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## MERLYN'S MISTAKE



by

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## ONE



Sofia held his door open for him like any professional chauffeur, but in a most unprofessional manner melted into Merlyn's warm kiss. She let him hold her in the late-night dark. His fingers combed into her dense curls adoringly and she smiled into his eyes, but it was a concerned smile. She saw him decide not to engage in a discussion about it.

She moved a bit of his grey hair from his face. It had grown long since the start of the pandemic, making his neatly trimmed beard an endearingly obvious effort of personal grooming. The beard had not changed in the years she'd known him, not in shade or styling.

He drew in a breath.

She said, "Were you noticing how much less the city smells of urine than it used to?"

Merlyn chuckled and shook his head. He said, "I was taking in the wonderful smell of you and imagining how beautiful you will be as you age and grey and anchoring a memory of how beautiful you are right now."

"Well, now I'm sorry I interrupted it."

"I sucked in the moment and pushed it into my cellular memory. Ever since you pulled me out of the prison--"

"It was a mental health facility."

"I know a prison when I'm in one."

Sofia winced.

Merlyn said, "Sorry. That felt like a jab because you feel guilty. You did nothing wrong. You have never done anything wrong. And if you have, I absolve you." He tilted his head to the side, "You have the kind of hair that makes men want to push their fingers through it but always makes women want to straighten it."

She said, "Merlyn, get in the car or let's go back to bed."

Merlyn chuckled then. He kissed her on the forehead and then on the neck. He said, "It's good to be offered options from time to time. It reminds one of his obligations. Get in the car."

He slipped past her into the back seat of his silent all-electric Bentley. His black, intricately textured coat, the one he wore all the time, flowed into the seat with him as graceful as silk. For the nine thousandth time she wondered how a grown man in the modern

world could be so effortlessly elegant without becoming effeminate. He smelled faintly of leather this evening.

He always smelled faintly of something and it was always something lovely.

She snapped herself into the driver's seat and in her practiced, professional voice, she said, "Where're we going?"

He said, "Central Park."

Sofia did not accelerate away from the curb. She said, "At two in the morning." She stretched her neck for perspective so she could watch him in the rear-view mirror.

His eyebrows twitched with excitement and enthusiasm.

That made her uncomfortable.

He said, "Yep. Gotta stalk darkly into the pre-dawn city, meet a lady and get this Quest underway. Drive! Drive! Drive, my darling Sofia. Portents and omens abound! Tonight's the night! It begins."

Grudgingly, she pressed the pedal and turned the wheel. The behemoth slid away from the curb and began the northward trek on the island of Manhattan. She said, "Begins. . . again." She tried to adjust her posture inconspicuously as she shifted her mirrored focus between the rear view and the man she sought to monitor for tics and twitches.

He said, "I'm almost certain I've got it right this time, Sof. It's about starting out with honesty. It's about building the Quest the same way I *thought* I built the sword. Right? It's about the intention, yes, but also the commitment to the truth. That's where I got it wrong the last time."

She sighed in the driver's seat. She said, "Merlyn. . . the last times." She wanted him to hear the concern in her ellipses, the worry. It was a play to open the conversation.

A set of headlights came on behind her on the nearly empty nighttime street. Their appearance caught her attention. The headlights hadn't turned onto the avenue. They had turned on.

She looked ahead, taking in the couple of vehicles well ahead of her passing in flashes under the streetlamps, a dry-cleaning van a block ahead and a sports coup a half a block beyond that, cruising along in the far-right lane.

Perhaps in response to a flash of concern as she glanced away, Merlyn's voice lifted with a near panic. "No. No. Don't start to cry. Listen. Please. Sofia." He began climbing over to the front passenger's seat through the console gap, a child frantic to comfort a grieving parent, restraint impossible.

She rocked toward her door to let him origami his six-feet of middle-aged, leathery musculature past her even as she admonished him. "Merlyn. Sit down. I can pull over if you want to —"

"It's fine. Keep driving."

"You're a fifty-eight-year-old man for Christ's sake."

"I'm eighteen hundred years old. At least."

"Okay." She focused on the road. Fears and guilt backed up on one another in her throat. She wanted to say a hundred different things and none of them was the thing that would make him happy right now. She wanted to say, "*You're having another episode.*" She wanted to say, "*I can't watch you go through this again.*" She wanted to say, "*I love you, but*

*I cannot enable you in your madness.*” What she said was, “The enthusiastic eyebrows are back.”

Settled into the passenger's seat, adjusting into a grown-up, forward-facing position, Merlyn studied her. She remained focused on the road, but she could feel him looking at her profile. She could feel the moment that he understood the depth of her concern. He said, “You won't sent me back to that place.”

He said it as though he knew it to be fact. She knew it to be fact, but she knew that he could not. He could not possibly. She had done it before; surely a part of him believed that she could do it again. She felt her own eyebrows doing the small thing they did when she feared she might cry but would prefer not to.

He said, “Your eyebrows are not at all enthusiastic.”

She said, “No. They're not.”

Merlyn said, “It's an adventure! Remember? You said you could spend your life on crazy adventures.”

Sofia glanced in the rear view. “I was twenty-five and you'd just bought me my first plane.”

“My organization bought a plane and you became chauffeur and pilot. The details matter.”

“Yes,” Sofia said. “*The magics titular.*”

For just a moment, she felt his excitement at her comprehension before he noticed how dryly she spoke. He sighed and said, “You *know* you've seen incredible things.”

That was true. Sofia could not deny it. Still, she had to be the voice of reason. She said, “Merlyn, I have loved every adventure... until they’ve ended. Then, when it all falls apart, I’ve watched you unravel.”

Merlyn bubbled again, returned to the point of the conversation, too excited to remain overly distracted by her concern. He paid the bills. He paid her salary. He called the shots. He didn’t have to slow his roll just ‘cause she had serious misgivings about his decision-making capacity. “It won’t fall apart this time, Sofia. That’s what I’m saying! Last time I had lies in operation. I drew people into the Field under false pretenses—”

“The professors, you mean,” she said.

“Yes. The professors.” She could hear his confusion and it was adorable because he genuinely could not work out who else she might be talking about.

She said, “I’m letting you know that you have always been completely honest with me. I’ve signed on for everything we’ve done. I’ve been in this with you. A hundred percent by choice.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you to say. Please say it on a day when I am less sure of myself. Or when someone tries to smear me with news of our affair. Yes. The professors. I lied to them because I *knew* they couldn’t fully back me knowing my ultimate intent. Right? This time – oh, Sofia, it’s like the moment in a hot desert just as the lightning cracks before the rain falls. I can feel it. I can *smell* it. The moment I realized it I came alive again—”

“I can see that.”

He went on as though she had not spoken. “This time things stay together. The center will hold! Nobody has to slouch anywhere to be born! This time, I will weave the Quest itself with the pure, focused intention of a spell or—or—a fabulous story. I will spin the yarn itself with ever increasing conscientiousness. Conducted beneath the protection of a fabric threaded with truth, my lovely mortal goddess of transport, this time the Quest will not fail. The Questing party will not come apart, and I may remain, throughout, fully raveled!”

He had slipped into a cadence he rarely used in casual conversation. She thought of it as his circus barker persona, but she knew that wasn't right. He could adopt a mannered form of speech in moments of grandiosity so naturally it seemed he simply forgot to pretend to be less than a manic master showman and poet.

She glanced toward her side mirror, mostly to mask her amusement. She wanted to be the grown up in the room, not the employee. Not the younger girlfriend. She said, “Last time it all fell apart *because* the truth came out. Put on your seat belt.”

Merlyn clapped his shoulderbelt clasp and folded his legs into a Celtic knot on the passenger's seat. “No!” He announced, seeming certain that if he just cleared up this small misconception she would understand, fully commit to joining him in his fantastic fancies once again. He took the breath that implied she should listen because soon everything would make perfect sense. He said, “Last time it all fell apart *when* the truth came out. It fell apart *because* I had concealed the truth from the start. I told the wrong story right at the beginning. That's the key, Sofia. This is how I screwed up the world to begin with. I told the wrong story.”



She sped up. The car that had turned on its lights maintained its precise comfortable distance behind her. She slowed, signaled left and changed lanes. It stayed in its lane but slowed to match her pace rather than passing. She signaled a left-hand turn and the headlights moved over to stay with her. She turned off the signal.

Sofia watched the car behind her and the road ahead and felt Merlyn watching her face. His excitement troubled her. Guilt fought with love. She tried to read his thoughts in the silence, tried to guess what he felt without projecting her own feelings onto him. He had to resent her. She had betrayed him. As much as she loved him, she could not fully commit to trusting him, to believing him.

He said, "Our mistakes only cause us pain after we realize errors and before we set them right."

Those words struck to the heart of it. She had sent him away. She had put him in a mental institution – she had done that. She had locked him up against his will and left him there. She didn't get points for figuring out *later* that she was wrong and getting him out. She said, "I can't undo it, though."

He said, "You can never undo a thing. You can only set it right. I'm right here."

"But you're doing this again. You went into a spiral, Merlyn. You threw away half a million dollars. Maybe more."

"Probably way, way more."

"Right?"

"So, drop me at 112th and Central Park West. Then be ready to pick me up at the Manhattan Diner –"

"96th and . . . something?"

"Yeah. I expect I'll have a woman with me."

"Okay."

"I'll have told her a story, a truthful story, and I'll have built a pretty solid spell into it—  
"

"Merlyn, there's no magic. Please."

"No *ambient* magic. But I can generate—It doesn't matter. I will have told her a wholly  
truthful story and she will be primed to play whatever part she has in all this."

"You don't know what part she plays?"

"I only know what she smells like."

"Seriously?"

"And what her door looks like."

"I love you so much, Merlyn." Sofia said it as an apology. She said it as a plea.

He said, "I wish you could love me with less anguish."

"Me too." She stared at the road, jaw clenched to hold back lectures.

"Do you want to talk about the Quest, or do you want to discuss my mental health?"

She said, "It's cyclical, Merlyn. You have to know this. You get excited, you start  
talking about magic and how you're gonna save the world and then when the grandiose  
fantasies dissolve around you, you spiral into depression and self-loathing."

"Do you think I went into a depression because the Quest fell apart?"

"No! I think you went into a depression because you're bipolar!"

“That may well be, my darling love. But that doesn't mean I'm delusional! I didn't spiral because the Quest fell apart. I spiraled because it was my fault. It's basic Druidry. Right?”

“I'm not basically a Druid, so...” She loaded the ellipses with nothing more than the invitation to continue.

He chuckled. “I wrote the beginning of all the wrong stories. The stories I wrote badly wound up getting told a lot. To a lot of people. You can't fix a flawed story by adding lies to it. That's not how it works.” His enthusiasm turned him in his seat, fearless, stupid, unbuckled. With his legs still folded he put his back to the glove compartment to see her better.

She did not scold him. She felt enough like an appointed safety monitor already. She said in tones as measured as she could manage, “I worry that I support your absurd delusions because you get so hot when you're passionate about doing something completely insane.”

“I know. Right? That's part of my Questing Field.”

“Pretty sure it's pheromones and testosterone or some shit, baby.”

“How is that not magic right there? You can't see it, you can't consciously even smell it, but there it is making you think things you shouldn't be thinking while you're driving. About pushing your nose into my neck to take me in.”

Inaudible beyond the contained space of the expensive car's cabin, she saw the puff of dust and the abrupt twitch of momentum as one of the van's tires blew out. She said, “Not now. Gotta drive.”

Merlyn said, "Having me trace your spine with my fingertips while I whisper in your ear how wonderful it will be to watch your grace and beauty change and grow with age before my eyes."

"Crap. Hang on tight."

His back to the road, Merlyn could not see what Sofia suddenly had to avoid. He put the flats of his feet against the backrest so he could hold himself in position. It would have to do. But if she hit something, an airbag was going to do awful things to his posture.

She pulled right, decelerating but a freed wheel bounced toward her, the spare tire, loosed from the back of the van by the jolt. As it came toward her she accelerated under it so that it bounced thuddingly across the roof. A glance in the mirror confirmed that the car behind her was safely slowed and able to dodge the stray radial.

The van up ahead, meantime, had turned crosswise to the road. The exposed axle of the catastrophically collapsed wheel sparked against the asphalt. She let off the accelerator and cranked the wheel left while she pulled up hard on the old-fashioned emergency break, locking them into a skid to burn off speed.

Adrenaline poured through Sofia. She knew that intellectually. Still, she perceived it viscerally, neurologically. She took in information so fast that the world seemed to slow around her. She gaged the speed of the Bentley's deceleration in relation to the unpredictable van. Engine still running, rear wheels continuing to turn, the van screamed, crippled corner gouging tarmac.

Making a best guess as to the timing, she released the mechanical brake and pushed the pedal to the floor as she steered into the skid, straightening the absurdly large car to aim into the gap between the van and the curb. The van slid away toward the center lanes.

She hit sixty as she blew through a green light and wondered if she'd been running reds. She didn't think she had. To her right, the van scraped against parked cars on the far side, slowing and falling behind. She couldn't hear the sound beyond the acoustically isolating cabin of the custom-fitted luxury apartment she was paid to drive.

The small debris field slid away behind them as they headed North at a steady forty-five. Merlyn turned to face front once more. He fastened his seatbelt.

Merlyn said, "You are impossibly beautiful."

"Not right now. Right now, I'm driving. Sorry."

"It's okay."

"You shouldn't be complimenting my looks. You should be complimenting my reflexes, my eye-hand coordination, my remarkable skills."

"You are definitely an excellent driver. And when you are fully focused, taking in the world at full speed, responding by instinct and reflex to utilize your practiced, extraordinary evasive driving skills, you are also impossibly beautiful"

She spread her fingers and steered for a moment with her palms. She pounded on the steering wheel a few times.

He spoke soothingly. He said, "You okay?"

"I thought I was gonna get us both killed."

"Not possible right now."

“Merlyn, no. We’re not protected by your mystical Questing Field. That was skill, and adrenalin and blind luck.”

“Okay.”

Another light turned from red to green as they approached. She slowed to thirty miles an hour. Another light turned from red to green as they approached. She pushed to almost sixty. The next light turned from red to green at their approach.

Merlyn did not comment on her experimentation. She could hear him not commenting on her experimentation with his stupid, imaginary Questing Field of protection and good fortune. He didn’t comment on that while all the lights turned over for her at her approach. He said, “Take a moment to find the sound of your breath.”

Sofia started to reply, then stopped herself. She listened to her breath. Two full breaths. Then she sighed. “There’s been a car following us, I think since right after we headed uptown.”

“I know,” Merlyn said. “I was impressed with their handling of your debris field.”

“It wasn’t *my* debris field, you delusional dick.” Sofia realized that a couple of breaths had not been enough to filter the left-over adrenalin.

She had believed, for two and a half-elongated seconds that she was about to see the end of all the grand adventures. She saw a very clear possibility that she might smash her boss up sideways against a cargo van. It would be her fault because, as much as she loved the fast, almost anti-gravitational acceleration and the weird, handling in turns, she had never thought to take the one-of-a-kind, retrofitted proof-of-concept, ultra-expensive luxury car that her boss bought for her out to a parking lot to do a few donuts and find out how it would respond

under torque and drift conditions. She had two and a half seconds of wondering whether looking back instead of forward had cost her the moment she would need to keep them intact.

Two and a half seconds dragged past as she watched the man she loved stare at her adoringly while, behind him, a cheerfully stylized man in a blue uniform on the side of the van, grew toward the back of his head in the silence beyond the glass. The figure came grinning at alarming speed carrying a suit on a hangar and near-certain crushing death. Only when she made the decision to cut the brake and saw the speedometer jump did she know for sure she would clear the van *if* she'd correctly guessed *its* trajectory.

Merlyn said, "Are you alright?"

She said, "Why?" Then she said, "Sorry." Then she said, "Shit. Was I cursing at you a lot?"

"You rejected responsibility for a debris field I watched develop in our wake and then – I believed – you returned to your breath."

"I might not be entirely okay. I might need a minute."

Merlyn said, "Okay. We've made good time. We have a minute."

A light turned red. She stopped at it without noticing, in the way one does when driving on a fairly empty road at night.

Two blocks back, the tail slowed down, creeping along the park side of Central Park West like he was looking for parking.

She said, "We both know I don't have any secret past that would lead to someone tailing me with this kind of old-style surveillance. You have any idea who it is?"

"Nobody as incompetent as this person who is still alive." Then he said, "That sounded sort of cool and scary, but I just meant that the couple of people I could sort of imagine being this clumsy are – well, a long time ago and --"

Sofia said, "Just let that moment go. So Central Park West at, like 2:20am. You don't want me with you?"

"I can take care of myself."

"And then pick you up at The Manhattan Diner a while later probably with a woman whom you'll have identified by smell."

He paused and she could see him making contact through the haze of his ideations, almost understanding the absurdity of his assertions. He seemed to want to say something big to her through their eye contact and to find himself shocked to be unable to do so. He said, "Yeah."

"You gonna hand her a pile of money?" She asked.

"It's good to be known by those you love."

She looked into his eyes and strove to give him the look of a winsome wife who will wait by the sea 'til the ships come home.

Merlyn said, "You are sucking your lips into your face like a child doing an impression of a toothless grandparent."

Sofia said, "I was not aware that I was doing that."

He said, reassuringly, "I know you worry. But I swear to you, you cannot see the things I know how to see."



She wondered how long this red light was going to last. She did not want to have this conversation. She sighed and said, "I don't even know what that means."

He furrowed in the way he did when he had decided to commit to a thing but needed an extra moment to frame his thoughts. He drew her in by feigning difficulty deciding whether he would speak. She knew the mannerism well. He did it well. He said, "We see things from very different angles, you and I, in both space and in time. Some of what I say will sound infuriatingly mad from your perspective and given your age —"

"Lines like that didn't piss me off as much when I was in my twenties."

Merlyn winced. He nodded as if the sting ran deeper than he wanted to reveal. He said, "My mistake, Lady. My point though, was that given *my* age I see things through a longer-barreled telescope than you can. Also, it is set up in a different room and turned to view a different part of the sky. In a slightly different spectrum from yours." Knowing he had failed to make his point, he said, "Do you remember the night I boasted to you of my facility with simile and metaphor?"

Sofia chuckled. She said, "I do."

He said, "I think the telescope simile is not my best work and I would like it stricken from the record."

The light turned green.

She said, "By unanimous consent? So ordered."

"Here's what it comes down to. This thing I'm trying to do – this thing I keep trying to do is the one thing I feel I am responsible for. In the world. The one thing I got wrong that

would be unforgivable in my own heart were I not to at least *try* to make it right. If you read your employee handbook—”

“It wasn’t an employee handbook. It was a typed journal of complex musings about ethics. I still don’t know what your organization actually does.”

“You read it!”

“Of course, I read it! You hired me.”

“Did you like it?”

“It was seventeen years ago, Merlyn. I’d have to look at it again. It was weird. As an employee handbook. Now that I know you, it might make more sense. What’s in it that you want me to remember?”

*“If anyone sees a way that he or she might try to save the world or help to save the world and does not pursue it, he or she is sort of an ass.”*

“Yeah. That’s not something that goes in an employee handbook.”

“It might be the most important thing in the employee handbook.”

“Then you should update it to ‘he, she or they.’”

“Good call.”

“You’re very open minded for an old guy, you know that?”

“Okay. Up there on the right,” he said.

“You want me to keep an eye on you?”

“I can take care of myself.”

Sofia nodded, and she tried to make it the nod of a chauffeur, not the nod of a worried girlfriend. “Nobody’s waiting for you.”

"I told you. I have to stalk darkly first."

She pulled up so that his door could open freely, got out and ran around to open his door for him, professional like. Less professionally, she took him by the collar and half pulled him out of the car so that he faced her, close enough that she could smell him and feel the stability of his balanced weight against her. His reassuring strength pressed right up against all her doubts.

He kissed her and she kissed him back. They did that for what seemed much too short a time. Merlyn said, "Give me a three count before you drive away and I can vanish. He won't find me. Make your next left and find parking. Look for a wide enough spot that —"

"Are you about to mansplain losing a tail to the trained, professional driver who just navigated through a sparking hellscape of disintegrating metal unscathed?"

"I am not. Although I do recognize now that I was about to mansplain parallel parking. Which really doesn't make it better."

She said, "Oh, but it does. So much better. Please be careful. I love you more than you could possibly know by my acts or behavior." She ran her fingertips along the well-kept shave line of his beard, wondering again how he could possibly still look exactly as old as the day she'd met him.

She climbed back into the drivers' seat of her company car.

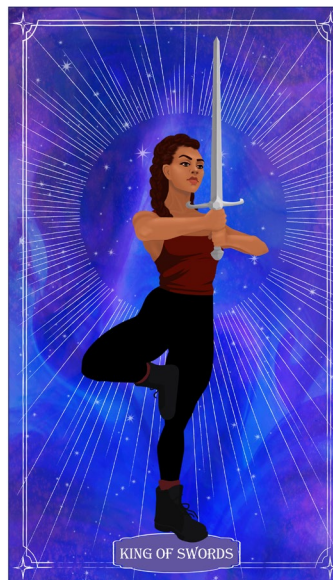
She pulled away from the curb, contained in the bubble of contemplative silence provided by modern sound-proofing and noise-filtering technology. Merlyn would say *magics acoustic*. He would say it as though it was not a correction, but a suggestion, a possible reframing.

She made a left and found a spot. She backed the giant car into the space in one, fluid S-curve drawn in reverse. She killed the silent engine and the lights.

She imagined a girl in a high window looking down and thinking, *Someday I want to drive a car like that.* And the girl's dumb brother would say, *That's a Bentley, I think! It's beautiful!* Then she would say, *I wasn't talking about the car. I was talking about how I want to drive.*

She realized she had begun to doze off, so she set an alarm to awaken her in time for the pick-up. She returned to the story she had been writing in her head about the charming girl. The throughline sublimated to dream, though, and she slept. Whatever truths were to be found in the tale of the little girl who wanted to learn to drive would not be discovered tonight.

TWO



Vivica sat atop the wall that separates Central Park from the sidewalk of Central Park West. Frankie leaned against the wall, his bulky form a reassuring presence. The silence lasted too long. She could feel him trying to think of something to say to fill the gap. She wanted the pause to last. She did not want to say the thing she had been thinking. She did not want to disappoint him. To say it aloud would make it real, would make it a decision.

She had been thinking of dropping out of Law School. She'd made it through pre-law and he'd supported her in a way she could never repay. He had stayed up nights with her helping her study. He had helped her cover rent when she'd taken time off from work at the library instead of letting go of the academics. He had come with her when she decided to confront Professor Karpman about his inappropriate behavior. Illegal. His illegal, abusive behavior.

She started to speak, took in the breath that would give her words tone. Before she uttered a sound, though, Frankie said, "Ooooh. Look at *that*."

Vivica glanced toward him then followed his gaze. A big grey car came toward them, silent but for a faint hiss of rubber on pavement. The lack of sound made it eerie, ghostlike as it moved up Central Park West toward them. Half a block away, now, it still seemed to glide without a hint of mechanical rumble or engine roar. "Rolls?" she asked.

"Bentley. But... Electric? Has to be a custom build. They don't—"

He stopped as the car pulled up to the curb just past their position. From her vantage point, Vivica watched a tall man unfold himself from the passengers' seat. He was probably no taller than Frankie's six feet, but without the athletic physique, the man didn't seem big, just tall. Silver grey hair poured long down the man's back and he wore an extraordinarily elegant coat of a black so dark it would have seemed a hole in space were it not for the complex jacquard pattern that pulled focus like a cop at a pool hall.

Frankie whispered, "Look at that coat!"

They knew from experience just how invisible they could become in their dark sweatshirts at night. Some nights, when they hung out here at the edge of the park, people

would walk by engaged in conversation completely unaware of their presence. Not this late, generally. But sometimes.

Vivica nodded her agreement.

He hissed, "I'm gonna ask him where I can get one."

The car door slammed, and the vehicle glided on up the avenue.

Vivica rolled her eyes. She shook her head and put her lips very close to his ear. "You'll scare the crap out of him. Just let him go."

A blue Honda sped past, headed uptown, making reassuringly old-fashioned internal combustion noises.

Frankie shook his head rejecting her advice and she knew he was already imagining himself strutting around in that gorgeous coat that he could not possibly afford. He pulled up his covid mask as he started to move toward the man with the long grey hair.

Vivica slipped down from the wall, cushioning her landing to remain quiet and followed her friend, putting her own mask in place as well.

Frankie put a fist to his mouth in the gesture she recognized as the one he used when he was about to do the gentle, 'ahem,' that he used in lieu of 'excuse me,' when he wanted to interrupt or get someone's attention.

The man said, calmly, almost warmly, "'Either state your business or slither back into the shadowed dark of the park from whence you emerged.'"

Vivica said, "You heard us?"

“The sound of people sneaking has long been one to which I am attuned. Like the change in a cat’s purr when it has had quite enough affection and asks you to stop before sharp-clawed instruction, some things are well worth attuning oneself to.”

Vivica, hoping to reassure the man, said, “My friend was just admiring that coat.”

The man chuckled. “Thank you. It was custom made by a brilliant fabricator who took great pride in his work.”

They moved toward him slowly. Without turning to face them, he reached into one of his coat’s pockets. Frankie immediately slipped his buck knife from the sheath he kept tucked into his hip pocket. Vivica glared at him and twitched her head telling him to put it away.

The tall man said, “Put the knife away.”

“I wasn’t sure what you were reaching for.”

“It was my mask.”

“I see that.”

He slipped the knife back into its sheath.

Then they all stood in silence, Vivica, Frankie and the man in the beautiful coat. “If you’re going to try to mug me or something, you’ll want to get started soon. I was getting ready to stalk darkly into the predawn city right before you showed up.”

“We weren’t going to mug you.”

“Okay,” the man said amiably.

Frankie said, “Screw it. Let’s just go.”



It was so odd, his comfortable willingness to carry on this conversation without turning to look at them. Most people, certainly most old white guys would be very nervous, possibly terrified to be approached by a young black couple in hoodies in the middle of the New York Night. This guy was impossibly casual. He hadn't even turned to look at them, still.

He said, "You and your friend struggle with an ancient dilemma. You are trapped between fear and curiosity."

She said, "How did you know Frankie had a knife?"

While he showed no change in posture, she could hear a bit of a self-satisfied smile on his lips, a delight in the conversation or the company or the night air. "Listen. I'm going to stalk darkly now. If you want to continue this conversation, you'll have to keep up." He strode across the empty avenue toward a narrow, numbered street of lamplit, soot-stained brownstones.

Frankie said, "I just wanted to get a better look at your coat!" but Vivica had shifted into a near-trot, a child keeping pace with a distracted, long-legged parent.

She could hear Frankie's steps as he caught up to her and then he was by her side, making her safe, keeping pace with her as she tailed the man westward.

As though there had been no outburst from Frankie, the man answered the questions. "Just before I put on my mask, I thought I smelled steel. I took a gamble."

Frankie said, "You can't smell steel."

The man turned now to face them, at least. He kept going on his way though, now walking backward along the sidewalk with the energy of an adolescent, heading home from school with his pals, recounting a tale of athletic prowess or summarizing a superhero film.

He said, "*You* can't smell steel. I have a history with steel." He spun away from them then and his stride became slightly grander, more performative. He unbuttoned his long coat so that it might flare a bit like a cape.

Vivica said, "Where are we going?" and she realized that her head was full of questions. She wanted information desperately. The car, the coat, his demeanor, everything about this man seemed strange and troubling and she could not stop finding things she wanted to ask.

The man stopped. "Oh, that is always so much more complicated a question than anybody thinks." He looked up at one of the nearly identical multi-story apartment houses, the dirty brick the color of old blood where it fell under the light of the halogen streetlamps. He put his hands up for a moment, framing the door between his squared fingers as though he was planning a photograph. He tilted his head to the side.

He turned abruptly to face them again and he made eye contact with her before his focus shifted over her shoulder to Frankie, hanging back, protective. Nothing in his posture suggested that he feared them, or worried that they might attack him. His tone, when he spoke, seemed casual, inviting. "I am going to ring that doorbell, meet a person I've never met in front of this doorway and convince her to help me with a project that means a great deal to me. The fact that you two walked with me has more significance than you can possibly realize. This tells me I tread a righteous path again. I've seen it before, but that was a long-ass time ago. I felt it tonight, but I didn't believe. Not fully. When I set out on this journey for the third time, I had a plan, an idea, a sense of what had to be done. I had forgotten the effortlessness of the ambient charms used for good. So, I'm pretty sure I recognize this moment. You two have a choice. You can go home, one or both of you, and

serve only as passing acquaintances who reassure me of the validity of my choices, or you may wait here with me and join what will likely be a far more interesting adventure than a series of brief encounters with frightened strangers in the night for meager profits.”

“We weren’t going to mug you,” Frankie insisted.

“Join you?” Vivica asked, and she raised eyebrows broadcast eager readiness.

His eyes glinted with joy as though she had just passed a test, or had informed him that he had done so. She felt the impulse to take his hand or to hug him. He said, “You choose what draws you.” He stepped toward the smaller of the two to put a hand on a shoulder and it felt right to her, a physical tethering she had begun to need. It was very unlike the non-consensual hair-touching she had slapped away a thousand times. The motion was not condescending or aggressive. It was impulsive, but appropriate.

Frankie was on him fast, grabbing his shoulder, spinning him away from her. Instead of turning, shocked, and yelling protestations, Merlyn ducked as he turned. He slipped under Frankie’s outstretched arm. As he unbent, the older man pressed a thumb to the back of the offending hand and wrapped his middle, ring and pinky fingers under to grip its palm. The fingertips of his other hand found the nerve plexus just below the young man’s ear, behind the hinge of his jaw. Vivica watched him perform the series of techniques and saw, at last, what her Hapkido master had been speaking of when he said, “Use technique with calm confidence, not strength, not anger.”

Using the pull of his left hand and the push from his right, he twisted from a right foot forward lunge into a left-turned crouch, to move her best friend gently from where he stood, to a new position, lying uncomfortably across four of the cement steps that led up to the

building. He did this so certainly and with such relaxed authority, that it seemed almost to be a trick of vaudevillian terpsichore rather than an act of violence or even combat.

Finding the boy's sheath, which was both tucked into a back pocket and securely captured in the circle of his belt, Merlyn took control of the Buck knife.

Frankie said, "What the fuck, dude?"

"I'm sorry. That was my fault. I forget the power of my desires. I very much wanted to hug you. Either of you." He held the hilt out toward Frankie and said, "If you'll stop trying to rob me, you can have this back and I won't have to destroy it."

Frankie eyed the hilt suspiciously, perhaps fearing a trap. He said, "I wasn't trying to rob you. I was trying to stop you 'cause you looked like you were making a move."

Merlyn said, "Okay."

Frankie said, "And I'm pretty sure you can't break this knife."

The man's eyes crinkled, suggesting a broad grin under the mask. He said, "Fair enough."

He turned to the stacked-brick newel post at the base of the stairs, found a crack in the mortar and drove the blade as deep into it as his mortal strength allowed him. He twisted a bit, grinding away a bit of the grouting. He pushed the knife farther in. He closed his eyes, though the slight play of a smile around his lips suggested something more was going on.

She wondered if Frankie could read what the strange man was thinking as he applied steady, direct pressure to slip the blade deeper until the hilt came up hard against the surface of the wall. Merlyn, stepped up onto the hilt with the agility of a teen, trusting it wholly to support his weight. When he hopped down, the hilt vibrated a bit against the rock with a fast-

fading spring-steel tone. He said, "You might just be right about that." He tugged a couple of times to satisfy himself that it was embedded.

He turned to Vivica and said, "You have five – maybe seven – No. Five questions. I am having too good an evening to play close to the vest. So why don't you go ahead and ask me two of them, and when I come back down those stairs, you'll have to ask me three more."

"How did you do that?"

"I'm not going to count that as one of your questions yet, 'cause it's much, much too vague. I've done more wonderful things in the last eight hours than I have in many years. I am, as it were, on the ascendent."

Frankie made a slightly scoffing snort sound and said, "*As it were.*"

"Indeed."

"My boy here grabs you. Now, I'm not sayin' he's the best with his hands —"

"Hey! I can hold my own," Frankie complained.

"Settle down. You're big. You're tough and strong and all that. I'm jus' sayin', it's not like you ever really came in to train with me or anything. Right?—Okay. So, Big dude grabs you from behind and you know he's got a knife. You just – kind of – set him down and take his knife from him and then . . ." Those big curious eyes shifted over to the knife stuck into the wall. Merlyn paused and his questioner waited and then said, "So, that's the first question."

"It's tempting to play literalism games and force you to put this in the form of a properly phrased question. It's as if – No. It is. It's some kind of a rule."

"What?"

"I said I'd answer two. I need you to make it a question, a specific, clear question."

"Why?"

"Language is one of the old magics. I believe that to carry out my current quest I must be very . . . cognizant of *how* I do it. A part of me wants to say that you used up your questions with the 'what?' and the 'why?' not to be a dick, just because the words, the specificity it has . . . so much power. The literal lives down deep."

Frankie said, "Dude is crazy, Shorts. We gotta walk away."

Vivica said, "Hold on. Hold on. He's gotta answer these two questions before he goes in."

"Aw, man. I think we should just walk away."

"Up to you, Shorts," Merlyn said. "But ask me the clear question or don't. I'm supposed to have a predestined encounter on these very steps very soon I think."

"Only Frankie calls me 'Shorts.' What is this predestined encounter you're here about?" She asked and she asked clearly to make certain it would be answered as a question and be answered.

"A long time ago a woman I trusted assured me that when a series of things happened one right after another, I would remember my purpose and reclaim my power. Part of the whole vision she cast upon me—"

*Short.* "Cast upon you."

"Quiet, Frankie."

"—was this door. My finger reaching for the doorbell button...the ringing sound...I start to turn, I smell her perfume and then . . . she remains beside me as the Quest

commences. I don't see her face, but these things come next in the vision. So, it is an encounter I will be having that is predestined. One more question and I'm doing this." He gestured broadly enough toward the doorbell button that it might have created an opportunity for him to palm a card in the other hand.

He had committed to answering questions, and he would act in this bargain in good faith. He had laid the rules unseen into the deal. She could feel the bond of commitment in the agreement. She and the man exchanged nods, both acknowledging the completion of the first question's answer.

She said, "I've done a little martial arts—"

"A *little*," Frankie muttered.

"Knock it off, Frankie. How did you put him on the ground, and take his knife like that?"

"Gracefully and with great care."

"That's not an answer. I'm not— like—a blackbelt or whatever, right? But after you slipped under his arm and got the wrist lock you owned him. I don't know any of those techniques you used afterward."

Merlyn considered this. He had, in fact, given both an answer and a correct answer. On the other hand, the young one had not tried to sneak in another question. She watched him carefully as he considered her objection and *chose* to honor the spirit of the bargain rather than insisting on the literal interpretation. Making the slow gestures to mime the action without an assailant, he dropped, turning as he had when Frankie grabbed him. He said, "When I felt your friend's hand, I ducked under and came up inside his strike circle, rather

than outside. Then I knew which hand was on me and," his fingers shaped around an imaginary attacker's hand, "placed the overhand wristlock. Yeah?"

"Yeah, I got that." Vivica followed his actions without starting to mirror them first. He noticed and threw her an approving nod. He had recognized in her the habits of the trained and studying martial artist.

"As I did this, he tensed his arm and locked his elbow, giving me a structured control point rather than a fluid one, so I found the nerve plexus under his jaw—"

Mid-motion, the stranger cum late-night pupil, feeling for the spot behind her own jaw, dropped out of stance and said, "Just show me."

Frankie stepped forward to object and a flush of adoration flooded her, but she wasn't going to let his protective impulse spoil her chance to pick up a new bit of technique. She said, "Frankie, knock it off. I want to learn this. I let my master do this all the time to me. I saw how he handled you and why. It was legit, man. I want to learn this. Remember what you said?"

"When?"

"I don't know. Once. You told me a long rambling story about how you tried to get a job and you got your hopes up, but it all fell apart and you were crushed but you'd learned a whole lot about – something – and no matter how much you risk no matter how much it hurts, you learn one thing, it's worthwhile?"

Frankie sighed the sigh of a tolerant friend or an indulgent chauffeur.

Vivica gave him the finger then bent over offering Merlyn a locked, extended arm.



Merlyn gently took the hand and pressed his thumb against the back so that it sent pressure down the shaft of the locked arm. He said, "Here. Yeah?"

"Yeah. I feel that."

He reached forward with his free hand and touched two points just below the ear behind the hinge of the jaw. He pushed firmly once just to demonstrate the force of those two techniques combined.

"Nice. Thank you. That's really useful."

"So, the answer to that question really is, 'gracefully and with great care.' Now, you'll have to excuse me."

He turned toward the door, pulling his mask down so as to better be understood over an electric intercom system. It felt a bit like a dismissal, but Vivica had three more questions and she her mind had begun to run as though she'd been thrown a curve ball by a moot court adversary. She found things she wished to ask and then parsed her phrasing. Stories from her childhood about genies who grant wishes danced through her mind. She worded and reworded as she absently retrieved Frankie's knife for him, tugging it from the stone wall in a single, smooth pull.

The mass-manufactured steel sang a clear, single tone in the night air as it came free.

Merlyn, hand outstretched, not yet touching the doorbell in its brass plate, turned at the tone. With the mask down, Merlyn grinned. He said, "I smell the perfume. You're a girl!" He saw the blade she had extracted from the stone. His knees tremble oddly. He staggered down to the bottom step and then discovered himself sitting on the second from the bottom, his feet on the sidewalk.

He said, "Oh."

She said, "You okay?"

He said, "Not a doorbell. The blade coming out of the stone. What's your name?"

She said, "Is it weird if I feel like I shouldn't tell you?"

"This is all fucking weird."

"Shut up, Frankie. Please. I love you, man. We've been friends forever. But none of this would've happened if you hadn't tried to impress me with the whole 'Let's find out where I can get a fine coat like that' thing." Her eyes never left the grey-haired man.

The grey-haired man began to recover his feet at once. He said, "No. It is not weird. That is intuition. You should trust it. There have been decades that I haven't told anybody my name."

Frankie said, "Can we go, now?"

She said, "We can't. I have one more question."

His head snapped toward her and she knew he was shocked at how closely she'd been keeping track, "Now," the man said, "I have a great many questions of my own."

"Yeah. But I didn't promise to answer yours when you came down those stairs. So can we go back to the one you skipped so it isn't wasted?"

The man nodded but he studied her now like she was the one who was deeply weird, not he. "Which one?"

She realized he could not see the smile under her mask, letting him know that they were on the same page. She said, "The first one. Are you okay?"

"You're using one of your questions to inquire about my health?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Knowing that you wasted one question asking if it was weird that you didn't want to share your name?"

"Yeah. Seriously, man. You're wandering around in Harlem in the middle of the night, stumbling down stairs and shit. Are you okay?"

"I believe I'm fine, my dear young woman. Not everyone I know agrees with me. But I have not suffered an injury, nor fainted. I just needed to sit for a moment. I am... pleased and stunned. And I feel terribly foolish because I tend to engage ideas so specifically, I miss the world and the wonder around me. I believe I am just fine."

She sat down on the step beside the man. They sat in silence for a while, him barefaced, her masked against the plague.

Frankie raised his arms in protest and then, in a continuation of the same gesture, dropped them with a sigh and did a full, shrugging spin in place. It was performative acquiescence letting her know that he disapproved of the entire scene but could not walk away without her. She could feel his embarrassment at having been so easily bested in combat.

"He's your knight," the man observed.

"Friend."

"Adoring protector."

"Okay. So, you're okay, you think. I'm not weird to want to withhold my name. I have one left."

"Ask."

She thought for a moment, then said, "What's *your* name, then?"

She tested to learn how thoroughly bound he was by the intent of his earlier words. She had found ways he could avoid the question without breaking the arrangement. He could create a compartment of literalism. He could claim that he'd promised to answer five of her questions, not 'all' of her questions nor 'any five.' He had the wiggle room to offer up a "some have called me," dodge. He did none of that.

He was not some clever bottle-jailed djinn to feign servitude while building cursed magics out of deceptive syntax. He said, "I am Merlyn Taliesin, last mortal witness to the War of the Trees."

"I don't know what that is."

"Almost nobody does. Now, I know you do not want me calling you Shorts. And have acknowledged an implication of ancient wisdom in your decision not to tell me your name." He let it hang there, not a question, just the suggestion of a need.

The girl sat in that silence, showing no need to fill the dead air.

Frankie shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His eyes scanned the street for threats, occasionally scanned Merlyn for any indication of danger.

Merlyn said to him, "Frankie! I'm very sorry I mis-assessed you. I suspect you to be of great nobility with a capacity for bravery known to few."

"Fantastic."

After a long time, the girl said, "Vaccinated?"

"Yeah."

She pulled down her mask. "You told me your name."

"I have rules I have to follow."

She nodded. She found a twig on the step near her hand and began turning it between her thumb and forefinger. "You also make rules other people have to follow, yeah?"

"No. I make rules for myself about how I may use my tools to affect others. I do—often—make it easier for people to make the choices that most benefit me or my goals."

"Okay," she said. She let the bark press down against the flesh of her thumb. "Can I try something?"

"Your choice."

"Right. Okay. I want to make a bargain with you."

Frankie said, "What the fuck? I don't understand what's going on."

"Neither do I, Frankie. But—can you trust me for a couple more minutes? I can try to explain later?"

He nodded, trusting her. She noticed that his posture had changed a bit when Merlyn retracted the fear cue. She wondered whether everybody had the ability to affect others that powerfully with a simple suggestion. She wondered if this was a power she could use, a power regularly used on her. She felt a slight concern that this might be something everybody did all the time that she was just learning about now.

Merlyn said, "We have several blocks to walk and quite a while before my driver picks us up at the Manhattan Diner. Before you propose any bargains with me, might I suggest that you consult with your oversized friend? I'm going to start walking, not to be rude but because I'm hungry. I hope I will have the opportunity to buy you two something as well."

Merlin stood up and began to walk away. The coat really was extraordinary, seen from behind. Or in front. It was a very good coat.

She shouted after him, "I will tell you my name if you will tell me everything without me needing to find the right questions. The secrets. Whatever your whole weird deal is, with the stalking and the word games and the Jedi mind tricks. All of it."

Merlyn spun to walk backward ahead of them again. He grinned broadly. He said, "I will accept your bargain! Also, you are one of the worst negotiators I have ever met. And I have been alive a long, long time."

"What do you mean?"

"You were going to get all this information regardless. This is where it starts. Here. On that stoop on this night." He nearly skipped away ahead of them on the empty sidewalk, raising his hands to let the coat reveal the wide-flaring joy of the showman. "A great Quest begins tonight, and I have been waiting a long, long time. You are one of the Great Heroes of the Questing Party. I knew it the moment I heard the ring of steel and smelled your perfume."

"Hold on." She stood up and jogged to stand before him with Frankie striding along behind her. The man stopped backing away so they could approach. She said, "I'm Vivica DeLongpre." She dropped her hood back so he could see her.

Merlyn repeated her name softly. He reached forward with one hand and allowed his fingertips to hover just over her heart. Frankie tensed for a moment but nothing aggressive propelled Merlyn's gesture, nothing pervy. He held his place.

Relaxation spread through Vivica. She leaned forward slowly until his fingertips made contact. As he muttered her name in soft tones of discovery and affection, she experienced a sensation vaguely familiar, with strands of anticipation and enthusiasm woven in of a sort she'd not felt since childhood. The gesture carried subtle flavors of the unconditional love she had always imagined receiving from her parents, but she did not feel it *from* this man she had just met. She felt it *toward* him, and Frankie. And the beautiful, blackened brownstones. She felt a connection to the people she could not see, beyond the walls and the moment she did, she also felt the capacity to feel all of humanity, all creatures around the globe, needing and afraid and beautiful. With the great rush of connection to it all, as she made the decision to let this stranger touch her heart, she knew that it was too much to hold onto all the time. That much feeling, that much life, that much breath seeming to enter her lungs all at once would overwhelm her if she stayed with it

She pulled in air and snapped back into her body, into her New York street self. She said, "Fuck."

Frankie said, "What the hell just happened?"

Vivica noticed that the twig she had been twirling, barely examined when she picked it up from the stoop, had living buds along it, just starting to crack open with green showing through tiny creases. Hardly thinking about it, she took it to the little square a few feet away, where a small tree grew from a dirt patch. She pressed one end of the twig into the earth, not knowing whether that was what one does with an orphaned, budding twig, but hoping it might be able to grow there.

Merlyn said, "You felt it too, huh?"

Frank said, "I felt it. I saw it. I . . . sort of heard it."

Merlyn said, "That, young knight, is the bright hum of old machinery shifting into motion."



## THREE



Merlyn walked ahead and the two walked behind him. Frankie slowed forcing Vivica to check her pace to stay with him. He could feel her eagerness to stay with the stranger, to keep up with him. He couldn't imagine what she found so interesting about him beyond the curiosity of an old white guy being in Harlem late at night.

While he tried to find the right words to say, she pulled her phone from her pocket and began thumbing search terms into it. After a few revisions, she held up the phone to him,

showing him a clean shaven, short-shorn version of the man they now followed, recognizable by the coat.

She muttered information to him as she walked. "Philanthropist and longtime social justice activist. Frequent contributor to a long list of charities and NGOs. Runs something called Liberty Is Knowledge Revolutionary Atheist Socialist Society with no apparent headquarters or web presence beyond its listing as a 501-4(c)."

Frankie said, "Stop walking. I'm telling you, Shorts. Something's wrong." But he kept up with her as she did not slow.

Vivica said, "I'm well aware."

"I don't get what you're doing here."

"He's really good, this guy. He showed me the lock and the pressure points gently, carefully. He's for real. Think about it for a second. You read faces, right? Was he lying? Ever?"

"No. No he wasn't. But none of what he's saying makes sense."

"Yeah. Something's wrong, Frankie. I knew it from the second he called out to us without looking back. I need to follow this out. You remember a few days ago when I was standing on the roof and I said, 'There's a high-pitched ringing in the back of my head and I don't know what it wants?'"

Frank said, "I remember thinking that I'd have to keep my eyes open for erratic behavior, now that you mention it."

"It's been different since just before he heard us behind him. Clearer and softer at the same time. It wants me to listen to him. It . . . that's not right. It doesn't *want*, exactly."

“So, I get no say. I just have to follow along if I’m gonna protect you?”

“You don’t have to do anything, Frankie. I can take care of myself. This guy has no ill intentions. I gave him the chance to show me who he is. He’s not malicious and he might be in real trouble.”

“What?”

“I’m going to the diner with him. When his driver gets there to pick him up, I’ll do a little check in to make sure someone’s got his meds in order or whatever. I’m not going to just let an old crazy white guy wander off into Harlem in the middle of the night on his own.”

It made sense now. Of course, she would have to stay with this guy. That’s who Vivica was, the girl who secretly nurtured an injured squirrel when they were kids, the woman who refused money to help a classmate cheat for money, instead offering free tutoring. The woman who would use a precious question to ask, ‘are you okay?’ He said, “You think he made me afraid when he made you curious.”

“You saying he didn’t?”

“And you don’t think he’s just wandered in with your destiny in his hands? You’re not going off to be some kind of hero on a quest?”

“I’m going to make sure a crazy, old, rich white guy gets a ride home safe.”

She picked up the pace so as not to let Merlyn get too far ahead as he made the left to head down toward 96<sup>th</sup> street.

Frankie stayed with her. He said, “You know, almost nobody would bother to take care of a guy like this other than you.”

"That can't be true."

Frankie walked along beside her as they made the left in stride despite the differential in leg-length.

On the avenue, the crazy man was easy to spot. He strode now, more than he walked, in the brighter light of the wider sidewalk. As he passed the streetlights, his shadow moved past him to his left like the second hand of a clock turning backward to point at them, following.

Frankie said, "I am hungry."

"Right?"

"But he's not paying for our dinner."

"Agreed. It's like the telling-him-my-name thing. It feels . . ."

"Yeah," Frankie said. "Exactly."

They walked in silence for half a block or so. "I want to believe him."

"I get that." Then he added, "He took the fear spell off when he apologized and told me he expected bravery from me."

"He really is good."

"I felt it. And when he touched you."

"Yeah."

Frankie said, "We're just humoring him until one of us can talk to his driver."

"Yeah."

They walked in silence for a moment then Frankie said, "This is more of the great weirdness, isn't it?"

"I think it is, yeah."

"I'm not sure any of it is connected, Viv."

"I know. But right now, it feels like... you know in the movies when a schizophrenic guy is always in the basement putting together the strings with the push-pins and the newspaper articles?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. It's like I have that going on in my head but it's not about the pushpins and the papers, it's about the strings. You know?"

"Not even a little bit."

"The sound in the back of my head, this whining hum happens and when I listen to it. A whole webwork of strings comes closer and closer into some kind of alignment or – symmetry and the tone gets clearer sometimes, almost layered harmonics instead of—I don't know all the words for this. The pitch changes to suggest... rightness?"

"You're really not making me less worried about you."

"Here's the thing, Frankie," she paused in her speech, but she kept walking at the New York pace through the lamplit lack of city bustle. Frankie stayed with her. She so rarely needed time to figure out what to say but she knew he could be patient and he did not fill the space. She said, "I think this old guy might be crazy and he might be in trouble, and he might need our help. He believes everything he said to us plus, there's a noise in my head telling me to stick with him. I feel like I don't have a choice and a huge part of me wants an adventure. So, I'm going to sit with this guy. I'm playing the games and letting him talk and humoring him until I find out what his deal is because, yes, because of the Great Weirdness. And because I want to make sure he's okay. You in or out?"

Frankie sighed and she heard a sound in his sigh that she could not fully read. He said, "I have to be there if you need me."

"You get that I can take care of myself, right?"

"I do," he said. "I don't protect you because you need me to, I protect you because don't know how not to."

###

The vinyl bench back booth at the Manhattan Diner squeaked every time any of them adjusted their weight. Frankie found this hilarious every time but allowed himself only a small chuckle. He sucked chocolate milkshake through a paper straw.

Vivica DeLongpre leaned over her plate and took a grease-dripping bite of the kind of double cheeseburger 24-hour diners serve, providing excessive portion size in lieu of culinary artistry. Her hair clung in tight thick braids that started at the front of her scalp so that her whole head seemed to be sculpted of a dark, knotty wood.

"I anticipated a great deal more resistance."

"You're not arresting us. You're eating with us," Frankie said.

"Still."

"And you offered to pay," Vivica pointed out.

Frankie sucked the very last of his milkshake. "Which will not be happening." He signaled the waiter for another one.

Vivica said, "I got a sense about you right away."

"Right away before you tried to sneak up on me or right away when I busted you?"

Frank said, "I had questions about your coat."

Nobody spoke for a long moment. Then Vivica said, "Things have been weird. And once, a psychic lady told me that one day, just when I thought things couldn't get any weirder, a man would stalk darkly into the pre-dawn moments of my adventure. She told me a lot of things, but when you said you were about to stalk darkly into the predawn city, I was pretty sure something was going on."

Frankie said, "Shit. I forgot about her. Okay. I missed that entirely."

"Things couldn't get any weirder?" Merlyn asked.

"She's been calling it The Great Weirdness."

"You have no idea. Did you ever have a couple weeks when suddenly – I don't know how to explain this."

Frankie said, "She got traction like a cat in a carpet store."

Merlyn nodded in appreciation of the simile. He said, "Can you give me anything more specific?"

Vivica said, "Okay. So it starts – and I know this sounds like nothing – I'm in a Taekwondo class, right? There's a kick I'm trying to get my body to do. The blackbelts, a lot of them, make this thing look easy, just . . . effortless."

"You understand they put in years of work, banked the effort in repetition and improvement to make it look that effortless, each flowing movement the result of –"

"Okay. You're mansplaining martial arts to me right now and it makes me want to punch you in the throat."

"Actually, I was mansplaining magic, but there will be other opportunities. Do go on, with my apologies."

Frankie watched Vivica blink, and he knew what she was doing. She had gone back a second in her mind and was reviewing what the man had just said that was about magic and so obviously about the martial arts. For a moment, Frankie considered trying to reconstruct the man's last thoughts from memory, but his new milkshake arrived just then, so he let the thought go.

Merlyn let the silence hang until Vivica continued without letting the story get derailed.

"You've studied some martial arts."

"A little bit."

"Okay. There's a kick called a five-forty. It's a jumping back spin kick —"

"Flying Dragon Whips Its Tail."

"What?"

"Different style. Same technique. Go on. You were trying to learn the kick."

"Yeah. And for just a second, as one of the kids—these kids in the class, fifteen, sixteen years old. It's like they can fly, you know? And one of 'em steps up for his kick and I see—sort of see—I can sort of imagine the energy balling at his center and in the muscles of his shoulders and his ass as he starts the step forward. I can follow the lines of energy and I get it. So, when it's my turn again, I'm not straining to figure out how to jump and spin and kick and land. I just let the pattern of my energy flow, twisting up from floor to the core through the knee, to the turning bull whip of the extended leg and – wow. Yeah. Flying Dragon Whips Its Tail."

"Wait!" Frankie said. "You said 'Merlin,' right? Are you named after the Wizard guy?"

Merlyn chuckled. "I am not. And I spell it with a 'Y'"



"How d'you know how I was spelling it?"

"Sounds different."

Vivica eyed him for a long time and Frankie saw the entire exchange, understanding it as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud. She had thought of saying, *You think you're him, don't you?*

The smiling man gave her the option of digging into that question or continuing her tale.

She went on. "I told Frankie this had started happening. It went on through class. We're doing forms and even as I'm watching the advanced forms, the ones I haven't learned yet I can see this . . . stuff."

"Chi."

"You can't see, chi."

"Or smell steel," Merlyn grinned.

She put it together. She thought it through. Frankie watched her eyes as she tracked the thought. He could almost see the flow of energy through her young classmate's body as she rewatched it in her mind's eye. "Oh," she said in a very small voice and then, taking in the idea as simple fact, went on. "Yes. I was suddenly seeing chi. But also, as I saw it, I was—my own chi was learning, or— I don't know. But I was picking up forms really fast. My sparring changed because—"

"Nobody can beat her sparring now. None of the black belts. None of the younger guys. Nobody."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah." Vivica nodded. "But there's more. More Weirdness. There was a thing where it seemed like I fixed a television by touching it. A group of pigeons followed me for two and a half blocks and when I asked them what they wanted they stopped and pretended they hadn't been following me."

"That's true. I saw that. It was fucking weird."

"This is very exciting to hear. I expected to have to convince a skeptic of the improbable. I forget how much fortune favors the brave."

"The bold," Vivica suggested.

"The beautiful," Frankie added.

"Anything else, before you two stumbled onto me?"

"There was gum stuck to my shoe and I got most of it off but there was still a little bit of stickiness when I walked and then it suddenly went away—"

"I don't think that's exactly—"

"—because a hundred-dollar bill stuck to it."

"That might be something."

"The pizza," Frankie suggested.

"Right! I wished for pizza and a guy shows up at my door. He had the wrong address. He wanted to just give me the pizza."

"You didn't let him?"

"I gave him the hundred-dollar bill."

"For a pizza!" Frankie half-complained.

"For a *free* pizza," Vivica said.

Merlyn chuckled.

“Tell you something funny,” she announced, but her words slowed as she put them together, the thought coalescing for the first time as she spoke. “For about a week and a half, two-weeks, I’ve been walking around having the life I always imagined the white people in mid-town have. You know? Subway shows up as I hit the platform. Last of the grocery line finishes up as I reach the counter to set down my stuff. Money shows up—”

“The ATM!”

“Right! There was an ATM that threw money at me.”

“How much?”

“I don’t know. All of it. Until it was finished. I didn’t count it. I was right there at the bank, so I just collected it and took it inside and told them what had happened.”

Merlyn nodded. He turned to Frankie. “You were there.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And that didn’t bother you.”

“What?”

“Collecting the money and giving it back?”

“What else were we gonna do?”

“Sure. But the hundred dollars for the pizza?”

“Oh, that didn’t bother me either. I understood it. It just wasn’t how I would’ve done it.”

“But you understood it.”

“Oh, yeah,” Frankie said. “I understood why she was doing it. I watched her.”

“What?”

“You know, if you watch people right, you can tell everything they’re thinking most of the time.”

“Is that right?” Merlyn said, but it was an invitation to go on, not a challenge.

Frankie started speaking at once, but he noticed that it was unusual for someone to respond to him so openly. “Yeah. I think most people don’t notice it or—they pretend not to notice it ‘cause . . .” he stopped, noticing only now how unusual it was for him to reply so openly

“‘cause what, Frankie?”

He made the decision to follow the thought out, to reveal the rest of the insight to this stranger. “Like, if I know Vivica wants me to bring her Haagen Daz peanut butter and chocolate ice- cream—”

“One time. One time this happened.”

Frankie continued undeterred. “—I have a couple of options. I can *not* do a thing knowing that it would make a person near me happy, or I can *do* the thing even though it means going downstairs and then coming back upstairs and maybe having to talk to the guy at the bodega with the weird twitch that makes me uncomfortable. But not doing the thing means pretending not to know that she wanted it. Right? So, most people start by pretending not to know. Then, after a few minutes, when the person asks for what they want, suddenly there are reasons not to do it that you didn’t even realize you were making up in your head to justify not having gone in the first place. Then they feel like they were imposing, and everybody feels lousy.”

“Plus, no ice cream,” Vivica interjected.

"Plus, no ice cream. And people do this all the time. Right? I know I used to."

"You stopped," Merlyn stated.

"Yeah. A while ago. It suddenly—once I saw it, once I realized it, you know? I felt like I was lying all the time. To everyone. And like everyone else was lying all the time, too. But I couldn't explain it to them."

"So, what'd you do?"

"He stopped going out."

"Except at night."

"Except at night," the young woman conceded, "When there are fewer people around to deal with."

Merlyn saw the look of confusion and concern on Frankie's face and Frankie watched him see it. He said, "Frankie, you have discovered a powerful talent. When those who have great talents recognize them and believe them to be universally accessible, the talents become teachable as craft. They say that when the student is ready, a teacher will appear."

"You think you're my teacher?"

"I think you are a teacher who has appeared, and you have a lot of work to do to be ready when a student arrives. Your talent isn't one we have schools for in the modern world. You are figuring things out and you're doing it by intuition and instinct. I can't instruct you, but I can offer you reassurance. Many people have the talent to sense the intentions of others, the desires. In some cases, they attune only to certain emotional frequencies. Hostility, anger and so on. Others just the connective ones – love, affection. Some people can intuit general ideas or detailed thoughts of others and, indeed, of those people some are conscious of their

ability and choose to hide it or ignore it. This is a layer of thought that Freud called the subconscious, the layer the Druids called—well—it would translate to ‘under-thoughts first tier’ and Chekhov would think of it as subtext. Of the people who have recognized that such layers of thought exist, very few indeed have taken the time to examine them, have accepted them as a valid and trustworthy form of communication and—this is a big thing, Sir Frank—none before has spoken of an ethical obligation to respond to intuited dialogue. This, as far as I can recall—and I can recall a great deal on my good days—this idea you present brings to light an entire realm of ethical consideration and philosophical inquiry previously unobserved: *what moral action are we obligated to take based on that which we know to be true despite a complete lack of physical evidence?*”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Frank said.

