child,” I spoke again, with that strange voice, “we stand before you as Maiden, Mother, and Crone, as morning, twilight, and evening. Three who are one.” The three faces of the Goddess, Mother of all. “Twice before you have come to us, first as neophyte and then as acolyte. Now, we call you to serve as priestess. Will you serve?”

“I will serve,” said the girl.

“Know,” said the woman in white, “that the path you choose is a path of wisdom and healing, of knowledge and duty. Will you serve?”

“I will serve,” she said again.

“Know,” said the woman in black, “that the path you choose is a path of sacrifice and hardship, of darkness and danger. Will you serve?”

“I will serve.”

I spoke again. “Druan Gwen, Mother of all that is, calls on you in each of her three aspects, Blodeuwedd, flower maiden, Arianrhod, mother and keeper of the cauldron, and Cerridwen, shadow and washer at the ford. Three times you have sworn to serve. Now, by sword and by cauldron and by the will of the secret powers, we will bind you to your oath. Nimuë, come forward.” I let my pride ring out in my voice; I loved this child, my student, as a daughter.

An athame, a double-edged knife, hung by a cord around my waist. I drew it from its scabbard as I stepped toward the child, her trembling, naked body the color of silver in the moonlight. As gently as I could, I reached out and touched the child under her chin with my free hand, lifting her gaze to meet mine.

And then I awoke with a start. In the dream, I called the girl Nimuë, but I knew her eyes, gray and piercing, despite the child’s face she wore. I’d recognized my teacher, Elaine Verner. And even then, still half in the dream state, I found myself struck by our reversed roles. In the dream, I had been the teacher and she the student.

I woke shaking, nearly desperate to talk to Elaine.

All the same, I almost didn’t tell her about my dream. How could I? What on earth would I say? I’d sound like an idiot. And yet, how could I not? I found myself suddenly shy, but a wiser part of me knew that silence would be a kind of betrayal.

If only I had learned that lesson better!

And so I sat down on my couch, folded my legs under me, found my phone card in my purse, and called her. I left the vid on even though I looked like hell, because I wanted to see her.
face and feel the comfort in her eyes.

“Hi, it’s me. Susan. Listen, I just had the strangest dream about you—” No preamble, no small talk.

Elaine heard something in my voice, something akin to wonder and fear, excitement and desperation. She invited me to her home for tea. “Come by, dear,” she said. “Come, and tell me about it.”

And so I went. I made my way to the elegant Druid Hills neighborhood off Ponce de Leon Avenue, and, for the very first time, to that grand old house with its old wood and gray stone, its tower library, and its fine, lovely gardens. When I found her driveway, I almost didn’t stop. When I reached her door, I almost didn’t knock. What if she wasn’t home? What if she was?

She welcomed me with a warm smile and a kiss on the forehead.

And what a place of treasures I found there! Artwork, books, teakettles, woolen quilts, clocks, brass and velvet and old dark wood, not hoarded (does a forest hoard leaves?) but cherished and covered and rediscovered and cherished anew. I loved it at once. I have never, not before or since, felt so comfortable and at home in a strange place.

Almost before I could blink thrice, I was sipping warm tea with milk and honey as I opened my dream to this woman I so loved and respected. And how did Elaine react? So many expressions crossed her face, and so quickly, that I couldn’t begin to count, much less name them. Astonishment, shock, joy, wonder. All of these and more. For the longest time, we sat in silence.

When at last she spoke, she said: “That, Susan, is a significant dream.”

As we talked that night, I learned a lot more about my teacher, about Elaine Verner. I learned that she was much more than a university professor. I learned she was the Lady of the Lake, and as my studies began in earnest, I began to learn what that meant.

We talked; I absorbed it all, memorizing and treasuring every word. I learned of the Goddess, of course, and how to listen to the voice of the wind. I learned secret rituals and magic. Not wishes and nonsense, but the simple, terribly beautiful magics of growing things and healing and the turning seasons. I learned about the Second Sight, and how to understand the images in my dreams. Most of all, I learned the mysteries of the Lake.

Again, those secrets are not mine to share, and I think that I would not share them even if they were. Some things I must tell you, however. As the Lady of the Lake, Elaine led a global church of the Goddess that traces its lineage back, unbroken, to days long before the Romans first trampled the soil of the British Isles. There is a hierarchical organization to the church, though its structure is much looser than those of the more repressive Patriarchal churches. The three high priestesses, one for each of the three aspects of the Goddess, head the order. The three name one chief—the Lady of the Lake.

I began my studies as an initiate, then an acolyte, and finally a priestess-in-training.

“It has been … many years since I saw such potential in one so young,” Elaine said at the beginning. She smiled at me, but for the briefest of seconds I thought I saw something else her eyes, something like worry. She proclaimed before all that I would one day become a high priestess, and my pride grew like a hatchling spreading its wings at last in flight as I learned.

The dreams continued and as I studied, they became even more lucid, more luminous. I knew the Cauldron to be a holy object sacred to the Mother, a thing of wisdom, inspiration, and healing. But the sword drew my attention, the flame, fierce and golden, that calls the moth.

Elaine taught me of the ancient rituals of Sovereignty, when the Goddess chose a king to rule the Land in Her name. In the ritual, the king is “married” to the Land. As he thrives, the Land prospers and blooms; as he declines, the Land withers and dies. The Ritual of Sovereignty is supremely powerful, beautiful and terrible. And yet, it struck me on an even deeper level. Why? Because in dreams I saw myself performing the ritual in some ancient time. I seemed to be much
younger than in my previous dream, the one with the girl called Nimuë, but somehow, in the heart’s deep place were truth dwells, I felt certain that I once again dreamed of the same lifetime.

I knew I dreamed, and yet it felt as real as memory. Fires blazed all around us, making a galaxy of suns in the shadows of the wooded hills, and the wind carried the sweet stench of smoke. In the distance, a youth with golden hair and eyes like moonlight played an old now-forgotten tune, slow and holy, on a harp with strings of silver.

The would-be king, so young, just growing into the strong and clumsy awkwardness of his manhood, came to me, the priestess of the Goddess. The priestesses had painted arcane symbols on his lean and naked body. When he removed his helmet affixed with the antlers of a stag, I saw his dark hair, the thin hairs of his first beard dusting his cheek, and his eyes the color of twilight.

Our coupling was frantic and overwhelmingly beautiful, an act of staggering ecstasy and holy awe because we came together under the stars, surrounded by sacred groves, not as man and woman, but as Goddess and God. And so the Land herself granted Sovereignty to the King.

One last holy event followed.

As a symbol of his authority, the king received a sword. He emerged from the grove where we shared our intimacy and stood at the shore of a lake, the same lake as in my earlier dream. He wore a robe of purple and a gold circlet held his wild, thick curls. An old man stood with him, a man with a long beard white as frost, white as the first snow.

There, at the edge of gentle water, the Lady of the Lake called forth the Sacred Sword of power. Shining with a light like thirty torches, the sword burst forth from beneath the still, glassy surface, held aloft by a woman’s arm, an arm clad in white samite.

I recognized it at once, of course. How could I not know the sword from my earlier dreams? I knew it, the Mother’s Sacred Sword of power, given at Her will, wielded in Her name. Now I learned the sword’s name: Excalibur.

I didn’t speak of this dream to Elaine.

We traveled together, Elaine and me. At lakes and holy wells all around the world, we worshipped. We danced with Native American shamans, whose drums make the soul rumble. We prayed with Christian nuns (this made me uncomfortable, but Elaine found the holiness she saw in their sterile rituals moving) and bells chimed the morning hours. We chanted with Tibetan monks, performed rituals with Wiccans in America, danced through birth and grief rituals with wise women in Africa, and we sang with neo-pagans and druids in Britain and Ireland.

There is something you must understand. Paganism is far from an organized religion. While there are certain similarities and more or less universal characteristics (a reverence for nature, for example), the sects are all independent, sometimes fiercely so. All the same, worshipers everywhere treated Elaine with reverence. I knew all or most of them had some connection with her, with our religion, but most of these ties remained a mystery to me.

I watched, I studied, I asked, I learned.

Often, as I studied with Elaine or others, I felt that I remembered as much as learned. I felt as if I simply reclaimed a part of me, that I rediscovered knowledge tucked away in the dusty cellars and cobwebbed attics of my brain.

My father died in the autumn of that year. At his graveside, I wept for words unsaid, lost now like smoke or whispers.

I started graduate school. Three nights a week I studied with Elaine. Sometimes we worked with others, sometimes we worked alone, just the two of us. And if I knew she held much back from me, what of it? I knew she would speak of everything I needed to hear when I needed to
Soon after, my dreams changed. I saw the holy treasures again—the sword, the spear, the cauldron, and the rest.

Only now, I heard a Voice.

The Voice rumbled low and subtle, a woman’s voice, beautiful but cold. Again, as by the Lake long ago, a feeling of ancient power struck me, like a glacier carving deep rock. It felt different this time, though. The Presence by the Lake had filled me with joy, ecstasy. This Voice, awesome, chilled me, and I remembered the Goddess is Shadow as well as Mother and Maiden. Still, in some strange way I can’t begin to explain, it seemed almost familiar. The Voice spoke of the treasures sacred to the Goddess, especially the sword and the cauldron. I sensed truth so I relaxed and listened. Elaine had spoken of spirit guides, so I welcomed this new Voice.

The dreams continued and always the Voice followed soon after. I began to suspect I’d been chosen for a great and terrible purpose. How arrogant that sounds to me now! But I never doubted the reality of the Voice with its icy, whispered words.

Mostly, I dreamed of the sword. These later dreams, by and large, brought me images and feelings rather than narrative like my dreams of the Lake. That didn’t trouble me. Elaine had taught me to trust my feelings above all.

When I dreamed of the sword, I awoke feeling angry, bitter. More, I felt afraid. I dreamed of betrayal; the king used the sword, but he did not honor the will of the Goddess. The sacrilege both infuriated and terrified me. Finally, I dreamed of another king taking the sword and sailing away, away towards the edge of the world. And then it was lost.

But I also dreamed of the sword in the world again; its light, shining like thirty torches, blazed in some modern city. And somehow, I knew its destiny was entwined with mine. I hungered for it with a longing akin to ache.

I still didn’t tell Elaine of these dreams. If she held her secrets and private agenda close, I did the same. We did so for the best of reasons and with the best of intentions, may the Goddess help us both.

From the images in dreams and from the Voice’s icy whispers, I knew that someone would soon wield the Sacred Sword of power. Once again, it would shape history. It would be my most sacred duty to ensure that its might remained dedicated to the service of the Goddess. For this holy purpose I’d been chosen, the Voice in my dreams had said as much, and for this destiny I dedicated myself anew to my studies. My work with Elaine continued.

Another autumn, another dream.

On the night before my initiation as priestess, my dreaming eyes saw the city, my home city, Atlanta, on fire. I saw rioting, violence, and death. I felt the brutality and anger; decades of hatred, fear, tension, poverty, oppression, and resentment bursting like a boil, vomiting bile on a city unaware of its own rotting, mortal wounds. In my nightmare, I saw children beaten to bloody, broken pulp while looters smashed windows and robbed the fallen. I saw trucks overturned, women raped, and buildings set aflame. I saw – no, more than saw, I experienced violence like war, but worse than war, for I found no purpose in the obscene, wanton destruction.

I woke screaming.

An hour or more passed before I stopped crying. I will write no more of my reactions, for they shame me so. As an acolyte, I should have been able to control my feelings. But dear Mother, the terrible, awful horror of it all!

Elaine. I had to tell her, to warn her. She could do something, I knew it.
Without thinking, I raced downstairs, still in my nightshirt, disconnected my little PET car from the charger and thumbed the ignition to start it. And then I just sat there while the whine of the engine and sounds from the radio made white noise. I didn’t move.

The dashboard clock read just a little after 3:30 in the morning. Elaine would see me, welcome me even. And yet … and yet I didn’t want my teacher to see me in such a state.

I’d had a Viewing. Elaine would have a thousand questions, questions I couldn’t answer. What? Where? When? I had no details. Had I learned nothing of control in my years of study? Despite my gift of the Sight, despite my accomplishments, I had nothing, nothing of any true relevance to relay. I would have to do better.

I cried some more, then made my way back indoors, showered, and dressed myself.

Composed somewhat, I entered my sacred space, my own private place of worship and meditation—a spare bedroom in my apartment that I’d made into a sanctuary. For a few moments, I stood there, finding what comfort I could. I couldn’t calm myself, I couldn’t collect my thoughts. Something to drink first. Water, though I wanted coffee or tea. Or a shot of single malt Irish whiskey.

Cradling my glass like a babe, I made my way to my old couch, wrapped myself in a favorite, threadbare blanket, unrolled the television, and switched it on. That shouldn’t have been a good idea, but strangely, it helped me. In some peculiar way, the horrors on the screen balanced the nightmares within and created a sort of equilibrium.

I found a late night news program on CNN. With the immersive off, flatscreen didn’t draw too much of my attention. Now and again an irritating personalized commercial blared my name and distracted me, but for the most part, I managed to ignore them.

Needless to say, the Julius trial dominated the headlines. The trial, reactions, more commercials, then the trial again. This hateful gyre repeated every fifteen minutes, and I watched it again and again in fascinated horror until it numbed me.

Again and again, I saw Wilson Julius himself, so tall, so beautiful. Taliesin, you asked us to record these accounts, that you may patchwork together a chronicle from our various narratives for posterity. Will “posterity” remember Wilson Julius? It seems impossible to think otherwise, but greater individuals who set greater events in motion have been forgotten, their names and deeds and unremembered causes lost in time. Perhaps, in the end, the people are irrelevant. There will always be another Bloody Sunday, another Black Friday. Selma, Alabama. Kent State. Belfast. Tiananmen Square. The World Trade Center. London. Los Angeles. Who died there? Can you call for me the names of the fallen? No. Only the names of the places.

Wilson Julius, the athlete whose shining natural charisma shadowed even his god-like abilities on the basketball court. When a knee injury forced him to retire at the age of 34, he invested several of his millions in a start-up technology business. How he found the time between Hollywood movies and such I’ll never know, but he quickly built his company into one of the most successful minority-owned businesses in the nation. When Brian Stein’s corporation, SoftTech, purchased his organization, things looked even better. Julius himself received a top management position in the new mega-conglomerate, and Stein promised his employees long-term prosperity.

Then the market changed.

Rather than adapting to evolving conditions, SoftTech made (how else can you say it?) management blunder after management blunder. Accusations flew, and even the great Wilson Julius and the billionaire Brian Stein were not spared.

When the lay-offs began, employees of Wilson Julius’ old company were among the first to go. Because a disproportionate number of Wilson’s employees were black, outraged cries of racism and discrimination exploded across the nation.

In Detroit, an entire operation closed. Two hundred employees were let go. A riot began
and before the fires could be extinguished, twelve people died. Worse followed. Thousands more lost their jobs. Around the world, companies dependent on SoftTech crumbled. In the end, even Wilson Julius spoke out in anger against Stein’s ruthlessness. Two days later, SoftTech “downsized” Wilson himself.

That same day, the cleaning crew found Stein brutally murdered in his Atlanta office. The evidence against the one suspect—Wilson Julius—seemed overwhelming.

But strangely, as the world watched the trial with morbid fascination, a people’s hero emerged. The Wilson Julius archetype metamorphosed from a bungling, hapless mismanager into a champion of the common man.

“Free Julius!” rang out on street corners and appeared in spray-paint on subway walls.

The public, outraged or merely curious, scooped up more than two million copies of his prison-written book. A mob attacked two white Atlanta police officers rumored to have been involved in the Julius arrest. One died from his injuries. Ironically, neither had been even remotely involved in the case.

As the trial continued, tensions rose. The violence escalated, but everyone felt that they’d merely witnessed the beginning, distant thunder before the storm. They were right.

The trial drew to a close the day I had my dream, the day before I became a priestess. The world watched the broadcast of the closing arguments over the next few days. Everyone knew the deliberations would continue for weeks. And what then? What would happen when the jury returned their verdict? The news commentators could only speculate.

But I knew. I had seen it all in a dream.

That led me to the hard question: what could I do?

Elaine expected me that evening for our regular class and the ceremony to follow. Okay. She would know what to do. But before I went to her, I needed information—times, places, key people. To find those facts, I had to face the apocalypse of my dream again. Not asleep, but awake and aware, in a vision-state, just as Elaine had taught me.

I pulled myself away from the sofa and the television, returning to my sacred space. Observing the formality of the ritual, I lit candles and placed them in their proper positions. I carefully unwrapped my deck of old, slightly tattered tarot cards from their silk wrapping and shuffled them six times, and three times more for luck. Then I cut the deck three times with my left hand, the precision of the acts serving as a focus, a meditation. I felt my mind clearing, my pulse calming.

For a few minutes more, I practiced breathing exercises, my right hand resting gently on the cards, focusing and relaxing. Slowly, I felt my mind reach another state, sleep-like but intensely aware. Then I dealt the cards.

There is no special magic in the cards themselves; they have no enchantment or other such foolishness. So why do I use them? As a centering exercise, certainly. The careful ritual of finding a pattern in the images on the cards, such primal archetypes, opens the more powerful parts of the mind, focusing the Second Sight. But that’s not all. There is meaning in the random fall of the images, a story to be found. The universe is structured in such a way that needed information presents itself to those who open their eyes and see. Carl Jung called it synchronicity, meaningful coincidence. Wiccans call it magic. Use whichever label makes you most comfortable.

I decided to use the old, traditional Celtic Cross spread, the tried and true, the familiar. The first card would be the significator. It’s not the usual way, but I decided to choose a random card. Usually, this first card represents a person, the one asking a question. Would it represent me? No, the city itself, the place where the violence would occur—the significator can also represent the matter questioned.

With that in mind, I placed the first card. I turned it over, revealing the Tower. The
Tower! A card of unforeseen catastrophe. There are many interpretations of this card, but Arthur Edward Waite's came immediately to mind—misery, distress, indigence, adversity, calamity, ruin. Not a good omen, but distressingly appropriate. Unbidden, terrible images from my dream flooded my mind—the burning, the metallic stink of violence.

The second card, placed over the first, shows the nature of obstacles relating to the problem. “This crosses the matter,” I said as I placed the second card. The Moon. Beautiful and mysterious, usually this is one of my favorite cards. A card of reflection, illumination and secret knowledge. But again Waite's interpretation came to mind. Hidden enemies, danger, darkness, terror.

Quaint, antiquated old Waite. Had I ever used his definitions in a reading? I thought not. Still, I knew enough to listen when a thought, feeling, or idea came so forcefully to mind in a ritual. So I opened my mind to the signification, and let it tell me what it would. At once certain knowledge, more than mere images, filled my mind. Hidden enemies. Someone, some force, manipulated violence in the near future, quietly pushing people and pulling events like hidden puppeteers.

I placed the third card above the first two, saying, “This crowns the matter.” The third card represents the ideal in the matter, the best that might happen. The ten of swords, pain, affliction, tears, sadness. Ouch. Did this mean my warning would be too late?

I remembered, also, that Waite gave an alternative divinatory meaning for this card: treason on the part of friends.

I placed the fourth card beneath the first two, saying, “This is beneath the matter.” Influences in the past, factors that have already passed into reality. I flipped the card, revealing the Devil, ravage, violence, extraordinary effort.

Again, sudden, intuitive knowledge filled my mind. It came to me like a discovery, or like an abruptly uncovered memory long repressed. I saw struggle, an age-old battle between Light and Darkness. I knew in that moment that Elaine, my friend and teacher, stood at the heart of this struggle. She did not fight alone, but she stood above the others, a leader, a general. At last I saw a hint of the secret agenda I had sensed in her long ago.

I placed the fifth card to the left the first two. Matters of the past. The Chariot, reversed, a card of war.

I focused on the image, and my knowledge of Elaine’s struggle deepened. It seemed impossible, but I suddenly knew of the centuries old struggle between Elaine’s organization (for lack of a better word) and their ancient enemy. Now and again, perhaps once in a millennium, the time came when one side or the other could win a decisive victory and shape the age to follow. Thus I sensed the secret history of the world. I knew that the time drew swiftly upon us, falling like shadow.

Battle seemed inevitable to me, like the turning of the seasons, like the cycle of life and death itself. I knew that the horrors in my dream augured but the first of many terrors and sorrows to follow, and I trembled with fear, unspeakable and relentless, like the darkness of the sea that covers a drowning woman.

In a dispassionate part of my awareness, the number of major arcana cards appearing in this ritual struck me; I realized that I had dealt a significant reading indeed.

I placed the next card to the right of the first two, opposite the fifth. “This is before the matter,” I said. Influences coming to be, actions that will operate in the near future. The Ace of Swords. I did not need to consult Waite for the meaning of this card. I had seen it in my dreams as clearly as I did in my mind at that moment—the Sacred Sword of the Goddess, its power coming again into the world. So the coming battle centered around the Sword.

I turned the final four cards up in succession and placed them one above the other in a line to the right of the cards already spread. The seventh card relates again to the matter questioned.
The Nine of Swords, death, failure, delay, and deception. Again, I saw images of the violence in Atlanta and knew it came rapidly, far sooner than expected. The fall of night advanced much faster than Elaine and her friends suspected. A part of me wondered, why here, why now? Why Atlanta? I found no answers.

I turned the eighth and ninth cards, revealing the Six of Cups, the future, that which will come to pass presently, and Five of Pentacles, reversed, disorder, chaos, immediate ruin. The positions represented the house, or immediate environment, and hopes and fears respectively.

My most urgent thoughts revolved around two crucial questions—when and how? I scarcely noticed the cards. Instead, I focused on the answers they opened in my mind. The riot would happen, it would happen almost at once. A week perhaps, no more.

People would die.

From the next room, I heard sounds from the television. I’d forgotten to shut it off. The news repeated the story about the Julius trial. Suddenly, I had my answer. The verdict would be announced soon, very soon, and then the dam would burst.

Even then, I grasped some small hope. I could warn Elaine. Armed with this knowledge, she would take what action she could. Perhaps she could turn the violence into a kind of victory. At worst, she would lessen the damage. I had no doubt she had the resources to do so.

That’s when the Voice came to me again.

“No, my child. You will not speak to the Circle of Three. That which must come to pass will come to pass. The Wheel must turn.”

My mind grew fiercely alert, but remained in its altered state of consciousness, the state akin to sleep. From the very root of my soul, I heard the Voice that before had spoken only in dreams as clearly as I heard the television in the next room.

Inside, silently, I screamed. No! Oh, so much death, such pain! I spoke no words; I protested with more basic, primal emotions, with raw hurt and terror, icy and searing.

“It must be so.” The words stabbed my heart, chilly daggers. “Hear the words of the Goddess, who is the Washer at the Ford foretelling the death of warriors. Who is the crow that feasts on the slain where they fall. Who is Crone as well as Mother and Maiden. The struggles between Light and Darkness are but turnings of the Wheel.”

My mind reeled, horrified, sickened.

“Child,” the Voice said, fading back into the darkness, “as leaves must die in autumn, so must this battle occur. Speak not, but remember the purpose for which you are chosen. When the Sword of Power returns to this world, reclaim its might for me. The time draws nigh.”

And then it left me, alone and shivering.

Trembling, I turned over the final card to close the reading. Death—a dark knight on a pale horse, his face an empty, glaring skull.
Mark McBride:

I couldn’t sleep after the nightmare, so I dragged myself out of bed with almost an hour to spare before I was supposed to pick up Daniel and John at the university—giving me time for a fast shower before I pulled on some jeans and a Hawaiian shirt. As I grabbed my coat, I heard the sound of Tom’s guitar drifting down from the attic room, so I decided to pop up and check on him.

I paused halfway up the stairs and listened. Tom drifted song to song, bits and pieces of melody that faded one into another; Classical Gas, a line or three from a Stan Rogers ballad, some Billy Fisher tunes, a little Jimmy Buffett, some old Irish jigs or airs or reels (I still can’t tell the difference), and finally some of his own stuff. I absolutely love listening to Tom when he’s just fooling around like that, but he hardly ever does it when he knows somebody’s around. Too bad.

Wait, I totally should tell you about our housemate, Tom Lewis. Tom is good. I mean really, really damn awful good. I swear to God, you can listen to him fooling around with one of his guitars, his mandolin, a penny whistle, that old harp of his, or anything else he happens to pick up, and he can make you feel—Jesus, anything. He can make you want to laugh, dance, or cry your eyes out, sometimes all at the same time. You know? When he plays, there’s a power in the room. It jumps out from him and passes, heart to heart, like blood or electricity.

I hated to interrupt, but I’d be late if I didn’t get a move on, and while none of our favorite haunts were especially likely to run out of beer, well, why take a chance? I went the rest of the way up and knocked on the frame of his open door.

I found him sitting on his bed, still picking at the guitar strings, riffing on an old country Gospel song I felt I should know. The late evening light came through his window and fell on him like a spotlight, warm and smiling. I noticed again his striking blond hair, almost white, and the shining green of his eyes. He wore his gold wire-rimmed John Lennon glasses, an old white tee shirt, a leather vest, faded jeans, and boots. He winked a hello at me.

“Hey, man,” I said. “You taking requests? Know any Dog Lost?”

He laughed. “You a crash head, amigo?”

I sent the grin back at him. “It’s just been a while since I’ve heard you play anything, like, from this century.”

Tom grinned, taking my teasing for a challenge, and launched into Baby You Can Pop My Zits, a stone crash rock song just starting to get passed around—only he played the familiar tune in a classical guitar style. Then he shifted it a little, now playing it as a jazz melody, complex and smoky, like old whiskey, smoothed by time. Before I realized he’d shifted again, it became an classic style rock tune, and then an old-fashioned speed metal riff. Finally, his grin widened as he banged it out loud, stone crash-style. His fingers danced across the frets and strings so fast they became a blur.

He finished with a flourish, and gave me another grin. “Satisfied?”

I clapped. “Pretty damn close to amazing.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased,” Tom said smugly. “Drop the gauntlet any time. So, did you come up here for anything other than to criticize my musical taste?”

“Matter of fact,” I said. “Look, me and Daniel are heading out for beers tonight. I’m pretty
sure John’s coming. Wanna join us?”

   “Are we to go a’prowling then? Sounds fast to me.”
   “I’m off to pick ‘em up. Want to ride along?”
   “Actually, if I can impose on your spontaneity enough to get you to pick a spot now, I’ll
meet you. How ‘bout the Commonwealth?”
   “Well, we’re getting pizza first. Daniel’s buying.”
   Tom’s eyebrows arched towards the fine hair that fell over his forehead. “Wow, a first. I
can’t miss that.”
   “No way. So Athens in Decatur? Say between seven-thirty and eight? Maybe we can hit the
pub afterwards.”
   “Sounds like a plan.”
As I closed his door, tiptoed down the stairs, Tom started playing again, a medley he’d
worked up out of two old folk favorites: Will the Circle Be Unbroken? and Harry Chapin’s Circles.
He started singing when he got to the line that says:
   “there’s no straight lines make up my life, and all my roads have bends …
there’s no clear cut beginnings, and so far no dead ends.
All my life’s a circle ….”
I closed the front door behind me, silencing the chorus.
Something damn strange happened as I left.
A car parked on the street across from the Castle pulled out right behind me as I circled
around to the main road. I couldn’t miss it—a jet-black luxury car, gasoline engine for chrissakes,
full size. It paused at the end of the street, and didn’t move again until I started the Mustang.
I made my way over to Ponce de Leon and headed into town. When I turned south on
Juniper, I thought I saw it again, that same black landboat of a car. Like there could be two of
them. When I looked to make sure, it had vanished. I shook my head.
I drove those last couple of blocks and managed to luck into a prime parking space in the
new decks right near the General Classroom Building. I had a few minutes after all, so I figured
I’d head on in and see if I couldn’t track down my pals.
As I got out, I spotted it again—the black car turned the corner just ahead of me. Daniel
says I’m just being retroactively paranoid, but even back then I had the strangest damn feeling
that car had been following me.

[Music]

   I found my roomies saying good-bye to their professor. Daniel saw me and waved.
   “Well,” Professor Huckleby said, “I see your third Musketeer has come to claim you. Since
I have this tedious paperwork to drop off at our learned dean’s office before I make my way home,
I’ll bid you good night.”
   I’m smiling a little as I write this. My parents divorced when I was way young, and Dad
was already doing his missionary work. I didn’t see too much of him after that. I didn’t see much
of Mom, either, because she had to work just about all the time. I never had any brothers or
sisters. In fact, I never had much of a family life at all—not until I moved into the Castle. But no
brothers were ever closer than we were. Which is a little funny, I guess, when you think about our
differences.
Daniel and I had the most in common, I suppose. He stood about my height, tall, but not
quite as tall as John. Daniel had thick and wavy hair, like mine, although my shade of brown is
lighter, close to blond. John wore his dark—almost black—hair longer than Daniel and me. He
had a paler complexion, although of course not even Daniel tanned like me. John, he had the look
of a man who liked to take his walks in a moonlit forest rather than a sunny beach. Me, I’d take the beach any day of the week and twice on Sunday. I guess you could say we call us night and day, John and me, with Daniel somewhere between us. But despite our differences, or maybe because of them, I loved them both, and Tom too.

“So,” said John, “we ready?”

“Um, in a minute,” Daniel said. “I have to run down to the newspaper office real quick. I’m gonna send a fast e-mail. On the unmonitored connection, Mark. Uh, if you don’t mind?”

John raised his eyebrows. “Stunt of the week? We don’t want to know, do we?”

“We probably don’t,” I agreed. I pulled my card out of my wallet, but I held it.

“So it’s the usual,” John said to me. He must’ve been noticing my discomfort. He turned to Daniel and smiled. “You’d better tell us anyway. As the last to see you, we might be accused of being accomplices or something. Aiding and abetting, as it were.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and said, “It’s nothing like that.”

“What is it like?” I prompted.

Daniel sighed. “Okay, dammit. I’m going to weasel my way into an interview with Madeleine Sinclair.”

I stifled a laugh. John shook his head with surprise. “The actress? You’re kidding, right?”

“She’s got a new movie coming out,” said Daniel. “I’m asking for an invitation to the advance screening and press conference, as well as an opportunity for a one-on-one interview.”

“Daniel,” John said, “you realize there is no way in the world this is going to work, don’t you? Look, every reporter in the world’s trying to interview this chick. She’s hotter than the sunny part of Hell in August right now. Besides, she lives way over in, like, England, right?”

“Scotland.”

“Whatever,” I countered. “Daniel, she’s related to the frigging Royal Family, for Christ’s sake.”

“She’s going to be in Toronto.”

I shrugged and rolled my eyes again. “At least that’s the same continent, anyway. The freakin’ other end, but the same continent.”

“Little faith, okay? Besides, it’s not quite the other end. Half way, maybe.”

John and I exchanged a glance and rolled our eyes. I don’t know why we even bothered to argue with Daniel. It never did any good.

I sighed and handed him the card. “Okay, but you’re buying the beer,” I said. “And just the one message, okay?”

“Deal.”

“Aventinus,” I added quickly. “I’m not putting my ass on the line for Bud Lite.”

“Only the good stuff.” Daniel chuckled and nodded as he snapped the card into his pad and booted it up. “And no trouble. I’ll be right back.”

He started to leave, but I stopped him. “Hey Daniel.” He turned back to us. “So what’s so hot about this chick? Why do you want to meet her so bad?”

“Huh?” He shrugged and looked away. “Oh, no particular reason, really. It’s just … crap, I don’t know. I’ve always liked getting interviews. You know that.”

“Yeah, but you’ve never gone to this much trouble,” I pointed out.

“I’ve never had to,” he reminded me.

“So,” John said, “we’re delaying the beer for one more celebrity for your interview collection?”

“No! Of course not, man. It’s just … there’s just something about her, okay? C’mon, just look at her. She’s special, you know?”

“So?” John said again.

“Have you ever listened to her talk? Have you ever just, like, listened to the sound of her
voice? God, that accent! But not just that. I mean, it’s more. The things she says … like when she’s being interviewed or something. Those are the things I’ve always wanted to hear.”

“What makes you think she’s going to say them for you?” I grinned, but he ignored the teasing.

“I don’t, Mark. But … Shit. I don’t know. I’ve always thought if we could just meet, she might kind of, you know. Like me.”

Normally, an opening like that wouldn’t slide by without a major league smart-ass slam, but something about the way he looked then stopped me. His eyes were wide and faraway, and he chewed on his lower lip, a habit he’d picked up from John. Somehow, I knew this exercise went beyond one more wild and silly Stunt of the Week for Daniel. I wanted to ask him about it, but to be honest I had no idea what I wanted to say. Before I figured it out, the moment was lost.

“I’ll be right back,” said Daniel. “Okay?”

“Tell you what,” said John. “Mark, how about if you keep him from getting distracted, okay? I’m going to take the chance to run down to the library. Can we meet back here in a few minutes?”

“Deal,” I said. “But make it fast. I’m thirsty.”
Susan Myers:

Night-black ink hemorrhages onto these pages like blood seeping from wounds that have scarcely begun to heal, as if each word I scratch opens them anew. But there is a perverse pleasure in peeling away scabs, isn’t there? Sharp pain and morbid but undeniable satisfaction mixed all together.

I left my apartment in early evening to make the drive to Elaine’s, hurrying a little to make the class we’d scheduled for 7:30. The ritual would follow soon after. When I stepped outside, the clear and startlingly brilliant blue sky surprised me—in my heart, I’d expected the weather to match the mood of the city. There should be thunder, dark and ominous clouds, dramatic meteorological special effects. Only the cold wind spoke of autumn and the coming bitterness of winter. The calm and lovely heavens didn’t soothe me; like old men with sudden pains from long-ago injuries, I knew a storm approached.

The image of the final card from my reading came again to my mind: Death, sudden, dramatic change, the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Mortality and destruction. The image troubled me, the pale knight on his ghostly mount, and I couldn’t force it from my thoughts.

Stopped at a traffic light, I saw a group of young men arguing. The oldest of them couldn’t have been more than seventeen. One of them wore an ear bleeder, and the 3D cone of the music they played—violently loud nail pound or stone crash stuff—was wide enough to surround and rock my little PET.

The shouting grew more intense. I heard anger over the pounding music, even if I couldn’t make out the words. One boy pushed another, and he pushed back. One fell hard to the pavement. The pedestrians in the area backed away. I saw a mother with a child turn and run.

The light turned green and I sped away as fast I could—just as the shoving exploded into violence. Should I have interfered? What could I have done? Probably nothing, of course. But to this day, despite all I have seen, the memory haunts me.

Traumatic change, endings and beginnings.

The calm sky mothered lightening. The storm had already begun.

I found cars parked in front of Elaine’s house. Not the few I’d expected, but dozens. Once, nearly a year before, I had driven to Elaine’s for a Midwinter celebration. On that cold night, I’d been forced to park nearly three blocks away and collapse my car to fit a space, so many revelers had arrived before me. I found as many cars now as then, or more. Puzzled, I found a spot and made my way to her door. My stomach did an unpleasant little dance in my belly as I walked.

I found the door open so I let myself in. Sounds led me to the great room, not laughter and pleasant chatting, but low murmuring, serious business. I found Elaine surrounded by others seated or standing in her great room, thirty or more.

I felt my eyes widen with surprise. Some I knew at once—Ginny Taylor, the Nobel Prize-
The Widening Gyre

winning author, Samuel West, the senator, Cynthia Thomas and Bradford O’Donnell, both members of Congress. My heart gave a little leap when I recognized Cynthia Thomas. She was a woman I’d long admired; I’d once volunteered for her campaign. I recognized the short, balding man as a minister, one who ran a soup kitchen in the inner city. I’d seen him on the news. I also noticed a doctor, one I’d seen at Emory University. Jeff Robinson, chief of police. Jenny Silverheels, the famous Native American wise woman, adventurer, and activist. An artist spoke to an actor. Damn! I should know them both. An Asian woman in a military uniform looked vaguely familiar.

I found my old friend Brenda Carter. Thank the Mother, a friendly, familiar face!

And then I saw Billy Fisher, the Billy Fisher. Tall, black, handsome, larger than life. I heard that marvelous, distinctive voice of his, like the actor Morgan Freeman from those old flat films. It thrummed across the room, seducing my ears long before I saw him. My jaw dropped. Folk rock musician, activist, poet, and humanitarian, Billy Fisher had been an idol of mine for as long as I could remember. In high school, I’d had a poster of him on my bedroom wall. In times of great strife and confusion, his voice calmed and soothed, his songs touched generations. Forgive me if I gush. If you know Billy Fisher at all, even if you’ve just heard the few cuts the streams overplay, you know such praise is well deserved. And he was here. Here! Here at Elaine’s house.

Strangely, I saw none of Elaine’s own religious Circle, save for Elaine herself and Brenda.

When I stepped into the room, conversation came to a halt, a sudden quiet loud as thunder. All eyes turned to me. I stood there silently in awe, mouth open, not knowing where to look, how to move. And then Elaine swept to my rescue, embracing me and leading me into the warmth of the Circle. “My friends,” Elaine said, “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Circle of Three, let me present my dear student, Susan Myers, on this her special day. Today, she will take her place as a member of our Order.”

Everyone greeted me with welcoming smiles and warm handshakes. I did my best to return their salutations with calm poise as befits a priestess. Even when Brenda introduced me to Billy Fisher himself. Billy Fisher! But questions raced and whirled though my mind.

Order? What Order? I’m supposed to join these people? What are their aims, their purpose?

I knew they didn’t all practice our religion; I recognized the tall one in the sweater as James Grantham, a prominent Christian evangelist, and another as an Eastern spiritualist from Tibet. Goddess, I should know his name! And Billy Fisher himself—he’d been a Christian missionary in his native South Africa at one point.

I liked these people at once. Some of them I’d admired for years. But images from my dreams of Christians taking the Goddess’s Sacred Sword even while turning from Her ways tormented me. The sacrilege from my night visions horrified me. My hand reached up to touch my breast, as though the gesture could soothe my troubled heart and still my perplexed mind. Why were people not of our religion gathered here? Especially tonight?

Seeing my confusion, Brenda and Elaine steered me from the room and let me gather myself in a quiet parlor. Elaine poured me a tall glass of ice water. I’d rather have had a mug of tea, but such is not appropriate before a ritual. Before she left me, Elaine bent and kissed me on the forehead. “Susan,” she said, “I must return to my guests. We have urgent business to discuss.”

“Elaine—”

“Shh … hush, Dear. Drink your water. Today you will join us. As a priestess. But first you have a class to attend! You still have so very much to learn, and so little time to learn it all. But oh my child, listen carefully, for this final class is the most important one of all. Brenda will be your teacher. Listen to her, my dear, listen with all that you are.”

And then she left me.

We sat quietly together, Brenda and I, making small talk while I finished my drink.
I never knew my grandmothers; both died before I was born. That’s why now, when I think of grandmothers, I think of Brenda. She was sixty-something when I met her, but she looked younger. She wasn’t tall, no more than my own five foot three, plump but not fat, and she had a kind, wise face, the face of a woman who has known joy and sadness and dealt with both as well as she can. In memory, her eyes are always smiling.

The silence of all we didn’t know how to say was uncomfortably loud, but Brenda’s smiles and pleasantries comforted me.

Twenty minutes later, we walked along the shores of the small, calm lake behind Elaine’s house. In the last of the afternoon light, I saw others of our Circle, tiny shadows in the distance, preparing the altar and readying wood for fires by the shore. If they spoke, I could not hear them. Winter cold hushed the forest, and the wood around the lake gentled the sounds of the city around us. There, by the edge of still water, Brenda told me about the Circle of Three.

