

TRANS MAGICK

Suffer
a Witch
to Live

AIMEE NORIN

*TRANS MAGICK:
Suffer a Witch to Live*

By Aimee Norin

Smashwords Edition

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To Kathleen,
A Great Person and Witch

“When any government, or any church for that matter, undertakes to say to its subjects, This you may not read, this you must not see, this you are forbidden to know, the end result is tyranny and oppression no matter how holy the motives.”

[Robert A. Heinlein](#)
If This Goes On—

PREFACE

In *Trans Magick: Suffer a Witch to Live*, a coven of witches sues the Christian god for peace in a court Between the Worlds. It is a satirical, sardonic, comedic romp that addresses deadly serious issues in religious tolerance and tolerance of difference that have gone on for thousands of years. Parts of the novel are dire, life and death, yet much of it works with quirky characters and absurdity to shed light on things that have been going on—and also things that many people believe should happen.

TM:SWL is set in a small town in Kansas, the Buckle of the Bible Belt—a region of the world just gaining indoor plumbing, that most people hadn't noticed even really exists, that has struggled on an official, state level with allowing evolution to be taught in schools, or how to how it should be referred, struggling to include Intelligent Design into class rooms. After a hate crime against the coven, and the ruling of a local judge the coven can no longer circle, the coven summons a tribunal of three Celtic gods who are ready to dispense justice. The gods encase the entire town in a 9 mile radius sphere to capture everyone present, prevent anyone else from entering, and then they inspire conflict between the witches and the Judeo-Christian fundamentalists within, bringing their three thousand year war to a head. The rest of the world learns about the war and tries to interfere, but it seems only the witches, and the Pope, are allowed. The climax of the story, however, does involve the entire planet as major changes are made.

Jessie Lynn Lyons, the High Priestess of the coven, is transgender neutrois, self-defining as variable, no particular gender that fits a binary description, or gender fluid. Because she was born overtly male, she prefers the feminine pronoun and reference to help balance an implied masculine gender. After several reincarnations, dealing with issues of herself, social justice, and witchcraft through millennia, she has come to believe that a binary gender limits her ability to connect with the energies of the cosmos, the All Power, the Goddess, as it tends to harmonize with the identity or nature internalized. For Jessie, the cosmos is everything, both masculine and feminine, and she finds ecstasy in harmonizing with All.

Wicca in the Coven of the Silver Moon is eclectic with symbols and tools, practices and beliefs self-inspired or taken from several different schools of thought. If one is familiar with the Craft in various popular forms, Gardnerian, Cochranean, Correllian, etc., coven workings will be familiar, yet nothing herein is meant to imply any particular Tradition.

Aimee Norin

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

A transgender neurois witch and her coven, in a small, fundamentalist Christian town in Kansas, sue God for peace in a court “Between the Worlds.” Facing oppression, the coven summons a tribunal of ancient Celtic gods who place a magick sphere around the town, within which magick becomes objective, demonstrable to muggles, even exaggerated. Fearing the witches, the town fights back, it blows up into a war, and the entire world becomes involved, including the Pope.

PROLOGUE

JUST OVER THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, I was living in southern France when local Christians burned me at the stake and took our farm. There had been some kind of sickness that made its way around town the prior month, killing over a dozen people. The townspeople were scared thinking their humors were off or they were being punished for something. They didn't know what to do. They let blood. That didn't work, so they prayed and found Satan as a cause. They needed to cut the evil out from among them, send it back to hell. They needed someone to blame.

A little girl with Asperger's syndrome, I was an easy target. My father disappeared when I was a baby, leaving just my mom and me. Mom had been able to hold onto the farm with a little help from good people in town—but my nature took up most of her time, and she never was physically strong, so we were barely surviving. Then she fell ill along with the others and passed away. The next day, alone and devastated, I was crying by the road, when four scared elders found me.

I screamed for the rest of my short life on a stack of branches—which hurt all the more, inside, because all I had ever wanted was their help.

I've been scared of Christians ever since. I've tried not to fear them. I know there are good people among them. But the fire that burned my body left its mark on my soul.

The first time I woke up in this life, I was scared because I didn't understand those things. I was a young boy (or girlish child, inside, maybe)—I don't know—soon after my sixth birthday. I had one of those powerful experiences when, as a child, you wake up and realize you're alive—except that in this life, I found myself standing in the middle of a small, Kansas wheat-farming community, a hundred miles from a library, at the very buckle of the Bible Belt, scared down to my socks with my knees shaking, wondering, *What the hell am I doing here?*

I looked around. Everything seemed to be normal, so what was wrong? Why was I so scared?

I had just been to our one-horse Christian church down on Main Street with my parents, trying to be a good girl and learn how I was a sinner. The preacher had given us his famous “You're goin' to hell for sure” sermon, the same one he gave every week. Heaven was where it belonged. The folks were friendly. And Santa Claus seemed to find his way into our foursquare farmhouse every Christmas Eve, even though we didn't have a chimney. He was magickal.

What could be the matter?

Plenty, if you don't fit in.

I was male, on the outside, as far as anyone knew, but I couldn't accept that in myself. I didn't feel like a boy, but not as a girl, either, really. Sometimes I thought I did, one or the other but nothing ever settled in with me. I loved my folks, the country and our farm at the south edge of town, but the town, I'm sure, wished I was gone.

When I was eight, Daddy passed away of cancer. Mom and I carried on as well as we could.

After I graduated high school, I went to the Big Smart College over in Kansas City. Pastor Enos said there was no reason to go to college. No one else had, and look how they turned out. He told me he was afraid college would corrupt me, and I suppose he was right in his way. I

discovered pagans in a class on comparative religion, got into a coven of witches out of curiosity, connected to the Cosmos as Myself—neither binary gender—grew my hair and had breast implants, and wound up High Priestess of the coven by my senior year.

Wicca was it! It fit me like bark on a tree. Hell, *I fit myself* like bark on a tree. We embraced each other so warmly, I felt it was an old friend come through time to love me. Suddenly, the grass, the trees, the soil, the hill (the only one in Kansas I know of), the cosmos, all spoke to me, and I *got it*. There was energy in all things, everywhere and in everyone. *Life exists*, I learned, in everything: you, me, the other animals, the earth, the moon, the sun, the seasons, the stars, the vacuum of space, the cycle of life, and in the coordination and connection of all things.

The cosmos had been shouting for me since forever, and I'd only sometimes heard.

Where had I been?

Through past-life recall, I began to learn about things I'd suffered centuries ago—different sexes I had been and how those sexes affected the way I connected with things—when awareness hit me even harder than that first time on Main Street, out in the middle of town. When I woke up this second time, I was scared *because I did remember*: It seems it was my burning, back in France, by the church hierarchy, the very people who claimed they were there to help, and by the secular authorities of the town, a corrupt and insecure social system.

It was traumatic.

And it explained a lot—though not why I chose to reincarnate in Kansas.

But I believe things don't happen by accident. There's always a reason, and it was clear that something was up. I knew it meant more than just becoming the witch I'd been accused of. I meditated many times, asked for guidance from the Goddess, and, for the longest time, never got a clear answer. Just the vision of a path she suggested to me: *Go back home to the farm and start a coven*.

No way! I thought back to her: *Move to San Francisco and open a nightclub*.

Coven, she fired back.

Move to New York and get a job in theater, I thought back to her.

Ashfield. I could feel her adamance.

Like hell! I thought to her, along with a few other things that I'm sure she noticed. There was a definite metaphysical short circuit in there somewhere, a transistor I probably fried blazing through on a high-speed astral projection.

Yet I heard her as clearly as my own mother, completely unruffled, as if thinking to a child who needed it repeated: *No*. And then she added a simple, unequivocal, *Go*.

That's all I got. The rest was a feeling of warm embrace and acceptance from her, a vision of how it could be, and a strong sense of trust.

Having graduated from the Big Smart College, I knew that move was a bad idea. A coven in that particular small town with its fire-breathing preacher? That'd be like being a Democrat or an abortionist, or knowing how to read or, worse, think. No way. Forget it. All those nice, God-fearing people would condemn me to hell in a heartbeat. I'd be shunned, ridiculed, outed and ousted. Ostracized. Beat, hung, whipped, shot, and scorned. I wouldn't even be able to go to the grocery store without being threatened. Even with the rich inner glories of Wicca, that was not my idea of the good life. There was no way I'd give in to the Goddess on this one. Must have been a little slip in the cosmic connection, a blip in the astral wireless. I would *never* agree to that.

So I moved back to the farm and started the coven as I was told.

Damn.

I had to submit to her! Part of being a witch is perceiving the big picture across one's many lives, and the theme of my soul's evolution—whether I liked it or not, apparently—was Historic Justice. There have been some three thousand years of persecution and oppression of witches, beginning with the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, with official scriptural commandments for condemnation by word or deed—scripture readily abused by the Church to support its “moral mandate” and “authority,” to oust anyone of a different faith. Torturing, killing, scapegoating people out of fear and greed for power, under the guise of righteousness, has been with us for a while now.

I'd been there before and was in no hurry to go there again, but evidently I was being advised to do something different this time. And I had well learned the wisdom of listening to the Goddess, even if I didn't know how to do what she was asking.

How could I deal with something three centuries—or three millennia—past, with all the players long gone, bodies dead and buried, or burnt, their souls moved on to other incarnations, changed and shuffled and unsure anymore who they were back then, what they'd done, or why?

That kept me stumped. And to be fair, I never would have figured it out had the gods not intervened.

Before this starts sounding like an idealistic whine for justice, let me assure you, it's not. Nor is it about the raucous hell we rained all over town, or how to be a witch in the great state of Kansas.

It's about how I came to love people I thought I hated, trust people I thought I feared, and turn something divisive into a cause for unity. It's about a sense of justice in an isolated town that becomes the epicenter of an historic fight for survival. It's about standing up to an engrained establishment while it evolves into a whole 'nother world.

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CHAPTER 1

THREE OF SWORDS: Beaten

“Good evening. I’m Connie Knight, and this is the Swift News Network.” The camera on the news anchor, in the studio, shifted slightly to the right to include a background shot of Cape Kennedy. “A crowd of over a hundred thousand gathered today for what would have been the launch of the next section of the International Space Station, but the launch had to be delayed due to the intrusion of a small private airplane.” The camera switched to a shot of a frightened man sitting in a Cessna 152, with a dozen unsmiling uniforms and suits surrounding him, weapons at the ready. “When questioned, the pilot said he honestly wasn’t trying to get a closer look at the launch, that he was simply lost and trying to locate his home airport of Clearport, Indiana.” Cut back to a close-up of the perky Ms. Knight. “Authorities have detained the man pending the repair of his compass, or the Second Coming, whichever comes first.” She smiled warmly.

The camera shifted to the left again for a background of a pentacle over a cross. “Religion is alive and well, but while membership is officially up, attendance has been dropping across the nation. A sociologist reports the drop to be about ten-point-five percent over the past five years—roughly the same percentage as the growth in recreational weekend soccer games.

“There is one religion, however, which has been on the rise, though it may surprise you: Wicca. It’s the religion of Celtic witchcraft from ancient days”—she smiled again—“and the kinds of people drawn to the faith may surprise you. Bob Eastman, our Martyr Correspondent explains.”

Cut to Bob Eastman, in his khaki adventure vest, holding a microphone to a smiling middle-aged man in a business suit. It’s downtown Philadelphia, because the shot has the cracked Liberty Bell in the background.

“So, Mr. Baker, you’re a warlock?”

Mr. Baker’s smile loses some of its luster. “No, no. That term has no reference here. Men aren’t ‘warlocks.’ Any Wiccan is a witch.”

“So, Mr. Baker, witches are famous for doing magic?”

“We try to keep it to ourselves, but, yes, we do magick. We like to spell that with a ‘k’ to differentiate it from stage magic.”

“Ok.” Bob tried hard to keep his amusement in check. “Uh, how does that work, exactly?”

Mr. Baker tried to explain and also segue: “You know, it isn’t just witches who can do magick. We have our way of working with it. But most folks can do a little magick.”

“How’s that?”

“I think it’s an ability that’s gradually evolving in our species.”

“You make things go ‘pop’ and disappear?”

Mr. Baker was looking less than pleased with the direction of the interview. “Sometimes we wish they would.”