“Isn’t that just faith?” Vivica asked and Frankie knew the excited tone that meant she had just put something together and was about to be the bright girl in class, ahead of the teacher and rewarded with praise.

“Faith is an insistent belief in the unprovable despite all evidence. It’s something else entirely. I’m talking about knowledge intuited. Or instinctively inferred from an eyebrow’s lift and the slight movement of an index finger. Or the movement of a person’s Chi, invisible to those who have not attuned to it. We know what we know. We know what we see. We sometimes *know* a truth. Does *knowing* make it imperative that we act? Must a fact become apparent to others to be acted upon?”

Frank turned to the woman he loved, the woman he had loved since she was a girl he had loved, the woman he would love until the moment he died. His eyes brimmed with a

pleading desperation. He said, "I can't be smart enough to light up a new ethical condensation," but his mind reeled. What if she really couldn't feel it. What if she didn't have this talent, or the right frequency of talent.

She said, "Those are just big words for an idea you had that nobody else has had before."

Merlyn spoke sharply. "Not *'just big words.'*" His anger emerged in the short syllables, snapping across the table and Frankie felt his anger. "I do not belittle the courage, the kindness, the openness that lie at the heart of your magic, young woman. I do not belittle the value or the potential of the magic for which your friend holds a remarkable talent. Please show me the same courtesy. Words live among the most ancient magics and represent one of my most trusted and powerful tools. I choose them carefully most of the time, and when I don't, I've had enough practice to get them right much of the time anyway." He turned to the large man, the man whose talent he had casually referred to as a valuable magic with much potential. He pointed a French fry at the young man, its tip dripping ketchup. He said, "You just said you see the lies under the surface, the tier one under-thoughts, but sometimes we don't notice them in ourselves. You pretend to be stupid, but you remember exactly what I said. So, let's set aside the 'light up a new ethical condensation,' bullshit. You know what I said and now I must insist that you say it aloud before I explain to you how the three of us are going to save the world. I work too hard at my craft to have my efforts wasted because an arrogant young hero hasn't yet learned that what she says has impact on her devoted follower, a large athlete who distrusts his intellect."

Frank saw a moment of confusion flash across Vivica's face. He realized that she did not understand the tiny lie the man had just called him on. She thought Merlyn had set aside the list of big words and had no idea what he was asking Frank to say aloud. Frank knew, though. Knowing, seeing the crack in the deception, a deception that seemed wholly pointless now that he was conscious of it, a tiny wave of dizziness swept through him. He tried to uncoil the original reason for the lie. He wondered why his fingers gripped the edge of the Formica tabletop so firmly. He wondered why he had not spoken the words aloud yet.

Merlyn waited. His pale hands open, upward on the tabletop as if he was prepared to catch the words as they fell from Frank's mouth.

Baffling tears rolled down the young man's dark cheeks. He gasped once. Then again, almost as if he had been weeping, wailing, though he had not. He said, "The idea I presented brought to light an entire realm of ethical consideration and philosophical inquiry previously unobserved."

"There you go. See, the reason I said this was so that you might see the intellectual value of the thoughts you had. They weren't just big words. They were the words that gave you and your idea the proper respect."

"Why was that so hard?" Frankie had released his grip on the table. He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Things just keep getting more disconcerting."

"Not weirder?"

"What?"

"It was hard because you had to admit to one of your own lies, so habitual, so reflexive that you were unaware of it until this moment. Soon you'll figure out why you developed the



habit and will begin training yourself out of it. It will be good. It will be growth. So, here's the simple rule to follow, 'Never play stupider than you really are. Your own stupidity will always be enough to do the job.'"

"Wisdom from some soothsayer?"

"A San Francisco comic, Will Durst. Hold on. Scrunch down so you're entirely in front of the seat back."

He followed the instructions without comment. Frankie sank deep into the booth and into thought. A new possibility planted moments earlier had begun to crack open, to seek the evidence that would nourish it and allow it to take root as a likelihood or even a probability.

Merlyn pulled out his phone and took a photo of the man against the monochrome background of the booth bench. "You next." He checked the photo he'd taken as he turned toward the woman.

"What's this about now, Wizard?"

He grinned at her, accepting the title without actively acknowledging it. "I assume you two don't have passports."

"We both have passports," she informed him. "Applied the day Trump won the primary. Now what's this about saving the world?"

The enthusiasm that twitched in the man's eyebrows as he prepared to speak told Frankie that he had been awaiting this moment for a long time, and that whether he was batshit crazy or not, he was about to share something he believed to be a vital truth.

## FOUR



“When I began my second great adventure, I was merely a Bard studying to be a Druid. I was within a moon of testing for the title officially when my friend Uther’s baby needed tending. So, I took the kid to Ector and dropped him off to be raised along with Ector’s kid Kay and went off to take the big Druid test. Now, this is a huge test, right? There are four of us testing.

“Dawn of day one, Simon leads a breath anchoring exercise at the start of the day. This is his thing. He’s been working at this as an area of expertise on his way to the staff. He just has us focus on our breath and occasionally throws images at us of who we are, of who we

have been, of what we can be. I realize that he's doing a basic tryptic form that I had learned in the leaf-strung libraries of the Forest Luddengrin. Each of us recites the twenty-seven Open-throated Histories. Not all of us. Each of us. All twenty-seven. We each deliver it once and listen to three other tellings. Then we discuss the slight differences between the tellings, their significance in terms of our perceptions of the story, how each of us has been influenced by the version our instructors have provided and by the distorting influence of our own imaginations and interpretations. Sometimes as we told the histories the elders among the alders would whisper to one another, perhaps in approval or disapproval, perhaps discussing the histories themselves. Or the supper spread." He stopped for a moment and wondered how much of the detailed memory Frankie could see under his words. He said, "We rarely felt any sense of abundance but on test days everybody ate well."

He spoke casually, but quickly, his eyes darting almost as if he had stepped into a waking dream. He reached across the table and took the hand of each of his companions in one of his own. It seemed to ground him somehow, and he slowed his breath.

"Breath anchoring?" Vivica asked.

The man said, "Yes. Would you like to learn it?"

Frankie nodded enthusiastically.

"Not now."

"No. Not now."

"Then yes."

As Merlyn told his story, now, he held their hands. The very tenor of his voice shifted, dropping into a slightly lower pitch as his throat and his chest relaxed. Modern mannerism melted and he was a teller of tales as old as his tradition.

“At the end of the first day of testing, Simon says, ‘to close out the day, Amran will lead a breath anchoring exercise.’ Amran says he’s never really studied the technique, that he’s not qualified, and Simon says, ‘Nonetheless. You heard me do it this morning, you understand the principle. Try.’ So Amran leads us into a guided meditation. I realize that he’s imitating the breath patterns that Simon used in the morning session, breaking words into the same phrasings. He had figured out how Simon had taken us into a thought then paused, giving us time to expect, to predict, then finished the thought with evocative ambiguity. Where Simon’s imagery had all been about the mental journey into relaxed dream space in search of meaning, Amran’s metaphor took us into the humid summers of youth to rediscover key moments of decision making. He drew our attention to turns our lives had taken as a direct result of our actions. Then he stripped away the idea of rewards and consequences and, under the broad umbrella ‘outcome,’ suggested the urgency of parsing action from reaction or deliberate inaction.

“I remember thinking that he had entirely missed the tryptic structure of the exercise as presented by the expert and I wondered if they would deduct points for that. I started to put together a sketch for a breathing exercise I might conduct when it came my turn the next day, utilizing both the tryptic construct and the breath and phrasing patterns Amran had observed. As I began ordering those deeply self-involved, unconsciously judgmental, and competitive thoughts, I realized that the older men in their robes had also participated in the

breathing exercise and now, as they came together in pairs in triads, they discussed the day's testing in quiet, relaxed tones, focused and cheerful.

“This was the most solemn and important test of my life and the panel before whom I demonstrated my knowledge was a relaxed, joyous body of sage men and women for whom I had immense respect. We had . . . a beautiful culture.”

A rising depth of melancholy passed through his hands to his new friends. The wait staff, the three other scattered pre-dawn seated customers, and a man at the counter paying for a box of to-go breakfast sandwiches had stopped talking. They all listened, rapt.

He was aware of the effect he was having. He hadn't intended it. Not really. But he had known it would likely happen. He couldn't stop now, though. Now he was in an unpracticed telling and he would not let that fall apart in the weave by getting distracted. He continued, “There had been some surprises and unexpected turns. At one point on the first day, we had been asked to look at a glyph post and from context figure out the meanings of wholly unfamiliar symbols. At first, we all stood there, staring at the thing, each of us trying to work it out. Then Grella, this tiny little Dryad in training, just starts talking it through. So, we start figuring it out with her. Then, we get the whole thing figured out and she just announces that we got it and the whole gathering burst into applause. She jumped up and down and hugged each of us and then did this funny little dance and the laughter was celebratory. It had never even occurred to the other three of us that it might not be a race, but the moment she started the collaboration we all saw it as the obvious way and without the tension of competition our individual skills served one another.

“These were good people and even our tests were lessons. When did we forget how to let people learn and start teaching them and then testing them to prove our own success?”

“That night I barely slept. I had prepared thoroughly for this event. Now I began to realize that the test wasn't exactly what I'd thought it would be at all. Simon had stumbled through some of his Open Throat and thoroughly mangled some story structure, but he got some unexpected laughs even if the whole delivery was embarrassingly conversational. At times, it seemed he did not know where a history ended as he meandered through a tale to its determined, eventual close and then beyond into codas and sometimes spontaneous observations so obvious it seemed he was trying to explain to our honored elders the point of stories they had themselves learned, told, and taught. Once he even changed a tale's whole point by altering the ending and instead of the murmurs of disapproval I expected, the panel cheered and laughed at the unexpected turn. I had no idea until long after he had been killed by an irritable warlord just how skilled and clever that man was, how advanced in his studies to realize that over time, even the truth of history becomes malleable. I resented him for being considered my equal, for being considered worthy.

“Now, the second day I started out very tense because I might have to do the breathing exercise at the start of the day, but that went to Grella. She had us all listening to our breath, gets us to slow our breath down but then she took our focus outward. She had us start listening to the sounds of the world around us. We start to hear one another's breaths. We start to hear beyond that rustlings of underbrush and soundings of birds. I hear a bird and when I focus on the sound I can find its position out there in the trees, unseen. With my eyes closed I knew where it was, this wild hunter, this keen-eyed little thing. I heard its shrill call

and for a moment it seemed I saw the forest through its eyes, scanning sharply through the branches for movement.

“Then, somewhat abruptly I felt, we opened our eyes and were ready to get down to work. I didn't remember much of what she had said during the breathing exercise, but it had been an interesting experience if a little clumsy in its closing. Still, everyone seemed impressed by her performance, so I figured it was all good enough and we started the second day's recitations.

“It was not until twenty-some years later, when I first told this story, when I last told this story, that I realized: after that exercise I had entered the day—and every day thereafter—with a slightly keener ability to pick out small movements, to discern key details in a way I had not before. I told the story to my young king as I said a last farewell at a tiny funeral pyre for the falcon who had accompanied me during the interim. As I told the story then, it dawned on me that the falcon I had adopted weeks after my test had been the same one I heard during the test. It dawns on me now, as I tell it again, that perhaps that falcon was my first induction into a Questing Field, before I had named it, before I had recognized it as a predictable and manipulable phenomenon.

“This, my wonderful children—” his words, his very intention extended outward to the larger audience of diner-folk, though his focus remained with the two who found themselves lost in his words. Merlyn willed his fingertips to convey urgency, the vibration of his vowels on the air.

He watched his two companions for response, shifts in pulse at the throat, changes in pupil dilation. He could see them trying to discern deeper pattern, saw Frankie keeping up with his face, his micro-expressions. He wondered what the young man saw.

“This growing power we knew long ago, the telling of tales, the keeping of thought, this is the place where it starts, my dears. We tell them again and we learn them anew. We learn from our present the things we knew once from a different perspective.

“Now, from an angle, apart and away and remembered, we learn new things, first, then, that it was the same bird, today that it was the same field in effect. We grow and in growing relearn and reknow. Relearn and reknow.

“Then we're into the recitations of the fourteen Rhymed Tales of Honor. We're doing some of them together in a chorus and some of them individually. I realize in the middle of this that they're trying to save time on this momentous test of mine to get on with other things. I realize for the first time that we've already all passed the test. We're here to demonstrate where we are in our studies. They would have no reason to invite anyone who didn't already know everything. In that moment, that youthful moment, because I was prepared to pass a test, I believed I knew everything.

“The sun hit my eyes as it dropped toward the horizon behind the staff-bearers who administered this event. Several sat on rocks and stumps. A few had brought stools. Many folded their legs and sat on the grass. Instructors and students attended, unreliably distinguishable only by the wear at the edges of their robes and the sense of authority with which they walked. My own instructor, Gwydion, who seemed so old to me then, asked me to step forward for the Rhymed Tale of the Guardian's Choices. I knew the tale well. I had



memorized it. I had said it aloud. I had walked it, reading each sound of each word represented by a different tree's leaf strung in the windings of the library. I also reviewed it in the woods at night, practicing secretly so that my instructor wouldn't know how difficult the work was for me. I had strung a yarn of my own out in the wilderness beyond our wooded sanctuary just to practice, building the sounds of the words leaf by leaf. I had done this with each new poem or tale I learned until I had a small library of my own out there. I was its only keeper and over time I let the older strands fall to decay. I came to revere the work and the dedication of the men and women who kept the libraries, replacing leaves as they wilted, keeping the letters sharp along the miles of their long soft-twined spines.

“I thought myself a cheater and a fraud, doing extra work to memorize while pretending that it came easily to me. Gwydion, seeing my progress, had unending confidence in me and delivered me new information at a terrifying rate, always delighted at how quickly I seemed to absorb new ideas, learn old histories, embark on new avenues of exploration. Frankly, none of the Rhymed Tales would have proved difficult for me, so thoroughly had I faked my way through, by duplicating the efforts of others. I had practiced and muttered the words in the woods, sorting the sounds into order, finding the patterns of the rhyme. I had spoken them and heard them. I had seen them as the repetition of leaf sequence as I needed through each one to build the tree-strung books. Alder for 'ay' Oak for 'K' in a rhyme scheme had a repeating look in the long blur of leaves. The stories and poems as they lived in my mind were supported by visual cues. I began speaking the rhyme by cocky rote.

“About halfway into the first long stanza, I hit an expository segment and started thinking about whether there might be entire quatrains I could combine to get all the ideas in

without all the awkward unnecessary bits. This was the first time I had ever thought of revising something I had memorized, improving it, clarifying it. I knew this was not the time to start doing that, spontaneously in the middle of an important recitation, so I kept going, falling into a sort of a distant trance as the words came out of me without effort. I found myself thinking ahead to the parts of the story to come. I noticed that I had been so busy learning the story, I had failed to pay any attention to what it was about. This tale lionized a pair of royal parents who make the noble choice to do their duty rather than raising their children. I noticed for the first time that the story I was about to tell seemed to codify behaviors that had consistently led to power struggles within dynasties. These tales presented in court or for advisory purposes long ago, remembered now against future use, had been instructional. As we had learned them, we had come to believe them as truths. But my parents . . . all our parents. . . had been simply terrible to us, always placing something ahead of their time teaching and rearing us. All of us harbored anger toward our parents. Now, in the middle of this recitation I could see the way of honor before me. I started to do rewrites just a few lines ahead of myself.

“I understood suddenly why poems that start as spontaneous rhymings come in quatrains rather than couplets, as I reached segments in the ancient, sacred poem with which I discovered I had a profound disagreement.

“The four-line rhyme structure let me keep up with my thoughts. Setting two lines in place gave time to find the rhyme for the first and then work the scan through my lips as my brain found the next. I started riding this vast conceptual rewrite in my head, seeing the shade-and- shape pattern groupings of the leaves on the strings as the ideas fell into place. I

heard myself speaking distantly, heard my ideas finding their way out in proper rhyme and in proper scan. I had a very strange experience for a bit. I was far above the clearing, circling, watching, a bit hungry. I banked away and then I was back before the gathering, sweat pouring from me, the story coming one line at a time. I had figured out at some point that the rhymes still worked with the new idea, many of them. I just needed to adjust the characters' actions within the hard scan leading to them. I realized that many of the rhymed words in this tale fell on adjectives to make the suffixes match up and that gave me another cheat to exploit as I gently twisted the tale to make the point that we have a responsibility to those we encounter, and we must start by opening our hearts to our children. I presented this idea of parental love as a virtue in place of the usual idea of the nobility of cruel and willful abandonment. They watched me doing it. I could feel their attentive, collective gaze. They were engaged and listening. Some of them knew I was off the script, others assumed I had a new one. Some, I know now, had never learned the tales themselves and did not even know that I had gone astray.

“In the middle of the penultimate stanza I realized that I was bound to the child I had delivered to Ector on behalf of Uther. The smell that had haunted my dreams somewhere between lavender and loss burst across my mind's sinus obscuring my vision. I knew it to be the smell of that infant's head. I thought I had dispensed with a responsibility, but it became clear to me now that I had accepted a new one.

“At the end of the piece I noticed tears damping my face, probably messing up the woad I'd applied for the testing ceremony. A silence fell. It hung so long I feared I had offended the entire community to its very heart by making these changes to the text. A cold trickle of

sweat made its way down my ribs in the long pause and I anchored to my breath. I noticed that the trickle of sweat created a physical connection to the tear tracks I imagined in my test day blues. The break came slowly. Some of the oldest began talking quietly as others began to applaud. Then, realizing that they had not yet shown their appreciation, the rest joined in. It swelled. It seemed all of Brittany and half of Gaul celebrated, the way they applauded in my memory. I did not revel in it. My mind, so young, so untrained, so certain that it knew everything, had fixed on a singular intention. I would finish the test, accept my esteemed new title and the staff, and take care of the boy until he was grown. I would prepare him to face whatever came his way. His father had abandoned him, largely to cover up his own infidelities or, in Uther-speak 'for the good of the Kingdom.' I had gone along with it. I had taken an action. I had, just recently, started thinking about the nature of action and consequence. I had a duty. I had begun a mission of conscience.

“When I ran the breathing exercise at the end of the day, I went into it with an absolute surety of my own competence. In paced out, carefully intoned phrases, I induced a soft breath trance. I built a tryptic of disparate images that had come to me over the previous two days, taking opportunities where I saw them to plant seeds of ideas that I could revisit, stanzas later, in shifted context or perspective. I lost myself in the clear, ringing tones of my own voice as line after line of brilliant, spontaneous metaphoric linguistic exploration emerged from what seemed an un-drainable wellspring of ideas and imaginings. Realizing I had reached the third segment of the tryptic structure, I began to aim toward an endpoint as my mind reviewed, trying to gauge the symmetry of my stanzas. Determined not to end with the jarring, ‘eyes open, let’s go’ chipper cut-off we’d gotten in the morning, I let the last

ideas work their way out, paced as deliberately as the opening had been, winding out to the last, inspirational, aspirated word. Then I ended the exercise.

“Scattered applause came at the very end of the long day. People groaned a bit as they stood up. Gwydion came over to me and said two things. He said, ‘Firstly, you are a talent and a genius and as long as your heart remains open, I will always be at your command,’ which seemed very strange to me at the time. I later recognized this as an effect of the Questing Field. The living world understands intent and, oh, we have so much more power than we have been told. Any of us. Any of us has it and none of us has been told. Relearn and reknow.

“The other thing Gwydion said to me that evening, for it was evening as we all disbanded and he came to express his pride, was this, and I learned it well. I pass it on to those of you who listen now who do not touch my hands.

“Remember this of what I say and little else. ‘This knowledge changes lives: You have the power to do far more with a few, well-chosen words than you currently do with a great many,’ my beloved teacher said. Then, after a long pause, ‘Remember this particularly when you close a long event.’”

The sharp laughter from the people around shifted the dynamic of the group, as though they realized for the first time that they had somehow become an audience at a show they had not agreed to attend.

The old, old storyteller said, “Now, if you would, please return to your seats so I may continue my meal with my young friends.”

The other patrons wandered off, checking watches and phones, each a bit confused at a loss of time. Some strove to recapture complicated and textured thoughts that now escaped them like fragments of symbolic smells from a dream about either babies or Stonehenge.

Merlyn went on in softer tones. He realized he had been indulging himself when he should be getting to the point. It was tempting just to draw people in with the skill and spark bits of their consciousness awake just to make things happen. He had, at one time, experimented with it extensively but ultimately, he had found it a dead end. The allure of such manipulations once the Questing Field began to expand could be intoxicating. He steered his focus back to where it needed to be. He anchored with a breath, smiling lightly at his wholly human tendency to wander a path, occasionally distracted by the pleasures along the way.

“So, Ector raises the kid and I spend a lot of time around those parts, teaching him the basic tools of thought, the use of words to influence, the basic tenets of the Magics Linguistic, some sketchy bits of the Magics Metallic that I'd picked up, the Laws of Honor as expressed through the Rhymes, some of the Histories and so on.

“I think I know everything. I haven't been off the continent at this point, and I think I know everything. I haven't been to Asia or Africa, I don't even know the Americas exist beyond some stories from the Norsemen about a place across their sea that only appears in summer.

“I travel between visits. I meet an old lady who provides a complex telling. I spend some time with a darkly brilliant worker of the Magics Linguistic as well as the Magics Botanical, the Magics Musical and Vibrational. She's got some solid training in the Magics

Sensual and Glamorous. She later turns out to be the kid's half-sister. Before that, though, she helps me through a three-veil spell. Utilizing potent botanicals and densely structured linguistic inductions, she sends me. I see bits of the kid's future. I see him as King, uniting the Druids and the Dryads and the new Romans who've been wandering around and getting bossy and weird about what people are allowed to believe.

"Now, I know it is very fashionable to hold people accountable for past mistakes, that 'a product of one's time' just doesn't cut it right now. But I swear to you that I knew no better. I saw this boy that I loved, in vague visions, becoming a powerful force for unification in a tribal land that was already clotting around me into a warring, fragmented island and an equally unhappy swath of the mainland deeply connected in their genetic and migratory roots.

"I did what I thought was right. I gave the boy the one thing I could imagine that would be sure to bring peace and see his destiny achieved grandly. I utilized every skill I had in all the Magics. I called in experts to help in the process for the metallurgy, for the elemental infusions, for the sigil engravings. I traveled to find the right techniques, and the right technicians to build every part from pommel to point. Through all of it, as I travelled and toiled, I drew from the world around me, filtering all the power I could draw into this single construct. It was a forged construct of Iron and Carbon from a secret recipe so new it had not yet been named, but also it was a construct of magics I pulled through my core and pushed through the lens of my focused intent. Unsleeping, unyielding, wavering perhaps but never waning as Coreil pounded out the blade and Garwin stamped the signet seals into the pommel, I delivered the magic to ascertain a perfect fluidity of response and balance to

blade. I wrapped it lovingly in fire magics and air magics. I travelled far to have the symbols of the magics of distant lands included in its construction. I pleaded with gods and elementals, telling them of the dangers of a world fragmented by conflicting beliefs, that I had a plan to quell the disquiet and bring Mortal and Magic worlds together. They rushed to join this endeavor, to build a healthy, unified future under a single symbol of Man's power—of humanity's power to determine its own destiny. The dwarf-mined ore went into a forge abandoned by Vulcan to be shaped. It was cooled in the water of Nimue's lake.

“I endowed it with protective spells and defensive spells, with intuitive magics for tactic and strategy, for speed and resiliency. For the boy I loved, the boy I swore to protect, I created a weapon so powerful it haunts our legends to this day. I did this to allow him to better achieve his destiny. I was arrogant and foolish and young and so, so certain. But I did this thing. By taking on the Quest, by making right this one mistake of mine, we might save the world.”

Frank said, “Are you going back in time?” What might have been a dry jab came out far more as a slightly enthusiastic but wholly genuine inquiry.

Merlyn said, “Probably not. No.”

Frankie signaled for the waiter to bring the check.

Merlyn chuckled. He said, “I can cover the check.”

The younger man shook his head. “I don't really care what you can do. It is important to me that Vivica and I cover our own. I'm happy to cover yours as well.” He pulled out an ATM card and put it on the table as Merlyn pulled out his wallet, now grinning in precisely the way grizzled old crazy dudes and prosecuting attorneys almost never do.



He said, "How about this, you pay the tab for all of us on that card, and I'll cover the tip?"

Frankie studied his face and based on what he saw there in the man's earnest eyes, he said, "Fine. Okay."

As the waitress passed, Merlyn said, "Excuse me, Shelley?"

Shelley said, "What do you need, hon?"

Merlyn pulled a few bills from his wallet and handed them to her with the card. He said, "That's for you, and please put the entire table on this young man's card." He paused for a moment and then said, "How much do you suppose the total is for everyone's bill in the place?"

He saw her doing fast math in her head. He said, "You know what? Here." He pulled out significantly more cash from the wallet which hadn't seemed particularly bulky to start with. He handed the stack of bills, all hundreds to the waitress who accepted them, a bit stunned. He said, "Cover their tabs and whatever's left is yours. Or – if you split tips with the cooks and busboys or whatever, that too. You know. That's enough. Yeah?"

"Uh. Yeah. Thank you. Way more. Yes. Are you sure about this?"

"Oh, yeah. But ours? That must go on the kid's card. Do you know why, Shelley?"

"I—why which?"

"Our tab has to go on this young man's card because while he is not certain of my veracity and he is certainly not convinced that his little friend here should go anywhere with me that might involve a passport, he has already intuited a simple truth about honor and self-reliance at the start of a magnificent adventure."

“Well, thank you for the tip,” having little interest at that moment, with three thousand or so dollars in her hand, in the kind old man’s ramblings.

“Don’t tell the other customers ‘til we’re gone, if that’s all right?”

The waitress said, “Sure. I’ll be back in a minute with the slip for you to sign. . .” she looked at the card “Franklin?”

“Frankie.”

“Okay. Well, have a good grand adventure.”

“I intend to!” Merlin enthused.

The waitress headed to the cash register.

Frankie watched her go as he said, “You think we’re going to go on this grand adventure with you.”

Merlyn said, “I think you are, yes.”

Frankie watched the waitress and Merlyn could see it was not lascivious. He wondered what had the boy’s interest for so long a beat. He glanced past the young man to the reflection in the window. He was watching her run the counterfeit-testing pen over the bills.

Frankie nodded thoughtfully and said, “What do we think, Viv?”

Vivica said, “I think this man believes we’re going to find Excalibur.”

Merlyn said, “Oh, we *are* going to find Excalibur. And then we are going to destroy it.”

## FIVE



They emerged as a group into the misting city. Merlyn's huge silver car slipped up to the curb, silent as an Erté sculpture, as impressive as its owner's tipping habits.

The driver, a tall woman with professional courtesy—old enough to feel committed to the work, not an assistant or a temporary hire—came around from the driver's side at a trot. It was impossible to tell whether she shut the car off or left current trickling, awaiting the touch of an accelerator. Vivica tried to skip ahead in time to intersect her path, to get in a few words, but the woman had the door open too fast and looked past her toward Merlyn.

Frankie watched her fail to catch the woman's eye and then slide naturally through the door in the natural rhythm which one moves through a politely held door.

He followed her quickly into the wide, passenger's cab. A tiny drink table with cup-holder depressions left comfortable leg room for her to have slid in ahead of him. He took one of the backward facing bucket-style recliners to face her and feel fancy beyond measure with his back to the driver's seat.

The car smelled of leather and a kind of luxury that he knew Vivica found irritating. He saw it in her face. He saw her thinking fast. He saw her considering how to proceed. He changed his mind and sat beside her, hunch-lurching over and around little table.

She said softly, "Good. I want you reading him. Yeah?"

"We didn't talk to the driver."

"No." Then she put a finger to her lips to eavesdrop.

The driver said, "Plaza?"

"Not necessary!" He veritably chirped with enthusiasm. "They already have passports! Quick stop up at the young woman's apartment and we're off! Text Darryl to fuel up and be ready for you, my dear."

The woman said, "Merlyn, two grown up young people having passports is not the big thing you think it is."

"Sometimes it's hard to know."

"I know, Baby."

Vivica mouthed, "Baby?" at Frankie and he chuckled.

Merlyn joined them in the back, taking the smaller seat facing Frankie. He said, "You two may not be aware of how clear it is, but we are on a true and righteous path. The last time I tapped a Questing Field this strong, we raised an army and forged a nation."

Vivica said, "You and Arthur."

"Yeah." He pulled that weirdly slender billfold from an inside pocket and opened it. Frankie tried to catch a really good look at the wallet this time, but Vivica noticed and nudged him. He focused not on the man's eyes but on his forehead. For moments on his cheekbones.

This face was a strange one to read. Amiable, and open. Inviting, even.

The man said, "Here," and put a stack of bills into Frankie's hand. Frankie, fairly sure the bills were hundreds that would pass a restaurant's counterfeit test, continued to watch the man's face.

Merlyn with only the *most* earnest desire to express the precise words he spoke, without a hint of deception except a slight twitching of regret at moments when he felt he might not be clear and could not possibly fit into words everything he wanted to say, said, "The deeper into this we get, the more we will face obstacles. If you see an obstacle that can be overcome by throwing money at it, do that."

Frankie said, "Put this back. I don't want your money."

"Sorry. I can't put money back into it. That would blow up the whole construct."

Again, Frankie saw no deception in the man's face. The series of thoughts unexpressed flashed too fast for him to catch, but none of them had the taste of a lie.

From the front of the vehicle so new and luxurious it still smelled of soft-sell in a lounge with cappuccino, the driver shouted "Just take the money. It's an argument you can't win because it doesn't make any sense."

Frankie kept his eyes on Merlyn as he said, "well then, thank you, sir." and folded the wad of bills into a pocket without looking away from Merlyn. They rode in silence for a long moment.

Merlyn said, "That's Sofia." Frankie saw the man's first act of omission in the off-handed introduction. He saw sorrow and adoration and pain. He saw the anguish of the unconditional lover.

No. Not just an act of omission. An active act of omission, not just for lack of time or salience but for reasons that held apology and trepidation. Frankie understood more things about this man than he knew how to put into words, and he wished he could be as good as Vivica at just *thinking*. She could make the argument for anything make sense in words. She could explain anything. Any feeling, any idea.

Vivica said, "Your driver."

Frankie believed in the instinctive way that one knows which way the ball will bounce or which corner of the trash bag to tug on to settle the weight without splitting the seam, that Merlyn would look away from him to the wallet, and then over to Vivica to answer. He dared to look directly at the man's eyes.

"Among other things," Merlyn said, in that same, casually enthusiastic tone with which he seemed to address the world but as he did—

The ball hits a rock. The trash bag tears. Merlyn noticed the young man's gaze and looked directly toward them for just a moment. Frankie felt caught in a robbery.

Frankie felt the impulse to apologize, to drop his eyes. His great grandfather had told him three times, in the four years they'd shared the earth. You don't look them in the eye, the white men. It scares them and they can go mad. They're like dogs. You show respect and let them sniff at you all they want but don't look 'em in the eye and don't show fear. He felt sweat trickle down his back and Merlyn crinkled at the corners of his eyes, wholly misunderstanding Frankie's look. A tiny sound, way at the back of Frankie's head cackled maniacally as he realized that this lunatic believed Frankie was gazing at him in abject admiration.

The man kept his eyes on Frankie's as he handed a wad of bills off to Vivica and he nodded at him, encouraging him to hold his gaze and under the arrogant assumption of adoration was so much more. He saw the readiness to return any admiration or adoration offered. He saw apology and embrace.

Sofia shouted as drivers do to reach passengers while watching the road, but the car was so quiet she didn't really need to. "He loves me deeply and pays me well. I love him deeply and get him where he needs to go."

Frankie saw the joy the man took in hearing that she loved him deeply and he saw the other, weirder, family joke, slightly cruel barb joy when she said that she got him where he needed to go. He suddenly felt not as though he was in danger at all, but as though he might be intruding. He saw relationship history flickering by, intimacy.

He looked away

"This block, yeah?" Sofia asked.

Vivica said, "Yeah. Anywhere along the right is fine. Thanks."

Sofia pulled them up to the curb on the one-way street leaving enough room for traffic to pass.

The rising sun slanted down the blocks, just off-center at the end of the brick and cinder canyon. It turned sandstone to gold. As Vivica jumped out of the cab to run inside, her small frame cast the long shadow of a lanky giant. She crossed the sidewalk, took the steps up to the door two at a time while she produced her keys and got the right one extended to slip into the lock on the first try without slowing her roll.

Even from behind, watching through the car window, Frankie could see the grin on her face as she turned the key, pushed the door open with a shoulder, freed the key and turned inside her building, door closing behind her, with a choreographed grace. He found himself grinning along with her.

"What's going on there?" Merlyn asked.

Frank said, "I think she's enjoying the Questing Field." Although Merlyn had wanted to know what the boy had been thinking.

"That's not Questing Field. That's epigenetics at work, right there. In this martial arts class, she had a breakthrough in her awareness of chi. Now she plays with flow the way a child plays with balance, walking the curb's edge, hopping on one foot. The genetic potential lay latent, awaiting awakening."

"Like my . . ." he pointed vaguely toward his head.

"Intellect?" Merlyn suggested.



Frankie laughed. "No. No, my empathic awareness thing."

Merlyn burst into a wide grin. "Dig you, using big words like it's not a secret."

"Has anybody ever told you you're an asshole?"

"In more languages than are now known to all mankind."

Sofia said, "I've heard it happen in, like, five and I've only known him for—what?—seventeen and a half years. Ish."

A 9mm clap broke the deep quiet, echoing fast against the shining cavern walls.

SIX



The city that doesn't sleep responded not at all to the report of a firearm at sunrise.

Frankie, raised in a world of school shootings, turf wars and protected police who often disapproved of black people in expensive cars, curled down into the seat.

That was good. He had no training for this sort of thing and hiding would more likely keep him alive to wonder about his decisions later than anything else he could do.

She had the front door half open for maximum cover and knew the shot hadn't hit the vehicle but she wanted eyes on the shooter and she wasn't even sure of the direction of fire. She scanned the far area behind the vehicle and to the right, first, knowing she'd have some cover behind the half-closed front door but before she'd even had a chance to adjust to light outside the light-reactive tinted windows, Merlyn had slipped out into the silent street with his hands up but in that eccentric, welcoming way he had, as though he was surrendering to

some Royal Army as a mere formality to be handled swiftly and with a minimum of fuss. He shouted, "Sophia, stay in the car. Whomever you are, come out and tell me your complaint."

Sophia said, "No. You get *back* in the car, you insane man. Someone is shooting."

Then someone across the street shouted, "Both of you get back in your car! I'm not shooting at you!" The man, steadying an arm across the top of his car door, his face obscured by a trilby hat, the internationally recognized official hat of the pretentiously effete, fired twice more in fast, controlled succession and she turned to follow his upward angle directly toward the building into which Vivica had just enthusiastically danced.

Sofia barked, "He's not shooting at us! Look!" It took everything she had not to shriek the words. She tried to maintain the professional calm of a pilot in distress, but she could hear the slight constriction in her throat, the speed with which the words came out.

Crawling from the top of the building's roof, a swarm of spiders moved in the early light like a seething inkblot, Rorschaching toward the only open window on the building's street-facing front. A light beyond that window flicked on and Vivica appeared inside, wholly unaware of the danger, the impossible, wall scaling danger of the spiders, dozens of them, each the size of a cocker spaniel.

The man fired again, either missing entirely or failing to hit an important spider organ. Merlyn yelled, "Pop the back hatch!" like he had a plan for an occasion like this and rather than standing still and screaming she reached in and pressed the trunk release button with the open-trunk iconography on it. When Merlyn shouted, "Frankie, you're gonna want to see this!" Then, "Hey! Stop shooting at them! I got this!" she let the front door swing open and sat sideways in her cockpit, feet on the curb.

Frankie did not wait to see what Merlyn wished to show him, though. He vaulted from the car, onto the sidewalk up to the locked door and threw a shoulder into it. It held against him.

Merlyn said, "They're gonna be sorry they didn't get to see this." He really said it to himself, but his natural inclination was to speak in his storyteller's voice when he had a particularly salient thought. Maybe he meant for Sofia to hear it. Frankie threw himself against the door again.

It didn't matter. She had one responsibility now. Only one. She sighed and moved to the back of the Bentley.

Frankie's third strike broke the doorframe around the deadbolt and he was in, charging off toward his girlfriend. She liked that kid and resented him for seeming so young and then remembered that grown up people don't like to be thought of as kids.

Merlyn pulled the crowbar/crank-handle part of the tire repair jack from the compartment and lifted above his head, shouting, "This'll do it! I've got this!"

Sofia, unable to take her eyes off the spiders that seemed not only to be coming in increasing numbers as well as varying sizes, said in her calmest, most authoritative tone, "Mr. Taliesin, among my other jobs is protector. I strongly urge you to get back into the car and let me drive you away from here."

"You are incredibly good at your job. You have the best driving skills and protective instincts. I love you more than I have ever loved any of the many, many women I have loved. Now watch me do *my* job!"

Then he mumbled something she did not understand and banged the iron tool against the priceless car so that it rang in his hand like a mournful bell.

He threw her an infuriating grin and walked toward the building with the impossible monsters climbing down toward him.

SEVEN



Marlyn moved toward the spiders, holding the ringing steel above his head. He muttered, reciting old, old lore, gathering information about spiders as he did so, recalling their unique attributes and elemental allegiances. In the memory forest of his inner world, he raced the strands of leaves, finding the poem of the Brothers and the Deadly Insects, then the one with the great spiders who guarded the well. He sought out source material lost to the elements long ago, refreshing knowledge he had never needed. The techniques he had learned late in antiquity served him now. He had learned the skills of retention and now needed only trace back the magical strand to each bit of text, sifting through mentions of spiders in history, biology, zoology, lore and legend as easily as one may move from kitchen to carnival in a

dream. He let a long breath connect him to the world around him. As he reached upward with his mind, he reached downward with his the cold iron.

He felt the cool minds of the over-grown spiders.

His right hand wrapped around the old school jack-handle. He dragged the heavy tool along the pavement, sending up a momentary screech of friction to draw the creatures' attention.

The spiders stopped to take him in far below them. He had no ambient magic to work with, but he should be able to do this on his own, generating what he needed through the energy of tone.

Merlyn lifted the tip to leave the metal vibrating with a clear, singular sound. He found the tone with his own voice and pressed the air out of his lungs in a sustained drone, an audible, extended thread along which he sent a clear thought. He connected the simple sound to the safety of the tense strands of a spider's web. Before his breath waned, he tapped the tire iron again, to renew its vibration, drew a deep, silent breath and repeated the exercise. He felt his gentle spell touching the simple minds near the top of the wall.

Another gunshot almost broke his focus, irritating him.

He heard Sofia trotting away from him, toward the gunman, shouting a friendly de-escalation. He let that slip from his awareness. He let a light smile play about his lips, enjoying the comfort of having a partner he could trust.

He imagined keeping the spiders there, drowsing in the transmitted sense of absolute comfort. He swaddled them in the secure, calming vibration of an undisturbed home, relaxed, half dreaming of silk-wrapped lunches.

He closed his eyes, his intent to keep the spiders sleeping, to protect his new friends from the threat held strong in the vibration. A loud, splashy pop unlike the gunfire broke his concentration. He opened his eyes to find the sound had been a falling spider hitting the sidewalk.

Merlyn dropped the tone and looked up. He released the thread of the spell as he silenced the improvised instrument with his free hand. The realization came too late though. The sleeping spiders, in succession so swift that it seemed a fast-spreading contagion, lost their sticky grips and plummeted. A brief, ugly rain of soft muzzles and huge eyes exploded with a series of water balloon splooshes of blood and white goo.

Sofia said, "The guy who's been following us? His name is Percy." She fumbled with Percy's wallet for a moment putting back his government ID. The feigned clumsiness gave Merlyn the moment he needed to glance at. She gave him the light nod that said she was pretty sure it was legit. Maybe that it matched his driver's license. Just that she had general confidence in it. It wasn't a detailed nod, as far as he could tell.

"The one from before?"

"Yeah. Same car, at least. He picked us up after the one from before set off that crash we drove through on the way to the park."

Merlyn slowed for a moment to quiet some stirring grief over the killing of the spiders. He said, "Why have you guys been following us, Mr. I Kill Spiders on Sight?"

"You just killed a whole hell of a lot of them yourself, Mr. Taliesin."

Sofia said, "He's trying to intimidate you with the casual proof that he knows your name. After he's been following you."



"I saw that. You think I should call him Mr. Clovis to return the favor?"

Sofia handed the man his wallet, closed, ID re-secured inside. Sofia said, "I'm eighty-three percent certain Mr. Taliesin didn't intend to kill them."

"What?"

"She's right. I was trying to put them into a gentle sleep until our friends got out here and we could all drive away."

"That's insane."

"You just fired a gun at a building full of slumbering New Yorkers."

"At giant fucking spiders!" the man shouted much too loudly.

That finally aroused some interest from the deeply never-sleeping city as someone shouted, "Will you keep it the fuck down, assholes?"

Merlyn spoke calmly, seriously, rivetingly. He said, "Percy Clovis. You work for an intelligence agency so buried in the bureaucracy that most of the people in the Legislature don't know you exist."

"There is no such agency."

"Of course. You notice how you called me Mr. Taliesin and then the young lady . . ." he paused to let the man fill in her name if he wanted to, then went on, ". . . did as well? That's because she would enjoy, as would I, discovering in the proper order and in proper time, as much as we possibly can about you, but she does not wish to reveal more about us than she must. She protected my first name in case you don't already know it. Do you know why she did that?"

“Tell me.” The man had taken on the bored demeanor of the cop who will let the suspect talk himself into a cell. Merlyn admired the man's hat. It was like a fedora, but with the smaller brim that implied he might, at any moment, do something inspired by early Fosse as rediscovered by 90s Wade Robson.

Merlyn said, “Because she is protective of me and she knows I can be idiosyncratically trusting of anyone who shows up in my sphere of influence and awareness. She believes that darkness guides the hearts of all men at all times. She was taught early that you cannot change the world and she came to believe it, that she shouldn't talk to strangers, that a penny saved is a penny earned. I was never taught these things. I believe you may be caught up in something I call a Questing Field because in a crucial moment you stepped out of the shadows and made your presence known. So, without intimidation or powerplay: Hi. I'm Merlyn Taliesin. You've been following me. I think you may be integral to my plans, but I simply cannot yet know why. I trust too much. She trusts not at all. I would like to know, sir, who, exactly, you are.”

The man stood, gun still drawn, pointed downward toward the pavement, finger off the trigger. Sofia abruptly stepped toward him, controlled his gun-hand, and disarmed him.

He glared at her.

She shrugged, almost apologetically. “Who are you?” She released the clip, emptied the chamber, pushed the ejected shell back into the top slot in the magazine, checked the breach—visually and then with her finger—and set all the components on the hood of the Bentley in a way that suggested to Percy Clovis that she did not treat the six-figure vehicle as something precious. It suggested to Merlyn that she was performatively showing him that

she, too, could treat the car as though she had no concerns about its value or appearance. He let himself chuckle.

Percy watched this simple task made Zen by her practiced skill. He looked to Merlyn and made eye contact for the first time. He saw that the subject of his surveillance, to whom he had wholly blown his cover, asked in earnest.

The man struggled for a moment with the question.

Merlyn saw the wash of memories sweep through the crease between the operative's eyebrows. He imagined having the talent to understand them.

"How long have you got?" Percy Clovis glanced up toward the open, lighted window. "cause everything you just said... it all connects to some very strange thoughts I've been having lately."

Sophia rolled her eyes and sighed.

Merlyn said, "They might have some things to discuss, and I certainly just bought them the time to do it"

"I will tell you who I am." The way he said it made it absolutely clear to Merlyn that this man was about to tell a story.

Merlyn loved stories. Merlyn knew the importance of stories. Sometimes, Merlyn was wise enough to know when it was time to shut up and hear someone else's story. He listened.

## SEVEN



“A bright young man comes into a major intelligence agency. He’s pretty sure this is the job for him. He loves his country. He mistakenly believes that it still grows toward its stated promises of equality and so on. He has tried to live well his entire life. He shows up wanting only to do good. He faces the same rigorous testing series as everyone else. He goes through the psych evals. And then there’s this thing—happens to all the recruits. We—they—I—”

He stopped for a moment. His lips twitched a couple of times almost into a smile and then he went cold again. He said, “So they sit this young man down across from an official looking woman in a lab coat.

“She takes him through the standard questionnaire. She shows him the ink blots and makes notes on his interpretations. She asks him about his ambitions. Her warmth seeps through her professionalism. He feels increasingly comfortable and relaxed. Even though they’re sitting in front of a panel of observers, she sets him completely at ease. She touches his knee. She helps him relax.”

“A simple induction. Yeah?”

“Yeah.” The spy named Percy nodded to Sofia. He went on. “She says, ‘You once did something – I know you think it is a secret and that it will shock me, but I assure you that is not the case. I need you to tell me how you remember that event. This is not about me confirming the details or running an investigation on the incident. This is purely for the sake of my understanding of your psyche. Do you understand?’

“The kid feels a wave of vertigo. You can see him gripping the arms of his chair, beginning to tremble. *She knew? How could she know? How could anyone know? They’re the Agency. They find things out. It’s what they do. But if they knew, why was he here? Why hadn’t he washed out already?* He keeps starting to speak, you know, but it’s as if other thoughts keep interfering before he gets a half a word into framing an idea.

“So she coaxes him. ‘Let’s start easy with a couple of incontrovertible, neutral facts. You were . . .’

“And he croaks out the word ‘Fourteen,’

“She nods, but maybe he thinks a hint of amusement flashes in her eyes. ‘That’s right. You were fourteen. And you were where?’

“Then he just opens up. That happens. Every time. They start saying the thing they’ve kept hidden and suddenly they’re just blabbering and blabbering. It’s not like they tell a story. It’s almost like they’re vomiting a secret, right? Expunging a poison.”

“Sure,” Merlyn said, a hint of derision at the corners of the word. “Plus, of course, she’d already opened him to suggestion, led him into a memory, touched his mind with reasons to accept the request and then triggered a psychic regenerative exploration for exploitive purposes, so I’m sure that happened with most of the recruits, right?”

Percy felt the judgement in the man’s tone. He narrowed his eyes deciding to let go the challenge and get on with the story. “He says the carnival came into town every year and set up in the parking lot of the Spendworth with the thrill rides and the rigged games in grimy booths. He invited Marianne Delmacher and she consented to join him there.

“He wanted to start going out with her, but he already felt guilty because he mostly wanted to go out with her so he could stop mooning over some girl he’d been friends with since the second grade.

“He’d never been on a proper date, and he wanted to do it right. He wanted to impress her. So, he got there an hour early, paid for entry and accepted his five complimentary tickets, each good for one game or three for a ride. He did not pay a dollar each for extra tickets. He toured the grounds so that he would be able to show Marianne around as her host and protector.

“He got hungry, but he only had a few dollars in his pocket and a hot dog cost three, so he figured he’d go without. A moment later though he passed a booth that was holding a hot dog eating contest. Admission was one game ticket. He sat down at the competitors’ table. A

carny put a steamer tin full of hotdogs and buns in front of each competitor. A bell rang and people around him started wolfing down hot dogs. Some dipped them in glasses of water to soften the buns. This kid ate one hotdog at a leisurely pace, took a sip of his water and after a moment, ate a second one.

“The carnny shouted ‘TIME!’ The man moved along the line, looking into the trays, counting the remainders. When he reached the kid’s tray, he cocked his head to the side and winked at the boy as though they shared a secret. It was a conspiratorial wink. That made a huge impression on the kid. He said it three, maybe four times. I don’t have the recording. ‘a conspiratorial wink. Conspiratorial.’

“The truth of what he had done crashed in on him. He had gamed the system, taken advantage of the circumstance. He had gotten two hot dogs for a one-dollar ticket rather than paying the proper price. It was as good as stealing. The winner received a big blue stuffed elephant. This guy walked from the stage, head bowed in shame.

“He showed Marianne around in a morose fog. Every time he passed the concessions stand, he felt he should be stopping to confess. Every stranger eating a hot dog reminded him of his crime.

“Marianne asked him what was wrong, but he couldn’t tell her. He could not speak aloud this thing that he had done. He could not admit the awful truth.

“They never went out again. When they passed one another in the hallway at school he avoided eye contact.

“She slid notes through the ventilation slots in his hallway locker. He ignored them. To reunite with her, he explained, could lead to only three possible outcomes: He would keep

his secret and their relationship would have a cloud hanging over it; he would confess his secret and she would hate him for being a dishonest, self-serving thief; or she would not care at all, put her own pleasure in a relationship over the honor of the boy with whom she was involved and he would be unable to love her.

“Better to bear the shame of his misdeed than to burden this girl with knowledge that could only lead to tragedy. Besides, he knew he really loved his old friend more than he could love any place-keeper replacement, no matter how wonderful and chaste and decent she was. He would strive, from then on, to be honest about his intentions, to be that man he wished he could be for the girl he truly loved, but the stain on his honor remained.

“He finishes his story, surprised to find tears damp on his cheeks.

“The Examiner pushes a box of Kleenex closer to him on the desk. She says, ‘Kid, I think we’re going to be able to use you here.’

“The boy is confused, freaked out. He says, ‘I don’t understand. Didn’t you hear anything I just told you? I’m a thief! A cheater!’

“She said that they understood, but that did not mean he could not serve. “He said he would have to think about it and he left, trembling.

“I could see everything that was going on in his head. Sort of. He might have said some of it aloud. What did it say about his employers if they knew of such an incident and were still prepared to hand him an ID and a position of legal authority, government clearance? Do you understand?”

“That boy, I take it, was you?”



“What? No. Very no. I do not have that kind of relationship with my past misdeeds. And mine are significantly worse than a couple of discount hotdogs. But it affected me. I was on the panel. Watching. I was weirdly moved by his story. You know how you hear someone telling their own thing, but you hear a story about a whole memory you have, kind of at the same time?”

“Yes,” Merlyn said. He grinned at Percy, nodding, wholly on board with this story.

“I had—when I was a kid, I had some pretty strong ideas about how to be a good person. My parents’ half-believed in Greek Orthodoxy but mostly thought of it as a social gathering and a diversion. When I left all that behind, I made a lot of rules about following one’s conscience regardless of circumstance. So, I joined the Navy. I thought it was noble and selfless. Or I thought it looked noble and selfless.

“Watching this kid—this boy, really—I mean, he was a grown man, a grown, young man. But he was so much older already than I was when I was joined the navy. When I was his age, I’d figured out that the system I served was flawed. I had figured out how to flatter and befriend for light duty, how to study and train and impress for advancement. When the offer came to shift into intelligence, I grabbed it. Landbound time, safe, paid, secure sounded good to me. So now I’m in Naval Intelligence and I start to realize the whole institution is made up of lazy people like me, some corrupt, others just incompetent or stupid. The whole thing is clearly rotten, but by now I’ve been vetted. I’m military. I have clearance. I’m on the team with the people I was sure were the good guys. I’m doing well at my job. But this young man reminds me that it is noble to retain ideals. It seemed to me somehow genuinely selfless. As a kid I had a conscience that guided me. I’d allowed it to be whittled away. I

have been thinking about it a lot lately. I have been. . .changing. And changing the way I function in my workplace.”

“Because an applicant reminded you of your childhood conscience.”

“Yes.”

“Huh,” Merlyn said.

Sofia said, “Do you remember the young man’s name? Maybe we need to find him for our questing party.”

Merlyn said, “It’s supposed to be capitalized. Questing Party.”

“How do you hear that?”

Merlyn shrugged. He said, “I don’t know. It’s a Questing Party. Lower case it sounds like a themed dance night where people wear pith helmets or LARPing costumes.”

Sofia said, “I kind of get that.”

Merlyn said, “She’s right, though. Do you know his name?”

“I do.”

Merlyn paused to find out if the man would tell him, realized he would not. “It would seem a breach of ethics to reveal the name of this man after telling me his deepest shame.”

“Yes. Also, a breach of security.”

Behind Merlyn, Frankie emerged from the building.

“Do you know what happened to him?”

Percy adjusted his hat, his mind running at high speed, reviewing everything he’d just said. He said, “I do. Why?”

Frank bounded down the stairs and announced, "She's gonna be a minute. She's—Oh! Hey man!"

"Frank! Hi. I did not realize that was you in the back seat. This is a—coincidence. Yes?"

"Merlyn! This is—crap. Sorry. Are you undercover or something?"

The spy laughed. "Really not, I guess. You?"

"Nah. I never went back inside. Merlyn, this is Percy Clovis. I applied for a gig at a . . . company where he worked."

Merlyn grinned at him. He looked like a bit of an idiot. He said, "No kidding."

Percy said, "Your file said you were very enthusiastic about getting in."

Frankie turned to him, but he went silent for a bit, remembering. He seemed almost to be reading words in the air before him. He said, "I really was. But then . . ." he shifted his focus to Merlyn. He said, "They put me through this whole interview and background check process, then they do this weird head game where they literally sit me down and make me confess to the worst thing I have ever done. They imply that it's necessary for security reasons, about protecting us from ethical vulnerabilities and so on but then—A whole panel of people and I'm sitting with this one woman and it's clear I gotta do this or they won't let me work there, they say they have all the facts already and I'm just verifying for them. So, I figure it's about making sure I'm not hiding anything. So I dig deep. I dig high school football deep, right?"

Merlyn said, "You told the truth?"

"All of it. The worst of it. I finish telling it. I'm weeping. I'm crying. I see this woman studying me, taking in my reaction to the story she's just heard, and I realize that I'm wrong

about all of it. They didn't even *know* about this. It was a con game to get this information, this confession out of me. I'm registering all of this. I haven't even started yet. Before I'm even working for these people, they've been lying to me about everything. They've been withholding information from me and gathering intel on me.

"Then this woman, says, 'Oh, we're going to be able to use you,' and my gut just said, get the hell away from this place. These people just found out your worst shit and nobody said, 'Hey, maybe we can hook you up with someone to work out some of that self-hatred.' You get me? Nobody comforted me as I wept. They just tricked me into exposing my greatest vulnerability and saw the gullibility that made me manipulable."

"That's not exactly what they saw," Percy said.

Merlyn caught the eyes of the newest entry to the Questing Party. Percy nodded to him waiting for Merlyn to announce that he had just revealed the full story of this man's greatest shame.

Merlyn said to Frank, "The Questing Field draws us together. He just told me of a young man who reminded him what it was to follow his conscience."

"That memory of you was important to me, Franklin."

Frankie said, "Well, glad to be of service, then." He looked around at the spider carnage. He said, "What the hell happened here?"

Merlyn said, "I tried to put the spiders to sleep so you two would have time to get your passports. I accidentally killed them all."

"We have to get this cleaned up."

Merlyn had questions, but the young man was already uncoiling a pressure hose from the little access door at the side of the stoop. He screwed the endpiece onto the building's exterior spigot and went to work spraying the grotesquery with a tightly focused stream powerful enough to break up the soft stuff and push around the carapace bits. He carefully sluiced all of it into the gutter.

The pressurized flow echoed off the pavement and the buildings, making conversation impossible.

Once the noise concluded, Merlyn said, "Your landlord real strict about magical spider guts on the sidewalk?"

Frank said to Percy, "He thinks he's funnier than he is. Welcome aboard! You seem like a good man."

Percy said, "What?"

Merlyn smiled broadly, openly.

Frank said, "He told you about the whole thing, right? The Questing Field. The magic sword. All of it?"

Percy said, "What?"

Merlyn said, "Elements and personalities coalesce around a single goal. The fearless, adventurous spirit upstairs, her protective adoring giant with a history of exceptional honor, now this... this... modern-day G-man with his reawakened conscience and his rash readiness to throw lead at anything that startles him." His manner was performative but also directly intentional.

Percy tried to imagine what point he was trying to drive home to his driver with such improbable urgency.

Sofia sighed.

Merlyn threw her a shrug.

“Did you say, ‘magic sword?’” Percy asked.

“I did!”

Merlyn looked up at the open window. It was no longer the only lighted one. The earliest risers had begun emerging from their buildings, moving toward the avenue where the busses and subway entrances waited. He said, “How long does it take to grab a couple of passports?”

“I’ve got the passports,” Frank said. “You’re not going to believe what’s going on in there.”

Merlyn closed his eyes slowly, a parent holding onto the last vestiges of calm. He said, “Try me.”

## EIGHT



“Check it out:

“I see the spiders headed toward Viv’s place, and I head in to get her.

“I’m taking the steps three at a time and I’m deep in my head, right? ‘cause this has been a weird fucking night already, and now there’s giant spiders. Also, I’m thinking about whether I’ve got a lot of adrenaline going or it’s ‘cause of your whole Questing Field but I’m racing up these stairs like gravity is just a myth we’ve chosen to believe in.

“So now I realize I’m running up the stairs at an improbable speed, but also because of what you were saying about me maybe being smart, I notice that I’m having all those

thoughts at the same time. I'm running fast but my brain is running so much faster it feels like I'm in slow motion.

"I hear more gunshots outside and I have a second to wonder who the hell showed up shooting.

"I get to Vivica's apartment. She's left the door ajar, 'cause she's just going in for the passports. I push it open. One of those spiders was already creeping in. It was wild. I was still in that hyper-aware state, you know. So, I had time to take in the weird, back-barbed legs and the huge, faceted eyes as it felt its way into the room.

"Vivica hadn't seen it yet. Her focus was on the drawer where she'd put our passports. I didn't want to freak her out, so I said, 'Hey, Viv. Listen—' and she turned toward me instead of toward the window which was good for her state of calm, but I suddenly wondered if the thing could jump. So, I kept talking while I stepped forward and drew her away from the window. 'I know you don't like for me to kill spiders, but I don't think I can catch this one under a Solo cup.'

"I was keeping it easy, you know, talking slow and calm as I moved her just past me and stepped toward the spider. I got my knife out, but I didn't know how I was going to fight the thing. I don't know how fast it is, or if it's venomous or what.

"It stops and it kind of looks at me. It tries to skitter around to my right, and I stay between the spider and Viv, and she says, 'Don't you dare!' and then she moves past me toward the giant spider, with her fist out at arm's length like she's meeting a friend's pit bull. She says, 'Stop it, Frankie. Look at those eyes.'