“Look around you,” Brenda said. “Not here, look out at the city, the world. Everywhere, there’s violence, needless death, poverty, and despair. Do you understand me? Susan, these are the tools of the Dark. Every time a child starves in a world which can feed itself a dozen times over just with the wasted scraps of a single day, the Dark grows stronger. Every time a woman is raped or abused, every time one man kills another in anger or hatred or desperation or fear, it is their victory. Susan, these are more than symptoms of a wounded society. These are the signs of the Dark, of forces that have been at work, gnawing at the very life roots of humanity since the dawn of civilization. Their tools are violence, hatred, want, and ignorance. The last one most of all.”

“But you talk about them like a … a physical entity, some kind of … supernatural conspiracy or something.”

Brenda stopped walking and raised her eyebrows. “Well, because that’s exactly what they are.” She sighed before she resumed her pace. “Oh, my dear, I wish I knew a gentler way to tell you this! How I wish I could find comforting words.”

I took her hand. “Thank you,” I said, grateful for the concern and compassion I saw in her eyes. Hand in hand we walked, finding what comfort we could in the contact. Her hand felt warm in mine.

“Susan, a conspiracy nests behind many of the events we know as history, everything from the fate of nations to forgotten murders in a dark city alley. It has existed for more than twenty centuries and quite probably much longer. It has manipulated religions, twisted scientific discovery, promoted division, and spread hatred and oppression and despair like some hideous cancer. It is evil, Susan.”

“Brenda, what you’re saying is … incredible.” I shook my head as I walked. “I just can’t believe that … that all of society’s ills are the work of some ancient evil organization.”

“Oh, of course they aren’t, dear. We humans are quite capable of damning ourselves without any outside help, it seems.” She sighed again. “But even still, the Dark is real, fanning those fires they find, igniting others for their own objectives. Destroying, corrupting, and tearing down that which is beautiful and noble.” She bowed her head and muttered. “Damn them all, anyway!”

Brenda paused for a moment and looked out at the trees as she collected her thoughts. Then she gave my hand a squeeze and we started walking again.

“For more than twenty centuries, the Circle of Three has opposed them,” she explained, and I heard her trying to hide the pain in her voice. I looked at her as we walked, but she didn’t meet my gaze. “My own family has long been a part of it, even though it has cost us so terribly much. Elaine, as Lady of the Lake, heads one of the three branches of the Circle. As surely as our
Church worships the Goddess, Mother of all, so too we join with the other branches in the centuries-old struggle against the Dark.”

A thousand questions troubled my mind. If anyone else, save Elaine or Brenda, had told me these things, I would have laughed and suggested they learn their history from some source other than supermarket tabloids or the Conspiracy Channel. But it was Brenda. Using the gifts she and Elaine had helped me nurture and develop, I heard the truth in her words.

And yet, for all my training, for all my visions, I found myself totally unprepared for the hideous reality of it all when it fell on me like a curtain. In a secret place inside me, I wanted to wail like a babe, tossed, battered, broken. Fear made me weak, it made me tremble. The shadows beneath the trees hid nightmares; every sound echoed like the scream of some demon leaping to attack.

Brenda squeezed my hand again. “Poor Susan. I can imagine what this must be like for you, to hear all of this, all at once.” I heard the love in Brenda’s voice, and I squeezed her hand so she would know my gratitude. “I learned little by little, slowly. How must it be for you, to suddenly be a soldier in a war you never even knew raged around you?”

When I found my voice at last, I said: “Frankly, it sucks.” We laughed together.

We walked. We talked some more. I asked questions and Brenda did her best to answer them, calmly and patiently. “Those people at Elaine’s, they are this Circle of Three?”

“Those are but a few, some of the leaders if you will. There are others, many hundreds of thousands, all across the world.”

“That many!” The scope amazed me.

“So few,” Brenda replied, “against the tide of Darkness. A dam of twigs against a flood.”

“You mentioned three organizations that make up the Circle of Three. Tell me of the others?”

“The other branches are the Pendragons and the Temple of Secrets. Sir Bedwyr, the last of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table, formed the Pendragons after the fall of Camelot.”

“Wait a minute. King Arthur? Camelot? But that’s just a myth!”

“Is it?” Instantly, I knew otherwise. Had I known before? Quite probably. But in that moment I became suddenly cognizant of the knowledge. Camelot. Again, images from my dreams flooded my awareness. The boy with the helmet affixed with the antlers of a stag, fires blazing all around us. The boy to whom I made love as the avatar of the Goddess, the one granted Sovereignty by the Land herself. Afraid, I forced the images from my mind.

“I wish,” said Brenda in a soft whisper, “that all such sorrows were but the stuff of myth.”

For a while longer, we walked quietly. When at last she spoke again, she said, “The Pendragons survived as ... well, a secret order of Christian warriors since the fall of Camelot. For centuries, they used the might of the king’s sword, Excalibur, until the last Pendragon carried it across the sea.”

Of course! The other king from my dreams, the one who fled with the Goddess’ sword.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What d’you mean, the last Pendragon? I thought you said their organization had survived?”

Brenda laughed. “Oh dear me, this is confusing, isn’t it? The Pendragon is the leader, the king granted Sovereignty by right of the Sacred Sword. The Pendragons, plural, are his followers, the organization. There has been no Pendragon since Prince Madoc in the twelfth Century. But the order itself continues in secret, opposing the Dark when they can. And waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” I felt certain I knew the answer.

“For a king to come again, and wield the sword in the name of the Light.”

Just as the voice in my dreams had said. The Sacred Sword is coming again into this world. The time draws nigh.
“When?” I was proud of my calm voice.

“I don’t know,” Brenda admitted. She sighed. “But soon. Elaine, and others who can read the signs, say the time will be very, very soon. There is a cycle … every two-thousand years or so, there comes a time when the world is in a state of flux. This is the cycle William Butler Yeats spoke of in his poem *The Second Coming*. Do you know it?” I nodded. “At such times, there is some great event, a happening so significant that it shapes the ages to come. The battle between Light and Darkness reaches a climax. Both sides hope to seize the moment, the point of change, and channel it to their own ends. And thus shape the age to follow.”

I frowned. Brenda raised her eyebrows, afraid she’d given me too much to absorb all in a go. After a moment, I nodded, and then we continued our walk. “What happened before?” I asked her. “Two-thousand years ago, I mean.”


“And this … this war has continued from then till now?”

“It has. The cost has been more dear than you can imagine, my heart. The pain is so terribly great, and the wounds won’t ever heal. But it comes to a climax at last. The final battle comes soon.”

“What will happen?”

Brenda smiled, a sad smile, and quoted Yeats:

> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

“And—” How should I ask this? “Is this Circle prepared?”

Brenda sighed. “Some think so. That we have done all we can until the Pendragon comes. Others feel that if we sit and wait until it is too late, all will be lost.”

“Then there is dissension in the ranks.” I forced a smile.

Brenda didn’t acknowledge my feeble attempt at levity. A moment or two of awkward, uneasy silence followed.

“So tell me,” I said. “What about the third branch?”

“The Temple of Secrets.” Brenda smiled again. “That’s not an official name, but it’s one we all use. I think, as you learn more, you’ll agree it suits them. Billy Fisher leads them.”

“What do they do?”

“They are the most mysterious of all, even to us. But I’ll try to tell you a little, okay? What little I know, anyway. There must be a king, one granted Sovereignty. A king married to the Land in the old way. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes,” I said, remembering my dreams.

“Yes, I believe that you do.” Brenda nodded slowly, her eyes looking deeply into mine. Then she turned her gaze to the trees and the lake. “As the king thrives, the Land blossoms. As long as the king is strong, the Dark cannot draw strength from it, they cannot bleed the Land’s vitality for their own ends.”

Magic. I knew Brenda spoke of dark magic. The king’s mystical bond with the Land somehow blocked the Dark from drawing power for their own workings.

“Is Billy Fisher the one?” I asked.

“Yes,” Brenda said. “He is.”

“Then why must the Circle wait for a Pendragon?” We neared the opposite shore of the lake. I could see, pale in the distance, the lights from Elaine’s home. They seemed small and very far away. We came to a grotto where a small stream tumbled over rocks and joined the lake. The music of running water broke the night silence.

“Billy Fisher is the Grail King, a … well, think of him as a spiritual leader. There must also
be a Sword King, too. A leader of a different sort.”

A general, I thought. A general for the coming war.

I disrobed and bathed myself where a rushing stream met the lake. The icy water shocked me to the soul, but it invigorated me at the same time. My senses came awake and alert, and I found myself very, acutely aware of all that surrounded me. Of a bird, startled, taking sudden wing. Of the distant sounds of the city, hushed, almost masked. Of the winter wind racing through naked trees. A sudden sadness struck me. Why can’t all moments be so clear? Why can’t all days seem so overwhelmingly significant? Why can’t we always feel so achingly, astonishingly alive?

Wet and trembling, I arose from the lake. The cold chilled me to the very core; my bones shook and rattled like wind chimes blasted by a tornado. Brenda helped me dry and dress myself in ritual robes, twilight-hued like those from my dreams.

One by one, others of our Circle joined us. Brenda’s husband, Rob Carter, came first. The time of my great ritual had come upon us at last. Together, we began the rites of preparation.

Some while later, I stood at the shore of the lake. A low barge waited at a small dock that extended out over the still water. Three women stood on the far shore, waiting. The fires blazed, bright even in the day’s last pale sunlight.

Rob helped me down to the dock. He walked with a cane, one I’d always suspected hid a sword. How that would suit him! The old man carried something of the swashbuckler about him. At that moment, I almost asked him. But I knew better than to talk of plaything swords at that moment. I needed to focus.

Behind us Elaine’s allies waited, the members of the Circle of Three. That bothered me, for they were not of our Circle. Some weren’t even pagans. Rituals are very solemn, sacred things, not stage plays for the entertainment of spectators. “These people shouldn’t be here,” I whispered.

“Shhh, don’t worry, Susan,” Rob said as he helped me don my cowl and veil. He gave me a gentle smile meant to be comforting. “Welcome them in your heart. They are all here in love and light. And they recognize the holiness of the occasion.”

“But—”

“Look, it’s all right,” he said, and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Truly it is. You know as well as I do, Elaine Verner wouldn’t have invited them if they didn’t belong here, right? Remember, the Goddess’ way is one of inclusion and unity, not division and strife.”

I found nothing to argue with in Rob’s words, but they offered no comfort. The sacrilege troubled me deeply. “They should not be here,” I repeated. Nonetheless, I allowed him to help me to the barge. Two women followed. Someone untied the rope, and my two companions pushed us away from the shore. I balanced myself and sat as gracefully I could, given the gentle motion.

The three women stood silently as the little boat touched the sandy bank. Each of the three wore a robe like mine, one wore white, one wore black, and the one in the center wore robes the color of twilight. I knew them all, especially Elaine, the woman in the twilight robes. But I didn’t think of the women I knew, for they stood before me as the Goddess herself. The one in white stepped forward to help me, but I stood again and made my own clumsy way to shore before she could reach me. She smiled, the woman in white did, though whether with pride or amusement I could not say. The two women on the boat pushed away and rowed as quietly as they could back to the dock.

“Come forward, child.” Elaine’s voice echoed in the twilight. The air blew chillier, and the
cold turned her breath to frost. I stepped closer, then opened my robe and let it fall to the ground. Naked and shivering, I knelt at Elaine’s feet.

“Lady of the Lake,” I said, “I have come.”

“Child,” Elaine said, “we stand before you as Maiden, Mother and Crone, as morning, twilight, and evening. Three who are one. You have come to us as neophyte and as acolyte. Now, you are called to serve as priestess. Will you serve?”

“I will serve,” I said, the words echoing through the hollow of my belly like a wisp of déjà vu.

“Know,” said the woman in white, “that the path you choose is a path of wisdom and healing, of knowledge and duty. Will you serve?”

“I will serve.” Goosebumps crawled over my bare flesh.

“Know,” said the woman in black, “that the path you choose is a path of sacrifice and hardship, of darkness and danger. Will you serve?”

“I will serve,” I repeated, and found myself thinking of danger as a wonderful, intriguing thing, intoxicating like strange wine, the exotic sweetness of something forbidden, a thing of the moonlit night. Three times I spoke, and I felt the power of my oath surge through me. I trembled with more than cold as I pronounced the closing of the ritual oath. “If I break my vow, may the sea rise and drown me, may the earth open and swallow me, and may the sky fall and break me.”

“Druan Gwen, Mother of all, calls on you in each of her three aspects, Mother, Maiden and Shadow. Three times you have sworn. Now, by sword and cauldron and the will of the secret powers, we bind you to your oath. Susan Myers, come forward.”

From beneath her robes, the woman in twilight brought forth the athame blade that hung from a cord around her waist. Gently, she reached out and touched me under my chin with the fingertips of her free hand. Just then, I felt the cold metal against my breast. “I hold this blade to your heart as a final mercy. Susan, the path you have chosen is a difficult and dangerous one. You will need all the courage, wisdom, compassion and strength you can muster to follow it. If you have a faint heart, it would be better by far for you to fall forward now, and end your life on this blade.” I held myself straight and tall. Elaine took the knife away. “Welcome back to us, my daughter,” she said. “Welcome home.”

In the moments that followed, I became a priestess, my life devoted forever to the service of the Mother. I will write no more of what happened by the lake.

Elaine and the others went back indoors. I completed the final part of the ritual alone. I spent a few minutes in silent meditation and prayer, washed myself again in the lake, and then dressed. Finally, I made my way back to the Circle of Three. The time had come for me to take my place among them.

I found them in Elaine’s great room, arguing. A booming voice carrying over the din. “I will speak for the Pendragons,” he said with a thick southern accent. I recognized him as Samuel West, one of our senators from Georgia. “We don’t have the sword yet,” he said. “We must be cautious and bide our time.”

Elaine herself answered him. “With all due respect to my esteemed comrade’s learned opinion, this plan is a load of shit.” I grinned in spite of myself. “I do not think the Dark is ‘biding their time’ to see what actions we will take. The Dark is at hand. We cannot sit idly by, waiting like a pack of shivering fools!”

“What about the boys?” the Senator returned. “Isn’t it time we brought them to us?”

_Boys? What boys?_ I wondered. _Why are they interested in children?_

The room grew quiet and everyone turned to hear Elaine and Senator West. “They are safe
for the moment, I think,” said Elaine.

“Moment?” said the Senator. “Think? We need better than that. We’ve left them alone long enough, if you ask me. We must bring them to a place of safety, and soon. That is paramount, above everything else. That, and to awaken them. I know it tears the heart to do so before we must, but if we tarry too long, all is lost. We just can’t risk that, dammit.”

“Their lives are their own,” Elaine began. “For a few fleeting moments, anyway. Nonetheless, we have begin the process of … educating them. Ian Huckleby can tell you more of them than I can—”

“Then where is Professor Huckleby?” someone, a woman, asked. The speaker was Jenny Silverheels herself.

“He is meeting with two of those ‘boys’ even as we speak,” Elaine said. “They have a class at the University.”

“More to the point,” Senator West spoke again, “does the Enemy know about them?”

Elaine chewed her lower lip quietly for a moment before she answered. All eyes in the room followed her. Her features remained composed, but I knew her well enough to see the frown in her eyes. “There is no reason to think so,” she said. “Alas, we have little reason to believe otherwise, either. There is great reason to fear.”

“Then we’d damn well better bring them to safety,” said Senator West, before they do learning anything. That, and that alone, is our mission now. Nothing else matters. Nothing.”

A Christian priest standing with Senator West spoke next. “Then by all that’s holy, we must ensure that they learn nothing from us! Isn’t that so? We must take care that our own actions don’t betray us, that we don’t give the enemy any information that may damn us!”

The debate continued, but so many voices spoke at once that I found it impossible to follow any single point or argument.

“Silence!” Elaine cried at last. “We accomplish nothing this way.” Once more, the room hushed. In a calmer voice, Elaine continued. “I do not intend to betray our final hope to the Dark,” she said. “But neither will I sit by while all we hold dear falls around us. They will strike soon, and every single one of you in this room knows it.” No one argued. “Damn it, read a newspaper! Don’t you see the pattern? Watch the blessed news! You can feel their taint in every story that’s reported! Don’t you feel their manipulations? I repeat, we must not sit idle!”

“Lady,” said another voice, “we can’t act blindly, either.”

I turned in surprise. Billy Fisher’s rich, sonorous voice filled the room. Then he looked to me, and gave me a warm smile.

“But one among us has the Sight, or so I understand. Didn’t you say this girl here is the strongest you’ve seen in all these many centuries, Miss Lady of the Lake?” I felt my face grow warm. I found myself suddenly uncomfortable with so many eyes upon me. “If the Dark is preparing so terrible an action, surely she will have sensed it just like you have. Am I right?”

Elaine turned to me, an appraising look on her face. “Susan?” she asked. I thought at once of my dream, of all the awful violence to come. And of the Julius trial, the spark which would ignite it. Seven days. Here arose a chance to do something, to take action, if not to stop it, at least to lessen the damage. To join in the battle against the Dark.

I also remembered the icy voice that spoke to me in the name of the Goddess. You will not speak to the Circle of Three. That which must come to pass will come to pass; the Wheel must turn.

“I don’t know anything,” I said, barely loud enough to be heard. I found that I couldn’t meet Elaine’s gaze.

“Susan,” Elaine said, “please think for a moment. What have you dreamed of lately? Do you know anything that might aid us? Think carefully, all depends on this.”

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to look up at my teacher. In her eyes, I saw trust and
love. More, I saw that she needed me, my guide, my mentor, my friend. She depended on me.

The struggles between Light and Darkness are but turnings of the Wheel. As leaves must die in autumn, so must this battle occur. Speak not, but remember the purpose for which you are chosen.

“I know so little,” I said to the room. To my own ears at least, my voice sounded weak. I had to look away from Elaine. “I … I’ve only learned about your struggle today. I still don’t really understand what the Dark is, or what’s at stake. But I sense the time for action has not yet come. We should wait, I think.” I barely whispered, but my words were daggers and I threw them at the friend I loved most in the world.

The debate continued for some little while longer, but my words had decided the issue. As Elaine’s guests began to leave one by one, I heard her whisper to Billy Fisher, again, a line from Yeats. “The best lack all conviction,” she said, “while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” If he had an answer for her, I didn’t hear it.

At last I readied to leave as well. Before I made my way out into the evening darkness, I turned and hugged my old teacher. And then, like Judas, I kissed her.
Chapter 6
A Soulless Society

John Fitzroy:

I’d like to say I knew from the beginning that my friends and I were caught up in something strange and terrible. That some sixth sense warned me that the world trembled with agonies that augur coming change. That I felt the overwhelming significance of the events unfolding around me, that I possessed wisdom enough to read the signs like an animal fleeing before an earthquake.

I’d like to say that.

For each of us, I think, there came a time when we realized the circumstances of our lives were more than random happenstance, that we were caught up in a Pattern larger than all of us. For me, the moment of awareness came on Halloween night in a North Georgia state park.

It should have come a week earlier.

Professor Ian Huckleby had given Daniel Corwin and me a lesson in the secret history of the world, and I went to the library to discover more. I knew I’d find the place closed, but my friend Jessie Malone, one of the head librarians, owed me a favor. She had to work late that night, so she had been good enough to lend me her key card and code it to my prints. I let myself in and logged on to one of the catalog terminals.

I hesitated over the mike for just a moment—I itched to look up the Knights Templar and the enticing mystery at Oak Island, the subjects with which Ian had teased us so mercilessly. He’d certainly aroused my curiosity. I resisted the temptation, though; Ian had given me a more pressing assignment. Reluctantly, I turned my attention to a different puzzle, one connected to Prince Madog ap Owain Gwynedd, or Madoc to use the more common modern spelling. I spoke both variations carefully. With those as key words, the computer gave me a short description: Madog ap Owain Gwynedd, a Welsh prince who, according to legend, sailed with a group of colonists to what is now Mobile, Alabama in the year 1170 CE, more than three hundred years before Columbus.

According to the computer, the library owned three volumes about Madoc; all three were available. I made a quick note of the locations and went to track them down, wondering about Ian’s hints, if perhaps he expected me to find some connection between the two puzzles—the lost secret of the Templars and the ancient Welsh in Mobile, the ones who brought a different treasure.

None of the books were on the shelves.

I checked three times to be sure, then went back to the terminal to be confirm that I’d noted the locations correctly and had the computer rescan. Once again, it confirmed all three volumes were on the shelves, so I went back and checked again.

The books were missing. I didn’t even see empty spaces where they should have been.

Weird.

I still had to return Jessie’s key, so I wandered down to her office. I found the door ajar, but I knocked anyway. “Jess?”

She looked up and smiled. “Well, if it isn’t the stranger in black himself!” Jessie liked to
keep her office dark—the only light came from a small desk lamp and her computer monitor. Jessie did most of her work online, but stacks of books on urban folklore covered her desk, computer table, file cabinet and even the floor. I suppose, like Tom, she just liked to have them around. She’d pulled her brown hair back into a bun, and her little glasses had slid halfway down her nose. She looked cute as a button. “You bring my key back?”

“Sure did. Hey, thanks. I really appreciate the help.”

“My pleasure. Anything for a guy who actually came all the way to the real library. Find what you needed?”

“Uh … well, no, actually. The computer said the books should be on the shelves, but no dice.”

“You must have looked in the wrong place.”

“I don’t think so. I checked twice.”

Jessie looked up, puzzled. “That’s odd,” she said at last.

“My thought exactly. So no idea what might have happened?”

“Well … no.” Her brow crinkled as she thought about it for a minute. “Want me to take a look?”

“Maybe tomorrow, okay? I don’t want to keep you late.” I added a wink. Jessie would live in the library if she could.

“Very gallant, sir!”

“How about if I come back later in the week?”

“See you then,” she said.

“See you then,” I promised.

I hooked up with Mark and Daniel in the Plaza. I couldn’t help smiling. Blond, tan, and sporting a Hawaiian shirt, Mark looked like a beach bum even late on a cold autumn evening. His coat did little to dilute the effect. Good old Mark had kindly come down to fetch Daniel and me, thus shortening the interval between business and beer. It had been a long week; we needed some serious frivolity.

“What’s the plan, gentlemen?” I asked.

“Pizza and beer,” Mark said. “Restaurant, not vending machine. Daniel’s buying.”

“Ah yes.” I grinned as we walked. “Stunt of the week. With the lovely Miss Sinclair.”

“Stunt of the week,” Mark confirmed with a nod. He and I exchanged a shrug and a grin.

“Like either of you has anything better to do,” Daniel muttered.

Alas, neither of us could argue. But that, the question of having things to do, reminded me of something. “Hey, you guys free next weekend?”

“What’s up?” Daniel asked.

“Trip to the mountains,” I said. “Remember that medieval group I used to hang with? The Society for Creative Anachronism?”

“Where all the guys dress up in armor and fight each other with swords?” Daniel asked.

“Well, there’s more to the SCA than that,” I said, feeling a little defensive. “Anyway, they’re having a big time event next weekend. Why don’t you guys come with me?” I’d been threatening to drag them both to an SCA event for months.

“I don’t know,” Mark said.

“Do we get cool costumes?” Daniel asked. “A hat with a feather and all that?”

“You bet,” I promised. “Besides, Mark, there’ll be babes in low-cut peasant blouses.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Daniel decided. “I’m there. Hey, there will be cold beer there, right?”
“Right,” I assured him. “How ’bout you, Mr. McBride?”

Mark pursed his lips as he mulled it over. “Let me see what’s going on.” he said with a noncommittal shrug.

The city seemed unusually dark and quiet. We crossed Peachtree Center Boulevard and made our way towards the new decks. Only two cars passed us as we walked. We didn’t see a soul on the streets. We did our best to banter, but our words sounded hollow in the empty streets. Just before the parking deck entrance, we found something on the concrete driveway.

“Hey,” Daniel said. “Check this.”

He pointed out some graffiti on the pavement; someone had drawn a five-pointed star inside a circle. The circle, perhaps four meters in circumference, touched all five points of the pentagram. I reached down and touched the red-black pigment. It felt wet and sticky. I caught a vaguely metallic stink in the air and it made my stomach turn.

We heard a sound behind us.

A figure, half hidden in shadow, regarded us. He wore a black suit and tie. Because of the distance and the darkness, I couldn’t see his face clearly but I noticed that, despite the hour, he wore dark sunglasses. He held a long object in his hands, and when he stepped forward, the light revealed a black blade more than a foot in length.

“Check out the dude with the knife,” Mark began.

Just then, we heard another sound. We turned and spotted another black clad figure approaching from our right. He too wore sunglasses, effectively hiding his features. He too carried a knife. And then, suddenly, we found ourselves surrounded by five men, each dressed in identical black suits, each carrying a blade. The first man shouted something I didn’t understand, and then all five charged us from a different direction.

It’s difficult to describe what happened next. The actions are simple enough, at least the ones I could see. In memory, time slows, distorting things; each second is preserved, individual and complete, in peculiar detail like frames from a movie, but my sense of time is skewed.

Something stirred inside, a rage, a change that came over each of us. Something fierce awoke. Later, Mark would tell me it burned like a sun that rose up inside him and turned his blood to fire. A colder fury moved inside me, freezing the blood in my veins and filling me with chilly anger. I found myself strangely calm.

By the time they reached us, we stood back to back, in the center of the still-damp pentagram on the pavement. We stepped forward to meet our attackers.

One lunged at me with his knife, but I turned and let his momentum carry him past me. As he passed, I caught his arm and threw him, a move I’d learned in Aikido class. The throw carried him into the man to my right, and both tumbled to the ground.

My own momentum turned me around, and I saw that Daniel had somehow managed to trip the man who rushed him. The man tried to rise, but Daniel kicked him under the chin. The kick flipped the attacker over and to the ground, and the back of his head hit the pavement. He didn’t move.

Two men attacked Mark, but Daniel tackled one. I would have helped too, but I had problems of my own. One of the two I’d dropped climbed back to his feet and lunged at me. I barely twisted out of the way. As I turned, I saw that the other, thank God, remained on the ground holding his knee.

The fall must have taught my attacker caution, because after the first lunge, he approached me slowly, holding the black knife in front of him.

I feinted a punch at his face, leaving my side exposed. My attacker took the bait and stabbed, but I spun out of the way and clubbed him hard on the back of the head. He staggered, leaving himself open for a hard kick.
As he fell, I grabbed his knife. Perhaps the adrenaline made me jumpy, but when I first touched the blade I felt a painful shock like a spark of electricity thrill through my body. Knife in hand, I turned to see if my friends needed help. They didn’t. The man Daniel had tackled had fled. He and the man with the injured knee must have hobbled away.

Mark had one man trapped against the wall of the parking deck and pounded his face mercilessly—I’m sure only the concrete and the force of the blows kept the man more or less erect, because when Daniel pulled Mark away, he slumped to the pavement. I saw blood on the wall, and on the man’s suit jacket. The sunglasses were broken.

With our attackers more or less in disarray, Daniel recommended that we exercise the better part of valor. “Run!” he yelled. We did.

Inside the parking deck, we didn’t bother with the elevators. None of us said anything, but I suppose we all thought the uglies with the wicked knives would regroup and be after us. We ran up two stories of spiraling rampway, found Mark’s car, and climbed in. Seconds later, we sped out into the city streets, our hearts pounding like crash drums.

“Look!” Daniel said, just as we passed the spot where we’d fought our attackers.

We did, but we saw nothing. Literally nothing—no sign of anything to hint that a fight had just taken place. The bastards in black had vanished, and even the blood on the wall and the pentagram on the pavement had disappeared.

I felt my eyes narrow. “Now that’s strange,” I said.

Daniel laughed a little. “Can you blame them for clearing out? We were pretty sweet back there!” His bravado did little to lighten the mood.

Just then, I realized that I still had the knife I’d taken from the last man I’d fought. As we drove, I examined it more closely. I traced the decoration on the handle with my finger—a strange pattern depicting a dragon rising from the sea.

“Shit,” Mark moaned, flexing his bloody grip on the steering wheel. “My hands hurt like hell.”

None of us felt much like a night out on the town after that, so we called Tom and headed back to the Castle.

We sat in the living room, all of us together, and for the longest time no one said anything. Daniel sat on the couch with Mark and helped him bandage his hands. Tom sat alone on the floor near the fireplace picking out a few chords and melodies on his guitar. I slumped down in the easy chair and stared out into the night. The wind shifted the distant bushes and trees, and every time the shadows moved I fancied that I saw men in black suits creeping closer. I thought about going downstairs to the dark and comfortable solitude of my room, but for once I decided against it. I wanted company.

Tom unrolled the TV but we didn’t really watch it. In our present mood, the news images only depressed us. More terrorist violence in the Middle East or somewhere, another school shooting, updates on the Julius trial, a plant closing in Michigan. Thousands of workers got the ax. Tom turned the images from immersive down to flatscreen, but that was bad enough. We didn’t turn it off, though.

In the end, we decided not to call the police. None of us had gotten a good look at the attackers; we figured it would just be more trouble than it was worth. The way things were going, they’d probably find something to charge us with.

On the vid news, Simon Proctor, the televangelist zillionaire turned presidential cabinet member, promised cheering masses that the government would take more steps to ensure safety
for decent Americans on the streets. He promised more federal troops with more guns and more camera monitors to watch as we came and went. Despite the fact that I’d just missed becoming a statistic myself, the promises brought little comfort. I tried to tune out Proctor’s words, but I couldn’t ignore the sound of his passionate voice. It chilled me.

“God, that man makes me so mad,” Daniel muttered. “It just makes the whole damn thing seem that much worse.”

Tom stopped playing his guitar. “Why’s that?” he asked.

“I just hate seeing cults and buttholes like that Nazi there on TV thriving when so many real churches are in trouble.”

I looked over at Daniel. “I didn’t realize you were religious.”

Daniel shrugged. “I don’t go as often as I should, but I believe. It’s important to me.”

“Me too,” Mark said. “Dude, my dad was a preacher.”

“How about you, John?” Tom asked me.

“Haven’t thought too much about it,” I admitted. I caught myself chewing my lower lip and forced myself to stop.

On the screen, we watched fights break out as a protest outside the Wilson Julius courthouse turned violent. The police stepped in before things got out of hand, but the scene turned ugly.

In some city that might or might not have been Atlanta, police raided a camp where some homeless people had bedded down for the night. At least two of them were killed.

Some workers from the plant in Michigan wondered how they’d feed their families.

The announcer bowed his head with dramatic sadness as he updated us on the school shooting: three more bodies were found. That brought the death total to thirteen, including the two who had started the whole thing. Plain old teenage suicide was a thing of the past. Now, troubled kids want to take their tormentors with them. Where the hell did they get the guns?

Crime statistics soared. Personal bankruptcies reached an all time-high. Children died of starvation. And Simon Proctor promised us all safety. I shook my head. “I think all that ‘safety’ is going to have a high price tag.”

“Well something’s gotta be done,” Mark said, shifting around to look at me. He flexed his bandaged hands and grimaced.

The news report ended and obnoxious personalized commercials boomed out at us. “Mark! Isn’t it time to get the Mustang serviced? John! Isn’t it time you got a new car of your own? Come on over to Metro Ford ….” The Nail Pound soundtrack they seemed to think appropriate for our demographic didn’t help their case much.

“Tom! There’s a new Taco Bell! In your neighborhood!”

“Turn that damn thing off,” Tom muttered.

Daniel ignored the noise. “I think the problems run deeper.”

“What d’you mean?” I asked him as I fumbled with the remote in the chair arm. I switched off the news channel and found an ocean scene, waves caressing a pebbled shore. I clicked back to immersive to let the comforting sounds and pictures surround us, and found the gentle, artificial breeze soothing.

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “It’s just … sometimes I feel like we’re living in a soulless society. Know what I mean? Where’s the hope? What do we stand for? Where’s something to believe in?”

“Where are the heroes for the information age?” Tom asked. I saw sadness in his eyes.

Daniel didn’t return Tom’s smile. “Proctor’s not going to give us that. Have things really gotten so bad that we have to look to hollow demagogues like that phony?”

“Lots of people do,” Mark said with a shrug. “Millions of them.” I could tell he wanted to
change the subject—it made him uncomfortable. Me, too, but for a different reason.

“I don’t mind admitting, the man scares me,” said Daniel.

I rested my elbow on the armrest and my chin on my hand. “My mom’s afraid he’s practically running the country.”

“He’s certainly close enough to the president,” Tom said with a lopsided grin. “Let’s just hope the ‘practically’ part holds.”

No one spoke for a moment, and only the muted sounds of waves and the occasional cry of a seagull from the TV broke the silence. “Hey,” Daniel said at last. “Did I tell you I know someone who works for Proctor?”

“No kidding,” said Mark. “Who?”

“A buddy of mine from high school. Remember Peter Melvin?”

“Belligerent Pete?” Mark grinned. If Daniel had paid us a dollar every time he’d told us a story about his adventures with Belligerent Peter Melvin, we’d all be richer than a dozen Simon Proctors.

“That’s him,” Daniel said with a nod. “He works in Proctor’s office at the White House.”

“I know someone who works for him too,” I said.

“Yeah?” said Mark. “Who’s that?”

“One of my stepbrothers,” I said.

“Lee?” said Daniel. “You’re kidding!”

“Not Lee.” I said. “My other brother. Stephen Verner.”

Mark chuckled. “Dude, your brother works for the bad guys!” We all laughed. Hard to believe, isn’t it? At the time, we thought it was funny.
Peter Melvin:

Okay look. The first thing you’re going to say when you read this is, Jesus! This Peter Melvin guy is a shit. I mean a first class S-H-I-T shit. And you know what? You’ll get no argument from me. But maybe I’m a little better now, now that I’ve paid the price, a little, for my actions and the decisions I made. So at least hear me out before you judge, huh?

About three weeks before I was scheduled to leave for Atlanta, I sat in Secretary Proctor’s office in Washington. I’d been there many times before, of course. But I never got used to it. I’d been a member of his staff since college, and I’d been a “Soldier in the Great Crusade” even longer—even since my mom took me to one of his stadium revivals when I was a kid. The Reverend Simon Proctor was more than a mentor to me. I worshiped him.

Look, I’m not gullible and I’m not a fool. I have values and I care about them. If I made poor choices, I’d appreciate it if you’d at least grant that I had my brain and my conscience in the right place. To understand, you’d have to have seen the man in person. My God, what a presence he had! You get a sense of it when you see him on television. You must. Otherwise, so many of you wouldn’t have sent him your paychecks and retirement savings. You wouldn’t have made his ministry one of the richest organizations on the planet. And he certainly wouldn’t have become a member of the Cabinet of the President of the United States of America.

I arrived precisely on time. Secretary Proctor didn’t like it when you arrived early—he said it make you look presumptuous—and he didn’t tolerate tardiness. He liked the precision of punctuality.

I found him on a call when I arrived. He waved me into his private office, so I entered and stood at a respectful distance until he motioned me to a chair. He used an earpiece and he’d turned the vid away from me. I could only hear his responses.

“You’ve located them then? All three? Good, good.”

A pause.

“Yeah. So they were attacked but remain unharmed?” Another pause, then a chuckle, soft and cold. “That’s damn fine work for a fact. Now then. I want you to listen carefully, Jim. I want the local police down there monitored closely. And have our source in the Circle remain vigilant. When they make their move, I want to know it. Is that clear? Good. Now, let us turn our attention to the … unfortunate disturbance at the court building this afternoon.”

For some reason I couldn’t begin to explain, the words chilled me right down to the bone. Mostly because I knew I’d heard something I shouldn’t have.

Or had I?

Simon Proctor didn’t do anything by accident. Not ever.

Still, I didn’t think too much about it. I loved and trusted the man completely and absolutely. How could I have known?

“Your men did a fine job keeping things well under control, but I don’t want the flames to die out entirely. Let the tension build—just see that it doesn’t explode until I say so.”

The Secretary paused, and then he nodded again.

“That’s just fine, Jim. See that my instructions are followed to the letter. Yes, a great pity,
that. Let’s be sure to pray for them all later, shall we?” Then he ended the call and turned his attention to me. He smiled.

“Now then, Peter my boy,” he said. “Tell me about the plans for our trip to Atlanta.”

Before I could answer, a noise outside interrupted us. On the street, protesters shouted “Information for everyone!” and “Unmonitored net access!” Proctor stood and closed the window. “They’re like children, aren’t they?” He sighed. “They simply don’t understand, do they?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Secretary Proctor touched a control stud on his cufflink and spoke into a lapel mike. “Bonnie, refer those troublemakers outside to the Suppression Agents at the Department of Technology Control, will you please? And have them make some arrests. I’m trying to get some work done in here.”

Then he turned his attention back to me. “Now then, son,” he said as he took his seat again. “The Atlanta trip. Tell me.”

“I have the rough agenda right here,” I said as I opened e-pad card. “But with all the disturbances, we may want to—”

“I do not want to,” he said, interrupting me. “The tensions will continue to build and, when the verdict is announced, there will be riots. I want us to have a presence there. Where they need us.”

“The Julius verdict?” My jaw dropped. “But how do you know?”

He smiled again. “Peter, I ask you to trust me. You do trust me, don’t you? The verdict will be announced in this week. The verdict will be guilty. Riots will follow, such as this nation has never seen before. Why, the tension has been building for … well, longer than you can imagine, son.”

“Then if you know, we can stop it!”

“No, son. That is exactly what we will not do.”

“But—”

“Peter, please. Trust me.” I saw the pain in his eyes, such terrible pain that I knew it must be genuine. “We must let this happen. Then the people will understand. Then they’ll let us do what’s necessary to protect them. You do understand, don’t you Peter?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He smiled. “Your faith is strong, Peter my boy. I’ve always admired that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You know, son, Atlanta seems to be at the very center of the troubles. Astonishing!” He smiled and shook his head, as if surprised. “It’s nothing less than a miracle we have a Crusade planned down there. The Lord works in mysterious ways, doesn’t He?”
Taliesin:

hey tried to kill my son,” Elaine said, her voice a growl. “The bastards tried to kill my son.”

Elaine Verner, the Lady of the Lake, handed me a knife and asked me to examine it. I shivered, only partly because Elaine kept the meeting room cold. The night-dark weapon felt heavy in my grasp. Its ebony blade reached more than a foot long. A fearsome dragon rising from an ocean had been forged into the handle and pommel. Elaine wanted me to see this image.


Congressman Bradford O’Donnell, Billy Fisher, Brenda and Rob Carter, Father Jason Mulligan, and Catherine Porter, the Special Assistant to the Atlanta Police Chief, had all assembled with us that night. Kim Chang, a soon-to-be retired Marine colonel who served as one of the Circle’s military leaders, had just left us. We’d gathered in Elaine’s living room, a comfortable, homey place. None of us rested. We paced, or shifted restlessly in our seats.

“The Môr Draig,” Rob Carter repeated, tapping his cane nervously. “Someone signed his work it seems.”

“Or we are meant to think so,” Billy commented. He stood and paced.

Congressman O’Donnell took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Sam West was right. We should have brought them to a place where we can protect them. Long before now.” Elaine ignored him.

Catherine Porter poured herself a second cup of coffee and sipped it black. She still wore her uniform; she had been on duty just an hour before. “I don’t understand,” she said with a frown. “What makes you so certain this isn’t just what it seems? A random mugging?”

“This,” I said and handed her the knife.

“And the circumstances,” Billy added. “The blades, the pentagram. Clearly, someone attempted a ritual killing.”

“Blood magic,” Elaine spat. “They dare!”

“But what did they hope to accomplish?” I wondered. “They struck against only three. There wouldn’t be much fuel for power in so few. As I understand it, hundreds would have to die just to light a bloody candle with dark magic.”

“Perhaps they believe there is power in the blood of those three specifically.” Rob leaned forward in his seat. “Is that possible, Elaine? Because of who they are?”

“I haven’t made a practice of studying the mechanics of dark magic,” she replied tersely. Elaine closed her eyes and bowed her head. She rested her hand on the window seal for support. My old friend looked very tired. “I’m sorry, Robert. I don’t mean to snap at you. It’s just— Damn it all! One of them is my son!”

“And a great deal more,” I said. I rested my hand on her shoulder. “Don’t forget that.”