Mr. Eastman paused, looked around a bit as if to see whether anyone was eavesdropping, and asked in a conspiratorial tone, “Aren’t you a little bit afraid to go around telling people you’re a witch—I mean, after the way they’ve historically been treated?”

“Any group can be hated by someone,” Mr. Baker said, his full smile returning. “But I don’t suppose it’s any worse than going around telling people you’re a reporter.”

“And this is Bob Eastman, SNN. Back to you, Connie.”

Close-up on Connie in the studio, who suppresses a chuckle. “Okay. In other news, scientists for the Federal Communications Commission have been investigating strange reports of radio and television interference in several cities in the Midwest, ranging from Omaha to Tulsa. The interference occurs usually within a couple of hours after dusk and is seen as ‘snow,’ or white noise, on television sets. No explanation has been offered; however, both politics and sunspots have been ruled out as possible causes. One instructor of the paranormal at an elementary school in San Francisco says the receivers could be picking up stress from farmers in the area frustrated with the growing trend toward huge out-of-state farming corporations and rising production costs.

“An unnamed military source, however, warns against the possibility of a terrorist threat. No one knows for sure.”

* * *

It was just after dusk, and the cloudless sky had faded through blue to black.

The Coven of the Silver Moon stood tense and earnest in our circle of six in the grass field just south of my barn, on the southwest edge of Ashfield, Kansas, on a plain so broad and featureless, Lewis and Clark themselves would have gotten hopelessly lost looking for its edge. The afternoon wind had died, but our candles burned in hurricane lamps on the center altar, anyway—a precaution against possible gusts, which were common enough on the plains. Our robes hung loose around our bodies and swayed with our motion as we chanted in desperation. The air brought the smell of wheat, plowed fields, and cut grass.

All the lights were out in the house. The barn blocked the meager effects of the few streetlamps in Ashfield, and I’d shot out the field light over the bunkhouse years ago.

The stars were bright. The land glowed under the billion stars flung overhead, as perfect as the Goddess herself. Green wheat turning gold shone full and silvery in the starlight for miles, though dim on the neighboring farms. The Summer Triangle, rising in the east—Altair in Aquila, Deneb in Cygnus, and Vega in Lyra—formed an arrowhead pointing south, a brilliant orientation for anyone needing direction. Everything gave us energy: other galaxies, the planets, the constellations. They all wrapped themselves around us in the night’s light. The Milky Way glowed in its crooked east-west swath across the sky, as if painted by the hands of the gods.

The earth lifted its heart to join the heavens in such moments, alive, at night, to those who’d see.

It was perfect for us, forming a circuit of energy for our desperate work. In our minds, we could shut out all other effects in the world. In that moment, we were an island of *magick*, isolated, alone, free of distraction. We could hear nothing but our own chant, see nothing but my farm and the natural earth around us. There were no other people, no other thoughts, no other agendas. Nothing else existed.

We needed focus. We needed the power of destruction. A friend of ours, good old Mr. Johnson, who ran the grocery store down on Main, was dying of cancer. Lymphoma. We were not about to let that happen. We were going to destroy it and restore him to health.

As a last resort, conventional medicine failing, Mr. Johnson asked for our help, though it couldn’t have been an easy thing to do. So, in the name of love and the preservation of life, we

were raising another Cone of Power in the waning moon—a towering vortex of energy to destroy his cancer and banish it from him, leaving health in its wake. We worked feverishly. We didn't know how much time he had, only that it was little enough.

We were holding hands, standing in a circle with eyes closed, envisioning a white-blue electrified cone rising up from the Earth around us and over our heads, spinning widdershins, counterclockwise, in the light of our moon and purpose. The waning moon was especially good for destructive energy, and widdershins was the direction of unmaking, dismantling. Or cleansing. Bobbie Sue's hand was strong on my right. Faye Poke was on my left. Stormy, my black Lab, lay half asleep against the barn, where he usually was. He gave us love, helping in his way.

The coven was strong. These were six good witches who knew what they were doing. In our minds, each of us saw vibrant strands of jagged lightning jar the walls of the cone, and in the seeing, the cone *was*. Hands held tighter. Voices grew louder. We chanted over and over to Hecate, crone goddess of the last waning moon:

*“In this night, we deem this hour.
Work this rite to raise our power!”*

With each chant, the cone became more visible, more electrified. It was hypnotic. Our skin tingled with the energy we raised. Our lips burned. Sparks blew from the cone, showering hair and robe.

We never used our mundane names in circle, so I called out to Bobby Sue in her coven name: “Scathach!” Great Celtic warrior. In the building energy, my tone was sharp, heated.

Bobbie Sue was as crude as a shingle on an outhouse. Though angry half the time in daily life, she could focus her energy like a laser, and when she did, she was a powerful witch. Hearing her secret coven name, she spat her feelings into the cone. “*Power!*”

At that simple word, the cone grew and sizzled. We felt it on our skin. We kept chanting:

*“In this night, we deem this hour.
Work this rite to raise our power!”*

“Amerach!” I said to Faye. An Ulster Druidess and time manipulator.

Faye Poke liked to think that her husband didn't know she was a priestess in the coven, but secrets are fantasy in a small town. Truth be told, he didn't want to know. “Now is the time! *Now!*” she ordered, the energy rising.

The cone sparked and buzzed, crackling with electric power. Outer fringes of hair began to ionize and frizz, standing out with the static charge.

“Gwyn ap Nuad!” Celtic god of fallen warriors. Again I had to raise my voice. The crackling from the cone was growing.

Hearing his coven name, Jack Miles, general all-purpose lawyer and initiate in the coven, threw his head back and shouted to the cone, “*Know your target!*” programming the cone for its destination.

In our mind's eye the cone jarred the air around us, the smell of ozone proof of our work. Our skin, chests, and faces burned with energy. This cone was powerful. We were focused. We would destroy the ugly cancer, see it wither into dust, the power of the cone blasting it away into the cosmos. *Save Mr. Johnson.* We knew it with the certainty required for magick.

* * *

A rusty gray Dodge Charger bounced over the dirt road, with four hostile men inside and Eddie Foul at the wheel. He, at least, was full of hate and rage. Howie Bark looked uncertain about the whole business but, coward that he was, didn't have the courage to speak up. Matthew Wright, the preacher's son, also knew better, but his rebelliousness sought a righteous outlet in fighting evil. Johnny Lard was drunk, as usual. There was little enough of his mind left to consider the finer points of right and wrong.

Hands working their grip around wooden bats, they didn't speak, didn't look at each other, just stared at the farm approaching in the star glow. Wheels skidded on dust and gravel around a turn. The Charger's lights were off, and enraged though Eddie was, he kept the engine low to make no unnecessary sound. He'd fix them witches, the same ones as destroyed the wheat in last week's hailstorm. His goddamn wife was one of them. She should know better.

* * *

Then is now; now is then. The span of time being omnipresent and ever now, three centuries ago was happening as well.

In the back of the collective mind, torn from conscience by guilt, a crimson-robed cleric charged with the "moral authority of the church" condemned a young woman in angry late Middle French. "Satan worshipper!" he spat. "Consort of the Devil! You have brought this sickness upon us!"

The bloodthirsty crowd, begrimed with soil and sweat, growled and shrieked their hatred of the odd young woman—and, therefore, witch—who had brought their suffering. "Burn her!" they shouted, eager to vent their own pain.

The naked woman's head rolled of its own volition from one extremity of her chains to the other. She had been beaten by the church for days, hanging from manacles on the open-air scaffold by the castle wall, her feet inches from the ground. The cuffs around her wrists had long since cut the blood flow to her hands, black necrosis ruining the flesh there although, mercifully, the fingers severed from her left hand no longer ached. She was bruised and broken everywhere by the boots of the angry mob. The guard, free to lash her whenever he felt like it—or, more to the point, whenever the crowd began to lose interest—had left gouges in the skin of her breasts, back, and stomach. She could barely see through swollen-shut eyes. Her left arm and right leg were broken.

Her mind, a vague wash of pain, thought for a moment to beg for death, to beg for God or anyone else to hear her. Just make it stop. What were they talking about? Would no one understand? But her body was too broken to cry out, and the crowd too noisy to hear anyway.

"Hang her!" someone yelled again, perhaps to distance himself from a similar plight, to make safe his own skin by tormenting another's.

"Burn her!"

"No! She has yet to confess her sins!" the cardinal warned. This was just what he needed.

* * *

Our skin burned so from the cone, we felt like steel workers around a coke oven. Flesh heated; sweat beaded on brows; muscles twitched. Faces looked up, eyes still closed, minds focused only on the energy swirling overhead.

“Sirona!” I called out, a Celtic healing goddess.

Small, quiet, gentle Annie James jumped at the sound of her coven name. “*Sear the sickness from his soul,*” she murmured softly, almost intimately, to the cone. I could barely hear her behind the shimmering, buzzing vortex. She had worked for Mr. Johnson since the eighth grade and loved him as a father.

Mary Lou Foul, an initiate, jerked to one side at the crack and spark of the Cone swirling noisily over our heads. But she didn’t break the circle. Never break the circle. Her hands held on with a grip of iron. She was sensitive; she would be a strong witch.

“Rosmertha!” I shouted to her over the noise. A Celtic and Roman Gaul goddess of fertility and abundance.

“Banish this sickness from our friend!” Mary Lou told the cone.

The cone spun faster and grew with her energy.

In trance, I could feel our minds as one, building the truest cone yet. It felt right. We would beat down the lymphoma, drive it from his system, leaving healthy tissues one with the powers around him to sustain the recovery. When we had raised enough energy, we would, in unison, send it his way as a charge of healing power, with all the blessings of the Goddess.

* * *

A dungeon in medieval Germany. An old man lay stretched on the rack, trying to hold on to life. The wheel was turned a little more, and with a sharp pop, his left shoulder pulled free of its socket. And yet, he could barely groan, because he couldn’t breathe. That was the worst of it. The parting of skin and bone was agony, but if he couldn’t breathe— His mind knew nothing but suffering. His prayer begging God for help, unable to form words, was reduced to pure, gibbering need.

Elsewhere, the sky was black with the smoke and cinder of a hundred bodies burned together. Though the citizens claimed openly that it was the right thing to do, secretly many of them vomited or soiled themselves, and they would later go home, crying, and spend the rest of their lives trying to clear the vision from their memory. The mortifying scene was impossible to witness without the morbid, grotesque sickness worming it’s way inside, for no matter how misguided or cruel, the watchers were still human.

* * *

A ghostly figure, present yet unseen by mortals, watched the torture through the veil of astral planes. His face contorting in grief, he cried and scratched a hundred more ticks on his slate. Humans, given choice, misused it so. Life, so hard to build and guide, so beautiful, was so easy to defile and destroy. What could the gods do when humans chose evil? He lowered his translucent head. Waves of despair filled his soul.

He turned in sadness to watch the coven. To him, all time was now. He saw the car scabble around a dirt corner toward the farm.

An astral tear fell from each eye, for he could only record, not intercede.

* * *

The gun-metal gray Charger stopped, with the barest squeak of brakes, beside the cattle guard in the fence. Men got out, left the doors open, and walked up behind the barn. Eddie Foul, tapping his bat against the riding heel of his boot, peeked around the corner at his wife, groveling in a satanic cult. His gut boiled. She was a disgrace. The sight sickened him. The other three stood around the corner, refusing to look.

We saw our Cone of Power solidify around us and over us in our perfect, inviolate circle. Its energy fused with our bodies, which channeled it, focused it, empowered it. It was spinning faster, widdershins—to the left—its destructive power growing for the cancer. I had led this coven long enough. I knew these witches, felt their power. All were focused only on the cone. If we were to help Mr. Johnson, no part of us could be distracted.

“Focus on the cone! Channel the energy!” I shouted at the coven. They knew this well enough on their own; I merely urged them on.

“And *Aradia!*” I yelled my own coven name. Protectress of the witches. High priestess of the coven. Leader of pagan ways on our island of magick.

My skin and lungs burned with the power coursing around and through us. It was hard to breathe, even to speak. We had raised such power! I yelled as best I could to the cone, “We charge you with the power of nature, the earth, the gods, and the cosmos! *Go and kill the cancer in our friend! Destroy it utterly! Drive it out of him! Restore his body to health!*”

“He is healthy!

He is healthy!” the coven chanted.

“With this magick IT IS DONE!” I shouted.