“So, I do that. I just—when she tells me to, I just shift out of the whole ‘protect Viv from the deadly spider, adrenaline-rush’ mindset and into the place where I know what people aren’t saying aloud. I looked at its eyes.

“They’re weird, right? I mean, they’re not round. They’re sort of . . . soccer ball-ey. And all black so it feels like they’re looking at you from all directions at once. But once I looked at the eyes, it didn’t matter that its face didn’t do expressions I know. I could see fear and curiosity and confusion and literally nothing else.

“It moved toward Vivica as cautiously as she moved toward it. It tasted her, or just tested her with its mandibles. Just gently, until she said, ‘Ouch! Too hard!’ and then it released her hand. She touched the spot behind its eyes, and she scratched it and I’ll be damned if the thing didn’t just lower its face and nuzzle into her shoulder.

“Then there was a loud noise from the street, and it turned to look toward the window for a second and Viv said, ‘What is it, Smedley? What do you hear?’

“I said, ‘Viv, we’re going on an adventure with a crazy dude. You can’t have a pet giant spider right now.’”

Merlyn raised his hand and cheerfully announced, “I’m the crazy dude!”

Nobody acknowledged it and Frankie went on, “She said, ‘His name is Smedley, and it’s too late. I love him. We’ve bonded. He’s my emotional support giant spider and they have to let him on the plane with us.’

“This sound came from outside, loud. Like . . . you know when some asshole at a party decides to tune a guitar, but his ear is for shit so he keeps playing two almost-identical notes, but he never gets them quite to be the same? It was like that.

“But Smedley just goes all relaxed. I’m looking into this creature’s eyes, and I see it go from terrified but intrigued to entirely comfortable and genial. It nudges Viv, pushing her out of a crouch and onto her ass and it literally crawls into her lap. The spindly legs are bumping against her as it settles its big old spider butt on her thighs and then it folds up all its legs and it goes to sleep. Its eyes don’t close, ‘cause they don’t have lids, apparently. But it definitely just zones out.

“Vivica finds all of this—seriously—all of it, hilarious and delightful. She’s sitting there cross-legged on the floor, laughing and scratching the sleeping spider. She’s petting it. She’s talking quietly to it.

“She tosses me the passports and shouts over the noise, ‘Go ahead. I’ll be down in a minute.’

“But I’m not leaving her alone with this thing. I mean, yeah, once I calmed down, I could see that it was just scared like—you know—all of us. But still, I’m not just walking away. I still feel like I gotta be ready to protect her. So, I just stood there.

“I realized I had snatched the passports out of the air, one after the other, with my left hand, without ever looking away from Viv and the spider and there was no need for ‘good toss,’ ‘great catch,’ ‘cause it was so totally natural. I put ‘em in my pocket, but I didn’t come downstairs.

“The noise stops. I say, ‘Viv, come on. We have to go.’

“Smedley wakes up. He stretches. He puts two legs around her neck for a moment, looking at her, and then he unfolds from her lap and steps back to watch her, and she tells it to sit. It doesn’t do anything, so she says it again and then gently bends a couple of its legs

for it and it sits down. She jumps up and down, excited and pleased and the spider jumps up. It turns around in a tight happy circle. She said, 'Sit!' and the fucking thing sits.

"She runs to the little kitchen area she's got up there. She pulls a package of baloney from the meat drawer and tears a slice in half to give as a reward. She says, 'Look how smart he is!' and then she said, 'Tell them I'll be down in a minute. I have to make sure he's clear on 'sit' 'stay' and 'come' before we come outside.'

"So, she'll be down in – I don't know – how long does it take to teach a smart giant spider three commands?"

Percy said, "Can we go back to the magic sword?"

NINE



Sofia parked in short-term parking. Percy slipped into the nearest parking spot he could find and caught up to the group as they walked toward the poorly-marked pathway from parking lot to terminal. As they waited for the traffic light to let them cross, the spy stood beside Merlyn in silence for a moment.

Merlyn said, "Glad you joined us."

"Glad you invited me."

Merlyn waited a moment, then said, "Say it. You'll feel better."

Percy held out for the barest of moment, "I called in that I'm now travelling with the subject and that we'll be flying to Heathrow. Right?"

"I figured you'd call in everything you knew."

"You're not mad about that?"

"You're still on the clock."

Sofia chimed in. "He can be weirdly forgiving."

Merlyn said, "This isn't forgiveness. The man's done nothing wrong. He's doing his job. He's keeping track of my whereabouts for his non-existent agency."

"He's joined the Questing Party, Merlyn. Doesn't that require some kind of loyalty or something?"

Merlyn said, "Nope! He's within the Sphere of Influence, involved in events, making choices, and still entirely entitled to explore his own convictions and ethics and to take the actions he feels are right."

She rolled her eyes at his cheery pomposity. "You've started capitalizing 'Sphere of Influence' haven't you?" The light changed.

"See? You can hear it!" he countered in the crosswalk.

Sofia kissed Merlyn briefly and slipped off through a small side entrance for employees or maintenance workers.

The rest of the group strode through the wide, sliding glass doors, looping masks over their ears.



People turned to look and continued to gape.

Partly, the Questing Field drew attention by its very nature. Partly, the group drew attention. In a space full of tense families gathered in informal pods of similar-looking people, several only half-visible over their protective masks, the questing party stood out.

Merlyn had pulled on a black, cloth mask and walked at the front of the group, back straight in his long black expensive coat. This coat had been made many, many years earlier and given to Merlyn as a gift. Merlyn hadn't known most of its properties at the time. He still wasn't sure he knew all its potential capacities. His instructor had said, "I'm giving you a coat. It's special. If you don't pick at it, it will last a lifetime." Merlyn hadn't known what he meant, which was just as well. If he had known of all the magic woven into the garment in the desperate days after he infused Excalibur, he might have torn the thing apart for the energies it contained. He would have destroyed it for the mere possibility that he might have a bit more magic to throw at some ill-considered goal, the junkie musician who sells an instrument for a fix. The coat had never been out of fashion, changing subtly, either never fraying or self-repairing. That magic alone was beyond his reckoning, although knowing it was possible—or once had been—gave him clues as to what had once been feasible for a skilled workman with enough available material. He marveled at the vast wealth of

possibility lost to his stupidity. As much as he longed to study it closely, he began to understand the warning. These workings were awfully delicate and complex. He would not pick at it. He might look at it closely, but he would not dismantle the edges of the construct to see its workings. Sometimes, when he needed to be unseen, or at least unnoticed, the coat turned boring or helped him slip into shadow. Right now, though, energized by the Questing Field, it drew attention in the way a coat can when it acknowledges its own magnificence. It flared a bit as though Merlyn walked into a stiff breeze.

Just behind him, Percy and Frank held a side-by-side pace, each giving off his own vibe. Merlyn could feel their footsteps falling into a naturally resonant synchronization on the tiled entryway before the carpeted corridors. He happily caught their rhythm knowing that, in the modern vernacular they must surely appear, with the wonderful hero at the back, like a fabulous gathering of spectacle!



Frank focused on the back of Merlyn's head. Vaguely, as a peripheral blur, he knew people surrounded them, looked toward them or at them. If he didn't start looking back at them, everything would be okay. Unguarded faces, even just eyes over Covid masks, fed him too much information.

He remembered seeing an advertisement once, he did not know what it was for but a whole bus-stop poster had been filled with the recognizable logos of internationally known corporations. The Swoosh, the Golden Arches, the A-to-Z Smile of Amazon, row after row. At first, he had looked them over trying to see how many he knew. Then he tried looking at them simply as graphics without attaching their meanings.

He found he could not.

If he knew an icon, he knew what company or what product it represented instantly. He had a feeling about each one, too, a familiarity, maybe some affection based on a childhood memory or resentment based on a vague awareness of child labor in Asia. He noted that his mind had been deliberately tampered with to associate positive feelings with each one and to dismiss or minimize negative ones. It was a few minutes of thinking at most, staring at that bus stop poster but it had felt as though he did hours of contemplation. It seemed he had stumbled into an act of abject evil, though he could not figure out what made it feel so very wrong. He thought about the possibility of a literal Satan like the one at Nana's church.

Then he remembered that man proves capable, time and again, of manufacturing enough evils without Hell's help. These deliberate manipulations of his preferences, careful imprints on his unconscious mind, were not the calculated result of evil or conspiracy; they came as the result of decades of serious deliberate parallel research at thousands of companies, these manipulations. They came as a byproduct of corporate evolution as the larger organism. Intending only to survive through constant growth, the corporate entity learned what fed it profits. Suddenly the codified triggers of advertising appeared vulgar in their demands on his attention. Every logo spoke of implanted memories, fed to him during half-noticed breaks in



his entertainments. Why did he feel more warmly toward an oil company that cleaned up some ducks it had harmed than about some of his own family?

It was that moment that had led him a few days later to realize that, once he saw how transparent people's faces were, he could not stop seeing it.

He found himself perpetually bombarded with the complex series of thoughts they unknowingly expressed. Just as he could not block out the associations to the logos on that sign, he realized that he could not see a face without taking in all the information conveyed.

He did not seek micro-expressions. Most of the time he couldn't say exactly what tension told him what, but he knew a lot of it immediately and more with time. Whether it was the asymmetrical smile or the slight narrowing of the eyes made no difference. He knew the thought each carried or concealed without knowing the details of how he had perceived it. It had become exhausting.

While his intent was to avoid taking in the faces all around him with their flying fears and their secret family dynamics, his refusal to look about gave him the appearance of a man singular in his determination and his certainty.

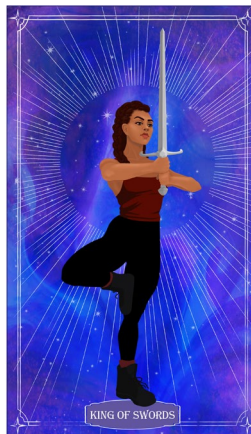


In perfect step with Frank though not in any ritualized or practiced sort of way, Percy took in everything. Training he had left in the field fifteen years earlier when he moved into the City Office had sparked back to life recently when he'd started volunteering for task forces and active assignments again. Bringing his hyper-alert, vigilant mind back on-line kept him on a light testosterone buzz.

He clocked a couple of likely operatives as he moved with this group through the parting crowds. He saw two whom he knew by name. When one of them spotted him, he nodded tersely and let a slight squint imply that he was deep undercover. He looked to the young man beside him to see if he'd noticed, but Frank was locked into some hyper focused state and wasn't showing any signs of having seen it. He kept an eye on the kid for a few steps, making sure he wasn't going to pass out or something. He could see the pulse at Frank's throat, a little fast but not freaking out. Sweat beaded on his forehead though, despite the air conditioning. Then he resumed his tactical scan of the space they moved through. He wasn't entirely clear why, but he knew he had a mission and that every time he tried to call it his 'assignment' it felt wrong in his head. Since this guy next to him had

reminded him that it was possible to make conscience driven decisions, he had felt different. He had been confused a lot of the time. He kept making choices that seemed out of character. Although it had led him here and this seemed somehow right. Maybe he would have found his way here anyway. It mattered little.

Moving through an airport, taking in information, keeping up with Merlyn who walked with surprisingly swift strides, the skills, the habits, the behaviors that had made him feel like a hero for those first few years on foreign assignment re-emerged, now infused with an effortless authority.



Several steps behind Frank and Percy, Vivica, maybe five two if she let out her braids, carried a huge spider in her arms. The woman cradled the creature. Two of its spikey weird legs wrapped around her neck. The rest of it bent up into a complicated version of the Kindergarten on the Carpet pose under its surprisingly small body supported by the girl's arm. It twisted about a bit trying to take in all directions with its dark, faceted eyes.

She sang softly to it, soothingly, but in the cavernous space of the ticketing and departures area the tones echoed and seemed to carry in a way that spoken words and footsteps did not. Walking with her new cadre, her new posse, carrying her beautifully exotic

new pet, she found herself lost in a strange sort of reverie. The spider began bobbing its head gently to the music. This encouraged her to let the tune emerge a little more freely.

Children, curious, tried to move toward the spectacle. Adults, pulled them back, explaining ideas of complex puppetry, their own eyes unblinking, minds trying to make sense of the thing that both intrigued and disgusted them. The children knew that they lied. Parents and children made silent pacts to pretend together that they did not all know that they lied. Entire families stood, fascinated, counting Vivica's hands again and again, trying to understand how the thing might be operated.

Vivica sang to Smedley. She used a tune her mother had sung to her what seemed a long, long time ago, even though it had ended less than a decade earlier. Still, the song held roots that lived in her lungs since before she was born, when her mother hummed it in pregnancy.

She sang clearly. The echo began to extend, seeming to choose which tones to reflect, to build subtle harmonies. She could hear them as she sang and wondered if she merely imagined them. She did not wish to stop. To stop would be to let them fade and her beautiful spider, now winding down in her arms, seemed so entranced.

She already felt an absurd amount of affection for the thing. It was young. She could sense that. She wondered how large it would grow. How swiftly. She sang.

**You're a pretty spider Sleeping in my arms. . .**

**Quiet Smedley Spider. . . Snoring**

**Such arachnid charms. . .**

**People are weird and judge sometimes All the time**

**We can ignore them, you and I Spider mine.**

The simple rhymes and broken phrases strung themselves together casually to a tune she knew. The rhythms and tones came naturally to her breath. She made up verses around the elegance of legs with spikes, the depth of eyes that hypnotize. The op-art nature of spun webs, allowed her new friend to hear in each tone the love she felt. She watched herself as adults have watched children in pet stores for generations, knowing it absurd to instantly adore a creature so absolutely but also knowing the undeniable power of babies and puppies.

She noticed that she had stopped walking and did not know how long they had been standing still. She reached an endpoint for the song and looked around as the echoing harmonies faded slowly, slowly to silence.

Nobody in the terminal spoke.

Merlyn shouted, "Nobody move for a moment!" Nobody did.

He let his voice boom, somehow capturing the precise combination of volume, timbre and tone to most clearly carry. His words, deeply steeped in joy were these: "Do you feel it? All of you? Do you feel it? What she did! What she made! You can do that! DO YOU FEEL IT? It's real and it's hers and she gave it to you with NO TRAINING! Out of nothing! She has given you this." He looked around almost frantic, almost desperate for them to understand. Then he said, "If I didn't care so much, I could just use all of this! All of it, to get us there SO FAST!"

He raised his hands as though he was about do the old man's 'get off my lawn' dismissal and then froze in place for a beat before saying into the vast chambers of departures domestic and chartered, "Go now about your business with my blessing. With her

blessing. With all the blessings.” Then, in a far less echoing and dramatic tone, he said, “Let’s get on a fucking plane.”

He led them to a small, unmarked door just before the mouse-maze ribbons of the TSA Environmental Theater of Frustration. The door led into a hallway, wide enough for them to walk double file if someone walked awkwardly on the slightly rounded section where the floor sloped up into the carpeted walls. They walked in staggered single file to the end of the strange hallway where another unmarked door opened onto the wide landing field.

Frankie took in his surroundings as they emerged onto the tarmac. He looked at the huge planes creeping around on their hilariously tiny wheels. He craned like a Times Square Tourist and said, “Are we really going on one of those?”

Merlyn said, “No. We’re going on this.”

He led them to a corporate jet, up the steps and into an elegant living room decorated by Gaudi, all curves and natural wood.

Sofia emerged from the cockpit to greet them and quickly moved a heavy, ceramic coffee cup into the tiny galley space. She said, “You said it was gonna take a couple of weeks for passports.”

“I was mistaken.”

“I’m just saying, I would have had them in to get the place all clean.”

“I’m just saying, things run more smoothly than I anticipated.”

“They already have passports and you’re saying Questing Field.”

Merlyn turned to his companions. He said, "She does not believe that I am who I claim to be," but it seemed very much to Vivica that he spoke mostly to her just then, as though she had become, by default, the confidante to whom he would direct his asides.

Sofia pulled up the steps so that they folded neatly inside the body of the plane. Then she heaved the door shut with a habitual grunt of effort. She said, "Everybody sit down. Here are the rules. If I come on the speakers and tell you to do a thing, you do the thing. You got it? Mostly it's gonna be sit down and belt in. Has everyone here been on a plane before, or do I have to do the whole thing?"

Vivica and Frank raised their hands immediately and spoke over one another announcing that they had never been on a plane before. Frank's voice held a little bit of tension and a great deal of excitement. Vivian hid a touch of embarrassment.

Sophia sighed. "Sir, with your permission, I'd like to just roll the video —"

"Oh, come now. We'll have none of that! Perform the full ritual that we may travel in safety!"

"It's not a ritual."

"It most certainly is!"

"The performance of it is not the thing that provides safety."

"It is the gentle weaving of a psychic spell to help us all sail above a vast ocean in a flimsy contraption with the utmost confidence!"

"You're not a ten-thousand-year-old Wizard."

"Eighteen hundred give or take. Druid."

"You're lucky you're good in bed, bud."

“She only says that because she likes to shock,” he told Vivica. Then, to Percy and Frank he said, “Also, sometimes we have sex. Not in the plane. Once. But that was the old plane. And there was a bed.”

The man's sudden sheepishness, his rambling, unstructured sentences surprised Vivica. She looked to Frankie to see if he had noticed it, but his focus was entirely on Merlyn and Sofia. He grinned watching their faces respond to one another in real time. She couldn't tell exactly what he saw, but the sheer joy at the corners of his eyes made her smile as well.

Smedley twitched abruptly and looked around. He stretched all his legs out one at a time and then cautiously stepped from the support of Vivica's arm onto Merlyn's shoulder and head, the pointy ends of two legs poking gently at his scalp.

Merlyn said, “He's light.”

“Yeah. He's mostly legs.”

The spider reached out toward Sofia. She said, “I've gotta be honest. It's kind of freaking me out.”

“He's friendly,” Frankie promised.

Sofia said, “Still. I feel guilty about all its relatives I've killed.”

Merlyn said, “Tell me about it.”

“Oh.” The pilot, for whatever worry the spider on his head caused her, reached out and put a hand on Merlyn's shoulder. “You okay?”

“Kind of. There's a lot going on. We're so close.”

“I know, babe.”



"I can't process any more tragic mistakes right now. I have to rely on my knowledge that I've acted with good intentions and keep trying to do better. I'll grieve for the spiders and the trees and the rest when I've fixed all I can. Right?"

"You don't need my permission. You know this."

"Right. Okay. So. You know the contract. You have to do the thing and you get the bonus for it. Let's go."

She narrowed her eyes in a kind of angry playful squint.

Vivica saw the under-flirtation and the delight that passed between them. She saw the complex and unspoken power-play between these two people. She found herself liking them immensely.

Merlyn still struck her as quirky and possibly troubled, but the great weirdness had been messing with her head and making her think she might be going crazy until this guy showed up, crazy enough to make her feel like she might be a stabilizing influence.

She hadn't entirely ruled out the possibility that she might be crazy.

On the other hand, Frankie settled into the cushiony seat of this luxury jet. He grinned at her enthusiastically, clearly no longer feeling he must protect Vivica from its wealthy eccentric owner.

Sofia pulled a small push-button hand-mic from the button-cradle beside the cockpit door. She said, "Good morning, Lady, Gentlemen and Arachnid of Unusual Size. As we prepare for takeoff, I must ask you now to take your seats and buckle in. For those of you who do not know how to use a seat belt, FAA regulations and my dick of an employer—"

Merlyn announced, "That's me!"

“—who does not hesitate to break all sorts of workplace rules when it suits him, require that I present a demonstration using this shorty seatbelt here.” She pulled a demonstration kit from a compartment in the wall.

Frankie and Vivica fastened their seatbelts and checked their fit significantly more diligently than Merlyn and Percy. The younger travelers listened intently through the safety instructions.

When told of oxygen masks and inflatable vests under their seats they felt around to be sure.

When the safety spiel concluded, she said, “I’m going to be in the cockpit flying this plane if anyone needs me. Also, for the record, the bonus he owes me for doing the ‘Safety Spell’ is significant. And it really is in the FAA regulations. But he also wanted to be able to make me wear a pilot’s uniform and I rejected that whole paragraph.”

“A special *lady* pilot’s uniform.”

“Yes. Now I’ve done the thing. Can I fly the plane? Are you happy?”

“Immensely!”

“Okay. But, Merlyn . . .?”

In the ellipses that trailed at the end of his name, what seemed an unspoken question reverberated with deep concern. The concern of a mother whose son is going to hang out with his friends in the late evening. The concern of a Labrador watching a small child wander away from the picnic.

“I know,” Merlyn said, in the tones of shame and remorse and apology.

"Yeah?" She asked, and the depth of her worry carried ominous echoes of subtext Vivica could not parse.

Merlyn said, "This isn't the professors."

"No, it very much isn't."

"Or the museum trips."

"This is different. I see that."

"The spider!"

"There's always weird shit."

"That's the Questing Field!"

She blinked. Twice. She sighed an, "Okay," as she turned to slip away into her cockpit. With each blink the worry had drained away a bit more, replaced by a resonant, sad, profound love that hung on the breathy tone of her resignation.

As the whine of the engines shifted piercingly to accompany a short bumpy acceleration and then the strange press-and-release of take-off Vivica watched the man she loved more than anyone in the world, grin in terror and grip the arms of his chair like a child on a rollercoaster.

He trusted Merlyn, and she absolutely trusted Frankie's read on people. She didn't entirely trust her own sanity at this point, though, and no matter how crazy she got, it always seemed as though Frankie was just ready to be there, having her back.

In the sky, circling upward to head East, Vivica hoped she had not let her madness draw Frankie into a crazy old guy's vehicle and toward what they refer to only after the fact as, 'a second location.'

TEN



“Well, boys and girl, we have a long flight ahead of us. I suggest everyone sleep while we have the chance.”

Vivica said, “Yeah. No. I have a whole lot more questions you need to answer.”

Merlyn sighed. “I do not *need* to answer your questions. Just because I agreed to answer your questions doesn’t make me your genie, tricked into infinite wishes.”

"I think it does." She studied his response and wondered what Frank might be picking up were he not staring out the window at the landscape falling away.

Merlyn said, "I beg your pardon?"

She had nine thoughts at once as to how best to proceed. She remained silent, assaying them.

She heard herself speaking before she knew she had decided. She said, "I think you are exactly who you say you are. More importantly, you think you are exactly who you say you are. You are bound by rules of magic and agreement and conscience that run so deep that to break them might just break you. Our agreement binds you. You thought you were going to come down those stairs with some woman and start an adventure and separate from that, you decided to bind me into the Questing Field by setting up my commitment to ask more questions. Didn't you?"

Merlyn said, "I suppose I did, yes. Or—I was testing my *ability* to do that. But yes. That's right. A version of correct. Not all of it."

"Are you deliberately trying to create branching routes of inquiry—wait. Frank, can you lie detect for me?"

Percy said, "Oooh. Wizard's in trouble now."

Merlyn chuckled.

Frankie said, "Go ahead."

Merlyn said, "You believe I am bound by our agreement, yet you think I can lie to you."

Vivica considered for a moment. She said, "Because you agreed to reveal everything in exchange for my name, do you feel compelled to answer all of my questions truthfully and extensively?"

Merlyn's cheeks twitched for a moment. His jowls trembled softly and then he said, "I do. I—yes. I very much do."

"Dammit! I knew it. I knew it." She needed no confirmation from Franklin, though Percy glanced at him and caught the nod. "And was that your intent when you accepted the casual offer and mocked my negotiating skills?"

"Of course not." He seemed so irritated that the response held depths of meaning. She let it sit there until he said, "Once again, as always, I behaved rashly and squandered a little bit of whatever lingering magic I can find around on a frivolous experiment instead of banking it and nurturing it. Is that what you want to hear?"

Percy said, "Hey! You're Universalizing. Stop that. It's the first step into the depression spiral. You did a thing. Perhaps you did a thing 'again.' But 'As always?' That's bullshit, old man."

"What do you know about it? Seriously. I am much, much older than you. How could you have any idea about my fuckup-to-success ratio?"

Percy suggested, "Vivica, before you grapple with the ethics of keeping him under a magical contract he did not intend to enter into, why don't you ask him about his meltdown at the airport after you sang to your spider?"

Smedley took a couple of spindly steps toward him.

He said, "Please stay away from me, you creepy fucking thing."

Smedley returned to straddle the space between Vivica's shoulder and the back of her chair.

Vivica reached up absently to scratch its belly. "I'll tell you why not. Because until I sort out the whole ethical thing, I can't ask any more questions at all." She slowed for a moment. She stopped talking. She stopped listening. She just stopped. She felt her chi settle into stillness except for the slight, constant shifting that adjusted for the movements of the plane. "Merlyn," she said, though she did not yet know what she intended to say next.

"Yes."

"I want to get honest answers from you about a great many things."

"I understand this."

"But it doesn't feel right to me to force you to answer them. Do you understand that?"

"I very much do." His moment of self-flagellation passed, he drifted into the melancholic tones of a proud father watching a daughter drive off to college.

She paused, confused by his warm eagerness to pursue the conversation. She had become accustomed to thinking through every sentence quickly lest she be talked over or interrupted mid-idea. "If you promise to tell me the truth in a bargain and then I release you from the obligation, I've done nothing to free you of the obligation."

"That's right."

For a moment she tried to work it out like one of those logic puzzles about the twins where one of them can only lie and one of them can only tell the truth. She said, "What would you suggest I do?"



Merlyn said, "I would suggest you ask your questions. Also, I will promise to answer you honestly to the best of my ability regardless of the obligation brought about by an ill-considered bargain."

"Unless you don't want to."

"What?"

"You're offering me a new bargain and I want to make sure it has your god damned free will baked into it. I will go on a quest with you for a magic sword and take your hundreds of dollars of miracle mana money and fly in your incredibly cool Criminal Minds plane to England. But I will not accept an amendment unless the new deal requires that you answer my questions truthfully and completely to the best of your ability *unless you don't want to.*"

"But I do want to."

"Okay. But just—" She glanced at her dear friend and hoped he could read her eyes as she both apologized and asked permission to use his private experience for her current needs. She saw his slight nod, though she did not know how specifically he understood the request. She said, "Look, Merlyn. There's a thing that happened a long time ago. A thing you don't think anyone knows about. Now, I won't go into the details of how we know, but we know all the details of it."

Percy snorted.

Frank barked a short laugh.

A light smile played at the corners of Merlyn's lips.

"Now, let's say I were to ask you about that thing in front of Sofia. Would you want to answer it in detail?"

Merlyn said, "I would not."

"I want you to be able to keep your secrets if and when it is important to you. You understand?"

Percy said, "You could have known Merlyn's shame."

"I'm not looking for leverage. I'm seeking truth. You *must* have the freedom to keep your secrets. You accept the terms?"

"I do."

"Fantastic. What the hell happened at the airport?"

"You stumbled into a latent talent for the Magics Musical and Acoustical, the same schools of magics I dipped into when I put the spiders to sleep. Maybe being exposed to the sound of my vibrational signal gave your unconscious mind the hints it needed to figure it out. I don't know. But you found a natural set of resonant frequencies for the space you were in. You turned a public space into a cathedral. The old, old technique generated an organic magical field around you. It grew out of your focused, maternal adoration for your lovely friend there and that haunting melody—"

Percy raised his hand and said, "It was 'Nothin's Gonna Harm You' from Sweeney Todd."

Merlyn said, "Okay."

Percy said, "Sondheim."

Merlyn said, "Yes." He looked at Percy, awaiting any further information on the song and then went on. "We had already been drawing a great deal of attention, though I imagine

you were much too engrossed in your weaving to notice. People had started to notice us because of the Questing Field and my coat—”

“It really is a nice coat, man,” Frankie said.

“Yes. Then they started to notice you and Smedley. As those stressed-out travelers turned their attention onto you, they slipped into the subtle vortex of your affection as it carried on the tones. Your voice, your ear, your instinct, and your impulse rose together, amplifying the vibrational energies specific to your emotional state. You drew added energy from the emotional lives of those around you, converting it for its magic potential—I have no idea how, exactly—and then re-broadcasting it through the music as familial love on a wave of newly generated magical energy. You made more magic in that lobby than I’ve seen collected anywhere in ages.”

“I was just singing to keep him calm in the new environment.”

“Yes.”

“Then I started playing with the echo a little bit. I got lost in a sort of complicated daydreamy thought about the way overlapping frequency diagrams can be like spider-webs. Then about a broadcast antenna sending out signal in lots of overlappy frequencies from a central position. I remember layering all those images over one another as I sang, aware of the way each tone interacted with and overlapped the echoes that remained from the last ones. Just gone. Lost in thought and singing to Smedley.”

“It was beautiful, Viv.” Frankie said very softly. “It kept me from freaking out with all those people around me.”

"You're saying that while I was day-dreaming about patterns and singing to my puppy—"

"Spider," Percy corrected.

"Do you know what a baby spider is called?"

"I don't think it's 'puppy.'"

"You're saying I accidentally did actual magic."

"I'm saying you accidentally generated magical energy—apparently through a complex circumstantial metaphor combining affection, visualized waves, literal audible waves and spider-influenced web-imagery—and used it to make a departures area full of anxious travelers shift from the fear and irritability of displacement to a profound, newfound appreciation for those around them."

"And then a thing happened where you freaked out."

"Ah. Yes. That thing did indeed happen. They didn't get it. At all. You did an extraordinary thing of grace and beauty and power. You demonstrated to all those people the potential in humanity to tap all the forces of nature, to generate energies so much more powerful, so much more *interesting* than electricity and microwaves. They couldn't understand that, of course, but. . . at least they should have applauded the beauty of your song."

"Her spider-centric parody of a Sondheim song."

"Thank you, Percy. And there was a selfishness in that, too, because I longed to see what kind of confidence you would immediately develop if, in that moment, you had been rewarded with the focused vibrational energy of the spontaneous applause I expected. I heard

the slow fade of the last tones and I waited for it. I could feel it about to break organically. I foresaw the rush of energy back toward you along that same echo track you had just defined when you spontaneously sanctified the chamber as a secret shrine to puppy love. But nobody remembers social graces anymore. They become an audience properly, but then they don't know quite how to behave. So, when they didn't give anything back, just left you standing there, I started to scold them, to try to get them to understand the gift you had just given them. Then I realized I was just a crazy man yelling in an airport and I noticed a TSA guy eyeing me funny—”

Percy said, “There was an airport cop at your four o'clock who unsnapped the safety strap on his holster.”

“I was looking at enough available magic, right there, infusing all of these people with enough childlike random bonding affection to keep them behaving beautifully at least to the ends of their journeys, a stretching spreading field—”

“Web.”

“Huh. Yes. As they moved outward on planes from that hub. But I also saw that I could avoid conflict and do a big dramatic exit by just re-claiming that pre-processed magical energy and using it to transport us directly to our next stop.”

“In England?”

“Exactly.”

“How would that have worked?”

"I could've done an engulfing fog and it would've been a ten or twelve pace walk through ether to get there or—hell—the amount of energy you refined and spread over the room? I could've done a straight up phantom doorway and closed it behind us."

"Cool."

"But that spell of yours was elegant and lovely and unintended and pure. No matter how unappreciated it went, I couldn't disrupt it just for our convenience."

"Or to show off."

"Or that."

She sat with that for a moment and then said, "Is there anything else on that event that I should know that I don't know to ask about?"

Merlyn chuckled in a tiny, reflective way. He seemed to give up some of his performative persona. He bobbed his head from side to side weighing options and then said, "Percy said you should ask me about it because he recognized a depressive thought pattern and thought he could break it if he made me talk about this noble choice I'd made. Is that right?"

Percy nodded. "Yep. I wasn't hip to the whole metaphorical web of broadcast interpersonal adoration thing, but I was pretty sure you had done something frustratingly noble. I know the adrenalin that passes through the body, and I saw you controlling yourself in the moment of a powerful emotional response. Anyone does that, there's an 87% chance their motives are noble. Nobody ever de-escalates out of malice."

“Ah, but you’re wrong, young man. I did not leave the elegant, beautiful spell in place for the purest of noble reasons. I didn’t want to go back to England abruptly without Sofia. Self-service taints my every decision.”

Frankie unfastened his seatbelt and said, “Can I go up in the cockpit with your girlfriend?”

“Probably. Sometimes she naps.”

“What?”

“See if she’s good with it.”

Percy said, “See if you can get her to spill secrets about the old guy.”

Frank said, “On it! Someone get me if he gets around to teaching the breathing thing.”

He reached the undersized door to the cockpit but did not knock. He turned back to the group in the cabin and said, “I don’t want to be weird, but this group of people, being with you guys on a plane, being with—jeeze—Viv, being with you on an adventure—I have never felt more right about anything in my life.”

Percy said, “That might be the lingering effects of the affection spell.” Then, after a beat, he added a little bit irritably, “I’m feeling it too.”

That drew Vivica’s attention. She had gotten a strong, *reluctant companion* vibe from Percy from the time she got downstairs with Smedly. His comments always came with a disruptive edge of snark, the smart boy at the back of Property Law who smirked through the lectures and blazed through the tests, throwing a nod to let the professor he could answer a question rather than raising his hand. The softness in his acknowledgement surprised her. She said, “What are you saying, now?”

Percy Clovis' face slipped into a controlled mask and he seemed to read from a script that he'd been writing in his mind for a long time. He said, "For years, a blown cover has been the worst thing I could imagine. I mean, if I'd known giant spiders was a possibility, it might have been a close second. But—So—that happened, and I'm not terrified. I'm enjoying myself. I mean – Sofia put my gun together for me and gave it back to me. Nobody threatened to shoot me in the head. None of this is normal. None of this is following protocol. But Merlyn said I can maintain contact with work so technically I'm just doing my job of tailing him really well. And then when we're walking through the airport and I'm seeing professionals from other branches with varying levels of sec-and-trust awareness, starting to go cold and empty in case—" He paused and then said, "You picked *Nothin's Gonna Harm You* and there was no way you could know my history with that song, but I suddenly felt so connected to you and then... to the Frankie and Merlyn. You did something really, seriously weird."

Frank nodded to Vivica, assuring her that he felt she was safe if he walked away. She nodded back, letting him know that she didn't need him to stay, that she felt safe.

In the sky, far above the Atlantic Ocean, Frank turned away from her and stepped through a tiny door.



## ELEVEN



Frank ducked a little bit stepping into the cockpit. That put him a little bit off balance, so he staggered. Rather than grabbing Sofia's shoulder to stabilize, he allowed himself to fall into the co-pilot's seat. He made a small show of slouching casually into proper position as if the awkward, stumbling entrance had been a deliberate cool move.

Sofia remained focused on the instrument panel. Frank said, "You mind if I sit up here a while?"

"Don't touch the controls."

"No."

"Okay. You can put on the headphones if you want to hear the chatter."

"Is it interesting?"

"No."

They sat in silence for a while. He stared out at the sky.

If he leaned over toward the side, he could peer downward through the intermittent cloud to vast, empty ocean. He said, "So, you're his driver and also his pilot."

"Yeah."

"Is that weird?"

"Unbelievably weird. Yes."

Frank scratched with a fingernail at the tiny-pebbled surface of the molded arm rest. He said, "But you don't believe in him."

"I believe he's real. I believe his cash spends. I believe he's the sweetest human I've ever met. And the most interesting. I very much believe in him. I just don't believe he's the two-thousand-year-old man."

"Yeah. So, who were the professors and what were the museums?" He kept his eyes on the world outside the plane, sometimes on the control panel in front of him, the retro-looking toggle switches. The brushed steel plating. He wanted to seem utterly casual. It felt as though he might scare her off if he looked at her even if she didn't know that he could read her face.

The plane lifted a little bit and then dropped again, just enough to give him that driving-over-a-hill moment of dizziness. Still, he did not speak. He wondered if she had made it happen on purpose to distract him or intimidate him a little bit.

Sofia said, "I've been with Merlyn for seventeen years."

"What? How old are you?" Now he did look at her, knowing that he had blurted inappropriately, but genuinely confused.

"Met him when I was twenty-three. Do the math."

"Wow. You do not look – that many – more than ... then."

She looked at him with an eyebrow raised and a slight smirk. She gestured to her forehead with a swirly index finger and said, "Botox. The rest of it, good genes."

He picked up no deception in her demeanor as he looked at her now. He saw no avoidance in her eyes. He studied her face. Indeed, the very start of laugh-lines had begun to develop at the corners of her eyes. He noticed the freckles across her nose that some white women have, tiny, almost like glitter. He realized that white-lady freckles had always looked a little bit snooty and fake to him, like something they did to make people notice how pale they were.

She said, "I'm parking cars doing valet service at a party in Bronxville. This man pulls up on a motorcycle, takes off his helmet, shakes out that mane of silver hair, tosses me the keys and the helmet and says, 'Park her where I can find her.'

"I said, 'I don't know how to drive one of these.'

"He said, 'You drive a stick?'

"I said, 'yeah.'

“He goes, ‘Clutch is your left hand, brake is your right hand and right foot. First gear is down with your left toes, then up for second, third, fourth, fifth.’

“I said, ‘I won’t need anything above second.’

“He said, ‘I’ll be out in about two hours. If you can get another hundred and eighty miles on her in that time, she’s yours.’ Then he pulls out his wallet, hands me a few hundred bucks, ‘in case I need gas,’ and starts to walk away. I say, ‘What the fuck, dude? I’m at work here!’ he says, ‘You make your decisions!’ A couple of hours later, guy comes out of the party. I grab his keys; I bring his bike around. It’s a nice bike. A CB 750, but customized, you know?”

“No idea.” He noticed, now, some thin vertical wrinkles above her upper lip that expanded and contracted when she spoke. He had never noticed that on someone before. He wondered if that was another white-skin thing, like the crepe paper that would start to happen on their arms. It hadn’t started to happen on her arms.

“He looks at his odometer before he gets on, like he’s gonna see that I’ve been speeding to hell and back trying to win his bike in some crazy 90 mile-an-hour challenge. And he’s a little confused. He says, ‘you know how many of these Hondas I’ve given away to valet kids with big smiles and badly scuffed up work clothes?’

“He offers me a job on the spot. I tell him that’s not how business gets done. He tells me he thinks I’m pretty and if it doesn’t freak me out that he’s an old man, he’d like to take me out to dinner, possibly sleep with me and/or negotiate the terms of a job, each noncontingent upon the others. Then he clarifies. He stands there, holding his hot-boy-in-high-school motorcycle helmet against his hip, and he explains that I can have dinner and neither work

for him nor sleep with him, or I can do any one, any two or all three of those things as I choose for as long as I choose. He went through the permutations. I could, if I so chose, skip the dinner, go right to sex and go right back to my valet job.

“Over dinner he offered me the driving job. Over breakfast he told me my starting salary.”

There it was. He saw it then, some of the concern, some of the regret. “Wait,” Frank said, “Are you worried that you’re . . .” He was so afraid he was about to say something wholly inappropriate again. He struggled to find a way around the thought, but she let him off the hook.

“Of course, I am, Frank. Every day I’m worried that I’m taking advantage of him.”

He felt the wave of relief that comes when one realizes that what one did not say was exactly the right thing to not say ever, to anyone.

She went on. “But it’s not as though I don’t really love him. I do. He’s wonderful. And he’s clearly not unhappy having me around. But—I mean, I’m indulging his insanity and I’m worried about him all the time. He’s paying me SO much to be his driver and his pilot—he put me through flight training when I said I was interested in it and then suddenly I’ve got this plane.”

“You think he’s insane?”

“He thinks he’s an eighteen-hundred-year-old sorcerer.”

“And you don’t.” He could see it clearly as she spoke the words.

She looked at him for a long time. “You do?”

“Kind of. Yeah.” Then, “Keep your eyes on the road.”

She did not look forward. There was no road. "Kind of?"

"Yeah. The Questing Field dragged me and Vivica into this thing. He's got me thinking in ways I've never thought before."

"We are the gods who kindle fire in the head," Sofia said. Then, "It's a line from one of his old druid poems or prayers or whatever."

"Ah."

"He says it sometimes."

"Okay."

"Early on he started on this whole rap about fixing it, about setting right his great mistake. I was in my twenties, having a blast, driving around my old rich boyfriend, making bank. Then suddenly instead of driving him around New York and out to Jersey and stuff, I'm driving him to Boston, to Saratoga Springs, to all these different colleges all over the place. He's talking to all these professors—"

"This is the professors!"

"Yes. He gets a bunch of them thinking they're Indiana Jones. I don't have the license yet, so he charts us a flight and we're all off to England the first time.

"We get there, and I drive us out of London into god-knows-where. One of the professors keeps talking about these eight possible lakes we're going to have to look at and another one has a computer printout of a picture of an old tapestry and he's certain that it's a map of some kind and that the directions to get to the right lake are in there if he can just figure it out. The last one, the other one just has this eager gleam in his eyes. Every time I

look at him, he does this little eyebrow raise, followed by a flash-widening of his eyes that reeks to me of greed and conspiracy. You know?"

Frankie nodded. He very much knew the creepy, conspiratorial look.

He found he liked this woman immensely. Her openness and decency made her instantly appealing, but he imagined that she had those weird long pale feet where the veins show through a little bit, and it always looks like they're too fragile to function. It occurred to him that the utter lack of attraction he felt to white women might make him a racist.

She said, "What are you thinking about right now?"

"Content of your character," he said.

"Huh."

She started to go on, but he stopped her. "You couldn't see that I was lying just then?"

"When?"

"Never mind. I'm sorry. My mind was a little wandering."

"I'm told I have that effect on some men. But I am spoken for."

"Okay."

She continued the story. "I've got an ear bud in, giving me occasional instructions from the GPS. I'm just half listening. Up to this point, I'm just Merlyn's driver who nobody knows he's sleeping with. Right? Maybe sometimes they suspect. Sometimes I drop playful hints in public. He's always open about it. I'm living in his place, but he offers me my own suite if I ever want it—"

"Any idea where his money comes from?"

"None! And I've tried to find out. I've hired people to look into it. No idea."

“Okay.”

“You know, other than that wallet.”

“Yeah. That’s cool, huh?”

“Now, I’m starting to pay attention for the first time to what this thing is that we’re doing. I realize that he’s got us on our way into the English countryside to find Excalibur, right?”

“Ours isn’t the first trip to do this.”

“Yeah.”

“So you gather these professors, you all go to England to find Excalibur and destroy it.”

“Exactly. But it didn’t happen. At all. It all went to shit with the professors. Merlyn’s in the front seat next to me. In the back, Professor Let’s Drive To Every Lake gets into a kind of prose-poetry rhythm about how maps must look if the world is flat, ‘cause they gotta make sense to a dark age cat. He charts paths out on maps to learn, his wife remembers turn by turn. Then the Tapestry guy starts cutting in with these brief stanzas, on a separate scan and a separate rhyme about how, ‘It’s instructions not a map. His modern thinking’s been a trap.’ Stuff like that. Merlyn nudges me to listen.

“They’ve got this thing going in the back of the car and it’s a deep groove. They didn’t seem to notice it’s happening, but their speech turned into tightly formal poetry and together they started to figure out how to read the tapestry, relating it to the topological maps of the possible lakes. Merlyn says, ‘You hear it? We’re doing it! It’s a proper Questing Field now. All the weird shit that’s been going on? I wasn’t sure. I thought I might be projecting, imagining. But you hear it right?’



“I did hear it. I review it all the time to be sure I wasn't lying, pretending even then. But I swear I heard it. And I said so. He said, ‘I'm on the path now, Sofia. I'm going to be free to watch you grow old once this is done. I am going to set right this mistake I made long ago and save the world.’

“Then there was a gasp in the back of the car and Rapmaster Tapestry leans over the other guy's computer-generated chart and circles a particular spot on the shoreline of a particular lake and he said, ‘We're going to find the Sword of Arthur!’

“And Merlyn said, ‘And destroy it.’

“He nails the delivery. Right? He drops this line like he's the guy who does movie trailers. I get goosebumps, thinking things are about to get real. You know what I'm sayin'?”

Frankie noticed that she was streeting up her language a little bit in response to his general black, New Yorkerness. He appreciated it. He did his best to adjust demeanor and language to his surroundings. It kept people comfortable even though he was tall and broad and dark skinned in a culture that cast him only as a star athlete or a violent criminal. Rarely did someone show him the same courtesy.

“Suddenly everyone in the car freaked out. The two talkative guys have lost all their Hamilton. Now they're both just shouty pompous-pants, telling my man that he's mad, calling him stupid and insane. So, I pulled over and got out, taking the keys with me. I pulled the first one out by his stupid tweed collar, pushed him against the car and made some threats about what would happen if he ever said such things about Merlyn again. The other guy came out to try to settle us down. To calm me down. Professor Creepy Eyes walked

across the street to take a piss. Merlyn stretched his legs, seemingly uninterested in whether or not I kicked the Professors' asses—”

“You think you could've taken 'em?”

“Yes.”

“All three.”

“Yeah.”

“Good to know.”

“They were academics.”

“Fair enough.” Now she turned back to the panel and that felt like an unconscious choice not to give him her full face to read so he looked out at the sky.

“We got back to the car and found that the maps and the printouts of the tapestry had vanished from the back seat. Both doors had been left open. It was possible the papers blew out. We checked around a lot. Merlyn was excited by the disappearance. He suggested it was more mystical weirdness created by his new Questing Field theory. The Professors just grew disheartened and demanded to be taken back to Heathrow and flown home, done with their adventure and their love affair with their new friend who turned out to think he was an Ancient Druid with magic powers who planned to destroy the object of their lives' imaginings.”

“And why is it that you don't believe him?”

“Because I'm sane.”

“Ah.”

They flew in silence for a long moment. She looked at him again for a long pause during which he returned her gaze studiously. As though it was the most important thing he could know about her, Sofia said, "I studied English Literature in College."

"Okay. Seriously, though, should you be watching the sky more?"

"If you want, you can watch the sky and let me know if we're gonna hit anything."

"Okay."

"There's something weird about him. I know that."

"Right?"

"He's never been unkind or abusive."

"Um. Okay. Good."

"There was a series of frantic trips to museums at one point when he got manic. I think he didn't sleep for several days. I remember sleeping in the cockpit while he ran around Rome. He thought if he could assemble some specific things tied to some specific moments in history, he could do some big magic spell that would bring the sword directly to him wherever he was."

"How'd that go?"

"We're flying to England again."

"Right."

Sofia said, "So, you and Vivica?"

"Sort of."

"Does she know?"

He shrugged. "Not sure."

"Have you told her?"

"Yeah."

"Aloud?"

"I don't know." He looked out at the sky. "I don't think so." Then he said, "You don't think he's really Merlyn?"

"I don't know." She looked out at the sky. "I don't think so."

Frankie nodded. He said, "When I lied to you earlier and then asked if you could tell whether I was lying?" but he said it as though it had a question mark at the end.

"Content of my character," Sofia said, assuring him that she knew what he referred to.

He said, "You were looking right at me and you couldn't even see that there was something I wasn't saying?"

"What?"

Frankie felt a small, cornflower of hope growing blue from a field of new green. There was a significant chance that Vivica had no idea what he was thinking most of the time and this thought bloomed with possibility.

Then a light tapping preceded the click and scratch opening of the hatch. Viv shouted a little too loudly, "Okay, Frankie. Get out here. Rich crazy white dude's gonna teach us how to breathe!" Frankie picked up a sense of urgency, though he hadn't been turned to see her face as she spoke so he could glean no further detail. She was already on her way back to her seat as he struggled out of the low-slung co-pilot position and stumbled toward the cabin.

He reclaimed his place on the passenger deck. He swiveled the fancy seat to fully engage the room. This thing had sounded intrigued him from the moment it was mentioned in the diner. Frankie put his full focus into the endeavor.

Merlyn said, "It occurs to me that I have never taught a grounding exercise on a plane before, but I did teach a group of very frightened sailors the exercise in the middle of an ocean once."

"How'd that go?" Percy asked, and there was a little bit of a sardonic sneer in his voice.

When Frankie glanced at him, he did not catch the sense of snide taunting that Percy's inflection had carried. Instead, he saw a slight challenge, a tinge of disbelief, a desire for confirmation.

"The lesson went well. Two men were lost nonetheless."

"How many survived?"

"All of us. Why wouldn't we survive?"

"You said two were lost."

"Oh! They went completely mad. The combination of fear and the cognitive dissonance left them deeply damaged. With long-standing beliefs challenged, they could not integrate new knowledge. It was a long time ago. That wasn't because of the exercise, though. That was because of the circumstance." Merlyn's face, calm, barely moving, still revealed information to Frankie. He read pain, loss, memory layered over with second-guesses and remorse. When Merlyn saw him staring, he let his eyes meet the young man's.

Frankie saw questions, he saw Merlyn seeking in his own face an answer to something important, meaningful to the man at a profound level. Frankie said, "I can't figure out what you're trying to ask."

Merlyn chuckled. He said, "I was asking if you could draw specific words. And then asked how much you could see, whether I could give story and detail and information and images to you directly."

"Oh. Then, no."

"Not yet, at least," Merlyn said. Then he took a slow, inward breath and said, "In a few moments, or perhaps a few minutes I will ask you to close your eyes and listen to your breath. That, really, is all you need to do as you explore this exercise for the first time.

"Before I ask that you do that—and know, all of you, that you are welcome to close your eyes and listen to your breath at any time. You need not await my permission. Ever. For anything.

"Also, if any of you choose not to do this exercise, you are most welcome to watch and listen, or to go sit in the cockpit with Sofia if you like, but I would ask that you not interrupt or ask questions until we have finished. Do you all choose to participate or to observe quietly?"

"Absolutely," Frankie said.

Vivica nodded emphatically.

Percy nodded a reserved agreement to the request, Frankie saw, though only to let it proceed.

“I want to be very clear before we begin this exercise, that while it will seem a very small thing that I do, it truly is ancient magic. The effects you feel may be profound and immediate or they may be barely noticeable at all at first. Using these magics regularly will eventually deepen your experience no matter where you find yourself when you start. Using these magics regularly will allow you to make real and lasting change in yourself.

“There is little magic left in this world and few who encourage its practice, keep it flowing, generate it anew.”

Percy sighed heavily.

Merlyn said, “Good. Sighing heavily is an excellent way of making it easier to listen to the breath. Now if you have not yet closed your eyes—”

Frankie noticed that Viv had already closed her eyes and seemed entirely relaxed, prepared to commit fully to this exercise. He watched her for a moment. He made the conscious decision to trust her instincts over his own subtle concerns. He committed fully.

“—I would suggest that you do so now or, if it makes you uncomfortable to do so at this time know that when you choose to close your eyes it will be the right time, the moment just before the thing you most need to hear reaches your mind. The thing you most need to listen to is your breath.”

Frankie allowed his eyes to close as he flew toward England, a faraway place he had only seen and heard of on television. He tried to listen to his breath but mostly he heard the plane's engine.

Merlyn said, “The sound of your breath may be difficult to find,” and in the time it took him to speak those words, his voice deepened significantly, coming clearly though softly.

“You may be unable to find it in your chest and need to seek it in your sinus cavity or . . . deeper down in your throat, or . . . coming through the canyons of your nostrils. . .” Frankie found the sound of his breath deep in his nostrils. He found the sound and realized suddenly that this sound had probably been there from moment of his birth, unnoticed, unrecognized. He found tremendous comfort in the sound. The sensation there, where the air had to turn in its path to travel through and downward, allowed him to trace the path of the air and to feel its currents like the ripples in a clear stream. As he let the air return to the world, he felt the direct connection of the exchange. The air in his lungs up through his open, relaxed throat, out again through that bend and down, a continuous, sinuous column connecting his innards to the air around him.

He felt the air on his skin and knew that it had been circulated through the plane's system, through his lungs, bits of it through the lungs of every other person on the plane. Somehow, for all the vents and pressurizing systems, the air inside still touched the cold, thin air outside. The molecules, the particles, the atoms of oxygen the same ones that had been here since Earth formed. He breathed the air of the dinosaurs, and he felt the power of momentum keeping him aloft in flight above the ocean.

He remembered looking out from the cockpit and imagining a clear surface reflecting the sky. The plane on the surface, would be invisible directly below. They would hang at the center of eternal sky here in this safe pocket of dense air.

A soft rise and fall drew his focus inward a bit but Merlyn reminded him that he need only listen to the sound of his own breath so he went back to that. Now, though, the path his breath took seemed labyrinthine in his mind. It tickled at the winding path his Nana had laid



out in her back yard of smooth, round stones she bought at a Home Depot. Then he recognized the soft warm maze as the specific shape he had traced with his eyes a hundred times the night Vivica fell asleep against his arm. He remembered the thirst, the cotton-mouthed, certain-he-would die thirst as she slept there. The weight of her head on his bicep reduced circulation to his hand while his eyes traced the little sculptural labyrinth of her ear. To move felt like it would be a breach of faith. Also, her smell, so close to him gave him a sense of safety. At the time he had thought he was being selfless, remaining in place despite his discomfort. Now he thought it was selfish. He had never wanted that moment to end. He would have endured any discomfort for any amount of time.

When at last she had awakened, he thought he might have dozed a bit, too. He took his arm back and went to the refrigerator. It took a few minutes for him to regain full use of that hand, but he did not let Vivica see the struggle he had getting the orange juice container opened one-handed. She did not know his sacrifice. That was how he'd thought of it. Now he realized that he had been ashamed, sitting there, indulging a fantasy of a relationship, staring creepily at her while she slept, memorizing the lovely little maze of her ear.

He saw that perfect, swirling, turning structure again, now, in the movement of air. He remembered a grade school diagram of a plane's wing on the same page as a grainy sepia-tone photograph of the Wright Brothers' plane. Widely spaced lines above the wings represented low pressure as the imaginary lines below created lift by turning into spirals and puffs. Seeing the diagram in memory, he saw it to be just as sophisticated a concept of air flow as those inked spirals of wind blown from the puff-cheeked clouds at the corners of olde-timey maps. He saw the profound similarity between Vivica's ear print, the stone path

in Nana's yard garden and the turn of the air under the wing of the plane. He could sense an important lesson in this, but then it was lost as he noticed that he had lost his understanding of the air under the wings.

It became chaotic, its supportive structure somehow disrupted, as though the very physics that kept the plane aloft had begun to collapse.

Frankie's eyes opened abruptly. He said, "Something's wrong."

Merlyn said, "And yet you remain calm. Very good . . . "

Frankie checked his seatbelt, locked his seat.

Vivica sat with her eyes closed, breath deep, relaxed.

"So, I would urge you all to open your eyes on a count of three. One, please be aware that you are on a plane over the Atlantic as you return to an awareness of your surroundings. Two, you find yourself in your seats, relaxed and comfortable. Three. I'm going to suggest that you return to full awareness of your surroundings as our young knight, bodyguard to the lady Vivica has announced with some urgency that something is wrong."

"Seatbelts!" Frankie shouted. "Lock your seats so they don't swivel! All the safety stuff!"

Vivica complied at once as did Merlyn.

Percy was already strapped in and locked down, but he snorted, very calm.

The plane bumped abruptly. It dropped twenty-five-hundred feet in a nearly vertical plunge.

Sofia's voice crackled over the system. She said, "Sorry about that. If you weren't strapped in before, I'd suggest you get that taken care of and I do hope you enjoyed your brief foray into perceived weightlessness."

They bumped downward again.

In that same, stalwart and utterly calm voice that pilots somehow learn to adopt in flight school she said, "Again, you have my apologies. Due to some inexplicable atmospheric conditions, ladies and gentlemen, there seems to be some chance that we are about to plummet from the sky. Please remain calm throughout this experience which I anticipate will be rough, but likely not fatal."

Merlyn shouted, "Atta girl! Any idea what's going on?"

Over the sound system she said, "Not a clue, baby. Sorry. Can't talk. Doing a thing."

TWELVE



Vivica took a moment after Frankie left for the cockpit to figure out how most efficiently to ask the questions. She knew she could just offer something open-ended and get the man talking but she'd already found out that he could wander through a story. She wanted information.

She said, "What do you believe is my part in this field exercise?"

"You, I believe, are a Questing Hero, but I am not certain about that. I have begun to suspect that archetypes may be rearranging themselves in this endeavor."

Percy made a slight snorting sound. Small, but distinct.

"You disagree, Mr. Clovis?"

Percy said, "I think this whole thing fits very nicely into a Joseph Campbell package and I think Mister Taliesin might believe every bit of what he says. I certainly can't deny that things have gotten strange around him, and I've seemed . . . impelled to take actions that are uncharacteristic of late. But I get the sense that his lady pilot—"

"In this millennium, we just call her a pilot," Vivica suggested.

"Okay. Well, I'm pretty sure she's not buying into it all and that made me start to think about the whole thing a little differently."

Merlyn sighed.

Vivica put a finger up to stop Percy from continuing and said, "What were the thoughts behind that sigh?"

Merlyn brightened immensely at that question. He turned to Vivica and said, "Listen carefully. I'll do this as fast as I can.

"Tier One: Oh, dear. Percy Clovis will either need to be convinced or the entire Quest could already be fracturing and going to shit. I'll need to make decisions about that later. Tier Two: If I had just done the fog-jump from the airport I could have left enough magic behind to spread some joy amongst the travelers and wouldn't have to deal again with the fractured nature of a Quest that includes Sofia. Tier Three: I don't care if she doesn't believe all the improbable things about me; I love her, and she loves me, and it simply cannot be true

that I must sacrifice that for this mission. I would rather try and fail throughout her mortal lifetime than continue without her for the sake of an ideal, even one as great as this. Tier Four: It has ever been thus. I make the best decisions I can at the time and regardless of outcome, I manage to come away with regret and remorse.”

“Wait. How many tiers can you give me?”

“Without entering a trance-state? Probably another eight.”

“Can you stop answering a question I've asked?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. So, ‘An Ideal—even one as great as this.’ What is that ideal, exactly?”

Merlyn said, “If I recognize a mistake that I have made that has done damage, I must do all that I can to fix the error and repair the damage.”

“Is this some ancient Druid ideal?”

“Huh. Only in that it is an ideal born of my conscience and it was in the Druid forests that I learned the voice of my conscience and its value as a guide.”

Smedley reached up with a pointed foot and put it directly on the center of the top of Vivica's head. Then he reached up with another pointy, pointy claw and put it very close to the first one.

Vivica said, “What're you doing there with all your pointy feet, Smedley Rothchild Achnid?”

Smedley did not answer. He continued collecting all of his pokey, toenail-hard, grippy leg-ends into a small octagon around the middle of Vivica's scalp. Then he folded himself up like a fancy umbrella and became a wide-eyed fascinator.

Percy said, "Wait. What if this whole thing is really just—" he paused, considering. "Wait. I get it. I – I'm sorry. Do go on."