“Which brings us back to the central question,” Catherine said. “What were they trying to accomplish?”

“I don’t think they attempted a spell.” Everyone turned, surprised. Billy Fisher had spoken. He nodded slowly.
"A straight simple murder attempt?" Catherine asked.

"Possible," Father Mulligan said, scratching is balding head as he nodded. "We've always known that these three would live their lives in constant danger. Even with our watchful eyes to protect them. Could they be attempting to eliminate the Pendragon, despite our years of vigilance? To keep us from obtaining the Sword?"

"That's impossible," Brenda declared. "They'd have to know who the Pendragon is."

"Or at least have narrowed it down to three," Elaine said. Her eyes narrowed. "We've always known that was possible. Probable, even. Which would mean either that they have prophecies of their own—"

"Or there is a traitor in our inner Circle," Fisher concluded. The tall, white-haired black man gazed at each of us in turn.

Ah, Billy, I thought then. *How long has it been since you and I made music together? How long before we shall again?*

"I don't know which is worse," O'Donnell said. The congressman's words snapped my attention back to the matter at hand. "So that's it then? To keep us from finding the Sword?"

"I don't think so," Fisher said.

"I don't either," I agreed. "Quite simply, the pieces don't fit the puzzle. Our foe wants the sword as desperately as we do. And the reborn Pendragon is the key. Without him, it can't be found. They must know that."

"I think," Billy said, "that their aim is to force our hand. They either wish us to reveal the Pendragon to them by our actions, or they want us to claim the Sword now, thinking they can take it from us."

"I can't argue with any of that," Father Mulligan said, nodding thoughtfully.

"Me either," O'Donnell said. "Damn it, does it have to be so cold in here?"

"The temperature keeps us alert," Elaine said. Nonetheless, she crossed to the thermostat. The furnace roared to life as she resumed her pacing. "They'll try to force our hand again."

"We know," Billy said. "We know. We knew it all too well."

"So what now?" Catherine asked. "Has the time come at last?"

"No," Elaine said. "Not yet."

"But—"

"I agree," I said. "If they want us to seek Excalibur now, it's the last thing we should do. At least until we can divert their attention elsewhere."

"And until we can determine exactly what they know and how they know it," Billy added.

"I made a promise long ago," Elaine said, looking at me.

I nodded. "To let them live their own lives for as long as possible. To let them live in the world for as long as they can, and come to love it."

"That may no longer be possible," Billy said. "Alas. As our Sam said. Now our mission is to bring them to a place where we can protect them, and wake their memories. Nothing else matters."

"And yet, these last moments are the most precious of all," Elaine said. He brow furrowed for a moment. "No," she said at last. "We must move our watch closer. And be ready in a blink to snatch them away to safety." She bowed her head. "And to wake at last the memories sleeping within them."

"Let them know who they are," Billy said. "Who they were born to be again."

"That blink will come soon," I said. "Perhaps it has already. The danger is nigh, but our timing must be perfect. An hour too soon or too late will doom them. And with them, all. We must not move too soon or too openly, true, but we must not tarry to long, either, I think."

"Perhaps," Elaine conceded. "But I hope we have a few breaths yet. If Ian can work with them, make them come to us of their own choice, as did my son Lee ...." She didn't finish the
“Blast it, we need information!” Father Mulligan said. “The enemy seems to know so much! Don’t we know anything at all? It kills me to think of our one hope in such terrible danger, while we fret about how to bring them to us and protect him.”

“What about the girl Susan?” Billy asked Elaine. “The one with the Sight?”

“She is still scarcely trained,” Elaine said. “If she sees anything, she hasn’t spoken of it.”

O’Donnell turned to Elaine. “You said ‘if.’ Do you have any reason to think she might be hiding something?”

Elaine’s frown deepened. “I have no reason,” she said carefully. “But sometimes I suspect she knows more than she chooses to say. I can’t imagine why, but I have that feeling.”

“Do you trust her?” Billy asked carefully.

Elaine pressed her lips tightly together as she considered. “I want to,” she said at last. “I love the child dearly. And I know she is no tool of the Dark, whatever else she may be. She is—”

Elaine sighed. “She is much like she was before.” I frowned.

“Perhaps if I talked to her again?” Brenda offered.

“Yes,” Elaine said and smiled at her. “If the opportunity presents itself, please do so. Tell her … tell her how much we’re depending on her.”

Brenda managed a smile, and I for one appreciated the effort. “I will,” she promised.

“Try to make her understand, if you can,” Elaine said. “Make her understand what is at stake. Tell her … tell her that we all must make sacrifices. We must never forget that.”

For a moment, Brenda’s smile vanished as her kind face turned cold. The harsh pain in her voice both surprised and shocked me. I recognized something else there too, something harsher still, cold anger. “I think I know that better than anyone, Lady.”

And well she should. Sometimes, it seemed as though ill fortune fell upon our Brenda like a shroud. The Circle’s struggle had cost her first her natural parents, and then her foster family. Before that, her grandparents had perished in our efforts to protect the isle of Britain during the Second World War. More recently, she had lost her twin sons, her only children.

Indeed, it seemed that in her days she had known as much loss and pain as Elaine and I had together. But we had borne our agony over long centuries; Brenda suffered only over the all-too-brief span of a normal human life. I wondered if I myself could bear to survive so much. Once again, I marveled at her gentle strength, and reminded myself to be grateful for her loyalty.

Poor, dearest Brenda! However could you bear it?

“I know, my dear friend,” Elaine said. “I know.”

Brenda simply nodded. None of us had anything more to say. Rob put his arm around her shoulder, and she sighed as she relaxed into the comfort of her husband’s embrace.

“So what now?” O’Donnell asked. “We wait?”

“We wait,” said Billy. “But we tighten our watch. We keep those boys protected. That above all. When the enemy moves at last, so do we. At the first hint of danger, we bring them to safety. Even if we have to tie them in sacks to do it. Are we all agreed?” No one dissented, so that settled the matter. We would bide our time for a while longer yet, even as our enemy massed around us. As Elaine said, let them love the world, for a few last precious heartbeats. A man is willing to die for that which he loves.

“Remember my words,” Elaine said. “I want those boys watched. Watched and protected. And be ready to move and bring them to us when we must.”

“They will be, Elaine,” Catherine said. “I promise.”

“They will be,” I agreed.

Elaine turned to a window and stared out into the night. What she saw there I cannot say. She clenched her fists tightly, and her breath frosted the glass.
“Damn them,” she said at last. “Damn them all. They tried to kill my son.”
The following Monday found me studying alone at my desk in my room in the Castle. Daniel came home, wandered down to my room, and dropped himself down on my bed. “Come in,” I said, lifting my eyebrows in a show of mock annoyance. “Make yourself at home.”

Daniel ignored the jibe. “Mark and Tom and I are going out for that pizza we’ve been promising ourselves. You in?”

“Might as well. I’m not getting much accomplished anyway.” So what if we had no business being out late on a Monday night. “Give me an hour or two?”

“Actually—” he grinned his lopsided grin—“I’m thinking of leaving a little sooner.”

I felt my eyes narrow suspiciously. “How come?”

“I’ve got our next venture planned,” he announced, his grin widening.

“Oh?” said I, letting my eyebrows arch once again.

Daniel had the decency to look abashed. “Not that I would ever make plans without consulting you first, of course.”

I sighed, as much to hide my smile as to demonstrate my reluctant resignation. “Why should this venture be any different? Besides, I thought you’d already pulled a stunt for this week. Madeleine Sinclair—?”

“Technically, that was last week. And besides, it wasn’t a stunt. Look, you want to hear about this or not?”

I sighed with resignation and returned the grin. “Go ahead.”

“Let’s get PI badges.”

“Excuse me?”


I shook my head. “Don’t you have to be, I don’t know, qualified or something?”

“Of course not. You just have to convince the government you are. That’s not the same thing at all.”

We took Mark’s Mustang, a classic red GT convertible, an old 2015 model, the last before Ford introduced the new body style.

Daniel convinced us that we should start at the Decatur Courthouse. He might have been right as far as any of us knew. But calling ahead for confirmation didn’t seem to fit the spirit of adventure. The courthouse was pretty close, at least as the Mustang flies, so we decided to give it a try.

In the end, it took us five stops in four different areas of the city to find the applications we were after. Along the way, we managed to laugh ourselves silly—the real point of the exercise. We always laughed so much back then. How I miss that! This is what our lives were like. This is what we’ve lost.
“What now?” I asked as we climbed into the car. “Home to fill these rascals out?”
“No way,” Mark piped up. “I’m thirsty. We can fill these things out at a bar, the closest one available.”
“Works for me,” Tom said. “Paperwork’s always more pleasant when completed over a pint or three.” No one could argue with that wisdom, so we were off.

We might have found something closer than the deck at Eddie’s Attic back in Decatur, but we couldn’t do better. Mark reasoned that if a pint made paperwork more pleasant, a pitcher ought to make it downright close to wonderful. Tom and I agreed, so Daniel called for a pitcher of Highland Gaelic Ale and a few dozen Decatur hot wings besides. That would hold us until we got the pizza.

We neared the bottom of our second pitcher and the wings had long since flown when we finally turned our attention to the applications. As the only one who had a pen, I elected myself secretary. I opened the first application. “Okay,” I said to Daniel. “You first. Full name.”
“Daniel Douglas Corwin,” he said. The address, phone, social security number and birth date followed, and that finished the first page.
“Height?”
“Six feet,” Daniel answered. Mark and I each lifted an eyebrow. Tom took off his wire-rimmed glasses and polished them, which had the same basic effect—an expression of disbelief. “Okay, dammit. Five feet, eleven and one half inches.”
I carefully noted it down. “Weight?”
“185.”
“Hair color?”
“Brown.”
“Eyes?”
“Two.”
I glared at him, but he pretended not to notice.
“Color, butthole?”
“Not so much anymore. But I still have some crayons.”
“His eyes are blue,” Tom pointed out helpfully when we stopped laughing. Dark blue, like the sky at dusk, but lighter than my own. It’s funny the things you remember.

Somehow we managed to get through the thing, aided in no small way by Daniel inventing some fairly impressive credentials when the forms demanded qualifications. In fact, we did just fine until we got to the last line. “Uh oh,” I said, then read out loud: “Return this application in person or by mail along with your application fee of one thousand dollars—”
“What!” Daniel exclaimed.
I began again. “Return this application—”
“A thousand bucks?”
“Yeap.”
“Well,” Tom said, “I guess we can forget that.”

After all the beer, we were just buzzed enough not to ask the details of Plan B. Not that it would have mattered, not with Daniel driving. We’d pre-committed ourselves, as it were. Daniel drove us to an unfamiliar—and decidedly unsavory—area of downtown Atlanta. Close to school, kind of, but far from anything, you know, safe. I looked around and couldn’t find anyone in sight. At least two security cameras watched every corner. I don’t care much for being under Big Brother’s all-seeing eye, but for once I hoped someone actually monitored them. Politicians like
Simon Proctor claimed that helpful public servants monitored them all the time, but of course everyone knew better. It was random at best, and I had a feeling that this neighborhood would likely prove, well, more random than others. At least one of the towers had been pulled down, its cameras smashed on the pavement. Judging by the rust on the few parts that remained, it must have happened months before.

“Where in the world are we?” Tom asked.

“What an incredible smell you’ve discovered,” I added, quoting a line from a favorite old flat movie. I had to step over a pile of greasy garbage as I climbed out of the Mustang.

“Lads,” Daniel said, “we’re shopping for a bargain.” He led us around the corner to the entrance to a little dump identified as Mr. Larry’s Pawn Shop. Inside, we found a counter surrounded by rows and aisles of … stuff. Surprisingly nice stuff. I wondered how strictly the establishment completed its background checks. Rather … flexibly, I imagined.

“Hey there,” an old man’s voice said. That’s when I noticed the wrinkled little gnome of a fellow in a worn derby cap at the counter. The cap must have been at least three sizes too large for the man; only his oversized red ears held it in place. He put his tabloid newspaper down and glared at us over a pair of smudged half-moon glasses. “Can I help you or what?” He said hep instead of help.

“We’ve come to look at police badges, my good man,” Daniel said. Tom and I exchanged a glance. Tom grinned and rolled his eyes, but I frowned, worried. He had to be kidding. A pawnshop with police badges? I remembered the towers outside. Suddenly, I hoped those cameras weren’t monitored after all. I definitely didn’t want anyone in authority to have a record of this.

Mr. Larry gave Daniel an ugly little wink and rummaged around behind the counter. A minute or two later, he came up with a wooden case filled with rows of shiny honest-to-God police badges. City police, state patrol, county police, Homeland Security, sheriff’s deputies and even, you guessed it, private detective badges. “Ah ha,” Daniel said. “How much for the PI badges?”

“Thirty bucks,” Mr. Larry said.

“That’s all?”

“Bid’ness been off lately. You want one or what?”

“Make it four,” Daniel said. As we reached for the thumb pad to pay, Mr. Larry asked for ID.

“ID?” I asked.

“Gotta know that you boys are really detectives,” he said. “Can’t sell these to just anyone, you know. It’s a’gin the law.”

“Actually, um, we’ve just been approved,” Daniel said. “Our stuff’s being mailed. If we’d already gotten it, we wouldn’t be here. See, we’re anxious to get started.”

“I admire your ambition. But I gotta see some paperwork.”

“Uh … how much extra to let us go ahead and get them now?” Daniel inquired.

Mr. Larry considered. “Call it twenty bucks each,” he said.

“Do you happen to have those little leather wallets?” Daniel.

“Matter of fact,” Mr. Larry acknowledged. “Twenty bucks.”

We each pressed our thumbs to his register pad in turn, and then we hit the trail again. It seemed steep for a prank, at least to me, but what of it? As we made our way back to the car, I slipped my badge into the little wallet thing. I flipped my wrist to snap it open a couple of times. Yeap, I’d look right nifty with this baby. Not bad at all.

We stopped by home to make ID cards to go with our badges. After that, Mark voted we stop for some pizza. Refortified, we drove to the Commonwealth, our favorite Irish pub. Daniel
said it had been his Dad's favorite too, back in the days when it had been called the County Cork, and later McDuff's Irish Pub. It was an old place, even though it wasn't the original building. A fire had razed the entire block after the turn of the century; only the Commonwealth had been rebuilt on more or less the same spot. The new place had some odds and ends from the original, plus a few items salvaged from other establishments. The grand old brick fireplace came from an English pub that had been across the street, or so I'd heard, and the magnificent cherry wood bar and beveled mirror came from a tavern that had been around the block.

The Commonwealth boasted more than just the pub. The adjoining room contained a coffee shop where the proprietors roasted their own personally selected coffee beans—and brewed beers and ales for the pub. The Commonwealth coffee shop had a wonderful, homey feel with its brick and dark wood walls all lined with bookshelves and great steaming cappuccino machines of brightly polished brass. The patrons sat in leather library chairs, overstuffed sofas and comfy easy chairs, all positioned in such a way to encourage conversation—in fact, to make it all but inevitable. And the most marvelous conversations always sprung up at the Commonwealth. It seemed that somehow, only the right people found their way to the Commonwealth. Friendships were born there. As a matter of fact, that’s where I’d met Tom for the first time. There used to be a little cyber café in the coffee shop, but of course it had closed long ago. With all the bureaucracy after the Information Control Defense of Liberty Act, the access licenses were too difficult to obtain and far too expensive to maintain.

The coffee shop connected to the next building, the Commonwealth bookstore, which must have been the largest and most wonderfully eclectic independent bookstore in the south. My friends and I had spent many, many hours and hard-earned dollars in both the coffee shop and the bookstore. But that night, our sights were locked on the pub.

A friend of ours was playing that night, a Celtic musician named Paul Longbottom, and a fun crowd packed the pub rooms to the rafters. A cop at the door checked IDs and collected the ten dollar cover charge, but he knew us and winked us on in. Our favorite barkeep spotted us and poured a round of our usual drinks. Paul hadn’t started yet, so we grabbed the black and tans and claimed a few square feet of empty floor space.

“The road goes on forever,” Daniel said, raising his glass.

“And the party never ends,” Tom, Mark, and I said together. The line came from some old song from our parents’ days; we’d heard Tom play it. We’d made it a toast we shared just about every time we drank a beer together. We’d made a ritual of it, a battle cry, our very own ‘all for one and one for all.’ We touched our glasses, drank deep, and settled in for good music.

Paul noticed us and came over to say hello. We finished up our pints, and Paul bought us another round. Being gentlemen, that obligated us to return the favor. We repeated this process a time or two, so we felt pretty close to righteous by the time Paul made his way to the stage. Daniel called for another round, and we settled in for tunes and babe scooping.

Paul played the old music. He started with Archie Fisher’s *Witch of the Westmoreland* and Stan Rogers’ rousing *The Mary Ellen Carter*, then he tore through a couple of spirited Irish drinking songs, *Mary Mack* and *Whiskey in the Jar*. After that, our friend decided he wanted company on the stage.

“A good old mate of mine and damn good musician is here tonight. Folks, how ‘bout a hand for Tom Lewis! Tom, come on up here and do a tune or two with me!”

The boisterous crowd cheered (as they had for just about everything else Paul said) but their enthusiasm didn’t move our Tom. “Later. I’m drinking.”

“C’mon, Tom,” Paul called. “Folks, give my old mate down there a little more encouragement.”

The crowd did, but Tom focused on the black and tan. “Call Daniel,” he said. “He’ll go.”

Paul rolled his eyes and shrugged. Daniel could only sing one song; he didn’t have a
musician’s voice like Tom, or even yours truly. Paul knew it, and most of the crowd knew it too because Daniel sang that one song near about every time we made it to the Commonwealth. For some strange reason that escapes me to this day, the pub’s clientele loved it. I suppose they just happened to enjoy the silly, the raunchy, and the boisterous. Daniel could provide it.

The roar grew even more enthusiastic. Of course, old Dan protested a few times, just to keep up appearances, but it didn’t take much to get him up there. “Hold my beer,” he said. I smiled, a wolf’s greeting to the sheep. Daniel gave me a look and decided (wisely) that if an empty glass would be waiting for his return anyway, he might as well make it so himself. He slugged down the last half pint and made his way to the stage. The crowd roared and Daniel bowed. Paul struck a chord, and Daniel began to sing:

“Faa—ther Abraham had seven sons, and seven sons had Father Abraham ….”

Yeap, he sang that old Sunday School song. You know the one. Of course, he added a little something extra. Most of the crowd made its way to the front of the room and the area around the stage; my pal had initiated one of those irritating audience participation songs. Tom and Mark and I took the opportunity to grab a newly vacated table. I noticed candles in glass lanterns on the tables then. They must have been added in the past week or so. A nice touch, I decided. Made the place seem homier.

“…and they never laughed, and they never cried, all they did was go like this! And to my right …”

“And to my right,” the crowd echoed.

With that, Daniel started moving his right arm, and the crowd did the same. The second verse proved the same as the first, only this time Daniel had the crowd moving their left arms as well. Pretty soon, he had all four limbs moving, the hips wiggling and the heads nodding.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe they like this song.”

“People love to participate,” Tom said with a shrug and a smile. “Hand me the rest of his beer, will you?”

“ Forget it, he downed it.”

“Scoundrel.”

On stage, Daniel started the last verse.

And then … well. This is the moment that stands out above the others, undimmed by time. I remember watching Daniel. Then turning, my gaze passing Tom as he set his empty pint glass on the hard wood of the table and licked a bit of white foam from his lips. Still turning, finally seeing two women, a blond and a brunette, at a table by themselves. The brunette faced the stage, but the blonde had turned more or less toward us. God, she looked incredible.

The dark haired woman, the shorter of the two, frowned as she watched Daniel’s silliness on the stage. The third chair at their table was empty, but someone had left a purse so I guessed they had a friend who would be returning.

I remember seeing Mark nudge Tom, like he’d done a thousand times before, and nod his head toward the two women at the table.

Tom turned, saw the objects of our attention, and started to grin. And then his face went pale. Tom’s blond and fair-skinned anyway, but in that second, he’d turned as white as frost. He stared at the brunette.

“Mark—” he began.

On stage, Daniel sang:

“…and they never laughed, and they never cried … all they did was go like this … and to my left …”

“And to my left,” the crowd repeated.

“And to my right …”
“And to my right . . .”
“And to my left . . .”
“And to my left . . .”
“With a wiggly of hips . . .”
“With a wiggly of hips . . .”
The crowd aped Daniel’s gyrations.
“And a noddy of the head . . .”
“And a noddy of the head . . .”
“And a sticky out of the tongue . . .”
“And a sticky out of the tongue . . .”
“And a dropsy of the trousers . . .”

At that moment, all the guys in the crowd (and most of the women, too) dropped their pants, skirts, or whatever they happened to be wearing to cover the lower halves of their bodies.

Normally, a crowded Irish pub full of people in their underwear is a sight to see, even as the last of the lyrics are drowned in squeals and laughter, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Tom. I’d never seen him so bothered and it spooked me. He didn’t look away from the little brunette. She was attractive, but her frown made her face hard. I wondered if he knew her from somewhere.

“And a fally to the floor . . .”
“And a fally to the floor . . .”

Daniel and his audience dropped to the floor, arms and legs flailing around in the air, like a crowd of turtles turned over on their shells. By now, both of the girls at the table by the bar watched Daniel. The smaller woman wore a dark countenance. Apparently, she didn’t find Daniel’s song to her taste. Tom seemed to pull himself together then. He grinned and winked at me, and I almost thought that I’d imagined the odd look on his face. Tom and I joined in with the crowd on the last line.

“All they did . . . was . . . go . . . like . . . this!”

The crowded managed to cheer and yell even while they stood, pulling up zippers, buckling belts, and gathering change and key cards from the floor. Daniel bowed theatrically, pulled his jeans back over his Speed Racer boxers, and shook hands with Paul. Then he glanced over the heads of the crowd and noticed the table we’d been watching. The brunette had gone, leaving the blond alone. It looked like the brunette wouldn’t be back. I couldn’t have told you why, but I felt a sudden and strange sense of relief, a feeling of danger narrowly avoided, like a man who just misses being shot and doesn’t even hear the bullet whistling past his ear.

Just then, another woman sat down with the blond. The third purse must have been hers. This woman’s gaze met Daniel’s and he grinned. She smiled a little and looked away. I thought Daniel would go over and talk to her, but when he stepped off the stage, the crowd surrounded him. Some still fastened pants and skirts, others looked for stuff they’d spilled. A lot of the people knew Daniel, at least by sight (the man has more friends and acquaintances than anyone I’ve ever known in my life, even Tom) and they all wanted to shake his hand or say hello. Of course Daniel took the opportunity to ham it up.

By the time he found his way to the table we’d commandeered, Paul called for Tom again. Now usually Tom’s as eager to play as we are to hear him, at least when he’s had time to finish a cold beer or three, but he hesitated and it puzzled me. Daniel and Mark whispered and looked back over at the babes we’d spotted, but the crowd ambled back and blocked our view.

“You okay, man?” Tom didn’t answer me. He watched Daniel. “What’s wrong?”

“C’mon up here, Tom!” Paul called from the stage. “Hurry up, you wanker!” The crowd cheered again. Some of them knew Tom, and knew what kind of treat they had in store. I found it easy to share their enthusiasm. As for the rest, they were in the mood to cheer anything, so they
followed along just to be obliging. Tom hesitated another second, glancing back and forth between Daniel and Paul and the spot where the brunette had been.

“What’s going on, Tom?” I asked him. “Who’s that woman?”

For a second I saw something wild and strange in his eyes. But he recovered quickly and then he smiled again.

“Hurry up, Tom!” Paul called again.

“All right, all right,” Tom called back. “Later,” he told me. Before I could reply, he dashed out to get his instruments from the car. As I ordered us another round, I saw Daniel trying to catch a glimpse of our two lovelies.

“Forget it,” I told him. “You can’t see them from here. You’ll have to go over.”

Daniel grinned at me. “You noticed ’em, huh?”

“Couldn’t help it. Not with McBride here—he never misses a woman. I think Tom might know one of them.” We had to raise our voices to be heard over the crowd noise.

Daniel lifted an eyebrow. “Really? Think he’ll introduce us?”

“Doubt it,” I said with a frown. My friend’s odd behavior still troubled me. “The one he knows is gone. Besides, old Tom didn’t look especially glad to see her. Probably an ex-girlfriend or something awkward like that.”

“Then we’ll have to do the honors ourselves.”

The barmaid made it back with our black and tans just as Tom made it to the stage. He and Paul talked quietly for a second, then he pulled out one of his tin whistles. He started playing and the room got quiet. Not suddenly, but in waves. First the people up front hushed themselves, then the next group of people, then the first row of tables, and so on all the way to the bar in the back. Which is quite an accomplishment, because the pub a crowd that wanted to be loud and fun. Our kind of crowd, if I do say so. But as the first notes from Tom’s whistle washed over them, the mood changed.

He played one of his favorites tunes, an old Irish air called Sí Beag and Sí Mór, which he says means big hill and little hill. There’s a story behind that tune, but I don’t remember it. After a few bars, Paul joined in, playing a gentle counter-medley on his guitar. The music sounded so beautiful that I thought my heart would break.

“C’mon,” Daniel whispered after a few minutes. “Let’s go.”

“Count me out,” I said. I wanted to hear Tom and Paul play. They’d just started in on a newer song, a Billy Fisher rock spiritual called Light a Candle on the Road to Heaven.

“At least lend some moral support,” Mark said.

“If you need me to support your morals, bud, there’s trouble.” I smiled, but followed my pals. I could hear more of the music if I didn’t have to listen to their hounding.

The two girls still sat at that table next to the bar. “Okay,” Mark said. “What are we going to say to them?”

“Hmmm,” Daniel mused, and began reciting an inventory of favorite pick-up lines. Mark vetoed them all, one by one. Nothing sounded quite right. He reasoned that they didn’t seem the types to respond to Daniel’s usual silly humor. If they were, they would’ve participated in Father Abraham. Now my bunkies were starting to get in trouble. They were at their best when they could be spontaneous. When they had to plan, things got awkward. Daniel rubbed his chin and threw out a couple more witty suggestions. Nothing flew.

Suddenly, the pressure was on. The two women gathered their purses and such—they were getting ready to leave. The brown-haired woman put a few dollars down for a tip, and the blonde tossed her jacket around her shoulders. And then they walked past us. “Wait!” Daniel exclaimed.

The two girls, startled, stopped and gazed at us expectantly, eyebrows raised. “Uh … could y’all just hold on a few minutes while we think of something to say to you?”
For a second, they looked at us like we were a trio of idiots, and then they both started laughing. “That was good,” the blonde conceded.

“It's like defusing a bomb! We have, what, ten seconds to make an impression here?” Daniel said.

“Or salvage one,” the brown-haired woman said. The two shared a glance, then smiled and invited us to join them for one more drink.

“My name's Daniel Corwin.”

“Kathy Wright,” said the blonde.

“No, I'm pretty sure it's Daniel ….” The girls rolled their eyes at the joke, but they both rewarded him with smiles. Back at the table, the brunette introduced herself as Beth Johnson. Kathy studied law at Emory; Beth had just started med school.

“So what do you do?” Kathy asked us.

“Well—” Mark began, but Daniel cut him off.

“We're private investigators,” he said. Kathy and Beth both lifted their eyebrows in one of those expressions that can only be interpreted as disbelief, so Daniel flashed his badge. Mark did the same. What the hell. I flashed mine, too. I have to admit, it was kind of fun. Daniel's stunts usually were. Not that I'll admit that while he's around.

Kathy looked at Mark. “You were about to say something different?”

He shrugged. “We're supposed to be undercover.”

“Of course,” Kathy said. I doubt she believed us, but she decided to play along and that was really the point. Suddenly, we were all playing a secret game together, and that made us instant friends. We ordered Irish coffees (made to Daniel's strict specifications—coffee, Old Bushmills Special Reserve Single Malt Irish Whiskey, Bailey's Irish Cream, just a hint of whipped cream with creme de menthe, cinnamon around the rim of the mug) and we talked for … God, I don't how long. Tom finished up a set with Paul, took a break, and started another.

“That guy's good,” Beth said.

“Which one?” I asked.

“Both,” she said. “But I meant the blond guy.” In the spotlight, Tom's hair looked almost white.

“That's our roomy,” I said with more than a little pride. “Name's Tom Lewis.”

“No kidding,” Beth said. She was impressed and it made me feel good, even though Tom did the actual impressing.

“Let's drink to him,” Daniel suggested.

We did. “That reminds me,” I told Daniel. “Tom's coming with us next weekend. To the SCA event in the mountains.” I didn't want to miss a chance to reinforce the sales pitch. The only thing better than having a good time is sharing it with my best friends.

“Shinin',” Daniel said.

“Is he a detective too?” Kathy asked, with just a hint of playfulness in her voice.

“He has a badge,” Mark hedged.

On stage, Tom switched to his twelve-string guitar. Paul joined him on a medley he did at most of his bar shows, a combination of Harry Chapin's *Circles* and an old folk spiritual, the Carter Family's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. Tom looked right at us when he started, like he wanted to say something, but when I caught his eye he looked away. He sang:

“Seems like I've been here before, but I can't remember when …
And I've got this funny feeling that we'll all be together again!”

The crowd cheered that line, and we joined them.

“There's no straight lines make up my life, and all my roads have bends …
There's no clear cut beginnings, but so far no dead ends …”

Paul joined him on the chorus, a simple but strong harmony.
“All my life’s a circle, sunrise and sundown …
The moon rides through the nighttime, till the daybreak comes around. All my life’s a circle, though I can’t tell you why,
Seasons spinning round and round, the years keep rolling by.”

Then they both exploded into the spiritual, a right nifty transition:
“Will the circle … be unbroken … by and by Lord, by and by ….”

And then we all found ourselves on our feet in a circle, Kathy and Beth, Daniel, Mark and me, along with most of the crowd. We all stood together, arms around each other’s shoulders, as we spun and danced in a sudden gyre of joy and exuberance. Paul and Tom sang faster, but somehow we kept pace. Our circle opened and grew wider as more people joined us, arm in arm and shoulder to shoulder, laughing and dancing and singing.

I remember the colors: the girls in white, Mark’s loud Caribbean Soul beach tee-shirt, Daniel’s twilight-blue sweater, my own black shirt and jeans. A subtle magic filled the room, a wild enchantment born of music and dance, drink and laughter, celebration and the unexpected joy of sudden friendship. Was it the drink, or had the room taken on a golden glow? The fire had burned low, and the wind from our frenzied motion made the candle flames perform a dance of their own. The music awoke something deep inside us, something old and enduring. We all sang together:
“Will the Circle … be unbroken ….”

Tom and Paul finished a verse of the spiritual, and segued smoothly back into the Chapin song:
“I’ve found you a thousand times, I guess you’ve done the same …
But then we lose each other, just like a children’s game.
And as I find you here again, this thought runs through my mind …
Our love is like a circle, let’s go ’round one more time!
All my life’s a circle ….”

We sang and laughed and danced and listened to Paul and Tom for a little while longer. Then, when the medley ended and the spell popped like a bubble, we caught Kathy looking at her watch.
“Time to go?” Beth asked her.
“We were supposed to meet Susan fifteen minutes ago.”
“What? Surely you’re not leaving us already …?” Daniel gave them his best puppy dog eyes.
“’Fraid so,” Kathy said, unmoved.
“The smoke and noise bothered our friend, so she left a little ahead of us,” Beth added.
“We’re supposed to meet her over at the IHOP for breakfast and a ride home.”
“I don’t think she liked your song,” Kathy teased Daniel.
“Then the woman has no taste!” he declared. “Mind if we walk with you?”

Kathy and Beth exchanged a glance. “Can’t see why not,” Beth said. That settled it. We paid for our coffee drinks and fought our way through the crowd to the door as Tom hurried to catch up. Outside, it had turned into a beautiful night. The clouds had cleared away, and the few stars visible among the lights of the city gleamed clear and lovely.

As we walked, Daniel and Mark told a favorite old story, about the time we snuck backstage at a concert. I added my two cents worth—just to make sure Daniel didn’t stray too much from the truth. He’d take all the credit himself if I let him.

Beth told us a funny story about one of her med school professors. Kathy mentioned that she took some philosophy classes, so I asked if she happened to know Elaine Verner. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “She’s my advisor.”
“She’s my stepmom,” I said, smiling proudly.
“Neat lady,” Kathy said as we crossed Roswell Road. “Our friend Susan is crazy about her. She’s so insightful and, well … what’s the word I’m looking for? Wise, I guess. And mysterious somehow. D’you know what I mean?” We did.

When we made it to the diner, we stood outside for a while. The girls waited to see if we’d come in, I think, and we waited to see if they’d invite us. Through the glass, we could see their friend, Susan, sitting with her back to us. “She has gorgeous hair,” Daniel said, and she did, long and lush and black as midnight.

Just then she stood up and walked back to the restrooms. As she passed, I caught a glimpse of the side of her face—certainly pretty. But she must have been waiting for a good while, I reasoned, because she didn’t look happy. Tom watched Daniel intently. “Why don’t you come in and have a cup of coffee?” Beth asked at last.

I opened my mouth to accept, but Daniel cut me off. “We can’t. We’ve got to get back.”


“We better head back,” Tom agreed. He seemed almost as anxious to leave as Daniel.

“Guess we’ll see you around,” Kathy said.

“Bye,” Beth said.

“Wait a sec,” Mark said with a little grin. “Tell me something. Do you ever, um, go out with immature guys?”

Kathy laughed and rolled her eyes. “Too often, I’m afraid.” But she got the hint. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to call soon. Daniel fidgeted, anxious to leave quickly, so we said our good-byes.

No one spoke on the way back to the Commonwealth. We were almost there when I turned to Daniel and said, “Hey, I don’t suppose you want to tell me the truth about why you didn’t want to go in with Kathy and Beth, do you?”

He sighed. “Susan.” He didn’t look at me.

“The friend? What about her?”

“Her name’s Susan Myers. I didn’t especially want to see her.” Ah ha.

Tom seemed shocked. “You know her?” Daniel nodded. “And there’s … bad feeling between you?” Daniel nodded again. “I didn’t know that.”

“Old girlfriend?” I asked.

Daniel nodded. “Got it in one.”

Just before we made it back to the Mustang, a huge old gas-burning luxury car spun across two lanes of traffic and barreled right for us. Tom shouted a warning and I dove out of the way. My friends must have done the same thing. Somehow, we all made it and managed to scamper over a waist-high concrete barrier into the Commonwealth parking lot. The black car thundered away.

“What a freaking idiot!” I shouted. “He almost ran us down!”

“Come on,” Daniel said. “Let’s call the police.”

“No,” Tom said.

“What? Why not?”

“Did you get a license number or anything?”

“Well, no,” Daniel admitted.

“Then there’s nothing they can do,” Tom said. “Damn! I hope my instruments are okay … .”

“I’ve seen that car before,” Mark said.
One more surprise awaited us back home at the Castle. We checked for messages and found one, an e-mail for Daniel. From the movie company publicity agent. His interview with Madeleine Sinclair had been granted. More, the studio would pick up the tab for his flight and hotel room.

Son of a bitch.

I shook my head and laughed out loud. I remember thinking at that moment that he must have long since used up his share of fun stuff in life and had started on someone else’s. Probably mine.

“You’d better start packing,” said Mark. “You leave tomorrow. Dude, I can’t believe you pulled this off!”

Tom grinned. “So that’s why you didn’t want to spend time with those lovelies back there! You’re saving yourself for Madeleine Sinclair!”

Of all of us, only Daniel didn’t laugh at Tom’s joke.
Chapter 10  
*The Circle Gathers*

Susan Myers:

*How fragile a thing love is, I thought, that it can be so easily turned to hate.*

My mind should have been on the present. Or if I couldn’t hold my attention on the matter at hand, it should at least have focused on the awful guilt that ate me like a cancer. I had to betray my mentor, the friend I loved best in the world, and by my silence condemn thousands or more to certain death.

Instead, and it shames me even now to admit it, my thoughts kept wandering back to a man I had narrowly missed meeting the night before. A man I had loved once, or thought I had.

It was the second gathering of the Circle of Three I’d attended as both a Priestess and a full member of the order—this time, some three times as many men and women had gathered. I didn’t know most of them, but I recognized many of the faces—world leaders, military officers, artists, clergy, scientists, businessmen and women, actors, and authors. It does not become a priestess, as all are equal in the Mother’s eyes, but the gathering awed me.

We had congregated in a large meeting room in an east-side office building that belonged to a friend of Senator West. Senator West assured us that his teams had secured the facility; Elaine and the others were satisfied.

Those assembled spoke of an operation akin to a military campaign. They spoke of mobilizing forces, of moving armies and weapons. Before my very eyes, the Circle prepared for war; its days as a secret society were numbered. The enemy had forced their hand. I listened in slack-jawed astonishment. It took all the self-control I could muster not to quake with terror.

And still, my thoughts drifted elsewhere, back to the night before. I hated myself for acting like a silly schoolgirl rather than a Priestess, but I just couldn’t keep my mind where it belonged.

I’d been there nursing my ale for less than an hour when Daniel Corwin and his entourage came in.

Dear Goddess! After all the years, I still hated the man. Why? In the summer between high school and college, and for a few months afterwards, we had been lovers. He did the damage. That is all that needs to be said, and I will recount no more for this record. Years had passed, but the pain and the anger it engendered remained. It saddens me, sometimes, to see what endures when other feelings die.

I did not want to see him. I certainly didn’t want to speak to him. So I made some lame excuse to my friends and arranged to meet them later. Then I fled. Just like a schoolgirl.

I waited in a diner, stared at the pages of a book, and drank bitter coffee.

Hours passed.

My friends were late. I thought about leaving them.

I ordered pancakes with fake syrup and more of that terrible coffee.

After an eternity, they came. I heard their laughter all the way across the parking lot. Goddess, what on Earth could be that funny? They weren’t alone, four men walked with them. Damn Kathy anyway. The woman couldn’t go to a convent without meeting a man. I tried not to
begrudge them their merriment. Truly, I tried. Through the large window I watched them coming, all bundled up in coats and scarves, their breath frosty in the cold night air. Like carolers in some God-awful latter-day Currier and Ives print. They walked arm-in-arm, laughing all the way. I wanted to puke.

And then my heart missed a beat. One of the men was Daniel Corwin. Daniel Corwin! I am not a coward and I do not shrink from confrontations. But that night I simply was not in the mood. When I knew they could see me, I made a show of standing up and walking to the rest room. Perhaps I imagined it, but as I turned, I think our gazes touched, just for a second. I made no sign. I simply walked across the room. It would be enough, I thought. I knew he would see me, and I knew that I could count on his cowardice at least. He did not disappoint me.

When I returned, Kathy and Beth were alone; Daniel and his friends had gone. Yet his image stayed with me through the night and the next day. He haunted my thoughts like some especially obnoxious ghost, the irritating specter of an especially persistent insurance salesman perhaps, or a telemarketer. Or like a termite gnawing at the rafters in the attics of my brain. Damn him and damn him again! I couldn’t stop thinking about him, and I hated him all the more for it.

With a will, I turned my attention back to the present and the crowded Circle around me. All across the nation, indeed, all across the world, organizations—everything from Masonic Lodges and American Legion Outposts to Policeman’s Benevolent Associations and chapters of the Society for Creative Anachronism—trained men and women to be soldiers in the Circle’s army. Few of these would-be warriors knew the scope of their connection, but all knew at least a little. The Circle recruited none blindly; they deceived no one.

One by one, leaders reported the status of various regional forces. My astonishment swelled to awe. I doubted that more than a few of the world’s nations could call on a force so mighty. Suddenly, I thought of the riots to come, the terrible violence I knew would follow the announcement of the Julius verdict. With such resources at its disposal, I knew the Circle could prevent much of the otherwise inevitable chaos.