Suddenly, a great BOOM ripped through our minds. *Deafening!* The cone was shattered by intrusion and exploded overhead in a concussion of sparks that covered the whole farm. Heads were thrown back by the force. Coven members staggered, the breath knocked out of us, blinded by shock, unable to fathom what had happened.

All heads turned in horror to the east, where someone had broken the circle, the psychologically inviolate barrier between the worlds of the earth plane around us and the astral planes within.

Eddie Foul beheld us with contempt, fire in his eyes, a grimace on his twisted lips. He shifted his gaze to his wife, Mary Lou. He swung his bat hard and flat against her back, bringing to bear the full force of muscles toned by thirty years of pushing people around. She was knocked off her feet into the middle of the circle, landing facedown on the altar, on the ground in the center, unconscious. Her robe caught the flame of a candle.

Eddie smiled.

The coven erupted in screams, as much from the shock of the attack as from the very real and physical ungrounded energy we had raised in our bodies. We were in a daze from our altered state of consciousness, for we hadn’t disconnected from our magick. We hadn’t had time to ground the excess energy. We had little understanding of even being attacked.

Everyone's first impulse was to continue holding hands. It was a cardinal rule in circle; we'd been trained against doing otherwise. But we were soon taught a new lesson when another bat slammed into the back of Jack's knees. Matthew Wright wore an uncertain mask of victory.

The crack of Jack's bones, and his screams of agony jarred us all into action. Some of us tried to run. Some of us tried to fight back. Bobbie Sue pushed the unconscious Mary Lou off the altar, grabbed the *athame*, the ritual knife, and charged at Eddie, screaming. I grabbed her wrist and bent it till the knife fell in the dirt. With a bark and growl, Stormy charged Eddie and got two broken ribs for his trouble. He wailed when he hit the ground, disabled but still trying to protect us.

After that, they hit us at random—bats across faces, chests, arms, legs. Skin was torn, bones broken, internal organs bruised and lacerated.

Four men with clubs can ride roughshod over six unarmed people in short order. It was all over in thirty seconds, a bloody mass of black robes scattered on the ground, covered in red blood and tears.

"Get up!" Eddie shouted at Mary Lou. She didn't move. "*Get up!*" he ordered again. When she still didn't move, he kicked her in the ribs, then turned to look at me.

"Keep her, you fuckin', goddamned devil lovers!" Eddie said to those of us who were still conscious. "Fuckin' witches! Fuck around out here in the dark." He spat on his wife, and the four of them started walking away.

The lucky ones could groan or cry. Some vomited from their injuries or from the ungrounded energy.

Mary Lou lay on her back, unmoving.

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CHAPTER 2

FIVE OF WANDS: Prohibited

It was cloudy over Vatican City. Shy, insecure, socially inept, twenty-two-year-old Monsignor Anton Maldea ran across Saint Peter's Square and up the steps into the basilica. He knew it was undignified, but his assistant had urged him to hurry.

Doors opened to hallways, and these onto the open, sculpted gardens leading to his beloved Pontifical Academy of Sciences, a hundred meters north of the basilica. Normally, he would walk slowly to savor the atmosphere, a rarefied blend of Holy Church and a university campus—heaven on earth, to him—but today he hardly noticed.

More doors opened to stairs leading down to the subbasement that Maldea called home.

"Monsignor! I'm so glad you're here!" His assistant, the aging Father Demel, seemed overwrought "We've got something."

They hurried through the large suite containing some of the most sophisticated electronics and computer systems known to man—the nerve center for a grid that spanned the globe. Over the past eight months, Maldea had worked to set up the system, get everything installed, and assemble his crew. Forty or more priests scurried, talking excitedly about whatever they were discovering.

Though filled with enormously expensive equipment, the communications center had a slapdash feel, as if it had been thrown together in great haste. There were no partitions, and the desks were not even squared. Computer and telephone cables were not bundled or harnessed together but merely strung like vines and creepers down the sides of desks and across the floor, which were haphazardly and only partially covered with a few rubberized floor mats.

Two steps up from the main floor, Monsignor Maldea sat down at the big, antique oak desk—God only knew how old it was—overlooking the huge electronic array. He performed an important function. Appointed by the Pope himself, he was the director of investigation in a newly formed department of the Roman Catholic Church's ancient and infamous Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Holy Office. Formerly known as the Holy Roman Inquisition. The next most important dicastery after the secretary of state of the Vatican for the Roman Curia. Protector of the moral integrity of the Church. The most secret, powerful, and highly protected board under God.

* * *

"Jessie Lynn Lyons, for the Love of Pete, sweetheart!" My mom scolded me with my whole name. It was clear she was pissed. "If you're such a powerful whiz-bang, lightning-shooting-out-of-your-fingertips witch, who can pop things into thin air and turn warts into gnats or newts or whatever the hell it is, *then why on God's green Earth couldn't you see them boys comin'?*"

That was mom: stalwart frontier woman cloned from a transporter-room glitch soup of the strong and the ditz. With her hair in an actual Auntie Em bun and wearing bib overalls—as if to

give the impression she ever did real farm work, she bitched while she leaned over the tub and washed my hair, trying in her way to nurture me back to health.

Yes, I was grown, but nudity is no big deal with me, and she had seen it before.

“Ya got both woman and man’s parts, now. I thought that was supposed to help you!”

She was referring to my breasts and male genitalia.

“The cosmos is neither gender, Mom, and don’t think I am, either.”

“You can make babies,” she said.

“Yes, I can.”

“You don’t take women’s hormones, do you? You never did?”

“Right. These,” I cupped my breasts, “are implants.”

“So if you can get a woman pregnant, you’re male.”

“I—don’t think I want to do that,” I said, simply.

I soaked in the tub, let her scrub my aches and pains away with her old long-handled brush, and stared out the second-story window of our farmhouse at some eighty square miles of picturesque country spring morning. There was no screen over the windows to blur the view, and there was just enough breeze to bring the scent of wildflowers and apple blossoms.

Mom never cared much what others thought, and for some reason, different as she was from everybody else, she never seemed to piss anyone off. She’d talk a blue streak about Goddess knows what, eventually answering her own questions with made-up answers and blabbing her fabrications all over Intelligence Central—the beauty parlor. Done with my hair, she switched to washing my back because, frankly, I couldn’t reach back there right then.

Mama had no trouble avoiding the sore spots, which were lovely shades of violet and blue. “With the fancy robes and power of the Gods coarsin’ through your veins all the way back to Goshen, you ought to been able to zap them bastards right over to Ned Baker’s outhouse—”

I hadn’t jumped in fast enough.

“Aw, Mom, even Jesus had bad days. They sneaked up on him in the garden, didn’t they?”

“Don’t be tryin’ to piss me off, now, hear?” she said, putting her long-handled scrub brush down on the edge of the tub with a stern finality. “Jesus coulda’ zapped that bunch o’ redneck twits back to King Tut with a single thought if he’d wanted! Power of the spirit, without even any dancing like you! But anyway, he suckered ’em in so’s he could be famous for the rest of his life—that’s eternity, for all you heathens as don’t know.”

No point in arguing the point with her, so I just lay there in the bathtub looking like your garden-variety witchy punching bag. I needed to soak some of that hot water into my joints and get them working again. I could think of a few other things I needed right then, too, but I wasn’t about to bring Cody to her attention.

A good, bone-shuddering orgasm is a wonderful antidote for all sorts of aches and pains.

“Doesn’t that kinda invalidate that whole speercheeality-frolickin’-in-the-night-outchonder thing ya got goin’ with yer weird friends?” She helped me out of the tub and dried me off with motherly tenderness.

She was trying’ to bait me, but I knew my mama. She loved me and put up with us as well as she could. Sometimes I think she even liked our Craft a little, since it gave her something to bitch about.

She was just pissed because I was hurt. She didn’t like seeing her baby all banged up.

“Bless your dead father’s soul. If Hank were alive, he’d roll over in his grave and then whup the tar out o’ them boys’ asses.”

She helped me get out of the tub, dry me off a bit, and limp over to the bed in my room. I sat down, glad to get off my right leg. The bruised muscles there hurt something awful.

“You gonna be a boy or a girl, today, Jes?”

“Neither.”

“Well, ya gotta wear somethin’. What is it gonna be?”

I thought of Cody. “How about girl-*ish*.”

Momma rummaged through the closet.

Stormy walked in and dropped by the bed, no doubt nursing his ribs. I gave him a good pet on the brow with my left foot.

They hadn’t broken anything on me, for which I was most thankful. They must have come close, though—I had a healthy set of bruises across my face, arms, and belly, a rib that hurt like hell when I breathed or moved my arms, and a left wrist that felt as if a truck had run over it. My right thigh had a huge, dark bruise that wrapped all the way around.

But I’d been hurt before and knew I’d get past it. Actually, I kinda looked like I did that time I fell off the tractor at age twelve and got rolled under the edge of the disk harrow. Scared the life out of my daddy. I should have been killed or dismembered. Goddess knows why I wasn’t. Those blades could have cut me into bacon, but somehow, after banging into everything else between there and my daddy’s knee, I slipped right in between the disks and got out of it not much worse off than I was now. Six shades of blue and too sore to get away from Mama’s cursing and Daddy’s crying.

I should have held on better back then; and I should have been more aware last night.

I shook my head and shed a tear for my dad. That memory hurt me all the more since he died years ago. I couldn’t bear the thought of causing him pain.

“This kind of thing hurts the most in the morning when you get up,” I said to reassure my mom. “After you loosen up some and work the kinks out, it’s not so bad.”

Mama eyed me critically, then brought a set of clothes to me. “Please tell me you’re not gonna wear these things.” A blue, long-sleeved blouse and a pair of jeans.

“You picked ‘em out,” I said.

“That’s ‘cause I think you’ll go for ‘em. Sheriff Cody thinks you look mighty fine in your *pink* blouse.”

“He wants me to be a woman.”

“I guess he’s gay. Can’t miss that twinkle in his eyes, just like I used to see in your daddy’s. Beats the hell out of me. You you ain’t got no— You gonna get a vagina some day?”

“Mom!”

“Well, hell, where’s he gonna put it?”

That was Mom. Match me up again. Cody Bo Wright was a fine man. I knew him since grade school—really my whole life—when he started coming to town with his father. “The pink blouse makes you look feminine. Some.”

“If he can’t accept me as I am, we’d never be much good together anyway.”

“You dress like a man, most of the time, honey.”

“These are women’s clothes, Mom. It’s just jeans is all.” I never thought I looked manly.

“They’re boxy.”

Guess I was looking at myself, sitting on the bed there naked, ‘cause Mama said, “No, hon, it ain’t your figure. Yer pretty enough with yer long hair—look better ‘n I do. It’s just, men don’t like strong whatever-you-are, and when you’re out there claiming you can change the world with

the power of your mind, you scare 'em off. Even Cody, and he has a gun. Somewhere at home in a drawer.

“You make a man go limp as overcooked spaghetti.”

“He’s also Pastor Enos’s son,” she said. That kept coming into it. “So is he gay?”

“I don’t think so, Mom.”

“Well, you ain’t a real woman.”

“I don’t want to be just a woman! Can you get off it?”

She changed the subject. “Get dressed before you catch cold, she said over her shoulder as she walked out of the room. “And you should wear the pink blouse.”

“I’m not gonna wear the pink blouse. If he’s not man enough to say he wants me, then he couldn’t handle me if he got me.” I started picking through the clothes she’d laid out for me on the bed, and put the underwear on.

“Why do you wear women’s panties?” Mom asked from the hallway.

“Because they’re over male parts, and I’m trying to be *neither*! It balances me out a little!”

“A bra over them tits is not balanced, then.”

“I wear the bra so I don’t flop around. That’s just practical.”

Mom came back into the room carrying a load of clean laundry in her arms. She grumbled as she dumped it on the bed. “Thirty-two years old and never been laid.”

“Have, too!”

“You prob’ly laid a few swingin’ dicks over in Kansas City— Men or women?” She turned and headed back out of the room, down the stairs, talking back to Jessie as she descended. “But here at home, you’re prudish as a spayed bitch. You git dressed, now, punkin’. You been babied far enough.” She gave herself a half second’s pause. “Goddamn sons a bitches hurt my baby,” she growled angrily at my attackers. I could barely hear her after that as she disappeared. “I’m gonna go into this here kitchen and see if food still cooks normal. You prob’ly got all the electrical magnetic currents voodooed outa whack to where the yeast won’t rise and eggs won’t fry—”

Normally, Stormy would have followed her downstairs to the kitchen, but that morning he stayed with me, hugging me in his way.