Vivica very much wished now that she had Frankie there. Frankie would have known exactly what went on during that pause. He would have been able to see right through to Percy Corvis' emotional cortex and known why he seemed suddenly to be all smirky and self-satisfied. He adopted a studied relaxation.

His general demeanor put her on edge. He moved like a cop and he always seemed to be examining her when she wasn't looking. Twice she'd caught him looking at Merlyn when the old man was speaking to other people.

Her right leg had been bent back, heel up against the safety stuff under the fancy executive swivel seat. She too had been feigning a casual pose. Now that she noted his withdrawal, she allowed some preparatory tension to slip from her muscles. She had been unconsciously poised for action.

She clicked off her safety belt and lifting herself by the armrests, folding her legs into a tight knot within the confines of the seat.

"Okay, Merlyn. Here we go. If there are three pieces of information that will be most useful for me to have on this quest, what are they?"

"You have been drawn into this Questing Field for a reason. You are the hero at the center of your own story. I know almost as little of the future as you."

"What do you know of the future that I don't? You know the future?"

"Pieces. Like I knew I would see the button and hear the ringing sound and smell perfume. I know there will be Breaking News Reports about an Ice Shelf collapsing that I

have not yet seen. I know I will see the sword again, but I will not see it placed in the hands of the Hero. I know I will press my hands against the Tree Of Life and my hands will be very, very wrinkled and I will wonder at that moment if at last I age and die. I see these things, but I do not know in what order they will happen or when. Also, the thing with my hands against the Tree's bark—that might just have been a little bit of a dream that I conflate with some images from the vision.”

“How is any of that useful?”

“That? I have no idea. I think the useful things you need to know are that you're in it for a reason. You are the hero at the center of your own story. And I know almost as little of the future as you.”

She glanced at Percy. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Okay, Merlyn. I'm gonna give this another shot. What would you suggest I do with this time?”

“I already suggested sleeping.”

“Right. Percy? Any thoughts on what more I should ask him?”

“Ask if he's ever been incarcerated or institutionalized?”

“What Agency did you say you work for?”

Percy smiled.

“How about it?” She asked Merlyn.

Merlyn said, “Of course, there was a span of several centuries locked in a crystal cave under a lush green hillside inaccessible by land or air, only to be found through a series of tunnels that originated underwater. I was once jailed for five days on suspicion of sorcery, a



very funny story, long before all the Arthur stuff took off. He was still a kid. I saw him regularly, but he was still just Arthur, the kid I was taking care of in lieu of his father. The delightful part was, I hadn't done the thing they thought I'd done, but I used pure Druid magic to get out of it. A less funny story is the one where the woman I love had me taken into custody under a fifty-one-fifty and had me held for seventy-two hours of evaluation which, sadly, stretched into three months. I refused to deny having said things that I had said to Sofia. Eventually it became apparent to both my captors and my lovely pilot that while I might be utterly bonk wonky, I didn't really seem to be much of a danger to anyone or to myself."

"Are you crazy? Do you think this might all be a delusion?"

Merlyn said, "You have a friendly spider nesting in your hair. The skeptical spy over there watched me accidentally kill a whole bunch of his little spider clan by humming."

"It didn't look accidental to me."

"I didn't know they couldn't sleep and hang on the wall at the same time. Bats do it."

Percy shrugged.

Merlyn turned back to Vivica. "I'm not going to try to convince you that you are swept up in a Questing Field. That's just a theory I've been developing and every time I find new evidence, I get excited all over again. I have memories reaching back to a time when magic flowed in the streams and danced the forest in the new moon dark just waiting for human hands to guide it into shape and purpose. I say to you the thing I have said many times to Sofia. You need not believe the things I say, but I truly hope you'll stick with me through the adventure."

Vivica nodded. She glanced at Percy and remained focused on him for a while, not because she thought she could read something, but because she knew how disconcerting it was when Frankie looked at her like that and she wanted the man disconcerted. She knew it made sense to be skeptical of Merlyn, that this might be some bizarre, misguided long con or the delusional escapade of a wealthy madman. Nonetheless, it had cost her nothing thus far and she was having a wonderful time. She had a wad of money in her pocket. She was on a plane with Frankie going to England.

“You want to tell me about this breathing thing? Frankie’s been all excited since you dropped it at the diner.”

“Go get the man,” Merlyn said. His grin told her that he understood the decision she had made. He saw her willingness if not to fully believe, at the very least to fully commit for now.

She went to the little hatch and knocked gently before opening it to peer in. The forward view through the windshield struck her as a confusing, nauseous field of impossible sky. She gripped the edge of the open doorway with unexpected strength and tried to sound casual as she said, “Okay, Frankie. Get out here. Rich crazy white dude’s gonna teach us how to breathe!”

She released her death lock on the doorframe, let the hatch swing shut and returned to her seat, aware of the widened stance that she adopted to walk safely on the shifting floor. She felt the tiny adjustments of balance and musculature. She took the three steps and then turned, wrapping herself again into her folded-up into the seat position.

The hatch opened and slapped shut again as Frankie emerged and turned his seat to face toward her. He leaned forward, elbows on knees like he expected to be discussing politics over a game of cards.

Merlyn said, "It occurs to me that I have never taught a grounding exercise on a plane before, but I did teach a group of very frightened sailors the exercise in the middle of an ocean once." His eyes glinted toward Vivica, and she saw the pure playfulness in him. He was tempting her to ask more questions, to pry further. She nodded toward him, smiling, acknowledging the play on her curiosity.

In return, he acknowledged her act of will in choosing not to pursue the story.

"How'd that go?" Percy asked.

"The lesson went well. Two men were lost nonetheless." The response came brusque and dismissive. He would love to tell long rambling stories, to draw her into the imaginative wonder of it all. Indulgence of Mr. Corvis' cynical criticality promised no joy.

"How many survived?"

"All of us. Why wouldn't we survive?"

"You said two were lost."

"Oh! They went completely mad. The combination of fear and the cognitive dissonance left them deeply damaged. With long-standing beliefs challenged, they could not integrate new knowledge. That wasn't because of the exercise, though. That was because of the circumstance."

Merlyn looked to Frankie and the two of them held a long, powerful eye contact. She saw both men settle into a sudden relaxation as though they shared an agreement.

Frankie said, "I can't figure out what you're trying to ask."

Percy had turned his focus to his phone, and had begun scrolling, touching virtual keys to the sound of electronically recreated button clicks.

Merlyn chuckled. He said, "I was asking if you could draw specific words. And then asked how much you could see, whether I could give story and detail and information and images to you directly."

"Oh. Then, no."

She watched Percy tap a last couple of times at his phone, and then he set it down on the small tray table beside him.

"Not yet, at least," Merlyn said. "In a few moments, or perhaps a few minutes I will ask you to close your eyes and listen to your breath. That, really, is all you need to do as you explore this exercise for the first time.

"Before I ask you all to do that – and know, all of you, that you are welcome to close your eyes and listen to your breath at any time. You need not await my permission. Ever. For anything." She noticed the incomplete sentence left hanging at the top of the sequence and the fragments at the bottom. She wondered if that was deliberate, some sort of linguistic misdirection. She realized she had been distracted and when she came back to the moment, he said, "Do you all choose to participate or to observe quietly?"

"Absolutely," Frankie said. Vivica gave what she believed to be a solemn and committed nod. Percy nodded, but his focus shifted to his phone again for a couple of quick taps. She hoped he was silencing it, although she had no idea whether phones could get signal in a plane.

After a few deliberately vague and confusing words about the nature of the magic he was about to perform and the ways in which it might or might not affect her, he dropped a line that turned in her head for a few moments, making her think about the airport, about the weird trance thing that had happened when she sang to Professor Smedley R. Achnid.

“There is little magic left in this world and few who encourage its practice, keep it flowing, generate it anew.”

She remembered him saying that she had done something remarkable, had generated magic from nothing just by singing. He said that she had cast a spell of affection and love that touched the people around her and that he could somehow have collected it and used it. She could almost see the magic moving out from her as she remembered singing softly. She remembered the vibration of the tones in her chest and on the air.

“... just before the thing you most need to hear reaches your mind. The thing you most need to listen to is your breath.” It occurred to her that singing, or humming is an excellent way to listen to one's breath. She allowed her focus to slip into the sound of her breath as it came to her now.

She heard it all through her skull and into her throat. She heard, once she turned her focus to it, the sound of the air filling and emptying her lungs.

Merlyn said, “You can hear my words and listen to your breath at the same time. When you focus on my words, steer your attention back to the sound of your own breath . . .”

She did that and as she allowed that sound, that overlapping sequence of sounds to become louder even than the man who spoke over the jet engines. She heard the high-pitched whine that she had so recently discovered at the back of her skull. Still there. Always

there, she realized now, sometimes almost imperceptible as part of the natural harmony of the world, resonating so organically with the traffic or the breeze or—now—the upper frequencies of an engine's baffled scream that the senses missed it in the vibration-scape of life. It had become audible to her, she knew, when it had fallen out of harmony. She considered the possibility that this might be the voice of her conscience.

Merlyn said, "Just steer your focus back to the sound of your breath."

She did that and immediately noticed the rhythmic switch from in breath to outbreath over the consistent sound of the droning pitch that seemed to originate inside her skull. This most primitive musical juxtaposition relaxed her, assured her that everything was okay.

She observed the vast universe around her. She sat in space and saw skies full of uncharted stars. The flickerings and pinpoint colors somehow added up to a tone and because of the speed at which they moved outward the tone dopplered down just enough to be the same as that in her skull. She listened to her breath and knew that everything was pretty much okay.

She relaxed into the weightlessness of intra-cranial interstellar tourism. Lines began to flash across her vision of the stars, linking them into the shapes of animals, then reconfiguring to use the same stars in new shapes. While each new constellation appeared, clearly, brightly demarcated, the others remained as well until a whole section of the sky was connected by a complex webwork of fine starlit lines that hummed in the frequency of Vivica's brain.

She moved through space effortlessly, balanced now. Having some weight when she needed it, she ran the web, bright rope springing beneath her feet. She found a strand that

took her toward the center and now she raced, eager, thrilled. When she came to Smedley at the center of his web, he greeted her with a turn of his head she could only interpret as a smile. His two frontmost legs opened wide and she realized he was not as close as she had thought. He was larger here at the center of his mind, in the middle of the sky. Still, she ran toward him and when she reached for the enormous spider, he took her in his big embrace. They held on like lovers in war. Then he lay down so she could climb atop him and burrow safe into the comforting hair on his back.

She felt this comfort and knew that what she felt, what Smedley shared with her, was the comfort he received, nesting right now in her hair on the plane.

She opened her eyes and immediately began fastening her seatbelt and yet she remained very calm. Merlyn gave simple instructions. Whatever was going on couldn't be too terrible. She listened to the sound of her breath and then the plane dropped very far, very fast and she felt a distinct sense of panic setting in.

## THIRTEEN



Percy had very little interest in the conversation taking place around him. When it felt as though the kid might run out of questions or the old guy might move things along, he threw in a snide comment to keep them talking, to stall.

He had an app in his phone that he very much wanted to find and use. He scrolled through, hoping it was named something he would recognize. He certainly had no memory of its icon. Not knowing what it was called, he couldn't just do a search. Text2Speech, maybe? Like Boyz2Men? Or Dictator?



He snorted softly at the idea of a meeting in which a marketing person had to explain to a tech genius why “Dictator” was not a good product name.

From the moment he had heard Sofia's skepticism of this trip, he had switched onto internal high alert. He had genuinely felt an inexplicable connection to all these people at the airport. He had sat, spinning in his own sense of calm, rightness and off-handedly let slip his legend. Something was definitely wrong with all of this.

Since the spiders appeared on the wall, he had been following a story that made too little sense. Perhaps he had been lightly drugged with a psychotropic of some kind? He tried to work through the logic of how, when it could have happened, how the guy could have known or directed the specifics of the hallucination. And the spider that was still with the girl wasn't just a hallucination. They all discussed the thing. Like it was normal.

He found the app he had been looking for. He touched the icon and the software opened. He used a slider to raise his microphone sensitivity until Merlyn's voice pushed the meters to tap the red zone without clipping. He checked the boxes for audio and auto-text saving and another box that would send the files to the cloud as soon as he was somewhere with signal.

He had no ear plugs with him and his earbuds were hundreds of miles away in an abandoned car.

He would use the disassociation techniques he had used during the worst of his interrogation in Helmand. He would let the phone create a transcript he could refer to later. For now, through the duration of the ‘exercise,’ he would remove himself from the internalization of whatever instructions the mentalist planned to plant by simply translating

the words as they came from English into Pashto, and then into Tari. It was a simple mind game of his own devising.

Under several hours of interrogation, he had managed to withhold the impulse to divulge classified information until his captors realized that he was there as part of the force sent from America to support their own efforts, not part of the force sent earlier from America to make an arms delivery to their oppressors. As he considered this, he wondered if that was when his absolute faith in the Agency had begun to slip.

The girl went to get Frank from the cockpit. Woman. He reminded himself that women don't like to be thought of as girls any more than men like to be thought of as boys. Then he wondered if he had been thinking of Frank as a boy. Certainly, on the day he came in for his interview he had been a boy, not much more than a year earlier. He had presented himself as a young man, well dressed, well mannered, soft-spoken, intimidatingly large, but he had been a boy. Treating the young hopefuls with the appearance of the respect accorded adults while curating their loyalties created trustworthy, long-game operatives but it also required a sociopathic willingness to warp a developing personality. It had taken him many years of plodding intellectual self-examination to unknot the threads of his indoctrination. Franklin's honest decency, his apoplectic guilt over a wrong so minor, committed so long ago, implied a life so pure that it forced Percy to see the amassed pile of his own transgressions beside it. The nature of the lies he had let himself accept while disregarding his own conscience became suddenly apparent. A whole lot of the tiny knots he'd been prying at for years loosened up now as he saw that he had been taught to make the Agency's mysterious

priorities outweigh his own intuition, his own instincts and ultimately even his own knowledge of what was right. What was wrong.

He did not know why they had perpetual surveillance up on Merlyn, nor whether his job was simply part of a larger intelligence gathering exercise or something more sinister. That information was need-to-know and Percy hadn't needed to know. He had needed to do his job and report in. Although his presence became known to his subject, he was still, ostensibly, entirely on the case, reporting in, uploading audio and transcript for the guys at New York Office to send to Washington Break Room to examine. Time and GPS stamps should be pinging, and the phone would start sending clear data the moment they touched down.

Merlyn gave him an opportunity to skip out and sit up front if he wanted to, but he wanted to stay. He considered leaving the phone to listen and transcribe, but only for a second. He wanted to hear what the kids were hearing. Others. The others. Not kids. Damn it. He felt a little bit old suddenly, as he sank into his chair. Then he realized that Merlyn had begun, and he had not been translating.

For a moment he panicked, thinking he might have been put into a hypnotic trance or something, but he reached for calm by listening to his own breath. He noticed the way he could find it anywhere along its path. He could hear his recently discovered middle-aged wheeze and the sound inside his nose. He had never noticed before how relaxing that sound was, how soothing.

He knew he had been thinking about something a moment earlier and he wanted to get back to the train of thought as it had seemed important. Some thread of an idea had led him

here. He translated that sentence into a couple of different languages for sport and then remembered that he had been thinking about whether that interrogation had been the start. He felt now as though he saw that question from a strange distance and knew the question itself to be a lie. The start had been earlier.

There was a woman he met on a train. He flirted with her. She found him charming. Then he became paranoid, afraid that she was prying for information. When she left him to get off at the next stop, she touched the tip of his nose with the tip of her finger and she said, "Young man—" that had stuck with him as she seemed at least ten years younger than he knew himself to seem, "—I think you are very good at your job. I will be interested in meeting you when you become confident enough to trust what you feel and to do what you want." She blew him a kiss from close enough that it might have been easier to kiss him directly. He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to ask her permission to take her in his arms. He wanted to beg her to allow him to take her in his arms. He said, "Before you go—" and she was already gone, the doors closed and the train moving as though he had skipped several frames ahead. He searched his spy's mind for a mention of her name, a memory of a luggage tag glimpsed but he could not even see luggage. She had been dressed too elegantly for a train and had said it was a lovely coincidence to meet another American after he had spoken to someone nearby. He had assumed she recognized his accent. He had questions suddenly as to who he had just spoken with, where she had come from, where she had gone and what had happened in the seconds between his starting to ask her name and his being, it seemed, twenty-two miles past the station stop with her far behind.

That experience had troubled him, though not for long. That train delivered him to adventures, terrors, capture, interrogation, relief, the epic saga of his time overseas and then his time in the New York office. The passing encounter with a fellow traveler had mostly slipped his mind except for that one moment when she touched his nose and spoke so soothingly to him, so confidently about what he would someday become. She had shown up in his dreams repeating that moment. Her bright green eyes had become a flashbulb memory that touched him with imaginings of what might have been. He barely remembered the conversation before that single moment. The time-jump right afterward always occupied his thoughts briefly, causing all that had come before to get a little bit lost. He had a moment of her eyes and the touch on his nose, her lips as she spoke, a smell that made him think of maple trees just after a rain. He had a deep, absurd certainty that had he done something different that day he would have followed an entirely different path. For the first time since that day, he admitted to himself the thing that had been unacknowledged.

She was perfect and he had let her go.

It made no sense to think that this conversation on a train could have become something more. He knew that. Still, he knew not only that it could have, but that it would have. He knew it with the same certainty he had heard in her voice when she said, "When you become confident enough..."

Now he wondered anew who she was. He recognized that as the day he had begun to change.

When his torturers released him, apologizing for not realizing sooner that his agency was no longer financing their enemy but was now arming and supporting them, his doubts about his employer only folded into the mix, making the change feel more urgent.

He noticed with a quick glance toward the surface of consciousness that he was diligently translating from English into Pashto, “Two, you find yourself in your seats, relaxed and comfortable.” The words were coming faster than they had been, he realized, because he had not gotten on from Pashto before they went on. “Three. I’m going to suggest that you return to full awareness of your surroundings as our young knight, bodyguard to the lady Vivica, has announced with some urgency that something is wrong.”

He was fully aware. He had never not been fully aware. Then, as he checked his seatbelt enjoying a surreal calm, the plane dropped precipitously. He wondered how the young man could have known that was coming. He thought it funny that after all the buildup, they had barely started the breathing thing when this interrupted it.

The plane dropped again, and he realized that he was about to be in another plane crash.

## FOURTEEN



Merlyn had already begun slowing his own breath and settling into his most relaxed focused state by the time he got to the start of the proper induction. He said, “Also, if any of you choose *not* to do this exercise, you are most welcome to watch and listen, or to go sit in the cockpit with Sofia, but I would ask that you not interrupt or ask questions until we have finished,” all on a single declaratory breath. Then, the moment that would lock them down for the duration, “Do you all choose to participate or to observe quietly?”

“Absolutely,” Frankie said.

Vivica nodded emphatically.

Percy nodded and Merlyn could see that he was already very nearly under if he hadn't put himself there already. He wondered if some boost given him by the Questing Field made the induction more effective, or just the exhaustion the young man caused himself, struggling with the surreal things he had experienced today. He realized Percy was well into his forties and likely did not think of himself as a young man.

He set expectations, both raising and lowering them, giving opposite poles to an idea. The participants would be free to accept their experience and to build the possibility that their experience might not end with the conclusion of the exercise. That was important. Set the wheels turning in a part of the brain. Give them permission to keep turning on their own.

"I want to be clear before we begin this exercise, that while it will seem a very small thing that I do, it truly is ancient magic. The effects you feel may be profound and immediate or they may be barely noticeable at all at first. Using these magics regularly will eventually deepen your experience no matter where you find yourself when you start. Using these magics regularly will allow you to make real and lasting change in yourself.

"There is little magic left in this world and few who encourage its practice, keep it flowing, generate it anew."

Percy sighed heavily.

Merlyn said, "Good. Sighing heavily is an excellent way of making it easier to listen to the breath.

"Now if you have not yet closed your eyes, I would suggest that you do so now or, if it makes you uncomfortable to do so at this time know that when you choose to close your



eyes it will be the right time, the moment just before the thing you most need to hear reaches your mind.” Vivica had already closed her eyes and he could see that she trusted the exercise and had already let go of her hard-muscled show of fearlessness. She seemed now to be without fear.

Merlyn kept his focus on the control of his own breath. Without looking at him, he directed his intention toward Frankie, softening his tone further and allowing it to resonate through his chest as much as his skull. “The thing you most need to listen to is your breath.”

Frankie’s eyes closed at last. Merlyn continued, his confidence buoyed by the closing of Frank’s eyes.

His will was strong, and his insight, that one. Had he not *wanted* to do this work, he might have resisted Merlyn’s most persuasive techniques. “The sound of your breath may be difficult to find. Unable to find it in your chest at first, you may need to seek it in your sinus cavity or. . . deeper down in your throat, or . . . coming through the canyons of your nostrils. . .”

Merlyn did not have Vivica’s easy ability to see the movement of chi at a casual glance. He had not the instinct that let Frankie know a lie from the truth and to peer through the tiers of thought by studying a face in response or repose. He knew when the room was his, though.

Just as Vivica’s spider-song lullaby had changed the feeling in the airport, Merlyn had taken charge of the cabin’s dynamic. He settled himself into work, making decisions based on breathing patterns and barely perceptible muscle twitches. He knew the nature of the spell, the purpose of the spell, the power, and the potential of the spell. He knew that even if

he did it imperfectly its impact could be profound. He thought through each line before he spoke, creating a broken rhythm, some pauses running so long it almost seemed he had lost his way, pauses that let his team absorb and interpret words they would likely never remember hearing. A small, second tier thought wondered how surprised Percy Clovis would be to find a clean recording and a transcript far, far longer than he anticipated.

**Listen to your breath.**

**Simply focus your attention on that sound, wherever you have now found it.**

**You will want to hear my words, but you needn't remember everything I say if it seems the easiest path**

**And if you choose to try, you may find that less important. . .**

**. . . than impossible. . . because you can listen to your breath and hear my voice. . .**

**When you listen to my words or my voice, just steer your focus. Gently return to the sound of your breath.**

**You have absolute freedom of choice to let yourself hear my voice but listen only to that sound of your breath.**

**That sound has been with you from the moment of your birth.**

**That sound will be with you until the moment of your death.**

**As long as you can find that sound, everything is pretty much okay. Everything is okay.**

**Now.**

**Listen to your breath.**

**Remember and imagine the invisible tether that holds you in alignment with the center of the earth. Gravitational. Your center to earth's center, even as you move far above the surface, still, the downward pull remains and...**

**Now listen to the sound of your breath and know that this connects you to all the world. . .**

**. . . every atom of air has, over eons, touched every other atom. . .**

**. . . every breath the product of countless exchanges. . .**

**. . . from beasts to plants to man. . .**

**. . . oxygen and carbon mixing and returning carrying . . .**

**. . . life and . . . listen to your breath. . .**

**. . . connection . . . and a way that all is literally one. . .**

**. . . vast. . . impossible . . . magical web of vibration. . .**

**. . . and light. . . sound. . . and thought. . . listen to your breath. Remember.**

**Imagine. Listen to your breath.**

**You have been an infant, screaming and afraid. You have been brave in time of terror.**

**You have been the recipient of love. You have been worthy.**

**Listen to your breath.**

**You have been the one who lies quiet in the night. You have been the hawk screeching on a high hill**

**And the worm burrowing in the dark earth.**

**You have been the consuming sensation of dew forming on naked flesh. Remember and imagine that you have made choices to bring you here. . .**

**. . . that you may choose now to find meaning in your experience . . .**

**. . . as you choose now to act. You are the captain and the oarsman. You choose your destination.**

**You map your route.**

**Your conscience serves you, ever more clearly as . . . Inner conflict falls away . . .**

**Inner conflict disappears.**

**You are the god who kindles fire in the head. You are the example you choose to set.**

**You know the power of the word. Acknowledge now the impulse toward honor. Acknowledge now the impulse toward honor.**

**Listen to your breath and know that as you move forward in time . . .**

**. . . you create your own momentum and . . .**

**. . . as you look through your memory. . .**

**. . . to telescope disparate events. . .**

**. . . to overlapping clarity . . .**

**Listen to your breath. Acknowledge**

**now the impulse toward honor draws you**

**as gravity tethers your body to earth and all its weighty wonders**

**respiration binds you to the world and all its living wonders.**

**Intuition guides you to the truth and all its difficult wonders. The new abilities you have begun to access . . .**

**Listen to your breath . . . Will grow and strengthen . . .**

**. . . as you open your mind to even greater possibilities. . . Attainable through increasing. . .**

**Understanding of flow. . . Listen to your breath. . .**

**. . . you will soar the heavens of your mindscape. . .**

**. . . slip the tracks of time. . .**

**. . . you will know truths without knowing how. . .**

**. . . and you will follow them . . .**

**. . . into difficult darkness. . .**

**. . . carrying only your own light . . .**

**. . . we are the heroes. . .**

**. . . we prevail. . .**

**. . . we persist. . . Listen to your breath.**

Franklin had begun to twitch uncomfortably, as if he was striving to awaken and Merlyn had not yet begun the proper shift into the future tense segment, so he offered a few spaced soothing lines before that magnificent young man forced his way out of a full depth experience to say, "Something's wrong."

Merlyn nodded to him and retained control over the room's tenor as he performed an abrupt close to the exercise. He had fully intended to stretch the exercise out as far as he

could, just to confuse Percy by bringing him back to consciousness as they were about to land at Heathrow.

He was annoyed by the man's conflicted skepticism. He wanted to dominate him and he could indulge that impulse subtly and with little guilt if he did it by providing him with an epigenetically supportive psychic adjustment. Percy would get all the benefit of the guided meditation *plus* Merlyn would get to see him unnerved by the time loss.

Merlyn understood, deep down—and also right near the surface where he could refuse to acknowledge it equally well—that everyone who had called him an asshole in any language had been correct.

Everyone got their seatbelts fastened per his instruction, as did he. Then the plane dropped suddenly.

Merlyn did a quick evaluation of the conditions of everyone around him. He heard Sofia over the intercom doing exactly what she should be doing. He cheered her on but when she couldn't tell him what was going on, he let her do her job.

She was a fantastic pilot. Also, though she did not know it, she was deeply charmed, naturally inclined to do the right thing in a crunch. Even when confusion blurred her understanding of the facts, she intuitively made the right choices.

Then the plane dropped through a whole lot more sky and Merlyn shifted his focus to the sound of his breath. He assured himself that as long as he could find this sound, everything was pretty much okay.

## FIFTEEN



Sofia realized how many feet she had dropped in how few seconds only after reading the altimeter three times. It seemed impossible to have lost so much altitude that fast without nosing down. It had been a straight drop as though the lift had gone out from under her wings. As she reached for the mic to reassure her passengers, she tried to imagine what sort of shear would cause that and if weather shifts that severe were taking place, why Heathrow hadn't been calling out warnings.

Flight instructors enjoy pithy sayings. "Any landing you walk away from is a good landing," they like to say. Also, "There's nothing more useless than sky above you or

runway behind you.” She had just gained a whole bunch of useless sky above her. She was nowhere near a runway. She did the reassuring pilot thing into the microphone and then continued to slow her breath for calm as Merlyn had taught her to do. They had practiced so regularly over the years it had become habitual.

“Go back to the sound of your breath,” he had said calmly when the guy in Barcelona held them at gun point. He had said it when the professors broke free of his influence and went back to their regular lives, a little bit richer for their time in his company, and she feared he would be furious with her for not believing in him enough and ruining the Questing Field. He had said it when she had found out just what the conditions were in that institution where she had sent him.

After she got him out, after she found out that he had written a paper himself and signed it, giving her full power of attorney to handle his finances until such a time as she passed away or deemed him capable of handling them himself, after she realized that he might be completely insane but he was genuinely, entirely in earnest, she wept. She gasped for air at the thought of what she had put him through. He had told her to breathe.

Before she knew what he had done, she had feared he might think she had put him away as a means of gaining control of his money. He knew she had hired people to look into him early in their arrangement.

The thing with the museums had left her shaken. The mania, the muttering, the long, exhausting drawing of a ‘summoning circle,’ the careful placing of talismans, the hours of chanting, adjusting the talismans, chanting again. It all led up to such disappointment, such utter emotional collapse and such a sudden greying of his beard that she feared another such



episode could ruin him. She did not want him to break himself. She liked his joy and his excitement and his enthusiasm. Perhaps a healthy mind wouldn't have those things to the extent that she enjoyed them, but that would be a small price to pay to keep this wonderfully kind, generous man from putting himself into that kind of spiral again.

She had only his interest at heart when she had him institutionalized. The thought that he might suspect her of doing it to steal from him had worried her for weeks. She had been doing research on the expense of private care facilities and had begun touring some, planning to pay for it out of her considerable savings.

The places she looked at left her depressed and concerned. The patients seemed so much less in touch with reality, so much more deeply troubled than Merlyn did most of the time. Apart from his delusions of immortality and his occasional insane missions to find a mythical artifact, he functioned as a jovial, likable, sometimes pompous old weirdo. His generosity toward everyone he encountered was, frankly, one of the things that most worried her about his behavior. He gave away money, literally gave it away constantly, as though that wallet of his really did just manufacture it magically.

Her compass suddenly spun as though it had been stuck in place and had just unjammed. She checked her headings and the plane dropped again as she realized that she could have been far off course for some time without being aware of it. No. That didn't feel right.

She feared, if she was genuinely honest with herself and she tried so hard to be genuinely honest with herself all the time, she feared they were about to crash because she did not believe strongly enough in Merlyn.

She knew it to be absurd.

The physics of flight could not be affected by whether she pretended to think her crazy boyfriend was an eighteen-hundred-year-old magician on a mystical quest. Still, it always seemed as though once he got one of these things going everything went improbably in his favor. People swept in to support the thing he was doing, and they all seemed to live in his weird bubble of luck until it fell apart and everyone slid out of his psychotic field of faith and left him weeping in some far away city while she wondered if he was going to remain miserable and muttering and withdrawn.

She knew eventually he would send her away for ruining everything he tried to do.

She knew that believing her lack of faith could ruin his imaginary Questing Field was as nonsensical as believing that he was an ancient wizard who could generate a Questing Field.

Still, she couldn't shake the sense that it was her fault every time he failed. Surely if he believed the things he said, he must blame her terribly.

Now her lack of faith had fucked up the luck again and they were about to crash into what looked like woodlands, which made very little sense as they should still have almost an hour before they even reached land.

She banked to get a good look at the blazingly green landscape below her. She wanted a long enough clearing or an empty highway, anything she might put down on that would be safer than continuing to fly through inexplicable down-drafts now over woody hilltops.

She spotted what she thought was an unbelievably opportune military landing field and brought the nose around toward it as she leveled out. She could do another pass around to wear off some more altitude, but if she hit another one of those pockets, they could come down anywhere in an uncontrolled crash.

She grabbed the mic and put on her Captain's voice which was as calm as any pilot she'd trained with but also way more personable. She said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are about to begin our final and possibly frightening descent on what appears to be—" as the angle of the light shifted she saw that she was not aimed at a landing field. What had looked like smooth tarmac was the mirror-still surface of a huge country lake. "—a lovely mountain lake!"

She recognized the shape of the hills about her abruptly. She remembered a map she had not looked at in a long time, and she knew exactly where she was. She knew how far the lake continued, curving beyond the hills ahead. She began to laugh, realized she still had the microphone button depressed, released it and giggled as she started to make the steep descent.

She was wholly unsure that she could get down fast enough to use the full length of the lake for her first water landing. Then another drop put her exactly where she would have preferred to be, while causing a terrified yelp to emerge from the passengers in the cabin.

She raised the mic and said, "I urge you now to relax as much as you can. There will be a loud noise, a splash and we will be enjoying the unlikely event of a water landing. Raise your Questing Fields to full power and let's put this girl down on a lake."

She felt herself automatically reaching for the foot brakes that would accompany the power-down and reverse on the ground. She pulled back the throttle as they dropped just over the tops of the last trees. She saw individual rocks on the shoreline between the trees and the water and then hit the reverse thrusters as if she was landing on the short run at

Burbank. She wasn't timing it to wheels down. She estimated the extra fourteen feet from wheels to belly. She got it right to within a millisecond.

The momentum slowed just before the sudden friction of fuselage on surface tension. For a moment she thought she'd gone too late with the retro-thrusters, that they would skip like a stone and regain too much air for the distance but an instant later the plane touched the water again, already slowing considerably. She felt the forward pull of negative G force, but she also saw the far edge of the lake coming up awfully fast as the engines roared trying to slow their plow through the still water.

She worked the yoke as if they were still in the air, banking slightly, not far enough to dip the wings just enough to—

Dammit.

—exactly enough to dip the wing. The drag started to spin the plane. She cut the engines entirely and waited to find out how badly she had screwed up as the plane turned now, spinning across the water on its belly.

The plane careened toward the very bank she had been trying to avoid, only now in a way that was likely to drive them down into the rocks instead of up into the tree line. As though she did not genuinely believe that they were all about to die because of just how awful a pilot she was, she pressed the mic button again. She said, "I would ask that you remain seated until the plane has come to a full stop." She anticipated a fiery death at any moment as she spoke, but she was gonna be damned if Merlyn was gonna die thinking she didn't have this under control. They hadn't died yet. She could still hear her breath.

The plane turned in what seemed now like slow motion. She watched the world reel past her windshield, the approaching shoreline, then the curving length of the lake, then the long expanse across to the shore where they had come down, then back around past a little bay, then back around to the shoreline, nearer than at its last appearance.

She went on as they spun toward imminent annihilation, “A point you might find of interest can be seen out the windows to the right of the plane. To the left of the plane. To the right of the plane.”

The plane thumped to a full stop.

Sofia looked out of the side window of the cockpit to see that her beautiful, beloved plane had spun out enough energy to sink a bit just before the shoreline. Now it rocked a little in the lingering ripples of its traumatic demise. The lake seemed to be reducing the residual energy with unnatural speed. She wondered whether it was depth or surface area that determined how fast a still pool could re-absorb a thrown pebble.

She unfastened her seatbelt, left the cockpit, and went to the exit door. She opened it to see whether they were going to need all the floatation stuff or the escape slide. When she saw that she did not, she wondered if she had just proven the power of the Questing Field or if she had proven that, in fact, her disbelief had as little effect on anything as any other kind of magical thinking had on anything. She did not say any of that.

While her passengers stared at one another in gape-eyed wide-mouthiness, she released the little latch that let the folded-up staircase fall free and arrange itself into position. She turned to the cabin, picked up the microphone that hung outside the cockpit and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to apologize. Due to current conditions in the air, I was

unable to get us any closer to the terminal. You may get your feet wet as we are just a step or two farther out than I would have preferred.”

They all burst into spontaneous applause.

Vivica was the first to the door, her spider very alert on her shoulder.

Sofia said, “Thank you for flying with us. I know you have many choices when it comes to free chartered air service, and we do hope you’ll consider us in the future.”

Vivica nodded. She turned the corners of her lips down and offered the slow nod of street respect toward the woman who had gotten them safely out of the sky, smacked them up against the end of the lake and shrugged it off like it was one of those stunt-slide parking jobs in the car commercials. She stepped down and was able to jump from the second step to dry land without touching the water. She said, loudly enough to cover the distance to the top of the steps, “You’re the real deal, Ma’am.”

Sofia threw her a half-assed salute.

Frankie ducked a bit as he stepped through the hatch onto the steps and then, seeing how close the plane was to the shore, he said, “Oh, Shit! You do that on purpose?”

Sofia said, “Oh, yeah. Check the flight plans.”

He ran down the steps and splashed onto the shore.

Feeling better about things now that she hadn’t killed the man she loved and all his new friends in a fiery crash, she grinned at Percy as he approached her. She said, “I do hope you enjoyed your flight and I hope you did not have an urgent connection to make at Heathrow.”

He said, “I am deeply troubled by . . . a lot of things that have been . . . occurring.”

She said, "You might want to take that up with your spiritual counsellor or a loved one. My job is putting you into the sky and then getting you back out of the sky alive. Which I have accomplished today against some steep odds."

He said, "Well, I have to say, I'm not very impressed with your navigational skills."

"Oh! You mean 'cause this isn't Heathrow, where you expected to be landing. I get it. Yeah. But also, kind of fuck you, 'cause I got us down alive and—oh! Look at your boarding pass! It says that you were not seated in the comments section."

Percy narrowed his eyes at her in a way that suggested he did not like her tone and that they would have further words about this at a later date. He might formulate a sternly worded e-mail. He descended the steps and made the leap to the shore with a reserved grace that covered the distance with his shoes dry but no unnecessary expenditure of energy.

Merlyn swept up to her side with a dramatic flourish, wrapping a romantic arm around her waist. He said, "You are my hero every day, my love. Today, you are also the reason we all survive. Yes?"

She spoke quietly to him now, but it was less about intimacy than about embarrassment. She said, "I don't know. Listen Merlyn, I really don't want you to hate me."

"Why would I hate you?"

"I'll understand if you're angry, but I don't want you to hate me."

"I do not know how to hate you." He pushed hair away from her eyes even though there was no hair in her eyes. Really, he just traced her brow. He kissed her gently.

She enjoyed that for the moment that it occurred. A shiver passed through her. With his arm around her she felt safe and protected. The gallons of adrenalin that had poured into her had left a dense residue of intensity.

She shivered again and then pulled away from him back into the cabin and did a full ten second shake-off-the-energy dance before she sat heavily into one of the swiveling executive chairs. "I almost got us all killed."

"I don't think you did. And you certainly didn't intend to. Do you think I care about a crashed plane?"

"No."

"About the expense?"

"What? No. Merlyn. Please. I know where we are. I figured it out just as we were about to crash."

"We were not about to crash."

"We were."

"You feared that we were, but in fact, you were about to land the plane. On a short strip of water."

"Okay. But what are the odds that I could try to bank us into the longer waters and dip the wing just enough to spin us to a stop at the shoreline?"

"The odds are 100% not only that it could happen but, on this day, with you at the controls, that it would happen. Do you know why?"

"Incredible luck?"

"Questing Field, sweetness!"



She sighed.

He said, "You were about to confess something that you feared would make me hate you."

She nodded. She went back to the cockpit and opened her charts pocket. She retrieved some folded items from it and returned. She said, "The reason I could land us so elegantly, attempting to adjust course to the hidden contours of the lake is that I know where we are."

She handed him the lost documents of Professor Lots O' Lakes and Doctor Stitchy Map.

The plane shifted a bit under them. Merlyn said, "I think we should disembark before I assure you that I don't hate you and I'm not angry."

"Disappointed?"

"Are you out of your brilliant pilot mind, my lovely young one?" He took her by the arm and led her toward the hatch.

She allowed him to guide her, and she muttered an obligatory, "I'm not that young anymore," but her heart had fallen out of it. She had been working very hard to maintain a calm and professional demeanor, but that kind of emotional control catches up. Tears streaked her face. She leaned on him weeping as they stepped out of the plane. She looked at his face the whole time through her side-stumble down the stairs, the watery slosh to the scrubby beachfront. She watched him for telling expressions, for an indication of what he would do now that he knew her betrayal. This betrayal. He knew about the other one already, of course, when she incarcerated him.

She sat on the ground and said, "I swear, I don't mean to fuck everything uuuh-huuuuuugh- huuuuuuuuup. I didn't even mean to take the maps and stuff. I've been so afraid

that you knew the whole time and it was some sort of a test. I didn't want you to hate me. I didn't mean to ruin the thing with the Professors. You told me – you said – my instinct would never fail me, and it just keeps failing me. And I don't know how to fix it. I'm so sahhhhhhhhhh- I'm so saaaugh—”

He sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her. He said, “I do not test those whom I love. We all face enough tests without having extras heaped upon us by those we trust.”

“You didn't suspect I'd taken the papers?”

“I knew the papers were gone. I suspected someone had taken them.”

“I ruined the whole quest, Merlyn. You spent a fortune. You tracked down the experts. You had a plan. They thought they'd figured out exactly where we had to go, and I was just driving you all through the British countryside thinking about how nuts it all sounded.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That's why it all fell apart. Right? The Questing Field needs faith, and I don't have faith.”

“The Questing Field I propose requires momentum. Action. It's not a magical thinking game where everyone has to pretend to be without doubt for the rain to fall or what-have-you.”

“What?”

“That Quest fell apart because it was too deeply flawed from the start. I wove deep impurities into the Field as I constructed it. In my defense, I didn't know that I was creating a Questing Field at the time because the notion didn't even occur to me until I began sorting back through events that have occurred over the centuries.”

"Merlyn."

"I don't lie to you."

She took in the long slow breath and let it out again as she did every time. She chose not to confront her beloved's delusions. The simple act of taking in and releasing that breath calmed her further, although this time she followed it with a violent shiver as the last drops of plane crash death-terror slid cold down the length of her spinal cord. Then she said, "That was a good landing."

Merlyn said, "It really, really was." He kissed her on the head. "You okay?"

"Yeah. No. Yeah. How can you not be mad that I stole the maps and ruined the Professor Quest?"

Her impossibly forgiving boyfriend took her in his arms. He took a moment to speak and she knew it as a genuine mannerism, not an affectation. He wanted to phrase something in a way that did not dismiss or minimize her skepticism. He wanted her to hear him and she knew how well he knew her to dodge so many potential trigger points at the same time. He said, "I was almost certain someone had taken the documents, that neither wind nor some other invisible party had done it. If one of the professors put together a new search for the sword, I would have known of it, intercepted, and participated. If it was you who had taken them, I had to assume that you did so following your own intuition and conscience."

"So, you did suspect."

"I knew it was a possibility that you'd taken them. Yes. And I trusted that if you had taken them, they would emerge at the appropriate moment to serve their appropriate purpose."

"You said something like that when I got you out of . . . that place."

"Yes."

"How can anyone trust that much?"

Merlyn stepped back to remove tear streaks from her cheeks. He said, "Trust, unlike love, requires a conscious choice. I have loved, in my years, eight women very poorly and six women very well. The love was the same. The difference, in every case, lay in the decision to trust."

"You know it's difficult to take seriously any sage wisdom that comes from a man I know to be clinically insane."

"You do not know that. You believe that. You will continue to believe it until the day that you decide to trust me."

"I do trust you, Merlyn. You know that."

"Except the things I say of my history, my abilities, and my understanding of the underlying function of time, space and consciousness."

"Those I don't believe at all. But I do trust you."

He grinned at her.

She grinned back.

They sat down on the hard earth, and she unfolded the map and the tapestry print-out the professors had been working from all those years ago. She had studied them closely, many times, sometimes lost in waves of guilt, other times fantasizing about announcing to Merlyn that she had found the sword's location and would take him there at once! Now, with his

casual acceptance of their reappearance as wholly right and appropriate, she felt her entire emotional expenditure to have been self-indulgence, a waste of time and energy.

“Okay,” she said, “I honestly have no idea how we wound up so far off course, but we’re nowhere near Heathrow. Instead, we have landed...” She pointed to place on the topographical chart at the bend in a lake. “... here.”

“Huh.” Merlyn said. “Why is that spot circled in sharpie a bunch of times?”

“Because this is the place where the Professors in the back seat were quite certain the sword was tossed into the lake by Percival. Look at the shape of the lake here, and the topography over here sketched out in the embroidery on this thing.”

“Here.” Merlyn looked around taking in the surroundings. “This could be Nimue’s lake.”

“Merlyn!” Frank shouted from the edge of the forest that surrounded the lake front, “There’s a guy here who says our camp is set up.”

“What?” Merlyn stood, squelching the impulse to groan as his bones unfolded and his muscles griped. He turned toward his young companion to see a familiar face beaming at him, all red beard and ginger mop. He said, “Danny Rourk! I didn’t expect you to be here at all!”

Sofia tried to remember where he had seen this man. It was like the face of a character actor whom she knew from one circumstance as a serious surgeon in a film showed up in a TV commercial as an avuncular lumberjack in a toilet paper commercial.

The man covered ground in a few happy strides to hug Merlyn. He said, "Are you kidding me? You gave me all the details, you told me about the Quest, you gave me a general timetable. How could I not show up?"

"But even I didn't expect to be here for another few weeks. I thought there would be passports to deal with, and a drive from London."

"You also said that you are compulsively early for appointments and that you believed a Questing Field would accelerate any endeavor toward its climactic conclusion, so I did some calculations and worked it out just about right. I set up your camp a couple of weeks ago."

"You've been waiting."

"Yes."

"How did you know where to go? I didn't know where to go."

The man looked lost suddenly. He seemed concerned, on the verge of panic. He said, "Trust my intuition, you said. The compass of my conscience and the north star of my desire. Always in the right place at the right time, you said." His hands trembled and he became even more familiar to her in his nervous vulnerability. It seemed to just now occur to him that he might have just gone willy-nilly into the forest, found a lake, set up camp and have misunderstood the old sorcerer's intentions entirely.

Merlyn chuckled. "Yes," he said. "I remember giving you that advice."

"It was good advice. Right?" He turned frantically to Sofia and said, "Wasn't it? It was good advice?"

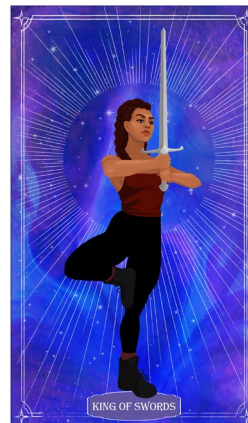
Sofia, to be comforting said, "Well, it got you here."

Danny said, "Right? I'm here. You're here. Right place. Right time."

Merlyn said, "You have done very well, Danny. Very few people can follow conscience and desire directly enough to get precisely where they need to go."

Danny hugged him again, relieved and relaxed, the doubt melting away. Merlyn said, "Sofia, this is Danny. We met in the mental asylum. I believe I introduced you!"

SIXTEEN





Danny Rourke led the small party through woods that smelled to Merlyn of childhood and hunger. With every step the Wizard tumbled anew through ancient corridors of memory. The trees themselves touched him with their twiggy reaches, deep descendants of trees he had known. The windings of impassable patches and underbrush had changed, yet they remained as he remembered them. He walked confidently over uneven terrain, knowing its ways.

Frankie and Vivica moved through the woods noisily, snapping branches and occasionally cursing. While Vivica projected gruff irritation, Frankie knew that the same nervous discomfort he felt affected her. Smedley leapt from her shoulder to nearby trees, skittered along branches ahead of them and then waited to drop back onto her shoulder or her head to ride for a bit.

Percy Corvis moved through the woods comfortably. Childhood hunting excursions with his father in upstate New York had taught him to move through the trees, taking in information. He found himself very calm, confident as he moved. The sound of his breath drew his attention and he found that he was able to listen to the sound of his breath and hear the world around him at the same time. He lost track of how long they walked.

Sofia caught up to their guide and walked with him. He smiled at her but said nothing.

She wanted to ask him about Merlyn's time in the institution. She wanted to ask if Merlyn had spoken of her, if he had ever expressed any of the resentment, he must surely have felt. She glanced back toward Merlyn and saw that tears streaked his cheeks. She let

herself drop back to match his pace. She took his hand in hers to be of whatever comfort she could. She said, "You okay?"

"Memories."

"Okay."

"Thanks."

"Here we go!" Danny announced brightly. "I didn't know exactly how this would go, so I did my best."

They broke the tree line surrounding Danny's camping-ground clearing. Merlyn began to laugh the joyous laugh of a man who, for just a moment, believes that it might just all be about him. He said, "Oh, Danny! You have done very well indeed."

Three huge, brightly colored campaign tents surrounded a fire pit. One of the tents had a flap open, and inside it had the lived-in look of personal quarters. Each of the tents had little banners flying from the front corners with tent-specific olde-timey coats of arms on them.

Percy turned to Merlyn. He said, "You had this all set up ahead of time?"

Merlyn shrugged and smiled. "Does it help if I didn't mean to?"

"Where the fuck did you come up with all this stuff?" Frankie blurted at Danny in amazement and delight. Then, "Wait. Is this 'camping?' Because the way I always imagined it was significantly more sucky."

"I stole this from my ex-wife, mostly. The fire pit I built here. You know, just rocks and a shovel really." He looked around at the group who stood staring at the anachronistic display. He added, "And wood. To burn."

Frankie abruptly spoke through tight teeth. He said, "Danny, I think someone's in your tent."

Percy followed his gaze, muscles tensing, ready.

Vivica backed up a step to let Frankie take the lead. It bothered her a bit that she did so, but she dropped into a loose Taekwondo sparring stance to remind herself that she was not dependent on him for protection.

Danny said, "Oh! Yeah. Guys, I'd like you to meet my new girlfriend!" He called out toward the tent. "They're here, baby!" Then he said, "Merlyn, all of Merlyn's friends, this is Nimue! She walked up out of the lake the first night I was here. Can you believe that?" He turned to Frankie and said, sotto voce—though not so sotto as to avoid being overheard—"And we have been having a lot of sex."

Frankie said, "Good for you."

Danny wiggled his eyebrows and glanced toward Vivica. "You two?"

Frank said, "Not any."

Vivica punched him in the kidney. Not hard. Not very hard.

"It's true, Shorts!"

Viv said, "It's none of his business."

Frankie said, "That, also is true."

Then the lady of the lake emerged from Danny Rourke's tent. She wore an elegant, draped sheet of flowing fabric in murky earth tones that shifted as she moved so that she seemed a blurred lens through which the forest behind her distorted into sensuous curves. The arc of her bare shoulder caught sunlight like a whitecap in a high wind. Her other

shoulder hid, coy, beneath a hair tangle of exorbitant volume. "Merlyn!" she yelped! "I hardly believed him when he said you'd be coming!"

She moved toward them, arms outstretched and every one of them felt the lurching pull of abrupt adoration. It took them over like the chemical rush of first lust. This came inside uninvited but wholly welcome, with teen-gush hormones and unconscious fantasies of intertwined limbs and shameless fluidity.

Danny said, "Isn't she wonderful?" He began to move toward her.

Merlyn said sternly, "Nim. Turn off the glamour."

She said, "Aw, come on, Merlyn. How long has it been since anyone fun has shown up here?"

Merlyn said, "I'm sure you're terribly lonely and for that I am genuinely sorry. Still, if you would. I'm on an important Quest and I am weaving an element of truth into the action, you understand?"

She cocked her head to the side as Danny reached her, put an arm around her, kissed the flesh exposed along her neck at the gesture. She said, "You are treating an adventure as if it were a spell."

"Did the tapestry metaphor give me away?"

"Bards and Druids. You learn the ways of words then you learn the ways of yarns then you think they are metaphors and not the very stuff of the magic itself."

The Questing Party, all of it, had moved in close around Merlyn whom they just now admired greatly for both knowing and casually conversing with the impossible wonder of attraction who stood before them speaking in burblingly distracting tones.

Merlyn smiled, "Is that what I do when I experiment with the weave of an adventure?"

"Very few mortals ever grow as wise as you, Merlyn."

"Am I mortal?"

She chuckled. "Who among us hasn't had that thought from time to time?"

Everyone in the Questing Party around Merlyn raised his or her hand. Not one of them had ever had that thought.

Merlyn said, "Please, Nimue. It is a deception, and it is . . . unkind."

Nimue, ancient lady of the lake, nodded. She put up a finger, requesting just a moment. She went to Percy who stood stunned, eyes twitching as though what he saw now was more impossible than anything he had seen in the last day, anything he had seen in his travels, anything he had seen in his most private imaginings. Her skin tone was very different now; she had worn makeup that day, perhaps somewhat old-fashioned makeup. He would still recognize her anywhere.

She looked him in the eyes, dripping with wantability. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. She gently touched Percy's nose with the tip of a finger and said, "Have you yet become confident enough to trust what you feel and to do what you want?"

He drew in a sharp breath and said, "I'm trying. I'm not sure."

She sighed, dissatisfied with that progress.

He looked into those green, green eyes and said, "Didn't you say I was a fellow American?"

"I said, 'A fellow traveler.' But I was doing an American accent."

"It was good."

“Right? I learned accents from Danny Kaye and mock languages from Syd Caesar.”

“I don't know what that means.”

She turned away from him with the bored sigh of a disaffected adolescent.

She changed in that instant, although at the same time she remained exactly the same.

That place where the sunlight had glanced off her shoulder resolved itself into a sharper focus to reveal flesh as uneven as a forest floor. Falling in clumps over the other shoulder, luxurious locks lost their luster. She said, “Come on! Danny did fish and carrots for dinner in a butter sauce!”

Danny kissed her scaly, unglamorous neck as they all moved into the camp. Then he ran ahead to bring out the food.

Nimue took Merlyn's hand. She led him toward the fire pit with the affection of a long-absent friend. The gesture held no hint of romance, nor the performative taint of the familial, referencing remembered wrongs and half-forgiven slights. She said, “The tall one's with you, yeah?” and she meant Sofia, not Frankie.

“Yeah.”

“A mortal?”

“Yeah.”

“What about weaving the truth into the adventure?”

“She knows.”

Nimue stopped walking and allowed the other members of the Questing Party to school around her and Merlyn on their way to the central space in the camp. She said, “They all know.”

"Yes."

"That's why they weren't freaked out by the veil dropping."

"Yes. Although Sofia—"

"The girlfriend?"

"Yeah. She doesn't believe me."

"After my entrance?"

"She's seen weirder."

"Yeah?"

"And better."

"You are a very old, very irritating dick."

Merlyn grinned.

Then an enormous helicopter swept in above them drowning out their conversations and blasting them with wind. Dust and ash assailed their eyes and their nostrils. It set down disrespectfully at the center of the camp, one of the landing skids crunching into the ash and embers of the firepit.

The booming SHUGGA-SHUGGA-SHUGGA of the motor slowed and then the last of the mechanics whirred to a stop.

Men began to emerge from the hatch, dressed in military fatigues with guns ready.

"More friends of yours?"

"Very no," Merlyn said. Then he shouted, "Percy? You bring these guys?"

From inside the tent, Percy shouted, "Probably."

Merlyn nodded.

The squadron spread out, fast and efficient. Long guns with extended magazines pointed at Merlyn and Nimue.

Some pointed at Vivica and Frankie who had been first to re-emerge at the sound of the chopper. They put their hands up in the reflex of surrender taught to all children of color in modern America, an ingrained acquiescence to the authority of the gun in the hands of a man in uniform or white skin.

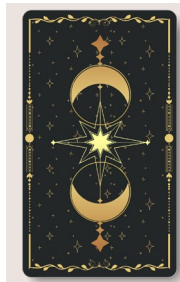
They stumbled out of the way, pushed from behind as Percy pushed between them. "Yeah," he said. "These idiots are probably my fault."

One of the newcomers stepped forward while Sofia emerged from the tent to stand near Merlyn. The man who had taken up the position of authority carried only a handgun which he held pointed groundward as he shouted, "Everybody stay still. Stop moving around."

Danny came out of the tent carrying a tray that held seven servings of gourmet-plated campfare. He looked around and then announced, "I haven't made nearly enough to serve everyone."



## SEVENTEEN



Carmine Urbello kept his handgun pointed downward as he surveyed the strange site. He took in the medieval-looking tents. He took in the middle-aged grey-haired man with the ponytail and the unmussed coat, the attractive woman with him and the weird grey-green savage-looking one to his other side. Two black kids covered by a tent. His boys had them covered. He had already ruled them out. The out-of-context chef didn't seem right. He turned slowly, trying to memorize everything he could about each of the people he saw in the group. He did this constantly now. He had to. It was part of the most difficult cover he had ever maintained. He hid it from everyone, fearing he would lose his commission, be drummed out of the field unit entirely perhaps, if anyone learned his secret. He could no longer see people's faces.

He didn't notice it when he spoke to people he knew well, and he had little interaction with people outside the agency. He knew the voices, the postures. Even in uniform he could distinguish people pretty easily, and rank insignia gave him a crutch when he didn't know a name.

He turned to the guy in the grey bomber jacket. He said, "Percy."

Percy said, "Yeah. I'm pretty sure they're here for me."

The man said, "I'm going to need to talk to you on board the aircraft, right now."

Merlyn chuckled.

The man with the gun continued. "You and I will have a little talk, and then we'll make decisions as to what to do with Chuckles and his friends."

Merlyn said, "Percy, you are under no obligation to go with this man if you do not wish to." Then, just a bit louder, he said, "Would you two like to come join us over here?"

Frank and Vivica exchanged looks, then Vivica shouted, "There's a bunch more guns aimed your way than ours." They stayed put.

Merlyn nodded, acknowledging the reasoning.

Percy said, "I'm honestly not sure what to do here, guys."

The man with the handgun held his wide stance with natural authority. He said, "What the fuck, Corvis?"

"Look. If I go into that helicopter with you and I tell you what I think is happening here, you are going to lose your shit and talk to the agency about me. I'm not exactly certain why you're here but I can tell you that I'm officially just here as a guest of Mr. Taliesin. Unofficially, when you showed up here aiming guns and calling my name, you casually blew

a solid cover and I'm a little bit annoyed with you. So how about you and your team put yourself under my command as the first on the scene and we proceed from there?"

"No."

"Oh." They stood for a long time that way. A solid second and a half is a long time for two people to stand silent, reading one another, one very much holding a gun, the other very much not.

Clenched, the man said, "I'm doing you a professional courtesy. We have reason to think you might have chosen to travel with these people willingly."

Percy smiled. He said, "I did, Carmine! It seemed the best way to continue my assignment. Surveil and report. Come on. Tell your men to stand down and tell me what you think is going on here."

Carmine did not move. It seemed he wanted to. The stillness of his team as they awaited instruction showed remarkable discipline. Percy felt their tension, both anticipation and anxiety. Few people naturally point guns at the unarmed. The brain of the well-trained soldier, the kind the agency built out of the military's smart-ass wash-outs, compartmentalized for such occasions. The prescribed criteria for escalation and de-escalation took control shutting down the conscience and the emotional life in deference to trained protocol. He watched them all doing it now, his former colleagues, turning off their consciences to do a job they had entered into believing it to be noble.

They were good soldiers, these. Not one of them had flipped off their safety. Not one of them had dropped an eager finger into the enclosure of the trigger guard.

Carmine said, "What the fuck did you send in to headquarters?"

“What?”

“You sent an audio recording that keeps sending our people into some kind of a trance. Everyone reports it saying something different before the plane crash.”

“There's a transcript.”

“People keep reading the same paragraphs over and over again.”

“Huh. That's very cool. It was a very short recording. We'd barely started when the plane went down.”

“You call in that you're travelling *with* your subject to Heathrow. Then you show up winking at an operative at the airport.”

“I didn't wink. I gave him an inconspicuous nod.”

“The computer says your car's abandoned in short-term.”

“Merlyn said he can cover that.”

Merlyn waved. He said, “That's me! I've got cash for parking. That's not a problem.”

“We look at you in real time and we get you heading toward Heathrow on a private jet that belongs to this guy's Liberty Is Knowledge Revolutionary Atheist Socialist Societ—”

“LIK-R-ASS,” Sofia offered.