The last speaker—Kim Chang, an Asian woman in a military uniform—had finished her report. “Now that our readiness is established,” Elaine said, “the question remains: what do we do?”

“We keep right on waiting,” a voice behind me replied. I turned and saw that Senator West had spoken. “We know the enemy is moving, but we can’t counter until we know what in hell’s name it is we’re countering.”

Debate ensued. The same old words. I couldn’t follow it. Too many voices spoke at once. My mind reeled. I knew what would come, I and I alone had the answer the Circle sought so desperately. Through the Sight, I had seen it all. And yet, I remembered the icy Voice that chilled my dreams. How could I speak? How could I not?

I felt faint; I felt like I was suffocating. More than anything, I needed fresh air. A chance to still my racing thoughts and quiet my pounding heart. I muttered something I hoped might pass as an excuse to the person next to me, then fled out into the still, cold night. Just like a thrice-damned schoolgirl.

The complex consisted of three tall buildings within a high wall, with a large green courtyard between them. I walked though the immaculately manicured and surprisingly peaceful grounds. Brenda Carter found me soon after. “Hi, Susan,” she said.

“Hi yourself,” I said with a smile. And then I collapsed into Brenda’s waiting embrace and cried. I allowed myself this indulgence for a few moments, no more, and then I composed myself. I should be acting like a Priestess of the Lake and a member of the Circle of Three, dammit. Not like a schoolgirl. “I’m sorry,” I said to Brenda at last.
“Shhh …. Hush now. It’s okay, Honey. Just relax for a minute or two, all right?”
“I’m fine now,” I said. It was only a little lie.
“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?”
“Do they give a prize for understatements?” I broke away from the hug and started back towards the building.
Brenda didn’t follow me. “Want to tell me about it?”
I paused. “About what?”
“About everything that’s bothering you. Susan, I know you. I know your strength. It takes a lot more than the organization of the Circle of Three to rattle you, and dear, you’re rattle plenty. What is it?”
I laughed in spite of myself and turned back to my friend. “Would you believe me if I said bad dreams?”
Brenda didn’t respond to my weak attempt at levity; she didn’t laugh or smile with me. “It’s the Sight, isn’t it? You’ve seen something.”
Goddess! How insightful could a woman be? “Brenda,” I said carefully, “I swear to you I don’t have anything I can say to Elaine or anyone else here. Truly! Please, Brenda, I’ll swear any oath you’ll believe.”
“That won’t be necessary.” Her lips twitched into a slight and gentle almost-smile. I wondered if she’d noticed how carefully I’d worded the truths I’d told; I wondered if she guessed the lie they hid. “Come, let’s walk for a bit. We can go back inside in a few minutes, okay?”
“Okay,” I said, and I followed her. We started a circle around the courtyard. “Do you believe me?” I asked her.
“I believe everything you tell me, Susan. Always.”
“That means a lot to me.” I wanted to cry then. Oh, Mother! How could I let this woman comfort and care for me even as I betrayed her?
“I know you’re hurting Susan. I can see it in you. Believe me, I know as much about hurt, and what it can drive you to do, as anyone.” She put an arm around my shoulder, and I put one around her waist. We walked thusly, touching like lovers.
“So trust me, please. Look, I’m sure every word you’ve said to me is the truth. But Elaine and I both wonder, just sometimes, if maybe there’s more? Something you’re not saying?”
“I don’t have anything else to say,” I hedged weakly. I struggled to keep my voice a controlled monotone. Otherwise, I knew I would break down. Tears collected behind my eyes like raindrops in a storm cloud; I fought to keep them inside me.
“If you do,” Brenda continued, “we could hardly blame you. After all, we’ve hardly told you everything either. Elaine has been wondering lately if perhaps we made a mistake. But Susan, you must understand that she’s only acting out of love! We all are. We’ve burdened you with so much, so quickly ….”
“I don’t know what you mean.”
“Would it surprise you if I told you Elaine is more than she seems?”
I allowed myself a smile. “Hardly!”
“Susan, this is going to be difficult for you to hear … Goddess! How many times have I used that line? But there are things you need to know.”
“I’m listening.”
“I know, my dear, I know. It’s just that what I have to tell you will be a little tough to swallow, at least at first. But you’ve been trained as a Priestess. Listen with your heart, and with all the skill you’ve been taught. Try to hear the truth in my words, okay?”
“Okay.”
“First, Elaine is older than she seems. Much older.”
“How much older?”
“Centuries older, Susan.”
Centuries! I didn’t even try to hide my gape or the shock in my eyes. “But—”
“Hush, listen. Elaine was born in Cornwall more than fifteen centuries ago.”
I stopped cold in my tracks. Brenda turned and regarded me. “But that’s impossible!” Even as I spoke, I knew that it wasn’t. I think Brenda must have seen that in my eyes, for she continued as though I hadn’t interrupted.
“Her mother was a noble woman; Igraine was her name.” Igraine! Something about the name stirred feeling in some well deep inside me. I forced it down; I would examine it later. Now was the time to listen. We started walking again. “Her father was Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall. It’s his blood that’s enabled her to survive through the long years.”
“How?”
“Gorlois was not human,” Brenda said. “He was one of the Sidhe.”
“She?”
“Sidhe,” she repeated.
“Sidhe.”
“That’s better. The Sidhe are an immortal race that walked this Earth long before humanity. The Celts worshiped them as gods, and they weren’t far wrong. They are a great and powerful race. They are tall and bright, the host of the air. They are the first and greatest of the fair folk.”
“I remember reading about them,” I said. “I just didn’t recognize the name when you said it—that wasn’t a context I thought we’d be talking about, I guess.”
“I bet,” Brenda said with a smile.
“So what happened to them?”
“Their realm, you’ve heard it called Faery or simply the Otherworld, has drifted far away from our world,” Brenda said. “Once the boundaries between the worlds were thin and travel was, well, at least possible, if hardly common. Indeed, some places, such as the Isle of Avalon, existed in both worlds. For better or for worse, that’s no longer the case, I’m afraid.”
“Fairyland,” I said. “You’re talking about Fairyland.” The Otherworld is nothing new to a Pagan, of course, but I’d always thought of it as a sort of metaphor, I suppose, not as something literally real, something that could actually impact my life. The night grew colder, and I shivered in spite of my long woolen coat and mittens. We completed our circle and started another.
“Faery,” Brenda said. “But don’t get the idea it’s some sugarplum realm of sweetness and light. It’s a dangerous place by all accounts, though I’m told it’s a startlingly beautiful one. There are other names, too. The Native Americans called it the Medicine Lands. Perhaps you’ll be more comfortable with that. It’s also called the Perilous Realm. Personally, I prefer simply the Otherworld. It contains many kingdoms, worlds within a world if you will. Anwyn for one. And Tir Nan Og.”
“And Elaine is one of these ... uh, faeries? A Sidhe?”
“She is half-Sidhe, yes. None of the true Sidhe still remain in this world.”
“Are there others like her? Other immortals?”
“Elaine is long-lived, but hardly immortal. That’s an important point to remember, Susan. And no, Elaine isn’t the only one. The Bard Taliesin is another. I think he may be even older than Elaine. And there are others. They are few. Most stayed in the Otherworld when the borders finally sealed completely at last, but there are others.”
My head spun. Brenda was right, it was too much to take in at once. Suddenly, images flooded my mind, images from a long-ago dream—the one in which I had been a Priestess by a lake, the Priestess who had initiated Elaine. In the dream, I had called her by a different name, but I knew her all the same. “Nimuë.”
Brenda reacted as though I’d slapped her. “Where did you hear that name?”
“A dream,” I told her. “I was there with her, wasn’t I? It’s a … a past life, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Brenda said, slowly. “You were there, you were her older sister. You died, dear, and you have been reborn. The Circle turns; this time, Elaine is your teacher.”

“And Nimuë was her name. Her secret name.” We started walking again.

“Yes,” Brenda said. “Oh my, when did I lose control of this conversation? I don’t think she wanted you to know all this, at least not quite yet! Not until you’re ready. It’s funny. Elaine says … how does she put it? Back then, in that past life, you were always a great one for keeping your own counsel! You always did what you believed to be right, but you never explained yourself. Elaine thinks perhaps you’re still like that. But you will remember that you have friends, won’t you? That we’re all in this together?”

“I know, Brenda.”

“Then I don’t need to remind you that you’ve sworn a very sacred oath, do I?” she said gently. “If you know something, you have an obligation to tell Elaine, because as the Lady of the Lake, she is the head of our Order.”

“I … I understand.”

“Only the Goddess is a higher authority,” she added carefully. The edge in her voice surprised me. “So unless you know you’re acting on the will of the Mother herself, you must follow Elaine’s orders, Susan. Do you understand me?” I nodded. Brenda smiled. “Although I suppose … if the Mother spoke directly to any of her daughters, it would be you, wouldn’t it? Listen for the voice of the Mother, and unless you’re certain you hear it, obey Élaine. You must understand how important that is!”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re welcome, my dearest. You’re so very welcome. Trust me, I know how hard this is, truly I do. I know how hard your decisions must be.”

Did she? Goddess! I could almost believe she did. “No kidding,” I said. “Some times I almost wish I’d taken the final mercy Elaine offered me when I became a priestess. It almost would have been easier to just fall on her knife, and not have to deal with all this.” I wasn’t thinking of the Sidhe and Elaine’s long history; I thought of riots and the deaths I was forbidden to prevent.

“Me too,” said Brenda. I’d said it with a smile, mostly as a joke. I’m not sure Brenda heard that. “Sometimes I long for that too.” I saw sadness in her eyes. “Like I said, I know how hard this must be for you, and how very complicated your choices. But the will of the Goddess must come first. Always, my dear.”

So kind, and so astonishingly insightful! She spoke exactly the words I needed to hear. We walked quietly as I tried to absorb it. Finally, another question occurred to me. “Brenda, you said … you told me that the last of King Arthur’s knights formed the Circle of Three.”

“One branch of the three. The Pendragons. By Sir Bedwyr.”

“Was Elaine there?”

“Yes,” Brenda said. “She has stood among those battling the Dark since the fall of Camelot.”

“Then she’s … she’s part of the King Arthur story.”

“Yes, she is. Perhaps you remember. Nimuë was the beautiful enchantress who is said to have seduced the wizard Merlin and imprisoned him in his cave of crystal. Afterwards, as Lady of the Lake, she took his place as King Arthur’s chief advisor.”

“And I was there, too?”

“Yes.”

“What … what was my name?”

“Your name,” said Brenda, “was Morgan le Fay.”
Chapter 11
First Class

Daniel Corwin:

I’d never flown first class before. I’d always been stuck in coach—the drawbacks of flying on a student’s budget. Back there, you’re lucky to get pretzels and water. It’s like prison with salt. No more. Now, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fly unless a beautiful flight attendant brings me a hot towel between courses of an excellent meal. You can get accustomed to first class real quick. And my trip would only get better, because soon I’d meet the fabulous Madeleine Sinclair herself.

Madeleine Sinclair! God, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. What in the world would I say to her? I had a chance most guys only dream about. I promised myself for the millionth time that I wouldn’t blow it. I could make this work. I could!

Who was I kidding? Deep down inside, I knew the best I could hope for was a good interview. But what the heck. That was more than good enough. And besides, a guy can dream, right?

The hotel was incredible. Incredible! I had a suite. A real honest-to-God suite! The bedroom had a king-size brass bed, a huge vid screen with HD3D immersive, and a fully stocked, complimentary bar. I hoped that if I was good in life, I might someday find just such a hotel room in Heaven.

A special screening of Madeleine Sinclair’s film topped the list of activities on my agenda. Genuine honest-to-God chauffeurs drove us to the screening room in limos. I loved the film, and Madeleine’s performance astonished us all. I got back to the room in the wee hours, so I ordered a little dinner from room service, poured myself a drink, and read a little. Then I went on to bed. It had been a long day, so I thought I’d be out in no time.

I couldn’t even close my eyes.

The excitement overwhelmed me, I suppose. I kept thinking about meeting Madeleine Sinclair. I imagined what I’d say to her. I played it over and over again in my mind, scenario after scenario, from the probable to the impossible. I hoped I’d be charming, I feared I’d be an idiot. I didn’t sleep at all.

I finally gave up around six in the morning. I climbed out of bed, stretched, and checked my agenda. The studio had scheduled the first meeting, the general session with Madeleine Sinclair, for 9:30. After that, we would break away for our individual one-on-one interviews. Mine was last, which could be good or bad depending on how things went. On the one hand, she might be tired and sick of answering the same questions over and over and hate the sight of reporters. On the other, maybe I’d have a little extra time with her. And maybe she’d want to get a drink or something afterwards. Hey, it could happen.

I had about three hours to kill, so I ordered some coffee and a continental breakfast with a side of bacon from room service—the latter because I wanted to see if I’d get Canadian bacon. I didn’t, they just brought me regular old bacon. The continental breakfast consisted of bread and
pastry with a selection of jams, jellies, and marmalades, all three of which turned out to be pretty much the same thing, albeit in different flavors. Tasty, though. I took a minute to check my agenda again, just to be sure I hadn’t missed anything.

Even the bathroom was incredible. Incredible! The door wouldn’t close at first, but that didn’t trouble me in the least. With a grunt, I put my shoulder and weight into it, and it closed just fine.

I found a TV there, and two telephones, one by the bathtub and one by the toilet. Speaking of the tub, it was a sunken marble job the size of a small wading pool. It had three spigots, one for hot water, one for cold, and one for (I swear) bubble bath. They had piped in bubbles! How shining fast is that? I’d planned to just take a quick shower, but how could I pass this up? I flipped on some Mickey Mouse cartoons and settled into a nice hot bubble bath. Luxury I tell you, pure luxury.

I was about as relaxed as I could possibly be when I finally climbed out of the tub and dried myself off with a big fluffy cotton towel. Even the towels were first class. I made a mental note to steal one before I checked out. I glanced at my watch: I still had more than an hour before my appointment. Nothing but time. That’s when I ran into trouble.

Remember the bathroom door? The one that wouldn’t close? The one I’d muscled shut like a complete and total idiot? Well, I’d shut it all right. In fact, I couldn’t open it. It was stuck tight. I pulled with all my might, put every ounce of my weight behind it, but it wouldn’t budge. I even had my foot up against the wall for leverage. Nothing.

It was almost time for my first meeting with the fabulous Madeleine Sinclair, and I had trapped myself in my bathroom.
Chapter 12
Prince Madoc in America

John Fitzroy:

The alarm clock roused me way too early on Wednesday morning. With Daniel away, it fell to me to ensure we didn't slide too far behind on the research we were supposed to be doing for Professor Huckleby. I grumbled an especially creative curse at my so-called friend and roomie, pulled myself out of bed, dressed, and caught the M-rail to Georgia State. I found my friend Jessie Malone in her office at the library. I tapped lightly on the doorframe and stuck my head in. "Hey, Jess. Got a few minutes?"

She looked up from a pile of books, pushed her glasses back into place and smiled a hello. "For the stranger in black? Always."

"You're too good to me."
"Don't you forget it. But I'm afraid I have some bad news."
"No luck tracking down the mysterious vanishing books?"
"Worse than that. I can't even get them through inter-library loan. Not the e-text, not even the physical books!"
"Wait a minute. You're telling me no college library anywhere has any books on this Prince Madoc guy?"
"Not so far. They're all supposed to—"
"But there are no copies on the shelves."
Jessie shrugged. "Not as far as I can tell. I'm not even getting replies."
I frowned. "That's too weird."
"You're telling me." She frowned. "I've never even heard of anything like this. Not in so many places, anyway."
"Any guesses?"
"Maybe there's an especially prolific thief with a fetish for legendary pre-Columbian explorers?" She laughed to shoo away the frustration.
I smiled at the joke. "Cute. Anything else?"
"Not a clue. But I have some friends looking into it."
"Thanks. You're the best."
"Don't you forget it," she said again. "Hey, I've got an idea. I'm heading over to the main Atlanta Public Library. Want to come? Maybe there's something over there."
"Works for me," said I. "The walk'll do me good."
"Let me get my coat."

We didn't exactly strike out at the Atlanta library, but we didn't have much luck, either. We found listings for a couple of books and quite a few articles. After we jotted down the file numbers, Jessie headed upstairs to check the shelves while I went downstairs to the periodical room.
It frustrated me, although by this point it didn’t surprise me, to find that most of the periodicals came up missing. The few I found weren’t much help. I didn’t learn much more than I already knew: Madoc was a Welsh Prince who supposedly sailed to America in the year 1170, more than three centuries before Columbus. The few articles I could dig up were all concerned with proving that Madoc’s journey was nothing more than a legend. At least one maintained that a Prince named Madoc never existed at all. Others claimed to prove that a journey such as Madoc’s was impossible given the technology of his day.

One article offered a theory that one Dr. John Dee, a mysterious mathematician, astrologer, and magician who acted as an advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, had invented Madoc’s voyage. The article theorized that Dee created the Madoc legend to give England a challenge to Spain’s claim on the New World. That seemed plausible enough. In fact, all the articles were rather convincing. So why did the subject interest Ian?

None of the articles hinted at any connections with the Knights Templar—the gents Daniel was supposedly researching—the mysteries surrounding the St. Clairs, Scotland, or Oak Island. I’d have to discover what I could and wait for Ian to connect the dots when he told us about Oak Island in class.

There should have been several more articles, many of which seemed to support the historical validity of Madoc and his voyage. They were all missing. Every single one. The reference librarian assured me that was impossible, but he was at a loss to find even one of the vanished periodicals.

Jessie didn’t have any luck either. “Let me guess,” I said when she came downstairs empty handed. “Nothing on the shelves?”
“Nothing. Not even empty spaces where the books should be.”
“The staff here has no clue?”
“In more ways than one,” she said with a wry smile. She kicked a table leg, apparently hoping to make the library staff suffer vicariously. “They were no help at all.”
“This is getting strange.”
Jessie frowned. “Way strange.”
“Any other ideas?”
“No. I … no, John. I’m sorry.”

A short train and bus ride would get me to Emory University, so I decided to try their library. Maybe I’d have better luck than Jessie’s inter-library friends. Once again, the computer catalog promised that I’d find three books on the shelves. I noted the numbers and made my way to the stacks. Once again, no dice. I checked the numbers again just to be sure, but the books were gone.

So what next? I had some friends at the University of Georgia in Athens, so I’d visited their excellent library on several occasions. The bus and commuter rail would take at least a couple of hours each way. Alas, I couldn’t come up with many other options. Daniel owed me big time for this.

On the train, I looked back over my notes, just in case I could spot some detail about the elusive Prince Madoc I’d overlooked. Needless to say, I didn’t. Still, I did notice something useful. Georgia State, the City of Atlanta, and Emory’s libraries all had virtually the same catalog numbers for books on Madoc. Apparently, there is some consistency in the systems libraries use to shelve books. Having done most of my research online in the past, I’d never noticed that.

When I finally made it to the University of Georgia library, I decided to bypass the computer catalog and go straight to the stacks. I found the general area, scouted around a little,
and actually found three books that looked like they’d be useful.

I didn’t have checkout privileges at UGA, so I found a quiet study carrel and settled down to read and take notes, scanning relevant passages into my e-pad card.

As I read, I quickly dismissed the two major criticisms of Madoc’s voyage I’d found in the articles I read earlier. First, John Dee and the Tudors published the most important of the Madoc documents fifteen years before Columbus’ voyage. They couldn’t have created a fiction in response to Columbus’ discovery for Spain—it hadn’t happened yet! Plus, there is no evidence that the British crown ever tried to use Madoc’s voyage as a challenge to the Spanish claim. More, a number of European explorers, most notably the Vikings Eric the Red and his son, Leif Ericson, reached this continent long before Columbus. Indeed, archeologists had uncovered some evidence that even the ancient Chinese and classical Greeks may have had knowledge of the Americas. Finally, voyages in crafts similar to those Madoc would have used had been recreated in modern times. Such a voyage might at least be possible. But did it actually happen?

As I read, Madoc’s story began to intrigue me.

Madoc’s father, Owain ap Gruffydd ap Cynan, ruled the Kingdom of Gwynedd, later the principality of North Wales, in the 12th Century. He didn’t exactly reign peacefully—in fact, he fought constantly—both with his neighbors, many of whom were his own kinsmen, and with King Henry II of England. He married several times and sired at least seventeen sons and two daughters.

Madoc was born with a clubfoot. Because a prince must be physically perfect, his father ordered that he be put to death at once. But his mother, one Brenda St. Clair, had him secreted away and raised by Pendaran, an old Druid she had known since childhood.

Perhaps it was Pendaran who told Madoc of the legends of wondrous lands across the Western sea. The Welsh Druids had long spoken of a “fair land to the West.” Pendaran would certainly have told Madoc of the poem by the famous bard Taliesin that spoke of “a magic country beyond the looking glass of the Western Sea.” Madoc learned to sail from Welsh fishermen.

Madoc’s deformity must have vanished with age. By all accounts, Madoc was nothing like his father. He grew into a handsome, robust, and charismatic man with a quick mind, a gentle nature, and a strong love for the sea.

On her deathbed, Brenda St. Clair confessed all. Madoc’s identity became known.

Hmmm. St. Clair. It suddenly occurred to me to wonder about the odds of a connection between her and the St. Clairs in Scotland, the ones Ian identified with the Templar Masons and the mysteries at Oak Island. It might be a bit of a stretch, but on the other hand it struck me as an awfully big coincidence. Ian had told us to watch for that name.

When King Owain died in 1169, he left no clear successor. His oldest son could make no claim because he had a large scar on his face—again, that pesky old Welsh law about a ruler not having any physical blemish. The remaining brothers fought for the throne. Only Madoc seemed to have no interest in ruling. Perhaps his love of exploration and the sea was stronger than his lust for power. He had no taste for bloodshed and wanted no part of his brothers’ squabbles.

In the year 1170, Madoc is said to have taken some twenty men and sailed across the Atlantic. After a long voyage, Madoc reached the southern coast of Florida, and then made his way into the Gulf of Mexico, finally landing in what is now Mobile Bay on the southern coast of Alabama.

He must have liked what he found. He left several of his men behind and returned to Wales to gather more colonists. Madoc intended to build a kingdom in the new land he had discovered.

Prince Madoc is said to have taken some great treasure or heirloom with him when he
departed. None of the books ventured a theory as to the nature of this treasure. Prince Madoc, his crew, and his mysterious treasure were never heard from again in Wales. So what happened?

The fate of Madoc’s colony is a mystery without an answer, but there are clues.

In 1666, the Tuscarora Indians captured a Presbyterian minister named Morgan Jones somewhere in the Carolina wilderness. Jones and his companions feared they would be killed. Before the execution could take place, a war captain belonging to the Sachem of the Doegs heard him praying in the Welsh tongue. This war captain told Jones in Welsh that he would not be killed. More, he told Jones that the Doegs spoke Welsh. Jones didn’t publish his account until 1686, but in 1673, Giovanni Paolo Marana, an Italian-born Turkish spy, wrote of the Welsh-speaking Doegs.

In 1660, a Welsh sailor named Stedman washed up on the Atlantic coast somewhere between Florida and Virginia after a shipwreck. He reported being rescued by Indians who spoke a language so like his own that he understood and conversed with them easily.

In the year 1801, Lt. Joseph Roberts, a Welshman, dined at a Washington D.C. hotel. Knowing the waiter to be Welsh, he ordered his meal in his native tongue. Suddenly, an Native American seated at a nearby table leapt to his feet. “Is that thy language?” the Native American asked. When Roberts answered in the affirmative, the Native American declared, “That is also my language, and the language of my fathers and my nation.” But the man had never heard of a place called Wales.

The books were filled with well-documented accounts of Welsh speaking Indians. At least a few reportedly had blue eyes—so-called “moon-eyed people.” All three sources argued that these Welsh Indians must have been the descendants of Madoc’s colony.

No archeological evidence of Madoc’s landing has been found in the area surrounding Mobile Bay. However, there is one very old house that apparently has an ancient Welsh-style stone wall as a part of its foundation. The same family has owned the property for generations, and they have never allowed the wall to be excavated or studied. Why? The books offered no speculation.

In 1953, the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a memorial plaque at Fort Morgan near Mobile Bay, Alabama with these words: “In memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer, who landed in Mobile Bay in the year 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.”

But what happened to the colony itself?

Apparently, something occurred on the coast of Mobile Bay to force the survivors to flee inland. Sir Thomas Herbert, a well-traveled and highly regarded scholar who wrote in the early 1600s, speculated that Madoc’s people where either “killed by the natives’ villainy, or forced away by a change in the clime.”

Did they flee inland? If so, it might suggest a possible answer to another mystery. Throughout the Southeast, there are mysterious stone forts built on the tops of hills and mountains. The fortifications seem to be of European design; the Native American peoples never built such structures. The Cherokees claim “moon-eyed people from across the sea”—men with fair skin and blue eyes—built the forts.

Objects which may have once been European coins and metal artifacts were found near one such structure—a ruin near Manchester, Tennessee known simply as Old Stone Fort, a descriptive name if not an overly imaginative one.

Similar forts were discovered on Lookout Mountain along the border between Tennessee and Georgia, and as far north as Clarke County, Indiana. Could Madoc’s people have built these forts? Archeological evidence suggests that the forts were built between 1200 and 1400, certainly close enough to the right time frame.

Apparently, whoever built the forts did so to protect themselves against attackers. Yet in
each case, they seem to have been overwhelmed and forced to flee. In the end, they seem to have made a final stand in their last fort, a structure built on the top of what is now known as Fort Mountain in a state park in Georgia.

The colony vanished, apparently destroyed. The survivors must have married into Indian tribes, and are now lost in time. Thus the Welsh Indians. It was a good theory.

It was getting late. I’d read through the better part of three books, but I found myself with more questions than answers.

Did Madoc really make his legendary journey to America? Could the Welsh-speaking Indians be the descendants of his colony? Did his people build the stone fortifications? What about the house in Mobile? Why haven’t the owners ever allowed it to be explored? And was there a treasure? If so, what was it? And what happened to it?

The librarians flashed the lights—they were ready to close. Just for laughs, I decided to try a little experiment before I made the trek back to Atlanta. I carefully placed the books back on the shelf where I’d found them, then wandered downstairs and looked them up on the catalog computer. Once again, the computer scanned and promised me the books were available. But once again, when I made my way back to shelves, they were gone. All three volumes had vanished without a trace.

A sudden wave of paranoia shivered through me. Ian’s tales had me seeing mysteries and dangerous intrigue at every turn, I suppose. And yet, one fact seemed terribly obvious. Someone, apparently, didn’t want me to read about Prince Madoc.
Chapter 13
A Storm Builds

Timothy Jones:

Fuck prison, my brothers and sisters. That’s what I thought as I lay there on my cot, my body bruised, broken, and bleeding from the beating the cops gave me. These weren’t even local pigs. These bastards were federal. No one can pound your ass into the pavement like feds.

They’d locked me up ostensibly to calm myself. Only I didn’t cool up any. I got madder by the minute. A whole lot madder. Fuck prison, my brothers and sisters. Fuck it hard up the ass.

No matter how bad you’ve heard jail is, it’s worse. I know. My first time in, I did some solid time. Not too bad, but long enough. I was young then, young and typical. You’ve heard my story a thousand times. Black kid grows up on the streets, runs with the wrong crowd—like there’s another crowd to run with on the streets—does something stupid, gets caught and gets busted solid hard.

I survived. I got stronger. I got out.

As a condition of my parole, I agreed to go to school. I went. Finished high school and got my papers. Did well enough to make a minority scholarship to Atlanta University and decided to give it a shot. What the hell, right? I went for a double major—Music and Political Science. One would be a career, the other a damn fine avocation. I had no idea which would be which.

I learned what injustice is really all about at Atlanta University.

You’ve seen the news. There among the stories of airport bombings, playground shootings, freeway rage, government monitoring, layoffs, war, famine, murders, rapes, plunging economy, urban violence, and ever worsening predictions of imminent Armageddon, you’ve seen my picture. So you know about the demonstrations. I don’t mind telling you, I participated. I marched with my brothers and sisters. Hell, it’s no goddamn secret anyway, right?

But the demonstrations and marches were always peaceful. Every single fucking time. Didn’t matter much. To hell with free speech and the right to assemble. I got slammed more often than not. I’d spend a night or two in the hole, get my wrist slapped so hard I thought my hand would fall off the last bloody tendons holding it to my arm, and go back to school. No sweat. I didn’t serve any real time, nothing I couldn’t have done standing on my head.

I’ve heard people call me an angry young man, but that’s not a good phrase. It sounds all romantic. Bullshit. It doesn’t come anywhere near telling you what ate at me from inside.

Rage burned there, dark fire that blazed hotter than mere anger.

I marched when our beloved leaders in Washington decided to end the minority scholarship program. Let each man earn based upon his merit and the strength of his character, they said. Shit. A four fucking oh, and I got tossed right back in the streets, and to hell with what I’d accomplished. You’ve seen my picture in the news story about the demonstrations. The angry young man, fist held high, leading his troops to face The Man in the AU admin building.

Things changed among the disenfranchised on the streets. Suddenly, some of us listened to Malcolm rather than Martin. But I swear in Allah’s holy name, we demonstrated peacefully. Sure, it was a little hot. If one or two of us carried baseball bats, it was just so we’d feel a little stronger, a little less vulnerable. We were goddamn angry young men, right? But like I said, it was all peaceful.
Until the cock-sucking cops showed up.

I don’t know why the shooting started. All I know is that my brothers and sisters died, and I took the fall.

All of us who survived did some time, but they singled me out to take the hard drop. They needed someone to put in the papers, I suppose. The angry goddamn young man who wrote all those articles and essays. The enemy of the people. That was me.

But good can come of everything, even time in prison. An old drunk who shared my cell gave me a copy of the Holy Koran. I read it, and the truth there spoke to me like a shout. Another brother in my pod taught me more. In the prison library, I found books on Islam and devoured them. When Muslim teachers came to pray with us, I converted. Here at last I found the peace I sought, if not the justice. I embraced my new faith with all the passion I could muster, and I found in it both strength and comfort.

When I finally made parole, I managed to find a job making deliveries for SoftTech South, one of Wilson Julius’ companies. Wilson Julius, a black Muslim just like me, had a scholarship program for employees and Allah blessed me enough to qualify. Wilson himself presented me with the award. When I met him, he told me to channel my anger into positive energy, to develop the leader he saw sleeping within me. I promised Wilson that I’d make something out of myself.

I was back in school when the murder happened. I watched when the pigs arrested Wilson. I watched as the trial began. And as I watched, I knew the man was doomed to drop. There is no justice for a black man in this nation. Not even for a rich one like Wilson Julius. Yeah, I organized the march. I rallied my brothers and sisters and I fanned the smoldering fires of their anger. We were fucking pissed. But we remained peaceful. We only wanted our voices heard; the victims would not be silent. It wasn’t even a demonstration. We came together for a simple prayer vigil. We looked to Mecca and prayed for justice. We sang songs of strength and hope, and we prayed for our brother Wilson.

When the Federal Black Guard SWAT cops showed up, it turned bloody.

They came in full riot gear. If we didn’t oblige them with a riot, well, that was all speed to them. They provided one. We were like children, sitting there with our candles, singing hymns of prayer. The pigs fell on us like a tidal wave, clubbing and beating. We didn’t resist, not at first, but they showed no mercy. When a few of us finally tried to fight back, they opened fire. I saw at least three men and two women fall. As for the rest, if you’ve read the papers, you know as much as I do. Something hit me on the back of head and I don’t remember anything else. When I woke up in jail, bleeding on my cot, two guards came into my cell and beat the remaining shit out of me. One of them was a black man.

On the vid news, I heard about the angry mob of students who stormed the AU center. About our “ruthless attack.” That was the justice we received.

We were supposed to calm down. They claimed they’d put out sparks before they flamed up into a riot. Shit. They hadn’t doused anything, unless it was with gasoline. Don’t believe what they tell you. Tensions didn’t ease. They were nurtured, fanned liked sparks. Whatever hope there’d been for peace evaporated like raindrops on hot Georgia asphalt.

If there wasn’t going to be justice in this land, there would to be an explosion. A big one.

Even as the rage burned in me, one cold thought chilled me. Someone shaped these events. Someone moved us, all of us, like pawns on a board. But knowledge isn’t always power. How can a pawn strike back at an unseen hand?

I would find a way, I vowed then. I would find a way.

This train of thought scared me plenty. Cancerous paranoia isn’t exactly something you like to find growing in yourself. But like folks say, you ain’t paranoid when they’re really out to get
your ass.

That was three days before Wilson’s verdict was announced. But even then, I knew that a storm stirred and brewed, a big one, thunder and lightening and winds that break stone. Oh yeah. I could feel it building inside me, and inside my brothers and sisters.

When it hit, it would hit hard.
Chapter 14
_Madeleine Sinclair and Me_

Daniel Corwin:

It was almost time for my first meeting with the fabulous Madeleine Sinclair, and I had trapped myself in my bathroom. I pulled, beat, and pounded until my hands were raw. The stupid door wouldn’t budge.

Finally, I had to swallow my pride and call for help. Suddenly, I found myself way grateful for those two phones. The front desk operator promised to send someone up right away. Since I'd left my shaving kit, clothes, hairbrush, and anything else that might have let me accomplish anything useful in the bedroom, I could only wait while the minutes ticked by.

The hotel’s definition of “right away” and mine must have differed somewhat, because something close to a total eternity passed before help finally arrived. At last, I heard a knock from the public hallway outside my suite door. As my present situation prevented me from opening the door personally, I called out a cheerful, “Come in!”

A few minutes later, there came another hesitant knock. “Come in!” I called again, somewhat less cheerfully.

“Sir,” said a voice from the hallway, “you’ve locked the door from the inside. You need to open it before we can come in.”

Well of course I’d locked the door. Everyone locks the door in hotels. “Ummm … I can’t unlock the door. I’m stuck in the bathroom, remember?”

“You’re gonna have to,” I said, proud of how well I kept my voice under control.

“You’ll have to wait a short while,” the voice called. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Wait a minute! Where’re you going?”

“To get the hotel detective. He can open the door.”

“Where is he?”

“In another building.”

“Another building! How long is this going to take?”

“I’ll back soon, sir,” the voice said.

“Wait a minute!” I called. But he was gone. Great.

Was this ‘other building’ in the same city? Was it even in Canada? I could only hope so. At this point, I knew I’d doomed myself to wicked speed tardiness, so I called the front desk again and asked to be connected to the studio’s suite. The line was busy, so I tried again. And again. Still busy.

Of course! They were doing television interviews, so they’d left the phones off the hook. I had to let them know I’d be late, so I called the front desk again and asked the operator to take a message. “Would you please send someone to tell them Daniel Corwin is stuck in his bathroom, so I’ll be late for the meeting with Madeleine Sinclair?”

“Would you please repeat the message a little more slowly,” the operator said with a thick French accent. Marvelous. I had to entrust my fate and my meeting with the fabulous Madeleine Sinclair to someone who spoke English as a second language.

I didn’t even insert a swear word. Truly, my newfound patience astonished me. I suffered like a regular Job. Or maybe a Jonah. A whale’s belly couldn’t be any worse than that bathroom. Lord knows I said as many prayers as a Biblical hero. I only hoped the other phrases I muttered didn’t offset any points I made by pleading with the Almighty.

I waited. And of course I’d left my clothes and shaving kit in my suitcase. There wasn’t a damn thing I could accomplish.

I waited some more.

Help finally arrived. The detective got them into my suite. Somehow. Then it took three guys to muscle my door open. I thanked them, dressed in a flash, shaved my entire face with maybe three strokes and brushed my hair as best as I could. Damn. I’d wanted to look my best when I met Madeleine Sinclair! Oh well. At least there would be a crowd for the first meeting. And besides, maybe if I was a little scruffy, she’d think I was cute naturally.

I ran through the hallways like a madman. The elevator took too long to arrive, so I bolted down the stairs. I’d just managed to tie my tie when I made it to the studio’s suite. “Hi,” I said to the rep at the door. “My name’s Daniel Corwin—”

“Thank God you’re here!” she said. “Speed, I thought. They waited for me!”

“Where’s Madeleine?” she asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head to clear the confusion. It didn’t help.

“You didn’t bring her?”

I saw my own bewilderment mirrored in the rep’s face. She shook her head. I wondered, suddenly, if perhaps I hadn’t read my itinerary closely enough. “Ummm, was I supposed to?”

The confusion flushed to embarrassment. “Oh! I’m sorry. I thought you were the gentleman stuck in the bathroom."

“That’s me,” I said, trying to hide my blush.

She shook her head again. “Then where’s Madeleine?”

“I’m afraid I don’t see the connection ….”

It took us forever to sort this one out. In the end, it turned out that my French-speaking friend at the front desk had taken two messages for the studio suite, mine and one saying that Madeleine Sinclair’s limo driver was running late. By the time the messages reached the studio, they’d sort of melded into one. The message the studio people actually received went something like this: “Daniel Corwin, Madeleine’s limo driver, is stuck in her bathroom, so she’ll be late.”

Jeez.

By the time we had it all figured out, Madeleine arrived and the press conference got started. I hurried to find a seat in the back of the crowded meeting room.

My God! She looked incredible. I’d never seen anyone so beautiful. Sure, I’d seen her films and all those pictures in the magazines. None of them prepared me for the reality. She glided to the front of the room with casual, elegant grace, radiant and lovely. She walked with a dancer’s light steps, like a woman who always heard music, like she had a pact with air and earth. And when she spoke! Oh, that wonderful, heartbreaking voice. Thank God I had a recorder, because otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to tell you a single thing she’d said.

The conference ended an hour later. Madeleine excused herself to go prepare for the one-on-one interviews. When she left us, the room seemed darker. I stood to leave, but before I made it to the door, I suddenly found myself surrounded by the international press. They all had one question.

“What were you doing in Madeleine Sinclair’s bathroom?”

I grinned in spite of myself. So that’s how all those rumors get started. I hoped the tabloids
would spell my name right.

Back in my hotel room, I played the tape over and over again. I just couldn’t get enough of her voice. I checked the schedule a time or two, just to be sure I’d read the time correctly.

I shaved (I’d missed a few spots) and brushed my hair again.

I went down to the cafe and had a bite of lunch, then came back to the room and played the tape a couple more times.

I checked the schedule once again, just to be sure.

I paced off the dimensions of my suite until I had them memorized.

Finally, after a slow eternity, the time came. Well, close enough. I brushed my hair and teeth one more time and hurried down. I figured a half an hour early wouldn’t look too bad.

Fortunately, they had a small waiting room, because I had quite a while to wait. First, I was a half an hour early for my original appointment. The limo driver’s tardiness had pushed everything back by more than an hour. And not too surprisingly, I suppose, the one-on-ones ran a little long.

I’d started on the small selection of magazines for the third time before the studio rep stuck her head in and announced that my turn had come at last.

Oh God.

I wasn’t ready after all. My stomach felt like it was filled with bricks and lava, and no matter how many times I wiped my hands on my pants I couldn’t get them dry. I literally trembled as I stood and I dropped my recorder twice. Then I couldn’t find my note pad. The studio rep noticed my discomfort, but thankfully she didn’t seem to recognize the cause. “Sorry about the wait,” she said with a very professional smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No problem,” I said, managing a grin. I pulled myself together as best as I could and let her lead me into the room where Madeleine Sinclair waited. I felt like Dorothy and the gang off to see the Wizard of Oz.

The hours that had passed since the first meeting hadn’t changed anything. Madeleine was still incredible. She sat in a comfortable armchair next to a sofa and a little end table. Madeleine stood and we shook hands. “Hi,” she said when the studio rep introduced us. Her eyes twinkled.

“So you’re the gentleman from my bathroom.”

“So I hear,” I said with a shy smile. I hoped she’d find it charming. The studio rep motioned me to the sofa. We both sat down as I placed my recorder on the table. We sat close, so very close. Okay, not unprofessionally close, but close. Almost like friends.