I loved him, too.

I stood wearing my pink blouse beside Mary Lou’s bed in our little one-horse, two-room hospital. Her bed was slightly inclined, sheets draped neatly over her still form.

The rest of the coven was messed up, but Mary Lou had taken the hardest hits—no surprise. Eddie Foul was her husband. Her broken jaw was wired shut, and her head was wrapped up like a wounded soldier’s, to help keep the swelling down. Some big-city doctor might have done it differently, but we weren’t that fancy around here. What I could see of her right side was bruised. Her ribs were taped, and her left arm and leg were also in a cast. Her right arm had an IV line in it.

Bad as she looked, she was conscious. When she saw me, tears ran down her right cheek. I knew that was as much from the oppression we’d known as from the beating and concern over letting Mr. Johnson down. She tried to speak.

“Sh-h-h, honey. It’s okay,” I said. But I broke down anyway and cried over her. Pulling myself together, I shook my head and said, “Don’t talk, hon; your mouth’s wired shut.” She looked like she wanted to. “We’re not gonna let this thing get us down. We’ll pull together.”

We'll be alright. *You'll* be alright. I'm here. We're all here, you hear me?" She cried some more. "And that asshole son of a bitch will get his, don't you worry."

She heard me, but she wasn't in the mood for a pep talk. I think she'd have laid her head on my arm if she could move well enough.

"Doc Gurney says you'll be okay. He said you didn't want to go to the big hospital in Wichita."

"Uh-uh," she said through clenched teeth.

"That's okay. You'll be all right here. But I told him, if something more serious develops, he's to ship you out pronto. With no argument from you—got that?" Her parents had passed on, and her brother was gone. That left the man who had put her in the hospital in the first place. Or us. Somebody had to look after her.

"Uh-huh," she intoned agreement. She seemed to appreciate that I was trying to care for her, and reached for my hand to hold it. Then she nodded off to sleep.

After a few minutes sitting with her, I walked out of her hospital room and tried to enter Mr. Johnson's room next door.

"Uh-uh, missy," Liz Ironfist said. "You ain't goin' in there without a gown. Doc'll get all bent out of shape if you do. Got to protect him from bacteria and such."

So I went over to her at the nurses' station to suit up. After the chemo treatments, Mr. Johnson's immune system was down, so Doc Gurney required anyone seeing him to wear gown, mask, and gloves. Dressed to code, I picked up my eight-by-ten photo and walked in.

He was on his back, asleep. His mouth hung open unnaturally far, jaw muscles more slack than normal. He wasn't snoring, but his breathing was labored, with the pauses sometimes going too long in between. His hair had all fallen out, and he was emaciated, thin skin stretched over bones, as if his body were already in the grave but his spirit hadn't caught up to the fact.

His room was as sterile as an operating room. Liz might be a bit of a hard-ass, but she was one hell of a good nurse. Everything was scrubbed clean. His sheets were neatly folded at the corners and smartly over his chest, his Foley catheter draining down behind a flap there into its reservoir. He had multiple IV lines in his left arm, one through an IVAC pump, and he had a little push button in his right hand to press for the Demerol when he felt too much pain. There were no fruits, no flowers, nothing that could endanger him. Doc wouldn't allow any such thing.

Maybe that was all good for the flesh, but the harsh, sterile conditions had to be hell on his soul.

The man needed nurturance. There had been some sorry dime-store print of fruit in a bowl hanging on the east wall when I came yesterday, just before our last circle. I had pulled it down and thrown it in the trash on my way out. I looked at the new picture Liz had put up since then: a cheesy plastic print of sheep on a hillside. I had to replace it. He needed something a bit more meaningful, so I put that one in a drawer and hung up a photo of his store on Main Street. It had been a sunny day. Nice picture. Bright. It was something he loved that showed accomplishment.

Mr. Johnson continued to sleep. I didn't speak to him, and he didn't wake, which was good. I didn't want to tell him what happened, and why we had failed.

Disgusted, I stepped out the front door of the hospital. If I smoked, I'd have lit one up. If I chewed, I'd have taken a chaw. If I drank much, I'd have pulled out the old hip flask and had a belt. Jesus, where was a good vice when you needed one?

I walked over to my pickup, an old, rusty-red Ford half-ton, took the sling off my left arm, and threw it on the seat. After what I'd just seen, my injuries didn't seem too bad. The pain was tolerable if I walked easy.

* * *

Nineteen people stood outside the two-story brick courthouse on Main—the tallest building in town other than the grain elevator and the church steeple. I looked at them from the post office across the street, still nauseated from last night's row.

They were not a mob, but they were uneasy, appalled at what they'd heard. Their feelings were a mix between "How could those bastards do such a thing!" and "How could the sheriff arrest people for doing what the Bible said?"

No matter what, it was the biggest thing to happen in town since the coven started ten years ago.

They watched me walk up the courthouse steps, looking like I'd been run over by a herd of buffalo. I honestly didn't remember who had hit me, or what with. I don't think I wanted to remember. These people in town were my friends, I tried to tell myself. This was nothing a good beer or two wouldn't fix once I got home.

I wanted to stop and cry, but I couldn't, because I wasn't just their friend. I was also the high priestess of a coven in their simple God-fearing town, constantly working for acceptance, teaching them what we were about and what we *could be*. I needed to show strength, resilience, and leadership.

"Shannon, Bill, how are you?" I asked, hoping for the usual friendly response. They all stood around, unsure whether to condemn or comfort me.

Everybody already knew what had happened.

Bill Poke, Faye's husband, was the first one to speak to me. "Did you do it?" he asked, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his bib overalls.

"What?" I asked.

"Kill the wheat," someone from the back added.

That's what they were worried about?

The wheat crop had been beat to hell the previous week in a hailstorm. Took out most of the county, some of mine included. But bad as that is for the crop and the economy of the whole town, it was par for the course about every other spring. Mother Nature liked to send thunderstorms through these parts.

Welcome to Kansas.

Bill jerked his thumb back to the interior of the courthouse. "Pastor Enos says God did it to punish us for letting you operate that *coven*." He said it like he was afraid that even saying it could bring down God's wrath. It was clear that others standing around thought the same thing. "Says we shouldn't tolerate your witchin' games. You're satanic. And you keep seducing people to join you."

"Oh, come on, guys," I addressed the whole group. It was not yet a mob. "You've known me all your lives. You know better'n that."

"You used to be a man," someone said.

"She still is," someone else said.

"You weren't always that way," said Edna Brown, standing behind Bob. "You got bad when you went to that college over in the big city." Like it was a disease. "Ought to close down big-city colleges. Gives people ideas. Before that, you was just a wimp."

Then I could see. My work had taken two steps back—again.

I could no sooner give up the Craft than give up sex.

I had tried to show them that the Craft couldn't operate the way they were told as children. We could raise only good energy, for good purposes. We could work spells only for something positive. There was no devil, no Satan, in the Craft. We weren't Satan worshipers—couldn't be, since there wasn't one. He was a Christian idea, and we weren't Christians.

"Guys, we can't operate that way," I said. "We just follow two main rules. First, the Wiccan Rede—"

"Don't listen to him," someone said.

"It's just 'An it harm none, do what ye will.'"

The crowd erupted in shouts and threats.

"God, she's preachin' again!"

"We don't want to hear it!"

"Get it out of here!"

"It just says we can't hurt anyone! Beyond that, do what you want. What's so bad about that?"

"Shut her up!" they yelled.

"Jessie! Drop it!" someone else shouted.

"But that's all it says," I shouted back. "And secondly, the Law of Return: 'Ever mind the Rule of Three: What ye do comes back to thee.'" I truly believe they didn't hear me say that last part through all their yelling. Someone pushed me from behind while I was trying to get it out. I stumbled.

"It's like 'You reap what you sow' in church!"

"Don't quote the Bible to us, witch!" a dozen of them shouted.

This was bad? Whatever energy you send out into the cosmos comes back threefold. If we were to do anything evil or hurt someone, it'd be like hurting ourselves in the first place. Like karma. On the other hand, if we did good things, that, too, would come back to us threefold.

I needed to share with them what we were doing last night, how we were trying to help heal Mr. Johnson. But we all had taken a sacred oath to keep secret anything that the coven did. And we had given Mr. Johnson our solemn oath, too. If anything were to be revealed, it would have to come from him.

But these people needed something. They were more than accusers; they were friends, hopefully, or could be, on some level. And they were scared, hurting, questioning themselves and us.

So I tried to make the information general: "We work in our circles only for good. We commune with the positive energy of the earth and the heavens." I looked around at them. Some of them seemed to understand me. Others were shaken. "We meditate. We help heal people who ask for our help. And we also ask the Goddess for a bountiful harvest."

That was part of the problem, and I knew it: referring to multiple deities. Using terms like "the Goddess" and "the God," when they all knew there was only one God, who wasn't a woman, who condemned pagans to hell.

"I'm a farmer, too, guys. You know we all get the same rain and the same hail."

Everyone turned to look up the steps. Eddie walked out of the courthouse. Not in chains. Not in cuffs. No trail of cops around him to protect him from angry mobs, but as a free man, unencumbered.

He stood at the top of the steps and looked down at me, angry yet triumphant. He dropped down the steps three at a time to stand in front of me. Unabashed, in front of everybody, daring them to do anything to stop him, he threatened me. He leaned close into my face.

“So, did you get my message last night?”

There was no way I would answer him.

“You better stop your witchin’ ways,” he threatened, “and keep away from my wife!”

Sheriff Cody Wright came out of the courthouse and walked up behind Eddie.

“What’s that you’re sayin’, there, Eddie?” he said, tapping him on the shoulder. “You askin’ the high priestess for her advice on somethin’?”

Eddie turned and stomped off.

Sheriff Cody, at thirty-five and six feet, was handsome as a logger. He always got my motor runnin’, and a little more often than my mama knew. Never carried a gun as there wasn’t any real need for one in these parts, unless you were shootin’ at a coyote trying to get into your chicken coop. He was a good sheriff, as far as anybody needed one in this normally placid little town.

It had been a peaceful town, usually, in the past. It was common to violate all manner of traffic laws. Nobody ever signaled before a turn, because there was hardly ever anyone else on the road. People parked where they wanted. Esther Case even drove her tractor to the grocery, ever since her truck broke six years ago. The state said to put up speed limit signs, but in Ashfield that was just fussy, since few people ever went that fast.

“I think we’ve had enough here,” Cody said. “Everybody, split it up, now, you hear?”

Reluctantly, at this wise suggestion, folks began to drift away.

“You keep her away from my home!” someone said in needless fear.

“There’s no problem,” the sheriff assured them with a smile.

I stepped over to Cody. Some folks craned their heads to see. The attraction between us was obvious for anyone who wanted to see. But we never seemed to blossom into a full-blown relationship—because he was reluctant, with me, in my situation. I knew Mama was right. It was my gender, but also the “witch thing” that held him back, kept us apart. He liked me some, but it was hard for him to allow it. Why, he wondered, did I have to be so gosh-darned different?

“Hi,” I said, meekly.

“Howdy, Jess. You don’t look so good,” he said with genuine tenderness.

I looked down, around, trying more or less to stop my tears. I didn’t want him to see my pain, my hurt at being attacked and beaten and then watching the asshole walk away.

“Better’n some.” I nodded toward the hospital, where Mary Lou lay.

“Yeah.” He looked so solid and strong, and so disgusted with Eddie and his bunch. Finally—I thought he never would—he moved his hand toward my waist, and I leaned against him for what little comfort I could find. As much as I loved the Craft, Ashfield, and my farm, the stress of it all could wear me down some now and again.

“Don’t worry about it, Jess. I’m sure it’ll work out all right.”

“But the judge let them go?” I stood back on my own, wiped my eyes. Judge Hack had come over special for this mess from the county seat.

He nodded.

“All four of ’em?”

“Yeah. Didn’t even let ’em plead. He wants to think about what to do with ’em.” He pondered his next words. “He thinks you may be partially at fault.”

He didn’t miss the shock on my face. Judge Hack was an educated man. He should have known better.

“No, no. He knows Wicca is a federally recognized religion and you got a right to practice. But you gotta admit, it is sinful.” Sounded like he meant that. Or was he mocking his father?

He could see my retort coming. “Now, don’t start with that, Jess.” He looked fairly disgusted, which was the point.