“What?” Carmine snapped.

Merlyn said, “It's the acronym for my philanthropic endeavor the Liberty Is Knowledge Revolutionary Atheist Socialist Society. LIK-R-ASS. When I created the organization, I figured anyone demanding to know the full, legal name of the organization was someone to whom we might want the opportunity to say that.”

Carmine glared at him for a long moment and then said, "When you created the organization?"

"Yes."

"It was founded in 1915."

"Yes."

Sofia said, "What?"

Carmine considered racking his gun to refocus the conversation, but that would result in an even more dramatic series of clicks and crunches as all of his team prepared for gunplay and he was not prepared to have that happen yet. He kept his tone even. He said, "It seems as though your organization has done a great deal for a great many people by way of charitable support over the years, Mr. . . Taliesin, is it?"

"Yes."

"Grandson?"

"Wait. Are you saying you're my grandfather?"

Had Carmine been only marginally less disciplined, he would have closed his eyes to let out a frustrated sigh. That might have given one of these people an opportunity to attack or escape, to create problems. Instead, he compartmentalized. He could do his job without vilifying. He said, "Am I to presume you are the grandson of the man who founded the group?"

"Only if you wish to be entirely mistaken."

Taliesin seemed so utterly unintimidated and unrelenting in his smart-assery that Carmine found himself wishing he could read facial cues, gather any more information about

his intent. He turned to Percy, "You were over the Atlantic when you started descending abruptly. Then, your phone shows up about 1500 feet lower and falling fast over Wales. Just when we figure out where you are and calculate a heading, there's another abrupt drop and another shift and suddenly you're on a low descent path straight into Glaslyn Lake."

Merlyn shouted, "Glaslyn! Of course. Glaslyn."

Nimue said, "Did you forget where I live?"

"A lot of things are different. You don't know how weird it is now where all the people are."

"I get out from time to time. I like to hit the comedy clubs to find the new truth tellers."

"You know, I thought I spotted you in an old photo of a Lord Buckley house concert."

"Yeah. I used to hang out at the Cracker Jack Palace."

"I convinced myself it was wishful thinking. I could've used an old friend in the fifties."

Percy chirped, "I met her once on a train crossing a desert!"

Nimue said, "Yes, dear. You were very special to me." Then, without giving room for him to derail the conversation she said to Merlyn, "You said you'd be back soon."

"I spent a few hundred years trapped in a crystal cave, you know."

"Ooh. Yeah. Sorry about that."

"You were doing what you thought was right."

"Morgan, man. She was persuasive, huh?"

"Yeah. She thought she was doing what was right."

"Fucking hindsight, right?"

"I want to know," Carmine said raising his voice to draw focus. "How your terrorist friends here can mess with the most sophisticated and accurate GPS transponder tracking systems anywhere in the world."

"LIK-R-ASS is not a terrorist organization," Merlyn said. "We have done nothing illegal, and we strive to do only good in the world. This continues to be the case as we move our mission forward, sir. Also, why, if we choose to mess with these tracking systems, would you already have found us? That you are here suggests to me that we should discuss whether you might play a part in this grand affair. I would invite—" he took a step toward the man who raised his gun to point it directly at the center of Merlyn's forehead.

Carmine said, "Stop walking, asshole."

He did not drop the safety. He did not put his finger inside the trigger guard.

Nimue stepped forward guiding the gun away from Merlyn as she said, "Oh, darling man, no, no, no." She moved elegantly but not without a level of animal savagery in the turn of her hips. Pheromones rode a wave of glamour as she spoke. She said in the most soothing tones, as quiet as perfume but as certain as gravity, "Your hunger makes you behave impolitely." She guided the man's gun into its holster. "Let's get you fed. Shall we?" She gestured for Danny and he came to her with the food.

Merlyn said, "Nimue, what are you doing?"

"Point of privilege, Merlyn. These men have entered the Circle of a Faerie Camp uninvited carrying the weapons of man. The Circle of *my* camp. They have damaged my hearth that I have built with my new beloved."

The chef raised his hand and said, "That's me!"

Merlyn laughed. "You're doing my act!"

Carmine, dismayed, realized that having his gun out had, indeed, been awfully rude of him.

Nimue brought a plate down from the tray to hand to the man as the smell of warm carrot followed by the French-layered smell of fish under butter sauce spread across the expanse like a mother's call across small-town sundown. She put the plate in the man's hands. He knew he should be telling the team to stay in position rather than lining up behind him, but he said, "Thank you," to the incredibly beautiful woman and looked for a place to sit down. This was not a meal he could eat without using the cutlery in his hand, wrapped in a cloth napkin.

A confusion crossed his mind, swiftly dismissed. The full tray of plated food seemed as full in his peripheral vision when the woman offered a plate to Jenkins who was, naturally, first in line. It still seemed full as she put another plate into Landry's hands. That felt odd to him, in the way it seems odd in a dream when the locale changes abruptly, but no time gets lost to travel.

Merlyn watched as Nimue handed the conjured food to the men.

Eating politely, and observing with the abstract distance of a lithium-clouded psychiatric inmate, Carmine watched the figures of Percy's strange party, tagging names where he could to items of clothing. His attention drifted frequently back to their hostess, Nimue. He could not really make out her individual beauty, but she moved in a captivating way and seemed to be taking care of all his men very nicely, simply because she felt affection for him!



Unguarded, Frank and Vivica drifted over toward the smell of food. As they reached for the food Nimue distributed, Merlyn said, "You take yours from Danny."

Danny handed each of his men a plate and the number of plates on the tray diminished by two. His adoring focus remained on the Lady of the Lake in her glamorous glory, distributing enchanted food to hungry soldiers. He said, "I do love watching her work."

Sofia said, "You don't mind that it's a glamour?"

Danny shook his head, vehemently. "I've never met anyone who understood the concept of glamour as clearly as I do. I mean, never. I heard the same stories as everyone else when we were kids. The same fairy tales. Nobody else seemed to get the idea. Right? Everyone else read the fairy tales and then watched television or rap videos or—you know—thin people who—travel for a living or— whatever. I saw them all wanting these things that were advertised to them and I thought, how do they not know this is a glamour? This is a distraction from the real quest. Then I saw Nimue wearing her silly glamour and it was so obviously deliberate that I just blurted out, 'Are you an actual Faerie?' and she started laughing. Up until then I just thought she was some weird savage girl who kept staring at me from the woods."

Nimue, still handing out plates and speaking softly to each recipient, said, "You didn't know I was watching you."

"Of course, I did. That's how I knew you were wearing a big silly glamour when you walked out and said hello."

Nimue said, "I was stealthy."

"You took the cake I left out for you."

Nimue shrugged and gave away a plate of food to the remaining customer, leaving only those prepared by Danny on the tray, enough for the remaining party who took them and began eating hungrily.

Merlyn accepted one and said, "You did promise to prove your cooking skills to me some day."

Danny grinned. He set an edge of his big serving tray down and rolled it expertly toward the open tent. It wheeled on in there leaving him with a plate of food in his hand for himself and one for Nimue. She took a bite, rolled her eyes in pleasure, and kissed the cook. She said, "You know, I can just tell 'em to sleep for two hundred years or whatever, now. They came into my Circle and took my bait."

Merlyn shook his head. "No. Things change so fast now. Who knows what they'd awaken to. Let 'em sleep it off and go on with their business. Right? They've cost us nothing."

"They came into my Circle uninvited."

"I know."

"With weapons."

"I've done that."

"That wasn't the same."

"Wasn't it?"

She stopped. She put a hand around Danny's waist. He stood with the posture of a man who enjoys the affection of a woman he considers to be well out of his league. Carmine envied him deeply just then.

Merlyn nodded approvingly at the man and it seemed they had history.

Merlyn said, "I showed up with a weapon, genuinely believing I was engaged in a noble activity for a nation I believed in."

"Wasn't a nation."

"A kingdom. A kingdom that was going to unite the world I knew with the world that was coming. Nimue, I was on a mission I thought was right. So are they."

"You were on a mission that *was* right."

"I went about it all wrong. All wrong."

"So are they."

She noticed then that Carmine was staring at her, then that several of his men were. She made a horse clucking sound of disappointment and he and the others all understood that they had overstepped and displeased her. He focused on his food, of which he seemed to have finished very little.

EIGHTEEN



Merlyn stopped. He said, “With this quest, Nimue, I intend to end a cycle of violence and revenge that I set in motion when I forged that beautiful monstrosity. I burned into the psyche of a culture a bright weapon as symbolic proof of nobility. I built into the Arthur affair the idea that he who wields the best weapon proves himself the most worthy. I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I was young. It was awful. But it was good magic. It was solid, selfless, untainted fucking magic. Misguided, but so well constructed. I didn’t know I was making a legend. I didn’t know it would reach into the depths of the collective consciousness in Brittany and Gaul ... spread through the Roman armies. I didn’t know.”

“Did you know?”

“What?”

“You seek redemption.”

“Yes.”

“For a thing you did wrong a long time ago.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“What?”

“You wish to be honest with your friends. You wish to weave truth into your spell.

When last you came to me you had a noble cause. You say you did not know. But you knew something. Don't stand there telling me that when we negotiated through that whole thing there wasn't something else going on for you beyond uniting a kingdom.”

They stood in silence for a long time. And then Merlyn said, “I wanted to impress you. I wanted you to see what I had made, what I had done. I wanted you to be a part of this grand thing and maybe . . . ‘

“Join you in the mortal world?”

“What? No. Invite me to join you in Faerie.”

“You would hate it there.”

“You don't know that.” He looked at her for a long time. “You were the most beautiful being I had ever seen.”

“Am I still?”

“You are still the most beautiful being I had ever seen.”

Sofia put an arm around his waist affectionately, but her smile held a hint of victory in it.

Nimue smiled at him. She said, “You don't know how much you would hate it there.”

He said, “That's not why I'm here today.”

She said, "Right. Today, that is not the secret that could taint the spell. Today you needed to acknowledge to all these people that you sought redemption for that."

"You all knew I was about redemption here, right?" The group grunted acknowledgement.

Nimue sighed a long, heavy, dramatic sigh and said, "Not that you sought redemption. That what you sought redemption *for* was the lustiness and self-involved desire to impress me that got the clarity of the spell all muddled."

Merlyn blinked, assessing that thought.

Frank blurted out, "Oh!"

Merlyn said, "You weren't even really part of the spell, though."

Nimue said, "Are you kidding me, you senile old moron? I was the presentation moment! I was the *pièce de résistance*! Do you think *that* imagery doesn't matter? The great, potent broadsword breaches the plane, as it rises, leather-wrapped, full-tang hilt held firmly in small hands. The soft sheath—"

"Well, okay, when you put it that way it sounds weird."

Vivica said, "Oh!"

Nimue said, "That's how you *recited it* when you told me about my part in the spell."

Sofia snickered, though it held affection and no cruelty.

Merlyn felt a new horror rising in his chest as this line of thinking opened to him. What other toxic horrors had he woven, all unknowing into this spell? There were times that he felt himself unable to sink to any greater a depth of remorse. Then a new chasm would yawn. Like the deep study of any subject, a new, profound revelation will lead to branching new

paths of potential exploration. Merlyn already saw a dozen, maybe five dozen paths this idea might lead him to explore, and they all brought him to lush gardens of shame and guilt. Without realizing it, he had also dosed the militaristic symbol with male-dominance and phallic supremacy.

He remembered the pre-Freud world. He remembered seeing Shakespeare's plays. He had seen the productions and had thought at the time the writer had an uncanny knack for writing characters who spoke the way people feel. If everyone spoke their innermost thoughts, their truest feelings from the heart and the tongue they would speak as Shakespeare had them speak. Only when Chekov revealed the want beneath the words did the world learn what Freud was explaining in medical circles. Merlyn had known, of course, from time before the knowledge was expunged and forbidden in the dark ages, the tiers of thought, the means to explore one's hidden imaginings and the ideas that lay beneath the actions.

It had never occurred to him to return to his great adventures to examine his own tiered thoughts at the time, to examine them through the lens of all that he had learned in the ages since. He saw the possibility of years of self-reflection ahead as he reopened old tomes and lensed them through his current understandings of psychology, of ethics, of basic decency.

As he grew and evolved, he had tried to forgive himself for past transgressions. It had never even crossed his mind to do a proper inventory. He could do nothing to change those, he thought, so what could he gain? Now, he saw that everything must be held up to the light, rolled between his fingertips, time and again. He must re-examine to relearn and reknow.

How much more damage had he done in his self-certain naiveté than even he could ever fully recognize? What more destruction had he caused by working complex magics, unaware of his own blind spots?

For now, though, he had to move ahead with the current quest, trusting that his instincts and those of his comrades would lead them to an outcome holding more joy than regret.

Nimue turned to team camo and said, "Gather around soldiers. I think we should have a talk."

The eight members of the unit, including Carmine, their group leader, gathered around her, campers drawn to their favorite counsellor.

She said, "You are all absolute darlings. Now, while I can see that you all feel terrible about your disrespectful and, quite frankly, unacceptable breaches of etiquette, I also recognize that you could not have known just how boorish and improper your behavior was. Nobody has ever taught you the rules. However, I see that you still carry weapons of the mortal world with you, and I would very much appreciate it if you were to disassemble them and pile the pieces near your noisy flying machine at once."

The men double-timed to the helicopter and took their weapons apart with practiced motions. They returned to her.

"Very kind of you all. Now, you have eaten of the faerie food, and this gives me significant sway over how you behave and what you do. Thanks to the kindness of Merlyn Taliesin and his insistence on serving as your vouchsafe, I choose not to use that influence to . . . harm you. We must go retrieve a very old sword from a very deep lake. So, I'm afraid I



can't indulge myself anyway. Men, find a place to lie down and nap and upon waking go about your business released from my command."

Most of the team wandered away but one remained, confused. "Why would they just go take a nap right after you said you're gonna do just about the coolest thing ever?"

"Stevie Connor? Is that you?" Percy exclaimed, delighted.

The higher pitch of this soldier's tone, and the slight frame came together in Nimue's head. She added, "Men and women. Go nap within the circle of the campgrounds and then go about your business."

Stevie said, "Yeah. No. I'd still rather do the old sword in the deep lake thing."

Baffled, Nimue turned to Merlyn. She said, "Any idea what's going on here?"

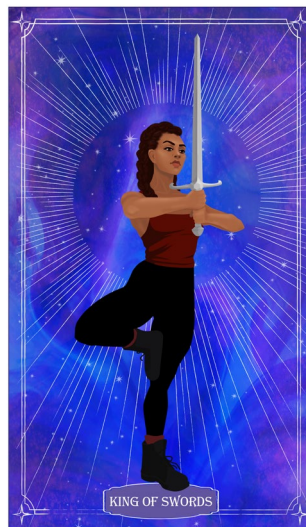
Percy said, "This is Stevie Connor. They joined the Agency when Trump made non-binary verboten in the military. They identify as a they."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it. Stevie. The guys are down for the count. You want to come with us, you leave the gun behind and come play. Yeah, Merlyn?"

Merlyn, seeing no harm, nodded. His mind had moved ahead to the next stage of this operation and a cold dread crept up his spine to infest every crevice of his brain.

## NINETEEN



The walk from the campground to the lakeshore seemed far shorter than the walk from the lakeshore to the campground. Smedley had arranged himself comfortably, two front legs draped over Vivica's shoulders, the rest hugging her torso. In the time they'd been together he seemed to have grown a few inches and put on a couple of pounds. She muttered to him often, and he responded with soft clicking sounds.

Stevie walked beside her, and she could almost hear all the questions rolling around in their mind. She held her silence. After a long while, the androgynous soldier said, "That's not a backpack, is it?"

Smedley made some soft clicking noises toward them.

“Nope.”

“Jesus.”

“Nope. Smedley. Smedley Roderick Achnid.”

“Okay.”

As they stepped out onto the bleak little Welsh beach, the plane they had arrived on greeted them morosely, intact, listing, lodged in place.

Sofia said, “She was a beautiful plane.”

Merlyn said, “We’ll get you a new one.”

Nimue said, “Great. Can you get the old one out of my lake?”

Merlyn said, “Crap. Yeah. Probably. It may take some doing and it’ll have to wait until after the quest.”

Nimue accepted this.

Vivica imagined huge cargo helicopters. She wondered how much that sort of rental would cost. For a brief, panicky moment she worried that she might have missed a rent payment. She realized with a bit of a shock that she had met Merlyn fewer than twenty-four hours ago.

It seemed impossible that so much had occurred in so little time. Not just since then, she realized. Time had gotten weird ever since she’d started hearing the whine. The slowed-down effect she experienced when she first saw her sparring partner’s chi seemed to come and go, but time slowed and sped up now depending on her need. She had not only shifted

geographically; she seemed to have stepped sideways to discover that the world had more in it than she had ever noticed.

The sun hung low in the sky now and the moon did that thing where it shows up white and clear before nighttime to mess with your understanding of how the sky works.

Nimue said, "This times out about right. I'll do the thing."

Merlyn said, "You don't have to do the thing."

Vivica heard a quelled urgency in Merlyn's tone.

Nimue said, "But I do. You spent two days negotiating the deal, making certain that I could see how careful you were with its crafting, Merlyn. You smirked your smarter-than-the-dean schoolboy smirk and you drank tea that you brought for yourself. You took nothing I offered. You flirted outrageously—insistently—relentlessly in a bid to woo me with the power of your negotiating skills, mortal. You spoke the words to me detailing the presentation I was to enact. You said, 'for maximum effect.' Are we not here because you wove this spell for maximum effect not knowing all the repercussions of that effect at the time?"

Merlyn's jaw clenched. Vivica could see his energy coiling to attack, enraged. Without changing his stance at all, he took a slow breath and his chi settled into a calm pool around his center of gravity. He nodded.

Nimue said, "Can you imagine the damage that might now be caused if the balance of that original spell were disrupted before you have an opportunity to properly dismantle it?" She said it with a wide smile that implied that, true though it might be, mostly she just loved winning arguments and getting her way.

The man seemed to be doing complex math in his head. He closed his eyes for a moment and nodded to Nimue, the scaly lake woman.

She added, "And while I could, if I wished, mitigate those dangers very, very easily, I think watching this thing again will do you good."

With her glamour down, the faerie queen had an appearance akin to a woman Vivica had once seen in a sideshow attraction. She wondered if that 'Crocodile Princess' might not have been afflicted with a rare skin condition as she'd assumed, but rather a faerie making her way among the mortals or worse, not knowing her own identity, reduced to believing herself powerless and accepting the work available. She said to Stevie, "Does 'bespectacled' mean 'forced to be a spectacle?'"

They said, "What?"

She said, "Never mind."

The giant ginger-headed looney, Danny Rourke, went to Nimue and kissed her fishy-looking mouth. Vivica thought about how cool it was that people could find love even if neither of them was someone anyone else on the planet could reasonably find attractive. She wondered if there might be perfect matches all over the place finding one another against all odds in a world that kept suggesting a homogeneity of preference for excessively fit white people.

Stevie said, "I think it means 'wearing glasses.' Why?"

"Just thinking," Vivica said. Her gaze drifted to Frank with his relaxed weight and his thick neck. His adorably weird-shaped head. For the two-thousandth time she wondered why he'd never made any kind of a move, whether he might be gay and deeply closeted. He saw

her looking at him and she had a vague sense of concern and inquiry in his gaze, as though he wanted to know what she was thinking. That almost made her laugh as she had, at that moment, been thinking about how she might be able to run her tongue up his neck to his ear and make him do that shuddering thing that men do when they shift from dominant lust to submissive desire.

Frankie's eyes widened as he looked at her. He smiled, grinned, beamed at her from five feet away. She saw his chi dance up and down his spine, flashing into his thighs and back up through his hips. She could not imagine what he might have seen or thought about that would have him dancing internally in such a celebration of joy.

Nimue finished kissing her lumpy white boyfriend and then said, "Okay, people. Listen up! I'm gonna walk into the water and then I am going to do just about the coolest thing any one of you has ever seen. Except Merlyn. And, for the record, this will be performed to the specifications demanded by Merlyn, who is wholly responsible for its content."

The group grunted and nodded or remained silent in the affirmative except for Danny who said, "I can't believe I get to see this!" and Stevie who barked out, "Yes, Ma'am!"

That drew Nimue's attention. She said, "You. The one with no gender."

Stevie said, "Yes, Ma'am!"

Nimue said, "Out of curiosity, are you in love with me and willing to do anything I ask?"

Stevie cocked their head to the side and said, "No. I was for a minute there. A while. When you were—um—"

"I understand," Nimue said. "The glamour works but I did not identify you properly with the commands. These are things we must keep up with. The overlap between magic and language is an ever-changing field. Sound symbols for ideas that must be agreed upon by all participants. In delicate negotiations one must be careful always to know what all the parties intend."

"Faeries pride themselves on their negotiating skills," Merlyn informed them.

"We must." She smiled at the sorcerer and then said, "We are, by our nature, bound by our agreements."

Merlyn said, "Is there no way I can dissuade you from shaming me?"

Nimue put a hand to his cheek. She said, "Do not be ashamed. You see something you made long ago. Something you made in your youth. You see it now only for its flaws. Allow yourself, before dismantling this thing, to see in it the beauty as well. Know that it holds more than the shame of your past. See the youthful and pure intent you reach for once again. See the old anew to visit the possibility of a new symbology, a new legend, a new era in a world you steered wrong. You were a child, Merlyn." She made eye contact and nodded and then took a step back from him and said in a voice authoritative and almost presentational, "To whom will I hand the sword and the scabbard?"

Merlyn said, "I'm eighty-seven percent certain it's supposed to go to Vivica."

"All right. Young Hero, please listen well."

Vivica stepped forward and said, "This is fucking wild. Frank, are you getting this?"

"I'm getting all of it," he said. "All of it."

Nimue said, "When I hold out the blade toward you for inspection, your instinct will be to touch the blade. DO NOT DO THAT. It's bad form and that blade has some problematic secondary effects due to the inexperience of its craftsman."

Merlyn said, "What are you talking about?"

"Take a minute to think about how you structured the cutting intent into the edge and then about how most people automatically test the sharpness of a blade."

Merlyn winced, wondering if any of Arthur's companions had lost fingers evaluating the edge.

"Yeah," she said. "Now remember how the thrust and slash response to a flat-parry would feel about, say, someone trying to move a careless pointy end from his face."

Merlyn said, "Oh. Dear gods and trees what did I do? I wanted to make it efficient and powerful. And deadly. I just. . . I intended it to be deadly."

"Yes."

"And I shrouded it in... beauty and lust and..."

"Glory," Nimue said. "You threaded it through with Glory. The warrior's version of Glamour. The lie that takes the hero off the quest. It strokes the ego and soothes the spirit. It justifies the unthinkable. In my glamour, I can make a grown mortal give up a life, a spouse, an entire world for the promise of a single kiss. What will people give up for Glory?"

Stevie said, "I was going to be a veterinarian."

Nimue said, "That was a rhetorical question, my dear—how shall I refer to you?"

"I thought, 'my dear' was nice."



“Okay. Now. I’ll sheathe the sword. Then I’ll present it hilt first. It will be your instinct to draw the sword from the sheath. DO NOT DO THAT. Please take the whole thing from my hands in the sheath, with both of your hands. It will be heavier than it looks, though once you have had it for a few seconds it will seem no heavier than a fencing rapier.”

“I do not know how heavy that would be,” Vivica told her.

“Very light.”

“Okay.”

“As long as the sword remains sheathed, no harm may come to you. As long as you have the sheath, you cannot be harmed by mortal weapons. Holding the drawn sword you cannot be slain in battle. Do you understand?”

Vivica nodded.

“Okay then. Let’s do this. It may take a bit. I have to walk pretty far into the lake and then wait to time it with ‘The moonlight cutting sharp ribbons of sheen across my bare, dripping shoulders.’”

“You really hate me, don’t you?”

“Oh, Merlyn. No! I love you immensely. You bring me such magnificent entertainments.”

Danny laughed at that as though the assurance had a double meaning. He held her hand as she walked away until their fingertips separated and then he watched her. They all did, as she walked into the water. She raised her glamour as she went. Even from behind the effect held. The beauty of her shape seemed scissor-cut from the world around her, an analog

animation of the platonic ideal of sexiness. Her departure delivered the heartbreak of hope dispelled.

Danny muttered, "She'll be back," with the sound of confidence that comes when one reassures a child.

The water deepened slowly. Watching her walk out, past the crashed plane, now up to her waist, now her shoulders, took so long. Vivica watched her go and saw that the sun was almost entirely hidden by the horizon as Nimue vanished at last beneath the surface in the small, small distance, still walking.

Frankie said, "Wow."

Danny said, "Right?"

Sofia put her arm around Merlyn. She said, "Everything you've told me is true, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"It's okay." He stared out over the water, but he rested his cheek against her head.

"You really wanted to impress the fish-chick, huh?"

"I really did."

"With your fancy negotiating skills."

"It wasn't negotiating skills. It was just patience and self-control. I knew she wanted what I offered and that what I was asking would cost her nothing. She kept trying to get me to make additional offerings and trying to add on additional conditions and I just kept bringing it back to the simple transaction. She was to do the ritual delivery of the sword from

Faerie to the shore of her lake and present it to the hero when called upon to do so. She would receive her reward in advance.”

“Can I ask what her reward was?”

“A cake.”

“Like, a chocolate, layered birthday cake kind of a thing?”

“We didn't have anything like that. It was a honey cake. Pretty big.” He gestured with his hands indicating something that did not, as cakes go, seem big.

“And she wasn't impressed with your negotiations.”

“Wait'll you see what I got for my pastry!”

“Okay. I promise to be impressed.”

He squeezed her around the waist as they looked out at the darkening water, waiting. He said, “You are never, ever, required to do the aircraft safety demo again.”

## TWENTY



The silence that hung over the Party seemed to deepen with the shadows. They stood together on the bank of the lake in their Field, awaiting the arrival of the very purpose of their adventure, the subject of their imaginings, the object to make all others subjects. Again, Merlyn saw deeper into the flaws in his earlier thinking. Would he ever learn, he wondered, to see his past failures without feeling waves of shame with each new revelation? *An object to make all others subjects. What kind of fool...?* he thought. Sofia squeezed his hand gently,

reassuringly, as though she had heard his self-recrimination and hoped to comfort him in his distress, but what she said was, "I don't know how you don't hate me."

So, he squeezed her hand in return.

Carmine's military command voice boomed angrily from the fringe of the trees. He said, "All of you! Hands up! Turn to face me. Kneel down."

They all turned to face him. Only Frank and Vivica raised their hands.

Merlyn wanted to reassure them, but he had only one intention right now. He had to stall. He said, "Come out here and talk to me like a person, man. These people stand under the protection of my 501c3 charitable organization."

The hidden soldier shouted, "What's that?"

Merlyn and Sofia replied in unison, "Lik-R-Ass!"

He and Sofia high fived without taking their eyes off the tree line. She said, "You really set that joke up a hundred and six years ago?"

"Yep. Didn't get to use it until nineteen sixty-eight. But when I came up with it, Gene Debs thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard of. Wish he'd gotten to hear it pay off."

Carmine let the *click and chunk* sound of his gun be heard and before it was finished it was echoed by the more solid *shatunk* of assault rifles racking rounds and coming to ready.

Merlyn felt the well of magic accessible to him. He knew that somewhere just behind him, under the water, the realm of Faerie lay open and the radiant magic available thrilled him with nervous memory of the days before he ruined the world. He wanted to reach into that well and make a grand show of sweeping his enemies aside with gusts of wind, to call

flocks of birds to do his bidding, to laugh as lightning danced the surface of the lake behind him. He could do it all and more. That would not serve here, though. He listened to his breath. He focused on the moment. He said, "I thought Nimue suggested that you sleep off your meal and then go about your business."

Carmine's retort came clear on the birch-scented air. He said, "Right now our business is recovering our kidnapped teammate and searching that plane for some kind of a radar jamming, teleportation device."

Stevie said, "I'm not kidnapped. After I put down my gun and you guys all went to sleep, I felt it would be right to continue to observe with Agent Corvis."

"Well get over here and report, soldier."

"My report, sir, is that I am not done observing. Also, I think something pretty cool is about to happen."

Merlyn shouted, "And you're welcome to search the plane!"

A long moment of quiet hung over the area now as negotiations seemed to have reached the opposite of an impasse and Carmine did not know exactly how to handle that.

Merlyn said, "Honestly, man. Take 'yes' for an answer. You and your guys can just come out and go look through our plane and ask us questions if you want." He turned to see that Vivica and Frank had dropped to their knees and still had their hands up. He said, "You two, get up. In my Questing Party we do not cower before thugs even when we are frightened."

Frankie stood up uncertainly and helped Vivica to her feet.

Still there had been no movement from the tree line, so Merlyn said, "The problem here, Carmine, is that you have been trained by movies by television, by the reckless use of some powerful magics. You have been trained to believe that everything must always escalate. You have never been taught that sometimes things can move along excitingly without conflict. Not every story must end in gunplay and violence. Some of us are trying hard to tell a different kind of story, with a different kind of climax. A different sort of resolution."

Carmine, the words blurring from his lips before he had the chance to think them through, shouted the truth. He said, as though it was a direct order, "I don't understand what the fuck is going on here!"

An overwhelming sound *thumped* across the wide expanse as two new uninvited Agency support helicopters came in low over the scene, appearing from two directions over the trees. Their spotlights blurred and blinded. The vast thudding motors deafened. The beating of propellers battered the senses with subsonic gut punches.

On nylon ropes the men slid down from open hatches to land on the waterfront near the edge of the woods. Smedley, the spider whose name seemed to have grown three or four syllables every time Vivica mentioned him, jumped down from her shoulders and scurried across the expanse toward the nearest chopper to examine their technique as they descended.

The night suns burned, enormous, focused LEDs slanting columns of light downward, one from each chopper. The descending soldiers, invisible in the hatches beyond the glare, appeared from above into the light and came to ground within the projected ellipse. Each either hit the ground running or shoulder-rolled to regain stability. Each team found a place to anchor a well-rehearsed formation. They knelt without speaking to one another and

leveled their weapons at the small group of unarmed adventurers who stood with their backs to the lake.

Merlyn admired the choreography, the intimidation, the drama of the entrance. His observational critique prevented the spell from properly disheartening him into meek submission.

The helicopters pulled away, relieving him of the sensory bombardment. He turned his back on the woods, his threatening counter-negotiator with his handgun, Carmine's squadron, and his newly air-dropped reinforcements. The downdraft disturbed the glassine surface in a focused circle beneath each flying machine. Those rippling areas overlapped the spread of the spotlights to create an incredibly accurate Venn Diagram of those parts of the ancient magical lake disturbed by the modern machinery, those parts of the ancient magical lake illuminated by the modern machinery, and those parts of the ancient magical lake affected in both ways. He chuckled.

He had developed that chuckle centuries earlier while on trial. During a very unpleasant presentation by a Spanish Cardinal regarding the nature of submission to a force greater than oneself, something funny occurred to Merlyn and he chuckled before he thought about it. The pious douche had stopped and glared at him, trying to guess what had caused the reaction. Merlyn realized that he would evermore take every opportunity in confrontational circumstances to chuckle at anything he found the least bit amusing, simply because it so unnerved the other participant in the conflict.

Just as the helicopters fell far enough out of range that he thought Carmine might be able to hear him again, he turned back toward the woods. The original batch of soldiers had



emerged sneakily from the woods. It had been loud, and he had been distracted but he decided to show them respect for their stealth, so he allowed his surprise to show as he adjusted his focus and shouted to them, "What do you say? You want to search the plane? Your man—person—your soldier is right here. Sorry, Stevie."

"It's cool, man. You're trying."

"Thanks."

Then the helicopters went silent.

Merlyn shouted, "Alright, everybody. Here we go." The shame he felt minutes earlier about what his girlfriend and, oddly, Frankie were going to learn about his psyche vanished like morning mist under the warm pride of workmanship. He had made mistakes and it might be embarrassing in its naked naiveté. It would be rougher around the edges than he remembered and things he had done for the first time then would seem cliché now, but it was a beautiful thing he had imagined and created and hired a real live Faerie Princess to perform. That she was now a Faerie Queen and performing it only out of friendly spite did not matter. Hell, it made him feel a little bit like he had real friends in strangely high places.

The sight of the helicopters, silent and stopped in the air with their weird crop-circle water formations suspended to oil-paint stillness, held everyone's attention for a moment.

Then, a dozen meters landward from those beams, a tiny spot on the surface of the lake caught the moonlight. It reflected white and clear toward the party, growing slowly from the night-dark water. At this distance with the trickery of moonlight and the reflection it became impossible to discern the movement toward the shore. What had been just the tip of the

proto-steel blade now emerged above the water into the moonlight as the reflection doubled its length.

Nausea swept through Merlyn as he watched it. He recognized abruptly the extent to which he might as well have just bought Arthur a cuirass emblazoned with inlaid gold that said, "My Wizard Friend has Phallic Insecurity!" He chuckled at the new adversary he found in his younger, idiot, trying-so-hard self. The pride trickled down into the endless maw of recrimination.

Sofia bumped him with her hip. She said, "It's beautiful."

He groaned, "It gets worse."

She looked at him for a moment, but he could not meet her eyes. He watched as the sword slowly extended, expanded upward through the undisturbed surface, penetrating and emerging. Then the cross-guard breached the surface.

He winced.

Before she came near enough to be a person, like a perfume ad that reveals the glamorous beauty a bit at a time, delaying gratification, her hands came into view wrapped around that hilt.

Merlyn choked back embarrassment.

The water ran down the spiral wrap of the hilt, and over Nimue's little hands, limned against the dark water. It dripped, a stretching stream from the sigil-scarred pommel to the very center of a widening circle of ripples where it touched the unmoving lake.

He remembered it now as he watched it, exactly as it had been all that time ago when he had thought of the sword as a symbol only of majesty and power.

The two times overlapped becoming a small bridge from who he was then to who he was now.

Even that first time he remembered it, in a way. He had imagined the staging thoroughly when he was so self-certain and young and thought of the ripple pattern only as a Druid symbol of unity, universal containment and expansion and the dozen other things implied in *that* culture by concentric circles in their various iterations.

Now, as Nimue's head emerged from this Georgia O'Keefe spread of yonic surface tension, the moonlight caught the slicked down shape of her glamour-glowing head. Merlyn remembered an aesthetic decision he had made and knew he had gotten it right. She would not speak yet. That would be too weird. Her head emerged fully from the water now, although the shape of her down-damp hair disguised the turn of her neck.

The bright reflection hid her features. She would rise silent, both stark and indistinct. She would approach as an archetype, all promise and ideal. She would approach silently.

In the dark of the night, with the moonlight behind her she continued walking toward the shore. Their depth perception meaningless with so little ambient light, nobody but he would know that she simply walked toward them, holding the sword aloft. She would move forward smoothly, seeming to rise from the lake. He heard the breathless wonder of the audience as they took it in, this simple bit of Magic Theatrical he had employed as part of the grander spell he had woven. She had been right. This image with her at its apple-core center was very much a part of the lasting legend, the work of the spell he had wrought.

The moonlight gave the sword shape against the dark lake despite the spotlights beyond calling out their strange, frozen ripple patches like lunar symbols etched in ice.

Distracted for a moment from the slow striptease revelation of his shame, he looked beyond the things he expected to see for just a moment. In the two formations of light and texture cast upon the water beneath the helicopters, the calm edge-crescents of the water undisturbed by the bluster but touched by light made moons in his eyes. Feminine symbols of power had appeared unbidden. He felt for a moment as though he might indeed be on the path to redemption. Perhaps this time his intention was pure enough that the field might correct for his narcissism, for his need for approval, for his incessant, gnawing humanity.

Then her arms were fully exposed. The sheath hung about her as a scarf. She lowered the sword before her so gracefully she seemed to pull it from the air lest it escape. Once she had emerged to her waist, she held the sword before her, allowing it to drop so its tip dipped through the surface to cut a wake ahead of her as she walked. The blade created an outward ripple through the center of which she moved, always flanked, never touched. Though her approach was apparent now, still she seemed to glide across the water toward the waiting group her distance from the ripples that started at the sword-point never varying.

He saw her eyes take in the new soldiers that he had brought to her shore. He expected rage but saw a slight flicker of delight.

Was she enjoying doing this to him in front of the larger audience?

Nimue rested the sword casually against her shoulder now, the blade touching only the sheath where it hung about her. The sheath hid her nipples from the night air. He had been so absorbed in the embarrassment of the poetry to come and the adolescent sword and sheath imagery, the big, obvious, self-indulgent fantasy slipped his millennia-old mind. He had failed to remember his insistence that she must rise from the water naked. "It's about purity,"

he had said, "and the virtue of woman unadorned," and now he knew that as he said it, he had been thinking in the lower, willfully ignored tiers of his young, unself-aware mind, *Faerie boobs!*

She had just reached the place at which the moon cut a ribbon of light across the sheen of her wet shoulders. *I thought I was building a path toward the salvation of mankind.* He mocked himself silently. *I was paving the way to 'Baywatch.'*

She began to speak. Her voice, when she spoke through the glamour, conveyed ideas down through the twelfth tier of thought in casual conversation. Now she spoke the words that he had written, and she imbued them with all his intention as clearly as she could express her own.

**All near enough upon my lake  
to hear my words may solace take  
in knowing you come now beneath the guard  
of my well-favored mortal friend. This bard  
who has upon my duty laid  
a claim for my most potent aid.  
From Faerie realms where magics rise  
like morning suns and lovers' eyes  
a symbol for a land at war.  
With magic woven to its core,  
through leather wrap, through smelted ore  
but that's not all. Just wait. There's more.**

**Who holds this sword and sheath shall not be slain**

**All challengers reduced to carpet stain.**

Merlyn caught a slight, self-congratulatory twist of a smile on Nimue's lips. For a moment he didn't understand what it signified. He looked to Frank to see if he too had observed it, or if he might be too caught up in the romantic pull of the glamour. He found the young man standing for the show with his arm around Vivica, the woman who was about to hold the most powerful weapon in the history of the world.

It occurred to him that Nimue was translating it on the fly from the pre-saxon Welsh. *Wait, He thought. Did I write it in Arthur's new Gaelic or did she have to translate it the first time, too?*

He realized now just how good this Faerie Queen was with the Magics Linguistic. Also, how ridiculous he must have seemed thinking his little rhymed poem would impress her enough that she would take him to Faerie. She had so accurately translated his own bad poetry that he hadn't noticed that the words were not his at all, but his thoughts in one language expressed through another tongue maintaining intent, rhyme scheme, scan and implication.

He returned his attention to the ridiculous invocative he had composed for Nimue to recite. He watched her work with newfound admiration and significant honest humility.

**Who bears the sheath shall be forever**

**safe from any weapon's harm.**

**Now, that one may lift this weight from on my arm,**

**Let the one to take the sword step forth.**

Vivica stepped forward as Nimue took the last steps out of the water and onto land carrying the sword toward its next bearer.

Stevie, excited, also stepped forward.

So did Carmine.

Merlyn did not chuckle. He watched, worried, as the idiot who had already displeased her approached a Queen of Faerie arrogantly and without invitation in the midst of a ritual. He feared for the man's wellbeing. Then the moron made it worse. He said, "You were the one with the drugged-up fish dinner, right?"

Unaccustomed to going unrecognized after having once introduced herself, the question took her by surprise. It took Merlyn by surprise as well.

The Queen of Faerie wrapped in glamour, dripping sexy, oozing desirability looked to the boor. Merlyn saw the moment that she lost the thread. The thudding of the helicopters returned in the distance as she let go the time spell and snapped, "You are stupid, and you need to take a long nap."

Already walking briskly, Carmine stumbled drunkenly and dozed on past her before he went to his knees and then napped face-down in the shallows.

Stevie, Vivica and Frank all raced to pull him out of the water and turn him to his side before he drowned. Frank shouted at Vivica, "We got him. Go do the thing!"

Vivica checked with Frankie to be sure. That beat gave Stevie the extra moment to move away, as though they had been the one to whom Frankie had spoken. With Stevie gone, Frankie nearly let Carmine slip back into the water, so Viv stayed to help support the man's weight and drag him toward safety.

Nimue said, "Dear, the sword is going to the woman with the pale blue aura and the unspoken, wholly incorrect certainty that she is unworthy."

Merlyn grinned.

Vivica deposited Carmine on the ground where he muttered audibly, "Some people think Saturday is for sleeping in, Dad!"

Vivica turned and looked directly at Nimue who smiled a smile Merlyn had never seen on a Faerie before. Neither predatory nor seductive, calculated nor pitying, it glowed with grandparental adoration.

Vivica looked directly into the eyes of the Faerie Queen and did not move for a moment.

Stevie, suddenly a sullen adolescent, began to slump toward shore.

Nimue said, "Dear?"

Stevie turned to face her. They said, "What?"

After a pause that contained unspoken reprimand, Nimue said, "You have stood in the presence of a Queen of Faerie and you have stood beside her friends." She threw a glance to Merlyn on the word. He caught it. "You have made interesting choices today and before today. Some of them have taken courage. You have claimed an element of your identity that quite literally did not have a place within the scope of language until quite recently. You are a soldier. You walk the world as a warrior, and you claim the strength of many in your choice of pronouns. This strong decision demands commitment. Legends may speak of the day that Stevie Connor stood second in line to hold the sword of Arthur before the Queen of the Terwith Twee. Now, that legend, if I have my way—and let me be very clear about just how important it is that I have my way—that legend will not have such a person schlumping



away from the great and glorious Lady of the Lake like an embarrassed Dylan Thomas fan five stanzas into a Bukowski reading." She paused awkwardly. "Nothing? Nobody?"

Chuckles emerged from some of the men with the guns, where they remained in place, enamored of the glamorous Lake Lady. She spoke in beautiful tones and might, at any time ask them to do anything she wanted them to do. With the chuckles came a few tentative laughs from others, hoping that was what the pause required, what the Lady sought.

She shouted, "Thank you!" toward the small group off to her right, well behind Merlyn and to his left.

Stevie said, "We don't know what any of that means."

Nimue said, "Really? None of you get 'Dylan Thomas fan at a Bukowski reading?'"

Merlyn said, "I'm almost two thousand years old and I don't know what you're talking about."

Nimue said, "Fine. Maybe you people aren't my crowd."

A pained groan came from the distant soldiers.

Nimue turned up her charm as she opened up the glamour to make her voice attend her intent. She said, "No, no, Guys, gals and others," She threw an affectionate glance toward Stevie and got an adoring nod in appreciation for the recognition. "That one's entirely on me. I can get esoteric, and I forget how audiences can be near the end of a Dark Age." The soldiers laughed knowing the rhythm of joke-and-laughter and wanting very much to please their entertainer.

Merlyn laughed. He realized everyone laughed. Except Carmine the team captain who said, "Turn off the TV!" and rolled so the side of his face pressed against the pebbly sand.

He drooled a little. Nimue was off script and self-indulgent as he had been at the diner. He could begrudge her none of it. She owned a crowd and spent, he knew, much of her long, long life lonely. Adored always if she chose to be, rarely if she did not work for it, she allowed herself the pleasure of this moment and he allowed himself to be a member of her audience.

She said, "You know what? I think you are a fine crowd and there's nothing I find more entertaining than entertaining. I think you should all move closer. I may have dropped my hold on time within this little sphere of my control and influence, but I assure you this show is not over." Applause scattered lightly as they moved toward the siren song of her sex-scented words. She said cheerfully, "How many of you are thinking about having a long lingering breakfast in bed with me, letting me feed you whipped cream and chocolate-peanut butter Haagen Daz with my fingertips... right... now?"

The group laughed enthusiastically. Some applauded. One young man shouted, "Hey! That's not a trick. You *told* us to imagine that."

She smiled and said, "Very good, young man. You've just explained a joke to death. You could get a job doing television narration for the hard of following."

The people laughed. She said, "Stevie Connor. There will be no schlumping away from the Faerie Queen. Yes?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Merlyn noticed that Stevie's automatic attention position was martial arts trained, not military. He wondered if Vivica had noticed it, if she had seen the chi do the little dance that drove Stevie's automatic twitch toward a bow rather than a salute. Then they committed to

the full bow, not as a reflex but as a genuine show of respect for the woman who had shown them respect. Nimue did not need to see it. That was the sort of status awareness and decency in interaction a Faerie could feel to her weirdly corrugated bones.

Nimue said, "My Darlings, I'd love to stand up here holding your attention and tickling your funny bones—and having done centuries of first-hand research on the subject I can tell you that at least one out of three here tonight has what I would consider a funny bone." She wiggled an eyebrow to make it a dick joke and the pre-eroticized audience caught on at once. "That's a whole other kind of stand-up comedy." Only about a third of them laughed so she experimented, using a finger to demonstrate various bends that she might find amusing. With each new iteration she got bigger response until eventually she got to one that required her entire arm to demonstrate and when she found all the fingers at the end, she seemed startled and intrigued. The men roared like the Redd Foxx audiences Bob Hope used to cut into his Christmas specials to seem hilarious. "If I'm being honest, in several cases it had to be first-foot research if I wanted to find out whether hilarity ensued," The men roared, and Merlyn chuckled at the pure utility of fetish humor. There had been a while in the late dark ages when bestiality ran wild and any joke about it got a solid laugh. The titillation of touching on sexual fantasy outside the mainstream always serves to make people laugh; they either remember predilections they know of but find strange, or hide the fact that their own predilections would seem strange to others. "But I'm happy to do that in the interest of research and the satisfaction of someone else's hedonistic pleasure. My point is, if any of you people wants to be a subject of research on the matter, you may come discuss the terms

after the show if you can find me.” Chuckles rippled through the air and men raised their hands tentatively.

Someone whispered, scolding, “After the show. She said *after the show*.”

“Now Stevie Connor my Dear, my Love, my brave One who does not get to hold a Sword and rise up as the right and true leader of, I’m guessing, a bright new world that readily embraces the existence and fellowship of the LGBTQIA Plus community, first unifying all the factions and then bringing them to the view of the public as a force to be reckoned with. Am I getting the fantasy about right?”

“How do you know LGBTQIA Plus, two hours after you can’t figure out my pronouns?”

“I went to Faerie for the sword, I did some research while I waited for the right placement of the moon—”

“Did some research?”

“I asked someone who spends more time—” She cut herself off and hissed, “I’m doing a thing here.” and then her voice boomed from all the world around them. Merlyn watched her reach back into Faerie, pull cords of magic out through the water and use their energy to cast her words into the world as efficiently as any loudspeaker. The weave was not the one he might have used for the effect. He examined it, tried to memorize it.

She said, “Mortals, you vex me and that is simply a terrible idea. I am not good with vexation. Does nobody in your realm know anything of courtesy, of manners, of civil, human behavior anymore? When watching a performance of any kind—listen up, Mr. ‘You Told Us To Imagine That.’”

The soldiers laughed but not with full commitment. It felt like she was scolding them and they very much wanted her to like them.

“When you witness a performance, no matter how light-hearted it may be, you assume that what you observe holds something worthwhile, presented with intent by the presenter. Does nobody tell you these things? I do not care if it is a Solstice prayer, a theatrical performance, an opera, a ballet, or an improvisational comedic interlude in the middle of the Welsh wilderness. You do not interrupt. You do not shout every thought that comes into your head. When that performance is given by a fucking Queen of Faerie after you have invaded her Sphere of Influence—“ Merlyn heard the capitalization and glanced at Sofia who, eyes locked on the Lady of the Lake as she moved fluidly from mood to mood, nodded so that he would know she'd caught it too, “—unannounced, uninvited, offering not a single slice of motherfucking cake among the lot of you, intending harm to her friends, when she starts firing off one-liners from the hip, you laugh and applaud appreciatively or hold your tongue and admire her impossible beauty. Those are the only options.”

Some of the men who had recently been in a social media group that passed around old recordings of Sam Kinison chuckled at the rhythm of her rant. Her focus turned to Merlyn and for several heartbeats he remembered seeing prey through his bird's eye. He imagined that if he tried, he could see himself now through Nimue's sharp occule. She said in a syrup dark voice still amplified in the Welsh wilds at a lake halfway up a mountain, “Merlyn, I understand that these armed children do not come under the intent of your umbrella, but for the moment, please take charge of them. As I recall you were fond of the Bardic Breathing exercises. Yes?”

Merlyn said, "How do you know that?" He searched for a time that he might have given her that information.

She said, "Please do not answer a question with a question. I remain your elder."

He nodded. "And one who does me a great favor this evening. How may I serve you, your Majesty?"

"Go run a breathing exercise, perhaps like the one you ran on the second day of your first staff testing. I remember that taking quite long enough for me to accomplish what I must tonight. Do something along those lines for these loathsome hostility mongers and use it to seed some ideas about social structure and respect for the arts or something, would you?"

"Yes, ma'am. And your instructions for them?"

"Anyone currently holding a gun, please make me happy at this time by . . . doing the thing where you eject the . . . thing part and. . ."

"Clear your weapons, Your Majesty," Percy offered.

"Thank you, Mortal. You see, people? Brief. Helpful. Respectful. Appropriate."

"Oh!" The former spy veritably chirped with adoring delight. "Thank you, Ma'am!"

"Annnnd, slipping over into obsequious. But still. At least this guy is trying. Okay. All of you, clear your weapons and then everyone but Stevie and Vivica go with Merlyn. The things you will learn in this simple breathing exercise, my beautiful mortals will make you more pleasant for me to have around. I believe each of you, genuinely wants to make it pleasant for me to have you around and I certainly hate to see you disappoint me. Go with Merlyn."

Frank said, "Your Majesty, I seriously have mad respect for y'all. I mean, I see what you can do, so there's fear, too. But that's not what I'm talking about right now. I can see that you've got rules and powers and some solid boundaries and everything going. But I am not going over there to do another breathing exercise with the Wizard while the woman I love walks away with the Lady who once threw my man over there in a cave for—like—hundreds of years. You get me?"

The Faerie Queen shrieked with glee. "She has a Knight!"

Merlyn said, "I didn't plan it."

"I didn't plan it. I didn't know.' You're really not very good at this whole epic, world-changing sorcerer thing, are you?"

Merlyn heard himself chuckle. He said, "How many mortals do you know whose names are attached to an epic, world-changing spell?"

"You are the only one I know personally."

"And now this is going to be another! So—that's something. Right?"

"No. This one is to fix the first one. So, no." To Frank she said, "You may join us and protect your beloved charge. Merlyn, keep the invading Christian horde you brought to my shores at bay while I complete this thing with the kids."

"They're fully grown mortals," Merlyn said with a casual tone that matched Nimue's to his best estimation to avoid making her angry at his input.

"To me you are all children. Even you, old man. This explains the sincerity and the depth of my forgiveness when you get me involved in your ridiculous schemes. So, you take the kids who play with the dangerous toys and your girlfriend and your private detective,

weapons expert guy and I will do my best to make this thing work right this time. Wait stop. No. You. Stevie. For nobility in service to a friend of the court and crown and decency toward her Majesty the Queen of Terwith Twee a region of Faerie bordering both Tír na nÓg and Elfame I do grant you a favor and such as I may deliver it to you I shall do so at my earliest convenience once you but speak my name thrice. You may go with Merlyn.” Merlyn heard the tone of irritable finality.

Stevie said, “What kind of a favor? Like a lot of money?”

“I could do that. Yes.”

“So, a wish.”

“Not exactly.”

“And I just do your name three times and then you come through.”

“Yes. Now, if I may proceed, little one, I’d like to continue the ritual delivery of the world-changing, symbolic weapon whose re-emergence on the mortal plane might just mark an inflection point in the development of your civilization.”

“Sure. Yeah,” they said. “But just, wherever I am?”

“Yes.”

“Which do you like? Nimue? Faerie Queen? Lady of the Lake?”

“Any of those, and that’s three right there so now—”

“Great. Sorry. Just explain all the details to me another time. Or—can you email them? Or text?”

“As a favor to you, I would be overjoyed to do that.”



“Great!” Stevie turned and trotted off with the rest of the soldiers under Merlyn’s care as he and the Faerie Queen exchanged a look of shared amusement at the vapid arrogance of a young mortal. He had just observed firsthand the way in which venal bargaining left storied mortals feeling cheated by the clever rules around Faerie promises. He had seen it and it seemed as natural and good natured as an Abbot and Costello math swindle played on a patsy landlord. He had not only seen her do it, but he had also seen her check for his awareness.

Sofia wrapped him in a firm and friendly arm as she walked beside him, bumping his hip. She said, “Now that I believe you’re eighteen hundred years old, I keep feeling like I should be gentler with you.”

“Get over it, kid.”

“You want me to go listen in on Nimue or something?”

Merlyn said, “you mean . . . like a spy?”

“I meant *as* a spy.”

He said, “You don’t feel compelled to come do a breathing exercise to make her want you around?”

“No.”

“Any idea why not?”

“I assumed it was the Questing Field or something.”

He stopped walking. He looked at her. He turned back toward Nimue, farther away than he had imagined he had walked. He shouted, “Your Majesty!”

She boomed back, “I can’t hear you!”

Cocky, excited, reckless to the point of abandon, he grabbed a thread of magic drifting up through the water from the open channel to Faerie. As if he were as entitled to the power as to the air they all breathed, he drew the thread into a quick spell. Remembering the technique as he performed it, he drew new connections between the ancient magic and modern understandings of acoustics, he said in a voice that reached Nimue's ears alone, "Your Majesty," He began again, "I think I have a Knight!"

She whispered back across the vast distance, "Congratulations. Are you still trying to impress me?"

"Very possibly, yes." Then, after an awkward pause that made him feel stupid, he tried to cover it by saying, "Okay. Merlyn out." He tapped his ear as he dismissed the spell. He took the extra bit of will and effort to restore the stream to its original flow, removing the tonal artifacts his working might have left as best he could.

Sofia said, "Did you just say, 'Merlyn out,' and tap your ear?"

Merlyn hung his head. He said, "Yes. Yes, I did."

She said, "Was that to the Queen of the Faeries, over a magical connection?"

"I might have been trying to impress her."

Sofia laughed. She said, "With your smooth Leverage phone fetish roleplay?"

With feigned irritation, Merlyn snorted. Then he grabbed a magical supply thread, gave his voice a soothing, warm tone, and contained it to the surrounding tree-lined cove as he said, "Settle into a comfortable seated position, please. In a moment I will suggest that you choose to close your eyes as you listen to your breath, but you are more than welcome, as soon as you are comfortable doing so, to close your eyes before that time as you begin

simply to steer your focus to the sound of your breath first. Or, if it is easier to find your breath, to close your eyes first and make the choice then to find your breath. Before that, as you begin to hear that sound and get comfortable, you may find it almost imperceptible, but as you seek it out, in the hollows of your lungs or the open caverns of your welcoming nostrils, perhaps your throat or the sinuous cavities of your sinus. . .” He scanned the group as they sat, a disorganized gathering. Some folded their legs. Others, less limber, wrapped their arms around their knees and pretended not to need the strength of their arms to supplement the strain to their abdomens. So, he lay in a few suggestions about choosing the most comfortable position, whether it be seated or ‘as I see many of you have chosen, good, lying down. ’ and when he saw that the very last one had succumbed to his induction he began in earnest.

He said, “I will give you a few moments just to listen to your breath and then I am going to make some simple suggestions for you to consider or, if you choose not to consider them, simply to set them aside knowing that if ever you come to a circumstance in which they might apply, you might consider them at that time. All these choices are yours. Now, though, as you simply listen to your breath. Know that this sound has been with you from the moment of your birth and will be with you until the moment of your death. . .”

He moved into a segment of the exercise that he had codified thoroughly. He split his focus as he intoned the well worked phrases.

He would, again, fail to see the sword handed over. If his motives were pure, if he were in this without ego, it should not sting that he be sent away while the millennial Blue Belt

received an honor so great only one other person in the history of the world had been given it.

He pulled his focus back to healing the reluctant spirits of men whose minds he had only some few minutes to affect. He set himself to carrying out that task as well as he could in the time he had. Yes, some instruction on manners would be included, but not the hierarchical nonsense of the Seelie courts. Offering memory prompts that revolved around childhood experiences of respect from others, he seeded the habits of decency that make manners an effortless act of generosity. He built the phrases, each upon the next. He watched for troubles, stirrings that might require a circular reset to trance state, a soft reminder of the breath or a comforting suggestion that things proceeded as they should.

He hoped that by doing this thing to the highest standard he could manage, committing fully to the task at hand, his sincerity in this might compensate for some unseen, unknown taint on the rest of this endeavor. Perhaps if he did this small thing well enough, the other big thing would not inherit the fundamental flaws of the man who built it.

The woman he loved would call that both self-defeating and magical thinking. He imagined. Also, though, she had said she believed in him. For now, that was enough.

## TWENTY ONE



Frank's heart started pounding the moment the Faerie Queen suggested he walk away from Vivica. Right up until that moment everything that had happened had seemed natural. The evening included an incredible display of genuine magic, so also supernatural. The sequence of events from the moment that time froze to the moment Nimue suggested she and Vivica go off alone had seemed an inevitable and engaging series of perfectly timed surprises.

It was delightful entertainment, visual stimulus evolving slowly, creating curiosity just enough to build and hold the attention without challenging the observer in any way. It kept him watching, emotionally engaged, intellectually incapacitated by the soothing imagery.

She came up out of the water like a music video, holding up this huge shining sword so that first you couldn't even tell what it was. It was just this big, long, glowing thing and he figured out that it was the sword and its reflection just before the hilt came out. He had moved to Vivica then and wrapped an arm around her. He had been unable to shift his eyes as the scaly lady with the makeover magic came out of the water. He realized that she was just walking back out of the water the way she went in, but the illusion still held him rapt. Vivica snuggled into his armpit and put her arm around his waist.

He stood there watching and then she started doing that poem about how everyone could relax because Merlyn put them under her protection. She came out of the water with her big, pale tits hidden under a Jewish prayer shawl, maybe. If they could be narrower, like ties. Then for a while he thought about who decided when ties were going to be fat and when they were going to be skinny and whether prayer shawls might have different styles. Then he thought for a minute about how Trump used to wear the giant red tie, and everyone made fun of it, and it made him a cartoon but it also worked like the Nike swoosh sort of, and the letters that you can't look at without shaping them into sounds that make words that make pictures in your head. Other people's words and images put in front of you constantly that you cannot look at without them putting thoughts in your head.

Nimue called Vivica forward and she walked away from him. He felt the loss of contact with her body like the gasp for air before one realizes the wind has been knocked out of him. He nearly followed her, but he saw that he should not.

She was walking forward to take from a Faerie Queen the sword of Arthur. Merlyn the Magician had assured the Lady of the Lake that Vivica, his little Vivica with her impossibly

perfect ears and her ability to look sexy going upstairs two at a time was the person who should get to hold Excalibur. There had never been a moment since he met her that he would not have believed her worthy of that honor although it had never occurred to him before yesterday.