She smiled back at me, and it broke my heart. “The one I’m having the mad affair with?”

“Well, I thought we’d just start with the interview and then maybe dinner or something. I’m not that easy, you know.”

She laughed. Oh thank Heaven! For a second, I thought she’d slap me. “If that’s what I have to settle for, then, I suppose we’d better get started.”

As I turned the recorder on and opened my note pad, the studio rep cleared her throat. “Don’t forget, you have exactly thirty minutes. I’ll be back to end the interview then.”

“Thanks,” I said forcing a smile. “A lot.”

“Don’t bother,” Madeleine told her. “I’m certain I can send this gentleman back to his bathroom when the time comes.”

“You’ve had a long afternoon, Ms. Sinclair. I only—”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ve had a much longer day than I have. Besides, after this, I’m
finished. You have to do it all again with the rest of the cast tomorrow, poor thing.”

“Well, if you’re sure—" "I’m sure. Go get some rest. You must need it!" "Good night, then.” The rep left, giving Madeleine a smile and me one last glare, and then I was alone with Madeleine Sinclair. In her hotel room. I couldn’t wait to tell the guys. "Now then,” she said in that amazing accent, part Scot, part English, all incredible. “Shall we get started?”

“Why not?” I checked to make sure the recorder was still running, and then asked my first question. “Tell me, did you always want to be an actor?” Oh God. Could I possibly find a more clichéd question? Inside, I rolled my eyes and pounded my waggling head. Some first impression.

“No,” she said. I felt my eyebrows lift. “No?” “When I was little, I wanted to be a knight.” I chuckled. “Cool!” “Not really. When I had the opportunity to actually meet some of our esteemed latter-day knights, I found them to be so very stuffy! Not dashing and romantic at all, poor things. So then I decided to be a dancer. I used to spend hours and hours dancing in front of a mirror! Can you imagine it? Always pretending I was a prima ballerina on the stage … dreaming and wishing with all my heart. Oh, I absolutely adored it! Dancing. It makes you feel so intensely alive! Do you know what I mean?” I nodded to assure her that I did. “So what happened?” She shrugged. In the gentle roll of her shoulders I saw the subtle grace of a dancer’s move. Then she smiled again, a little sadly. “I grew up. Wrong body type.” “Too bad. So then you decided on acting?” “Not right away. I decided to be an archeologist, then an author, then a painter. Then an actor. But dancing is my first love. Do you know what? I still catch myself dancing in front of a mirror sometimes.”

The interview was perfect. Perfect! It wasn’t just a question and answer give-and-take, it became a conversation. I have no idea how long it took, but I’m certain it lasted more than the allotted thirty minutes. I had the beginnings of a wonderful article. It would practically write itself—I’d just have to punch the keyboard.

At last, or all too soon, Madeleine walked me to her door. I think the idea was for me to leave then, but I just couldn’t. Not right away. I stalled, desperate to find some way to make the conversation last just a little longer. I ran the risk of making things a little awkward, but I couldn’t help it. “I guess you’re pretty tired after all these interviews.” “A little,” she admitted. “Well, I suppose I should let you go. I bet you’ll sleep like a baby.” “In a while, I suppose. I’m going to read a bit, then maybe drop down to the restaurant for a bite of dinner.” “Have fun. Good night!” “Good night, Mr. Corwin. Thanks for a very pleasant interview.” She offered me her hand to shake; I let go quickly to be sure she wouldn’t think I held it too long. “My pleasure. It was nice to meet you.” "You too.”
Okay. She said she was going to the restaurant. I had one more chance! Unless she decided to call room service or go somewhere else. But no, she had specifically said she was going down to the restaurant. That meant the one in the hotel. It had to. Unless she changed her mind. Women do that, you know. And it’s not like we had an appointment or anything. I raced to my room, changed clothes so it wouldn’t look like I’d run straight to the restaurant to wait for her, and then ran straight to the restaurant to wait for her.

The restaurant turned out to be small but elegant in a comfortable way. Cozy and a little romantic. Perfect! It was crowded, but that could work to my advantage, too. If Madeleine had to wait for a table, maybe she’d want to share mine. Hey, it could happen. Couldn’t it?

I waited a few moments before a waiter who doubled as maître d’ came to seat me. “Sorry about the wait,” he said. “We’re a little short-staffed tonight.”

“No problem,” I replied.

“Table for one?”

“Actually … it’s sort of possible it might be for two.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“Well, an … acquaintance of mine is coming down soon, I think. I’m hoping she’ll join me.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“Ummm … right. Think you can help?”

It occurred to me that I should offer the man a gratuity, but he stopped me when he saw me going for my wallet. “Forget it. I’m the manager. You can’t afford to bribe me.”

I glanced down at his shiny brass nametag. Sure enough, it read Rick Le Mon, Manager. I lifted an eyebrow. “The manager is waiting tables?”

“Like I said, we’re short-staffed. Your best hope is to appeal to my better nature.”

“I’m appealing,” I said with a grin.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I’ll see what I can do. Take the table by the fire, eh? It’s romantic, and it’s close to the front so you can keep an eye out for your, um, friend.”

“Perfect. Listen, can I ask one more favor?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Look, if it’s trouble—”

“Never mind. What is it?”

“First, I’d like it to look like I just got here.”

“That’s no problem, sir. I just won’t wait on you.”

“Great! And one more thing.”

He sighed patiently. “Yes?”

“Can you tell her it will be a few minutes before you can seat her? That way, I’ll have an excuse to ask her to join me.”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir. Who’s the fortunate young victim?”

“Her name is Madeleine Sinclair. She’s about my height, blond, blue eyes—”

“I’ll know her,” he assured me. Of course he would. Everyone knew her.

I waited almost two hours. When she finally arrived, my little plan worked like a charm. There really weren’t any tables. My friend the manager/maître d’ explained this very fact as I walked over. “Hi, Miss Sinclair,” I said. “Remember me?”
“Mr. Corwin from the bathroom! Of course. But please, call me Madeleine.” Wow! She remembered my name!

“Then call me Daniel. Look, I couldn’t help but overhear. I’m alone, would you care to join me? There’s plenty of room and no waiting.”

“Oh, do you mind? I’m simply famished.”

“It would be my pleasure,” I said. The maître d’ had the decency to wait until she’d turned her back before he afforded me a smirk. I winked a thank you at him.

Together, we enjoyed a pretty close to perfect dinner. Almost at once, we found ourselves talking like friends. Somewhere along the way, I think we actually became friends. There are certain moments when friendships are born, precise instants when an acquaintance or even a total stranger suddenly becomes someone you can share secrets with. Such moments are rare, but they’re magical and precious. That’s what we shared, that and a bottle of an excellent Merlot.

We’d just finished our coffee and dessert when I found the courage to ask her to take a walk with me. How could we come this far and not see some of Toronto? To my delight, she accepted.

And what a beautiful city! Toronto proved to be clean, crowded, and fun. The people downtown were friendly and seemed only too happy to point us to fun little pubs, shops, and jazz clubs. Sure, we felt the tension on the streets, what with the Julius trial and all. But we were never really uncomfortable. Madeleine wore a funky little hat and some glasses, so most people didn’t recognize her. When they did, she seemed happy to smile for pictures or sign autographs.

We visited a bookshop and discovered we shared quite a few favorite authors—J.R.R. Tolkien, Ray Bradbury, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alexandre Dumas, Charles de Lint, C.S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, John Myers Myers, Madeleine L’Engle, Mark Helprin, Wilton Barnhardt, Dr. Seuss. We found a 90s-themed oldies music club and danced till we ached. We went to a poetry reading at a coffeehouse, but a large woman in a flannel shirt asked us to leave when we caught a fit of giggles and couldn’t stop laughing.

We finally ended up at a smoky little blues bar with bare brick walls, a pool table, and an old fashioned neon Pabst Blue Ribbon sign. Three old black men provided the music, and they were amazing. We went in for one last quick drink and wound up talking till the wee hours of the morning. Around three-o’clock in the morning, we finally caught a cab back to the hotel.

I walked her back to her room. “Thanks,” I said at last.
Madeleine smiled. Oh, God! That smile! “For what?”
“Well, for joining me for dinner for starters.”
“I enjoyed it. Really I did.”
“It’s been fun,” I said softly.
“It has been fun,” she agreed. “I don’t get nearly enough evenings like that. I needed a night out like that so very, very much! It’s good to sneak away from the entourage now and then.”
“I’m glad.”
“Mind telling me something?”
“What?”
“Why you went to so much trouble?”
“I don’t know what you mean.”
“Coming all the way up here to begin with. Not to mention all the trouble you took to arrange things with the maître d’—”
“You knew about that? Jesus, I’m glad I didn’t tip him.”
“Daniel, relax. If I didn’t want to have dinner with you, I wouldn’t have made such a point
of telling you I was going down to the restaurant.”
   “I see.”
   “So?”
   “A needle pulling thread?”
   She giggled. “No, silly. So why all the trouble?”
   “You really will think I’m silly.”
   “I started thinking that about the time we got booted out of that little coffee shop.”
   “It’s nothing really.”
   “Hey,” she said gently. She reached out to touch my arm. “You can tell me. I danced in front of a mirror, remember?”
   “I just … I really wanted to meet you.”
   “Why?”
   “That’s hard to answer.”
   “Because I’m pretty? Because I’m famous?”
   “No. Believe me, it’s more than that. Really. I just don’t know how to put it into words. Something about you … I wish I knew what to say—”
   “But how did you know? Daniel, I know what you mean, but how could you have known what you’d feel before you even met me? You didn’t even know anything about me, not really.”
   “Remember, I’ve read a lot of what you’ve written, and all those interviews you’ve given. On some level I can’t begin to describe, I … well, I heard you. I understood what you were saying, I really did. Do you believe me?” She nodded. “And Madeleine, I think you know that a lot of you, the real true you, comes across in your art.”
   “Is that all?”
   “Yes. Well, maybe. I guess when you want to meet someone, it’s never because of who they are. It’s who they might be.”
   That must have been the right answer, because before I could continue, she touched a finger to my lips and hushed me. “To each his Dulcinea,” she whispered. Then she kissed me. Before I even knew what was happening, I put my arms around her and pulled her close. The kiss grew deeper then, and I was lost.
   “Wow,” she said when we finally came up for air.
   “Yeah,” I said. “Wow.”
   “Good night, Daniel.”
   “Wait a minute,” I said.
   “Yes?”
   “It’s just … uh, are you heading back to England after this?”
   “No.”
   “No?” I had a splinter of hope then, at least a little. Maybe I could see her one more time. We could have breakfast. Or I could change my flight …
   “No. I’m going to New York to meet with my American agent, then I’m going to Atlanta. Maybe we can meet for dinner or something?”
   “Atlanta! Why didn’t you tell me?”
   She smiled. “I thought I’d surprise you.”
   “You did! What’s the occasion?”
   “I’m to meet with a friend of my father’s. Someone who’s researching the Sinclair family and some of our properties.”
   Someone in Atlanta. Someone interested in the Sinclairs.
   No. It couldn’t be.
   “Ummm … If you don’t mind my asking, who’s your friend?”
“A professor. His name is Ian Huckleby.” I'll be darned.

I floated back to my own room, the taste of her kiss still alive and tingling on my lips. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep; I was too happy, too excited. I had to tell someone. Without even thinking, I picked up the phone and called the Castle. After a few rings, a very groggy voice answered. “Hello?”

“John? That you?” He hadn’t turned on the vid.
“Daniel? Jesus Christ, man! Do you know what time it is?”
“No, actually.”
“It’s almost four in the bleeding morning!”
“Sorry. Did I wake you?”
“Daniel, this better be good.”
“Madeleine Sinclair just kissed me!”
The line was silent. “You suck,” John said at last.
“And guess what? She’s coming to Atlanta to visit me! Tell the guys, will you?”
“You suck,” he repeated.
Chapter 15
An Army of Chaos

Stephen Verner:

This is my confession. It’s not meant to justify my actions; not even to my brother Lee and my stepbrother John. It’s meant to explain, not to excuse. Let God judge me as he will. Still, Lee and John—if you read this, I pray you’ll find some way to forgive me. I always wanted to do the right thing, you know. Even when I tried to kill our mother. Do you believe me? I only wanted to make things right.

I can name for you the exact moment when my downfall began.

On Thursday, the day before Black Friday, I reported to Simon Proctor’s office. I had just completed a three-hundred page brief on the activities of militia groups across the nation. The information we’d gathered shocked me. It did not, however, shock Simon Proctor.

“Frankly, sir, I find this rather disturbing,” I began.

“Why is that, Stephen?” Simon regarded me with those dark eyes of his. We met in his private office. He’d designed that office to intimidate. I served proudly as a member of Simon’s senior staff, a trusted associate. Even, I thought, a friend. Yet in that place especially, where I sat looking up at him, he never failed to unnerve me.

As always, his gray-black suit and crisp white shirt were perfect and wrinkle free, like they’d been sculpted from cold stone. His slate black hair was perfectly, precisely groomed. His massive desk and chair sat on a slightly raised dais, so that he looked down, slightly, on the visitor who sat where I did.

“Why?” I repeated dumbly. I shook my head, but his words make no more sense to me.

“Um, have you read the report, sir?”

“I know what it contains.”

“We have all these people—”

“They are Americans, Stephen.” His hands were folded neatly beneath his chin, and he regarded me with a piercing, merciless gaze that tore through flesh to probe the soul. “They are filled with rage and fear, but they are Americans.”

“Right. We have all these … Americans arming themselves to the teeth with illegal weapons. Literally thousands of these little armies, well trained and well armed. Each with their own agenda, Simon, all of them hating authority.”

He nodded once, curtly. “And why d’you think that is?”

“Uh … what?” No matter how many times I rehearsed what I needed to say to Simon, no matter how carefully I planned my arguments, I always found myself at a loss for words, stumbling like an idiot after elusive thoughts and prepared phrases as they slipped away like water spilling through cupped fingers.

“Why are … how did you put it? Why are all these little armies hating authority?”

“Well, I’m not sure there’s a consistent reason—”

“Isn’t there? I drew a different conclusion. Why do you suppose that is?”

“Simon, I’m not sure they reason at all. I’m telling you, these people are dangerous. We’re talking about powder kegs all over the country!”
“Son, powder kegs can be very useful, when they’re properly placed. But you never answered my question. Why do these people distrust government so strongly that they feel compelled to arm themselves and form militias?”

I shook my head again. “I don’t know,” I admitted.

Simon smiled. “I’ll tell you then. It’s because they feel their government has betrayed them. Personally, I feel they may be right.”

I sat slack-jawed, stunned. For a moment, I couldn’t even speak. Surely I hadn’t heard him correctly. When I finally found my voice, I could only manage a simple, “What?”

“Look around you, Stephen. Look at the sorry shape this nation is in. Is this what the founding fathers intended? Rampant crime? Liberal judges putting rapists and murderers back on our streets to prey on children? Honest, hardworking people supporting deadbeat welfare-for-lifers? Weapons in public schools where the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is forbidden?”

“No, sir. But—”

“Do you think the patriots who built this nation design our healthcare system to turn doctors’ offices into butcher shops stained with the blood of unborn babies murdered in the womb? Did they intend to watch as our hard-won jobs were sent overseas, or given to undeserving workers because of an arbitrary and unjust quota system in the name of ‘affirmative action?’ Homosexuals teaching our children and dictating our morals? Cults corrupting the innocent at every turn? Is that the America our forefathers fought and died for?”

“Well … no, sir.”

“It pains me to hear you say that. Perhaps I misunderstood why you wanted to join our Crusade in the first place. Perhaps I wasn’t clear about the work you hoped to accomplish.” I tried to protest, but Simon didn’t give me an opportunity to interrupt. “Perhaps I did misjudge you, Stephen. You wouldn’t be the first, I fear. I have far too much faith in people, alas. But tell me, pray, what do you feel is relevant?”

For an awkward moment, I just stared at him, mouth open, unable to even speak, much less find the right words. “Sir,” I said at last, “These people, these … Americans are walking arsenals. With illegal automatic weapons! We’re not talking Saturday night specials. They’re better fortified than … than half the police forces in the nation. Dear God, they outnumber most police forces! How are they getting them? In my opinion, this is a dangerous situation nearing crisis level. Why weren’t these activities monitored sooner?”

“They have been monitored.”

“They … uh, what?”

“I assure you, I can list their arsenals for you down to the last bullet.”

“But how?”

“As Secretary of Homeland Security, it’s my responsibility to know, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well of course, sir.”

“Stephen, I know their strength because I have allowed them to accumulate their weapons. I have aided their recruitment efforts. I have even sent them ‘volunteers’ with extensive military experience to see that these troops are properly trained. And, I might add, to speak … favorably of me and our Holy Crusade at opportune moments.”

I nodded. “Drill sergeants and PR hacks all rolled into one. Clever.”

“I thought so.”

“Do any of these men know of your involvement?”
“Oh, they have no idea, of course. Aside from you and a very few trusted others, no one knows of my involvement. Absolutely no one can prove any improper activities or trace them to this office. Not to me or to President McDonald. Absolutely no one. Do you understand me?”

I nodded again, and then shook my head. “But why, Simon? You yourself worked to pass some of those gun control laws. The very same laws these people are breaking!”

“I intended to control weapons, not outlaw them. Please note the distinction. And what does the Constitution say about militias? About the right to bear arms? Or do you also question the Constitution itself, Stephen?”

“I don’t understand.” Shaking my head again didn’t help.

Simon smiled at me the way he’d smile at a child and I felt like a fool. “Let me ask you a question,” he said. “Please answer honestly, my friend. I need to know your heart. Why did you come to work for me? Why did you join this crusade?”

“To make a difference, Simon. You know that.”

“Perhaps we both need to be reminded. From time to time. You’ve been with me since the early days, long before I heard this nation’s cry and entered the politics. I’ve enjoyed success in government largely because of your actions. I’ve come to depend on you, Stephen. You’ve been my strong right arm.” I flushed with pride. “Tell me again, son. Why?”

This time, the words came easily. “You and I made a commitment, Simon. To each other, to this nation, to God. We both saw the problems; you just made a good list of them. I still feel we can do something. This nation needs good moral leadership again. It needs strength. That’s why we’re here. That’s why we’ve always been here.” It’s true. We did make a commitment. But that’s not what I thought about right then. I thought about power. I believed in our mission, or I told myself I did, anyway. I like to think that, deep down, I really did. But more than conviction drove me, and Simon Proctor knew it.

Simon’s smile widened. “Stephen,” he said, “I fear our work is going to be even more difficult than either of us imagined when we first made that solemn oath. I am going to share something with you now, something few know, or dare imagine. This is a great secret, one I fear has grown too terrible for me to bear alone. I need you, Stephen. I need you badly. Can I still depend on you?”

“Of course, Simon.”

My answer seemed to satisfy him. He stood and walked to a file cabinet behind his desk, touched his thumb to the keypad, then typed in code. “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Open..” When his voice print and command password phrase were recognized, a drawer popped open a crack.

Simon opened the drawer and pulled out a bound report. I couldn’t imagine what information could warrant such security; after all, we worked in the most secure building on the plane.

Simon hesitated as he looked at the cover for a moment, then turned and walked back to his desk. He didn’t speak until he sat down again.

“I must ask you to repeat your oath, Stephen. This is a most serious matter.”

“I swear,” I said. I held his gaze for as long as I could, hoping he’d see the sincerity in my eyes. I had to look away.

“Take this report. Read it tonight. Show it to no one. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” The report cover read The Circle of Three. “What is it?”

He spoke slowly and precisely. “It is an intelligence report, perhaps the most secret one I have ever seen or heard of. The information it contains is terrible in its implications, but I fear I must ask you to read it. Stephen, we two have fought a good fight. From the earliest days of the ministry to our service to the President. But we have been fighting a losing battle. We are like heroes battling some hell-spawned creature from myth, a fearsome beast with many heads. Have
you read of such beasts? In school, perhaps?” I nodded. “When you strike at one head, a drug lord
or a prostitution ring, say, dozens more spring up to take its place. Do you see my meaning?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What we haven’t been able to do is strike at the heart of the beast. To kill it rather than
wounding it. Have we, son?”

“No, sir.”

“Despite our best work, our many victories in the name of America and the Lord, the beast
grows stronger. That report you hold may give us a clue how to strike at the beast’s heart.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to.” Simon stood and paced as he spoke. I leaned forward, horrified and
fascinated. “But that report will tell you about a most terrifying cult that has existed, quite
literally, for centuries. They have manipulated history, Stephen. Like the mythic beast, their
tentacles are everywhere. In government, new age cults, the media, organized crime. Even in our
schools, Stephen. Even in our schools. We strike at a head, but the beast lives on, it thrives. And
the result? The nation we love, and the principles upon which it was founded, is devoured, like an
oak with rot at its root, like a strong man with a cancer in his bones.”

“Simon, what you’re telling me, it’s incredible.”

“I know that. Read the report.”

“But what … what are we going to do? Why tell me now?”

“Because now we have a chance to strike. The leaders of this so-called Circle of Three are
gathering, soon, in one place. We are going to attack. We will arrest those we can, the rest …
well, God’s will be done. But as Secretary of Homeland Security, I can’t let a chance like this
pass.”

“Who’s making the arrest? The army? Or local police? Will they be under our control?”

“They will be under our control, but they will not be local police. Not the army, not even
the Homeland Security Black Guard troops. Because Stephen, if something goes wrong, we must
ensure our actions can’t be traced back to this office, and especially not back to the President.
We’ll need another army. An army of our own. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I looked down at the report, not the one Simon had given me, but the one I had just
delivered to him. The one on the activities of militia groups.

Oh, God, surely not!

“Simon,” I said as realization came to me, “you can’t be serious! This isn’t an army, this is
chaos!”

“Chaos may be a small price to pay.”

“But … these people—”

“These Americans, Stephen.” Simon stopped pacing and rested one meaty hand on a gilded
globe. He looked like the mythical titan Atlas in reverse: not a god bearing the world on his
shoulders, but one holding it firm in a strong grip. Once again, I couldn’t meet his gaze. “These
Americans share our ideals. They can be a mighty weapon. They simply need to be harnessed.”

“I wonder how their leaders will feel about being harnessed.”

“Most of them, I think, will be only too happy to join us. The rest …” He shrugged. “They
will be dealt with.”

“Dealt with? How, exactly?”

“Imprisoned if possible.”

“And if not?”

“Stephen, don’t think we can fight a war like this without casualties. You know what’s at
stake, or you will when you’ve read that report. I think you have reason to trust me. You do trust
me, don’t you? Because I must know I can depend on you, as I always have.”

I did not agree blindly. Let’s be clear on that. This is my confession. I knew what I was
doing. I wasn’t fooled; I was willing. Perfectly willing. “You can count on me,” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

“First, read the report. We will talk further if you like.”
“Yes, sir.”
“Then, I want you to begin contacting the leaders of these militias. Remember, nothing may be traced back to this office. Nothing in writing.”
“Yes, sir. But Simon, why me?”
“First, because I know I can depend on you.”
“Yes?”
“This is difficult.” I saw sadness in his eyes.
“Tell me. Simon, please.”
Simon didn’t answer me for a long moment. At last, he took his hand off the globe and sat in the chair next to me. “I fear your brothers may be a part of this cult,” he said at last.
“Lee? And John? No!” Oh, please, God. Not my brothers. Suddenly, power meant even more. I’d been given a tool I could use to save the two I cared about most.
“Read the report, son. Your mother is one of the leaders of this cult. Didn’t you yourself tell me she was openly a witch?”
“Elaine Verner is not my mother. She simply married my father.”
“But she has a considerable influence on your brother and your stepbrother. Am I right?”
“Yes,” I said, my voice coming out as a croak.
Lee and John! An image came to me suddenly, an old memory. The three of us in the backyard behind my father’s house. We played knights, with trash can lids for shields and sticks for swords. They were younger than me, but I adored the time we spent together. I hated the witch from the beginning; I hated her for trying to replace my real mother, I hated her because she didn’t go to church with us the way Mom did. But John, my new stepbrother, I loved him as much as I loved Lee, my true brother. And now they faced terrible danger. Because of the witch.
“If there is a chance to help your brothers, Stephen,” Simon said, “to save them, I want you to have it.”
“Thank you.”
“You’re welcome, son. We’ll talk again tomorrow. Now then, do you have Peter Melvin’s report on the deployment of the Federal SWAT troops?”
I appreciated of the change of subject. I had a great deal to digest, and I welcomed the diversion. Peter Melvin was a junior staff member, one whose work I supervised directly. “It’s right here, Simon.” I found the proper file on my pocket computer. “He’s sent the commands, just as you wanted. You realize this is directly against the President’s orders?”
“I do. If there is … trouble, Peter will be in a position to take responsibility. You needn’t worry, I have seen to that.”
“I worry for Peter. He’s a good kid.”
Simon nodded his agreement. “He is a good, loyal soldier. I’ll protect him if I can, of course. But remember what I said. In a war, there will be casualties. Some will be dear. But we have no choice; we must act. Still, I think the consequences will be few. Tomorrow, attention will be diverted elsewhere.”
“Mind telling me what this is all about?”
“Tomorrow evening, a verdict will be handed down in the Wilson Julius trial. Riots will follow. The violence will spread. Worldwide, I dare say.”
“More powder kegs?”
“That’s right, son. Each one carefully placed.”
Something occurred to me then. “Wait a minute. The Julius case! And riots! How can you
I know, Stephen. That’s all you need to know. If we are to fight this war, we need to have soldiers in place. We need tighter control of the cities, the people. This unfortunate violence will give us the reason we need. As I told you, there will be casualties. We must pray for those poor people, but as soldiers, we must sometimes make difficult decisions. For the greater good, you understand.”

“And the federal SWAT troops, the Black Guards. They are to stop these riots?”

“No,” said Simon. “That’s not their purpose at all.”
Mark McBride:

With the burden of hindsight, it seems almost funny now, but Black Friday came just like every other Friday comes. Isn’t that incredible? It started out just like any other day. Daniel Corwin called my office at a little after three, right on schedule. As always, I chuckled when I took the call.

“McBride!” he said with an exaggerated Scottish accent.

“If you’re calling to tell me about Madeleine Sinclair one more time, I’m not listening.”

“I’ll save it then. What’s up?”

“Believe it or not, nobody’s doing a damn thing. The whole freakin’ office.”

“Watching the trial?”

“Closing arguments. They’re just about over. Man, it’s like everybody has their computers tuned to CNN to watch.”

“It’s like that everywhere.”

“So I hear. Oh! Wilson Julius just left the courtroom. It’s going to the jury now.” I’m not normally a big current events guy, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the screen that day. Like millions of others all across the planet, I sat there and stared at the screen with a kind of morbid fascination.

“So when are they expecting a verdict?”

“Well, it’s just now going to the jury, so I think it’ll be a few days at least. Maybe a couple of weeks. Who knows?”

“Wow,” said Daniel.

“Yeah.”

“So look, you doing anything tonight?”

“I might be talked into something. Whatcha got in mind?”

“There’s this improv comedy troop down in Buckhead that’s holding auditions tonight. I say we give it a shot.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Of course not. Dude, why not? We’re all funny, right?”

“Well—”

“It’ll be fun.”

“Why’s that?”

“Like I said, why not? Besides, there might be babes there. Funny actress babes.”

I couldn’t argue with that logic, so I agreed. He would’ve talked me into it anyway. Might as well save us both the trouble. “I guess that could shine,” I conceded.

“John and I are meeting Ian. Can you pick us up at school?”

“As always. Usual spot. See you at Georgia State around seven?”

“Righteous speed.”
I spent the rest of the day pretending to work while I watched the trial coverage. At five, I grabbed my coat, dropped the Macintosh in my pocket, and headed for home. I felt … I don’t know. Uneasy. Maybe it was because of the trial, maybe because of the mood of the office. For a second, I thought I saw that same creepy guy with the phone again—the one I’d seen the week before, the one I’d been sure watched me from the shadows. I doubled back to check, but the lobby was crowded. If he’d been there, I didn’t spot him again.

I listened to more coverage of the trial as I made my way home. Almost seventy-five years still to go, and they already called it the trial of the century. They analyzed every twist and turn, and interviewed just about everybody who’d ever met Wilson Julius.

I made it home around six. A quick shower and a change of clothes had me ready to go again. It’s funny how everybody remembers exactly where they were, what they were doing, even what they were thinking about in those last hours before.

There weren’t many cars on the road. Not many people, either. Most folks wanted to be inside, I guess. I saw a few more as I got closer to downtown, though. Just a block or two from my destination, I saw five skinheads beat the living hell out of three other people. I’m not sure, but I think one of them was a woman. Frantically, I pulled my phone card out of my coat pocket and dialed for help. I’m sure it was too late to matter.

I didn’t get lucky with a parking place, so I had to put the ’stang in a garage down the block. There’s nothing I hate more than paying to park, except maybe paying for ice. Some things just shouldn’t be. At least somebody would look after my car.

I noticed more people on the streets as I made the short three-block walk to the General Classroom Building. A car passed by as I left the deck. I wondered if it could possibly be the same black sedan I’d seen the week before. I wondered if it really was following me. I walked a little faster.

I must have arrived a little early because I found my bunkies still in class with their professor. I thought about heading downstairs for a fast joe and a burger from the Starbucks and Wendy’s machines, but the bit of lecture I heard before I left sounded kind of cool, so I took a seat off to the side and eavesdropped for a bit. Professor Huckleby saw me and gave me a wink. Daniel gave me a wave and an apologetic shrug.

Eavesdropping. That’s how I spent the last hours before.

The professor continued from where he’d been before I interrupted. “Now then,” he said, “back to the mystery at Oak Island and the journey of Prince Madoc.” I leaned back and made myself comfortable.

When I close my eyes, I still hear him talking. I can hear them all, so close and immediate is the past. Thanks to the help in Taliesin’s music, I remember every word as I write, just like I’m there again. Am I getting it all right? I think so. I hope so. My hand is sore; I wish I had an e-pad instead of empty white paper. I write a little faster, wishing my pen could keep pace with the memories.

As I write, I ask Daniel to look at my journal and check what I’ve written. He smiles and nods. My memory jives with his. Every word. The spell in the music worked; it helps.

“You’re ahead of me,” Daniel tells me. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

I continue writing a little more confidently. I wish the rest of that day’s events were as pleasant to write about.
After the professor had given them their assignments for the week, we made a quick stop by the Athens Pizza machine for hot slices and cold sodas. Then we were off. About ten minutes later, all hell broke loose.
Chapter 17

A Visitor

Susan Myers:

I'd just started playing a Billy Fisher album when he came to visit me.

It was without question the worst day of my life. I'd been in a panic since long before dawn. Panic. It seems like too simple a word, but no other comes even close to describing the desperation of my frantic emotional state. Even hysteria seems far too gentle.

Friday, Black Friday, had come at last. The words from my dreams echoed through my thoughts: The struggles between Light and Darkness are but turnings of the Wheel. As leaves must die in autumn, so must this battle occur. Speak not, but remember the purpose for which you are chosen.

I tried to calm myself. I tried meditations and breathing exercises. I reminded myself that I obeyed the will of the Mother Herself. I found no comfort. The words from my dreams mocked me while guilt ate my guts like gulls tearing the rotting carcasses of fish. I'd betrayed the friend I loved most in the world, and my silence doomed thousands to injury and death. Silently, I listed my crimes again and again, a mantra of damnation. I'd been warned that serving the Goddess could have a terrible price. Once again, I almost wished I'd accepted the symbolic final mercy Elaine offered me during the priestess ceremony. I almost wished I'd let myself fall on her knife. It seemed a kinder fate. But I couldn't long for mercy I didn't deserve.

I cried for hours.

I watched as the trial coverage played continuously on every channel. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. It was like seeing a baby crawling along the ledge of a skyscraper. The outcome was inevitable, and I couldn't do a damn thing to prevent it. Oh, Goddess! What had I done?

I screamed and tore my apartment apart. I threw a lamp across the room and watched it shatter against the wall. I overturned furniture. I smashed dishes on the floor. Then I sat in the middle of the room and cried until I had no more tears left inside me. My hands bled from countless little cuts; somehow I'd injured myself in my exertions. I'd ripped one fingernail completely away. It hurt like hell. I forced myself to stand and clean up as best I could. When my apartment had been restored to some semblance of order, I smashed it all to pieces again. Then I collapsed and cried some more.

That is how I passed my day on Black Friday.

By evening, I'd exhausted myself—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Everything inside me had drained away, leaving only a dull ache. Finally I stood. I had to gather my energies. There might be nothing I could do, but just in case, I wanted to be ready. At the very least, I could pray for those condemned by my silence.

I called up a Billy Fisher album, The Shaman's Doorway. It was the first of his I'd downloaded, and it was still my favorite. Music washed over me like a shower. Then I put on a kettle for tea. It had just come to a boil when I heard a knock at my door. My heart thumped and my palms were wet. Who could it be? Elaine? Did she know? No! What could I say to her?

It was not Elaine. It was Billy Fisher.

Billy Fisher himself had come to my apartment! As though my playing his music had summoned him somehow. Standing there in the hallway, he seemed even taller than he had before. The white in his hair and his beard looked so beautiful against his ebony skin, like the
holy fire around a shaman’s head. I have no idea how long I stood there, staring, mouth open. It must have been far too long.

Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke. “Hi there, Susan girl. Sorry to drop in like this. May I come in?”

“I’m so sorry! Yes! Oh, please come in!”

“Thanks,” he said and slipped past me. “Nice place you have …. Oh, my God! What happened here? Did someone break in?”

“I’m afraid Hurricane Susan hit this place,” I admitted. I blushed. “It’s been a bad day.”

“Must have been. Maybe what you need is a friend?”

“Gnosis, the third cut on the disc, had just started. African and Native American drums combined with Celtic sounds to create, surprisingly, a blues-rock beat. Without question, a great song. “I see you have excellent taste in music,” he added and I grinned, grateful for the banter.

“I was just making some tea. Would you like some?”

“You don’t have any coffee on, I suppose?”

“Fraid not. Um, I can make some if you’d like.”

“Don’t bother. But yes, I’d love some of that tea.”

“I’ll just get it right now.” I righted a chair in the midst of the chaos; one leg of it was demolished forever. Thank the Mother, the sofa was more or less clear. “Please, have a seat. Milk and honey? In your tea, I mean.”

“Not for me, thanks. I take mine straight and strong.”

I fetched the mugs, and we sat together quietly for a while, just listening to the music. We both knew we had a lot to say, but neither of us knew where to begin. I felt like crying again.

“Care to tell me about it?” Billy said at last.

“About what?” I hedged.

“Let’s see. How about the peculiar atmospheric conditions that led to the sudden rise of ‘Hurricane Susan?’” I didn’t answer at once, so he continued. “You poor girl. I know you have so much to deal with all at once.”

“I haven’t had time to digest it all,” I said truthfully. “I think it’s going to take a while.” We shared more companionable silence. At last I spoke again. “Billy, have you ever heard the voice of the Goddess? I mean, literally heard her words?”

He rubbed his bearded chin quietly for a few moments as he considered my question. Just then, another song began—the title cut, The Shaman’s Doorway. A song about journeys of the spirit, of mystical communion with the Divine. My question seemed so silly then. Of course he had! The song itself offered an answer. Billy had more to add, however. “First, you must remember that while I may be very comfortable with a number of this old world’s spiritual traditions, I’m a Christian first and foremost. So maybe I think of the Divine a little bit differently than you do. But Susan, I’m sure I’ve heard the voice of the Holy Spirit. And I think of her as female. Does that surprise you? All the Christians used to, you know, or so I’ve been told. Back in the early days. They called her Sophia, wisdom.”

“That’s not the same.”

“I think it is, my friend. I think the holy creative … force that reveals herself to you as the Great Goddess is the same I think of as the Holy Spirit. God. Alpha and Omega, all loving.”

It seems ludicrous now. Billy Fisher—the Billy Fisher—and I sat in my ruined living room sipping tea and discussing theology. It was like having tea with William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln, or a Beatle and discussing the weather. Meanwhile, the world teetered on the edge of the abyss, about to go to hell around us.

“It’s the most wonderful thing I’ve ever experienced, Susan. It’s awesome, overwhelming, and beautiful. It’s … it’s being alive. Those words fall so far short, but they’re the best I can do. If I could put it in words, I wouldn’t have had to make all those records, would I?” I smiled a little. Sweet Mother. I started to cry again. Billy leaned back and looked me in the eye. “But you’re not asking me just because you’re a little bit curious, are you?”

“No,”
“Has … has the Goddess spoken to you, Susan? In words?”
“Would you believe me if I said yes?”
“I don’t think you’d lie to me, Susan girl.”
“It wasn’t like what you described. Well, it was … cold. It was awesome, but it terrified me.”
“That doesn’t sound like God to me, honey.”
“It was, Billy. She has three aspects, you know. Including a Dark one. It was Her. I know it.”

“Do you? Is that what you feel, deep in your heart?”
Was it? “Yes,” I said quickly.
“Well then. What did she say?”
“She told me things. That I’d been chosen, and that I wasn’t to tell the Circle of Three what I’d seen with the Sight. Oh Billy, that was before I even knew about the Circle!”
“What did you see?” he asked quietly, but with a voice that rumbled like the Earth itself. I heard something troubling in his voice, concern and fear. He sat up and his eyes were wide.
“Violence. A … battle,” I said. “Riots. Terror. Death. It’s all going to happen when the Julius verdict is announced.”
The look on his face, hurt, shock, and horror all at once, stabbed me to the soul. “Your Goddess told you not to tell us? To do nothing? Does that sound like the Divine Love you worship?”
“Yes … no. I don’t know.”
He leaned close and put his hands on my shoulders. “What did She tell you, Susan? Exactly?”

“The struggles between Light and Darkness are but turnings of the Wheel,” I repeated. “As leaves must die in autumn, so must this battle occur. Speak not, but remember the purpose for which you are chosen.”
He released my shoulders and stood. “Maybe there’s still time.”
“No.” I cried again. Dear Goddess, I couldn’t stop. Billy came back to the sofa, took me in his arms, and held me. Even knowing how I’d betrayed them all, he offered me what comfort he could.

“When, Susan? When will this happen? Please tell me, maybe there’s time—”
“Oh, Billy,” I said when I found my voice again at last.
“When, Susan?”
“Right now,” I said.
Chapter 18
The Storm Hits

Timothy Jones:

When it hit, it hit hard.

I know what you’ve read, I know what you’ve heard. But I didn’t start the riots on Black Friday. I didn’t lead the demonstration. Sure, I went down there. I read those leaflets spread all over the city. How could I miss them? How could anyone? But I didn’t distribute them. Hell, I was fresh out of jail! I hadn’t had time. I only came to offer support. See, that’s what we’d all come together for: support and solidarity. We didn’t even mean to demonstrate, just to show peaceful support for Wilson Julius. We gathered in front of the Atlanta Federal complex, thousands of us, all united in a cause. The turnout amazed me, me who pretended to be jaded beyond amazement at the power of a crowd assembled in the name of peace. Only the reason that brought us together marred the beauty of the gathering.

Of course it couldn’t last.

A huge screen had been erected near the main entrance so the people who couldn’t get a seat in the courtroom could see the proceedings. Now that the trial was over, it showed newsfeed recaps. Just under the screen, a group of kids, hundreds of them, stood together with candles, singing songs like Amazing Grace and We Shall Overcome. In the parking area across the street, thousands more carried signs as they marched, chanting “Free Wilson Now!” at the top of their lungs. Most of us simply stood there and watched. It meant enough to us to be gathered together, sharing, taking a stand for justice. It was a powerful moment. Until it all went to hell.

I remember talking to some friends when suddenly a hush fell across the crowd. Everyone turned back to the vid screen. Something happened! A verdict had been returned. How could that be? The jury hadn’t even deliberated an hour, for Allah’s holy sake, much less the weeks everyone expected. I trembled from sudden cold in the night wind.