“Well, then don’t *you* start with that.”

He seemed to back down. “Sorry.”

I stepped back and took his hand off my waist. How, with a hurdle like this, were we ever going to grow beyond an occasional, behind-the-scenes date?

Cody stuck his thumbs in his pockets—one of his resolute gestures. Whenever he did that, I knew he was going to lay down some law.

“Judge said you have to quit doing witchcraft for now, Jess. No more covens. No magick spells. No circles. Till this thing blows over. Else there’ll be trouble.”

I backed away from him, openmouthed.

“You’re gonna have to tell your coven to leave it alone for the time being, till he figures this thing out. If you don’t, he’ll make up something to get you for, and you know he will. So you understand?”

* * *

“Jack!” I called out as I walked into the office on Main, across from Mr. Johnson’s grocery. “Ja-ack!”

“Attorney at Law,” read the window in the door, which wasn’t locked, as usual. “*Jack?*” No one seemed to be there. I went back out and closed the door. The window was a little loose, and it rattled.

Jack’s house was just around the corner, so I walked. No point in driving the truck eighty feet.

“Jack?” I knocked on his front door, then let myself in. It wasn’t locked, either.

I heard a groan from the living room and walked in there. He was trying to get out of his recliner—not terribly easy to do with a cast on his left leg. It was one of those plastic ones that strap on.

“Jess.” He sagged back into his chair when I came in. “Hand me that remote over there on the TV, will ya?”

Tossing it to him, I said, “How’s the leg?” He had taken a pretty good whack across the backs of his knees.

“Well, they’re both pretty screwed up, but that left one’s a pain.” He knocked on the plastic with his knuckles. “Doc said I should take it easy until the swelling goes down some. Some ligaments were traumatized.”

“The rest of you looks pretty good,” I said.

“*Oof,*” he moaned. “Got some nasty bruises, and I think I need a new chest. Got one on order from a catalog. The problem’s not so much my knees; it’s my ribs. Didn’t hurt so much last night, but this morning, damn! I can barely move.”

“You’ll limber up. Been there myself. Hurts like hell now, but it’ll feel a lot better this afternoon.”

I went into his kitchen to raid the fridge. “Want something?” I called out?

“Hell, yes! Haven’t made it as far as the kitchen yet, either last night or today. Why don’t you fix me something?”

I came back in there and handed him a glass of milk. “You really are a wuss, you know that? You’re supposed to be big and strong, an inspiration to all us delicate girls.” I walked back into

his kitchen to fix us some breakfast: eggs, turkey hot dogs for sausages. They were lower in fat. A few potatoes.

He almost chuckled. “Girls, my ass. Some of you ’bout as tough as rawhide.”

“Bobbie Sue,” I called back.

“Yeah, and Faye Poke’s not exactly what I’d call dainty, you know. Get pretty buff slopping hogs, though she doesn’t need it in the classroom, I suppose.”

The banter continued while I made breakfast and brought it in. He accepted it gratefully, and I sat down on the couch and ate my second breakfast with him.

In spite of his attempt at good humor, I could tell he was hurting. This attack had shaken his confidence. He had always felt a bit alone in our coven, being the only man there and unsure how he fit in. And now his helplessness in the face of last night’s attack was affecting his male pride. Though he didn’t say it, I knew he was down partly because he couldn’t save us women from disaster. Man, the protector.

“You heard what Judge Hack said?” I asked.

“Yeah. Cody called me.”

“That’s illegal, isn’t it? Telling us we can’t circle.”

He thought about that one a while, mulled it over. “Well, it’s not like we’re making bonfires on the courthouse lawn and he’s tellin’ us not to ’cause we might burn the place down. That, he could tell us not to do. We circle on your place. It’s private, so you can’t even raise the ridiculous notion of needing a permit to gather. We don’t use any illegal tools. No drugs. We don’t parade naked—at least, not where anyone can see. We aren’t sacrificing animals, so they can’t bitch about that. Hell, we aren’t even making any noise or creating light pollution. There’s *nothing* we’re doing wrong. So, yeah. It’s a blatant violation of the First Amendment.

“And Kansas allows Wicca to happen—which, by the way,” he said more to himself as an aside, “still shocks the bejeesus out of me.” He shook his head in surprise, though it wasn’t new information to him. “I mean, this is the state that deleted evolution as a topic in 1999 by the Board of Education, that held the Kanas Evolution Hearings in 2005 to push “intelligent design” on us.”

“Isn’t the Craft a religion?”

“Yeah,” he said. “We can’t objectively prove all our tenets—like most religions—but it doesn’t fight science. I think it’s a sensitivity to energies around us, part of our evolution as a species. I think we’ll get more and more sensitive to it in coming millennia.”

“Me, too,” I said. “But we can’t circle, now?”

“We could butcher his ass in court, if we went that way. Be a test case for the state.” He adjusted the way he was sitting in his chair, with a little grimace, and set his empty plate down on the end table. “But I don’t think you want to do that.”

“Why not?” I asked. Not that I was out for blood, wanting to defeat the judge or show him up, but I was surprised that he wouldn’t want to challenge this obvious injustice.

“Oh, well, follow it through. Could we challenge all these things and win? Yeah.” He considered that. “Sure we could, in time. But who knows what those secondary rounds would spawn?”

“But that’s outrageous, Jack!” I said. “These are good people. This is Eddie’s doing. *He’s* the asshole, always has been. Not the people in town. And they all hate him, already. Hell, they’re *afraid* of him.”

As soon as I said it, I realized that was part of the problem.

“Yeah, they are, which is one reason they don’t want to stand up to him. But it’s not the basis for the problem.”

I thought about where he was trying to go, and I understood.

“We could go to court and fight for our freedoms,” he said. “We’d win, and that’s typically the way we hang on to freedoms in this country. It works. But in this setting, they’re more afraid of us than of him.” He said it calmly, with conviction. “This touches something deep in their souls. It’s the same reason people have always been afraid of witches. Winning would only force them to allow us to practice, without ever really going to the heart of the problem.”

“That if we have power, we might hurt them.”

“Right.”

“That there’s an ingrained fear and hatred of us.”

“Right again. You could fight for your rights, and half the people in the world would support you. But if you want to live in this town with these people, you might not want to do that. Not force them to live with fear. They never will—not for long. Especially not with someone like Eddie around, and a judge who’s sympathetic to him. Somebody will beak the law and do something drastic, which may be worse than what we got last night.”

I sat there on the couch, pondering this, incredulously. “You mean just live with this wrong?”

“No, no. Are you out of your mind? I mean fix it another way. If you really want to solve this problem, don’t force them to put up with us. Fix the fear. Fix the *reason* they’re afraid.”

* * *

A battered bunch of babes—and that included Jack, too, but don’t tell him I said so—sat around my kitchen table, each sporting an assortment of bruises, slings, or casts. Stormy lay against Momma’s antique kitchen hoosier, his ribs taped, too.

“I ought to go over there and smack a harelip on that son of a bitch!” Bobbie Sue’s fist banged down on the pine tabletop.

“You sound like some country bull dyke, dear, talking like that,” Faye said maternally.

“That’s all right by me!” She looked at Faye in defiance, then over at Annie.

Small, quiet, delicate Annie James blushed.

A couple of others looked at them in surprise, including Faye. Her “oops” facial expression suggested she leave it alone.

“What’s this mean, exactly?” Faye asked. “We can’t circle? Spells are outlawed?”

“We can’t invoke the Goddess?” Annie asked. “No magick? What about Mr. Johnson?” Annie was still fairly new to Wicca. She had been with us for less than a year, and I admired the way she hung in there with us.

“No, guys,” I said. “They all stopped and looked at me. “In this country, in this day, we could surely fight for our rights to have our own religion, separate from the churches. Of course, it’ll cost a bundle.”

Jack affirmed that.

“It might take years.”

He affirmed that, too.

“And in the end, we’d be forcing ourselves onto friends who don’t want us.”

“Bit of a contradiction there,” Faye said.

“But we have rights!” Bobbie Sue yelled, ever the angry fighter. “We’re not gonna roll over and take a fucking from these people! *Minorities* have rights!”

“That’s why this is America, and not some dictatorship,” Jack said. “We all have a right to our own religion.”

“Yeah, but we’ve had that right for two hundred years, and nothing’s changed,” Faye said.

Bobbie agreed. “We’re gonna wind up being a bunch of old witches, hobbling around on our canes and throwing balls of yarn at Eddie while he comes zooming around the barn.” Annie buried her face in her hands. “Or we’ll wind up dead.”

I held up my hand to calm them. “I didn’t say we wouldn’t get ’em, though.” I waited until they calmed back down as much as could be expected. I walked around the table.

“The best way to change the past is to change the future,” I told them all, doing my best to sound confident.

“Poof! There it goes. Magick it to hell and gone.” Bobbie Sue’s sarcasm surprised me.

“We’re only limited by our own creativity. S.O.P. hasn’t changed much these last three millennia, so no matter how crazy it sounds, we do something *else*,” I said.

“Sherlock Holmes would like that reasoning,” the schoolteacher in Faye pointed out.

“And Captain Kirk,” Bobbie added. “And Dumbledore.”

“He’s dead,” Faye said.

“We’re witches, aren’t we?” I said. “We invoke the gods and goddesses for their power and expertise. The people in town fear us because of our spirituality, our magick, right? They don’t fear how we might use the *law*.”

“Right,” they followed.

“And this coven is powerful, is it not?!” I demanded.

“Yes!” they responded in unison. That was a fact. This coven had the right combination of something, that final ingredient that made the difference between mediocre magick and something altogether more serious.

“I’m saying,” I said, looking into each pair of eyes in turn, “we won’t do this through the earthly courts. We won’t litigate our rights with mortals. Let’s use who we are—let’s do it with the *gods*!”

Practice, from having been their high priestess for years, had given me the tone of voice I needed to command spiritual authority, to lead them down a divine path culminating in certain magick—real magick they had seen a hundred times, that had changed the world for the better—a fact proven in their daily lives.

I could see light bulbs go on.

Jack summarized: “We sue their God for three thousand years of libel, in an astral Between the Worlds.”

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CHAPTER 3

SIX OF WANDS: Astral Court

But we couldn't get it to work.

In secret, so we wouldn't rouse the town, we tried everything, used every legal symbol and key to altered states of holy consciousness we could think of. We met in circle every night. We chanted. We invoked gods and goddesses. We raised power. We lit candles, worked spells with herbs, stones, knots, chords, candles, oils, incenses, and brooms. We dressed in dark robes, light robes, purple robes, street clothes. We danced around a fire naked. We laughed and cried, cheered, pleaded, encouraged.

Nothing had yet worked.

We sent healing energy to Mary Lou and Mr. Johnson. Mary Lou was getting better, but Mr. Johnson worried us terribly.

But we made no progress on our suit.

We wondered if it was because one of us was in the hospital. Could be—we were only five instead of our usual six. That changed our combination. But we had to overcome.

Could it be because the goddess wouldn't hear us? Were we being unjust? Was it wrong to ask them to help us stand up to the church? If so, then what hell would come down on us for breaking the Rede and the Law of Return? Was it maybe too much to ask of the Goddess and the God? Maybe they couldn't confront a two-thousand-year-old church with two billion people in it.

No. We knew that much wasn't true.

"Keep trying," my old friend, Oceanna told me over the phone from San Francisco. She was another transgender witch who had been in the craft for decades. "Never give up. Believe in yourself. Believe in the Gods. *Know* that things can happen before they happen."

That was the message. All of us focused every day, all day.

It was high magick.

Mary Lou, from her bed, helped us. In her way, she gave us emotional support. We didn't ask her to visualize for us, because she was on pain medication, and on drugs she might hinder more than help. She helped by rooting for us.

We worked every night in circle. The moon as Cerridwen and Hecate waned, became a new moon through the Irish goddess Nair, and then waxed through the maiden forms of Anu, Hera, and Eri of the Golden Hair—and finally to the full moon as Brighid: the maternal goddess of the ancient Celts; "the Goddess" as the feminine All-Power; the Triple Goddess as the maiden, mother, and crone; and a smith as the supreme creatrix of the universe.

Then, one night under the full moon in early June, it happened. Better than even we had imagined.

The afternoon breeze had calmed utterly, with not a breath stirring. The oppressive heat of the late spring afternoon followed the sun west over the horizon, leaving its radiant afterglow in the earth to warm our magick.