The sword in the movies was always held by a white guy in armor with a pale, red-headed girlfriend. Today, though, Vivica was the hero and he got to watch her get the sword.

Then Stevie the non-binary kid walked up like they had just gotten confused in the chaos and thought the sword was supposed to be theirs. Before that nonsense even had time to play out, Carmine the cowboy with a private army started bulling toward Nimue like he intended to take the sword by force or demand it in the name of the Agency, The President and National Security. That struck Frankie as phenomenally stupid, given both the off-handed shows of power he'd seen recently and the fact that he had just heard that the person holding that sword and sheath would be a dangerous badass.

He moved to stop the man as he saw Nimue's focus shift. Her face told him of the rage she sublimated in that moment. He saw the moment when she raised her hand preparing to destroy the man who so arrogantly approached. In that moment, Frank recognized her as the closest thing he had ever seen to a god. He could see the ease with which she considered extinguishing the man's life.

In the half second between raising her hand toward the man and casting the spell he watched her thoughts rushing by at a speed he had only seen once before, when Vivica asked her Ethics Professor about his thoughts on the appropriateness of making a pass at a student.

That had been just after he'd started seeing the thoughts dance across faces. He hadn't told Vivica about it yet, even. If he had, he might have done something, watching the superior smirk and the truth deliberately hidden as the teacher said nothing to incriminate himself. Had Vivica known that he could see the layers of deception, that he knew from the man's unconscious, subconscious confession what she knew as his victim, he still wouldn't have pummeled the man. The rules said that knowing was not enough and even then, a white professor attacked by the young black friend of a young black student wasn't going to play for the police. The world would think Frankie was acting rashly out of anger based on assumption if he did anything other than stand witness as Viv had asked him. No matter what he knew, no matter how angry he grew, Vivica couldn't see him as anything but wholly honorable in his actions. That was important to him. He believed that a flaw, though he thought sometimes that he acted honorably out of habit, now.

Looking at Nimue tonight, he watched a series of thoughts run across her face. She hid no panic or insecurity as that teacher had. She wasn't bluffing frantically in front of a victim and her intimidating, huge friend who did nothing but stare at his face. Her mind just worked *that* fast all the time. Frankie wondered if his ability to keep up with it meant that *his* mind could work that fast all the time too.

Nimue looked with disdain at the man Carmine as he approached. The rage she felt at an interruption of her thought, at the insolence, the sheer rudeness of his approach far outweighed any sense of rage she had at the person who had committed the acts. Her impulse was to reduce him to whatever he would be if she took all the water from the man's body and gifted it to her lake.



Frankie saw that thought as clearly as if it been flashed on a bright sign in words and images. Then that was gone.

He saw the thought that she could do something more dramatic that would leave a more powerful impression on the other mortals. Her readiness to use the murder of a man as an object lesson for those around her seemed purely efficient to her, an opportunity. If she was killing a guy anyway, she might as well make a grand spectacle of it that would be spoken of with awe and fear. He saw the twitch at the corner of her eye as she chose not to glance away to see what Merlyn thought. He saw her realize without looking toward the magician that Merlyn felt protective toward all these idiots, even the ones he didn't bring with him. He saw her consider his wants. Without slowing she continued to raise her hand toward Carmine and he saw her choose.

Frankie raced toward the man, to stop him in his approach, yet he remained in the dazed state of the audient. He felt like the magician's volunteer or the guy who stands there while the jugglers trade knives around him. He was both watching the action and part of it. He felt urgency to protect the life of this man he did not know, but even in action he could not stop observing.

When Nimue spoke, he found himself reading her lips because the helicopters suddenly got loud again. For a moment he thought they were coming back but then he realized that in that long moment as she walked out of the water, when it felt as though Nimue had stopped time, Nimue had, in fact, stopped time.

She had so held his focus just by walking out of the water, that he hadn't noticed she had stopped time.

He saw her tell the man to go to sleep and the man stumbled drunkenly. Frank slowed, laughing as he realized that she had granted this deluded man his life as a gift to Merlyn because she did not want to appear less than honorable in the old man's eyes.

Then she glanced Merlyn's way at last and he saw a whole other wave rush across her in a single flash. He knew that it had been to please Merlyn, somehow to protect him, and in hope of making him like her more. Now he saw love that ran as deep as the familial. She loved him and she longed for his affection and respect. She wanted him but felt wrong to want him at a level so deep that even to contemplate a fantasy might unleash slithering, hungry creatures from the darkest murk of her unhuman soul.

That was it, he saw, as Carmine stumbled comically toward the lake, already asleep on his feet, as inconsequential to her as he had been before he landed his helicopter and started waving guns around. She had considered taking the man's life with a cavalier gesture not because she was cruel and inhuman, but because she was unhuman. The thoughts that she rattled through at an unhuman rate did not carry the same ethical or emotional anchor points as those that mortals carried.

She didn't care that Carmine was falling forward into the lake and likely to die anyway. *Merlyn couldn't blame her for that, he read, if that were to happen while she faced away and executed with her business.*

Frankie re-engaged his forward momentum, which had lagged from an all-out sprint to a near jog when he saw her choose not to make a spectacle of the murder. Now he sprinted to get there as the Carmine's muscular frame went down in the shallows, face under the water.

He started pulling Carmine out, and Vivica came to help him. So did Stevie, which impressed him. He shouted to Vivica that he could manage, but Stevie took the opportunity to try to claim the sword and Viv stayed to help.

He and Viv wrestled the unconscious man up the bank. Nimue said something that struck Vivica profoundly. She turned toward the Faerie Queen, entirely abandoning the task to him now that the man's face was out of the shallows.

He adjusted his grip on Sleepy McFoolhardy and pulled the man's hundred-and-ninety-pound frame away from the water line. He got him situated on his back, head turned to the side. The muttering and snoring told him the man would survive the ordeal.

He stood up and took in the current circumstance, again carried by the natural, comforting flow of Nimue's charms.

Things had shifted from the solemn ritualistic choreography of the big entrance to a surreal night club act. As Nimue worked the crowd and did jokes, Frankie moved back to Vivica. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and she acknowledged his presence by resting her head back against his chest.

He marveled at the speed with which the Faerie assessed thoughts and ideas and decided which to pursue, which to dismiss. The workings of her mind now kept him as enthralled as her emergence from the depths had moments earlier.

Still, through the tonal shifts, the race to save a man's life, now the rising ire in the Lady's voice, the undertone of mortal threat she directed toward those who displeased her, the series of events had the organic connection of daydream. The transitions faded into the emotional experience and carried him along half-unthinking for all the thoughts he continued

processing. He watched from a distance, lost in his head, unable to take his eyes from the Queen, aware of this phenomenon and unfazed by it.

Then Nimue suggested that he go with Merlyn while she took Vivica alone for the handover of the Sword. He had just watched the ease with which this powerful being could drift from irritability to rage. He had seen in her eyes her willingness to take life and to do it with calculation that would leave her seemingly blameless.

He spoke before he had time to consider the wisdom or the danger. He was not certain what he said, but he made an effort to keep his voice clear and unbreaking. He approached with respect but also did not allow any hint of subservience to show. Even as he began speaking, he read the Faerie's micro-expressions and they came in a sequence so startling to him that he almost stopped speaking before he'd finished.

He saw first her confusion at his resistance to her instruction and then very quickly schoolgirl delight at praise from a teacher from a higher grade as he began with flattery, honest flattery but flattery, nonetheless. He stated his respect and acknowledged his fear without showing it. Then he stated his intention. He would not let her go anywhere with Vivica alone. He saw comprehension slide into Nimue's mind, a realization. He saw her separate his outburst from those of the idiots and hecklers who had broken her rhythm moments earlier. For a moment he saw her searching her memory, flipping through old gods, spirits, and archetypes like trading cards in a display folder. He saw her find 'Knight.'

He saw the figure as both idea and image. He felt the rightness of the image. A figure of strength, unarmored, standing guard before a shadowed room that contained the unknown. Reading the mind behind Nimue's face, he knew that this darkened room could contain

anything from a single sacred artifact to a beloved leader or even an unwritten, unexpressed ideal. The Knight followed the dictate of full commitment to the subject of his attachment. His armor stood ready, half-assembled against the wall beside the door. His weapon, too. Within reach, their presence emphasized the extent to which they existed *separate* from the figure. Whatever lay within, the Knight protected alone at the door. The sword and the plumed helm, the shining accoutrements could be taken up when needed, a kind of glamour.

Then she beamed a smile of recognition directly into his eyes, somehow knowing that he had seen the image in her mind. Her sudden, rain-break sun smile touched notes of grandparent's first look at the new infant. It hummed of welcome and concern and the need to say too much all at once when a lifetime would not suffice to express it.

He saw her make the decision to let him figure things out on his own and that too was touched with the grandparent looking at the infant. Then she shouted to Merlyn, "She has a Knight!"

She would let him accompany her while the others went with Merlyn for a Breathing Exercise. Only that mattered now. He would be there, if needed, for Vivica.

The moment Merlyn headed off with his group, Nimue started off in the opposite direction at a brisk pace, expecting Vivica and him to keep up. Vivica matched Nimue's pace and then some, occasionally doing a couple of quick relaxed lunges while they walked, side-stepping. She skipped for a few paces. He read her body language from behind, seeing that she had so accepted what was about to happen, was so relaxed in this moment, that she was genuinely enjoying the exercise of a fast walk along the beach. She did not see this

Faerie woman as a threat at all. She had not seen the deliberate act of attempted homicide, nor the imagined horrors of a performative live snuff show contemplated just before it.

Had Nimue been evil, Vivica surely would have sensed it. She had to have enough instinct for that. But Nimue was not evil. She just lived on a different moral plane than he and Viv had ever imagined. Not a higher plane or a lower plane. Entirely different. Nimue could be constrained by the rules that guided her negotiations and her interactions. She had emotions and desires much like mortals, but he could only read them as near analogues to the ones he experienced.

She was not without conscience. Her conscience simply did not see the death of a mortal as a moral or ethical issue.

All mortals die. The rest is timing.

He turned as he walked, checking for anyone following or approaching. Seeing himself as the archetype of the Knight, he tested 'scanning the perimeter' as a character mannerism, a potential habitual idiosyncrasy.

Nimue said, "Sir Frank, attend your charge now, I think. Hear what she hears. Know her burden to better understand the nature and the gravity of your burden. Yes?"

Frank finished his pretentious search of the near shadows and caught up to walk beside Vivica. She took his hand and squeezed it, but he could not tell by touch whether it was affection and excitement or something else that drove the kind clench.

Merlyn shouted from far behind them and Nimue turned back. She used the magical amplification that she'd utilized earlier to tell him that she could not hear him. Then she gazed off toward the distant Druid, a light smile at her lips as she said without booming from

the sky, "Congratulations. Are you still trying to impress me?" Even in that brief sentence he saw millennia of memories, regrets, promises kept or pending—never broken, not for a Faerie.

Then she said, "Oh, my beautiful, near-grown girl child, turn toward me. You stand behind her and to her left. Wait. Vivica. You're right-handed?"

"I am."

"Oh, good! I thought we were gonna have to take this thing in and get it refitted for a lefty."

"What?"

"I kid, kid. It eases the tension, and in a minute, I must do this as a proper ritual. It's so much more important than mortals realize. I know how big and significant it will feel. You do not because this is your first time. So, I kid, kid, because it eases my tension. You dig?"

"I dig, Ma'am." Vivica said, smiling.

"So. Frankie, behind and to her left. Good. Listen, you two, incredibly young, impossibly charming mortals. I will try to cram as much meaning into a few words here as I can:

"You have, each of you, all of you, the capacity to become truly self-determining. Make decisions. Take action and discover outcome. Correct errors when you can. Forgive when you cannot. You two have stepped into your own potential. Merlyn will make you think he did this for you, found you, prepared you. Do not believe him. You chose to be here. You chose to trust. He has very much not prepared you. And I cannot."

She used her free hand to raise one end of her suede boob-scarf. He noticed that this end cut almost straight across, while the other end got pointy.

She said, "This scabbard, soft and supple, tanned and sewn of the hide of a seven-pointed stag hunted down by Hern himself, the Spirit of the Hunt, the Horned King who rides but once in every hundred twenty-seven years and gives the bounty of his hunt grudgingly, rarely, and only when he sees true need to do so, holds in its construct more magic than now exists in all of the Eastern Hemisphere. The thread that binds the layered suede and keeps the belt-hasp firm, has been woven from a single strand of a gold alloy, the formula for which is beyond my authority to reveal to modern man, its potential applications—according to some—too dangerous to risk." Her tone made this a sort of recital, though she had not announced that she had started the ceremony.

He could tell, though, that it would not be appropriate to interrupt her with questions. He continued to focus on Vivica's shoulder. It didn't interest him, particularly, her shoulder. Finding a place of focus kept his eyes off Nimue's face so that he could hear her words without being confused by all the thoughts he couldn't stop reading.

"Who bears this scabbard can be harmed by no weapon. Say it back to me."

Vivica said, "Who bears this scabbard can be harmed by no weapon."

"Good, young hero. Who bears this scabbard cannot be slain in battle."

"Who bares this sword cannot be slain in battle."

"Sewn within the layers of the leather of this scabbard rests a single seed of the Tree of Life. Young Knight look up now, that you might know what I have too little time to say."



Frankie looked at her face and she looked straight into his eyes as she said, "The Tree of Life, untended and forgotten fails." In the micro expressions, perhaps the fluctuations of her irises, deliberately and sequentially she thought and showed him images that came with those words: A tree spread above and rooted outward below, welcoming in its shade, its fruit, blending soft red to yellow. He saw its wide canopy of green and knew what stained glass had originally tried to replicate. The sunlight illuminated it from behind. Rare gaps in the verdant awning allowed slim streaks to reach the mossy earth beneath.

He felt the loving warmth of the air beneath the Tree as it came into his lungs by seeing it in the Faerie Queen's eyes. Or perhaps the muscles under her cheeks. He felt a profound connection to the Tree and knew he was feeling Nimue's connection. He felt the resonant response of the Tree to her. He felt he should drop to his knees and thank her for allowing him the experience of this feeling that he knew he would carry with him forever. He felt the weight of that debt. She snapped, aloud "You owe me nothing for this. The Tree as I remember her most clearly, as you see her now, Frank, lived for at least multiples of thousands of years. She lived in your world with roots that knew how to find their way to Faerie." As she spoke the word 'Faerie' an encyclopedia unloaded itself into his brain bottling the geography, the history, the surreal laws of language and a system of exchange having nothing to do with financial commerce.

A twitch of Nimue's eyebrow threw his focus to his new knowledge of the Knights of Faerie and Brittany, the Knights in whose tradition he now walked, and he knew with a cold, unsettling certainty that he was somehow bound by their laws. The choices he had made had endowed him now with the ability to resist the will of a Faerie Queen if he so chose.

He pulled his eyes away from her for just a moment to test his theory and then returned to the visions she offered, knowing that he did so entirely by choice.

She acknowledged all that he had just put together with a flash of smile as though a toddler had shown how clean his hands were. She said, "That Tree has been failing, faster lately." In the time it took her to speak those words he slipped forward in time at the speed of thought, and only now realized the expanse of time her memory of this Tree covered. He moved through hundreds of years in a blink, spending time beneath this tree that smelled of home and hummed comfort and then abruptly a softening of the perfect emerald sky dome began to take hold. The possibility of its original vibrance became the hyperbole of nostalgia. Centuries passed and Frank felt a confusion from the tree, a distance.

He remembered the slow loss of Nana as her memory went and he reached for a reason as they continued through time past the industrial revolution. At the precise moment that a chain reaction took place above Hiroshima in Nimue's memory, the very last, long stretching root of that Tree lost contact with the otherworld. The gaping horror of that loss to the tree, to the world, to Nimue and in that moment to Frank drew a howl of sorrow from him. Leaves fell about him brown and wilting as he knelt now involuntarily, weeping in abject grief.

Nimue said, "You owe me nothing for what I have shared. Notice: You can take in my face and what you read there, and you can hear my words at the same time. You underestimate yourself, averting your eyes, fearing you will reach a limit. You are a Knight. You can manage more than you know. Stand up."

Frankie stood.

Vivica said, "Are you alright?" She whispered it as though she was trying to sneak it past Nimue.

Frank said, "I'm fine. Merlyn has no idea what he's doing."

Vivica said, "What?"

Nimue said, "This Sword, Excalibur, shall pass to you just moments hence, Vivica." She moved the soft, floppy scabbard to drape over her arm so that she could rest the absurdly dangerous blade across her wrist. She manipulated the enormous weapon as though it weighed no more than a conductor's baton. She held it out horizontally in front of her and said, "This weapon, improbably forged of metals from three continents and the fire of two realms, bound and cast with magics from every civilized culture on Earth of the time, relics from every faith endowing its thrusting form with a potency never before felt by humankind."

She wagged her eyebrows at Frankie to let him know that the phallic specificity of the imagery was required in the ceremony but also, knowing his capability now for receiving nuance, she was able to communicate that this language was Merlyn's from the original presentation agreement; at the time neither of them had been aware of the silliness of it; now she was able to kind of dig it as she delivered the material. She leaned a little bit into the romance-novel camp of it all.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Vivica, mesmerized by the intricately engraved blade, moving to touch it. He reached out, combat-fast to stop her, putting two fingers against the inside of her wrist, reminding her tactilely that the blade was not to be touched.

“Graven with the knots of the Celtic lands, runes of the north, ogham-branded eel skin wrapping a Jade Dragon hidden in the hilt, this weapon contains a construct of more magics than are held in sheath and the entire modern world combined. Cross laces woven from the spider silk of Anansi himself hold the eel skin in place. The pommel, inscribed with magics of Greek scholars, arrived with a delivery team of trained owls who flew four days and nights without rest so that it could play its part in what the great minds of the world all agreed was man’s last hope against the brutal spread of ignorance and conquest. HEED WELL.” She didn’t yell. She just emphasized in a way that communicated tremendous importance.

Frank looked directly at her face as she spoke.

“And last before we speak the words, know this. Well hidden, underneath the eel, all tied with trickster-spider’s web—” He abruptly found he knew things about why eel skin had been used: Some sword maker knew it absorbed sweat from the palms without getting slippery. He saw the intricately woven laces over the hilt of the sword in his mind in such detail that he more fully understood the texture he had only taken in as a delicate impression when he saw it in the moonlight from a few feet away, not carved as he had originally believed but layered. Eel skin under a web of silk that came from some powerful spider that was jovial and dangerous all at once. He got impressions he was certain were of Africa though they did not correlate with anything in Africa he had ever seen or heard of. He received images of a dark-skinned people trading and working surrounded by colors and symbols and styles and habits that implied a lasting and advanced civilization. He saw Africa at a time he had never learned about, before the people of the world began subjugating and

transporting one another across oceans. The city he saw, where Anansi played his tricks in this vision rose out of a desert around a plentiful spring oasis just as civilized, structured and entrenched as any European city he remembered hearing about in the . . . what would that be? Eighth Century? Twelfth? He tried to place Arthurian legend on the timeline of history for a moment, noticed he'd gotten distracted and dragged his attention back to the face of the Faerie Queen.

She gave him a flat stare of forced patience. She expected him to be heeding well. He re-applied himself to the instruction. He could take in the imagery and hear the words at the same time. This was not beyond him.

“—within the claws of that secret dragon, hidden well within the hilt, beneath the hand of whomsoever holds this blade lies similarly a single seed, this one of the other Tree, the much maligned and far more necessary Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.”

The Tree—the one he knew from Church with Nana stood near to the Tree of Life, their reaching branches just touching in a garden. A clearing really.

Nimue stopped speaking. While she went through a swift series of motions sheathing the sword, she let him look at her memories though it meant she had to think the beats through slowly. She let him read in the slow passage of seconds, at a rate he could grasp, the details. She guided him first to the corrected word, “glade,” though he could not imagine how she did so.

His vision expanded until he saw that he stood beneath one of the two Great Trees in a glade surrounded at a wide garden's distance by a wood so well-tended that the trees in their various families stood in friendly groupings of their own. The Willow alternated in wide

swaths with smaller groupings of Rowan. He saw the perfection of the circle they formed, how deliberately they alternated. He was her, now. He was Nimue, seeing this as a child for the first time.

He learned with the awe and excitement of Nimue's youth about these trees as she walked with her grandmother. The trees of the wood around them, the Rowan, and the Willow, beyond that Cyprus, Birch, and Spindle, each found optimum positioning to meet its needs for light and spread, for branch and root. Gentle hands of humanity over generations innumerable had spaced these trees, growing a forest outward from the center. This tall garden reached out generationally, in rings. By walking the rings, counting them in a straight journey, it might be possible to read the age of the society that tended the place.

Beyond the Spindle they spread through Laurel and Cherry and at the outer fringe a range of Alder that her grandmother worked with daily—these tame trees and the wild within gave food and comfort, joy, and life. Mortals in their thousands over centuries had tended here, had curated this land with noble thought and care for every spirit.

An alliance bound Nimue and her people to those who tended a landscape to such beauty. She had learned on this day from her grandmother—that was who taught her in this memory, he understood at last—that her family would be safe here for hundreds of years. He remembered through her heart that she had mistakenly believed her grandmother had meant “forever.”

He understood why “glade” mattered.

Nimue's eyes closed, setting Frank back into his own mind for just a second. He saw her eyebrows dancing stories she strove to conceal of loss and fire and . . . Merlyn?

Vivica said, "Are you okay?"

He and Nimue said, "Yes."

Then Nimue's eyes locked his again and he became conscious of tears streaming down her face before her memory took him and he knew there was more to the story.

Frankie did not trust that Merlyn's penchant for transparency and disclosure could be assumed as an attribute of unhuman magical beings who showed up along the way. Still, he wanted whatever information she could offer. She might be withholding, but he felt certain that what he read was memory, not fiction. He'd take all he could get. Also, he had no desire to resist as she pulled him into the warm, lush air of the glade and he felt the clean, hyper-oxygenated rush of Nimue's childhood instruction take hold again.

In a forest centuries in the careful making, surrounded by trees that mortals tended and that Nimue's grandmother thought of as her children, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil had visitors. Human and Faerie and others whose names did not make sense. Some animals. Deer stood beneath the two Great Trees nibbling their leaves and fruits. People came and picked the fruit of the Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil and they bit into it and looked at one another wide eyed. They wept and held one another. They departed. A steady flow of people. Some visited both trees. Many visited one or the other. He saw this over time as he had seen the passage of time for the other tree as it became fragile and failed. He saw centuries of visitations.

He saw the sparse beginnings of the Alder ranks become a vast border, half a mile deep around the ancient tree garden. He saw new visitors brought to this place. Some wore clothes he knew from history books but knew through young Nimue as the strange garb of the

savage outsiders. The visiting mortals grew rarer. Men in rough hung robes of plaid and then in kilts. Women in rags or in gowns or strange silks, guided in by Faerie Folk and offered fruit, only to leave, awed. Most wept. Some laughed. Nobody tasted this fruit unchanged.

Skipping time, he saw the tree dead, burned, a husk. He saw ranks upon ranks of trees torched and left charred, stretching out. From the nearest Willow to the farthest Alder he saw the blackened, level landscape and he felt the dense, malevolent intent behind the scar. This destruction, this deliberate desecration must not stand.

Then she released him from her mindscape and held out the sword before her, sheathed now, the twin straps pulled about the cross guard but not fastened through the small brass clasp at the side of the scabbard.

She said in the tone of ritual, "Who draws this sword shall conquer all who challenge."

Vivica said, "Who draws this sword shall conquer all who challenge."

"Who bears this sword shall rule all who submit."

"What?" Vivica said.

"Who bears this sword shall rule all who submit."

"I don't want that."

"This is a ceremony."

"I don't give a shit," Vivica said, and Frank grinned watching her saying it.

The bafflement crossing Nimue's face may have had tinges of annoyance in it about the interruption of the ceremony but mostly she just could not comprehend what has happening.



Vivica went on, "If taking that thing means that I need to rule people who submit to me, that's sort of the same bullshit that's had the system screwed up from the time I was born. Right? Nah. I don't think so."

"By holding this Sword, you become the High King. The whole point of the sword was as a way of bestowing rulership. It's an honor to rule. A good ruler serves people." Nimue blinked twice thinking only two thoughts over and over again. *How do these creatures live as long as they do? And I understand what Merlyn saw in this weird little one.* She suddenly blurted out, exasperated, "This shouldn't be this complicated."

Vivica said, "We're supposed to be destroying the sword anyway, right?"

"Yes."

"So why does it matter if I say the thing?"

"If we're destroying it anyway, why does it matter if you *don't* say the thing?"

"Exactly!"

Frank tried not to smirk as he watched Nimue stumble through her thoughts. She slowed her breath and the smirk left him as he watched this unhuman creature of incalculable power control herself, make a choice to alter the course of her emotional state. He watched her very carefully. He watched her change her emotional state close to the woman he loved, and she held a dangerous weapon.

He watched her do it with a technique he had begun to learn hours earlier, listening to the sound of her own breath before speaking, before acting.

He felt connected to her, to the world that he had just learned about. He thought about how he spoke when he was with college professors as opposed to how he spoke when he was

with his family. He thought about how he spoke when he wanted a job and he thought about how he spoke when he was fed up and ready to throw a job away.

He stepped forward and spoke as the person he had only recently understood himself to be.

He said, "Lady of the Lake, as Knight to the Hero Vivica I ask to be heard."

Nimue turned her focus to him, relieved to have a distraction in the moment she needed to maintain ceremonial composure.

Seeing that, Frank nodded his understanding, a 'you're welcome' to her unspoken sense of gratitude, a tiny exchange in which he had given her something. Something so small but now, acknowledging it, sharing the moment with him, a tiny thread of a bond formed. It did not feel like debt exactly, but she had acknowledged the unintended gift received and his confidently stated title. It was a private agreement and he recognized it as the very real connection people tried desperately to recreate when they gave one another conspiratorial nods and winks over ethical transgressions.

Nimue dignified and codified his title and status as she said, "The Hero Vivica's Knight shall be heard."

He continued, focusing through the infinite potential for exploration that her eyes offered, to say what he had to say clearly and briefly. He continued to send her as much of the underlying thinking and ideation as he could through that contact, not knowing how much of it she could read. He said, "We stand here today at the edge of the water not to take up an ancient symbolic weapon, but to destroy one. As if it were a whole new ceremony,

knowing you must hand that thing to Vivica, lay out the bits she needs to know in language she will understand. This must be done well, far more than it needs to be done correctly.”

Vivica looked at him and even from the corner of his eye he could see her admiring the persona he had taken on for this conversation. She liked watching him when he turned into different people. She didn't think it made him a fraud or a liar. She had once said it was a superpower.

The Queen of Faerie laughed and said, “You speak good sense. To change the world, I suppose, we must be willing to part with tradition. Let's do this thing.”

She said, “Vivica, I have no idea why you are here. I don't know how Merlyn found you or why he chose you, nor do I know what happens between now and the time Merlyn destroys the sword. I don't know why he couldn't just have come here and asked me for it himself.”

Vivica turned to Frank. “That true?”

“All of it.”

“You are about to take this powerful thing. I am not allowed to advise. I can only give the information in the ritual and the ritual is designed to give you information that you can figure out for yourself at the right moments because it embeds the idea more powerfully or some esoteric Druid bullshit like that. So, my deal with Merlyn has me doing it exactly the way he put it together. But your Knight here suggests that Merlyn was a different man then than he is today and perhaps I shall choose in this instance the intent of an agreement. Because it is important. Even if it may mean that I owe that asshole another favor.”

Frank said, “You love that asshole.”

"I do. Over nineteen hundred and twelve years, a relationship can get complicated."

Vivica said, "Are we talking about Merlyn? I thought he said he was eighteen-hundred."

"He loses track of the changes from lunar to solar to Gregorian. Plus, I stuck him in a cave for a lot longer than he seems to realize."

Without preamble, she handed the sword to Vivica. She said, "When we did this the first time, Arthur had grown up in the mortal world outside the Druid sanctuaries and people did not know how to learn, to remember, to take instruction. You say a thing, you make them repeat it, you sink it into them. It's an early magic, the teaching of a thing in a single sitting so that it may be retained. You respond poorly to the ceremony. That is difficult for me."

"I didn't want to say something in a somber, sort of sacred moment that I don't believe."

"I get this. You have the sword. Do not draw it. Please. I know it sounds as though drawing it would be magnificent but it's just an awful thing. All it does is kill people and make people admire you if you hold it over your head in bright sunlight. The really cool magic is in that scabbard. Merlyn never understood that. Arthur sure as hell didn't. Also—and there was discussion of this among some of the spell-weavers he brought in—there's *incentive* to keep the sword sheathed. You can't be slain in battle with the sword nor conquered, but that scabbard makes you impervious to weapons when the sword is drawn, impossible to harm when worn."

Vivica, holding the sword went through that information again, memorizing it and then said, "Got it. Thank you. That's really, really helpful."

She looked down at the sheathed sword in her hands evaluating its weight and then she spun it once, gripped at its center of gravity like a short staff. She felt the impulse to pull it

from the scabbard and dance about playing pirate on the beach. She did not do that. Quite suddenly, she spun toward Frank, holding it up for him to see like it was a trophy.

She said, "Frank! Look! I'm the fucking High King!"

He grinned and said, "My Fucking Liege!"

"And you said I am the woman you love!"

He said, "I did?"

Nimue said, "You did!"

His tiny hero with her huge medieval sword in its magical scabbard, leapt into his arms and for a moment it seemed she would be too heavy to hold. Then she settled her legs around his waist, and she was exactly the right comfortable weight even with the sword's mass added.

As their mouths opened to one another, tongues celebrating in privacy between them, she bumped him in the back of the head with the handle of her legendary weapon, but he didn't complain because the rest of it was just too wonderful to interrupt.

## TWENTY TWO



When Merlyn heard Nimue and his young colleagues returning, he began pulling out of the dense spell-weaving focus. The visualization prompts he fed to the large party of participants and the reminders that they return to the sound of the breath had become sparse, the barest touches of oar to water to keep their minds awake in the changing streams of their thoughts. Now, as he brought them back to the boundary of waking physical consciousness, he strung together longer sets of images, building a ladder back to the surface, leaving tiers of newly

realized, barely examined underthought to affect each of them with tickles of new self-awareness. It was all he could hope to do in a single session.

He too made the journey of return, although the delivery of a breathing exercise led to an entirely different trance state from the one achieved when performing one. Few if any of these people would return to the breath on their own, would discover the entirely different trance state that comes when one finds it with neither accompaniment nor guide, instruction nor intonation.

He realized with a small shock that he had begun drawing deeply from the well of magic at his back.

Using sound and word alone to deliver breathing exercises for others, he had learned to generate scraps of magical energy in the world he had drained. On his own, without a person or a group to affect with the spell, he seemed incapable of generating more than a hair's volume of magic.

He had tried. He had indulged lengthy fantasies in which he found some magical well within himself and through a magnificent act of will and focus drew from it until all the creatures of Earth and Faerie knew that he had done what he had sought to do, that he had fixed the harm.

No.

He could not do that. Not all these centuries of harm. He could not fix it in an act. Not in a million acts of redemption spread over another eighteen-hundred years. Twenty? Since birth or since the first Quest? Or since the Camelot collapse? Or since he emerged from the cave?

When magic had been plentiful, he had known it as a never-diminishing resource, as constant in presence as air or ideas. Or trees. Or time.

He counted everyone back to full awareness. He slowed through the last few beats ensuring that they could awake refreshed, getting their bearings just as Nimue would arrive to hold their attention. He released all the magic he had been pulling through himself, letting the sensation recede. He allowed himself the satisfaction that in using the power available to him, he had done no harm beyond its use and had used it, in general for good. Also, on a whim that might have been legitimate intuition and might have been purely self-serving, he syphoned a little of the magic to reinforce the protective spells and depleted wards about his favorite coat. If the reinforcements served nobody but him for a hundred and fifty years or so, he would assign himself penance.

Carl Jung had once ranted at him that his system of personal penance for things he had promised to nobody but himself proved him to be both arrogant and disturbingly dissociative. He cast himself in the role both of sinner and of the God to whom he must make amends. Merlyn had found it amusing that his friend, so frequently a wonderful help during the psychiatric therapy process, had been so struck by this as to lecture him, enraged, during a session. Another lie, that claim of amusement. He had resented Carl that afternoon when he walked away along the cobbles to the river muttering to himself.

Only now did he remember how impotent he had felt, his only tricks left, really, his coat and his ability to drone people into a simple trance and offer them good advice while they were in the right state to hear it. And the wallet.



The wallet he had made for his teacher, Gwydion. The purse changed shape to match the current fashion, like the coat. It would always provide the currency of the land, this gift he had not gotten to deliver. He winced at that thought and stored it in the bottom drawer like batteries, improperly stored, untouched for fear of the burn of leaked acid upon exploratory fingers.

Carl would have loved to know that Merlyn's thoughts jumped between him and his early mentor, Gwydion.

Gwydion would have loved to know that the wallet he never received had funded this expedition to correct the terrible, ever mounting wrong that he had done.

He tallied his own discoveries, thoughts, important mind-wanderings, new connections and pulled himself fully into his waking self as the soldiers found their own way back to themselves, following instructions to stretch and discuss with one another any interesting thoughts they might have had recently.

He stood in one motion from the fold-legged pose, turning half-way around at precisely the right moment to deeply impress the approaching young ones.

Nimue walked toward him swiftly. Vivica and her Knight approached behind her. The sword lay in Vivica's arms. In the dark between moonset and morning pale, he saw the ambient magic of the sword. He could feel its touch even carried so far away behind the approaching Faerie. She said, "The Hero has the Sword, Merlyn. Good luck with all of this." She touched his cheek, and he felt a deliberately infused rush of magic delivered so discretely, so playfully, that it might seem no more than a flirtation.

She said, "Would you like me to do something cruel to the enchanted ones?"

"I would not, Lady, but thank you for the offer."

"And the sleeping one?"

"The one you chose not to kill?"

She said, "He'll wake about now. He won't be happy."

Merlyn said, "He'll be alive. Thank you for that. It is a life I shall repay."

"It is not. I was forced to make changes in your ritual. You owe me nothing. I owe you nothing."

Merlyn felt a profound sadness at that pronouncement. Relationships among the Faerie hinged so powerfully upon obligation and transaction that he did not know how to be certain he would see her again without some hanging debt.

She turned to walk away, glanced toward the men who knelt around them, just a worshipper's space away from where Merlyn had entranced them. She said, "Do this without using the wellspring, young man." She glanced at his coat, grinned, and said, "Unless you absolutely must."

"I'm sorry I failed you so terribly."

"Only twice. And I put you in prison in between. Listen, you're aware of what you're about to be in the middle of, right?"

Merlyn thought it through. The Agency's little army would get its shit together fast, collect its guns, return to trained habits of hostility, rage and enmity.

Vivica held the sword.

The young man had his knife at his belt for whatever that was worth, and he was likely to act impulsively if he believed Vivica was in trouble.

Percy might side with him or with Carmine and the specially trained goon squad; he had been slipping in and out of sync with the Questing Field unpredictably.

Sofia stood near enough that he could smell her pilot's post-crash sweat and he imagined throwing his protective cloak around her to keep her safe amid chaos and confusion.

He felt there was something he had forgotten in the big picture, a rook lurking in a corner or a shotgun hung on Chekhov's wall. He worried that whatever it was, it might not be an asset. He knew Nimue was offering to help and that if he accepted it, they could escape and let her clean up the mess. He knew that her help would cost lives. He lied, "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

She said, "Take care of Danny, would you? Tell him I love him."

"Do you?"

"You know, I really do, in my own peculiar way."

He nodded at her, smiling. "Congratulations. You know they all die."

"I do," she assured him, and it carried sadness. "Try not to let it happen to him tonight, okay? He knows how to call me when it's done."

Merlyn turned toward his companions to warn them that they were about to be at the center of an angry army of hostile attackers. He knew they had only moments to strategize before the trained killers had all watched Nimue ooze back into the water and got their bearings.

He had planned to draw his team close enough that he could transport them away with the sword silently if the soldiers didn't have their weapons yet. He had planned to do it

dramatically if they had their weapons, but that would require magic from the well and Nimue had asked him not to do that. He needed a new plan.

Frankie, earnest and sweet snapped his fingers and said, "Hey! Wizard. Look at me right now. Quick question. What happened at the War of the Trees?"

Merlyn saw too late just how far the boy's talent had grown, how great his comfort with it. His confidence had developed notably since he had first reinforced the boy's intuition that he was experiencing something real. He felt the boy's gaze tear open that fucking drawer.

The acid sting of those memories hit him like the spatter of hot oil, but the boy's eyes held him, reading them. He felt forced, first through the flashes of easy moments and then down through the tiers of examination and revision, down through the repression and back past the years. He knew as it occurred that the young man wanted it all, *needed* to know. The danger was imminent and there was little time and so much to tell if he was to tell it all, if he was to tell it honestly. He focused on a metaphor of download, not upload speed. He wanted Frankie to pull this thing out of him as fast as possible. He imagined he could do it as pure data for Frankie to sort through later. He had to get back to the men with the guns.

Frank's skill had not yet grown that sophisticated, of course. So, as he saw flashes come, he broke each down chronologically. Forcing Merlyn to walk it through a beat at a time.

Time passed while they made eye contact. He did not know how long it had been since Nimue had turned toward the lake. He feared the guns might be cocking right now. He told himself he was following intuition, guided by conscience. His Hero's Knight needed this information.

He knew he was lying, because the voice in his head kept piling up more reasons that he should make the worst decision possible.

He was about to do this thing because he was under the young man's control. The boy had reached through his eyeballs, grabbed him by the brain and pulled him into places he didn't want to go. Merlyn reeled. *Does he even know he can do that?*

Then he gave up on the struggle to warn his companions of imminent danger, and as the weak coward he had always known himself to be, he gave up. He opened his memories, hoping that the boy could make effective use of them if he had to look at this whole horror again.

Merlyn had escaped his cave, had been travelling for a hundred years or so. He learned what he could of recent, post-Arthurian histories in an age so dark the only ones reading and writing did it in a language the people had not spoken in generations.

He saw how diminished the magic was in the world. He wondered if he somehow was cutting himself off from it out of anguish over the failure of Camelot, his betrayal by Nimue in collusion with Morgan. He considered the explanation that he protected the world from his own rage by refusing himself access to the magical flow. He feared the more awful explanation that he was cut off from it by Gods or Faeries as punishment for using it so poorly. He knew that Nimue could not love him, not properly. Now she had locked him in that cave under the misdirection of Morgan.

*No more backstory. Urgency.*

Two ravens found him, old ravens from one of the Forest Clans. He did not know they still lived, the Raven Clans of the Forest, the Cliffs and the Hills. They delivered a message.

Gwydion needed him at once. He had not known his old instructor still lived. Since emerging from the cave he had met nobody still alive from the Time of the Trees, had heard the Druids spoken of mostly in hushed, shameful tones, villains in stories.

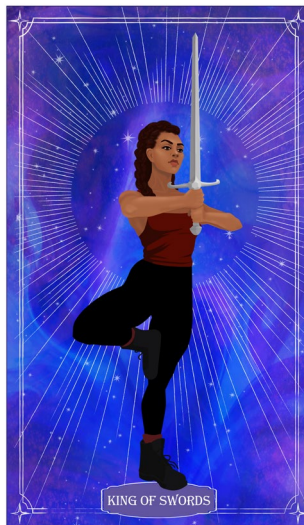
The Ravens gave him no time to gather himself. He had no opportunity to collect the purse he had made as a gift. It had been among the first things he located upon emergence from his forced meditative retreat.

Phrasing the two or three hundred years trapped in a confusingly translucent and reflective cave as “forced meditative retreat” brought a spike of resentment for the intrusion of Frank’s mind into his. The moment he felt that resentment Frank looked away, breaking their connection. The boy said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you hadn’t agreed —”

Merlyn said, “I had! You need this. Fast. I’ll try to get it to you in flashes but fast! Come on!”

He let Frank watch through his eyes as he dove into his memory, holding the young man’s deep, kind focus, letting him take the information not because he was forced to do so but because he had not been. Frank was an honorable man. Going into what could be a terrible battle, Frank had far too little information. If he believed he needed this information, Merlyn needed to trust him as readily, as wholly, as Frank had been willing to trust him. He ripped open the memory and walked into the gaping, stinking wound that was the War of the Trees.

## TWENTY THREE



When Vivica finished kissing her Knight most thoroughly, she did a small shift of her weight to tell him to set her down and he did so without her having to say anything aloud. She loved him more than she had ever loved anyone in her life.

Nimue said, “If you two are quite finished. . .”

“I think we might be just starting.”

“Be that as it may, young Hero. A very wise man once told me, *Things always suck. But we need not find out how badly they can suck, if every day we do something to make things suck less.*”

“I don't know what that means.”

“It was Merlyn. The wise man.”

“I don't care. What does it mean?”

“It sounded better in the original Old Welsh.”

“What comes next, Nimue? I've got the sword. How do we destroy it?”

“I believe Merlyn must destroy it.”

“How?”

“I do not know.”

“So, we have to get it to Merlyn.”

“Yes.”

“And he knows how to destroy it.”

“I do not know, my Darling Girl. He appears, threaded through the fabric of my life, a bright color that appears for a few, catching stitches. He appears with his wonderful adventures and his plans to save the mortal world. He flirts with me. Sometimes, fearlessly. A mortal! He tries to fool me. He pretends his not-so-secret desire to move to Faerie motivates the silliness, but that's not why he does it. He does it because he knows, with all the longevity granted by that exquisitely wrought never-sick spell Gwydion wove for him, that I am the only woman he will not have to watch as she ages and dies. His desire to love



me makes him unable to be seduced. His inability to love me makes him hate himself for trying so hard to do so. He just wants to love someone he can't outlive."

"I really can't blame him for that. I guess."

"Yes. Nobody could. Except him. On his darkest nights, I assure you, this is what torments him. He tries to be generous and kind and forgiving. Then, through the lens of his madness, in retrospect he sees it all as self-serving."

"He created Excalibur trying to save the world."

"Yes. And all he sees is the damage he has done."

"He wants to destroy it, he says, to save the world."

"Yes."

"That's noble, right? He's gone to all this trouble?"

"Trouble?" She laughed in the face of the young New Yorker in a way that very few people laugh in the face of New Yorkers.

Vivica raised an eyebrow at her.

She said, "A quest begins. A gathering occurs about a hero, grows to be a band. It travels far and faces great travails. While some lose hope or fall behind, distracted by temptations, or seduced by glammers, some will reach the object they all seek. It is only then the hero comes to light, when all that must be done seems bright as sun, as others fall, to blood and bloody glory only one –"

"All right. Knock it off. I'm very impressed with your . . . what is that, Frank? Tetrameter?"

"That was a fucking Elizabethan off-the-cuff unrhymed Pentameter, King Shorts."

"Thank ye, Sir Frankie. You're telling me that all this time you've been a damned literary genius?"

Frankie said, "Yeah. I may have been playing stupider than I really am. The old guy may have helped me out there."

"If this is how you two juvenile mortals are going to spend your precious time in the presence of a Faerie Queen, I'm going to walk regally across the beach back toward Merlyn and you two will walk ten paces behind me so that I have an opportunity to speak to him for a moment out of earshot and because it is good and right that you do so. Understood?"

"Don't play all hurt and sulky, your Ma'amnesty. You *just* told me that you like Merlyn 'cause he's not impressed by your title. Which is cool to know for a couple of different reasons. And also, I think I'm the High King."

"Not over Faerie."

"Fair enough."

"Faerie nuff," Frankie said. Then he said, "Anything?"

Nimue said, "Young Knight. Guard up."

Vivica said, "We're—what?—forty feet away from the guy. What do you think is going to happen between here and there?"

Nimue sighed heavily. She shook her head as though she knew something sad and secret. She said, "I am not always certain how far ahead the obvious future is possible for mortals to see. Do you understand?"

"No."

“Unless I am deliberately causing something to happen, I cannot give away what seems so clear to me, and I am fond of you. And of Merlyn’s schemes. And of this one in particular. But I cannot tell you futures. Once, I let him see things I thought were obvious in his future. I thought the through line so clear that when he saw the bits I could show him, he would understand what needed doing. I meant to bolster him when he needed it. It was a great error on my part. I’m quite certain I hurt him in that moment. Perhaps damaged him. I might have forever broken a great mind. I will not risk that again.”

Then she turned and walked elegantly up the beach. Vivica put her arm around Frank. She said, “I feel as though we should let her get ten paces ahead before we start walking.”

Frank said, “Right? Not everything has to be a power struggle.”

Once Nimue was far enough up the beach, they followed along behind her.

Frank said, “Okay, you know that thing where I can tell when people are lying and shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there’s some powerful shit coming out of that lake of hers, and I’m turned up like five notches. Once she saw that I could see what she was thinking by looking at her, she started feeding me info. Check it out. There were these two trees, huge trees at the center of a glade.”

“Like – a clearing?”

“Yeah. . . but no. Okay. You know how sometimes on PBS on Sunday the guy says, ‘this Garden in Norway has been tended by five generations of The Morsons of Norvellenhelmerstadt?’”

"What?"

"Like a . . . tree museum. That's not right. They just lived in the woods, some of them."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry. There's way too much information. It feels like I'm yelling at you through the wrong end of a telescope."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. So. The Tree of Life."

"Seed in the scabbard."

"Yes."

"I listen."

"You do."

"Tree of Life."

"When did I say I love you?"

"You said I am the woman you love. It was why you wouldn't let me walk away alone with someone who imprisoned Merlyn."

"I didn't say that."

"You very did."

"Well, that was urgent."

"Yes."

He held her against his side, loving that he had said that aloud, loving that she had heard it. He said, "Well, it was an excited utterance and that holds up in court. Listen. I want to do a fast download, 'cause I want to trick Merlyn into spilling a little more information."

"Okay."

"Her focus isn't really on the sword at all. The Tree of Life and The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

"From the Bible."

"Yes. But from before the Bible."

"What?"

"I don't know how long ago this was, but it was people, alive and doing stuff, right? Before bronze, maybe? But there was a world, people and a life but nothing that would hurt the woods, nothing to last. And in the middle of this huge forest of perfect trees, our people and her people took care of these two giant, beautiful trees Life and The Knowledge. Right? So old their roots ran into Faerie, so fucking pre-platonically ideal that the health of their fruit affects the health of the fruit everywhere. I saw them for a second and I wanted to spend eternity there, so she let me! She just took me through time so I could feel the love that can build between a people and a couple of Trees, how important they had been for how long. These things connected the world of magic to the world of man. Right? One of 'em is dead, and I think the other one is close to dying. Merlyn wants to heal his spirit. I get that. Nimue thinks we can heal the world."

"Isn't that what Merlyn wants?"

"He wants to save the world. Which would be fine were it not Glory-driven. I think. I don't understand all the rules. But as I learn them it feels like I must follow them. It's strange."

"You think we may need to betray him."

“He has information that may be important to you, and it may feel to him like betrayal. I don't know. You are the Hero who bears the sword and my first duty is to put you in the best position to properly complete the arc of the story. Also, he needs to tell me. I think I can ask him about it, make eye contact and let him know that he can get this information out, that he doesn't need to say it aloud. He can just give it to me by thinking it through. I can pick through the images as they come. I can do it with the distance of the observer. I can look for the clues in it that make it so important.”

“What the hell, Man? We got the sword for Merlyn. We're going home. Right?”

Frank said, “You know that story where the Hero meets a Wizard who gives her money, takes care of her, flies her to a place where she falls out of the sky is handed the Object of her Quest, finds out her Knight loves her and then she hands the most important artifact in history over to the menfolk to take care of the last, interesting bits?”

Nimue spoke quietly with Merlyn now and they allowed the gap to close as they approached rather than hanging all the way back until she moved on.

Vivica said, “Okay. Real quick. Talk like my Knight again.”

He grinned and said, “I thought, when first I switched to code for ancient Faerie royalty, My Darling Maiden King, that this persona might delight and entertain.”

“Indeed. But I'm no maiden.”

“But made in heaven?”

“No.”

“This is your maiden voyage as King, so—”

“Very no.”

He sighed. "So, my Darling King, am I not to be the first man to whom you will have made love?"

She said, "You want my stock answer?"

Nimue walked away all sexy-like down along the water line.

He muttered, "I think this should only take a couple of seconds. Nimue was spoon feeding me while she did the sword ceremony, but I think I can figure out how to get to the important bits of the story and it's so fast it feels more like download than conversation."

"Could you learn Kung Fu? And a Keanu impression?"

"Maybe. Here we go. Keep an eye on the guys from the Agency. We don't know what they're gonna be doing when they get their act together."

"Shit. I hadn't thought of that."

Frankie reached forward to snap his fingers just as Merlyn turned away from Nimue, still glazed over by the presence of his long-time friend, his not-quite lover as she walked off. The snap seemed bold, but not disrespectful or hostile. It carried simple, emotionless imperative. He needed Merlyn's full attention. "Hey! Wizard. Look at me right now. Quick question. What happened at the War of the Trees?"

Merlyn turned toward him, concern twitching across his brow. He paused, considering.

Vivica heard the distant murmur of trained soldiers realizing that once again they had been distracted from their simple job, staying alert, following the orders of their superiors. She looked out at the groupings around the camp and could see the chi more accurately, more clearly, than she ever had before. The half-perceived awareness became a whole new

segment of visible spectrum. She wondered if holding the sword had sharpened this sense of the energy moving through and around people.

Frankie abruptly said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know you hadn't agreed—"

Merlyn said, "I had! I pulled away. Not your fault. You need this. Fast. I'll try to get it to you in flashes but fast! Come on!"

Then she heard the first few solid clicks of magazines snapping into rifles from the distance in the woods. She held the sheathed sword in her hand, the loose straps that could secure the blade trapped under her grip so they wouldn't dangle.

Merlyn's hand rested on Frank's shoulder, but she could not tell which of them it was to steady. It might simply have been an indication of trust or a need for reassurance.

She looked out toward the woods, knowing she was the only protection Merlyn and Frank had until they finished whatever the hell that little communion was about. The sound of a first round spring-released into a chamber came soft but clear behind her. She spun.

Percy stood right behind her and to her left with an automatic weapon that looked heavy and dark and mechanical and mean. He said cheerfully, "Look what I stole from one of the guys I used to hang out with!"

She said, "Nice! I wasn't sure you were on our side." Relief flooded through her at the idea of back-up.

Percy said, "I wasn't either. But when Carmine authorized live ammo knowing you were pretty much unarmed—"

Then a red mist exploded forward from a single point in the center of his right shoulder. He lurched forward and dropped his gun.



Vivica smelled iron sudden on the air as the man she had known for a day or so stumbled toward her, staring at the wound.

He said, "Hey! I think someone shot me and also that I may be passing out because the world is narrow." Then he lay down gracelessly.

Turning to follow the direction of the shot, she saw Carmine coming toward her, seething, handgun held downward at his side. A trail of smoke rose from the barrel. He had taken out the threat, he figured. Now it was just the unarmed civilians. She saw all of that in the swagger of his hips, the relaxed approach belied by the facial tensions that could tell Frank his life story.

The man said, "I'm taking that sword with me."

She said, "You very much are not."

He moved fast across the expanse. A big rock stood between them, but he didn't seem to notice it, he was so focused on the sword. He was most certainly going to trip over the rock, and she had no intention of warning him. She imagined rushing him as he stumbled. She also imagined pointing and laughing.

The sword cried out to her to draw it. She knew that this was battle. He had the gun. He had already shot her companion. She blocked the thought of Percy from her mind. She didn't have time to sort that through right now. Draw the sword and she could not be defeated in battle. She was within her rights, she thought.

Just a few more steps. Just let him stumble over the rock and she would move at him. She might have enough time to bonk him with the sheathed weapon and then see where that left her.

Nimue had said not to draw the sword. Frank said the mission was bigger than what Merlyn thought it was, even. Also, Nimue feared she had broken Merlyn's mind. Once she bought into Merlyn's claims of ancient wizardry she had let go of her suspicions of madness. What if *both* were true?

She was not going to draw the sword. Unless it was necessary. Or her intuition told her it was important that she do so. So that was a clear decision right there. She snorted in amusement at her own line of thinking. She would just leave that up to her, then.

Two more steps toward her and he was on track to trip inelegantly. She had been so preoccupied that she only noticed now the twitch of intention moving through his arm. She saw the gun coming up to point directly at her face. She saw the depth of the barrel and for a moment she saw nothing else, as tunnel vision narrowed to a singular certainty. She was about to die.

The rock sprung from the ground. Unfolding his legs, Smedley Reuben Achnid III, First Pet to Her Highness the High King of Fucking Everything Except, Maybe, Faerie planted himself across the span between the man's chest and his gun hand, pushing it off line.

Carmine screamed things, none of them fully coherent, as Smedley sank his pincers into the flesh of the man's gun hand. Carmine pulled away from the giant spider firing his gun, but Smedley had the meat between thumb and his forefinger clamped tight in his jaws and his aim was off by more than ninety degrees.

Agency goons shouted protests as his stray shots stitched through the woods around them.

Carmine dropped the gun. Trying to shake the creature from his hand, he backed toward the woods. Most of what he shouted came as an incomprehensible rush of vowels, but as Smedley let go his hand and moved toward his face, Vivica heard the brave soldier shout "Fucking shoot it!" which would have been the worst possible thing for him at that time.

She shouted, "Good boy, Smedley! Let him go! Manners, buddy!"

The Spider jumped down. As he ran across the open space toward her, she distinctly heard one of the camouflaged morons hiss to another in what seemed an intentional stage whisper, "Oh, shit. She's a witch, too."

Smedley ran up her leg, circled to her back then perched, spanning her shoulder and her head to squat, surveying the field.

She said, "That was awesome, Smedley. Now, listen, I may need some more help, 'cause I think things might be about to get deeply, deeply hairy."

Her only helpful ally clicked happily and then skittered off toward the tree line leaving her alone with the sword she did not want to draw. She said, "Okay! Good huddle."

All around her, automatic weapons released spring loaded munitions into the firing chambers of mass-manufactured, predictable, reliable weapons of war. The sounds came from three squads of professional warriors hidden in groups around a wide lakefront. The sounds came almost simultaneously. They had their radios up. According to Percy, the order was to use live and lethal rounds.

## TWENTY FOUR



Frank found himself lost for a moment or nine, just watching Nimue walk toward the lake. Then he saw that Merlyn was about to speak. The very nature of his inbreath as he turned to face Vivica promised pronouncement and instruction. It was a perfect time to grab his attention, in the moment of transition from farewells to mansplanation. This was a tiny transition time.

Frankie, following Merlyn's instruction to assume constant expansion of abilities and the abandonment of any pretense of stupidity, noticed that dawn's glow had taken over the

East, that Nimue had timed her departure to the rising day. He noticed that he knew that moments of transition were key.

Dawns, dusks, shifts of attention from one thing to another, doorways, the places where neighborhoods meet, seashores. Lakefronts. Metaphor and legend rolled together in his mind as he made connections he might never have made before.

He unselfconsciously, indeed, unconsciously altogether, syphoned magic from the lake. He felt the influx of energy. He wondered if this feeling came from being near to the sword or perhaps from stepping into a new persona as a Knight of Faerie. His mind processed the world at an impossible speed, and he understood Merlyn's 'tiers of thought' stuff as clearly as he understood now why old rules of luck revolve around the front door of a home and why Solstices and Equinoxes meant something to the people who first figured them out.

He snapped his fingers casually beside Merlyn's left ear and said into his right, "Hey! Wizard. Look at me right now. Quick question. What happened at the War of the Trees?"

Merlyn turned toward him, and their eyes met in the moment that the question registered. He got flashes in the less than no time it took Merlyn to cover his thoughts. They were not the flashes he expected.

He did not see flame and weeping. He saw that forest again, but he saw it from within, the trees about creating a perfect, canopy. Sunlight came through in occasional pin lights, but the green above illuminated the world like a translucent diffuser. Smells of underbrush hit him and a profound sense of pain, grief.

He searched in the moment for what was so important here, why this brought such emotional resonance.

He turned to his left and saw a doorway with a sign above it that said "ENTER" in big glowing green letters. He moved toward it and it remained always just out of reach. He feared Merlyn toyed with him, but he could feel only resounding anguish in the image of the forest around him. He had no sense that this was a deliberate tease. He slowed his breath, set aside his paranoia, and tried to speak with his dream voice into the forest of Merlyn's memory. "It's okay, man. I'm Knight to High King Vivica. I can protect you as we do this. Yes?"

Frankie suddenly knew that Merlyn heard him. Or at least seemed to understand what he was about. The door opened and he gasped at the panorama about him as he stepped through. A chaos of pain and sorrow stretched in all directions. He made himself look, bear witness to as much of what the ancient Wizard showed him as he could. The Wizard had borne this for centuries, suffered it like a stone in his shoe if the stone were the size of a loved one lost. Or a civilization fallen and forgotten. In the imagery around him he found both. As he glanced on flashes of bodies burning, or bleeding, screaming or unmoving, every one of them brought a flash of memory, the sounds that made each name, long unspoken, listed at him too fast to keep track of. He tried to order the images. He could not absorb the data all at once. Oh.

He shouted, "I need them one at a time. I want them all, but I need them to be in order." He did not know if his voice could be heard by Merlyn, or his intent, but it was beginning to feel very much as though he and the old man whose eyes he held were sympatico in what was going on. Sort of.

If the young Knight was brutally honest with himself, and he tried to be brutally honest with himself, he had emphasized his need for this information thinking it more likely to open the man's defenses. An outright admission that he wanted the information, and that he believed the old man needed to share it would have been too complex to land with any impact.

Merlyn, young sat on a boulder, waking, stood, walked away. Stumbled. Hungry. Towns died of plague and pox, of poverty and despair. Other towns held on to hope, barely towns, long treks between. He felt the world around him pale, as though his eyes had lost their love of color.

He gathered tales of Arthur for a time, some hundreds of years gone and time between confused by his imprisonment. The tales he learned he told in pubs and sang in ale houses for coin. He rewrote them to better fit the stories he remembered. He saved his proceeds in a small, gold-embroidered purse hung on his belt. He plied his wares as a storyteller, a bard, all the while seeking the magic that had been lost to the world, the magic that had been lost to him.

He saw two dozen towns in the first year, twice as many the next. A day or two between, with pubs and inns at night. The world had changed since his youth. Now people put up shack and shake-roof hovel groupings. They slept on tamped dirt and thought themselves very modern. They all looked the same, these dead-wood and dry-rot villages. Merlyn tried not to complain about it unless he could make it funny in a story.