We all watched together as one by one the twelve jurors re-entered the courtroom. Wilson and his attorneys were already present. Hell, they probably hadn’t even had time to leave the building. All rose as the judge entered. He called the court to order. Given the distance, I couldn’t make out most of the words. But I heard that judge’s gavel echoing through the night like the clap of doom on Judgment Day. The crowd outside hushed.

His Honor asked the foreperson if the jury had reached a verdict. I saw her nod as she answered in the affirmative. The bailiff made his way to the jury box, and then carried an envelope to the judge’s bench. The judge opened the paper. Then he asked Wilson to rise. The judge turned to the foreperson and asked her to read the verdict. She did. That’s one word we all heard, all of us there outside the Federal Building that night, and everyone else around the world.

“Guilty.”

For one long moment, nobody moved. We all stood there, looking dumbly at one another, too stunned to speak, too numb to think. Had we really heard it? There must be some mistake

…

Guilty.

It couldn’t be. Everyone knew Wilson was innocent. Everyone knew it! This wasn’t justice.
Surely we had heard it wrong, all of us. A mistake. It must be.

Guilty.

But slowly, the reality of the situation sank in as the word echoed through the sink of the cold urban night. The silence of the crowd fell away like a shroud, and a cry of anger rang out in the still night. People shouted, their cries giving a voice to their rage, first a few, then thousands. That’s when it began.

I know what you’ve seen on the news. But no one started the violence. It roared to life like a forest fire, a random, spontaneous thing. I can’t tell you where the first spark came from. I doubt anyone can. I heard glass shatter—it must have been a building, because it wasn’t plastic like a car’s windshield—and then I saw people fighting. Here and there, and soon everywhere. Beyond that, it’s like trying to describe an explosion. It’s a lot easier if you see it from a distance. Tension turned to shouting, shouting to fighting. And then it swelled to a full-scale riot, a war zone.

The police arrived. The elite Homeland Security SWAT teams, the bastard Black Guard themselves. They swarmed into the crowds like an invading army, clubbing and beating. Everywhere, I saw pigs in black riot armor cut people down like weeds.

Just then, something heavy hit me on the back of the head and I hit the ground, hard. When I came to my senses, my hands and legs had been cuffed and the pavement tore my jeans and my flesh beneath as they dragged me across the pavement. They threw me roughly into the back seat of a black, unmarked police sedan. Someone, it seemed, had to take the fall for this war, and who better than me? They needed a goddamn nigger scapegoat, and they led me to the slaughter. Never mind my innocence. That doesn’t matter at all. Not for a black man in America. Just ask Wilson Julius. I was the famous black activist, the troublemaker, and they had me in chains.

As the car door slammed shut, I heard gunshots.
The Widening Gyre

Chapter 19
Anarchy is Loosed

John Fitzroy:

We stepped out of the General Classroom Building and straight into hell. The city burned. Directly across the street, flames engulfed the antiquated, elegant Hurt Building; black smoke billowed from every window. On the next block, a row of shops and fast food restaurants disappeared in conflagration. In the distance we saw black smoke from the area around Five Points and Peachtree Street. The heat hit us like a blast from a furnace door opened suddenly. The streetlights were out, and only the infernal, raging light from the fires revealed the scene before us in stark detail, red and black. The smoke choked me and I couldn’t breathe.

Riots turned Peachtree Center Boulevard into a battlefield; twisted steel and shattered glass covered the sidewalks; broken bodies blanketed the pavement.

Even as we watched, a mass of people in gang colors, fifty of them at least, converged on a car, turned it over and torched it. I have no idea what became of the driver. And everywhere, even among the wreckage, people fought. Not a few, but hundreds, thousands, pounding and tearing at each another, stomping on the fallen, all of them splattered with blood, consumed by rage without mercy, agony without horizon. Looters did their worst. The noise of violence drowned the sounds of burglar alarms.

“Jesus! Jesus Christ!” Mark cried out.
“Come on,” Daniel said, shouting. “Back inside!”
“My car!” Mark ran forward, but Daniel and I caught him and threw him back. He struggled, panicking, but we pulled him towards the door and inside. “God dammit, I gotta get my car!”
“We can’t get to it that way!” Daniel said.
“Mark, listen,” I said. “If it’s okay, we’ll get it tomorrow. If it’s not, there’s nothing you can do about it now!”
“Fuck!” Mark said. His eyes were wild.
“Come on!” Daniel said.
“Where?” I asked.
“We can’t get out that way,” Daniel said. “Let’s go to the Courtland door and see if we can make it down to the Grady M-rail station.”
I didn’t have a better plan, so I nodded. Even inside, the appalling sounds of riot followed us. “Fuck!” Mark said again. “What the fuck’s happening out there?”
“Beats me,” I said. I fought to keep my voice calm. “But I’d rather find out from a considerable distance, okay?” We heard a crash at the door, a sudden and dreadful sound, metal on metal and shattering glass, pounding. I took a moment to thank God that at this hour, the door was locked from the inside; people could get out but not in.
“Is that going to hold?” Mark asked.
“Not long,” I guessed.
“Let’s go,” Daniel repeated.
And then we ran, propelled by blind panic. We made our way to a stairwell and scrambled
one floor down. The basement, a huge, dark storage area that used to be a parking deck, connected all the buildings on the West Campus. From there we made our way past Kell Hall, entered New Sparks Hall, and climbed up to the first floor. There wasn’t a soul in sight.

We found Sparks Hall dark, but flickering emergency lights gave off enough illumination to create strange and eerie shadows. Distances, shapes and perspectives seemed wrong. Noise from the riots followed us, closer. We walked carefully but quickly to the exit on the far side of the building. The door on the northwest end of Sparks was locked and chained.

“Dammit!” I said, my voice little more than a whisper. It took more of an effort to choke down the panic.

“Do we try the other one?” Daniel asked. He frowned, but I saw determination in his eyes.

“Well, one of them’s got to be open,” I said. “There’s the fire code and all that, right?”

“Let’s go,” he said.

Like I said, I should have known.

I’ve always wondered what people think, the people who are present at some monumental moment in time, the people who witness some enormous turning point, a moment when a falling twig suddenly changes the course of the great, rushing river of history. Like the people who saw first-hand, say, the Boston Massacre. Could they have known, somehow, that the awful commotion and death would lead, inevitably, to revolution and a new world order? Did the power of the moment overwhelm them so that, somehow, they all knew its significance?

Again, for myself, I can honestly say the answer is no. I was there, smack in the middle of the Atlanta riots, the very epicenter of a shock wave that rattled the entire world on Black Friday. Like everyone in Atlanta we’d felt the tension growing. But it had always seemed unreal, distant. When it came at last, it caught us all completely unprepared.

In retrospect, I’d like to say that I recognized that the incidences in my life added up to more than mere random happenstance. That I sensed that I’d been caught up in the pattern of a story, that I recognized the genesis of the events that would shape the age to come. I would like to say, at least, that I realized that something unusual happened, and that I was somehow a part of it. I did not. That recognition would come later. But at that moment, I could only think of getting the hell away. Blind panic drove me, that and a fierce determination to be somewhere, anywhere, else.

We made our way to the northeast corner of Sparks Hall. There, too, a chain held the door but (thank God!) the lock wasn’t fastened. We kicked it open. A little side street ran between Sparks Hall and across Piedmont Avenue towards Grady, maybe five or six blocks away. Hurt Park waited just across the street, a pretty scary place after dark on the best of nights. The streets were empty of traffic. We heard noise, though. And it came closer. Panic rose up in me, and I wanted to vomit.

We sprinted east towards Grady. Behind us, we heard the awful sounds of fighting, not gentled at all by the distance. Even blocks away, we felt the heat from the infernos at our backs. Just as we reached Courtland, Daniel stopped.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mark demanded.


“Shit,” I said. Around the corner, we heard more brutal sounds of fighting. The riot came closer. “Now what?”
“Run for it?” Mark asked. I could tell from his voice he wasn’t too keen on the idea. We’d have a long run to the station, even if we could make it across the street.

I eased up and peeked around the corner. Hundreds of people moved up Courtland, fighting, beating, and breaking. Looters shattered the glass windows of the campus store and carried off what they could. They smashed or burned anything too large to steal. Mindless destruction swallowed everything in its path.

The noise sickened me, awful and terrifying. It came closer.

“We’re not going that way,” I said.

“Okay,” Daniel said. “We’ll cut across the park, then make our way down Auburn.”

“Think it’ll be clear?” I said.

“Got a better idea?”

I didn’t, so we followed him. Normally, we stayed away from Hurt Park past sunset. Scarcely a square block in size, its trees and bushes created too many hiding places for the vagrants and crash heads who slept there. With violence burning close behind us, we had no choice.

We moved carefully but purposefully down the bank and into the Park. A concrete bench where homeless men slept had been overturned and broken to bits. The air stank of blood and urine. I had an empty, sick feeling in my stomach and my heart pounded so hard it made my chest hurt. We moved fast. A few more feet, and we’d reach Auburn Avenue.

Suddenly, Daniel stopped again. “Look,” he said, and pointed at some dense bushes ahead of us.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“Something moved. There!”

“I saw it,” Mark said.

“Where?” I hadn’t seen anything.

“Now what?” cried Mark.

“It’s too late trying to hide now,” I said.

“Who’s first?” Daniel whispered.

“Shit!” Mark said, and took off. Even with his computer in the pocket, his trench coat flew behind him like a cape.

“Looks like our decision is made,” I observed.

“C’mon,” Daniel said.

We took off after him. Mark reached the growth ahead of us, then stopped cold in his tracks. A man hid in the bush there. I say a man, although he couldn’t have been older than us—he may not have been all of sixteen. He was Hispanic and dressed in the remains of a gang’s colors. His arm lay twisted at a horrible angle and blood drenched his tattered clothes.

“Oh, Jesus,” he screamed, “leave me the fuck alone! Oh sweet fuckin’ Jesus, just leave me alone!”

“We’re not going to hurt you, man,” Mark said. “Are you okay?”

“Oh shit, please leave me alone! Don’t fuckin’ hurt me none. Oh, Jesus!”

“We can’t leave him here,” Daniel said.

“Guess not,” Mark agreed.

“No! Leave me the fuck alone! You hear me? I’ll goddamn cut you, man.”

“Nobody’s going to hurt you,” Daniel said. “We’re going to take you to a doctor.”

“Um … how’re we going to do that?” Mark asked.

“We can lift him,” I suggested.

We heard a noise behind us—a block or two down Auburn, back towards Peachtree Center Boulevard. The riots were closer; they practically surrounded us on three sides. Mark and I knelt
to grab the kid’s arms, but as soon as we got close, he pulled a knife. I barely saw it in time to roll out of the way. My tumble crashed me into Mark, and we both landed hard. Faster than I thought possible considering how badly he was hurt, the kid sprang to his feet, knocked Daniel off balance and ran like he’d been shot out of a cannon.

We untangled ourselves and climbed to our feet. The kid disappeared into the darkness. “He went that way,” Daniel said, pointing back towards Peachtree Center Boulevard.

“Do we go after him?” said Mark.

“No, that way,” I said, shaking my head.

“You’re right,” Daniel agreed. “He’s on his own now. Let’s go!”

We scrambled up the low bank to Auburn and turned east. We ran the block to Courtland. As we crossed, we saw a war, just a few blocks away, terror and blood and senseless, mindless hatred. Before, I’d only seen war on television, where the horror is held at a reasonable distance. Safe in my living room, a glass screen protected me. Here it was real, unfiltered and undimmed, and so much worse, worse than I could have imagined even in nightmares. I couldn’t see much as we ran, but what I heard was enough. The sounds, the sounds of screams, cracking bones, breaking glass, and savage, angry shouts, the sounds were the worst of all.

“Look,” Daniel said. I turned, and I almost laughed out loud with relief. The cavalry had come—Black Guard SWAT troops in full riot gear, black helmets and black Kevlar body armor. Each trooper carried a heavy assault rifle. Seconds later, my relief turned to revulsion. The troops fired, not into the air, but into the crowds. Bodies fell by the dozens.

“Shit!” I screamed. One of the troopers must have heard, because he turned and fired. The bullet blew away a chunk of the masonry in the building behind us.

“Run!” Daniel cried. But by the time I heard his voice, we were already moving. I heard more shots, hundreds more, but I honestly can’t say if any were aimed at us.

We ran two blocks, crossed Piedmont, and then we could see Grady Hospital itself, just a few blocks away. The monorail station would be just one block further. “This way,” Daniel shouted, and turned down a side street.

“Where the hell are you going?” Mark cried. Daniel led us further from the M-rail.

“We’re cutting this way,” Daniel called back. “So they can’t see us from Piedmont.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want anybody to see three targets running away.”

“I think you’re right,” I panted. And then we ran.

One block further north, then we turned back east. Christ, what’s the name of that street? I don’t remember. The riots had left it a war zone, too. There had been fighting, but it had passed, leaving broken glass in the shops and office buildings. The looters had done their work, everything left had been carried into the street and smashed or burned. The sounds of the riot came closer. We ran.

At Grady Avenue, we turned back south. The M-rail tracks were above us; we were only a couple of blocks from the station. But as we turned the corner, we saw more violence.

A gang of men, five of them, surrounded a car and beat it with baseball bats, smashing the hood and shattering the glass. As we watched, they rolled the car over, and pulled the stunned driver out. He was unconscious, but his attackers either didn’t notice or didn’t care. They kept on beating and kicking him.

Chapter 20

The Black Mass

Susan Myers:

Perhaps I flatter myself to think I might have made a difference. Perhaps it's arrogance to think I might have changed the inevitable, that I and I alone might have doused the spark before the powder keg ignited. Perhaps it is so, but it doesn't lessen my guilt any. I don't know which was easier to deal with, the guilt or my newfound knowledge that in a past life, I had been the sorceress Morgan le Fay. Oh dear Goddess, wasn't Morgan always portrayed as the villainess in the King Arthur stories?

Powerless to change that which I had made no effort to stop, I at least didn't turn away. Perhaps watching is the beginning of penance. On television and through the Sight, I watched the violence as it broke out in cities all across the world. I believed with all my heart, in the very deepest places in my soul, that these fires burned at the Mother's will, that every blow fell for Her holy purpose.

But that didn't ease the agony, not in the least. As the Goddess wept for her children, I her priestess cried as well. The riots began as primal outrage, an angry cry for justice. A perversion, a wanton orgy of violence and destruction, followed.

On MSNBC and CNN, I watched live footage from Atlanta. Ordinary flatscreen proved more than enough. Trying to avoid a mass of looters, a truck plowed into three cars, crushing them beyond recognition. Flames engulfed at least one of them. Only the driver of the truck could possibly have survived.

The truck's trailer spun out of control and smashed into a ground floor electronics store; the trailer smashed through the plate window and through the metal security grid. Looters had targeted that store, and at least three of them were crushed between the trailer and the window. Those remaining paid no mind at all to the fallen. Instead, they turned to the truck driver, still trapped in his cab. Their aim was not to rescue the man. Angry that the driver had damaged their prize, the looters pulled the man from his cab and beat him without mercy.

Others came and pulled the looters away from the man. These newcomers hadn't come to help; they simply wanted their own taste of the violence. The last image lingered on the driver's spilled blood, dark against the black pavement. The cameraman dropped his equipment and ran for his life.

I changed the channel. In New York, an estimated two-hundred wounded had been turned away from the over-full hospitals. No one could guess how many hadn't made it that far. Police confirmed more than fifty dead.

Nearly one hundred more were confirmed dead in Chicago. There were no reports at all from Detroit or San Francisco. In London, the police were ordered to abandon the city until the army could arrive. Twelve people had been shot trying to escape.

In Los Angeles, sixteen city blocks burned, but fire fighters couldn't make their way through the street fighting to combat the fires, so they raged unchecked.

People fought in the streets of Jerusalem as well, and at least three bombs wreaked havoc in
densely populated neighborhoods. The commentator’s voice sounded to me like a courtroom judge reading my crimes before a jury. Those were the television reports.

I poured myself a glass of Irish whiskey, but it tasted bitter, its fire dull. With effort, I forced myself back to the television. I made myself watch the reports as channel after channel and site after site repeated the same gruesome details. The repetition became a sort of terrible meditation, a litany of agony, and soon I felt my mind still.

Billy Fisher believed these riots were the mechanisms of the Circle’s enemy, the Dark. He’d told me so just an hour before when he left my apartment. As the leader of the Temple of Secrets, he had a mystical bond with the Land, something I didn’t understand. But he explained enough for me to know that because of this bond, the Dark could not draw energy from the Land to power their spells. He believed the Dark intended to use the violent energy from the riots to power some fearsome, evil work. He couldn’t even guess what shape their foul enchantment might take. Was he correct?

I could find out.

There would be time enough for guilt and self-recrimination later. Now, I had to take action. I closed my eyes, calmed my breath, and found a still place deep within. The Sight took me.

Through the Second Sight, I witnessed the violence in city after city. I felt every blow as if it struck against my own body. My stomach churned and heaved. The tempest-stirred sea of violence carried me here and there only to dash my broken spirit-self against jagged rocks of fighting and destruction.

Soon, however, I began to sense a pattern, an order in the gyre of chaos. The merciless eddies twirled around some central nexus, a focal point, an eye in the storm, as though some terrible vortex sucked in all the violent energy. Even as that thought occurred to me, I felt the truth in it. I’d found what I sought. I turned my attention to the vortex, and let the storm carry me there.

I found myself in a great open space, some huge, cavernous chamber. As I looked, I realized it must be the main sanctuary of some beautiful old cathedral. Or rather, it had been. The holy icons had been smashed or defaced and the rows of pews had been cleared away. In their place, someone had etched a giant pentagram on the floor, turned opposite from the way I usually saw it. A great fire burned in the center of the pentagram. On a deep, intuitive level, I sensed that the bodies of six sacrificed children fueled that hideous blaze. The air stank of black smoke and burning flesh.

A great wooden cross stood at the front of the room. A woman had been stripped naked and hung there upside down to die. She bled from a number of wounds where she had been stabbed and where nails had been driven into her hands and feet. In nightmares, I still hear her screams. As I watched her, I knew, suddenly, her name: Sophia. In her brief time, she had been a nun and then a whore. She had been tortured even as she hung there on that cross, beaten, burned, and raped. I prayed that death would take her swiftly.

The Second Sight is a gift, a holy thing from the Mother Herself. In that moment, I cursed it.

Hundreds of people, no, thousands, filled the unholy cathedral. All wore black robes. They formed circles around the fire and chanted some hateful verse in a forgotten language I couldn’t understand. I forced myself to listen, even though every awful syllable ate at me, icy fire. At last they spoke a final phrase in English, one they repeated over and over again, each time louder than before.

Let the gateway open, that the Rider may pass through and hunt His prey.
Let the gateway open, that the Rider may pass through and hunt His prey.
Let the Gateway open ....
I could feel the energy from the riots, from all the chaotic battles and destruction across the globe. These people captured it somehow, channeling that hideous strength. The vision horrified me, but I had a sickening feeling that more happened than my Second Sight had shown me. This awful scene was part of something larger, something even more terrible.

The holy things that had once filled this room were not the icons of my religion, but the blasphemy made me ill. Evil filled the room like the black smoke from the bone fire. My body waited miles away, but I gagged and choked.

*Let the gateway open, that the Rider may pass through and hunt His prey.*

I saw then another image. This time, I saw a sword thrust into a chalice. The chalice shattered into a thousand pieces. I don’t know if this was a part of the Dark ritual I had witnessed, or if the chalice had some holy significance. But its destruction filled me with despair. I wanted to weep. Still the chanting continued: *Let the gateway open* ....

I wondered who they were, these night-clad magicians who drank death like liquor. I could feel their might, their power, as strong as the taint of their evil. But on some deep level, I sensed they weren’t the architects of this hateful work. Whatever dark masters these people served, they pulled the strings from elsewhere.

From far away, I heard laughter. For one terrible moment, I thought I knew that laughing voice.

I came to myself after that. I awoke on the sofa in my apartment, my body drenched with cold sweat, images of the violence still flickering across the television, a shattered whiskey glass at my feet. The Black Mass was far away. The last thing I saw was a clip of Black Guard troops firing into fleeing mobs. Bodies fell like forest leaves in a fierce autumn storm.

I must have fainted then, for I remember nothing more.
Taliesin:

"Damn and damn it all," I muttered, my head buried in my hands. "We waited too damn long."

Bradford O'Donnell, the congressman, stood quietly in a corner, his hands deep in his jacket pockets, staring at the images replaying on the video screen for the hundredth time. "So much planning to snatch them to safety when the danger comes, and here we sit, goddamn helpless."

While the city burned, twelve members of the Circle of Three gathered at the home of my old and dearest friend, Elaine Verner, the Lady of the Lake. Others of our Order had been there earlier that evening and would have rejoined us, but the work of our enemy made travel in the city impossible. Centuries of stony sleep were passed; our war began in earnest.

In Elaine's makeshift communications center deep in her basement, acolytes and priestesses monitored feeds from all over the world. When news came, they brought it to us. They needn't have bothered: they all told the same grim tale we twelve watched on the video wall in Elaine's office room. Black-clad federal riot troops fired assault rifles into crowds of rioters. Even when the masses turned to flee or tried to surrender. The Department of Homeland Security declared martial law across the nation, and we knew it would be a reign of terror.

Our moment had come at last. The situation called for decisive action. And yet, what to do? Despite ages of waiting and planning, we found ourselves ill prepared. I paced hither and there as my comrades argued and debated. I stopped before a great bay window and stared out at the troubled night. In the distance, I saw smoke, black against the late night sky. Gods, what to do?

"We may have just lost out war tonight," said Congressman O'Donnell.

Ginny Taylor, her crucifix necklace held tightly in her small hands, prayed alone in a corner. Father Jason Mulligan plowed trenches in Elaine's carpet with his pacing. The rest took what comfort they could in one another; inaction did not come easily.

Only Sam West, the fiery old Georgia Senator, took any action at all. In a back corner of the room, he bellowed through a phone card at his contacts in Washington, seeking information, answers. His cheeks turned red under his shock of white hair, and his eyes flashed bright with anger. "Dammit!" He raised his voice once again. His shouts gave voice to the frustration we all shared. "I'm the chairman of the United States Armed Forces Committee! Federal God Damned Black Guard troops are firing on civilians, and I demand to know who gave that order!"

There came a sharp knock at the door, and then a tall black woman in a blue uniform entered—Catherine Porter, Assistant to the City of Atlanta Chief of Police. Like her boss, she served as a member of the Circle of Three. Elaine leapt to her feet at once. "Catherine!" she cried. "Oh, thank the Mother! News?" We crowded around as an acolyte took her coat and hat. Even Senator West kept one eye on the newcomer from his corner.

"Just what you've heard, I'm afraid. Riots have broken out in five different areas of the city. The three worst are around the old downtown area. Five Points, Grady, Underground."
“All around the university,” I pointed out.
“Have you made any headway?” Elaine asked.
“Midtown’s under control,” Catherine replied. “Beyond that, little enough.”
“Have you … Oh dear, what am I thinking? Forgive me, my friend. Please! Sit. You’re exhausted. Celia, fetch a pot of tea. And brandy! Hurry!” The young acolyte disappeared, and Elaine steered the shivering police officer to a chair. Someone found a woolen blanket to wrap around her shoulders. Catherine continued her report.
“Once the Federal Troops arrived, they ordered us away from the fighting. They’ve declared martial law. You know that, I suppose. I came here.”
“Is there … is there any word of the boys?” Elaine gave voice to the worry on all our minds.
“Nothing. I … Christ, I’m sorry.”
“Oh dear Lord,” said Father Mulligan. “If something happens to them—”
“We may have lost our war,” Bradford repeated.
“Then all is lost,” Elaine finished.
“Then we can’t just sit here!” Father Mulligan said. The big priest was the gentlest of men. But the need for action, for anything other than debate and waiting, flashed in his eyes.
“There’s nothing we can do,” said Elaine. “You’ll never get close to the city. Others are looking for them. Now the time for faith. And for hope, however frail it seems.”
“I agree with Father Mulligan.” We all turned, surprised. I felt my eyebrows climb my forehead. Billy Fisher himself, always the first to urge caution, had spoken.
“Then all is lost,” Elaine finished.
“Billy, do I have to remind you that one of these boys is my son? Do you believe that I wouldn’t risk anything—everything—if I thought I might save him?”
“Lady, you know that I, more than anyone, feel the Land’s hurt.” How true. His bond made him feel the Land’s anguish, soul agony and physical pain, as surely as if it tortured his own physical flesh. I felt a sudden rush of guilt then; I, Taliesin, had recruited him to the Circle of Three all those years ago; I had recognized his role. I was responsible for his present suffering, and all yet to come. I had acted only out of greatest need, but that knowledge brought no comfort. The sorrow was too heavy.
“Remember who you are, Billy,” Elaine said, forcing her voice to remain calm. “As you thrive, the Land blossoms. As you fail, the Land suffers. You risk more than just yourself.” Lost in my own guilt, I felt a sudden wave of pity for my old friend. Oh, Elaine, how much worse it must be for you!
“I know my role,” Billy returned tersely. “But you know I can’t just stand around while … while the Land suffers. I came here to tell you what I learned from poor Susan. I’ve done that. Elaine … Lady of the Lake, I’m speaking to you as an equal and a friend. I know the risk, but I must go.”
“I can get us downtown, I know it,” Father Mulligan promised. I for one believed him. The man had run an inner city mission for more than two decades; he knew Atlanta better than any of us.
“If you do, those Homeland Security Black Guard troops will gun you down,” Catherine declared.
“Maybe so,” Father Mulligan said. “But we can’t stay and do nothing. If we must fall, I’ll go down fighting, God save me.”
“God save us all, Father,” Elaine said. She hesitated for just a moment more, then nodded. “Get them to safety. As Billy said, nothing else matters.” With that, he left us. Seven others
followed him. Only five of us remained.

“There is one thing,” Catherine said. “Chief Robinson and I may not have jobs come Monday, but despite their orders, we kept the monorails running. For a while, anyway. Our people are aboard each car, so they’re as safe as they can be under the circumstances. If those boys are okay, they’ll have a way out.”

“Oh Catherine, that is the first good news I’ve heard tonight!” Elaine hugged her.

“Well, here’s some more news,” Senator West said as he slid his phone back into his pocket. “I know who’s behind this … the federal troops, anyway.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Proctor,” he said. Simon Proctor, the Secretary of Homeland Security. The room grew colder.

“Can we prove it?” Congressman O’Donnell asked.

“I traced the order to one of his underlings,” the Senator said. “A kid named Peter Melvin. But we know who’s pulling the strings. He dares a whole hell of a lot. But so do I. If you’ll excuse me, I have some calls to make.”

The little acolyte returned at last with tea and a crystal decanter of brandy, but Catherine declined. “No,” she said simply. “I … I only came to bring news to the Circle. My place is out there.” Elaine and I knew better than to argue.

“There’s something else we need to discuss,” O’Donnell said. “What do we do when we find the boys?” No one dared say if we find them. “It’s clear our hand has been forced. Is it time to retrieve the sword?”

“Perhaps,” Elaine said. “It seems our hand has been forced. But before we decide what to do, let us consider one more question. Are we prepared to protect them?”

“We can be by Monday,” O’Donnell declared.

“And in the meantime?” Elaine countered.

“This doesn’t seem like a surgical strike,” said O’Donnell. “It’s a show. Again, to force our hand. Or perhaps to make us shine a spotlight on the ones we mean to protect. If we move our armies faster, immediately, we’ll call even more attention.” He sighed. “Hell, I don’t know. But damned if we should dance to the tune the enemy calls. Damned if we should, by God.”

Elaine nodded. “If we can’t protect them here until Monday, I’ll take them away from where we know the enemy’s gaze is focused.” She pursed her lips as she considered. “I’d planned to go out of town with my sons, Lee and John. One last time together before ….” She swallowed. “If we can find them, I will keep that plan. I can keep them hidden and protect them for the few days we need to gather our armies. I’ll see that John brings his friends. Yes. I can keep them safe as long as we’re away from here. I’ll … I’ll talk to them. That buys us time to ensure that all is prepared at last.”

“That’s a good idea,” O’Donnell agreed. “Find them, and get them the hell away from here. Until we have an army assembled to protect them.”

“Until we can wake the secrets sleeping inside them,” I added solemnly. “We have waited as long as we dare. The time has come at last.”

O’Donnell nodded. “These are our goals, and no matter what, we must remain focused on them: find the boys, get them to a place of safety, and awaken them to their destinies.”

“Then whatever it takes, I’m going to make damn sure I get them away from the city,” Elaine said. “But move quickly. A state park won’t hide them for long.”

“I’ll carry that message then.”

“Thank you, Brad,” Elaine said. He nodded, and he too left.

“I’m going too,” I told Elaine.

“Oh Gwion,” she said calling me by an old name she alone used. “Why?”

“As the good father said, we do what we can. We must find them and keep them safe.
Perhaps there is something I can do after all. If there is, I must go and do it."

"Then the Goddess bless and be with you."

“And you also, my dearest friend.” Catherine gathered her belongings, giving Elaine and me a moment alone. “Something else is bothering you,” I said. “Will you tell me?”

Elaine looked away from me. “It’s Susan.”

“Ah. The girl with the Sight.”

“She is more than that, my friend.”

“We’ve known it from the beginning. What troubles you now?”

“Tonight, all this. Susan knew it all. Everything. The Sight. And I knew she hid something! I’m afraid, Gwion. I’m afraid for her, and suddenly, I’m a little afraid of her. And yet … I know she serves the Goddess. Not the Dark. Her purpose is ours, but—”

“But she chose not to tell you.”

“Just so. She knew this storm brewed, but she chose not to warn us. Even after she learned of our true purpose here. It’s just like before.”

“True enough,” I said. I remembered a time when the girl Susan wore a different face, Morgan le Fay’s face. Lifetimes ago and more. Then, too, she had followed her own purpose. “Do you think our Brenda told her the truth too soon?” Elaine shook her head. We’d debated that time and again. Susan would have known sooner or later anyway. “What will you do?”

She smiled. “What I can. I will love her, because how can I do otherwise? She’s my sister, and like a daughter to me. I will guide her if I can. I will try to earn her trust, and, yes, I will try to find a way to trust her as well. For all we’ve shared, I can do nothing else. And because we need her so.”

“Dearest Nimuē.” I too had a secret name to call my friend.

“Shining Brow,” she said. “Take care. Do what you must, but take care. You are needed.”

Just then, the acolyte Celia approached Elaine. "Lady, there is news," the girl said.

“What is it, child?"

"The Black Guard has stopped the trains and monorails. There’s no way out of the city now."

Elaine looked at me and nodded. She had nothing more to say.

Catherine Porter rejoined us then. “Let’s go,” she said.

With those words, I, Taliesin, Bard of the West, followed the Assistant Chief of Police out into the night.
Chapter 22

More Orders

Peter Melvin:

When I entered Reverend Proctor’s office, I found Stephen Verner waiting silently for him to finish a call. An empty chair waited for me next to Stephen, but I knew better than to take it before Reverend Proctor invited me to sit. I stood quietly.

“You’ve been able to monitor our young friends then? Good, good.” A pause. “You’re certain they saw who fired?”

Another pause, then a cold chuckle.

“Yes sirree, I’ll just bet they flew like the devil himself was on their heels. Now then. You listen carefully, commander. Let the local authorities maintain their perimeter around the hospital, and see that the boys reach it unharmed. Let the bastards sweat. We need to light a fire under their fannies.”

As usual, I had no idea what he was talking about, or to whom he spoke. But the conversation bothered me. Something big stirred. More than the riots, something else. But I thought, okay, look, if Reverend Proctor knew about it, the situation must be under control.

The Reverend listened and smiled again. “That’s damn fine work, Commander. Your country will appreciate it, I’ll see to that. Now you just see that my instructions are followed to the letter.” Then he ended the call, and turned his attention to me.

“Peter,” he said. “Come, sit.” I took the chair next to Stephen. “We need to accelerate our plans. I want you to leave for Atlanta tonight. There’s a plane waiting for you. Traffic is stopped, but that one’ll take off, don’t you worry.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now then,” he continued. “I want you to coordinate this mission with Stephen here—”

A chime on his computer interrupted him. Stephen and I exchanged a puzzled glance. As far as we knew, only the President had access to that line, and it couldn’t be him. He was in the middle of a televised press conference outlining the government’s response to the riots.

Reverend Proctor touched a button on the com and took the call. A strange look passed across his face when he saw the face on the screen. If I’d been looking at anyone else, I would have been certain I read fear in his expression. But not even the President himself made Simon Proctor afraid.

“A moment,” he said to the caller. “My friends, please excuse me. Peter, Stephen has your orders. Leave me now. Close the door.”

We walked through the long corridor together. “What was that all about?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Stephen replied. His brow creased and he pressed his lips tightly together, and I recognized my own confusion mirrored in his grim features. Frankly, that bothered me even more. “But I advise you not to ask too many questions. Are you ready?”

“I can leave right away.”
“Good. There’s a chopper ready to take you to the airport. You know, there may be some questions about the Black Guard.”
“I know,” I said. “And don’t worry. I’ll answer just like you coached me.”
“Thanks, man. You know we value your excellent work.”
“Thank you,” I said. He nodded.
“I’ve downloaded the rest of your instructions into your pad. You can read them on the flight. Once you understand everything, I suggest you erase them. The stakes are pretty high right now.” He said ‘suggest,’ but I knew an order when I heard one.
“I will.”
“Good.” We reached Stephen’s office. I opened my mouth to say good-bye when he stopped and put his hand on my shoulder. “Listen, there’s something I want to ask you about. A favor.”
“Sure, man.”
“It’s about a friend of yours. From high school.”
I shook my head, stunned. How could he know about my friends from high school? Then I smiled. Of course. Intelligence fell under Stephen’s area of authority. He’d probably done my pre-employment background check himself. He probably knew more about me than I knew about myself.
“Have you kept in touch with Daniel Corwin?” he asked me. Daniel had been my best friend in High School.
“We talk pretty often. What about him?”
“I want you to look him up while you’re in Atlanta. Spend some time with him. Can you do that?”
“Sure. May I ask why?”
“He’s a friend of my stepbrother, John Fitzroy.”
“I’ve met John Fitzroy. Small world! I didn’t know he was your brother.”
“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll do what I can.”
“Just … make sure he’s okay, will you?”
“Um, sure. I guess. I’ll do my best.”
Chapter 23
*Fight and Flight*

Mark McBride:

Violence surrounded us like a net of fire. We had no time for planning or decisions, we just ran. But no matter where we turned the riots found us.

We raced through streets like you see on the news, shots of war-torn nations in central Europe or the Middle East or somewhere, places where the bombs make ancient ruins of modern cities in a single night, where homes and businesses become rubble stained with blood.

We ran.

After a few blocks, we turned a corner and saw five guys with baseball bats surround a car and smash it to scrap. As we watched, they rolled the car over and pulled the driver out. He didn’t move or struggle, but those bastards didn’t give a damn. They kept right on beating and kicking him.


Even before he finished speaking, John moved. Daniel and I followed. When John got close, the nearest man turned and swung right at his head. John ducked under the blow, hit the ground, rolled, and used his momentum to slug the guy with a hard left to the gut. As the man crumpled, John caught him with a right hook to the chin. He dropped like a used condom and didn’t move.

I noticed, vaguely, John charging the next guy, but I didn’t see what happened. By then, Daniel and I had caught up, and we had problems of our own.

The fucker I reached first must have been watching John because when he turned to me, he didn’t have time to get much on his swing. I caught the bat in my left hand and tackled him. We would have hit the pavement, but the wrecked car broke our fall.

My right hand was free, so I slugged the man on the side of the face, hard, again and again. Blood splattered the bandana he wore around his forehead. He didn’t have the leverage to hit me back, so the fight ended fast. He loosened his grip on the bat, and I pulled it out of his hand. When I let him go, he fell to the ground and didn’t move.

Just then, I felt a push against the back of my trench coat, and my ribs exploded with pain. I screamed and swung around instantly, lashing out with the bat. I felt it connect with the man behind me, on the neck or the side of the head. The bat flew out of my hand and it, my attacker, and I all hit the pavement at about the same time. I tried to stand, but sharp pain shot through me. I reached behind me, and my hand found something warm and moist. I rolled over, and the rough pavement was wet with blood. I'd been stabbed.

Of the five men, only one still stood. As I watched, that last man swung at Daniel’s head. Daniel dodged, but the blow caught him on the shoulder and knocked him down. The man raised the bat over his head, but Daniel kicked him hard in the knee before he could strike. As the man fell, John clubbed him in the back of the neck. He hit the asphalt and lay still.

“Are you okay?” John helped Daniel to his feet.

“I’m fine; check Ian,” Daniel said. “Mark, where are you?”

“Here,” I said. “I can use some help.”

Daniel reached my side in an instant. “Can you stand up? Here, let me … Jesus, Mark!
You're bleeding!"

“How bad?” I asked. God, but it hurt.

“I don’t think it’s too bad. Look, here’s the knife. You’ve got something in your pocket. Must have deflected the blade.”

“The computer,” I said. The Mac had saved me.

“Here, let me help you up. Let’s see if you can stand.”

I could, but barely. Pain tore through me. “Oh God … shit!”

“Hey, easy. Just sit tight for a second. Here, take my shirt.” Daniel pulled off his sweater and the polo shirt he wore beneath it. He pressed the shirt against my wound and pulled the sweater back over his head. “Just hold this right here for a sec, okay? I’m going to help John with Ian.”

“I’m okay,” I said. Daniel went to where John examined the professor and kneeled down beside them. One of the attackers moaned and moved his arm a little, but he made no other motion.

The sounds of the riots came closer. I felt a sudden twinge of something worse than claustrophobia. The violence fell in on us like a collapsing building. The thunder of automatic gunfire boomed around us. The screams were louder. “Hurry up,” I said. “We can’t stay here.”

“Is he okay?” I heard Daniel ask.

“I don’t think so,” John said. “He’s not bleeding much, but he’s beat up pretty bad.” As they talked, I wrapped my coat around my torso to keep Daniel’s shirt bandage in place.

“Is he awake?”

“He was … sort of, anyway. I think he’s in shock.”

“We’re going to have to move him. Think we can carry him?”

“We might do more harm than good,” John said. “He might have, like, internal injuries or something. Think we can take the car?” It was one of the lighter electric models. If all three of us had been healthy, we might have managed to right it. It might even have started. But I doubt it.

“Forget it,” Daniel said. We heard another noise, something loud like an explosion, close, maybe a block away or less. “Listen, I don’t think help is coming, and we can’t stay here.”

I made it to my feet, and found that when I used one of the baseball bats as a crutch, I could walk pretty well. It hurt like hell and I didn’t imagine I’d be setting any speed records, but I could keep up with John and Daniel. Of course, between the two of them they half carried and half dragged an unconscious man, so that’s no great feat. Thankfully, we only had about three blocks to go; almost two straight ahead and then one short one to the left. Moving proved a slow and painful process, but fear is a wicked strong motivator. When I looked behind me, back towards the ruined car, I saw a trail of blood droplets splattered on the dark asphalt like dark breadcrumbs.

We’d made it two blocks when the riots found us. A crowd reached the street we were on, and turned right towards us. At first I thought they were after us, but then I saw they were running like hell themselves. A second later, we saw why. Black Guard troops chased right behind them. The runners they caught were tackled and savagely beaten. I heard at least three more shots, and three bodies fell. The killers came straight at us.