At dusk, the full moon rose in the eastern sky. It was bright in the grass field on the south side of my barn, a few stars barely visible behind its radiant glow. The bare-wood barn stood charcoal in color, like the fence posts, against miles of ragged light gray wheat, still battered from last month's hail.

Our altar stood in its usual place on the grass, a small round structure of ash and willow, dressed in silver cotton, adorned with the symbols and tools of our craft: silver chalice, white candle, iron cauldron, and holy water for the Goddess; a golden candle, athame, wand, censer, and bowl of salt for the God; a clay vase of flowers, stones, and five-inch wooden pentacle for both; with the rest of the altar top covered in oils, minor candles, and talismans. In the center of the altar, as well, stood a third major candle: orange, for justice, for the Prince when he arrived.

Uncharacteristically, my Book of Shadows laid on a silk pillow next to the altar, imbued with years of successful workings, spells, and drawings. Its meaning for us was deeply magickal, associated with the essence of connection, Between the Worlds of the Realms.

All the candles were in jars or hurricane lamps, as breezes were often strong or unpredictable.

On the ground at the perimeter of our soon-to-be-cast circle stood one color-coded candle at each of the four cardinal points, honoring the four elemental quarters soon to be invoked: yellow for east and air, and red for south and fire, blue for west and water, and green for north and the earth.

The five of us wore black robes that night, with no hoods. Jack, Faye, Annie, and Bobby Sue stood in a nine-foot-diameter circle around the small altar, eyes closed, meditating on our magick to be worked that night. I stood as well in quiet meditation for several minutes, near the center, near the altar, letting the import of our night's magickal task sink in. Much was at stake: a man's life, medical science having gone as far as it could; our spiritual lives, our freedom to worship the gods and commune with nature as we saw it; and untold tragedies, human lives both directly and indirectly ruined over thousands of years of persecution and murder. This three-thousand-year-old crime of religious persecution would be corrected this night, I knew, by the ancient Celtic gods and the power of these witches here with me, tonight.

In that moment, everywhere within my mind-sight, energy began pouring up out of the earth, flooding the whole area's sphere of influence with a brilliant white-blue glow of spiritual flame. I felt my shoulders jerk to straighten my back in line with the flow, that it might move freely over me without any slightest eddy. This night's ritual, I knew, would be the most powerful we had ever invoked. That was the reason we formed a coven. That was the reason we were here.

I opened my eyes and looked at our coven, standing around our little altar in the night, knowing we would be successful this time. I was proud of them. Our confidence had been tested and found worthy. A less convinced group would have become discouraged by two weeks of failure, bringing forth doubt that our magick was up to the task. But we knew that it was waiting for something—as sure as dreams and inspiration, breath and air, earth and life—and were encouraged. Counterinductive logic, one of my old professors would have said: the longer something doesn't happen, the more likely it soon will.

I took a deep breath and selected my athame off the altar. It looked like a dagger with a crescent moon on the handle, but was used to point energy.

Our coven tradition was our version of generic Celtic Wicca. Finding works of wisdom in many sources, we had chosen to take aspects from various traditions and blend them into one we tailored for ourselves.

Now to call the quarters. I had done it a thousand times, but this night it felt ominous.

Feeling the energy all about me, I strode to our eastern quarter and began to speak. “Guardians of the east, of spirits, sylphs, of new beginnings, and elements of the air! Hear our request! Enter our circle and bless our cause. This Coven of the Silver Moon IS HERE! Inspire us with your knowledge of old! Help us share our message! Join us on our quest Between the Worlds!” I shouted, my voice strong in certainty and command of nature. “Inspire us with your wisdom as we cut through the ignorance and fear that *grips this town!*”

I felt the circle stiffen at the strength in my tone. I could feel the energies coming, surrounding us, empowering us. The tip of my athame thrice drew a blazing invoking pentagram in the air over our eastern edge.

Picking up the censer off the altar, I moved rapidly to the south, athame held high, and shouted in a voice somehow more powerful than before: “Powers of fire!” I invited. “Guardians of the south, salamanders, and spirits! We cry out to you in the name of countless hordes mutilated in the cause of our worship! Witness our magick! Transform our earthly fire into the passion of the age! Protect our circle in our work! Purify our strength and courage as we move Between the Worlds!” My athame drew three pentagrams of fire in the air to the south. The coven knew my actions and meditated on bringing energy to our circle.

* * *

Mom and Ned Bakes, her latest boyfriend, who owns and runs the café out on the highway at the edge of town, stopped on the east road to reconnoiter.

Mom had lived on the farm thirty-four years—since Dad married her and brought her over from the next county—so she knew where they should go to spy on us.

“We ought to be able to crawl through that wheat field over there,” Mom said, “past that first fence, and through that ditch,” she told him. “On the other side, there’s a rise. It’s Kansas, so it’s as small rise. We ought to be able to see ’em from there.”

“Right,” Ned said. I could just see him nodding like Joe Friday.

“Prob’ly won’t pick us up,” she went on. “She gets into them circles, she don’t notice nothin’ ’cept what she’s doing. The candles ruin her night vision, I expect.”

* * *

I brought the chalice, symbol of the Goddess and the alchemical element water and filled with fruit nectar, from the altar with me to the west. I held it in my left hand to receive the elemental energies there, and called the quarter: “Guardians of the west, undines, spirits, and the elements of water, hear our call this night! We witches of the Ancient Ways invite your presence and your powers to accent our own. Be with us this night! Protect our circle, witness our working, and bless our magick.” Then with the athame in my right hand—my power hand—I drew an invoking pentagram three times, high in the air to the west.

Everyone within the circle was filled with the Goddess’ essence.

Laying the chalice back on the altar, I took a green malachite stone with me to the north quarter and held it in my left hand to receive the powers there: “Guardians of the north, spirits, gnomes, and elements of the earth—hear our cry this night! We beseech you, join us in our circle and add your power to ours. Give us the strength and stability of the earth at our feet, and the surety of nature around us!” Then, with the athame in my right hand, I drew an invoking pentagram three times high in the air to the north.

After placing the malachite back on the altar, I moved to the east, just outside my witches. There I pointed my double-edged athame at the ground with my right hand and began walking around them deasil, clockwise, in one large circle, burning a mark into the earth with the athame's energy to define our sacred perimeter. During this ambit, I loudly spoke, "I cast this circle of energy and protection that our magick this night be pure and undisturbed. We hereby form this circle with the power of the Gods to be inviolate—a union Between the Worlds of the earthly plane and the astral plane, to protect us in our sacred workings. An it harm none, so mote it be."

"An it harm none, so mote it be," the coven replied.

When I had come full around to my starting point, I said, "The circle is cast, and we are firmly Between the Worlds—a part of each—where joy and sorrow, the beginning and the end, the past and the future, the image and the action, meet as one."

I laid the athame back on the altar and took my place among the coven, to the north along the side of the barn, with my back to the town. We all moved a little closer to each other and clasped hands.

My eyes were then closed, as were all, yet in my mind's eye I could see everyone, the altar, the flame from the candles. My mind was entirely focused on the task at hand, yet I could feel the warm night air, smell the grass under our feet and the wheat in the surrounding fields. The electric power of the earth surged of its own accord through my flesh, yet I could feel the beating hearts of the coven, and the blood quickening in our veins.

The All Power was at hand for those who knew how to sense it.

With the coven meditating on our goal, I addressed the gods directly with our blatant plea: "We Coven of the Silver Moon are here tonight, gathered in our sacred circle, protected from all without, energizing all within, focused on everything. All are here, and we are one.

"Cerridwen, with your cauldron of knowledge, I plead, give us your power!" I was now speaking directly to the Goddess. "Help us invoke the gods to this field. Help us form a tribunal to right millennia of wrong. Through the ages, witches, persecuted as scapegoats for the church's crimes, have burned. Their fire has scorched our souls and blackened the aura of every creed. For if one religion is bound, all are bound. If one innocent is burned, all are burned.

"Help us, Cerridwen, to impanel judges over this crime."

"Hear us!" the coven chanted over and over, raising and intensifying the energy. "Hear us!"

I silently asked Cerridwen if she was with us, and received the warming glow of her reply. *Yes.* A smile parted my lips, and I spoke to all the gods in unison.

"Gods tonight this haunting hour. Fill us with your magick power!"

The rising energy began to burn the skin on my stomach and breasts, through my arms, neck, and face. Muscles ached in preorgasmic tension, begging for release.

Mom and Ned lay on the lee of a dirt rim at the edge of a field and watched through night-vision binoculars. They had no trouble hearing, because we were purposely loud.

When the tension peaked, I opened my eyes and shouted to the heavens, at the top of my lungs. It was time to invoke the gods:

"Prince Lewellyn, first of three,

For mankind's sake, *we've need of thee!*
Hordes have plotted, evil done.
But battles rage and must be won!
Fair and just, our need is dire.
Cast this evil in the fire!
Man of myth and Celtic lore,
Share this court as none before!"

A primal BOOM shook the ground, the barn, the house, and everyone around. It felt like a cannon shot between the ears. All five heads jerked involuntarily to the south, where a bolt of lightning had blown the earth apart. There was a scream from somewhere to the left. A fencepost was on fire, its barbed wire frayed and twisted. A fireball mushroomed into the sky with a luminescent figure in its midst, hovering three feet above the ground.

There was a collective gasp, for we saw this with our physical eyes, not our usual inner vision. Prince Lewellyn was floating in the air, over my wheat! Looking at us.

The whole coven took a breath and stared.

"Holy shit," Bobbie Sue mumbled under her breath.

"It's the Prince," Jack said, gaping.

Terrible breach of protocol. They were not supposed to speak like that in mid circle. It could break concentration, destroy our work. Goddess, I'd have to talk to them about that.

But at least we kept holding hands.

And the Prince stood in the air, unwavering, his visage stern. We looked at each other and heard murmuring. That's when we noticed a crowd of townspeople, Sheriff Cody in the lead, huddled together by my barn, watching and, evidently, seeing.

This was completely outside our experience—and, no doubt, theirs.

"You wanna go over there?" Mama asked Ned.

"I'm fine right here," Ned answered.

I gave no direction to the coven. They knew what to do. I gripped tightly the hands on either side of me, closed my eyes again, and continued in my best shouting voice:

"Span the bridge between us new!
Join this triad, Sun God, Lugh!
Evil builds and burns the land.
Right it with your mighty hand!
Through believers, vision blessed,
Show us how to do this best.
God of Harvest, Master Lugh,
Come this night in justice, too!"

Another boom shook the air, the shock wave nearly knocking us over. Half the townspeople staggered backward. Again all coven heads jerked toward the wheat, eyes snapping open. Near the wheat, beside Prince Lewellyn, a brilliant red-giant sun, hot and swelling, grew out among

us, engulfed us, sunburned the townspeople—singed hair, clothes, and skin—then dissipated, leaving another luminescent figure of a man, robed in golden light and barely discernible amid its own brilliance.

Within our circle, we felt no pain.

Bobbie Sue began to say something, but thought better of it.

Several among the townspeople screamed, and two of them fled, running through the wheat toward the road. Another followed. The rest remained, anchored by their fear and awe. I don't think they could believe what they were seeing, yet they couldn't bear to miss it.

I carried on, staring Lugh in the face, pressing the cause of hundreds of thousands of victims, boldly demanding holy audience. My words were harsh, stern. My voice grew louder with righteous anger felt through the millennia, and confidence in the knowledge that tonight we were succeeding. My voice sounded unnaturally loud, almost as if I were speaking through a bullhorn:

“Winds howl; storms grow higher!”

The wind actually did build. I paused to flash a warning glare at those watching, while my hair whipped around my head. They had better not interfere.

“Whirl the wild mane; *warn with fire!*” I shouted.

“Rain and flood to wash the earth,
To this tribunal WE GIVE BIRTH!
Triple Goddess, need decreed,
Rule this court as our Brigid!
Maiden, mother, crone, so bold!
The time is right! *Let all behold!*”

Two gods held their place, hovering above the wheat. Five witches held the circle, eyes turned to the wheat. Two dozen townspeople held their breath, terrified to look at the wheat.

The weather kicked up into a localized storm.

Sticks and hay rose in the growing wind and whirled around us in a cyclone. Loose shingles in the barn sang their whine, broke free, and flew toward the town. Lightning struck from a clear sky. Rain, horizontal in the gale, stung the hands and faces of the townspeople, who cowered against the barn before unknown forces.