Another purse, less showy in its presence, black and unobtrusive, hung untouched, awaiting its delivery to the man for whom he made the thing. He never put coins into it. He

occasionally pulled some from it if the occasion warranted. He carried it as a memento, a sentimental reminder of a man he refused to admit he believed to be dead. Mild guilt circled around it, each time he pulled coins from it for casual use. He put in a drawer somewhere. He had gone to get it, then retrieved it and now he put it in... a drawer with batteries in it in a mid-century modern kitchen. The batteries were leaking. He slammed the purse into the drawer and it seemed as though this was expected to explain a great deal to Frankie, but it only confused him.

He didn't have the purse with him, though. Merlyn didn't have the purse with him when... he was in this medieval dirt town and something happened with some birds that were weirdly close to his face. Somehow, who their parents were seemed important. Then he was on the road to meet a guy.

The image of that man came through clear as any video transmission, dashing, with a beard so curated one had to wonder how it was accomplished in a—Frankie suddenly had a quick tutorial in facial hair management in druid times before he realized how easily he could leaf through Merlyn's mind. He put himself back into what seemed to be a story he could follow. The ravens led him toward a meeting with that well-shaved man. Gwydion! He was alive! He loved that guy. He could not wait to see him and yet, he had left the purse he'd made for him behind today.

In the distant past, Frankie rode piggyback in the memory of Merlyn, younger on his walk toward a place he had loved when he first visited it, to see a man he had missed and loved, and whom he had believed dead.



At the same time, Merlyn, through whom he remembered this joyous journey, knew what was to come. He did not want to see it again. He did not want to go near it again. He did not want to revisit the memory of this moment, this walk. This was the world before he knew what he had done. These were the moments before the end of the world he knew. He did not want to see his home ravaged again.

Frank stopped reaching for information. He let Merlyn move at his own pace, forward along the path toward Gwydion. Near evening, he saw lines of great trees in the distance. Off to the left he heard shuffling sounds of soldiers trying to be quiet. For a moment he was distracted, wondering if he heard the Agency Goons and incorporated that sound into the vision. Or if Merlyn did.

Then he was among the beautiful trees, instead of approaching them. The moment he came to be beneath this newer, darker canopy of green at the outskirts of Forest Arden, the big door that had welcomed him earlier reappeared and then slammed shut on him.

He immediately turned his eyes away from Merlyn's. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know you hadn't agreed—"

Merlyn said, "I had! You need this. Fast. I'll try to get it to you in flashes but fast! Come on!"



Merlyn grasped his shoulder in one hand, pulled in serious magical mojo, synchronized his breath to Frank's. Frank had less than a frame of film's time to think about how powerfully that gesture had affected him and then the lost wonder of the Forest Arden, shared home of the Greenfolk and the Druid and the Faerie engulfed him once again and he and Merlyn sat together in this space. When he spoke, he found he asked several questions at once, *We're both here? How am I doing this? Are you doing this? Are you okay doing this? When did I learn to do this?*

When Merlyn responded it came in a similar barrage of too many thoughts. *FIRST: We are.*

*We cooperate. You have much to learn. I am Okay.* then, also in a separate blast of ideas: *Don't converse. I lead. You follow. Watch with me or through me. Also, through her.*

For a deeply confusing moment, Frank slipped out of body within his mind and observed from above a wide-angle view of the forest below. He circled dizzily above the canopy and realized he could shift to the raven's perspective. With a thought, he was below

the canopy again beside Merlyn in the beauty of a memory that he knew he would see destroyed.

In the dream state of memory, they walked side by side.

Merlyn had encountered no remnant of the Raven clans since escaping the cave. Now these two huge crows brought Gwydion's call and Merlyn, young, though seemingly not all that much more youthful, traveled the miles to see his friend.

*Yes, Merlyn let him know. He had heard soldiers sneaking clumsily outside the Forest. Roman. Under a commander who believed the word of God had been spoken to him directly by a member of the increasingly powerful clergy.*

Through Merlyn's heart, Frank felt ancient sorrow knowing that even this villain of his early youth believed he did what was right. He acted without conscience because he believed what he did was right.

That idea circled alone in Frank's mind for a moment and then he had a distinct sense of, *stop distracting me.*

From the crow's eye view, Frank saw the Roman soldiers, all geared up in groups, sneaking toward the Alders, whispering to one another.

Then he was back in the forest watching as Merlyn found Gwydion. They hugged. Merlyn took him in his arms, and in his nostrils. The solid, earthy hug made Merlyn tear up, seeing his old friend. Then he had believed him to be dead. Now he knew him to be dead. He let that all sink in with the sheer pleasure of that hug. Seeing it from the outside, Frank longed to join in, but he knew this part was not for him to do. This was for him to see.

Young Merlyn said, "Gwydion, you're alive and I'm overjoyed. But right now, there are soldiers gathering up outside the Forest and it doesn't look like anyone is there to meet them."

Gwydion said, "We are here to meet them. All of us."

A susurrus from all around suggested hidden figures, reassuring him from the open, green-dappled woods.

They wanted to ask one another how they had survived the centuries. They longed to catch up and trade tales. The urgency of the moment prevented it. Still, Merlyn blurted out, "I made you a gift, but I don't have it with me."

"Save it for another time, and whatever it is, I hope you use it yourself in the meanwhile."

"I've been trying not to."

"What's the point in that? Always use all your gifts, Merlyn. Surely, I've said it before." He stood up and shook out of the long, black coat he wore. He said, "I've been using the thing I made for you since I found out you were stuck in a mountain. Here. I'm giving you a coat. It's special. If you don't pick at it, it will last a lifetime." He tossed it to Merlyn who caught it, shocked at how light it was. Then he saw the weavings.

"Armor?"

"Among other things. Explore it for functional threads. It does all sorts of things once you figure out how to wear it."

"Wow. It's beautiful."

“Right? I do good work. Now, listen. Near as we can tell they’ve got about two thirds of a legion left.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“We have twelve spell-casters, two spear-tribes, a few angry villagers who see their way of life changing or who just don’t like the Romans. We have pointy sticks. They have fewer than a hundred ruthless pricks with metal swords that are really hard to break, some guys who picked up long-bow near the Fenwig somewhere, and they’re hard as boar to kill. Really good armor we haven’t figured out how to get past yet.”

“Okay, but we’ve got Druids and plenty of Magic to work with, right?”

“Merlyn, think about what you can do with the ambient flow around you. We’re trying to keep them away from the heart of the land, where it’s stronger, but we hope not to decamp and retreat that far. Powers help us all if they get so close to Ogg and MaGog that we have ample magic to play with.”

“Yeah,” Merlyn said. He found himself relieved to know the dearth of magic affected others, not just him. “What’s going on with that?”

Gwydion said, “Nobody knows for sure.” Then something passed over his face that Merlyn had not clocked when it happened in this moment long ago. He saw it in the turn of Gwydion’s eyebrows. Perhaps he only saw it because Frankie saw it. Gwydion already knew the thing that Merlyn would take another several centuries to figure out. He said the rest of the sentence Merlyn *had* remembered. “Some have guesses but I try to silence them when they insist on wriggling toward the truth.” Merlyn had no idea then what that had been about. *Why would Gwydion of all people have suppressed the truth? Or was he saying that he had*

*guesses but repressed them for fear that they were true? What were his guesses?* Merlyn, in his youth couldn't understand the secrecy, the sense that Gwydion was deliberately cryptic. Now he felt quite certain that Gwydion knew how badly Merlyn had screwed up and was telling him that he'd been covering for him when his name emerged as the one who had cursed the land with his pagan spells and his satanic corruption of the Great King who was expected to be the bridge to a Christian Nation.

Half the time when Merlyn retold the stories he had learned about Arthur's time, he did it with an eye toward rehabilitating the image of the man he had been. Now, understanding what his teacher had been telling him all those years ago, he knew that he was not the only one doing damage control on his legend.

As he once again shrugged into that coat for the first time, he remembered the leather smell and Gwydion musk. Gwydion said, "I might have bled on it a little."

Merlyn saw that one of his teacher's tunic sleeves was soaked in blood and a nasty wound yawned at his shoulder. Young Merlyn moved to him, held the wound closed with trembling fingers and worked a spell, pulling every bit of energy from the forest around them. It had been so powerful, this forest. Radiating outward from the center, amplifying the central force of the two great elder trees of the Glade's mythos. Now, within the forest itself he pulled together the barest trickle from the world around him, had to build a deep focus trance to generate what little more he could and was able to close the wound, to return some mobility to Gwydion's arm.

While he did that, Gwydion, through clenched teeth, said, "He has one goal and one goal only."

"Kill anyone who doesn't agree with him?"

"Nah. That's easy to fight. He wants to cut down the tree."

"Which one?"

"Knowledge of Good and Evil."

"Well, that's just stupid."

"Their controlling religious body says it is the beginning of man's troubles, the first sin."

"Are they idiots?"

"Many of them, yes. Why?"

Merlyn blinked at him. He said, "What kind of belief system would set out to destroy itself?"

"It isn't the belief system. It's the power structure, Merlyn. They want to control knowledge itself, the freedom to trust intuition and conscience. They put it in a sacred text that they won't teach anyone to read: Eating from the Tree of Knowledge is the Original Sin. Now everyone must go to the Priests for this knowledge. The Priests know everybody's business and keep everyone living in a state of shame over their circumstance. People believe themselves doomed to poverty and isolated struggle due to some flaw in their relationship with a god they can't talk to. Feeling the perpetual prick of the unacknowledged conscience, they fear some eternal afterlife punishment. They seek absolution from their priests because they cannot understand their inner pain and are rewarded with meaningless acts of prescribed ritual. It's repugnant. You can't talk to them. About anything. They bring

it back around to this bizarre set of very restrictive beliefs that make no sense and that they will not have challenged.”

“So, they want to kill the Tree?”

“Yes.”

“And we are going to stop them.”

“Yes.”

“With twelve underpowered Druids.”

“And pointy sticks.”

“Great!”

“We have held them off through seven sorties. They come at the darkest time of the night and think themselves stealthy. We pick them off from the shadows. We harry them. The trees fight on our side. We have tended them and guarded them, protected them for generations and now they return the favor.”

“Okay.”

“Merlyn, this is the moment we have trained for our whole lives. This is when we stand, victorious heroes preventing the end of the world.”

“Fun!”

“Given that we are members of the generation that stands at the breach, protecting the best of the world from being overrun by the worst of the world, I want you to know, I am tremendously proud of you. What you tried to do with Arthur took vision and courage and tremendous effort. I cannot know how any of us will be remembered. But if I am remembered at all, I hope that you, of all my students and friends, is mentioned, if nowhere



else, in the end rhymes where they stick the less important expository bits about tertiary characters, camp followers, hangers on and so forth.”

“Very nice. If they’re not going to attack until the darkest part of night, why’re you out here hiding on a slope bleeding in the afternoon?”

“It was my turn to stay on watch through daylight. We’re all tired. I wasn’t going to claim Taliesin’s privilege and sleep off a flesh wound when I was needed.”

“Of course. Look, I’ll keep watch. You run back to the Trees and get that taken care of.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Merlyn. I’m fine. And I’m thrilled that you’re—” Then he staggered back a step, a bit confused, sat down heavily on his ass and was asleep in the perfect position to tip over sideways, his head resting on a moss-covered mound. Merlyn launched forward worried for his friend’s health, concerned that he might suffer other wounds he had concealed. He might have been bleeding out while they spoke.

Nimue laughed her sexiest laugh in the wood long ago and Merlyn spun around, startled. He yelped like a startled fox and then saw who it was. His mind overloaded with things he wanted to say, back then. Recriminations and questions. Mostly, though, he felt relief to see someone he had known long ago, to find her again in his sphere of awareness, to know that his life had through line he might cling to. He needed every small proof that even when he could not see it, he walked a path. She said, “Merlyn! You came!”

“Gwydion sent for me.”

“I called.”

“What?”

“I called your name three times. I called.”

"I'm not Faerie, kid. That doesn't work on me."

"I'm older than you," the Millenia-old Faerie told the centuries-old Druid long ago as Frank watched now. He almost got distracted by the layers of time and slipped into Merlyn's own intellectual rabbit hole of temporal inquiry. Merlyn put his arm around Frankie, and they stood to the side observing impassively as Merlyn made clear through his avuncular positioning that they would work together to stay focused. *He too sought distractions.* Time passed out there in the world, however slowly, and he could not allow himself to stall. He let the story play.

Nimue went on, "Besides, I said your name three times and here you are, so I would say it very much does work on you."

Young Merlyn sighed a sigh that Frankie already found familiar from his time with Old Merlyn.

Nimue said, "You're here to save us all!"

"What?"

"You forged the sword that sought to unify a land."

"Yes."

"You tamed dragons."

"I conversed with Dragons, and they agreed to help me."

"You are Merlyn the Magician, and you are the Hero of Your Own Story."

"Everyone is the Hero of their *own* story."

"No. The people out there across the country, all living in identical towns trying to do the things the Church says they should do or their Landlord says they should do or their

Baron or their King? Do you know they're burning women who collect herbs to help people? How insane do you have to be—I mean, how ugly has the world gotten when people will literally vilify and punish those who are just trying to get medicine to them?"

"Wait, what's happening, now?"

"They're burning women at the stake for witchcraft."

Merlyn found himself conflicted. "You know, Druids used to burn people in baskets as sacrifice for—"

"Yes, Merlyn. Druids have historical flaws. So do you." She held his gaze for a long time, and he wished he could put Frankie in for him now to read her, but that moment had passed, again. Past. "But you're here to fix it because you have returned from death to protect us all from an existential threat."

"I—why would I be able to—I don't—"

She plead with him, terror in her eyes. "I'm not allowed to tell you what you need to do."

He said, "I don't understand. How?"

"Just be the hero who recognizes his error. I know you can be that. When the world is at stake and the hero realizes his mistake and knows the steps he has to take, the path is clear as any stream. A world reborn in which to dream awaits the one whose deep-flawed scheme unravels at its silk-sewn seam from his own willingness to deem it damned. You understand?"

"No! Stop it with the ambiguous Faerie poetry of inexplicable urgency! It makes me crazy!"

“That is not what it does, Merlyn! It does not make you crazy. It offers hints, it provides guidance. The future you keep moving toward the one that brings the grand reward, you know how meaning follows rhyme. Go back two thoughts to act in time. Please. You’ve eaten of the fruits of both the trees. You know your conscience calls to you. These people would kill the Tree of Conscience.”

“This is the Christians we’re talking about?”

“Yeah. They’re pretty recent. I wasn’t sure you’d—”

“No. They were around before you locked me in the cave. I know about them. That’s the gap I was trying to bridge. With Arthur and Excalibur.”

“The sword you created!” Now, old Merlyn could see that she was excited to bring her younger mortal acquaintance to this word. He saw the back-step rhyme riddle that should have gotten him there earlier. He understood what his younger self, still so proud of his great accomplishment, could not.

“Yes! You came out of the water for me.”

“Yes. The sword.”

“A work of legend and power, a symbol for the ages!”

She said, “Yes.” And Merlyn watching saw the enthusiasm drain from her as the blind, self-satisfied pride emerged from his young self.

Standing beside Frankie, Merlyn rubbed his forehead with his fingertips, remembering this conversation now, as he observed it. The shame, the sheer embarrassment rolled off him so strongly that Frankie put a dream-body arm around the old man to reassure him. He had been young, boasting. He would not figure out until the mid-twentieth century what he had

to do to fix things. She had seen it already, the obvious end of a story suspended. She had assumed it would come that day.

Then Merlyn smelled smoke. The leaves all around made their susurrus again, leaf against leaf, branch against branch. He realized now that the sound was not an army of hidden druids shaking the leaves but the trees themselves communicating.

Gwydion woke with a start, started to sit up and shouted, "Stupid shoulder!" Then he switched sides, rolled to his feet, and said, "What's going on?"

"They're not waiting till night's darkest today, man. The Romans are coming with fire."

"But Merlyn is here to save us!" Nimue enthused.

"I will do my best," Merlyn announced bravely, dipping into his artistry as a bard and a performer to make it stick. "We will work together, and we will save Ogg and MaGog, though. Now, get back to the Glade and slip through to Faerie. On the way, spread word of the danger. They'll be coming fast." He heard distant screams. He was not certain who had issued them nor what language they shouted but he knew they were the screams of the burned and the dying. "Tell them to ready themselves. For the trees will do all they can to save us, and we must do all we can to hold the mortal woods and so, in turn, protect the sacred Trees within."

Then Nimue was gone.

The whiff on the breeze became the smell of a blaze and the world seemed both murkier and brighter than it had been. A wall of smoke glowed red from the inside. Tendrils of flame crawled across the leafy ceiling.

Young Merlyn and Gwydion, his idol and instructor, took slow careful breaths together to steady their focus. Each breath came unnervingly acrid with smoke. They worked together doing the slow forms for the simple generation of energy, the two of them, before the rising monster of smoke and flame. They held fast and pulled what they could from the great, magic-breathing glade far behind them, a bit from the organic elemental chaos of the blaze itself.

Combining those energies with what meager scraps they could pull up through this excruciatingly slow ritual of intention and manifestation, they built a construct, Merlyn and Gwydion. Scrap by steady scrap they wove a barrier across the expanse of trees as the fire came at them.

Merlyn could not see the exact nature of the firetraps Gwydion set. He knew his own to be the simplest he could think of. Pockets of wind-disturbance layered about from tree to tree would stop the momentum of the blaze while using the least magic necessary to achieve the effect.

Having found an efficient technique to build the pressure-traps, Merlyn moved fast building his fire wall. Who could weaponize an unreasoning natural force, but an enemy indoctrinated to distrust their own consciences?

He worked in an increasing internal rage, and he remained focused, breathing steadily, generating, pulling, commanding the energy he needed, only as much as he needed for each small pocket of protection for the Trees, for the Druids, for the people and the birds and the beasts of the forest they had inhabited. Then he moved on to do it again for the next pocket.

Gwydion, panicked, shouted to him from the far end of the air break, "It's too big! We have to run!" But Merlyn could not spare the energy to stop what he was doing and shout back over the rising roar of the blaze so close now that he could see the leading wisps of smoke and ash dissipating as they hit the baffling wall of up and down drafts. It was working.

Except the fire was starting to catch to his right where he hadn't built the spells yet and he couldn't catch up with the movement of the consuming blaze. He looked toward where he had last seen Gwydion and saw only fire that had flanked the wall of magic at the far end.

Fire began to creep insistently along the trunks of the very trees he had anchored his spells to. He ran.

He dodged quickly between the trees even in the strange lighting. He knew the rhythm of these woods. He had spent time here in his youth, a great deal of time.

He heard increasingly prevalent shouts and screams, barely discernable over the great, roaring force chasing him down. He had half wondered as he ran that day whether some of the tiny, distant screams he heard might have been his own.

When he lost control of his breath, his path became confused and he tripped over a root, falling face forward. Whimpering, certain he was going die, Merlyn pulled himself into a weeping fetal position and waited for the fire to take him.

The coat, spelled with love and intent, protected him from the worst of the heat, though he could feel it around him. He pulled his head under the collar and his arms in through the sleeves to turtle up. He brought his legs under him and hugged himself to them. The coat, sensing his intent perhaps, spread and stretched to make an oversized fire blanket with

Merlyn inside. And inside Merlyn his older self, remembering and his older-self's much younger friend, absorbing it all.

Frank felt the heat and knew the fear. Even knowing the outcome, he shared the young wizard's terror that he would die today, huddled under a coat in a blaze of failure and dismay. He felt the old wizard's shame. He saw the slippery secret wish that he had died that day, never knowing that Gwydion had realized the terrible thing he'd done and had not held it against him but had protected him from vilification he probably deserved. Knowing now that Nimue, dear, crazy fucking Nimue who had just helped him again, today, before she walked into her lake, had known then, as her world burned down that it was his fault. She had not despised him for it. *How had she not despised him?* If she had only found a way to tell him earlier what it took him so, so long to figure out.

He hugged his knees to his face, young Merlyn, in his five or six-hundreds, and he cried.

*His motives had been so pure*, he thought now as he shared the space with Frankie and with his weeping younger self. *How could it all have gone so wrong?*

All three of them huddled there in Merlyn's consciousness. In the way that a long period may pass in a dream, Frank knew that hours went by while Merlyn hunkered crying under his coat. He had failed Nimue. He wondered how many had died in the flames. He wondered if any of the People of the Forest had survived. He wondered if a single Dryad had slipped away, if Nimue had managed to get through to her own side before the fire descended upon her. He imagined the Romans, in the name of the Christ, coming toward him even now with spears and short swords, stabbing any who remained. Even after the heat had diminished and the crackle and hush of embers had faded around him, he remained, wholly hunkered,



shocked to still be alive. He did not want to emerge. He did not want to see what was left of the forest he had loved. He hugged his folded legs and told himself it was time. The fire had passed. He had to stand.

Frank remembered that he could get a bird's eye view and reached for that perspective, but the bird could not be found. Having remembered that he owned this dream, though, he pulled away from the Merlyn on the ground. The Merlyn he had brought here came with him.

The black-lump, cloak-covered memory of a broken man arose, collar up on his pristine, black on black embroidered coat. The garment appeared freshly cleaned and pressed. He turned and surveyed a landscape charred to the edge of perception.

When fire rips through underbrush and canopy both, few trunks remain. Those blackened stalks reached skyward with the crumbling futility of winter solstice ice sculptures straining to hold their abstracted shapes into mid-spring. The next good rain would wash down the very last of this once great forest. The bleak world before him had a fragile line of green at the far edge of his perception out near the horizon, but he was almost certain his imagination created a mirage of a living world where none existed. He turned slowly, seeing for the first time just how much sheer territory the forest had covered. It seemed he stood at the center, but he knew that was far from true.

In one direction he saw smoke still rising. In his impossibly clean coat, he began to run toward the danger.

Frankie and Merlyn moved with him as the distant flicker and smoke resolved into plume and flame. If it still burned, the Old Ones might still be alive. The People might be

gone, the Elves and the Greenmen and the local Faerie who could not escape. But those two Trees, if they lived, were his last hope for redemption.

Undernourished, finding less oxygen available than he expected, he quickly slowed. He trudged as through snow or sand. Every step required an unlikely amount of energy. The crunching squeak of compressing charcoal accompanied each one. He spotted the flash of clean white against the black. As he collected the charmed shawl of the Taliesin, he knew the blackened bits that fell away were not the scorched branches of trees, but the bones of Gwydion, the former Taliesin. He hung the strip of enchanted cloth around his neck and promised to speak Gwydion's memory properly later. As he began to stand, he saw a small, delicate skeleton nearby. He found it to be a Faerie corpse, the bones textured with grooves and ruts. He imagined it to be Nimue and he wept, again making promises, as he stood to continue the long trudge.

At times he cried. Other times he crunched along making no other sound but the soft rhythm of his breathing.

The distant fire seemed to grow no closer.

In his younger mind, Merlyn remembered how long it had taken him to travel the forest to reach the glade even before the extended Alder ranks had filled out.

He thought of the hundreds, thousands who had lived lifetimes in the wood, never knowing the pattern or the paths, never finding the two Ancient Ones at the center. Some sought earnestly but could not see their way to it. Others wandered the wood feigning a quest for knowledge while playing out a pantomime of disbelief proven accurate.

While the razing of the forest gave him a more direct route to its burning heart, seeing the distance he must travel made it a more onerous, intimidating task. Without the comfort of the trees about him, reducing the scope of his vision, he felt tiny, inconsequential, a man at sea on a New Moon night when the stars teach the laws of great distance.

Near sunset he began to tread upon smoldering grounds. The smoke smell rolled up at him constantly. The warmth coming from beneath him in the softening light of dusk disoriented him. A campfire warms from one direction, the sun from above. To have it all around, coming from underneath felt sickeningly unnatural.

Frankie felt it too. The illusory heatwaves rose before them, making the fire ahead and the smoky sky all take on an uncertain, watercolor appearance. Frank thought of the lakes of fire his Nana had told him not to worry about after church. She said, "God didn't make nobody so bad he'd have to make a place like that to punish them. Just some people like to have something real scary to keep their kids in line. They don't know how to teach the kids right from wrong on their own."

Merlyn stopped Frankie suddenly from following his younger self. In clear, unlayered sentences he thought directly to Frankie, "That's the thing you need to know. There it is. It's good. We can probably get back to the world now."

Frankie could not remember what thought the Wizard might have picked up that he felt was good enough. He tried to rerun his most recent observations the way Vivica could a conversation. He had no idea what had just changed. Within the dreamworld he looked into the eyes of his new friend and companion and within the dreamworld he laughed, seeing how desperately Merlyn wanted to avoid this next part. He did not try to make specific

words for Merlyn to parse through. He turned and sped to catch up with the tale knowing Merlyn would join him or kick him back out unceremoniously.

This memory burned like an infection on Merlyn's soul. It might be painful, but Frank was a Knight and Merlyn needed the thing lanced.

Indeed, within moments Merlyn was beside him again and taking charge. The determination bleeding off his mind into Frankie's implied the tremendous effort it took for him simply to keep moving forward. Merlyn, the Magician of legend, the one from the books, did not back down once he saw what must happen. He moved them across the dead Earth to the outskirts of the Roman Camp.

Wagons wet the ground ahead using a multi-channeled trough to distribute water from a carriage-top cistern. They had delivered a small camp of canvas campaign tents. Soot stained, the tents blended grey into the grey of the world in the growing dark. He might have stumbled unknowing into the camp were it not for the bright flames that burned beyond, turning the roman constructs to stark silhouette against a bright backdrop in motion. Unnatural right angles felt an egregious transgression against everything organic.

He skirted the edge of the camp, thinking to avoid notice but quite abruptly relief flooded him. He could see the Romans, up ahead at the fire's edge, creeping forward over the ground. Then the fire parted before them. Perceived through the ever-nightening twilight under smoke dark skies, through tear-shot, spark-stung, blood-traced eyes, through despair and delusion, he saw this as a powerful fire-elemental who had stepped through from beyond the veil to save the Trees. Or perhaps one of the Great Sacred Trees had embraced consciousness and acted. He was certain the fire parted, though, and for three, or perhaps

five blessed seconds, he knew that everything would be taken care of. The Romans would be kept from the Trees that fed magic to two worlds. Too many people depended on them.

Someone was stepping up, quelling the flames.

Then he saw that the parting of the flames occurred because they had reached the edge of the glade. They had consumed half the Forest Arden, twig, bough, and trunk, behind him, around him. Now the flame had reached the heart of the world.

Romans, in their leather armor and their freakishly neat rows marched forward in slow formation. Ahead of the army, wagons crawled, cooling the ground to keep the wooden wheels from burning, making their passage possible across the smoldering land.

He ran now, against the ruined earth that could no longer support him properly. No powerful ally had quelled flames, coming to the rescue. Nobody opposed the Roman army as it moved into the holiest of places.

They believed the Tree of the Knowledge and Good and Evil to be the source of all sin.

They had come to destroy it and they had willfully razed the great garden to get to it.

His boots crunched and then he was upon them, racing past the slow stepping ranks. For a bit he thought he could get to the widening span that opened onto the innermost clearing where the Trees stood, peaceful in the moonlit night, now. *How long had he lay immobilized in fear and shame and failure? How long had he run to catch up? When had the sun set?*

In his black, charmed coat in the black, charred world, Merlyn went unseen. He was not fast enough. When he reached the glade, the Romans had already come into the clearing.

The distance between Forest and Sacred Trees made a good firebreak. No drifting ember had reached the leaves of Life and Knowledge. Once the wagon had cleared the long, slow

hike to the clearing, the men moved in swift formation and then in casual disarray. A dozen of the soldiers gathered at once around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They doused it in oil and as he watched they used torches to set it ablaze. More swarmed to watch the fire. This blaze rising above them, stained the sky and they cheered in victory. The death of this powerful, ancient tree had been their goal. Their self-certain, pious leader stood apart from the soldiers, enjoying their pleasure.

The trees of Arden at the far side of the clearing had not all gone to blazes. Out of the forest, a trickle of nervous Faerie and Greenmen, some ushering Mortals along with them, made fast dashes from the edge of the woods to the Tree of Life, to climb into the branches and from there, he hoped, through open portals to Faerie. He couldn't be certain of that. He had always imagined that was how the spirit folk came and went through the Trees' branches.

He reached the edge of the clearing, wheezing and gasping. His feet hurt terribly, not only from the distance but from the heat of the coals he had traversed. He saw the forest folk sneaking to the Tree of Life behind the distracted soldiers.

He tried to imagine a way to get to the far side of the burning Tree to put on a distracting show and give more of them a chance to make the dash. Even a brief distraction might let a few more refugees escape. More if after the Romans killed him, they assumed he had come from the unburned forest nearest their target and kept their focus close.

Again, he was too slow in thought, too slow in action.

One of the Romans spotted the fleeing Faerie, now a panicking stream huddling across the lawn from wood to Tree. Behind them the trees had all begun to catch and a new choir of dying wails had begun to emerge from the great conflagration.

Romans descended on the terrified folk who sought only escape from the flame. Young Merlyn watched in fragments of horror as he sprinted toward what had become a one-sided melee. He saw a Greenman, hoist a mortal of the Forest into the Tree. The Merlyns recognized him, knew him by name. One of them watched with concern and hope, the other with longing and resolve and regret. Frank could sense through both versions of Merlyn just how dire things must be for mortals to be guided and helped into Faerie at this stage in history.

A Roman short sword cleaved the legs of the Greenman from under him. The scream he let out in pain and shock as he struggled backward on his elbows before the killing stroke reminded the Merlyns and informed Frank that for all their appearances and behaviors, Greenmen were not human. They were something quite different indeed.

The short sword, still dripping with the viscous blood of the dead Greenman, turned to the mortal, pulled up and away into the tree before he could hack it to death. Merlyn, young and observing more than he was racing to save anyone, thought he glimpsed the hands that helped the human to safety above. He flashed on the pain of having failed Nimue. The speed with which the fire had raced across the canopy all but eliminated the chances that Nimue had made it back to the heart of the forest before the fire overtook her. He found some relief in the belief that she had died in the blaze, that she was not alive and helping others escape what she would have known to be the scope of his failure.

He hated himself for preferring the death of a weird woman he kind of loved sometimes to having her know the extent of his shame. It was a little extra helping of self-loathing he could dollop on top of the grand shit stew he had made of everything.

He had no time for that.

Roman soldiers carved through mortal and Faerie alike, slashing and stabbing like it was a competition to see who could express the least humanity. Some shouted about demon-spawn, others of savages, but it was all the same. It was the same as the battle rage he had seen occasionally in the Norsemen.

These insufferable assholes were doing it in the holiest place he had ever known. They had killed his teacher and his oldest Faerie acquaintance. He was tired and pissed and he had been too slow too many times now to care whether his timing was right, or he had properly planned his next move.

He walked across the soft grass of the unburned clearing, coming up on the Tree of Life casually, obscured by the tree as much as he could be. He remained in strict control of his breathing.

A willowy Faerie fellow watched his beloved daughter beheaded. He ran from her killer into the burning wood, screaming and suffering to his death.

Merlyn had known him. He would deliver any item anywhere one wanted in exchange for a large honey cake or two small honey cakes.

Merlyn strolled toward the legendary Tree of Life as though he was a bark peddler, stopping by to see if the Tree had any interest picking up a new coat to wear for the big Christian Invasion party.



Merlyn winced inwardly beside Frank and the younger man sent him steady waves of calm in return. He allowed Frank to see the truth: He had intended to climb into the tree, hoping to find escape to Faerie. That wee moment of self-revelation, though, was immediately followed with a soft broadcast, direct to Frank, letting him know that he was still there, with him, aware. The thought was, *Oh. But it gets worse.* Even the experienced Sorcerer with his tips for how to function in this space could not help letting tiers of thought slip through and Frankie felt them like the distant echoes of concert stack feedback. . .

*Please don't hate me / I cannot keep letting myself off the hook because I was young / How did I not know I needed to return to this memory? / Got to remember to compliment Frank on his development / Fuck. How long is it taking to get to the point of this journey? We must find what he needs and get back to the world.*

Frank sent back a reassuring and focused. *I'm tracking time. It's been seconds. Stay with me.*

Merlyn, the young one, the one they remembered together in the space of a breath, touched the Tree of Life. For the first time since he had last stood at the Lady's Lake, young Merlyn remembered what the world felt like when he had easy access to the depth of magic in Faerie. He realized that having made the walk with enough Druid nonchalance to slip past a raging army of Christ-crazed Romans, he had just given himself access to the powers that he had wielded so elegantly that he already had his own legend developing long before the rise of Arthur. From here, beside the tree, he could work his will once more.

Watching himself carry out those actions, Merlyn realized that the coat had done the work for him, rendering him nearly unnoticeable to the Romans' eyes. He remembered feeling the rush of contact with the Tree whose roots ran to Faerie.

One of those foolish, delusional men ran gleefully toward the remaining tree with a lit brand from the first.

The man threw the blazing branch up into the tree above him. The leaves took up the flame with shocking speed and Merlyn feared he was too slow again.

He pushed everything else out of his mind and built a significantly larger version of the spell he had constructed a hundred times to build a wall against the flame as he and Gwydion had the night before.

He pushed Gwydion out of his mind. Not forever, he promised himself and Merlyn wondered how many similar silent promises he had made to himself over the years that he had similarly broken. *When had he last thought of Gwydion? When had he ever properly mourned his death?*

Frankie felt the howl of unresolved grief tear through the world as Merlyn beside him truly took in the size of his own personal pain. They stood at the center of his destroyed world.

While Merlyn felt a wave of personal relief at the recognition and expression of the world rocking sadness he felt now at the loss he had witnessed moments ago and had experienced centuries earlier, the big one was still coming. He braced and Frank braced with him, curious, supportive.

Young Merlyn had become facile with the spell, speeding through it with intense focus under the false hope that he could stop a forest fire with forty thousand tiny spells tied together from scraps of ambient energy. Now he was standing at a wellspring. The Tree held an open passage direct to Faerie.

Without thinking about how efficient and lean he had gotten the construct to be, without noticing that he was passing a vibrational flood through and around him from a source that felt like an endless river of generous current and undrainable depth, he built the spell. He took his time, watching with his peripheral vision to make certain that any straggling Forest Folk had made it to the Tree.

He knew what would happen.

Imagine the amount of water it takes to douse miles of fires. Imagine the amount of power and energy that goes into creating a low-pressure zone strong enough to do that without the water. Imagine you stand at the center of that sudden vacuum, and you had not been warned.

Merlyn pulled in a deep breath, held it, and triggered the spell he had just constructed.

The opposite of thunder emptied the world of sound. All the air was pulled from the lungs of the unexpected soldiers. They struggled, panic hitting as they found themselves unable to breathe, unable to hear. They gaped at one another in the silence as they realized they were dying and watching one another die.

It took only a few seconds for the blazing husk of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to go dark, the glowing, lifeless boughs to crumble, fading to the ground. The

burning boughs above him extinguished swiftly as well, leaving much of the tree of Life undamaged. Fire needs more oxygen than men. Fire needs more oxygen than trees.

The vacuum he had created with a gesture stretched as far out as he could imagine the Forest of Arden stretching. In the distance he saw the bright line of flame, low across the night, flicker out. It had the appearance of a thousand tiny candles, and he tried to fathom how far the fire must have gone in the time since he had seen it reach the Glade of the Trees.

He set it aside. It was out now.

The Roman soldiers, each of whom had a name, some of whom had wives and children, all of whom had parents, staggered, holding onto consciousness. With the flame extinguished and the smoke still dense enough to block out the stars, only diffuse moonlight reached the grass patch at the center of a vast arboreal abattoir.

One soldier noticed Merlyn and properly guessed him to be the source of their problem. He moved toward him pleadingly and young Merlyn utilized a technique he had learned long ago and had been warned could be powerful and dangerous. He had been warned there were circumstances under which it was morally objectionable to use this technique and that he must not use it on the untrained without significantly more training. That had been a long time ago when everyone he loved wasn't dead and he wasn't looking at the people who killed them. He pushed a thought into the minds of all who could receive such a signal. He pushed it out with a vindictive sneer. *You want a world with no knowledge of good and evil? You've got it. A world where conscience matters little in the face of rules? This is Faerie Justice, then. You have enraged someone much, much more powerful than you. Today I watch you die because I want to, and I can.*

Frankie watched the vengeance play through. He felt young Merlyn's righteous, lost, decisive rage and heard the thought he broadcast to the men he stood murdering. He felt the agony of Merlyn with him, observing his own crime, revealing his sin. That it had occurred centuries ago mattered not at all, nor that no other witness survived. All the people who might have observed it or figured it out had long since died, rotted, and been consumed. That didn't matter either. The fact of what he had done, stood. Merlyn watched himself as the seconds ticked by, as the minutes ticked by. He held his breath until the last soldier fell. When the very last of the bastards who had burned the world down around him lay still, wholly unmoving, the poet, the bard, the wizard, the sorcerer, the murderer held his breath for an additional twenty-count.

Then he released the spell.

Thousands of cubic hectares of air swept in to fill the vacuum with a clap and roar like thunder's drunken uncle. The landscape, rendered in extensive charcoal, lifted up several inches and then settled back to its customary height as a deep layer of ash responded to the wide, sudden sound. Everything in the world hung as silent as the dead men, already blending into the nightscape.

An occasional distant snap or crunch suggested a settling out of last gravitational matters, not fire. Not fire at all. Then a nearer snap startled young Merlyn and Frank and not old Merlyn.

As young Merlyn spun, seeking the source of the sound, two first tier boughs of the Tree of Life fell away, leaving a scorched scar down one side of her newly exposed, asymmetrically altered trunk. The guilt over that damage rolled into Frank from both

Merlyns. That tree lived, but it was not well, and Merlyn could not be sure anything could survive properly without both trees. The fallen limbs stirred up a small storm of dust that somehow failed to stick to that incredible coat.

When all the ash had settled, Merlyn sat alone at the bleak-on-bleak center of the end of the world, back to trunk of the deeply damaged Tree of Life, awaiting dawn. He thought of drawing magic from Faerie to do something with, but he couldn't think what he might do to make anything better.

To dispel his self-pity, or perhaps to indulge it, young Merlyn began a slow recitation of all those he had lost whom he knew by name. First on the list of course, was Arthur whom he named by all his ranks and titles, Royal and Ceremonial, Christian and Pagan, Mortal and Faerie. That little ritual reminded him every time of just what an extraordinary young man Arthur had been, even before he had the sword. He muttered them as a litany, the dead, giving each as full an accounting as he could. When he spoke the many names of Nimue, she climbed down from within the remaining green of the Tree of Life and watched him, unnoticed.

Merlyn the elder sent an amused thought to Frank. He had not known that he spoke her name three times, calling her from Faerie. He had thought, moments later, when she sat beside him, that she had come on her own to survey the damage and to find him sitting there at the center of it.

She moved to sit beside Merlyn. While he hung his head, kneecaps pressed tight against his face, arms pulling shins inward, straining to shrink himself to a point, Nimue folded her legs, knees pointed outward and observed the stark, simplified beauty of a scorched land.

She said, "I'm so, so sorry, Merlyn."

"Why are you sorry? I'm the one who failed entirely."

"What can I do for you?" Now it was clear that she believed she had been called. Then it had just felt like a cruel jab.

"Nothing. There's nothing to be done."

"I do not believe a Faerie has ever been asked for nothing before by a mortal."

"Yeah, well, I'm Merlyn the Magician, the hero returned to save the day."

"I thought that happened today. I misread the obvious. Or maybe you delayed the inevitable. I don't know. But I am sorry."

Merlyn understood these words now, While he jumped to the idea that their deeds on the shore of Nimue's Lake today would be the time she had seen, he withheld full commitment to that optimism. After seeing today how little he had understood then, he was loath to trust the depth of his own insight.

Merlyn said to Nimue long ago, "I killed a lot of men tonight."

"I know."

"I used power drawn through the Tree of Life to kill a whole lot of men."

"Was that your intent?"

He sat for a long moment then said, "Yes."

She sat for a long moment then said, "You are not Faerie."

"No."

"You've eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge."

"Yes. I pretended that with the Tree gone I could ignore my conscience."

"Can a mortal survive doing that?"

"I don't know."

Concern crossed Nimue's face then. She said, "Well, I have grown fond of you, and I hope you do not die of conscience because I believe you still have work to do. And I am very, very sorry I said that you were the hero back from the dead to save us all."

"That's okay."

"Clearly, this time, you were here to save very few of us indeed."

"Yes."

"And about two thirds of a Tree."

"Great."

"Merlyn, you just stood alone against a Roman Legion to save a few people and two thirds of a Tree. Accept the victory where it lies. Grieve the losses."

Merlyn stared at her, aghast. He said, "The world is burned. The whole of the heart of the world is gone."

Nimue without glamour, seemed young, too. She looked into the moon dark, coal black night and said, "Only this heart, Merlyn. Trees grow elsewhere and other distant tribes of Faerie and Mortal maintain their own treaties. There are other Glades and Groves and Oases and Jungle Clearings. At this time, hope remains in Faerie for this world and for ours."

Merlyn looked to her, confused, and thrilled to learn that hope remained somewhere for something. He said, "I didn't break the whole world?"

Nimue shrugged. "You do have an ego, don't you, Merlyn? No. You only destroyed *your* world." She stood up, spun once to take in the land reshaped and reached upward for a



low-hanging branch. She said, "Of course, one never knows how far a crack will reach if not repaired."

He stood to see her go and said, "I thought you were dead."

Old Merlyn saw her put the pieces together, understanding why he had called her thrice. She said, "You put one of the Faerie in your Litany of Loss."

"I did."

She took him in differently then, with a new kind of respect. Then, before she vanished up into the branches, through a veil and into a whole different world, she said, "Nice coat."

Merlyn took the first step on the long, lonesome walk back to the land of the living.

## TWENTY FIVE



After the bright fire of his memories, the sepia tones of sand-camouflaged soldiers and unkempt British scrub appeared reassuringly drab.

Merlyn turned to take in the scene, to find out how much time had been lost in his much-needed, if ill-timed therapeutic deep-dive into self-loathing. Percy Corvis lay injured but not dying, and Merlyn absorbed that information with the dispassionate intellect of a man who has seen thousands injured, seen more than that dead, and knew, usually, how to triage his tasks. He took it in with the concern appropriate to one who had recently appeared

in his life and whom he knew himself not to have injured, compartmentalizing for later the responsibility that came of drawing the man into his Questing Field, his Party, his redemptive excursion.

Vivica had stepped away from him and Frank and the injured spy. She held a stance he knew to be drawn from the Eastern tradition, balanced on one foot, the other comfortably braced against the inside of her thigh with yogic ease. The sword, held two handed, rose vertically, hilt at shoulder height, still sheathed. Her elbows pointed outward, forearms and right upper arm perfectly horizontal. He wondered at the practice it must have taken just to be able to hold that stance, much less to hold it with such relaxation and comfort that she could clearly move in any direction.

Merlyn moved to join her, but sharp gunfire rang out and a shriek came from the woods. It took several more sprays of automatic weapons fire for him to figure out what was happening.

Smedley, the spider had engaged the enemy and they had no idea how to fight him.

He leapt from tree to tree. His long reaching legs gave him the appearance of great size and he shifted direction and momentum abruptly, utilizing webbing to stop himself mid-jump, and to hang motionless before climbing into obscurity, only to appear again in a new place, terrorizing a new group of soldiers. The men fired in short belches of rounds into the ground, into the sky, not once hitting the elusive and unpredictable target.

The confrontations with the spider moved about the tree line from right to left in a clear sequence, so while the spider seemed to be bouncing about randomly, he did so in one area for a bit then moved on to the next with some intention that Merlyn could not fully fathom.

More than once he heard frightened gunfire resolve into the panicked clicking of an empty chamber, so the spider's efforts were at least helping to waste ammunition.

The spider made a second pass, going the other way. This caused more confusion as the Agency goons now mistakenly believed that more than one giant spider had begun harassing them after their strange day of unexpected naps, a lakeside nightclub performance, a guided meditation, surreal romantic heartbreak and now an ongoing standoff against a young woman with a sheathed stage sword and a fancy crane stance. More gunfire ensued intermittently interrupted by authoritative shouts of "Cease fire! Hold your fire!"

Merlyn believed he could settle everything out with the truth. He had believed it before, and he believed it again. He wanted nobody more to die today. He could pull the magic for amplification spells that would let him speak clearly, loudly, with or without the intimidating reverb and subsonics he generally blended in when he used the Wizard Voice in the olde days.

He preferred to respect Nimue's request. To the best of his ability, with no magical support, he opened his throat, worked the diaphragm, and made his voice loud enough for everyone to hear. He forced himself to smile as he had learned to do during difficult phone calls, as the shape of the smile can be heard in the voice and sets a more productive tone. He said, "Everybody, please be calm. All of you who hide in the woods now, you know that just minutes ago I guided you through a breathing exercise. If we were enemies, I clearly would have taken that opportunity to disarm and slay you all. Please, come on out and let us explain why we are here and why we cannot give you the sword the young lady holds."

Hushed conversations slipped out from the concealment of the woods. Occasional walkie squawks suggested that cross talk had started to take place. Slowly, the men in their battle fatigues and silly helmets stood up. Tentatively they peered out at the small party on the beach. They began to move forward, releasing the tension on their firing pins. Merlyn let out a slow breath of relief.

Vivica dropped into a comfortable back stance, now, the sword, still pointing skyward, still sheathed. She waited a beat, then relaxed significantly, turning the sword to hold it at her waist, one hand wrapped at the center of the scabbard. The weapon remained unstrapped, ready for her easy reach should she need to draw the blade. The bearer of Excalibur stood before the armed forces of a governmental agency, twenty feet away from her nearest ally. She stood ready.

Frankie strode up to stand with her. Merlyn read their lips.

Feeling the amount of magic available to him, he could remember how possible it was, how natural, to believe that the stuff was infinite, undiminshable, unlimited for the use of all. The way mortals used to think of lumber or oil or water or air, he had thought of magic. They could not see, as he could not before he had seen the proof; One man was small in a river, but once the bodies piled deep enough, even Conwy could be dammed. Nimue had asked him not to use her Spring. He would honor that request.

He picked up their conversation without the use of the magic. Vivica said, "You're gonna want to give me some room if I have to draw this thing."

Frank said, "Nimue told you not to draw the thing."

“I really don't want to. I can feel the power in it, Frank. It wants to be drawn. It wants to wait for someone to attack me and then it wants to help me kill them. All of them.”

Then, the foremost of the emerging Agency lads tripped over low strands pulled tight. The transparent filament stuck to their ankles and did not break, stealing their balance and lurching them to the ground. Behind them, soldiers yelled in surprise as they ran into taut nets that shimmered visibly as their body weight disturbed the silken stillness. The vibration faded, turning them invisible again, only showing in tiny ripples around the men as they struggled to move against the adhesive threads.

Several of them around the lake front cursed and struggled, unable to move forward or back, solidly stuck in Smedley's webbing.

Returned to Vivica's shoulder now, Smedley clicked triumphantly. Merlyn realized with the wonder that comes at one's failure to figure a thing out earlier, that this was a direct offspring of Anansi, the African Trickster God, this wonderful, funny, joyous little beast who might just have doomed the world. Also, then, the rest of his siblings, the ones Merlyn had slain probably were too. Having only met the deity once, he did not know what the response might be if he were to learn that. He set aside that problem for another day.

Out of the woods came the clear order. “Reload if you have to. Get one in the chambers. Line 'em up and take these assholes down.”

That was followed almost immediately by a far less clear, far whinier, “Would one of you guys get me down from here?”

Merlyn sighed.

One of the men in the woods shouted, "Hold fire! I have an idea!" He ran toward the webbing where one of his colleagues had stuck, ran up the man's back like Donald O'Connor preparing for a back flip, and launched himself as far upward as he could. He stuck to the web just above the other man. He wriggled a little bit, adhered invisibly six and a half feet off the ground.

Some snickering laughter filtered out from between the trees. Somebody said, "Was that your idea, Laurence?"

"Yes," the humiliated soldier shouted. "Yes. That was my idea."

The commanding voice came again. "Light 'em up! Take 'em down!"

The gunfire began in earnest. The speed of bullets in flight made it difficult to fully understand what happened. The gunfire, aimed at the unmoving bearer of the sword who stood, obdurate before them, missed. She could not be harmed while she had the scabbard. The sword protected her. Some guns jammed. Some soldiers found their fingers slipping off triggers. Most fired as though they'd had their guns replaced with the wonk-sighted air rifles of a carnival booth.

Merlyn spun around, thinking Sofia still just behind him. He turned away from the firefight for a moment, composing himself and informing his coat of his need to be as invisible as possible as he scanned the lake front. Safe for the time being, Sofia crouched behind the moss-covered lump of a fallen tree. It took him a beat to figure out that she was performing first aid on Danny. He guessed that the man had caught a stray bullet and Sofia had realized nobody else was going to help him just now.

He heard Vivica shout, "No!" behind him and he returned focus to the action, trying desperately to figure out how to fix the terrible mess he'd made of this.

He was supposed to have time now to sit with the sword and figure out how to dismantle the construct; surely, he'd left a loose thread that might let him unravel the whole, dense weave.

Or he was supposed to have collected all the information he needed on the journey. Wasn't that how the Questing Field was supposed to work? He had to think, but the machine guns kept barking and now he saw what Vivica was shouting about. As bullets found a narrow path around her, fired from the tree line, a few clever members of the keystone squadrons had found their way parallel to the beach, around Smedley's traps.

Those five, creeping unnoticed toward her flank, had caught the attention of her Knight. Seeing danger coming at his beloved, Frankie grabbed the exposed hilt of the sword, leaving Vivica protected by the scabbard as he moved toward her attackers to defend her.

She chased after him as he ran, hoping the scabbard's protection might extend to him. He was significantly faster than she, though and Merlyn saw the extent to which the boy instinctively pulled energy from the pond—or perhaps the sword did that for him in its lust for battle.

As the forest-sheltered warriors saw what their companions were attempting, they held fire. None of them had realized that continuing to fire at the woman was pointless anyway.

Merlyn saw the tip of the blade drop and then come up as Frank tested its weight and the sword adjusted to his impulses. He twirled the sword one-handed as he ran, feeling out the balance. A bullet tore through his left shoulder. Merlyn saw the spray of blood a fraction of a



second before the sound of the gun reached his ears. He feared it might have been a heart shot. Frankie did not slow.

The young man charged into the gunfire. They moved away from Merlyn up the beach and toward the woods. He had his moment to think and all he could do was feel relief that the angle made it increasingly unlikely that stray fire could hit Sofia. That wasn't helpful. It was selfish and a distraction. He had gotten these two young people into this absurd mess. He had to have some easy way of saving them.

Some easy way other than drawing up magic from the well and laying waste to their attackers.

Or a hard way. Some way.

He began to hum a soothing spell of sleep to lay on the battlefield, but the angry purr of a machine gun broke the sound and his focus.

Two more wounds, both in Frankie's right thigh, poured blood, soaking his pants. Still, he ran toward the men who had threatened his Hero. His gait barely changed. His pace barely slowed. He could not be conquered. The magic of the sword supported and propelled him. While Merlyn stood watching and thought about his girlfriend's safety.

He had tried so hard to do everything right this time.

He had ruined it all again. All of it. Again. He followed a vague plan based on ancient Druid precepts of honor and conscience and duty, of making the best decisions with the information at hand; now a young man, unconquerable, walked into a hail of bullets on behalf of Merlyn's hand-picked Hero. He had a Hero without a sword. He had a girlfriend in

danger. He was so angry that he dared not pull power toward any kind of a battle spell. He refused to give in to the homicidal impulse he knew he had in him. Not again.

The Roman soldiers he killed had believed they were doing what was right for their god. They believed, as all good soldiers do, they served a higher cause, that they were among some elite few who could set aside the rules of society for a greater good. That made perfect sense to people who had been trained from birth to doubt their own consciences.

If the knowledge of good and evil was sin, where were they to turn for guidance in their daily lives?

Some needed structure and order, some just enough money to survive hard times or imbalanced economies and turned to militaries in the old Christian nations. Eventually those militaries stopped disbanding when a war was won.

Those Roman soldiers believed they did right because they had been told they did right by the people who declared themselves the only true arbiters of what was right. Someone in a comfortable room decided something was worth killing for and sent younger men who trusted that it was worth dying for.

These men sniping from the woods were no different. He would not kill them. They acted, all unknowing, under lifetimes of indoctrination, generations of conviction so deep it became genetic memory.

More bullets damaged the young Knight as he turned sideways to put weight behind a swing that took off the leading gunman's hands. Then as the man staggered, Frankie took his head.

Following the momentum started by the sword's arc, the untrained swordsman turned like a receiver dodging a tackle. Slipping from another gunman's sights as he drove Excalibur's point through a second man. Then he froze.

The remaining attackers paused. The big man, drenched in his own blood and that of their teammates snarled, deep in inner battle.

Merlyn had seen the Sword at work. He had been so proud of its skill. He had heard from Arthur of its readiness to take control and seek its targets. He had been so enamored of its power. Now he saw a young man battling with the will of the sword.

Runes of Odin from the North and the mark of Athena held spells that let the sword seek out the berserker rage wherever it lay in the bearer, and flip on the calculating mind of the strategist at the same time. What Arthur had told him privately of the use of Excalibur in battle made it sound like an extended adrenaline rush, focused, strong, so fully engaged that time seemed to slow down. His senses alert, the sword had seemed to guide him through defense and attack so that he need only remained relaxed and responsive, allowing the rage and the strength of his limbs to whirl through enemies, fast, fluid, fearless.

Neither of them had thought at the time of killing in battle as killing unjustly. A king had to lead and if people were to see the benefit of having Arthur to unify the land and bridge the old ways with the new, they first had to know that his will would not be challenged. Or questioned. They had to know that he could dominate any who came against him. Then, Merlyn had believed the Old Peoples of the Forests would not have to slay all the incoming Christians who had virtually no knowledge of the old magics. After unifying the lands of Brittany and Gaul, Arthur could have reached West and South to show the

Christians that under his benign rule, their strange beliefs might come to be tolerated by the regular people and they could all live harmoniously. That had been the plan that had gone so, so badly at the start of it all.

This new terrible plan had a young man of tremendous spirit battling with his own triggered instincts to kill brutally and efficiently as well as the will of the most powerfully tooled magical weapon in the history the world. Frank stood, trembling with rage, tears streaming down his face. He shouted, "Go away! Leave her alone!" and his voice cracked so that he sounded very much like a child protecting a friend on a school yard.

He jerked with the impact of another bullet as the sound of the shot reached Merlyn and the large young man wailed as though his guts were being dragged out of him. He raised the sword and raced forward on leaking legs.

Vivica just behind him, almost caught up, watched in scabbard-safe horror. Set to fully automatic, four military style weapons threw lead at him in angry swarms.

Merlyn muttered, "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," but he knew that didn't help in any way.

Ribs hung from Frankie's side, torn loose and kept in place only by the flap of skin and muscle that should have been keeping them inside his body. Blood poured out of the wound as Frank spun bringing the sword horizontally across the belly of an awestruck agent. Frank shouted, "No! You have to stop!" and Merlyn tried to gauge whether he was shouting at the men or at himself or at the sword. But Frankie could not stop any more than he could be stopped now. The scabbard protected from harm. The sword only ensured that the holder could not be conquered nor slain in battle. Nothing else. Frankie should be dead already, but he was still in battle, sword in hand. He could not be conquered. He could not be slain.

Everything was coming apart again.

Like it always did.

Merlyn had no idea what to do. He imagined running to Sofia. He could wrap his coat around her and transport them all away from here. They could track down the sword later. It could be a new adventure, finding out where the Agency had taken it. That would mean pulling a little bit of energy through the Lake to do the transport, but it wouldn't be much and Nimue had forgiven him so much. That small a transgression—he glanced toward Sofia again, estimating how many steps it would take to get to her and she made eye contact with him. She half-shouted to him, "I'm okay. I got this. Danny's fine. I'm working on Percy! Go. Take care of them."

Her words were intended to reassure him that he could do the thing she expected of him, the thing his conscience told him to do. A thing that made no sense at all because once he did it, he had no idea what came next.

Up the beach, surrounded by the bodies of the dead, Sir Frank leaned on the ancient relic Excalibur in precisely the way any good sword instructor would tell him never to. He staggered and then dropped to a knee in a spreading pool of blood and guts. The image became clearer as Merlyn sprinted toward the weeping, dying man.

Vivica got there first and dropped to her knees beside him. Merlyn, his senses sharpened by the flow of terror through his veins, could not tell whether he heard her or read her lips as he closed the distance by strides. She said, "You can't die. Here we go. You're okay. We're still in battle, right? Can't be slain in battle. You should've had the scabbard. Dammit. I sort of had a plan."

Frankie croaked, "Sorry." He did not look good. He reached for the scabbard and Vivica handed it to him. He started to sheath the sword, but she stayed his hand, saying, "Not yet. We're still at battle, Frank. They're still out there in the trees. Stay with me. Hang on to the sword." She unceremoniously closed the flap of skin and rib bone back into place and Frank yelped.

Frank said, "I don't want to be in the battle. I don't want to kill more people. What did I do, Viv? Like three people! Or. . . Four? Oh, shit."

Vivica said, "It's okay, Frank. You had to. You were taking care of me. Don't die. Hold the sword. We're still in battle."

As if to prove her point, gunfire shouted from shadows of the trees beyond the protective spiderwebs, and the irritated, immobilized men still glued to them.

Someone punched Merlyn in the back hard enough that he lost his footing and stumbled into a shoulder roll. By the time he was back on his feet he knew that Gwydion's coat had taken a bullet and held. As he strode toward his young friends, he let the coat flare and then, reaching to direct its internally organized lattice of spell work, he invited it to flare further. He walked now, rather than sprinting, not because he had run out of breath or because it made him look cool, but because he had begun to formulate a plan.

He positioned himself directly in the narrow sightline along the beach between the shooters, impeded by spider-stuck colleagues, and their targets. He protected Vivica and Frank by turning his back, turning up his collar to the lead and taking the beating. The machine gun fire came as a hail against his back, but nothing penetrated the spelled armor of that beautiful garment. The powerful pelting pushed him forward and he managed to shout

over the pounding of the guns and the pummeling of the projectiles, "You're both safe! We're still in battle but the attacks now are against me. Understand? Hold the sword. Keep it bare!"

He loomed over them now, his coat spread wide around him from the shoulders into a fashion week haute couture tent fiasco. Bullets thudded against his back with relentless insistence. They pattered with seemingly no force at all against the batwing spread of magicked fabric.

He considered the possibility that he was unconsciously willing the coat to let the impact through as some sort of flagellatory punishment for the thought of escaping with his beautiful, noble girlfriend. The protective layer of his coat thinned further so that each bullet seemed to strike more pointedly. Merlyn took control of his thoughts and the coat. He reversed the shift until the shots seemed merely an assault on his back and not on his innards. At last, he could pull a proper breath. He let himself listen to one, then another.