John and Daniel each grabbed one of Ian’s arms and dragged the poor man behind them as they ran. I hobbled along behind them as fast as I could. We made the turn; the hospital was close, so close! Just then, more night-armored troops appeared from the opposite direction, the one we’d come from. The runners found they were sprinting straight into gunfire. More shots, ten or a thousand or more. I don’t know. I only heard the sounds echo and pound in my head. I fell and hit the pavement. Indescribable pain surged through me. Terror propelled me to my feet and despite the agony and dizziness, I ran.
Straight into a nightmare.
We were cut off. The hospital loomed right there, right in front of us, but more troops in riot gear ran straight at us. We stopped, and I collapsed. The rough pavement scrapped away whatever skin I had left. This time, I couldn't make it back to my feet, even when I tried to use the bat as a prop. It didn't matter; we had nowhere to go, no way to escape. I screamed.

And then the troops were on us. I covered my head with my hands, expecting to be pounded into the asphalt. But the blows never came. Most of the troopers rushed past us. As they passed, I heard one of them, a woman, shout orders. “Help those men! Get them back to the hospital!”

Arms reached down and pulled me to my feet. The city spun, but I noticed that these troopers were dressed in blue uniforms, not the black of the Federal teams. Whatever madness had taken the Black Guard had spared the Atlanta PD. I think I blacked out then. Everything else is a blur.
Chapter 24

After the Storm

Daniel Corwin:

As the storm raged all around us, we spent the night there in the hospital. It was early Saturday morning before Tom could get down and pick up John and me, but that didn’t bother us. At least we were safe. Mark and Ian weren’t released; they both had to stay at least one more night.

By the next morning, the city began to heal, I suppose, as did cities all around the world. The scars showed, though. Black Guard SWAT troops with automatic rifles patrolled every street corner in Atlanta, and I gathered from the news that it was the same in just about every city and town in the country. Now and then the violence flared up again, once only a block or two away from the Castle, but the Black Guard suppressed it quickly and brutally. The tension broke, but in some way that’s hard to describe, so did the spirit of the city. Most people stayed indoors. Those few that ventured out walked quickly, with heads held low.

The Secretary of Homeland Security, Simon Proctor, talked about the state of national emergency on the news just about every hour. He didn’t actually use the words “martial law,” not after Friday, anyway, but we got the idea. The cameras in the monitored zones moved constantly. For the most part, the riots were over. But the mood of the city was awful.

We called the hospital to ask about Mark and Ian a few times, but we couldn’t speak to them. We were assured they were recovering, though. I wanted to visit them, but of course we couldn’t get anywhere near the old downtown.

The morning grew old and afternoon waited its turn. I sat on the sofa staring blankly at the screen. The same images played again and again. The announcement of the Julius verdict. The riots. The black guy who started it all dragged away in cuffs and leg irons. It was horrible, and I couldn’t stop watching. That’s when John and Tom found me.

“Hey, Bunky,” Tom said. “You okay?”
“No,” I muttered bitterly. “Well, I mean yeah, but—”
“Yeah,” he said. “I know.”
“Jeez,” I said. “I need to call my folks down in Florida, let them know I’m okay. They must have seen all this shit on the news. I bet they’re worried sick.”
“Listen,” John said before I could stand. “Are you up to anything tonight? And tomorrow?”
I pursed my lips for a second. “Well, I’d planned to go to a Halloween party tonight,” I began.
“But it’s probably canceled, right?”
I nodded. “Most likely so.”
“Listen,” John said, “Remember the SCA event we talked about going to? My mom, my brother Lee, and I are still going. Tom’s coming too. Mom thinks we really need to get out of here for a while. Why don’t you join us? C’mon. Let’s head up to the mountains for the
weekend.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t feel much like a jaunt.”

Tom lifted an eyebrow. “All the more reason to take one,” he pointed out.

“What if Mark or Ian need something?”

“Dan, there’s nothing you can do and you know it,” Tom said. “I think getting away from the city’s going to be a very good thing for all of us about now. But if you don’t come with us, I’m going to worry and decide to stay with you. Now you don’t want to make me stay, do you?”

“So tell me again what’s in the mountains?” I asked John.

“Unicoi State Park. And the medieval group I used to hang out with. It’s a huge event.”

“Oh yeah.” I’d completely forgotten John and I had tentative plans. “The … what did you call them? Society for Creative Cool Something.”

“Society for Creative Anachronism,” John reminded me. “SCA for short.”

“I always thought they sounded kind of shinin’,” I said, tempted in spite of myself.

“So are you coming with us?”

“I don’t know,” I said hesitantly. Running off and having a good time with Mark still in the hospital seemed a little cold.

“Think about it this way,” Tom said. “What would we do at the party? Dress up in costume? Drink heavily? Ogle women? From what John’s told me, that’s what the SCA is all about!” I smiled. “Daniel, if I thought we could possibly help Mark, you know I’d stay, right? But right now, I think we need to heal ourselves a little. We can do that better away from the city.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said at last. “Got a shinin’ fast costume to lend me, Johnny?”

“You bet,” he said. “Besides, my mom practically insisted you come with us. You don’t want to be on her bad side, do you?”

We all laughed, and it felt good. “Okay, okay,” I said. “Count me in. Let me call Mom and Dad, and then I’ll get ready.”
e drove to the North Georgia Mountains with lead weights in our bellies. Tom and Daniel and I had piled into one of my mom’s cars, her Infiniti sport utility. I drove.

In the back, Tom had his mandolin, but he didn’t play. He simply held it, finding comfort in the touch of wood and strings. Daniel rode shotgun.

Armed Black Guard troops prowled every street corner, but they only stopped us a time or two. Leaving the memories behind though, that proved more difficult. The forest, the mountains, and the astonishingly brilliant blue sky were all magnificent, but they failed to comfort us. When we looked, we saw burning buildings and fallen bodies. Yesterday’s nightmares lingered. The world we knew had gone to hell.

We’d been afraid the event would be canceled, but luck was with us. Maybe they couldn’t reach enough people, or maybe they decided to whistle in the dark.

Normally, the prospect of a weekend in the mountains would have delighted me. Especially when the occasion involved a romp with the Society for Creative Anachronism. I’d threatened to drag my housemates off to an SCA event for … gosh, months. Years. Now that the opportunity had finally presented itself, I found myself unable to enjoy it. I was worried about Mark and Ian. We rode in silence most of the way.

Anxious for something to do, for something to think about, I took the car off auto and drove manually once we left the highway. I found the sharp curves and steep hills on the mountain roads satisfying, even when a few glances from Daniel reminded me that I took a few of them too fast.

Before long, we arrived in Unicoi State Park, deep in the woods and high in the mountains of North Georgia. The event would take place in the new area of the park, just on the other side of the mountain from Anna Ruby Falls. I’d never been there before, but I liked it at once.

My stepmother and my brother Lee were already on site somewhere. I spotted Lee’s truck right off, but he was nowhere to be found. The event site covered a lot of ground, and he’d had plenty of time to lose himself in the crowd. I’d probably find him off in a cabin somewhere knocking back a few horns of good home brew with some old pals.

I intended to join him as quickly as possible. If anything could turn our thoughts from dark memory and worry about Mark and Ian, it would be a few drinks, favorite lies told by old friends, and a weekend designed for escapism. Maybe Mom was right after all. Maybe this was just what the doctor ordered.

The SCA is a medieval re-creation organization. Basically, members get together for various activities dressed in pretty darned elaborate medieval and early Renaissance clothing and armor and do medieval type things—art, crafts, singing, dancing, drinking and feasting (lots of those two), and, of course, fighting. My brother Lee and I came mostly for the fighting. Well, that and a chance to drink the health of some dear old friends we don’t get to see nearly enough.

Of the three of us, Tom dressed the simplest—he wore a plain wool Celtic tunic over tight gray leggings and shoes of soft black leather. Simple, sure, but he looked great. Elegant, even.
like I always imagined a Celtic bard should look.

Daniel and I had gone for a flashier look. I lent Daniel gray breeches, an elaborate hunter green and black long-sleeved Renaissance-style doublet, and a white shirt with ruffles at the cuffs and collar. He carried a genuine heavy sword rapier at his belt, one of the prizes of my medieval weapons collection—my second best, in fact. Cavalier's boots, a gray woolen cloak, and a green hat with a long white feather completed the ensemble. The outfit looked ... right on him somehow. In a strange way, he looked as comfortable in the costume as he did in shorts and a baseball shirt. Even the sword looked right. It takes a knack to wear one, but he carried his with the swagger of a gunfighter with his six shooters. In fact, I'd have to say that he ranked just about number two on the list of the best-looking guys there.

If I do say so, the best looking award went to me. I wore a black with silver outfit Mom made from a design she found in an old woodcarving. The top had puffed slashed sleeves and an intricately embroidered collar over a white shirt. Cuts in the top and second layers, combined with my mom's embroidery, created incredibly complex patterns.

My long sword, a real antique, boasted even more ornamentation than the one Daniel had borrowed. It had been a gift for my twenty-fifth birthday, just a few months before. It had been in my mom's family for God knows how many generations. The pommel and the guard were plated with gold, and the grip was wound with silver wire. The blade was of jet-black tempered steel. I loved that sword like an old friend. It was heavy, way too heavy for me really, but I'd been working out and I could handle it tolerably well. The grip felt right in my hand, like it belonged there. The sword should have a name, but I hadn't found the right one. I'd tried a few on for size, but none of them quite seemed to fit. I felt like the blade already had a name; I simply had to discover it.

Tom disappeared almost immediately; he wanted to find the other musicians. Quite a few SCA members play instruments; their jam sessions are legendary. Tom hoped to sit in. I felt more than a little envious of the other musicians, and a little sorry for them, too. Sorry, because I knew Tom would blow them all away. Envious, because being a part of any music that Tom makes is an absolutely incredible experience.

"Should we follow him?" Daniel asked me.

"Greetings, my lords and ladies! Greeting to all," a loud and chipper feminine voice said with a reasonably passable British accent. "Be welcome to the High Crown List Tournament! The registration table and troll is open! Step this way!"

Two young ladies in society garb manned a table near the path that led from the parking area to the event site below. "Howdy do," said I. "Any good cabins left?"

"Greetings to you, fair lords," one of the girls said. "You honor me by allowing me to offer you hospitality for the glorious festivities." Ah, Society speak. It had been too long. I actually grinned a little, and that surprised me. I was starting to have a good time. For a moment, if a fleeting one, the riots seemed far away.

The cutie at the table winked and passed me a map of the site. I picked a cabin that happened to be next to the ones my brother and his wife had selected and signed my Society name, Lord Anguselus Lareston, on the registration list. The first name is that of a Scottish warrior I'd found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain. The name Lareston came from an old Scottish battle song I'd taken a fancy to, Lock the Door, Lareston. I helped Daniel chose a handle that reflected his heritage, too. The names Gywdion McCool came from Welsh and Irish mythology, respectively. Just above our names on the list, I saw the name Gwion Bach printed neatly in a hand I knew well. Tom had already registered. "Cool name," Daniel commented. I nodded and made a mental note to ask him about it.
Our cabin sat close to the dramatic Anna Ruby Falls; we’d hear its music as we drifted off to sleep. God, but it was good to be out of the city! Even after the peak, the trees on the majestic blue ridge mountain slopes were alive with autumn color, and the sky blazed about as blue as it ever gets. I’d forgotten how sweet fresh air can taste. I drank it in and discovered that indeed, I’d begun to heal a little. After we stowed our gear, Daniel and I enjoyed a quick lunch of roasted meat, cheese and bread—along with a few horns of truly fine homemade ale that we found in a nearby cabin. “Think they’ll mind?” Daniel asked me.

“They’ll never miss it,” I assured him. “Besides, they all have a head start on us, so we have some catching up to do.”

Thus fortified, we made our way down to the fair greens, the meadow where most of the events were to take place. We found a considerable number of folks assembled, but there wasn’t as much of a crowd as I’d anticipated. I guess a lot of people weren’t ready for something as frivolous as SCA mountain escapism so soon after the riots. People deal with tragedy in different ways, I suppose. For me, it’s important to keep on doing the things I’d intended to do, no matter how trivial, if not to begin the healing process, then at the very least as an act of defiance. I had to say that no matter what, life goes on. No one is going to take the joy of it away from me. Because life is short, and we are so fragile. Yes, I too would need my time to mourn and to heal. I’d need to find some way to cope, some way to integrate the horrors I’d experienced into the pattern of my life. But that would come later. Right then, I intended to live. To do anything else would be to surrender, to let the evil ones—the bastards who bomb churches, hijack planes, and yes, start riots—win. That’s something I would never do. Not so long as I still had breath in my body.

The first tents on the green made up a market where the society craftspeople sold their wares—garb, jewelry, art, armor and the like. We would probably find my mom among them somewhere, but I didn’t spot her right off. She set up shop to sell her costumes, of course, and did a little fortune telling and natural healing on the side. Her Celtic earth mother mysticism went over great with the Society crowd.

We passed a guy making wooden musical instruments, a genuine honest-to-God blacksmith, and a woman embroidering Celtic knotwork onto a tunic or cloak. I recognized the latter as Dawn, the wife of a friend, and I waved a hello. The marketplace delighted Daniel, but I told him we’d have plenty of time to spend with the hucksters later. What I wanted to see waited just ahead: the fighting. Daniel, Mark, and even Tom played baseball, softball, basketball, football, and the like. But the only organized sport (if you could call it that … organized, I mean) I cared for was SCA fighting. Basically, a bunch of large, burly guys put on amazingly complex medieval armor (usually homemade) and go at each other with big wooden clubs. Believe it or not, it’s a lot of fun. The idea is to re-create a medieval tournament as accurately as possible. Jousting is at best impractical, and fighting with naked steel is also out. The local constabulary would frown upon it, and besides, we’d quickly run out of folks to fight. So instead, we use duct tape–wrapped rattan wood sticks of the approximate size and weight of swords, maces, and the like.

The object is to land a good solid blow on your opponent’s body anywhere above the knees. The armor is supposed to keep it from hurting. Much. Meanwhile, your opponent is trying to do the same thing to you. To prevent it, you use your shield, or your second weapon if you’re either stupid or good enough to fight two–handed. A good, solid blow is one that, presumably, would do some damage even through armor. A blow to an arm or a leg means you lose the use of that limb, so you have to fight with, say, only one arm or from a kneeling position, putting you at a decided disadvantage. A blow to the head or the torso “kills you.” In other words, you lose.
The tournament area consisted of a ring in the center of the green. Pavilions, where the knights, ladies, squires, and friends watched the action, surrounded the ring. The pavilions themselves varied between fairly authentic re-creations to large modern picnic tents. All sported colorful banners, flags and heraldic devices. Across the way, I spotted Lee’s banner, a rampant red lion on a green field, so Daniel and I made our way in that direction. Lee had achieved the rank of full knight—sort of the SCA equivalent of an Eagle Scout in that it takes a great deal of time and effort and it’s a big honor, one that I’d never come close to achieving. Lee had entered the fighting that day, and I didn’t want to miss his first match. Not much chance of that, actually. The best fighters were usually paired up toward the end of each round, and Lee ranked among the best, even with an ale or three in him.

Lee had set up his pavilion tent beneath the branches of a majestic old oak tree that still held most of its red-gold leaves. “Good God almighty,” Daniel said just as we reached it.

Just a ways ahead he’d noticed a woman, and while we could only get a back view, what we saw looked incredible. She had long, dark, almost black hair, thick and lustrous. Her body, at least as near as I could tell from behind, filled an emerald gown and mantle quite well indeed. She wore a circlet of flowers in her hair that looked wonderful. Trust Daniel to spot her.

“No bad,” I acknowledged.

“Yeah,” Daniel said with a surprising lack of enthusiasm. I lifted my eyebrows when I caught a hint of a frown on his face.

“You know her?” I asked.

“Maybe.” He didn’t my gaze. “Never mind, it couldn’t be.”

“Oh?” I prompted. “Wait a minute. Isn’t that the babe you avoided at the Commonwealth? What’s her name?”

“Susan,” Daniel said. “I think so. Although I don’t seem to be having much luck with the avoiding thing lately.”

“Well, unless you’re planning to hide all weekend, which you’re not, I might add, you might want to go talk to her.”

His frown deepened. “I don’t think so. Or …. Hell. Maybe.”

“You should probably just get it over with,” I suggested.

“Probably,” Daniel agreed.

“Hey, guys!” said a voice from behind us. It was Tom. I turned to greet him just as he spotted the woman Daniel watched. “Uh oh,” he said. “Isn’t that our … friend from the other night?”

“We think so,” said I. “Daniel’s about to go talk to her.”

“Daniel’s thinking about it,” he corrected me.

“Better make up your mind,” I pointed out. “She’s about to disappear into the crowd.”

“Somehow, I don’t think finding her’s going to be a problem,” Tom said. “You two seem to be on a collision course.” He didn’t seem much happier about the idea than Daniel did. Of course, he hadn’t seemed happy to see her at the Commonwealth, either. I reminded myself to ask him about his own history with her later.


“I’ll come with you,” Tom said quickly.

“I thought you wanted to find the musicians,” I said, hoping Tom would catch the hint. If he did, he didn’t show it.

“I found them,” Tom said. “The jam’s just getting started. The big stuff’s not till tonight.” He turned to Daniel. “So if you really want to do this—”

I’m not sure what Tom had in mind to say because he never got a chance to finish. A body that fell from the branches of the oak tree interrupted him. The three of us spun around, startled, but the body on the ground bounced to its feet, obviously unhurt.
The little man spun nimbly around on the very tips of his toes. He wore a gaudy court jester's outfit, all bright colors and patches. He seemed a little worse for the wear after his ordeal; his hair and beard were tangled with twigs and branches, and his costume seemed patched from twigs, leaves, and dirt as much as mismatched squares of gaudy cloth.

My nose crinkled when I caught a whiff of his stench, a scent of earth and decay and stale wine. Strange, but not exactly unpleasant, like the smell of a forest deep in autumn. In his left hand, he carried a wand tied with bells and ribbons, at the end of which he'd tied a balloon-like bladder filled with liquid. He turned a cartwheel, belched, and giggled, then turned to regard us.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he said. “That one is trouble, she is.”

“Wouldn’t do what?” I asked.

“Talk to Susan?” Daniel’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

The man spun and giggled some more, then slapped Tom on the head with the bladder wand. “He knows! Don’t you, True Thomas?”

I turned to Tom. “You know this guy?” I’d never seen him before, but the SCA attracts all types.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” Tom said. He frowned. “May I ask your name, sir?”

The little man laughed. “Oh, but you know better than that, don’t you True Thomas? Tom the Rhymer! Tom Tom, Tom O’Bedlam!” The little man seemed to find that exceptionally funny.

“Please tell me your name,” Tom repeated.

“Me? My name? Why, I’m just a fool, entertaining the gentles on the afternoon of this glorious fair! A simple fool! That’s me, tee hee!”

The little man’s jester hat was just a few sizes too large for him. When he laughed, it fell over his eyes. If not for his long nose, his whole head might have been lost. The hat shook so violently when he laughed that I would have bet money he was going to lose at least a couple of those damned jingle bells. Most of the nearby crowd turned and watched us with amusement.

“Even a fool has a name,” Tom said. “Tell me.”

With that, the jester stopped laughing and raised his hat away from his eyes. He lifted one eyebrow and glared at Tom with a serious, almost solemn expression that would have been almost frightening if it wasn’t so comical. “Look out, True Thomas,” he said. “A Rider is at hand, and the Gray Man is about!”

“What…” Tom began, but the little man interrupted him.

“You there,” he said to Daniel, “You’re after that one?” He pointed his wand in the direction where the dark-haired woman in green had vanished into the crowd. “Stay away from her, I tell you.” The fool seemed to find this even funnier; he literally collapsed with laughter. “That one’s trouble, she is.”

“Don’t I know it,” Daniel agreed with a nod and a grin.

When the fool bounced back to his feet, I saw tears in his eyes. He still laughed a little. He leaned close to Tom then, and gave him a conspiring whisper. “She’s after the same things you people are,” he said. “The sword and the cup.”

“Is she?” Tom said. He didn’t smile.

“Me,” said the Fool, “I’m just looking for the rest of me, the part that’s stuck here. The Gray Man is about, you know.”

It occurred to me then that the slaps with the bladder wand must have really pissed old Tom off because he’d gone white as a sheet. I had to agree, the jester act had worn a little thin.

“It’s just fun,” I reassured him. “All part of the show.”

“Oh yes,” the Fool replied with his stage whisper. “But by the time she’s done, they’ll both
be destroyed! Isn’t that rich? Lost forever, poof poof!” The fool danced. “Gone gone gone!”

“No,” Tom said. “Listen—”

But the little man slapped him on the side of the head with the bladder wand again. Before Tom could recover, the jester had spun away and danced into the crowd. “Where is he?” Tom said, frantically looking this way and that. “Where did he go?”

“Don’t forget to look out!” we heard the Fool call. “A Rider is at hand tonight … and the Gray Man is about!”
Chapter 26
Saturday is Worse

Guy Curtis:

Everybody talks about Black Friday, but in Boston, the next day was even worse, and it
didn’t get better as it wore along. Especially for a beat cop like me. It was supposed to be
my day off, but the chief called everybody in. Well, those who weren’t in a hospital or the
morgue. So maybe I could think of worse fates than stomping a beat in riot gear, even on my day
off.

My partner Ray Duncan had been hit pretty bad on Black Friday; he’d wound up in the
hospital. Some coward who never showed his face took him down with a bullet from an assault
rifle. Then the fleeing crowd trampled and beat him as he lay there bleeding on the pavement. He
was in bad shape—a coma, they said. Jesus.

While we waited for news from the hospital, the department found someone else to pair me
up with, a man named Gilbert Stevens. Guess I got stuck with him because nobody else would
take him if they could help it. To be honest, most of the others didn’t like him too much. He was
one of those little guys, the ones that’re always bitching, always walking around like they’re pissed
off at the world. Even when he wasn’t complaining, he found something to run his mouth off
about. What’s wrong with the government, why the foreigners were screwing up food prices, why
the Sox stank. That kind of stuff. But what the hell. He didn’t bother me much, I guess. In a way,
he kind of reminded me of my little brother Joey.

Boston felt wicked spooky that morning; me and Gilbert both thought so. The streets were
empty. Nobody was around except for the Federal Homeland Security SWAT Black Guards, the
ones who’d come to “support” us. Some help. They made it clear who was in charge, and it wasn’t
anybody in Boston blue. But that’s the kind of spooky I can handle. After Black Friday, I
welcomed a little peace.

Me and Gilbert stopped for breakfast at a little Italian coffee shop in the old part of North
End. I bought him a coffee and a pastry, but it didn’t stop him from bitching about the captain,
the chief, and just about every other mutual acquaintance we shared between us. But again, what
the hell, you know? I liked it better than talking about yesterday, I suppose.

We didn’t talk about all the shit that went down—or about Ray. Gilbert did his best not to
look at my black eye or the gashes on my cheek and forehead. I did my best not to wonder how he
got off without a scratch. We’d just finished up our refills when the calls came. Riots had broken
out in three places on the other side of the tunnels, up around Logan Airport. Riots. Fucking
again. The fighting had spread all the way to Wonderland. Me and Gilbert grabbed our helmets
and headed out.

I thought we’d be ordered to the fighting, but the Black Guard SWATs claimed to have
the situation under control. I could tell the brass didn’t like that much. Instead, they ordered us
back to Government Center, so we crossed under the bridge, cut through Quincy market, then
headed past the Union Oyster House and the Bell in Hand. That’s when we got new orders. The
fighting had reached both the Callahan and Ted Williams Tunnels. The Captain ordered us to
take position on the other end of the Callahan Tunnel to make sure it didn’t spread towards Beacon Hill and the Common.

About forty cops had gathered at the tunnel when me and Gilbert got there. By the time we had the entrance sealed, twenty or so more joined us. We waited, weapons ready. But nobody got through. The Black Guard saw to that.

The reports we got on the radio were sketchy at best, but what we heard horrified us. People died. There were no reports of any arrests. None. How the hell did they expect to stop the fighting if they didn’t run some assholes in? What were they thinking?

We heard reports of more fighting. This time riots had broken out in Harvard Square around the Garage, an old shopping complex where Wilson Julius owned a clothing store. I thought they’d send us there, but we were ordered to stay put. The Cambridge police in the Harvard Square area were ordered to surround the area and contain the violence. Only the Black Guard penetrated the perimeter. Like the goddamn Feds knew how to handle Boston better than the locals.

A few minutes later, we unsealed the tunnel long enough to let the ambulances through. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I’d never seen so many! On the radio, we heard that the fighting in Harvard Square had escalated. Nice freakin’ work, Black Guard. Jesus. Jesus H. Christ.

And then, suddenly, we found ourselves in the middle of a war zone. Fast as you can blink, riots surrounded us. I can’t begin to tell you how they began, or even where they came from, except to guess that it must have been from the direction of Government Center or maybe Chinatown and the Leather District. It might even have come from the Bay area. I don’t know. The fighting just fell on us.

From somewhere off in the distance, I heard the sound of an explosion. Behind me, I heard Gilbert screaming into the microphone on his collar, “Back up! We need back up now! We need back up at, oh Jesus! Where the hell are we?” If he managed to get an answer, I didn’t hear it.

We did what we could. We fired rubber bullets into the crowd, and we pushed rioters to the ground and cuffed them. I fired until my gun was empty. With the close fighting, I couldn’t reload. Besides, I only had regular bullets left, not the rubber kind. So I swung my billy club like a fan blade.

Just as we gained control, the Black Guard S.W.A.T. s appeared and ordered us to fall back. As we obeyed, Black Guards fell on the crowd like some kind of Old Testament wrath of God plague. The bullets they fired weren’t made of rubber. I screamed, we all did, begging them to stop.

They ignored us and forced us back. Bodies fell. The Black Guards, they didn’t seem to know what they were doing. Hell, they didn’t even make any arrests! They just made the people madder. The ones that lived, anyway. They didn’t put the fires out; they fanned them.

“They’re doing it on purpose,” Gilbert said later on.

“What?” I said.

“The Black Guards,” he answered me. “They’re not trying to stop the riots. They’re trying to make them worse.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re crazy.”

“You watch,” he said. “They’re taking control. They just need an excuse, man. Just like Atlanta and LA. You mark my words.”

“You’re crazy,” I repeated. I didn’t have any patience for nutty conspiracy theories. I didn’t want to hear about secret government plots and cover-ups and stuff like that. But that night when I tried to sleep, I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said. Why hadn’t the Black Guards made any arrests? Why didn’t they do anything to keep the riots from breaking out all over again? And why did they keep the local cops away from the fighting?

Then something else occurred to me. The bullet that hit Ray hadn’t come from a street
gun. It had been fired from a high caliber assault rifle. Even the mobs didn’t have those. So some punk must have gotten hold of a military weapon, right? Who else could have fired that shot?

I hadn’t slept wink one when the phone rang a little after two a.m. The Parker House Hotel was burning, and more fighting had broken out near Fenway and in the Common. No rest for the weary, I reckon. My mind raced as I suited up. The shot that took down Ray. It must have been some punk with a stolen weapon, right? I mean, nobody official would have shot at a cop, right? But I just couldn’t get two questions out of my mind.

What the hell was the Black Guard doing?
And who fired that shot?
Chapter 27
A Journey North

Susan Myers:

I’d wallowed in my pain and self-pity long enough. The time had come to accept responsibility for my actions. The time had come to begin a penance. Penance. Goddess, listen to me! I sound just like one of the Christians. Perhaps there is a little of my father in me after all. Wouldn’t he laugh to hear it! For some reason, that thought brought a smile to my face.

I would start with the hardest task first, just like my father always told me. The time had come to face Elaine. I showered and dressed, then called her. No answer. I made myself a mug of tea and tried again. This time Leanne, an acolyte staying in Elaine’s house, answered. Elaine was away. I left a message asking if I could come by for a while. We needed to talk. Leanne promised to have Elaine return the call.

A part of me felt I should stay put and wait for Elaine’s call, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t just sit there, still and idle. Too much needed to be done! The city bled, and damn it all, I was a priestess. I was supposed to be a healer.

The sun was just peaking over the horizon when I made my way to the Trinity Women’s Shelter where I did some volunteer work. Black Guard troopers stopped me twice and demanded to know my business, but I had a shelter ID so they let me pass.

I arrived to find our tiny facility turned into an emergency first aid station—far too many wounded filled Atlanta’s hospitals. The backbreaking work proved far beyond what we were trained and equipped to handle, but we persevered. When Red Cross workers finally arrived to relieve us, I nearly fainted from exhaustion. Somehow, I managed to steer my little car home.

A message from Elaine waited for me. She’d already left for a weekend in Unicoi State Park with two of her sons. She wanted me to join her. She expected me at her house by 1:30—Goddess! Less than an hour! I could catch a ride with Caitlin Verner, her daughter-in-law. I didn’t need to pack; I would find a bag with appropriate clothing waiting for me in the foyer. The “invitation” wasn’t worded as an order, but I heard the urgency all the same. It never occurred to me to disobey. I called Elaine’s number and asked Leanne to tell this Caitlin that I was on my way.

I couldn’t help wondering—why on earth had Elaine gone away to a park in the mountains now of all times? Surely the Circle needed her here? Maybe she simply wanted to protect her sons. Or maybe something new had happened that I didn’t know about. She must have her reasons. She would tell me or not as she saw fit. She had little enough reason to trust me with the Circle of Three’s secrets. For now, I would simply obey and hope to heal our wounded friendship.

Fortunately, the route to Elaine’s house took me away from downtown, so the roads were more or less clear. I arrived only a little late; Caitlin and a friend were still loading their car. I introduced myself, then ran inside to grab the suit bag. It awaited me just as Elaine had promised. Inside I discovered two gowns, one emerald green and one cream, as well as a mantle, leggings and a tunic. Costumes? Goddess, where on earth were we going? She’d left me Renaissance-style clothing!
Before I rejoined Caitlin and her friend, I made a quick stop in Elaine's library. She wouldn’t mind my borrowing a book or two. Caitlin blew her horn just as I found a couple of volumes that seemed to be what I wanted: two modern retellings of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

As we pulled away from Atlanta, Caitlin and her companion, Jenny, told me about the Society for Creative Anachronism and the event we were attending. Almost in spite of myself, I actually found myself looking forward to the weekend. Elaine, bless her heart, knew what she was doing. Something like this was exactly what I needed. Of course, I would also have to face Elaine and confess my guilt. With that thought, my blossoming excitement withered and dread sank in my belly like an anchor.

For the first thirty minutes or so, Jenny and Caitlin made a valiant effort to include me in their chat. But they were old friends with a lot of catching up to do. Soon the conversation left me behind. That didn’t bother me in the least. I wanted to learn more about the Arthur story—especially about Morgan le Fay. I pulled my feet up on the back seat, curled up, and opened one of the books.

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Uther Pendragon, son of Ambrosius, was king of England. He didn’t rule peacefully; war tore the land apart. The Romans had abandoned the isle and Saxon invaders ravaged the coasts. Petty kings and chieftains struggled for power. One of these lesser lords was Duke Gorlois of Cornwall.

Duke Gorlois. For some reason, my heart leapt when I read his name. The name spoke to me of warm and gentle kindness. Curious. Anyway, Gorlois fought with king Uther for many years, until at last the wizard Merlin negotiated a peace.

Merlin. That name, too awoke feelings deep inside me. A rational part of my mind assumed the wizard archetype struck a chord somewhere in the recesses of my psyche. I felt awe and wonder, certainly, and also a little fear. And something else, something like anger. I wondered why.

King Uther sealed the peace with a great feast in his castle. Gorlois and his men came, and the Duke brought his wife, the lady Igraine.

Igraine.

According to Brenda, Igraine had been my mother in that long ago past life. I tried to remember her. It made me a little sad to find that I couldn't. Igraine was just a name to me.

Igraine was the fairest woman in all of Britain at the time. When King Uther saw her, he loved her at once. Igraine saw the lust in Uther’s eyes when he looked at her, and she became afraid. She urged her husband to flee with her in secret that very night. Gorlois did so. He took his wife and shut her in Tintagel, his strongest castle.

When Uther learned that the Duke and his wife had left, he grew “wonderly wroth.” I loved that phrase! Uther gathered his armies and made to pursue the Duke. Gorlois was ready, however, and the fighting was terrible. Meanwhile, Uther’s desire for Igraine grew fiercer. At last he sent one of his most trusted knights to summon Merlin. Merlin heard the king’s plea, and agreed to use his magic. For a price. Whatever issue might come from the king's union with Igraine would be given to Merlin. The king would literally pay for his tryst with his first-born child!

That night, Merlin cast an enchantment that made King Uther look exactly like the Duke. While the Duke and his men fought the King's army, Uther entered the castle and loved Igraine. Both books said loved; neither used the word rape. That same night, Igraine conceived a child. In
the morning, the man she thought to be her husband rode away. Later, Igraine learned that her husband had been killed the night before.

I checked both volumes, but neither mentioned what the poor woman must have felt. I could only imagine—terrible grief over the loss of her husband, coupled with confusion that must have been close to terror. Not to mention the horrible torment that must have followed the rape.

With the Duke dead, the war soon ended. Uther married Igraine.

Igraine had mothered three children with the late Duke Gorlois, all girls. The oldest, Morgause, married King Lot of Orkney. She would mother four sons, Gawain, Gareth, Gaheris, and Agravaine. Later, she would be called the Queen of Air and Darkness. That title made me uneasy.

The youngest daughter was Nimuë, who would later become Lady of the Lake. I was understandably curious about this woman, whom I knew would one day, centuries later, become my teacher. But the books had almost nothing to say about her. The first didn’t seem to mention her at all until much later in the story when she began to study with Merlin. The other book called this youngest daughter Elaine, and said that she would foster one Lancelot du Lac, the son of King Ban of Benwick. That was all.

The middle daughter was, of course, Morgan le Fay. Of her, it was said that Igraine sent her away to a nunnery, where she became a very great student of enchantment. I remembered the dreams I’d had, the dreams of myself as a priestess by the Lake.

_Humph._ Nunnery indeed.

When it became obvious that Igraine was pregnant, Uther came to her and asked who had fathered her child. Igraine told him about the night when her husband died, when a man came to her in his likeness. That man had sired her child. Uther smiled proudly, and explained that he, then, had fathered the babe.

When Igraine bore the child, Uther gave him to Merlin as promised. Merlin took the child away to the castle of Sir Ector, to be fostered in secret. This was, of course, the boy who would one day grow up to be King Arthur.

As for Igraine’s feelings on the matter, the books were infuriatingly silent. I couldn’t help wondering about her. Had she loved her husband, the Duke? On the other hand, she seemed quick to accept Uther as the father of her child. Had she loved him all along? Was she happy when he married her? Or was she simply resigned to her fate? And what of her child? Had she been furious or mad with grief when Uther gave the babe to the old wizard? Or had she known, somehow, that King Uther was doomed and her child was safer away? Perhaps some womanly intuition told her that only Merlin could protect the infant boy.

I wondered. I wondered about this woman, who in that long-ago past life had been my mother. I wondered if I’d loved her, and she me. Had she sung to me and told me stories? Did she comfort me when I cried? I tried to remember, but those feelings were lost. The books certainly had little enough to say about her. Poor Igraine. You’ve been reduced to a minor, almost forgotten character in someone else’s story.

I closed the books and tried to sleep. I didn’t want to read any more.

Soon enough, we made it to Unicoi and checked into our cabins. I would be sharing one with Elaine. I gathered my courage and entered. She wasn’t there, and I didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. The former, mostly. I’d only postponed the inevitable. Besides, as much as I dreaded the thought of facing her, I needed my friend. Could she ever forgive my betrayal? Could I ever forgive myself?

Jenny and Caitlin wanted go down to the main event area at once, but I needed a little time
so I promised to follow shortly. I opened the suit bag, chose the green gown and mantle, and fumbled with them for a while. When I wore both more or less correctly, I knew I could delay no longer. Knocking thrice on the doorframe for luck, I took a deep breath for courage and went to find Elaine.

The fair charmed me. The feeling of stepping back in time, or into a storybook, delighted me. The pavilion tents formed a circle around an open meadow where “knights” in armor postured and swung wooden swords at one another. Everywhere I turned I found bright costumes, jugglers, musicians, craftspeople, and more. Meat and vegetables roasted over a fire, and my rumbling stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten in a while. Later. Right then, I had an errand.

Across the meadow I saw the green banner with a red rampant lion Caitlin had described as belonging to Elaine’s son, Lee, so I made my way in that direction. She wasn’t there, but a large and friendly man who introduced himself as King Bearkiller pointed me in a direction. Soon enough, I spotted Jenny and Caitlin in the crowd, so I wandered over to them. Just as I greeted them and met Caitlin’s husband, Lee Verner, I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Hi, Susan,” Elaine said. “We need to talk.”

We walked back to Elaine’s cabin in silence. Or at least we walked without speaking. The sound of my heart pounding must have carried like cannon fire all the way back to the crowded meadow. Once inside, Elaine offered me tea from a thermos. I declined, but she poured a cup for herself. Then she pulled the room’s single hardwood chair over to her bunk. She sat cross-legged on the thin mattress; I took the chair. “Now,” she said at last. “This is the time for total truth between us. I want you to tell me everything, Susan. Everything. Starting with the Voice in your dreams. Is that clear, child?”

“Yes, Lady,” I said. And so I began. As Elaine sipped her tea and listened quietly, I spoke of my visions of Atlanta and the world ravaged by violence. I told her of the Voice which ordered me not to speak of my foresight to the Circle of Three—a full day before Elaine and Brenda introduced me to their order. I told her how I had betrayed her. Elaine’s face paled to ash and it broke my heart. Still, I held nothing back. I did not spare her feelings or my own. Finally, I spoke of the objects of power in my dreams, the chalice and the sword, both shining with golden light. I told her of my certainty that I’d been chosen to reclaim these treasures for the Goddess, because soon they would reappear in the world.

When at last I finished my confession, I wept like a babe. Elaine pulled me to her on the bed, wrapped a blanket around us, and took me in her arms and held me while I sobbed. “Oh, Elaine,” I said through my tears, “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh, hush, child. Shhh.”

“I’m so sorry,” I repeated, and Elaine held me close.

I don’t know how long I cried, but it must have been at least an hour. Probably longer. At last I had no more tears left inside. I was an empty, limp, ragdoll woman. Still Elaine held me. I felt guilty for the comfort I found in her arms. At last, I broke the silence. The hardest words had yet to be spoken. “Elaine, is there … is there any way to heal this rift between us?” Reluctantly, I pulled away from the harbor of her embrace. “Is there any way I can earn your forgiveness?”

Elaine sat quietly for a moment and chewed her lip. “Susan, I can’t allow you to claim responsibility for all this. I’m afraid you must forgive me, too,” she said.

“Elaine, no—”

“Listen, child. I should have warned you. I knew what your … abilities are. I just had no
idea they would develop so quickly!"

I shook my head, confused. "I don't understand."

"Susan, when you talked to Billy on Friday, I think he suggested that the Voice you heard might be something else. There are dangers that come with the Sight, especially for someone as gifted as you are. Oh, child, I should have known! I should have seen how rapidly your abilities reawakened. But after all these years, things are happening so fast! Can you forgive me, Susan? For not being the teacher you needed?"

"Elaine, please! Please don't talk like that. You know I'd forgive you anything … if I ever had anything to forgive! I … I'm trying to understand."

"Listen to me carefully, Susan. I'm going to ask you the same questions Billy asked you. The Voice in your dreams. I want you to compare it to the Presence you once described to me. The Presence you felt that first time, when you attended the ritual by the Lake with Brenda. How did you feel, deep in your heart? Did the Presence feel the same?"

"The Mother has many aspects," I said, repeating the phrase by rote. "Some are Dark."

"Damn it, Susan, answer the question! How did it feel? Was the feeling the same?"

"I … no. They didn't feel the same at all."

"What was the first Presence like?"

"Warm and kind," I said quickly. "It filled me with joy and comfort and something like awe, but more than awe. It was numinous … I can't find the words."

"This Presence … did She speak to you in words?"

"No."

"But you knew the meaning. There was … communion."

"Yes."

"Now, the Voice in your dreams. How did it make you feel?"