A wild gust blew Cody's hat off. It hit the wall of the barn, rolled and skidded along its length, and disappeared around the corner.

But not the coven.

Within our protective circle, the wind died, candles burned straight without a flicker, gowns hung lightly, and hair fell to lay undisturbed.

The townspeople were looking around, at each other and out into the field, holding on to their clothes. Looking for the Goddess. Deeply aware that the angry weather had hit them and not the coven.

Then the sudden storm ceased.

The area over the wheat, between Lugh and the Prince, seemed to open from some other world behind it—a place vast, near, dark, and colorful all at the same time. Knowing rather than seeing, we could tell that it was rich in knowledge and experience of past, present, and future. There, everything was one: all that had ever been and all that could ever be.

Our mundane thoughts filled with memories, our minds absorbed *akasha*—until our vision finally cleared, and there, standing in the air, centered between the other two beings and looking back at us, was the most beautiful woman any of us had ever seen. A bass hum, so deep it was barely audible, permeated the air and moved as she moved.

A huge, ornately carved oak bench materialized before the three judges and was set down heavily, with a thud that we all felt, though it remained three feet above the earth while still flattening—without touching—my wheat below.

“Devil worshippers!” Eddie Foul spat, breaking the silence.

“Satan lovers!” Howie Bark seconded.

“Somebody stop this!” someone else demanded.

“God, we shoulda never let this shit go on in this town!” someone said.

“Then let’s get over there and put a stop to it now!” Eddie shouted. “*Now* you see what we were doing?” he said, trying to justify his actions from two weeks ago.

The little mob quickly agreed and made angrily toward the coven.

Cody started to hold them back—

“*Hold your place!*” the Goddess, Brighid, roared in a deep, commanding alto voice to everyone that demanded absolute compliance.

Lugh pointed at the ground in front of the mob, and a sizzling bolt of fire barred their path, burning without fuel.

The people shrank back before a power they couldn’t begin to understand.

“Do not disrupt this court of law!” Brighid commanded. She didn’t look like someone to argue with.

It was the first time I ever heard Eddie stammer. “Sh—shit, it’s real.” He glanced at a couple of the others—looking for support, I supposed, though no one noticed him. The beautiful, blazing, terrifying woman-thing floating in the air had their full attention. She looked ready to fry somebody.

With a weight and gravity no one could fathom or explain, she said, “Through the ages, men have burned them. But not tonight! *NO ONE WILL HARM MY WITCHES!*”

The crowd recoiled at her words, and I could see the growing dark spot as Eddie pissed his pants.

Bobbie Sue, never known for having a sense of the appropriate, whispered, “Oh, she’s good!”

I gave her a dirty look. We all continued holding hands.

Cody, a leader in the town, found his speech, though he clearly knew nothing about circle protocol—well, to be precise, the tribunal wasn’t actually in our circle. “What are you!” he demanded of both Brighid and of me, his head turning back and forth. He was clearly troubled. “What are you doing here?” he asked of the Goddess.

“We are who you know us to be, mortal,” Brighid said, with maybe a touch of something somewhere between condescension and annoyance. I knew she loved humans, but she was definitely in a bit of a mood tonight. Angry at past injustices. “You heard our invocations. You witnessed the workings of these witches. And you know why we are here,” she snarled. She fairly shook as she brought her focus to bear.

“Do you deny knowing our cause?” Brighid asked Cody.

“No. No, it’s clear,” Cody said, indicating Eddie Foul, though he still wasn’t sure whom he was addressing. Was this some demon in disguise? A witch goddess, here to help the coven? Or was she, like God Almighty, for real?

“Aradia, Protectress of these Witches!” Brighid looked me straight in the eye.

“Yes,” I answered, though feeling, I must admit, a little insecure about claiming such a powerful name for my paltry, imperfect self before the living form of the ancient Celtic Goddess. It was a lot to live up to.

“Scathach! Gwyn ap Nuad!” Brighid called the names of warriors.

“Yes,” Bobbie Sue and Jack answered together.

“Do you mean to make war on these mortals?” she said, indicating the townspeople.

We didn’t answer, knowing the question was rhetorical.

“Amerach! Sirona!” Brighid called.

“Yes,” Faye and Annie answered.

“Do you seek peace?” She looked at us.

Lugh was clearly fed up, too, and spoke for the first time: “Rosmerta!” He said it almost as if it were a curse word, though I’m fairly sure he didn’t mean it that way.

“Yes,” We heard Mary Lou Foul answer, even though she was still in town in the hospital.

“Fertility and abundance—needing only to help, yet you lie in the hospital? But that’s not all!” He swept his hand at the townspeople. “Tell these mortals what you can do.”

She started to, but he interrupted her.

“And Amerach!” Lugh said.

Faye answered, “Yes.”

“Weaver of the Universe. You traveled through the depths of the dark labyrinth and back again to the light.”

The people around Cody were visibly shaken. They looked unmanned by fear, and they started to murmur, building energy for contempt of this astral Court.

“*SILENCE!*” Brighid shouted.

The force of her voice knocked them against the wall of my barn. Two of them fell quaking in the dirt. Brighid sat in all her ethereal majesty and looked at the assemblage in silence, the only sound the omnidirectional, permeating bass hum.

Finally feeling that she had gained control over her court, she continued in a slightly softer tone, though still very much angry and commanding. “You know why we are here.” Everyone was transfixed by her voice. “Through the ages, we have watched in horror the sickening strife brewing between the patriarchal and the pagan.” Brighid looked at everyone present, pagan and Christian.

“You fear! That is your flaw. You!” she waved at the townspeople, pressed back and squirming against the wall of my barn. “You fear the power the witches might use against you. And you”—she gestured to the coven—“fear the prejudice and oppression of these people.”

“*So be it!*” Lugh said. All eyes turned a few degrees to focus on him. “You have all been told before. When your doctors leave, it’s the shaman you want. When the medicine fails, the witch doctor’s herbs. But let a disaster happen, and you blame them, kill them, take their lands!”

“And I’ve had *ENOUGH OF IT!*” Brighid thundered, rising to stand in her majesty, throwing her arms into the air, her glowing robes a-shimmer. They felt a slight trembling in the earth, and the bass hum that filled the air rose and peaked as if the whole area were charged with her fury. The hair on all the human heads, filled with static charge, rose and crackled.

“Fear? Fear is the fire of the weak, begetting only anger and hatred and cowardice and *danger.*” She said the last word with foreboding, and her image seemed to grow in size as she spoke.

“Masses and outcasts, Christians and Wiccans, townspeople and coven,” Brigid said in godly wrath, her arms outstretched, waving to encompass our entire surroundings.

“Hear, this night, and until done,
Take them all, without them none.
Those you hate and learn to fear,
ALL pay heed and listen dear!
These nine miles of radius make
a circle of *magick, my witches take!*
Those without and those within,
Do your will!
We now begin!”

She looked in scorn at the assemblage, dismayed as a parent might at incorrigible children. She stared, looking ready to blast anyone who dared speak.

Finally, feeling she had been heard, she finished.

“As I will, so mote it be.”

She said it to everyone present, yet with an accusing finger pointed directly at Eddie Allen Foul. “And you,” she said to Eddie. “Damn you to hell.”

Then she, Lugh, and the bench vanished in a mushroom cloud of smoke. The line of fire before the mob died, the deep contrabass humming ceased, and the air grew still. Our ears tingled in the sudden quiet. No one moved.

Only gentle Prince Llewellyn remained, staring at us from where he floated above the wheat.

Two of the townspeople started for us, still in circle.

“*Back off!*” I growled. I’d had enough intrusion. I felt like crying tears right there and then, not of pain but of cathartic release, after the most powerful event I had ever experienced.

They did back off, and right away, almost eagerly, still holding their clothes to themselves as if the wind were still blowing.

Cody looked at me, questioning.

“Please leave us,” I said to them all in a much more civil tone. “This was supposed to be private.”

At this, he nodded his head and turned, and the assemblage followed him away.

The Prince addressed us, the coven, privately, speaking for the first time. “Be careful,” he said gently, as was his nature according to lore. “Be careful how you seek justice, that it not be revenge. Make sure you know the cause of a wrong before you try to right it.”

Then he gave a beautiful smile and gently dissolved.

The five of us stood weak and limp, in circle around our altar. The energy raised had been amplified beyond our expectations. We stood there for a long time with shaking knees, hands clasped, absorbing what had happened, until finally we sat and then lay down on the ground to rest.

After some uncertain time, when we had recovered, we thanked the gods for their help and meditated on what we had done. But this was so far outside our experience, we had no frame of reference. We asked various deities how we had done and whether we were on a good track, but we got no response.

Unsure of ourselves and what just happened, we finally dismissed the quarters, grounded and centered, and opened the circle.

Open but never broken.

Exhausted, we all took a step backward, knelt, and placed our hands on the earth to let the residual energy flow from us back into the earth. Our arms shook. Our legs were weak.

I lay down on the grass in front of the altar, where the candles still burned with a soft light beneath a million stars, watching overhead.

I didn't know what had happened.

I prayed I hadn't screwed up.

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CHAPTER 4

NINE OF CUPS: Magick

News anchor Connie Knight, wearing a loud red suit and matching lipstick, looked very serious. “According to Defense Department spokesmen, the electrostatic disturbances of late, throughout the Midwest, have been increasing. Earlier this evening, whole cities lost television and radio reception for about thirty minutes in parts of Oklahoma and southwestern Missouri. Let’s go to a live Department of Defense press conference currently under way in Kirksville, Missouri.”

A young, short, thin Army colonel, hair slicked back with too much grease, stood behind a large mahogany lectern, a thicket of microphones obscuring the lower part of his face. A horde of reporters stood around him, maintaining some semblance of decorum as they jockeyed and jostled for a better vantage point. One from the crowd asked, “Colonel Dart, where is the disturbance coming from?”

The colonel looked like a man more concerned with scientific research or, perhaps, classroom instruction than with public relations. Certainly he seemed out of place and out of sorts at a press conference, but he was doing his best. “We’re not sure. Yet,” he ventured, sounding a little absentminded. “From the pattern spread across the region, allowing for the variance in intensities, adjustments made for the types of receivers in question—you know, they’re not all the same. Televisions and radios operate in different bands, and within those groups there’s variance between type, quality, and material of manufacture. We can’t locate the signal, as it appears to be too diffuse, but it seems to be coming from an area north of Oklahoma, west of Missouri, and south of Nebraska.”

Where?

The reporters looked thoughtful, searching their minds. They weren’t sure where that was.

Colonel Dart continued, “That’s a region I’ve heard of called Kansas.”

The reporters murmured, asking one another if they had ever heard of this place Kansas before. They looked to the colonel for more.

“We have reason to believe it’s inhabited, because of its wheat export and a few taxes which are collected. What we didn’t know until now is that they may have developed a technological society, able to reach out to others.”

The buzz from the reporters grew louder as they talked excitedly among themselves.

* * *

“No. I won’t come out!” A head protruded from around the cracked church door, just far enough to reveal disheveled hair, one eyeball, and not much else.

“Aw, Howie, it’s just a bunch of witches with floating gods throwing lightning at the grass,” Cody said, trying to minimize it. “You can’t hole up in the church for ever.”

“Hell I can’t!” Howie yelled back.

“Me, too,” someone called out from behind him.

Cody gave it another try. “Let’s just go over there and talk to her. She’s lived here all her life. She’s not the enemy.”

Howie ducked his head back inside and disappeared.

Cody shouted in to them, “Hell, guys, I don’t want to go over there by myself.”

Nothing.

Cody shouted again at the closed door, “I got some garlic here! And a cross! A wooden croquet mallet!”

No response.

“Silver bullets?”

* * *

I sprawled on the linoleum floor of the kitchen with my black Lab, stroking his tummy. He stiffened his legs in the air and groaned in bliss.

“Well put, big guy,” I said.

I got up and walked out of the house to stare at the wheat field in the light of day. Stormy followed. The wheat where last night’s tribunal was held looked perfect. I waded out into the waving, almost-golden sea, the stalks came up to my mid-thigh and rustled against my jeans and brown round-toed boots. Though smashed flat last night, it was just fine this morning. Better, in fact, than the rest of the area still pockmarked from hail. I ran my hand over the tops, bending the stalks, looking for creases near the soil. No crop circles, no space ship tripod imprints, nothing.