Frankie looked up at him, despair traced in blood on a backdrop of rage. He gasped for air, holding his side together with an elbow as he gripped the hilt of Excalibur. Only the magic of the sword sustained him. He leaned heavily on it as he knelt, clutching hilt with one hand and guard-cross with the other. He said, "What'd I do, Merlyn? What'd you make me do?"

Vivica looked up at the man, panic and anger and terror coming at him in waves almost powerful enough to make him stagger backward against the onslaught of lead. She screamed over the bleating bursts of gunfire, "What now?"

Merlyn, slowed his breath, finding its sound over the cacophony. He shouted, "Give me a second!"

King Vivica, sheltered completely from the gunfire, extracted herself from the dying man she loved. She stood as she shouted, "Give you a second? The only thing keeping him alive is the sword you want to destroy and if I understand the rules, as soon as this battle is over, that protection is gone too. We don't have a second. Merlyn. Until that sword is gone, I am the High Fucking King of Everything and I command you to fix this!"

Merlyn felt the imperative and it directed his brain to solve the puzzle. He saw it fall together like the riddle about the ferry that must transport a cabbage, a goat and a tiger across. He said, "Okay. We can do this. Sir Frank, this is going to hurt a lot, but only for a short while."

"Am I going to die?"

"I very much hope not. Here we go. If you can lift the sword for a second, Vivica, you have to get the scabbard under it so that it gets poked. Got it?"

"We're putting a hole in the scabbard."

"You're gonna pierce the scabbard under Frank's weight and then pull it hard against the blade's edge to do the fast-fileting thing."

"The what?"

"Like with a fish."

"I don't know what we're talking about."

"Okay. I'll explain in a minute. Do the thing. Ready? On three. One. Two.—"

"Wait. What are you doing?"



"I'm standing here getting shot in the back, Viv, so that you don't have to get shot in the front."

"Then why are you counting it in. Here we go. Frankie?"

"Yeah. Go." He yelped at the pain as he lifted his weight using the less damaged of his legs. He raised the point of the blade a good three inches before collapsing back to his dying knight pose, using the greatest sword in Western legend used as a makeshift crutch.

The moment was all Vivica needed. She saw the balling of his chi and the explosion of effort. As he moved, she slid the leather under the steel like a weathered seamstress working a beloved sewing machine. The blade met a moment's resistance, but it was rigged to respond to resistance and quickly punctured the scabbard with a sudden pop. The spelled edge drove down through layers of leather like a hot awl through ice-cream.

Light burst from the cut. Every dust mote anyone ever examined in a shaft of childhood sunlight began billowing out of the pierced scabbard.

The bursts of gunfire slowed as the men ran out of ammunition or realized that continuing to shoot at someone who did not seem troubled by it served no purpose.

Merlyn said, "Do the fish thing. Just . . . Grab the eel by the head." He began to gesture as a demonstration, but a short blatt of rounds reminded him that he was the only thing between these people and the bullets now that the scabbard was pierced. He raised his arms outward to keep the long coat spread wide.

The glowing motes, carrying their own internal light so that they seemed to be sun-drenched even in the Wizard's shadow, drifted toward Frankie. Smedley skittered out from wherever he had been, and frantically spewed webbing about Frank's injuries. Where the

tiny flickers of escaping old magic found the webbing, they stuck. Their glow spread along the fibers, defusing as it extended away. As more adhered, their illuminated strands overlapping, the organic bandages glowed ever brighter with the protective energies of that enchanted scabbard. Vivica shouted, "I think it's healing him."

"It's trying. Do the thing. Fast. Pull. Like the table-cloth trick where the flatware stays in place."

Vivica grasped the mouth of the soft suede scabbard in two hands and pulled the length of the leather against the sharp edge of the sword. The material parted with no great effort of strength, but the sound of that hide tearing ripped like a Hendrix solo through stadium amps. The blade of the sword resonated to it and continued to hum long after the scabbard was split.

More tiny particles of glowing dust rose from the floppy sheath strips. Then what seemed to be wisps of smoke.

Another round of automatic gunfire hit Merlyn's back, but he hardly noticed. With Frank and Vivica he watched the soft white smoke and the bright yellow fuzz and felt the disappointment children mask with excessive enthusiasm when they get to Disney World and realize it is not a magical kingdom at all, it is just a place of business with child-friendly colors. "Anticlimax," Merlyn sighed. "The only possible outcome of anticiflation."

Then Vivica grabbed the two loose scabbard tails and pulled from that end completing the split.

Spectacle occurred.

Snakelike, the parts of the scabbard writhed, though the sound that came from them had the haunting sound of peacocks courting in the night. With a near-electric snap they rejoined. Merlyn's chest thumped with the thought that the scabbard had healed itself, that neither the scabbard nor the sword *could* be destroyed. The cut seam still showed, though, and the light still leaked out.

Then the mouth of the scabbard pulled back to a cuff and the amount of sheer magic stuffed inside became visible, releasing into the world and spreading out into the sky, bright and flowing. Beings that had the look of intermittent rainbow emerged and dispersed. Music hummed on the air and found echo in the shifting leaves of the unkempt woods all around them. Where that song reached, the muted tones of modern Wales took on new saturation.

Merlyn spotted a Djinn, only half-visible in the morning sun, extricating himself from the tight quarters, circling quizzically a few times before taking off for distant lands to trick mortals with ill-conceived wishes. Merlyn had entirely forgotten that marvel of a being who had given his full self to the great project, making himself ready should Merlyn's great unifying Hero, in time of despair, call out for wishes he might grant.

Steam puffed out then rose away as clouds with map- corner faces. Archetypes of protection from cultures ranging the globe pulled themselves free as the ever-increasing flow of pure, unstructured magic rolled out, brightening a growing sphere around them from the soft sunlight of Welsh morning to the festival lighting at a vast competition.

Like the details of the War of the Trees, newly examined and refreshed in his mind, bits of the process of the building of these constructs returned to Merlyn, the Scabbard and the Sword. He had remembered in an abstract way that a whole lot of magic had been collected

into them, but now the whole ordeal came back, months of travel almost entirely on foot except when he rode ships. He remembered developing a magical containment technique as he traveled so that even in the portions of his travel spent waiting on deck or tromping through wilderness, he could continue endowing the artifacts with increasing working energy pulling from the world around him as he went.

The plan was to amplify and support the spells he had built into the pieces. He travelled the world pulling as much magic out of it as he could, storing all of it in these two objects on which he had chosen to hang the fate of his Island.

He had thought of the sword and scabbard as a project he carried with him; he built it to support Arthur. He had not realized that the confidence and persuasive power he built into the sword bolstered his own effort. Like the cockiness he remembered as he strode confidently past the Romans, not yet aware that his cloak could make him incredibly difficult to see, his credulous delight at the enthusiasm with which many, like the Djinn, committed their full essences to the project, demanded to be part of one artifact or the other in support of Merlyn's cause now showed itself to be blindness to his own reliance on psychic manipulations. His pitch, more refined with each presentation, came with ever-increasing magical emphasis from the great weapon of leadership. *The Lands Arthur would unite could serve as proof of concept for a world at peace, he had said, and then, under this powerful symbol of unity, drawing its strength from the combined powers of the many Peoples and their Avatars in Faerie, we shall build a great world of prosperity and the arts, of celebration and honor, of knowledge and discovery. Beneath the banner of the man who bears this weapon, all the world may be as one.*

Those to whom he spoke, though, heard those stirring thoughts from the one who held sword and scabbard that were scepter and spell, authority and confidence and indomitability. They could not refuse his requests and had no idea that they should guard their psychic space before making any commitment because none of them, not one, would suspect a mortal to be capable of manipulating their minds. Merlyn would not have thought it possible until now. He saw the amount of magic pouring out of the scabbard and thought ahead, thought back, to how much more was contained in the sword.

Some bits of Excalibur needed to be worked on in situ as he continued his travels. Those parts had been sent on to him later. He allowed for the time as he travelled, but his sleep became so staggered and the passage of time so confusing, that when all the parts came together and all the long nights of collection and containment of energies to compress within the blade and the sheath had been finished, he had lost track of the weeks. He sewed into place the last careful stitches of the scabbard. He tied off the last spell of grandeur and identity on the sword.

He slept for two and a half days, waking only for sips of water or to relieve himself.

Now, seeing it re-emerge, he realized just how much he had pulled from the world in his steady, efficient efforts. As his skill had increased with the constant attention to the singular goal, he had pulled and stored more of the organic resources than he imagined possible for any one mortal, much less one as lazy and prone to shortcuts as he.

Creatures half invisible and half imagined emerged from the ruined fabrics of the sheath. Joyous to find their freedom and return to their natural place they sang and howled

and chittered distantly as they vanished away into the world. Merlyn watched the fountain of life and light explode upward from the gaping mouth of the scabbard.

The gunfire had gone silent. Merlyn imagined that from their perspective it must look as though the man had opened his trench coat toward the young couple and was now releasing from its lining a light show extraordinaire filled with phantoms and creatures, colors and eye-tricking sublimations.

The scabbard had rolled itself back nearly to its tip, now, the suede drying to desiccation as it lost the magic that sustained it. Then they came.

Two great Asian dragons of protection, side by side, reached out with bone white claws to widen the gap. Their heads came through. Scales the color of Taylor Swift's teeth covered faces like albino alligators. Long teeth—more tusks than fangs—gave them a distinctly distinguished look, like curated moustaches. They strained their necks, craning and pulling to get free. They seemed at first to be a single, two headed creature doing battle with itself, but Merlyn knew who they were. Once their shoulders and wings had cleared the gap, their long serpentine bodies tumbled out in a wrestling joyous ball of twisting Great White Dragons at play. They unwound themselves from one another, and lifted on their tails, spreading their wings in a display that made Merlyn's coat trick look like an Etsy-purchased novelty item. One of them spoke in a voice that rumbled deep across the lake and the beachfront, through the woods and out into the night. It rumbled without amplification. It rumbled by its thunderous nature. It said, "How long?" It said it in Old Welsh, though it spoke with an obsolete Asian accent.

Merlyn responded in a language he had not needed in a long, long time. He said, "Much too long. I am so sorry."

The dragon said, "Did it work?"

"Not yet."

The beasts nodded, understanding time better than most. The one who had spoken said, "The intent was right."

Merlyn said, "I owe you both and am at your service if you need me."

The other dragon laughed so loudly that the soldiers stuck to webbing moved like the diaphragms of great speakers. The two lifted away. As had been the case every time he saw them, their grace awed Merlyn. They moved not as heavy birds, heaving themselves into the air in great scoops of their wings, but like dragonflies, effortlessly rising on humming membranes that beat to invisibility. At altitude they seemed to swim, unsupported, into the distance.

The flood of magic from the damaged scabbard dipped to a trickle.

Then sporadic puffs.

Then an elf, no taller than Vivica stepped free. He shook the last bit of the scabbard from his foot. Like an ouroboros sock that folds itself into extinction, the scabbard swallowed the very last of itself.

The elf walked toward Merlyn. It held up a single seed to show the man. Then it walked nine feet past the old Wizard toward the waiting military force and pushed the seed down into the soft scabble soil of the waterfront. It circled back around Merlyn, stood before him, made eye contact to offer a deeply disappointed sigh, then giggled and vanished in a puff of

smoke that trailed up into the sky and then away, coherent, visible into the distance like a kite on a string-snap breeze.

Frank groaned, straining against the impulse to curl inward around his pain. Vivica stared over Merlyn's shoulder, agape. Merlyn felt an abrupt shift in temperature as shade protected his back from the direct sun. He saw the shifting shadow build over his friends and imagined a giant approaching from behind.

He spun, keeping his coat wide in case of renewed assault riflery. He needn't have bothered.

The trunk of the Tree of Life had widened in seconds so that he could almost reach out and touch the bark. The circumference of its trunk creaked outward toward him still, though slowly. The branches had already spread wide above them, and their expansion slowed as well.

The Tree obscured enough of the beach now that the soldiers would have to hike well past the end of the spider's defensive net to shoot at them. He had at least a few moments to catch his breath. He touched the trunk of the Tree of Life as he had done centuries before when Gwydion had first brought him to its foot. He thanked it for its bounty and pushed at it, as though his tiny weight could shake its massive solidity. Although the Tree moved not at all, a fruit fell from high above and Merlyn caught it neatly. He took a bite and tossed it to Vivica. "Give him a bite. Take one for yourself. He's gonna be okay."

Vivica broke a bit of the fruit off and put it between Frank's lips. The glow of the magic dust that stuck in his bandages gave him the appearance of a zombie with huge chunks



carved out and leaking light. As he chewed the soft meat of the fruit, Merlyn watched the young man's wounds heal, the silk poultices fall away.

Before Vivica took a bite, she said, "Is this why you get to be, like, nine-thousand years old and not die?"

"No."

She took a bite. Her eyes widened.

He knew what she felt.

The young woman slowed her breath as she had just recently learned to do and Merlyn could see that she felt a new understanding of her world crashing in upon her and expanding outward from her, her connection to the tree whose oxygen she would draw in, her connection to the woods, and to the people around her, friends and adversaries. And those far away. He saw her understand more deeply the nature of the breathing exercise, but he also saw her shifting her weight, newly conscious of the motion of her own chi. She turned her gaze to Merlyn and he nodded understanding. *Indeed, he thought, this is the thing you have felt lacking in the world, little one.*

Then he remembered that his work was not done.

Frank had recovered a bit of his strength. The arm that had been pressed to his side, holding his torso shut had dropped to the grass in a fist so rather than looking like a drunk swordsman vomiting in a pool of his own regret, he had the appearance of a tired swordsman, preparing to re-engage the enemy as soon as he catches his breath and stops bleeding to death.

Merlyn knelt before the young Knight and said, "You're going to be okay. Are you ready to give me the sword?"

Frankie, a little bit slurred and significantly unfocused, said, "Don't use it, Merlyn. It's awful."

"I know. Give it to me, now."

"I think I need it."

"I know. You don't."

Frank leaned on the hilt leveraging himself to his feet and Merlyn saw the surprise as he found himself nearly healed. Frank said, "I stand. I Sir Frank, Knight to the Disenmaiden Lady Vivica, Defender of the Hero, Protector of the Wizard Merlyn in his Quest have wielded Excalibur in battle." He said it in very quiet amazement. It was not a boast. He expressed a terrifying understanding about archetypes and the burden of legend.

"And tamed it."

"What?"

"You tamed the sword. I saw it, kid. You stopped advancing when it wanted more blood."

"Not for long."

"Nonetheless. And it took a bullet to your body for the sword to break your control. I watched it happen. Until they came at you, you tamed the power of a sword rigged to do nothing but help you kill."

Frank blinked, taking that in. He nodded slowly. He handed the Sword's hilt to Merlyn.

Merlyn held the sword he had made for the first time since the day before he brought Arthur here to see the strip show and get the big door prize.

Vivica said, "So now what?"

Merlyn said, "I'm thinking."

"What?"

"I'm looking at the spell work for something I can pull apart so that I can—I don't know—I'm thinking there was a binding to prevent rust and that if I can pull that loose, the whole thing might crumble."

"You're thinking that *if* you can pull something loose, it *might* crumble?"

"Give me a second!"

Frankie said, "You don't need to pull apart the spell right now. You need to get that seed."

Merlyn nodded, excitedly. "Yes! Yes!" Then he did not move. He stood there holding the sword. Then he said, "Nobody can be holding it." He dropped the sword abruptly and the moment it lay in the grass untouched it lost a good deal of its glamorous appeal. "Give me your knife."

Frankie pulled the bright, modern blade from its sheath at the back of his belt and Merlyn drove it into the eel skin wrap of the handle. With nobody to protect, the sword put up no defense and the mortal blade of the Buck knife easily parted the rough wrappings.

The first seeping trickle of magic of the sword crept out very differently from the magic of the scabbard. This started as a dark smoke that came in distinct tendrils, wrapping one another and then reaching out across the sky. This dense magic spread out at what seemed to

be a low altitude, it dispersed oily to enhance the dark edges of a growing storm cloud above.

He twisted the knife. The binding cords crisscrossed up the hilt in the style of the traditional katana holding the torn eel skin in place. They prevented access to the Jade Dragon within that held the necessary seed. The translucent, braided strands of those delicate-looking laces dug grooves into the mass-manufactured steel of Frank's knife. The only thing he could think of that might cut through the web of Anansi was the sword itself and he could not imagine a way of using the sword to affect its own hilt. It was like the schoolyard challenge to lick one's own elbow.

Tentatively, oh so quietly, the great spider climbed up the bark of the Tree of Life, stood near Merlyn's left ear and clicked a gentle question. Unaware that he seemed to have suddenly learned to converse in spider, Merlyn sighed and said, "Sure. Have a go." Smedley, child of the Great Trickster himself, stepped down to the sword, gripped the cord in his mandibles, bit down, and with a soft click he undid the bit that held the whole damn thing together.

The silk bindings snapped clear of the hilt and spooled out into serpentine smoke that spiraled downward like the dark grey version of steam. As it reached the ground it condensed from heavy gas to fluid and to an equal volume of equally translucent spiders, small only by comparison to Smedley. This crawling swarm of coin-sized creatures moved to the tree and filed by the thousands past their huge cousin, paying respect. Then the creepy parade continued around the trunk to spiral back down to the ground on the far side toward

the soldiers who had shot and cursed at Smedley Rothfuss Aknid, Spider to the Once and Never Again High King.

Merlyn said, "Can you call them back?"

Smedley clicked, confused.

"I know they shot at you. And at the rest of us. Still. They tried to kill us. This does not mean that we are obligated to behave the same way."

The spider clicked and sighed in profound understanding. He clicked a fast series of clicks.

Merlyn said, "You think a few of your buddies here could get one of these fruits down to Danny and Percy?"

Smedley skittered to the lowest branch, tossed a couple of fruit to a cluster of spiderlings. On the difficult-to-see bodies, the apples bobbed off toward Sofia's beachfront infirmary.

Merlyn, who had knelt to work the hilt without grabbing the sword, stood up quickly and backed away as the first thing to emerge this time was the seed bearer. The Jade Dragon at the hidden core of Excalibur's hilt tore free with the sound thunder would make if it felt the need to make a particularly direct impression. The sky answered with thunder that said it was not impressed but hinted at secret admiration.

Fat drops fell, widely spaced, heavy.

At Smedley's instruction, by his own impulse, a bunch more groups of small spiders had begun carrying fruits of the Tree of Life out toward the members of the attacking team.

Distant screams from the woods told Merlyn that the gifts delivered by spiders were not well received. He wanted to reassure them, to explain. He began to reach for amplification spells, but he had promised Nimue not to draw from the lake just as she—he touched his cheek, remembering the casual, flirtatious transfer of power. Not a lot. Enough. If he was efficient.

He slapped together the amplification spell he had seen her use that infused the voice with undeniable appeal, instead of his own versions that were all just about volume and bombast. He used that tiny bit of gifted magic to make himself heard. He said, “You want peace. We want peace. Our giant spider will come around to free those of you who are caught in his webs. His smaller friends will be offering you the Fruit of this Tree. If you do not wish to try it, you may search the remnants of my plane, or you may return to your helicopter. I ask that you stop shooting at us. If you choose to taste of the fruit, don’t fill up on Life, kids, ‘cause we’ll be having Knowledge of Good and Evil as soon as it’s ready!” The soldiers chuckled in the woods. He heard a gasp and wondered whether one of them had bitten into a fruit, or Smedley had just arrived to release the immobilized.

The Jade Dragon did not claw slowly from the gap in the hilt. It grew out in a boom, displacing air and stretching its wings upward to create a sudden updraft. The size of this dragon, even beside the Tree of Life, changed the way it felt to be human. The depth of history in its eyes changed what it meant to be mortal. Merlyn remembered negotiating with this creature as if the images came from a dream. How long had he gone without sleep during those travels, putting all the energy he could channel into history’s worst idea?

Merlyn knew that the flashing lights at the edge of his vision represented a grand show of emerging magics in greys and whites, transparencies and opacities, anthropomorphs, archetypes and abstractions given form, bigger and darker and more potent by far than the display provided by the destruction of the scabbard. He could not watch it.

The impossibly large serpent owned his gaze. It loomed long, hanging on gently-pulling wings, tail-tip grazing the tops of the grass. It descended slowly onto the lawn beside the Tree of Life, tail curling into small circle, and then an expanding coil. Its wings pulled it up a bit to adjust its scaly body with rippling undermuscle, arranging itself meticulously and then dropping the next coil into place, until it had created a base almost as wide as that of the Tree itself and it could look the Wizard in the eyes. It held out what appeared to be an ordinary acorn between its foreclaw and opposing talon.

The chaotic sounds and flickerings of magic returning to Earth continued unabated in his peripheral vision. Merlyn could feel the rush of available energy. He knew some of it came from biting into that fruit, and some from the tree beside him. He could still feel Nimue's underwater source, but the reservoir of energy he had pulled from cyclical use and stuck into these two grand artifacts staggered even the mind of the man who had accomplished it.

He tried to understand why the Dragon showed him the seed. He said, "You want me to see that you have cared for it?"

The dragon made a deep, grumbling dissatisfied sound.

A hand dropped to Merlyn's shoulder startling him. Frank stood just behind him. He said, "Look at the tension around his lips. He wants to know why you aren't taking it."

“You can read a dragon?”

“Now he wants to know why you're not taking it after I told you what he wants.”

Merlyn reached forward tentatively to take the nut from the Dragon's claws. He rolled it between his fingers. He did a quick slight of hand making it vanish and reappear. The Dragon made a sound of distinct disapproval.

Frank said, “You have to plant it. And he feels very strongly that it has to be you.”

“What? Why?”

Frank did a sigh of performative patience that seemed familiar to Merlyn, though he could not place where he had heard it before. He gave the Dragon a quick look and translated. “He says: You've arrived to save us all. You forged the sword that sought to unify a land. You charmed dragons to your cause. You witnessed the War of the Trees and the—something in Welsh maybe that I don't understand.” The Dragon snarled. “Okay. Um. Something about a dark time with a lot of bloodshed and a fire on an Island —”

“I know what that is. You're getting this from his lip tension?”

“And sometimes, like, the twitchiness in the scaly bit under his eyes. There's more. And he's still annoyed that I didn't know what . . . Abbelyawn? is.”

“Avalon.”

“Okay.” He went on as the Dragon's interpreter. “You are Merlyn the Magician, and you are the Breaker of the World, the Hero of his Own Story. The one who will return from death to protect us all from existential threat.”

“He just said that?”



“Sound familiar? There’s a whole lot more and he’s not good at translating into rhymed verse for me—” To the Dragon he said with surprising authority, “Patience old one. When the Knight to the Hero speaks, even Dragons await his attendance to their needs.”

The Dragon sighed, acquiescing, so Frankie added, “I thank you, Great one. I strive to give a proper accounting of your thoughts to the Wizard, while moving things along.”

Then the Dragon nodded, approving as though he had been asked and had now granted permission.

Frank said to Merlyn, “I figured it out when he got to the part about, ‘When the world is at stake and the hero realizes his mistake and knows the steps he has to take, the path is clear as any stream. A world reborn in which to dream awaits the one whose deep flawed scheme unravels at its silk-sewn seam from his own willingness to deem it damned.’”

“Oh,” Merlyn said. “The silk-sewn seam.”

The Dragon boomed a sound that Frankie translated as, “You understand!”

Then the beast lifted back and away, upward into the magic-sparkled glowering sky. Lightning greeted it. It made a long, happy circle beneath the banks of heavy grey. A moment later a natural thunder rolled through. The Dragon vanished into the space above the storm as the droplets turned to a steady overhead patter against the umbrella of trees, then it circled back down. It landed, far down the lake front, again performing the careful coiling ritual.

Merlyn and his friends stood in the protection of the Tree of Life’s dense, breathing shade.

Sofia, Percy, and Danny slogged up from the lake. Danny leaned more heavily on Merlyn's girlfriend for support than the Wizard believed necessary. He felt a rush of proprietary rage, then pretended it was righteous rage on her behalf. Then he laughed at his own stupidity and took a self-congratulatory moment to notice that he had caught himself before he built up a reason for hostility where it was unnecessary. Sofia unceremoniously dropped the man with the neatly bandaged arm under the Tree of Life. She could take care of herself.

She fell into Merlyn's arms, not like a woman who has been awaiting rescue, but like a woman who has seen some weird shit over a couple of days, hasn't slept enough and just watched her boyfriend take about a thousand bullets to the back, flash his friends, produce history's most incredible golden showers, and then stand eye to eye with a dragon the size of the Guggenheim.

Merlyn held her for a moment, just listening to the rain on the leaves above, on the world around in the perfect protection of the Tree of Life. He kissed the top of her head and enjoyed the presence of her, the smell of her unshowered scalp, the weight of her shape against his own. He remembered this sound, so different from rain on a flat roof, or on shingle. He remembered this feeling, dry in the protection of trees while the rain fell. It was a long-ago memory, like the carved wooden wolf he had been given at Solstice by the man who made the scroll spools, before he was full grown, before he was a young man, before he was alone and afraid, before he was brave and proud and accomplished, before he cracked the world.

He palmed the acorn, reached past Sofia, pushed at the tree, caught the fruit it dropped and handed it to the woman he loved. He kissed her on the mouth then he said, "Eat this. It's delicious. And also important. There's a thing I still have to do."

TWENTY SIX



Sofia said, “These two wolfed down the ones the spiders brought. Friends of Smedley’s?”

She accepted the fruit Merlyn handed her and took a bite. The meat of the fruit burst against the roof of her mouth, sweet and earthy and almost fizzing with life. As the taste drew her focus to her senses, the effect on her brain as the juices hit her mucous membrane threw her into a momentary panic. “Is this dosed? Is this psychedelic?”

“No and not exactly. This is the Fruit of the Tree of Life. From the sacred Trees, the archetypal Trees, the laws of systemic symbology transfer their energy outward so their prime qualities may manifest elsewhere reflected across their analogues. You understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Merlyn blinked. “You do? Really?”

“Thanks to a connection between archetype and avatar, where fruit grows, it carries a bit of the essence of the fruit of The Tree of Life. And for its effects to reach all the fruit of the world, the original must be deeply saturated with the energy and insight it provides, thus my sudden awareness of the singular nature of all life, animal and vegetable on the planet.

Yeah?”

Merlyn stared at her and then kissed her again.

She said, “What was that for?”

He said, “For being wonderful.”

“You have to go do something.”

“Yeah. You should watch. I think it's gonna be cool.”

He put his heel to the base of the trunk and counted his strides under his breath as he walked away from her. She watched him. She watched the sway and flare of his fancy Wizard coat that never got dirty and protected him from bullets. She watched the confidence with which he strode into the world. She chose not to stay at the center of the shelter.

She ran, almost skipping across the ground. Beneath the lush shade of the spreading leaves, scrubby, dry bank had already begun mossing over and sprouting small flowers and mushrooms. She caught up to Merlyn and walked beside him, matching his pace in silence

as he counted his steps. They reached the edge of the tree's cover, and a curtain of rain came down before them. A light spray reached them where they stood just inches away from the unseasonably warm, unreasonably heavy, downpour.

On the far side of Merlyn, Vivica and Frank lined up, looking into the intimidating torrent. Percy caught up and stood right next to Sofia. She had not known they were walking with Merlyn as well. She wanted to blame the patter of the rain for preventing her from hearing their footfalls, but that was not it. She had been lost in her absolute adoration for this man who had loved her and supported her and enjoyed her without ever denying her the right to disbelieve. She had been walking with Merlyn, gazing at him, thinking about him the way the soldiers had thought about Nimue. No. Not right. The way Danny Rourke thought about Nimue, even without the glamour.

Merlyn said, "You guys don't have to get wet."

Vivica said, "You know the story where the hero stands tall, sword unsheathed before well-armed enemies with her trusty spider and then stands aside while the menfolk clean up the fun bits?"

Percy said, "What?"

Sofia said, "We're going."

"Where the Hero goes, the Knight goes as well," Frankie intoned. He was shaken by the day's events, she could tell. He was slipping into the removed state his new assignment allowed him, providing an entire character to sink into in moments of uncertainty. The character fit him, the noble knight, adhering to a personal code of chivalry, an ethos to transcend time and fashion.

Percy said, "Is it okay if I watch from here? That rain is coming down."

"Do what you want, Percy. Always," Merlyn said. "All right, People Let's finish saving the world. Twenty-eight paces straight out."

Frank said, "What's that about?"

"Proper reach for canopy means proper reach for roots."

"What?"

"Do they teach nothing useful at all these days? As above, so below. Twenty-eight paces. This is gonna suck for a minute."

Together they strode forward into the deluge.

Sofia walked beside Merlyn as the rain drove her skull down, compressing her neck into a tensed spring between rising shoulders. The warmth of the water might have been pleasant had the volume not been so unrelenting.

She hoped Merlyn had been counting paces. It felt to her that they had walked for hours. She hunched forward. The saturated ground became indistinguishable from the Lake as lines blurred. The tree line, somehow farther back than it had seemed in the sunlight, bled into green and grey streaks.

Through her newfound connection to the living world, she could feel the forests around them drinking in the water, drought sickened, globally warmed, love starved. The flora for miles around, every tree and shrub and blade of grass took in this fresh dose of magic-infused storm water, tasting in it a renewal of life, or at least the promise of it. Magic dumped into the skies came down in this rain, but more.

Now all water in all rain, all water in the cycle had water from the fruit of the Tree of Life to learn from. All water had the dew those perfect leaves collected in the morning to reflect in its own dewy nature. All water had the knowledge that once it had been and once it would be again, a part of the sap that ran through the Great Tree's core, through its branches, out through its verdant leaves, entwined with the nutrients of the earth and the carbon from the air and the magics of Faerie.

As she understood the value and power of the rain, its impact became less of a burden. It still bent her, but now she bent without resenting it. The rain was good. She had chosen to walk through it with the man she had just seen walk in front of machine guns. She could do that without griping about her pantlegs sticking to her ankles. And the pinchy seams at her armpits as the wet soaked through her crisp pilot's shirt. And the squishy sound her shoes made.

Merlyn stopped walking. He shouted over the radio static rush of rain hitting the ground overlapping the applause sound of rain hitting the lake. "You doing okay?"

She shouted, "Before enlightenment we suffer wedgies from wet underwear. After enlightenment we suffer wedgies from wet underwear."

"I love you more than the heavens can drown."

"Good story," she yelled. Then she said, "Can we do the thing, baby? I'm a little afraid the weather is about to turn."

Merlyn held up the acorn dramatically. She saw him decide the moment did not require ceremony. He pushed the acorn down into the saturated earth then shouted, "Back! Back! Back!"



He sprinted back toward the Tree of Life as the ground began to rumble around them. Taken by surprise, Vivica and Frank froze for a moment then took off after Merlyn, with Sofia just behind them. At the edge of her rain-hazy tunnel-vision, she saw the Jade Dragon, still curled up where he had chosen to land. He seemed unbothered by the water crashing down on his head, although occasionally his huge eyes blinked in their strange, slow, reptilian way.

Glancing behind her, she saw a tree the size of her grandmother's oldest maple growing larger, pushing the ground out around it in widening ripples disrupting the very contours of the earth as easily as a child disrupts the still perfection of a pollen-covered pond with a tossed pebble or a crashing plane.

Merlyn shouted, "Should be good here!" He stopped running and three of his companions slid to a stop.

Of the three, only Vivica managed to do so without falling into the wet muck. She put her hands out like a surfer and rode the slick surface to a stop before retreating a few steps to join the others whose braking methods were more effective if less impressively graceful.

Frankie stood up in stoic silence. Sofia did the same, except that she also shouted, "What the fuck, Merlyn?" in the tone of a soaking wet person who had literally just said that she was uncomfortable in her wet underwear before being required to sprint.

Merlyn shouted back over the storm, "Sorry. Didn't realize how fast that was going to grow until I got the seed near the ground and saw roots reaching out toward the water. Then I just pushed it into—" The world got quieter, and he continued to shout, "—the earth and yelled to you guys." Now that they stood beneath the protection of the newly spreading

second Tree, he repeated that last phrase more softly. "I pushed the seed into the earth and yelled to you guys."

They all watched as the out-pushed mounds of dirt rumbled toward them under the pressure of the still-expanding trunk of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The overhead awning spread outward, straining to reach the edge of the first Tree's wide crown. As if sensing her brother's presence, The Tree of Life groaned itself a little bit bigger, expanding from trunk to leaf, reaching outward with slow, frantic twig tips.

The Great Jade Dragon uncoiled and pinned his wings back, tight against his body to move skink-like under the vast shelter of the Tree of Conscience. He slithered into the newly formed tree, far up into the hidden parts of the branches and then slithered back down with fruit. He handed one to Vivica and one to Sofia. He made a soft sound, like air escaping from a basketball.

Frank said, "It suggests you eat the fruit and then share it with us."

Merlyn said, "Why?"

The Dragon looked to Frank and offered something guttural.

The young translator said, "You're not the only one with long-standing symbology that must be addressed at moments such as this."

The Dragon snorted, almost a sneeze.

Frank said, "Very sorry. 'Inflection points' like this."

The Dragon twitched and Frank corrected the record again, "'*such as* this' was right, so 'inflection points such as this.'"

Satisfied, the dragon coiled itself up to wait.

Sofia said, "I can't believe how resistant I am to this."

"You've never been religious," Merlyn reminded her.

"Sure. But—you know—this is the thing, right? The original sin. The big one. The apple. From the serpent."

Merlyn said, "One bite and you will understand why it needed to be vilified."

She nodded and she and Vivica bit into the fruit that seemed to fall somewhere between small Korean pears and huge kiwi. The crunch of the solid mesocarp caused it to break off in a bigger piece than she expected and the edge bit into the inside of her cheek as she worked it around trying to chew. She started to laugh, then, covering her mouth and handing the fruit off to Merlyn who took a somewhat more careful mouthful.

Unlike the sweet explosion of discovery that came with the first fruit, this one chewed into grainy pulp and then dissolved down the gullet with a dark kick like inexpensive bourbon. In wonder and dismay, she looked up at Merlyn who, chewing down his own dose of Knowledge, met her eyes with compassion and love. As the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil burned through her blood she remembered every lie, every misbehavior, every act of self-service she had ever performed that she had felt the need to explain or excuse internally. The litany started in childhood and seemed to unroll in an incomprehensible accounting of a terribly misspent life up to and including most of the time she'd spent with Merlyn.

She hadn't believed him. She had taken the money from his magic wallet and indulged him. Yes, she loved him. Yes, she believed he loved her. But she had done this knowing it was wrong. She had justified it. She didn't understand how he could love her.

Then the sad smile of adoration and sympathy he offered reached her guts. He had known who she was the whole time. He had known and he hadn't cared. He had done things he believed far worse than any transgression she might have committed. She found him wonderful and forgivable and infinitely lovable. Perhaps, if she began to do better now, knowing good from evil with the clarity of an untaught child, without allowing wiggle-room for 'everyone does it' or 'the realities of modern life,' perhaps she could be worthy of the love he obviously felt for her.

Still, as memory after memory forced itself to the surface of her awareness, she felt deep shame. Not embarrassment or guilt, but real shame, the belief that only she and not her behavior or her culture or the economy she lived under could be blamed. Seeing without rationalization the million tiny compromises she had made over the years she felt naked in the eyes of the world, certain they could see the stain upon her spirit.

She also understood the brooding moods of her beloved. Misdeeds she now felt awful about she also knew to have been well-intentioned. Merlyn had grown up before this Tree was destroyed. He had grown up in a world where everyone who ate any fruit had some of that essence delivered to them naturally. The magical connection to their own conscience led them toward basic decency, compassion, mutual respect as the fruit touched by the essence of Life connected them with all the beings of the world and this fruit excited the knowledge of good and evil, the tingling, life-affirming, death-accepting ability to differentiate.

He had known the obvious truth of his moral compass as he navigated a world that had systematically erased confidence in its own. He had been around through almost two thousand years of cultural changes and personal growth. How many memories did he have to

constantly sort through for wrongs he might right? How had he held on to hope that he could right the wrong he had committed when he forged the sword?

The weight he carried made her profound disgust with herself over her own history seem silly. It did not matter. Once the only gauge was her own conscience, the comparison became meaningless. There was work to do, people to apologize to, debts to repay. As she began to construct her list of reparations, she felt the heartache begin to fade.

Vivica, locked in with Frank as they each chewed the half-enjoyable fruit, suddenly said, "Oh, man. Oh, shit. I am so, so sorry, Frank."

Frank said, "It's okay."

Sofia could not see exactly what he was reading in Vivica's face.

He said, "You didn't know."

Vivica said, "No. I did, though. I did know."

Frank said, "Yeah, I know. But you didn't know you knew. Nobody ever taught us how to look at our own second and third tier thinking, you know?"

"Right?"

"It's okay, Viv. Really."

"There's so much I have to fix."

"Okay. We can do that." Then, "There's a travelling carnival I have to track down and pay back."

They stood there for a moment looking at one another, Frank seeming to read her mind just by looking into her eyes while she gazed up at him.

He said, "All of it is okay, Vivica. I could never hate you for anything you had done."  
Then, "You watched me hack a bunch of guys to death with an old sword."

"I do not hate you for that."

"This is what I'm saying."

"I'm sorry you had to do that."

Merlyn said, "Do you understand how different the world is when just a touch of these thoughts affects every mortal mind?"

They stood for a moment imagining. Sofia knew she did not fully understand the implications.

Merlyn continued, "Now every act of honor and compassion, every choice that values empathy over self-protection, kindness over self-service, generates ambient magic. That magic can be collected, used, recycled as long as the trees stand and their roots touch Faerie. Without Knowledge of Good and Evil, distrusting the conscience, few people have the wherewithal to generate a shred of magic in a lifetime. When I pulled a shit-ton of magic out of our world and hoarded it in the worst possible symbolic artifact, I threw things out of balance. Once the Romans killed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil the spiral started. Honor turned into obedience and glory. Intellectual inquiry, the desire simply to know came to be associated with evil, so that our own evolution faltered with the rise of that damaging, damning mythology. And if I'm being honest, kids, I was just trying to destroy the sword and the scabbard. I wanted to release those magics back into the world and thought I could, perhaps, solve some of the systemic damage I had done by removing the archetypes of military dominance as the symbols of ideal governance. You know?"

Vivica said, "You didn't know this was about replanting the Trees."

"I did not."

"And you didn't know how you were going to dismantle the sword."

"I did not."

"And you were not responsible for making us crash into exactly the right lake in the wilds of Wales?"

"Not directly. No. I trusted a set of guiding principles and listened to the voice of my conscience."

"The piercing whine at the back of my skull."

"No. That might be the voice of *your* conscience."

Sofia suggested, "Try figuring out what you can do to correct past wrongs."

Merlyn said, "What?"

Vivica said, "Holy shit! Thank you! That's awesome. It quiets right down."

Sofia said, "Right?"

The Dragon said something that sounded an awful lot like five seals barking at once.

Frank shouted, "Here we go!"

Merlyn said, "Where?"

Frank said, "I'm translating. The Jade Dragon shouted, 'Here we go!'"

"There is no way you're getting this off of facial tics."

"Nah. At this point I've just got a full-on telepathic link going with this bad boy. 'cause apparently that's something I can do now when I'm near a strong source of magic."

"Strong sources of magic," Vivica added, "also, apparently a thing now."

Then the Earth began to tremble. The dragon made an excited hunting dogs noise.

Frankie shouted, "Wahoooo! Ride the wild planet!"

Sofia shouted, "Can he tell you what's happening?"

The Dragon shouted something in Dragon and Frankie shouted, "He says—" but he staggered with the rolling movement of the earth beneath his feet. He shouted, "Sit down!" as he let himself slip to the ground where the movement became unsettling but not particularly dangerous. A sound seemed to come from far below, out of sync with the rumbling terrain.

The quake stopped. The Dragon spiraled up the Tree and vanished into its branches.

Frankie said, "He says that was the roots reaching the roots of the Sibling," he gestured vaguely toward the other Tree, "and the two of them, holding hands to reach into Faerie together."

Smedley chattered wildly and skittered up the trunk and into the mysterious upper branches that somehow led to the same place the roots had reached. Sofia saw sadness pass across Vivica's face as the strange creature ran off toward some otherworldly home.

A few tentative figures, small-looking people climbed down, looking around uncertainly and then rushing off into the wilderness. Then a group that was obviously a family. Merlyn stepped close to Sofia, gasping. He gripped her hand. "Look!" he said. "They're coming back. They're all coming back! I didn't fail them all."

She held his hand and did not understand, fully, what he was talking about, only that she saw joy in him that she had seen too rarely in the time they had been together.



As the steady flood of refugees returned from their time in Faerie and raced from the familiar Tree into an unfamiliar world, Sofia understood that this change would affect all of Britain and over time the world.

Percy showed up now that the canopy gave a dry path. Sofia tossed him one of the fruit, noticing how quickly it had become natural to handle the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

He took a bite and she watched him blink it down.

Smedley came back down the Tree and the Vivica the Hero Who Had Been King did a girlish, cheerleadery jump in the air, clapping with delight at his return. Halfway across the new-grown grass to the woman the spider stopped, ran back to the Tree and ran halfway up the trunk. It ran back down, stopped in the same place, did impatient spider push-ups, waiting.

A huge, pointy spider leg reached out of the branches. It reached all the way down to the ground as another braced delicately against the Tree's trunk. A third leg emerged and found solid footing to the left of that first grounded leg and then a spider body the size of a Cessna pulled downward out of the branches into the mortal world. Its faceted eyes reflected the world around it in discomfiting fragments.

A great many of the soldiers, recently acting on orders and rappelling from helicopters into tight battle formations, now stood in loose groups chewing fruit, staring nervously but keeping their guns un-cocked. A few of them, she noticed, were engaged in a complex philosophical conversation about their work with the agency and exactly how their missions—and this one in particular—served the American values they were supposed to be protecting at home and projecting abroad.

As the remaining legs came down the tree, the spider somehow folded in on itself so that in the space of two steps he had shaped his whole self, body and legs, into an oversized shadow-puppet of a person. Then in the next step a normal sized shadow puppet of a person, and then a person. He wore a Dashiki and his skin glistened in the dark tones of the oldest African tribes. He walked directly toward Vivica, but Frankie stepped up to intercept him.

“I am Anansi,” the figure said, “and you will not stand in my way.”

“I am Sir Frank and if you seek audience with my Hero you don't show up all creepy like and then storm at her like an angry school principal in a fancy night shirt.”

Anansi blinked in a way that suggested that he was unaccustomed to doing so but wished to convey his speechlessness in the communications system most comfortable for the man with whom he spoke. Then he said, “I can kill you with a single—”

Smedley clicked and chittered at hm.

“My son says I may not kill you. But I can be terribly cruel and vengeful to—” Smedley repeated his percussive diatribe.

Anansi drooped in the long-suffering way that parents have drooped for centuries in response to enthusiastically insistent children. His shoulders closed inward in a near perfect impression of fatherly acquiescence. He said, “Forgive me. May I beg your leave to have words with the Former High King Vivien—”

Smedley chittered.

“Vivica! Fine. May I please have words with Former High King Vivica who seems to have been a protective and influential force in my child's life of late?”

Frank blinked at him doing a passable impression of a spider in a person suit learning how to blink slowly.

Vivica said, "Let him through."

Frank stepped aside, a bouncer not entirely convinced the ID he checked was legit. Anansi stood before Vivica and as he shifted focus from Frank to her, his size changed so that he stood eye to eye with her. He reached forward slowly to touch her face. He said, "You are the Hero."

She said, "You know what? Not so much. I think, really, Merlyn is the hero today."

Anansi chuckled. "You think? As a proud papa I could make an argument that at this pivotal point in the Mortal world my son was the only one who could snap my threads and break open the hilt of Merlyn's stupid sword. Was he lying when he told me this?"

"He was not lying."

"Our legends say, a great hero will accompany one of mine to break the magic I once helped to bind. My son is quite certain that you are that hero. He also told me that you named him Smedley R. Aknid with an ever-changing list of middle names that start with R. Is that also true?"

"It is."

"I do not find this funny."

"Then I will not give you clever nicknames, Sir."

Anansi said, "Thank you for taking good care of my son. I'm glad he was helpful to you in your journey. I sent you an entire cohort of Godspawn but this one tells me he's the only one to find you."

Merlyn cleared his throat. He said, "That's on me, Trickster. I am deeply sorry. I believed them a threat and meant only to sedate them but there's no question that I am responsible for the death of the rest of those spiderlings."

Anansi chuckled. He said, "You believe that you killed nine Godspawn—"

Smedley corrected him.

"Sorry. You believe that you killed twelve Godspawn singlehandedly and by accident?"

"That's right."

"Okay, old man. It sounds unlikely; did anyone see you perform this feat of derring do with sword in hand?"

Merlyn said, "It was a crowbar. And, yes. Percy?"

Percy said, "Yeah. That happened."

"And my girlfriend will vouch for me. Right, kid?"

Sofia smiled and shrugged. She nodded her assertion that he spoke truth.

Anansi considered this. He said, "You do not lie?"

"I try not to."

Anansi nodded. He said, "I have had many children, over many centuries. Still, I get angry when my children are mistreated. When they are killed without reason."

"That is quite understandable, sir. And I will accept whatever punishment you mete out against me. Please know also that I do not lie when I say that I did not intend to kill them."

Anansi, the trickster god looked at Merlyn for a long time, studying him, then he said, "I'm not good with faces using the person eyes." He pointed at his face awkwardly in a way that suggested that he had only recently learned to point and figured out where he kept his

face. "You're Merlyn! You brought me the sword and had me wrap it. It was adorable! You were, what? Nine? Ten?"

"I was four-hundred and eighty years old."

"You were all excited about this present you'd made for your friend. Oh! You were on a grand adventure! You had stuffed an indecent amount of the world's magic into some weaponry, and you had made this big, school project out of it. You travelled to many lands! You enchanted many beings! You were going to make your friend invincible, and he was going to unite all the mortals in a vast peaceful world by beating them into submission. That was you. Yeah?"

"If you knew it was a bad idea, why did you help me?"

"Oh, little one. Firstly, of course, it was hilarious. Secondly, in the words of Dave Chapelle, 'I don't care how gangsta you think you are; a toddler hands you a toy phone, you take that call.'"

"I was *four hundred and eighty years old.*"

Frankie said, "Does everyone who lives in Faerie keep up with modern comedy?"

"I do not follow comedy. Mr. Chapelle came to my home for a consultation during a personal crisis. I believe that you did not intend to kill my children and also the blow is softened by the fact that literally billions of my younger children come to untimely ends every day. Those that age far enough to return through the Great Web to my domain are rare."

Smedley raised a leg and chittered.

“Yes. That’s you. You are one of those who was clever enough. Those who survive on their own to grow large enough shift from survival webbing to sensory webbing and then beyond that to the webbing that connects to the Great Web where Self is discovered through Connection. Many die before they reach the Great Web and come to me to become proper Emissaries and Out-Weavers. I do not know you well. But I believe you to have had good intentions when you came to me as a child, and you had no intention of killing my children. I name you safe from my wrath.”

“Thank you.”

“In this instance, I’m saying, Wizard. Not forever and always.”

“I understand.”

“You can’t go around stomping on my children, shouting, ‘What’re you gonna do about it? Your Dad said I’m safe!’”

“I will not do that. Why would I do that?”

“Young people do strange things.”

“I’m eighteen hundred years old.”

Without another word to Merlyn, Anansi returned his attention to Vivica. “You have been kind, over time, to many of my children.”

“All the spiders I’ve caught and released?”

“Not all of them. Some of them. Enough. Some spiders are more my children than others.”

“Huh.”

“A few seconds ago—or maybe years—Time runs differently on this side. Does anyone here know how to do the math?” Nobody did. “You released a spider into the wild and said, “There you go. Now, let all of your friends and family know that I’m doing my best not to be an ass to any of you.”

“I think I’ve said that—I don’t know. A thousand times. It’s almost a ritual.”

“Yes. One of those thousand times, it was to someone on the brink of finding her way to me. She was deeply touched. She mentioned it soon after she found her way to the web. I sent a small cluster of my spawn to keep a lookout for you and be ready if you were in any trouble. They have lived on your roof for some time now.”

Frankie said, “What kind of trouble was she in when they started coming down her wall at her?”

Smedley chattered on for quite a while at his Dad.

Anansi, a bit annoyed to be reduced to translator, said, “Apparently she stayed out later than usual then came running in from an unfamiliar vehicle full of white people and you, then another car pulled up just ahead and down the street and a guy looked out with weird eyes—”

Some spider chitter from Smedley.

“—Good eyes not like mine? Special eyes? I don’t know.”

Percy raised his hand. He said, “That’s me. I had binoculars.”

Smedley chattered in a way that was clearly the equivalent of the charades player’s finger to the nose.

Sir Frank narrowed his eyes and spoke darkly. "That sounds less protectory and more stalkery."

Vivica laughed. "Is that the part that makes a cluster of giant spiders living on my roof creepy?"

Anansi said, "The superstitious of your modern world are fond of saying that 'everything happens for a reason.' I would like to suggest to you that while this may be true, almost every time, the reason comes first and can be safely called 'the cause.' My son tells me that when he was your only friend, you stood against a small army on one leg to distract them while he built forward protections from attack. On one leg! Do you know how impressive that is to a young spider?"

Smedley tried to accomplish the feat, slowly lifting legs up until he had five off the ground and then losing balance and returning to a more stable spider stance.

Vivica said, "You keep working on it. But you were the real hero there, Smedley Rassmussen Aknid. I was just trying to figure out how to keep everyone from dying. I was trying to figure out how to explain to the guys in the woods what was going on."

Smedley chattered.

"Yes. I did hear her say that you were a hero, too. And she's right." Anansi said to his son in the tone of every father who takes an awkward moment to point out an object lesson. "Everyone must ultimately accept the responsibility for being the hero of his, her, or their own story."

"His, her or their!" Vivica exclaimed so delightedly that the punctuation seemed to hang on the air. "You're pretty hip for an ancient god."



"I'm on the web."

"Okay."

"Always have feelers out."

"Alright."

"Thank you for taking care of the little one."

"Thank you for sending him my way."

Anansi nodded and started to turn away, but the smaller spider griped at him. He turned back. "Okay. Apparently, the kid has something he wants me to say."

He waited while Smedley made clickety noises. He said to Smedley, "Nobody ever gets—" More clicks cut him off.

"He would like me to grant you a boon. When you wish to collect, speak my name three times and I shall do all that I can to grant it."

Smedley clicked.

"In a spirit of generosity and in keeping with your intents in the request, not as some form of cruel trickery."

Quick clicks. "You're welcome."

More clicks.

"Oh, come on."

Two clicks and something like the unwinding of a watch spring when the escapement snaps free.

"He would like to stay with you rather than coming back to Faerie with me."

"I would welcome that," Vivica said.

Mandible clacks.

"I will pay a caretaking fee."

"That won't be necessary."

"It really will. I cannot be in debt to a mortal."

"In exchange for the care and feeding of Smedley R. Aknid for howsoever long he wishes to stay with me I ask this payment, Anansi. Send all the Godspawn it takes to scour these trees for seeds. The Tree of Life ones are teeny tiny and the ones from—"

"I know what they look like. I bound one inside the sword."

"Right. You have your kids find them and transport them through Faerie back to your home continent. Where Trees still stand in Africa you nurse them to health. Where pairs have died let them be reborn. If you know how to bring them to the other continents as well, the Americas, Asia, include those. This is the price I ask."

Anansi said, "You have the freedom to ask the Trickster God for anything you wish as a boon and this is what you ask?"

"Oh, no. I have a boon promised me by the Trickster God in my back pocket for some other day entirely, perhaps. I have been asked what the price is for taking your son with me, a responsibility I am perfectly happy to take on at no cost to you whatsoever. If you don't want to be indebted to me, though, and insist that I name a price for that—separate from whatever boon I may someday ask—this is my price."

Anansi grinned at her. "That's the price."

"Yes."

"I could give you gold."

"If you did, I would accept it and not feel in any way indebted because I have not asked for it."

"I like you a great deal, child."

"That is delightful to know," she responded, suggesting that she was not prepared to commit to an opinion on him. A smile that lived at the corners of her eyes, and also in the middle of her eyes and in some other parts of her face suggested that she liked him a great deal. Anansi couldn't read any of that. He was having enough trouble making his own face do things that looked vaguely like what humans did when they conversed.

"Your price is met. This is an extraordinary thing you do with the opportunity."

"I'm sort of hoping that if you do this—"

"I've agreed."

"—*when* you do this, then, more people will begin making such conscientious decisions as the influence of the fruit takes hold. As their consciences spark back to life and they do more honorably in the world, they will generate more ambient magic to flow through all of those channels and rebuild the natural order, with magic cycling globally as steadily and reliably as the Gulf stream used to. Right?"

"I understand what you're trying to do. It might even work. And I am thrilled to be a part of it."

"It's pretty much entirely self-interested," Vivica admitted. "It's the world I want to live in."

Smedley climbed Vivica to nestle on her shoulder and then, one foot poking scratchily at her scalp, reached out with its two front legs toward Anansi and clicked happily.

The spider who wore a spectacular man costume stepped close to kiss the much smaller giant spider on the foreheadish part of his giant spider face area. He said, “Vivica, this choice, your generosity of spirit, your kindness to descendants of Anansi, including but by no means limited to Smedley Rochefort Aknid—” Smedley cheered and waved his front legs in delight— “your acceptance of him as a comrade and a friend, and your selfless use of my beneficence add up to this. In the estimation of Anansi, Trickster God, Weaver of the Unseen Web, you are a Hero and shall be clicked of in legends through the ages and your name woven into the great libraries beneath the ruins of Aksum.” Then he turned, unfolded back into a gargantuan arachnid and spindle-legged it up into the branches.

Smedley climbed onto Vivica's head and folded up, though now he seemed more the size of a fuzzy Russian winter hat than a fascinator or a pillbox. Frank took Vivica's hand and leaned in, nonchalant, to whisper something in her ear that made her laugh and bump him with her shoulder.

Merlyn looked around at the peaceful warriors about him, sitting in the fast-growing grass in their desert fatigues. Some still gnawed on the potent fruit. Several had wandered back toward their one remaining helicopter.

Merlyn said, “Percy? You think we could hitch a ride? They gonna call the other choppers back?”

Percy shifted uneasily. He said, “Merlyn, I don't think that's a good idea.”

“What?”

“I've been having these thoughts for a while now, right? Since I met Frankie. I'm totally ready to leave my life with the Agency behind and follow my conscience into whatever

adventures lie in the world now that it's maybe going to be able to start healing. But those guys—I don't know how long the effect of these fruits lasts. I don't know if all of them ate, certainly not if all of them ate both. It might be...dangerous for you to come with us, I think.”

Merlyn nodded. “And you want to go with them?”

“I kind of want to find out how much things change as these guys get back and more people start to awaken.”

“Go get on the chopper with them. Stay in touch.”

“You know I'll give a full and honest report, right?”

“I do.”

“Thanks, Merlyn. All of you. This has been a great Party.” He moved off toward the retreating soldiers to join with them in the after-confusion of the strange night.

Merlyn said, “We don't have a plane, people.”

“Yes,” Sofia said. “Thank you for reminding me. That way is South, that way is West, so if we head . . .” she spun to face Eastward “... that-a-way we should hit the road that winds us down the mountain past another lake to the main road.”

Merlyn took a moment to put his hand to the Trunk of the Tree of Life, to whose shelter they had returned as the second tree grew.

Sofia's flawless sense of direction charted a path directly past the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They found Nimue sitting under the tree, Danny's head in her lap as she stroked his hair. When he saw Merlyn coming, he jumped up and ran to hug his fellow mental patient.

He said, "See? I told you, you were no crazier than me! Look what you did." He thumped Merlyn's back with manly affection. Sofia saw Merlyn stiffen at the impact against his recently strafed spine.

The rain had let up to a gentle patter and the thunder had moved on so that it came well after distant flashes.

Nimue said, "I think you did good this time, Merlyn."

"You think?"

"I can never be sure. I thought you did pretty well the first time, when I helped you with the Arthur thing. You don't know how things are gonna turn out until you try them. But these trees? This is good. And in my front yard, on the rim of my own lake? Honestly, Merlyn, I cannot imagine a more beautiful gift anyone could ever have given me."

"I hope it makes up for my past failures."

"I believe it might. And if you ever wish for reassurance, return to my lake, speak my name three times and I will tell you that you are smart and handsome and kind in exchange for tea cakes or honey cakes or pancakes."

"I'll remember that."

"Birthday cakes and wedding cakes are good too."

"Okay."

Danny said, not to anyone in particular, "I think I should return my wife's Renaissance Fair stuff. That wasn't right, taking it like that."

Nimue said, "Isn't he great? You know, for a mortal who just learned he has a conscience, not a mental defect?"

Danny kissed her shoulder. He said, "I have to figure out how to get all these tents in to— you know. A pack-n-mail store or whatever."

Nimue said, "Not to worry, darling. We can take care of returning them all just as soon as I'm done basking in the wonderful hereness of these trees."

As the new Glade at the Lady's Lake took root and magic infused the soil with forgotten fertility, fresh green of new spread beyond the grassing beneath the Great Trees. All around, the woods seemed to have subtly shifted into more organized, better spaced arrangement. Sofia wrote that off as an illusion of the rising light, not a realignment of the wild trees themselves.

Danny said, "So, you guys look like you're not settling in to stay with us here."

Sofia thought about how nice it would be to stay there, how pleasant, how peaceful. She immediately felt a restlessness and knew that there was too much to do back home, too many long-standing debts to repay, errors of judgement to correct. The decision relieved her anxiety as she put her mind back to the truth of her responsibilities as a person with a functioning conscience.

She said, "Can't do it, Danny. Places to be and Wizards to do."

Danny said, "Where you headed?"

It was the Knight who answered. "East," he said. "We're headed East of here."

Merlyn started laughing as he turned slowly, taking in the world. He said, "Do you hear that? That's the sound of my childhood!" He took a long, audible breath. Then he said, "We don't need to walk to the road. We do not have to sleep in a hotel. I don't need to buy you a

new plane right away.” He paused, then said, in his most gravelly, chest-resonant Wizard voice, “My friends, would you like to see something very cool?”

With a series of swift gestures, he altered the air around him so that he stood beside a simple, freestanding door.

Sofia said, “Where does it go?”

Merlyn said, “Anywhere you would like, my love. Where may I take you next?”

She said, “I could eat.”

Frank concurred.

Vivica said, “Is it weird that I really feel like I have to be vegan, suddenly?”

Frank said, “I get that.”

Merlyn said, “I know a place.”

He opened the door.

END