"Cold," I said. "The Voice sounded beautiful, but harsh. Almost cruel. But I felt the power behind it, like an ocean pounding a rocky shore. Oh Elaine, it was real! I swear it!"

"Oh, I don't question that."

"But—"

"Shhh. Listen to me. Answer honestly. The Presence and the Voice. They seemed very different to you. Am I correct?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Let us consider something different. The images from your dreams. The sword and the chalice. How did they make you feel?"

"Covetous," I said, looking down at the floor. I wasn't proud of the answer. "I mean, that's not all! I felt … filled with awe, wonder. And purpose! But—"

"But a part of you felt something else."

"Yes," I said. Oh, how bitter that confession tasted!

Elaine smiled. "That's good," she said. "I wonder if you could have admitted that before?"

"Before what?" I asked.

"Never mind, my dear," Elaine said. "Now, the images and the Voice. Did they come at the same time?"

"No. I dreamed of the treasures before I heard the Voice."

"What did you know of them then?"

"Little enough," I admitted. "I knew they were very holy, and very old. Powerful, I think. And they are coming into the world again soon. That's all. Although … I sensed something, well, familiar about them. I was certain from the beginning that my destiny is tied up with those two treasures. Does that make any sense at all?"

"Did your feelings change when the Voice came?"

"Yes. I think so. Maybe. It's hard to say."
“That’s okay. Susan, for someone like you …. Well, as I said, there are dangers.”

“What kind of dangers?”

“There are others who can speak to you in your dreams, Susan. Some are your friends. Guides, if you will. Some are not. Do you understand me? Remember when I told you the Sight could be a curse as well as a gift?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice a whisper.

Elaine closed her eyes for a moment and bowed her head. Then she looked up at me again.

“Oh, my child, there is so much I should have told you. Where did the time go? But we needed you so much. Can you forgive me?”

I took Elaine’s hands in mine. They felt so very cold. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

Elaine took a deep breath before she spoke again. “Susan, I want you to consider that the Voice in your dreams may have been something other than the Divine. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know.” I found it impossible to sort out my feelings. My mind raced. Someone else? But who? What? I had too much to consider, too many questions to ask.

“You never even considered that the Voice might not be the Goddess, did you?”

“No. Until Billy suggested it, the idea never even occurred to me.”

“You must learn to question everything, Susan. Every thing I tell you. Until I can teach you more, or until more of your abilities awaken. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking down again.

“Just try, dear. That’s all I ask. Think about it. Does this Voice, the one that made you so cold, seem like the Mother we worship? Would the Goddess of Love and Light ask you to doom thousands of her children to death and injury? Or ask you to betray your friends? Consider this carefully.”

“I will,” I promised. “But who? What else could have spoken to me … that way? Could it have been my imagination?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“But you have an idea.”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Someone we both knew once. We will talk of that later, when I can gather the others. In the meantime, Susan, if this happens again, I need your word that you will tell me at once. No matter what. If you swear an oath, I will believe you. Otherwise, leave now and we will part friends.”

“I swear,” I said. At that moment, I would have promised Elaine anything. “If I break my oath, may the earth open and swallow me, may the sea rise and drown me, may the sky fall and crush me.”

“I accept your oath,” Elaine said. “And as Lady of the Lake, I expect to be obeyed. Never forget that.”

I nodded. I could not meet her gaze.

“There is something else you must know,” she continued sternly. She put her hand under my chin, gently but firmly, and lifted my face so that she could see my eyes. “I blame myself for much of what happened. I should have told you more and told you sooner. I acted with compassion, but I made a mistake. Perhaps a critical one. Time will tell.

“But know this, child. If I didn’t bear at least part of the blame, we would not be having this conversation. As much as we need you and your Sight, and for all the love that is between us, I would not have given you an opportunity to betray us again. Your oaths and apologies would not have been nearly enough. Too much is at stake, Susan. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes,” I said.
Then let us find a way to trust one another again. There is enough blame to share, I think. I know you have more questions. And there is so much more you need to know! It will not be easy for you to hear. But there are others who must know as well. When we get back home, I'll call you all together. Like I said, it is time for total truth. But now … now I have been away from my sons too long. This may be the last time we have to spend together for quite a long time. Will you come with me?

“Can I follow you in a while? I … I need a little time.”

“Of course, child. Of course. But come soon, okay?”

I did follow soon, or soon enough, anyway. I wandered through the crowd and tried my best to enjoy my surroundings. When I finally found Elaine, she was talking to a tall dark-haired man dressed in black. I assumed he must be one of her sons. He looked familiar. A moment passed before I recognized him as part of Daniel Corwin’s entourage. Under different circumstances, I would have found him attractive. If only he had better taste in friends. In any case, he obviously worried about his mother. Elaine wore her cares unmasked. “You look terrible,” he told her with a kind smile.

“Thanks, Bucko,” she said, returning his grin. They chatted, but I don’t like to eavesdrop so I wandered back into the crowd. I was not in the mood to meet one of Daniel Corwin’s friends. Even if he was Elaine’s son. And even if he was so darkly handsome.

That night, I helped Elaine with a fun play ritual. Lee, her other son, was crowned SCA king. At a gate fashioned from garlands and branches, we made Lee and Caitlin swear to uphold the sacred traditions of the Land. It was theatre, playacting, but it was quite lovely in its way. Almost in spite of myself, I found myself enjoying the show.

Later, Elaine and I went apart from the crowd with a few others and performed the Hallowmass rituals for Samhain. By the time it ended I had completely exhausted myself, so I excused myself from the wild celebration that followed and went to find my bed. I should have done more. Especially on Samhain, a holy day. But I could only think of my cot and a warm blanket.

That night, I dreamed of the sword, the Mother’s Sacred Sword of power. In the dream, it felt close. Almost near enough to touch. I felt the warmth of its glorious, golden light dancing upon my face.

It couldn’t have been more than a few hours before I opened my eyes to find Elaine shaking me awake. “Susan!” she said. “Quickly, I need you. Something terrible has happened!”

“Elaine? What? What is it?” Through the window, I saw a gray sky. I shivered in the pre-morning cold.

“Here!” She thrust car keys into my hand. “Take my car. It’s more than half charged, so don’t stop for anything. I need you to go back to my house and gather the Circle. You may have to go downtown, to the office building. The Patterson-Murphey Complex. Do you remember the signs I gave you? The entire Circle, do you understand me? Billy Fisher will help you.”

I tried to wipe the sleep from my eyes. “I … I don’t understand.”

“Oh, Susan! After all these years, our moment has come at last—and we’re not nearly ready.”

“Elaine, please, what is it? What’s happening?”

“Something terrible,” she repeated. “Later, there is no time now. Go. Stop for nothing. I
will join you as soon as I can. They are gathering already, but caution be damned, they must make even greater haste. It is time to call the Armies of Light!”
As Tom left us to follow the Fool, I peered under the flap of Lee’s tent and found the largest man I’ve ever seen in my life sitting with his back to me. “Bear?” I asked.

“Go away,” the large man said. “I’m drinking.”

“Now is that any way to talk to an old pal who only wants to toast your health?” I said, suppressing a grin. The big guy was easily the tallest and strongest man in the SCA. In the Society, we called him Sir Bran the Bearkiller, the present king of the local SCA kingdom, Meridies, which covers most of the Southeast except for Florida and the Carolinas.

“Oh, it’s you, Lareston. C’mon in.” I did so. I entered from the rear; the front of the tent was open, giving us a spectacular view of the greens where the marshals set up the next fight.

Daniel didn’t follow me, he thought he might have caught another glimpse of the girl who might have been Susan and wondered whether or not to follow her.

“I’m just drinking a toast to the last hours of my kingship,” Bear said. “Care to join me?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said, handing him the large pewter mug I’d brought along for just such an occasion. Bear obliged me by filling it to the rim with red from his current bottle. Being king suited Bear. He was big and hairy, sure, but he had a wild noble look about him. He’d been drinking, as two empty wineskins at his feet testified. I couldn’t help wondering how much of it he’d downed himself. When I remembered that he shared the pavilion with my brother, I knew he couldn’t have accounted for more than half of it.

I crooked a thumb in Daniel’s direction. “That fellow over there drooling at the ladies is a buddy of mine. Gwydon’s what he calls himself.”

Daniel turned around and grinned. “A beautiful woman stole my manners,” he apologized. “Pardon me.”

“Not at all,” the Bear said.

“Hiya,” Daniel said as he followed me at last into the pavilion. “Nice to meet … Stan?”

I laughed as I saw Bear’s eyes open wide with surprise. “Corwin? Holy shit, man! How’ve you been?” Daniel amazed me again. I couldn’t take him anywhere without running into friends of his. The guy must have known half the world. I smiled when I saw his eyes pop out when the Bear clasped his hand. The big guy had a grip like one of those things that crush cars in junkyards. When the Bear decides to shake your hand, it gets sbook.


“Stan Harrison! My God, it’s been a while.”

“So you two know each other?” I asked, as ever an astute observer of the obvious.

“This weasel and I went to school together,” Bear told me.

“Evans Dale Elementary, Henderson Middle, and Lakeside High,” Daniel confirmed. “Stan used to hang around with Pete Melvin and me.”

“We played baseball,” Bear acknowledged as he rummaged through my brother’s cooler looking for more wine.

“Small world,” I noted.
“It’s starting to reach the point of implosion,” Daniel agreed. “Say, you don’t happen to know a lady in green who just passed by here? Susan’s her name. In the real world, anyway. I don’t know her SCA name thingee.”

“Can’t say that I do,” Bear admitted. “But he might.” He nodded at me.

“Excuse me?” I said, confused.

“John! I mean, uh, Lareston! You’ve been holding out on me!” Daniel said with a grin.

“News to me,” I confessed.

“She came to meet with your mom,” Bear explained. “Susan, yeah, I’m sure that’s her name.”

“I knew it,” Daniel said, his expression neutral.

“Well, she can wait, the lovely Susan can.” I wanted to do some Society type stuff. Aside from the drinking. So with a grin I dropped to one knee and bowed my head to the Bear.

“Forgive me, my lord king. I have not yet done you honor.”

Daniel saw and followed my lead. “No shit,” he said.

“Oh, rise,” said Bear. “I can’t accept your homage and drink at the same time. While I do appreciate the honor and all, please don’t think otherwise, I don’t want to cut into my drinking time. You understand.”

“So Stan, you’re, like, the king?” Daniel managed to rise and top off his mug at the same time.

“For the rest of the day and some of the evening. But call me Bran or Bearkiller while we’re up here, okay?”

I agreed with Bear. “It’s the spirit of the thing, don’tcha know.” I’d known the guy for years, and until then I don’t think I’d ever heard his mundane name.

“Who takes your place?” Daniel asked.

“That’s what those lads out there are looking to settle,” Bear said, nodding at the guys who geared up for the next fights.

We filled him in, the Bear and me. One of the biggest tournaments that each SCA kingdom holds every six months is the Crown List. All the fighters with royal aspirations fight in a single elimination contest. The final winner is the new king, and his lady is the queen. That night is the coronation, just plum full of pomp and ceremony. In the old days, the winner reigned as prince for a full six months before becoming king. But times change, alas, even in the SCA.

This time around, just about everybody who could hold a sword had signed up to participate in the Crown List because, as the outgoing king, Sir Bran the Bearkiller was ineligible. That meant that for once, the outcome wasn’t a foregone conclusion. Quite frankly, everyone acknowledged Bear as just about the best fighter the SCA had to offer, period. I’d fought him once myself, years before. Actually, I’d have to call it something of an overstatement to say I’d fought him. It’s more accurate to say I’d stood in a tournament ring and let him beat me with a stick. Still the Bear had lost a fight or two. Three, to be precise, two of them to my brother. Which I have to admit made me think. I could beat my brother. In fact, over the past couple of years, I’d won nearly every time we’d sparred. But the lists had closed, so I couldn’t enter the tourney, more’s the pity. And besides, I didn’t have time to be the king anyway.

While we waited for the next fighters to armor up, Bear and I talked SCA stuff. We laid it on thick, lots of courtly this and that, flavored liberally with accents and anachronistic phrases. My high school theatre background came out, I suppose. We sounded good, the Bear and me. I could tell, because I caught Daniel rolling his eyes more than once. He acted like he found the whole thing silly, but I could tell by his grin we’d impressed him. Daniel, my friend, there’s something of the theatre in you, too, you old faker.

By the time Daniel and I managed to make our way down to the ring, the first rounds were
over. Only the best or luckiest fighters remained. My brother was one of them.

The herald in the ring called the next fighters. With the distance I couldn’t be certain, but I thought one of the combatants called was my brother. “Lee’s up next?” I inquired.

“Lee? Oh, that’s your brother’s mundane name, isn’t it? I think so.”

“Wait a minute,” Daniel said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m a little confused. Is Lee your mom’s … natural son?”

“No,” I said. “He’s a stepson, too. Just like me.”

“And you and Lee aren’t really brothers?”

“No. Stephen’s his real brother. Okay … it’s like this. Elaine, my stepmom, was a very dear friend of my real parents. She was my Godmother. When my real parents were killed in France, she adopted me.”

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Hey, I wasn’t even a year old when it happened. Anyway, Lee and I met in grade school, and we really hit it off. Somewhere along the way, Elaine and Lee’s dad, Barton Verner, met and fell in love. It’s funny, Elaine always said she thought she’d lived past such things. Anyway, they married, and Lee and Stephen became my stepbrothers.”

“I never met your stepdad, did I?”

“He died a few years ago. Before I met you and Mark.”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Daniel told me.

“I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t want you to know,” I assured him.

Lee was in fact up next. I could make out the steel and leather armor he and I had spent an entire summer making. I wanted to head over. Daniel on the other hand still had his mind, such as it was, on other things. I could always count on my friend’s persistence, bless his rascally heart.

“So … where do you think your mom is?” I knew Mom wasn’t the one he wondered about.

“Still want to track down that Susan babe?”

“I don’t know.”

“You want to talk to her or avoid her?”

Daniel shrugged. “To tell you the truth, I haven’t made up my mind yet. So where do you think she is?”

“Beats me,” I allowed. “But I remind you, there are other maidens here—”

He grinned. “Fine. Where are they?”

“Later, Danny boy. Besides, I thought you were in love.”

“Madeleine Sinclair’s not coming down till Monday,” Daniel said. “In the meantime, I believe in keeping my options open.”

“Madeleine Sinclair?” asked Bear. “The actress?”

“Drop it, Bear,” I warned him. “Once you get Master Corwin here going about Madeleine Sinclair, you’ll never shut him up. Speaking of, I can’t seem to keep my fool roomy away from the crowd much longer, so I think we’re gonna mosey on over and check out the fighting. Care to join us?”

“Naw,” Bear yawned. “Walking seems too much like work just now. I think I’ll just hang around here and enjoy the last few hours of my sovereignty in peace.”

I returned his smile. “Then if I may beg your majesty’s pardon …?”

“Granted, of course,” Bear said, winking at the wine bottle. “So long as you join me for one last toast.”

Daniel poured, then the three of us lifted our glasses. I began. “Here’s to the wine we love to drink and the food we love to eat.”

Bear continued. “Here’s to our wives and girlfriends …”

“… and may they never meet,” Daniel concluded.

“And here’s to Sir Bran the Bearkiller,” I finished. “The noblest lord this fair kingdom has
The Widening Gyre

ever known, and the largest man I’ve ever encountered.”

“Bear,” echoed Daniel. “By any name, an old pal I’ve missed.”

We downed our full mugs in one long drought. It may not be the best way to enjoy good wine, but it was the best salute I could come up with, and the Bear deserved it. “I imagine folks’ll be looking for you about now.”

“You haven’t seen me,” he said with that friendly, open smile of his. “I’ll find ’em when I’m good and ready.”

We made our way along the path that wound behind the circle of pavilions. As we walked, Daniel put his arm companionably around my neck. “Thanks for bringing me, man,” he said. “I’m having fun. God knows I needed something like this.”

I squeezed his shoulder in return. “Glad you could make it. Say, let’s keep an eye open for Tom.”

With the crowd, it took us a good ten or fifteen minutes to make it over to where Lee and his crew waited. Lee already wore his armor, shining in the afternoon mountain sunlight, save for the helmet. He was glad to see me, of course, and he seemed delighted to see Daniel as well. Even Caitlin seemed happy, which would make old Daniel about the only one of Lee’s friends she approved of, myself included. We exchanged hugs and handshakes all around, and then it was time for the fight.

Lee’s opponent turned out to be a tall, rangy guy named Orlando—if I ever knew his mundane name, I can’t remember it. Anyway, a quick look at the elimination chart showed me that he was the toughest fighter on the field, which meant that if Lee could beat him, he’d be in pretty good shape. But Orlando was damn good. He’d been the king a time or two himself. In all the SCA, there was no one who enjoyed being king more than Orlando. Sure, Bear loved the fighting, the celebrity, and the, um, fringe benefits, but he hated all the court appearances the job required, and he had no patience with all the politicking. Orlando loved it all. I knew he’d give Lee a tough fight.

The marshal herald, who served both as a referee (not really necessary, as the combatants did most of the officiating themselves) and announcer, took to the ring and cried out in a voice that, despite the distance, carried over the field: “Hear ye, Hear ye, my most noble lords and ladies! I call for the next combatants to approach for the List!”

“That’s me,” Lee said with a smile. He meant it to be a cocky kind of grin, but he didn’t quite pull it off. He never could. Not that he lacked self-assurance; my brother is one of the most quietly confident men I’ve ever known. But his attempts at cocky smirks always managed to come across as humble and unassuming, and I never met a single person who didn’t love him for it. Stephen did the smirking in the family.

Lee and Orlando approached the ring where the herald waited. It made quite a spectacle. Exactly the sort of thing that I got hooked up with the SCA for in the first place. Orlando’s armor looked magnificent, shining with color and ornamentation, none of which made it anything less than practical. Lee’s armor lacked the detail and flash of Orlando’s gear, but it had an elegance to its simplicity and Lee wore it well. Even the foppish herald enhanced the picture. Add to this the colors of the pavilions, the banners, and the hundreds of Society members in a brilliant rainbow of costumes set against a background of the magnificent north Georgia mountains ablaze with autumn color before a sky that shone like a sapphire—and you begin to understand why this picture is burned so clearly in my memory, like one of those bright, glorious Wyeth illustrations, all light and color, from The Boy’s King Arthur. I found myself more than a
little jealous of my brother, but I like to hope that jealousy and admiration aren’t all that far apart.

The crowd cheered and the herald shouted something that drowned in the noise. Lee and Orlando saluted each other and began circling. Orlando feinted first, then swung a blow at the opening created when Lee moved his shield. Lee darted quickly though; he caught Orlando’s weapon with his own, then pushed him back with his shield. Orlando stumbled backwards a step or two and Lee pressed the advantage, but Orlando gave him no opening. At last they separated, and began circling again, slowly, eachcocked, tense and ready, watching for a hint of an opening.

SCA battles seldom last more than a couple of minutes. Someone will take a chance and either score a hit or leave an opening for his opponent. But Lee and Orlando had fought often, so each knew the other’s style. Very likely, neither would make a mistake, at least not for a while. I couldn’t guess which would have an advantage.

Lee swung an over-handed blow at Orlando’s helm, but he took the shot on his shield and took a swipe at Lee’s exposed side under the arm. Lee avoided the blow, barely, by jumping backwards out of the way. He landed hard on his back. Orlando took a quick shot, but he’d stumbled off balance so Lee was able to roll out of the way, using the momentum to regain his feet. Orlando took two quick shots, forcing Lee to retreat, but then Lee landed a heavy blow on Orlando’s shield that forced him back and cost him his advantage.

My brother seemed to be tiring first. After another round of blows, the two separated again and I saw that Lee held his shield way too low. Orlando noticed it too, and concentrated his attack on my brother’s left side. That was just what Lee wanted. He’d baited a trap, and Orlando went for it.

Lee caught Orlando’s shot on the top of his round shield and lifted it up, exposing his left side. Orlando compensated by moving his shield. Lee’s sword moved right, and when Orlando twisted to avoid the feint, Lee twisted his wrist to slide his weapon over Orlando’s and landed a solid blow on his helm. Solid indeed, we could hear the sound all the way across the field.

Orlando fell, hamming up his “death” in the best tradition of Hollywood swashbuckling villains. Lee had won, and the crowd roared.

My brother helped Orlando to his feet. The two exchanged a handshake and mutual slaps on the back, then made their way back to the sidelines. Lee found his way back to us, and we all offered our congratulations. The spectacle fascinated Daniel. As we all walked back to Lee’s pavilion, he asked question after question, which Lee and I were only too happy to answer.

Back at the Pavilion, we discovered that the Bear had disappeared. The wine had vanished, too. The rest of us found a good seat from which to view the fighting and talk about old times. Lee drank an entire wineskin filled with Gatorade as Caitlin and his squire helped him remove his armor. Daniel picked up Lee’s sword and swung it a few times to test the weight. “Good lord,” he said. “This thing’s heavier than a baseball bat. You actually get hit with this?”

Lee laughed. “We’ll have our bumps and bruises tomorrow—” Caitlin made a noise, something between a *bumph*, a snort, and a laugh. It got the point across. “But you really don’t feel much,” Lee continued.

“That’s what the armor’s for,” I added.

“Here,” Lee put his helmet back on. “Want to try?”

“Sure,” Daniel said. Lee’s squire, James, lent Daniel a helm, shield, and a wooden sword. The shield, a round wooden one covered with stretched leather and iron studs, was heavy, but Daniel held it correctly.

“You ever held a shield before?” I asked. I had one or two around the house, but I couldn’t remember if Dan had ever given one a try.

“No. Is this right?”

“Exactly,” I said. There was a trick to it, but Daniel picked it up right away. Meanwhile, Lee picked up his own shield and sword. “Turn your body sideways to your opponent,” I told
him. “Just bend your elbow to move the shield up or down.”

“Like this?”

“That’s it,” Lee said. Lee lowered his shield. “Now hit me,” he said.

“Now?”

“Go ahead.”

Dink. Daniel landed a soft swipe on Lee’s helm. Had there been a fly between the metal and the sword, it would have been safe. “Harder,” Lee said. “Nobody would have called that blow.” Daniel’s next swing was harder, but still decidedly halfhearted. “Harder,” Lee said. “I want you to see that this isn’t going to hurt me.” Daniel let loose, and this time the blow rang out solidly. “That’s better,” Lee allowed.

“Jeez,” Daniel said.

Before any of us even saw him move, Lee landed a fast, heavy blow on the side of Daniel’s own helm. The sound echoed across the field. “See?” Lee said. “The armor protects you.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Daniel said, grinning. “How long till the ringing goes away?”

“Now guard yourself, and I’ll show you some moves.” Daniel turned his body sideways, the way we’d taught him. Lee swung a blow at Daniel’s helm, but he telegraphed it pretty well. Daniel had plenty of time to raise the shield. Lee feinted another strike, then changed direction and took a hard swipe towards Daniel’s legs. It was a weak swing, since they weren’t wearing any armor aside from the helmets, but Daniel dropped his shield just in time to block it. “Good!” Lee said.

“Not bad at all,” James whispered. “He could learn.”

“He just might have some potential,” I acknowledged with a nod.

Lee took another blow, and Daniel caught it. Before Lee could step back, Daniel tried another shot but missed badly and stumbled. Lee took advantage of the opening and aimed a quick swipe at Daniel’s exposed side. He didn’t have a prayer of getting the shield around in time, so Daniel tried to parry Lee’s weapon with his own. Surprisingly enough, he did. Then, he deftly flicked his wrist, slipping his blade around and under Lee’s. Then he twisted his sword somehow, and suddenly Lee’s sword spun out of hand and tumbled to the ground. Daniel had disarmed him. In all my years in the SCA, I’d only seen a move like that work maybe once or twice.

We all stood there for a second, mouths open, and tried to figure out what we’d just seen. Lee laughed first. “Not bad, not bad at all!” he said. “Did my brother teach you that?”

Funny, I had the strangest feeling that I had, even though I felt certain Daniel had never tried my SCA equipment. It was a regular move of mine, one that never would have worked if Lee had really been on guard. He’d seen it too many times. I racked my brain, but no. Daniel and I had never sparred. I shook my head.

Daniel looked just as confused. “It … sorta just came to me,” he said. “It seemed right.”

Lee grinned. “You’ve got some good instincts,” he said. “Either that or the best beginner’s luck I’ve ever seen.”

Lee won his next fight handily. Truth to tell, it ended before I noticed it had begun. The one after was the big one, the final round. Lee’s opponent turned out to be a tall, well-built guy I didn’t recognize. He gave Lee a better fight, but Lee nailed him all the same. My brother had won. That night, he would be made king. The crowd cheered and cheered, and my voice rang out above them all.

When Lee made his way off the field, Caitlin jumped into his arms, knocking him flat on his back, and planted a long, wet kiss on him. When she finally let him up, Lee and I exchanged
an embrace that came only just short of cracking bones. Lee let go with one arm to accept Daniel’s handshake. “Congratulations,” my roomy said. “I’m glad I could be here to see that.”

The celebration on the field lasted the better part of an hour. Finally, the group broke up as folks made their way back to their cabins. Daniel and I were among the last to find our own way back. He headed in for a quick nap before dinner, but I stopped on the porch to listen to the waterfall for a bit. A few wispy white clouds were beginning to appear on the horizon. Even with twilight still a few hours away, the sunset promised to be spectacular.

I listened to the sounds of the water for a good while before I realized that I’d heard another sound as well. There came music that tumbled and turned and formed a counter-melody to the song of the falling river. Gentle and complex in its perfection, like sounds the wind plucked as it danced through a wood. I knew it had to be Tom, so I climbed down to look for him.

A path wound behind our cabin, leading into the forest and more or less towards the river. I grabbed a bottle of beer and followed it to a little shelf right at the top of the waterfall. I found Tom leaning against a rock, his fingers dancing across the strings of his mandolin. He smiled at me and I nodded. I didn’t want to interrupt, so I simply sat and listened. Eventually, though, his tune wound its way to an ending place, and I felt an ache when he stopped. “Hiya,” Tom said at last.

“Hey man. Pretty music.”
He nodded at the compliment. “You drinking that beer, or just carrying it around?”
I glanced down, and discovered that I hadn’t even taken the first sip. “I brought it to you, bud,” I said. Tom grinned his thanks. I handed the bottle over and sat down next to him.

“The road goes on forever.” Tom lifted his bottle in salute.

“And the party never ends,” I replied, completing our old toast. We watched the water together for a while, and I told him about Lee’s victory.

“You ever find that fool of a jester guy?” I asked him.

“No.” Tom frowned, but shrugged it off. “I ran into your mom, though. We had a nice chat.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“She said to tell you to be sure to keep that sword next to you. Especially on Samhain.” Samhain, that’s the old Celtic name for Halloween.

“You bet,” I said with a nod. Leave it to Mom. I should have known she wouldn’t have approved of me hauling the thing up here. It was worth a fortune, and the cabins didn’t have locks. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure nothing happens to it.”

Tom looked puzzled for a second, and I thought he was going to say something. But then he nodded, satisfied. We watched the majesty of Anna Ruby Falls as it thundered away below us for a while, talking about this and that, but mostly just listening to the river’s music. Finally, I decided it was about time to wake Daniel for the feast, so we made our way back to the cabins.

That night was a time for celebration. At the top of the waterfall, a huge, roaring bonfire blazed in a clearing in the trees. Everyone was there, drinking, dancing, singing, yelling, and laughing at old, old jokes. Tom sat with the other musicians, pulling melodies from his harp. It was a jam; most of them had never played together before. Hell, some of them sounded like they’d never even played before. But somehow, Tom’s chords wove the other threads of sound together into something magical. My mom was nowhere to be found and I wondered about that.
I shrugged, figuring she’d turn up in her own good time, as usual.

Some dancers circled the fire, stepping in elaborate, practiced patterns. The dance was a ritual, an elaborate thing old as time, and I found it lovely. Not lovely enough to participate, though. Courty dancing isn’t my kind of thing. But it was pleasant to toast old pals and watch their precise, intricate movements.

Tom saw me watching, winked at me, and changed the tune. Faster it became, and chaotic. Primal. The other players held on for dear life and followed as best they could. At first, the dancers stumbled, trying to maintain the movement’s rigid pattern. But then the music took them. As they gave themselves to it, their movements became fey, wild. Creased brows gave way to expressions of joy swelling to something close to ecstasy. Faster still Tom played, and faster still the dancers twirled and leapt. The fire roared higher, showering the clearing with constellations of glowing sparks, and more and more people joined the dance. There was something almost religious about the frenzy of the moment through the rain of red-gold sparks from the fire, but if a god was at the heart of it, he wore the antlers of a stag, not a crown of thorns.

And just as suddenly, Tom twisted the tune back to the courtly, precise dance piece he’d started with, order out of chaos. People looked around them, dazed. On the other side of the fire, I saw Tom grin at me. I smiled my appreciation and went to fill my glass so that I could drink his health.

Mom showed up a little after sundown and doted on Lee. Susan, the girl Daniel knew, followed her but I didn’t get a chance to speak to her. I looked to see if my roomy was around, but he’d disappeared. A lot of folks had headed back to the field to try some of Bear’s famous homemade mead, and Dan had probably joined them. He, too, had an old friend to catch up with. A pretty good while passed before I finally got to talk to Mom, and when I did I was a bit worried. “You okay? You look terrible,” I said tactfully.

“Thanks, Bucko,” Mom grinned, dismissing my concern. I tried to ask where she’d been all day, and it was much later before I realized that she’d avoided every question. Same old Mom.

Lee and I found Daniel and spent the next hour or so with James, the Bear, and the rest of the old gang. We drank and sang and told profound truths and good lies until the sky turned dark and the stars blazed. About then, I decided time had come to head back to the cabin and get cleaned up. The kingmaking ceremony would begin at eleven, and the time drew near.

Lee and Caitlin’s coronation began with a processional that led into a park assembly building that would serve as a chapel. A garland hung above the door. Inside, illumination from hundreds of candles turned the rough wood to gold. Tapestries decorated the wall opposite the door, and flowers covered the aisles. The cross at the front of the room seemed to shine with a light of its own, and I felt a sudden urge to pray.

Daniel and I served as a part of Lee’s honor guard. A man in what passed for priestly garb muttered a few prayers in Gaelic, then sprinkled Lee’s head with water. After that, we all moved out into the night. Under the light of the full moon, we followed Lee and Caitlin, all of us, two by two, across the field and onto the path that led to the top of the mountain.

At the first bend in the path, two more SCA members in Celtic priestly garb waited by a gate they had fashioned from stones, like smaller versions of the arches at Stonehenge. Both wore silver Celtic crosses on chains around their necks. I recognized one as James, Lee’s squire. A rising fog obscured the light of the full moon. The night grew darker.

“This is the Gate of Law,” James said. “By what right do you seek to pass here?”
“By right of sovereignty,” Lee answered.
“Will you then swear to uphold the ancient laws of this Land?”
“I do so swear.”
“Then pass, Lord. And remember that the law is greater than any man, greater even than the nations of men.”

We followed Lee through the gate and continued, in line, up the mountain. Each king creates his own coronation ceremony. Lee’s had the feeling of ritual about it, timeless and powerful—no doubt my mom’s influence. Lee isn’t as theatrical as most of the men the SCA attracts, and certainly not as much as I am. But the ritual impressed me.

Soon we came to another arch, this one made from bundles of muddy sticks tied with twine. At the gate we found two men and two women, dressed in rags. “This is the Gate of the People,” said a woman. “By what right do you seek to pass here?”
“By right of virtue,” Lee answered.
“Will you then swear to protect your people? To clothe and feed them? To guard their Lands? And by your justice uphold their rights?”
“I do so swear,” Lee said. And so we passed. The mist thickened. Our processional continued up the mountain, slowly and solemnly.

The next gate had been fashioned of swords; in the fog, I couldn’t see how they held together. Two men guarded it, both clad in black armor. The visors of the helm obscured their features, but judging by size, one of them could only be the Bear. The other man spoke. “This is the Gate of War,” he said. “By what right do you seek to pass here?”
“By right of combat,” Lee replied. Well, why not? He’d won the List, sure enough. Not bad. I liked this.

“Will you swear then to lead your people faithfully in war, to win honor and protect the weak? Will you be first in battle and last in retreat?”
“I do so swear,” Lee said.
“Pass then, and may your sword protect the Land.”

Flowering branches bound with vines of ivy formed the next gate. Four women waited there, all clad in plain black robes. One of them happened to be Susan, the woman Daniel knew. I recognized the leader as my stepmother. I thought so! I knew I’d recognized her touch in all this.

“This is the Gate of Women,” my mother said. “By what right wouldst thou pass here?”
“By right of tradition,” Lee replied.
“There are things older than such rights,” she answered. “How wilt thou honor the sacred mysteries of the Land?”

This time, Caitlin replied. “As the embodiment of Sovereignty, I will guide my husband in the sacred mysteries. By his vigor, the Land will thrive.” The crowd laughed and cheered.

“And wilt thou swear to honor her guidance?”
“I do so swear,” Lee said.
“Pass then. Thy queen is Sovereignty, thy bride the Land.”

We continued up the mountain. We came near the top, the place where Lee would be crowned, so I guessed we had passed the final gate. Daniel and I wouldn’t miss much if we took a short cut. The path wound around, but if we cut through the woods and sprinted straight up the mountain, we’d make it faster. I wanted to be closer to the actual coronation; otherwise, with the crowd and the fog, we’d never be able to see what happened. “C’mon,” I whispered. Daniel followed, and we slipped into the trees.

The mist grew thicker as we climbed. “Man, how ’bout this fog?” said Daniel. “Where are we?”

“Shit, man. I can’t see a blessed thing.” The fog and the dense wood confused me. We should have made it to the clearing by now. No way we could be lost—we’d headed straight up. I
stopped to get my bearings, and Daniel nearly ran into me.

“This is some short cut,” he muttered. “Why don’t I ever learn about trusting your sense of direction?” Just then, we saw a flicker of movement. “What was that?”

It’s hard to describe everything that happened next. In memory, things change, like time in a dream. “C’mon,” I said, whispering for some reason I couldn’t have explained. “Let’s go see.” We climbed down a bit, and then we saw the motion again. This time we were closer, and we could make out a shape quite clearly, despite the fog. It was a deer, great and graceful, with antlers tall and mighty that shone like silver. In the moonlit fog, the deer looked as white as winter snow. A flash of white, then it vanished like an apparition in the night.

Without a word, Daniel and I followed. We heard no sound, so the deer couldn’t have gone far. Maybe it had hurt itself. Deeper into the wood we followed. The trees and undergrowth were thick, and there was no path. But we went on. I don’t think either of us thought about doing anything else. It never even occurred to us that there might be another course of action available other than following that ghostly white deer.

Ahead, we caught another flash of white, so we pressed on, quicker now, into the thicket. Further and deeper we followed, but we saw no more sign, no glimpse of fleeting white.

Suddenly, a sound like thunder broke the misty silence. I turned and screamed. A rider, his horse as black as the gloom of midnight, charged down hard on us. The horse was as tall a beast as I’ve ever seen in my life, and the rider loomed tall as well. He wore a black cloak and a hood that shadowed his face.

All this I grasped in less than a second, for he rode down on us like a madman. Somehow, we managed to leap out of the way to avoid being crushed by horse’s hooves, but barely. As I fell to the hard, stony earth, I saw sparks flaring from where the horse’s crashing hooves met stone.

“What the _hell_—” I heard Daniel yell, but I watched the rider. He turned and pulled a long, jet-black sword from his belt. And then he rode at us again. The blade flashed above his head like a shadow, and then it came down, black thunder, straight towards Daniel’s head. I jumped and caught Daniel around the waist. We both hit the ground hard. The black sword rushed past us, missing us by the breadth of an atom.

I moved, more from instinct than thought. I rolled, landing on my feet and drawing my own blade in one graceful motion, one I’d be proud of if I could honestly say I’d accomplished it with practiced skill or athletic ability instead of some mix of instinct, luck, and wild panic. The sound of thunder boomed all around us.

The rider came on me again before I saw him turn. Thank God, because if I’d been able to think, I never could have moved. In one motion, I parried the rider’s blow. It should have knocked me over, but I managed to use the momentum to spin around and swing a blow of my own. I felt contact, but I’m fairly certain I only hit that billowing cloak.

“Run!” I cried.

Branches slapped and tore at us, but they didn’t slow us. We didn’t look back, but I felt the rider bearing down on us again. Suddenly, the river appeared before us. At the top of the mountain, we were near its source. It was little more than a wide stream at this point, but it rushed over the rocks in its bed towards the mighty waterfall below. We splashed our way across, and the depth of the water astonished me. The depth, and the bone-rattling cold. The icy water stabbed at me like a thousand blades.

And then … and then, I’m not sure what happened. There came a sound, a sound like the Earth itself, or the forest, something old and mighty. Did it speak, or did I imagine words? I can’t say. But I heard a command, and I knew the danger had gone. Silence fell like the mist on the wood. Daniel and I climbed trembling to our feet, but we saw nothing. The rider was gone.

“What the _fuck_—” Daniel began.
“Shhh,” I said. Something came. To this day, I can’t say what happened next. Daniel remembers it one way, I another. We don’t talk about it much. We heard another sound, different this time, and we turned.

Something emerged before us, but in the mists, we couldn’t see it clearly. Light surrounded the something. Perhaps the full moon had broken through the fog behind it, or perhaps this something had a radiance of its own. I remember falling to my knees, because, somehow, I knew that I was in the presence of a great mystery. I felt something on my brow, a touch that stirred something deep within me. The voice spoke again, or seemed to. It came from above, but from within as well, and rumbled through the forest and the night. With the first touch, I heard, That is for courage, and my fear melted away. I was still overwhelmed, more than overwhelmed, with what? Awe and wonder, certainly, but more than both.

There followed a second touch, and the voice said, That is for memory. Awake! And my entire being, body and soul and more, trembled. There came a final touch, and we fell to the ground. Let that be the last blow you receive unanswered.

As we felt the presence move away, I opened my eyes at last. A shape, taller than a man, taller even than the trees themselves, moved away from us. He was clad (or seemed to be) in skins and leaves and shadows, the stuff of the woods. On his head grew the antlers of a stag. Strangely, my fear was gone, or rather replaced with a feeling that danger is in some strange way a lovely thing that has to do with sky and mist and ancient wood.

Time passed. Maybe seconds, maybe more. Again, I remember it one way, Daniel another. We haven’t talked about it enough to really compare notes, and I doubt we ever will. Besides, I doubt we’d resolve anything.

We stood together, Daniel and me, and regarded one another. We found a path before us, I had no idea how we’d missed it before. Just ahead, I saw something gray, a darker patch of fog, where the antlered giant had trod. A man? I think so. Bent, as though with age or great weariness. There was something familiar about him, almost, in the way strange things can seem familiar in a dream. I felt he had been watching us, but with sadness, not fear. Daniel says he spoke to us, but I certainly don’t remember that. And then the gray man vanished into the mists and the night, as though he had never been there at all.

Without a word, Daniel and I scrambled to the path, moving with dream steps, like sleepwalkers. I think we talked on the way back. I’m sure we must have. Was it really a deer we’d seen? Or maybe a big dog? The gray man, did you see him? The rider … had some SCA nut finally gone round the bend? But I don’t remember exactly what we said to one another, and Daniel swears we walked in silence. Maybe so.

After a time, minutes or hours, the winding path led us back to the cabins. In the distance, I heard the sounds of celebration, of fey, lilting music. But it never even occurred to me to seek out the company of others. A part of me felt that I should find my mom, but I couldn’t bring myself to actually do it. I couldn’t think of anything but bed and sleep. We fell to our cots like dead men, men drunk on the taste of some unearthly wine.
The Widening Gyre

Please let me know if you’d liked to be notified when the complete *The Widening Gyre* is published.

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