Plucking a stalk, I took the head apart to look at it. The dog was a good listener, so, as usual, I talked to him. “If it weren’t for the hail, this would be one fine crop, big guy,” I said. He wagged his tail and rubbed his head against my leg.

Memory told me it had indeed all happened, but the part of me raised in this small Kansas town had trouble believing it. Could it have really happened?

I started back toward the kitchen, and Stormy followed. He was a good dog—followed me everywhere I went on the farm, though he didn’t like to venture into town much.

I got to the spot where the coven stood last night, and stopped. Something drew my attention to the place where the altar had been. Grass. Green grass. But not just grass. Something was different. It was broad daylight, midmorning. We weren’t in circle. We hadn’t prepared, but I began to feel the energy. My mind felt flush with something airy, beyond my usual awareness. My fingers began to tingle. My hair, while I’m sure it didn’t actually move, felt light and dry. And something occurred to me.

“Stormy?” I checked with him, but he didn’t seem to feel it.

I remembered what Brigid had said last night, and bolted for the house at a dead run. The door flew open before I got there. The phone was ringing and instantly flew off its cradle and into my hand.

“Jess!” it said to me.

“Faye!”

“Do you feel it?” she said.

I paused for only a second, took a breath, and said, “Yes. I do.”

“My God!” Faye said. “Do you know what I just did? It was the best sex I ever had, swear to God!”

We weren’t uptight talking about that sort of thing, like most others in town.

I began to giggle. “I know! I know.” And I don’t know how I knew, but I did. I could feel her excitement—more than that, I *knew* how she felt.

“Jess, do it. Just do it,” she urged.

And through the giggles, I did. I put out my right hand, palm out, facing the toaster on the counter three feet away. Both the toaster and my hand began to glow and sparkle blues and reds. The toaster lifted off the countertop to spin in place in midair. Slowly at first, then faster. Stormy barked at it, and I laughed, positively giddy. Faye squealed in joy and said, "I gotta go."

* * *

"*Sooo-ie! Sooo-ie!*" Faye hollered again at the pigs and dumped a bucket of kitchen slop in their pen. *What a mess*, she thought, shaking her head. Pigs rolled in their mud to cool off, she knew. Not tidy at all. At the thought, the pen suddenly looked like something out of one of those fancy homemaker magazines. It had tile flooring, plastic curtains around the railing, a nice new feed bin, and a little fountain on one side spraying dainty droplets of spring water out for whatever little pig might want to get cool. A brass drain in the floor caught the runoff.

Faye clasped her hands together and laughed, thanked the gods for their part, and reveled in this culmination of her magickal journey.

Her husband stood in the doorway of the barn, watching, and lost his glow from the sex.

* * *

Annie greeted Maggie Bullhorn as she approached the checkout counter with her groceries. "How you doing today, Mrs. Bullhorn?" she asked. Maggie gave Annie an absent smile and reached for her checkbook as usual.

Annie—rather artistically, she thought—waved her hands over the pile of groceries and threw their energy into a shopping cart at the end. They all disappeared and reappeared in the cart, bagged and tagged.

"That'll be forty-eight ninety-five, Miz Bullhorn," she said with a smile.

But Maggie was already on a sprint for the door. *Well, she's in good shape*, Annie thought giddily.

* * *

The phone rang again.

"Jack!" I said to it.

"Jess! Jesus, did you get it, too?"

Jack had just rebuilt the engine on his twenty-two-year-old Harley in an instant and didn't even have to pull the cylinder heads!

"Oh, Great Goddess," I said. He triggered a memory from something Bobbie Sue had said one night over beers maybe five years ago. "I gotta check with someone!" I said, and hung up and called over to Bobbie's. Didn't even use the phone—just force of mind.

"Bobbie! Bobbie!" I was both excited and scared, thinking, *Oh, no, she wouldn't*, and *Oh, yes, I hope she can*, and *She damn well better not!* all at the same time, hopes and fears scrambled.

"Bobbie! Answer me!" I left the house and walked out into the wheat—to get better reception.

Over at her house in town, Bobbie Sue, with the usual scowl on her face, stomped through her yard toward the garage, where her broom laid. She was determined as a cow at the feed trough.

“Yeah?” she said as if she hadn’t a care in the world and nothing big was going on. For her, just that one word of acknowledgment that someone else existed was a great sign of consideration for others, taking time out of her busy schedule to talk to someone.

“Bobbie Sue,” I said, you stand down! You don’t know what that thing’ll do! You could get hurt!”

Bobbie didn’t answer. She walked toward her ordinary old grocery store broom with the frayed plastic bristles, laughing and rubbing her hands together.

“Bobbie! That is a purely bottom-of-the-line broom!” I said. “It was never meant for flying!”

“*Was* a bottom-of-the-line broom,” Bobbie said back to me. “Now, Harry Potter wish he had it.”

“That thing doesn’t have an engine!” I tried to talk her out of this for her own safety.

“Sure, it does,” she said confidently, picking it up in one hand.

“It might quit!” I said.

“No, it won’t.” She sat astride it and kick-started it like a motorcycle, though the sound it made was more like a turbojet.

“You don’t know!”

“Yes, I do!” she screamed over the roar, and blasted off into the air, straight over her neighborhood, up at a forty-five-degree angle. Sound was more like a military fighter jet than a broom.

“You don’t know how much fuel you have!” I screamed after her, but she couldn’t hear me through the noise and her own yelling.

“Oh, Jesus! They’re flying brooms now!” Johnny said over at the church, bravely peeking out the window of the sanctuary.

“Horse shit, Johnny! You’re drunk.”

“No cussin’ in the Lord’s house,” Eddie Foul scolded.

The town preacher, Enos Wright, and the four most wayward members of his flock—Eddie, Howie, Johnny, and Matthew, Enos’s second son, had gathered in the sanctuary for protection and some spur-of-the-moment spiritual groveling for salvation.

They all walked through the pews to the nearest window to have a look. They could see the figure of a short, fat lady on a broom with a trail of smoke coming out the back, and hear the screams of both the engine and the rider. She was whipping all over the sky like a bottle rocket on the Fourth of July with its tail feathers twisted.

“Shit! She’s coming this way!” Matthew said.

“Boy!” The preacher reprimanded him for his cussing.

High overhead, they saw a slight dip in the flight path while Bobbie’s head turned smartly to stare down at the church. Though it was too far away for the guys in the church to tell for sure, I’ll bet you the farm there was a sinister grin on her face.

The broom turned, pointed directly at the church, and dived head-on, buzzing the church and ripping a patch of shingles off the roof. It shuddered through the building, shaking everything out of socket. Everyone inside ducked for cover under the pews.

Along with the Doppler effect-lowered frequency of the departing broom, they heard a wickedly gleeful laugh.

“Jesus!” the five of them—even Enos—exclaimed without thinking.

“Was that Bobbie Sue from over’t the grain elevator?” Howie Bark asked.

“I dunno,” his stupefied friends answered in chorus.

They watched her fly down the road—nap-of-the-earth flying, bouncing up over utility poles and mailboxes. Blew Maggie Haine’s apple pie off her windowsill and sent the curtains flying out the window.

“Sits that broom like a bull rider over’t the Clarksville rodeo,” Johnny said between nips of his latest pint of bottom-shelf bourbon, a touch of admiration in his voice.

Lying there on the floor of the church and peering out the window, they all tended to agree.

“Yeah, kinda what it looks like,” Matthew said.

“Think it’ll throw her?” Johnny asked?

Bobbie, who had never flown anything in her life, flew that broom like an ace. At a thought, it pulled left, right, up, or down. If she wanted to go faster, she went faster. If she wanted to hover, she hovered. Stop suddenly? So be it. Normal broom-flying physics didn’t apply. There was magick in the air.

Just for fun, she buzzed Maple Street at four hundred miles per hour give or take, up and over street signs, under power lines, through the tops of trees, bursting leaves off limbs with her shock wave. Then she turned and buzzed Oak Street at five hundred miles per hour, screaming at the top of her lungs, before turning to whip down Main at an eye-popping six hundred miles per hour—barely a streak even to those who knew she was coming. You could hardly hear her until after she was gone, when the noise about knocked you over. No car alarms were set off, because there was no reason to have any, but she did break the picture window out of the front of the post office. Shattered as if a bomb had hit it. Most of the garbage cans were fairly empty, so they went spinning down the street, bumping into cars.

Bobbie Sue was in heaven. It was effortless. She was as natural as a duck in water. And there was no reason she should follow any laws of physics; she sure wasn’t following any other laws. The wind didn’t bother her—just blew about enough to stream her short hair back enough for effect. She had no trouble hanging on, regardless of the g-forces. She just thought about it and flew, laughing with uncontained glee.

Over the school yard? In her dust an eyeblink later.

More power! she felt. And the roar of her twin engines, which is what it sounded like, doubled. She went wide and circled the whole town, just like in the military air show. She looked down at Stormy and me staring up at her. She probably assumed I was cussing, which I was. She started to wave, but even Bobbie Sue, incautious as she normally was, thought better of letting go. She was gone by the time she thought of it, anyway, the whole area having streaked by her before she had a chance to breathe.

For her, it was the fulfillment of a dream.

After a while, she pulled back on the stick and let her speed bleed off with altitude. Sitting pretty two miles above the town, looking across the Kansas countryside for a hundred miles, she paused. The town below was so small and beautiful! Fields of brownish wheat checked with plowed earth stretched to forever. Dirt roads, farmhouses, neighboring towns with water towers

—as far as she could see. The air was still. She felt light-headed, airy, dreamlike. She could stay there forever.

She looked up toward the heavens. Up there, high above the earth, at the edge of the atmosphere—what would it be like? Cool? Quiet? Far away from everything? Peaceful? The atmosphere had to fade to black somewhere up there.

On Main Street, people cautiously came out of their stores to stare, fearful in the practical sense because someone was flying low over city streets, and fearful in an abstract sense about something they didn't understand. A dragon with its hair on fire had roared through their town like something out of the Old Testament and stopped high over their heads to wait. For what, though? The people stood in silent dread, knowing this had to be something else scary from one of those damn witches.

Faye Poke's tenth-grade physics class looked out the school windows, necks bent back, faces up.

"Now, that's an exhibition of speed!" she said. She looked down the line of windows at her students gawking out. Her giddiness was almost as uncontained as Bobbie Sue's. She was about ready to burst with joy at her own powers, yet she was determined to make a lesson out of it for her kids.

"You all remember $F = MA$?" she asked them. She didn't notice their faces turning white. "We studied that last week. Force equals mass times acceleration. Well, looky there; that's a good example of it. If you take that little pudgy woman sittin' on her store-bought broom, at a hundred and fifty pounds, or a hundred and sixty or whatever—better call it one eighty—the broom at three pounds, boost it from zero to six hundred miles an hour in about three seconds, how much energy did Bobbie Sue need to channel?" Overwhelmed with the whole thing of her obvious practical magick, she had to scream as loudly as she could.

A couple of the students turned from the window to stare at their teacher.

Faye was grinning from ear to ear, and if not for magick, she would never have been able to do the calculation at that point. She was that light-headed. Then the dot overhead began to move in a loud roar, streaking upward at an eighty-degree angle, a trail of white smoke in its wake, and vanished from earthbound view. The roar diminished with altitude and faded. But the people still looked, anyway.

In his office at the hospital, Doc Gurney was reaching for a stiff drink of whiskey when he heard the loud double crack of the sonic boom.

He didn't spill his drink, didn't even flinch. After what he had just seen—

The loud double boom made by a woman on a broom hitting Mach 1 resounded through the church. Hearing it, scared refugees within tried to remember the instructions they learned as schoolchildren for what to do in the event of a nuclear attack.

Miles above them, Bobbie Sue pushed her twin-engine broom faster and faster? How high could she go? To the blackness of space? To the face of the MOON? She laughed. It never occurred to her to wonder why. She just knew she needed to go up, up. The world shrank beneath her until she could see half of Kansas in one glance.

Twenty thousand feet, thirty thousand. Six miles. Seven. Eight... The horizon of the earth began to curve. The sky began to fade.

Then it all suddenly, instantly quit. The roar ceased, along with her protection from the wind and cold, lack of oxygen and air pressure.

The broom followed a parabolic arc over the landscape, flailing in a freezing wind strong enough to rip her clothes yet thin enough to suck the wind from her fragile lungs. The broom, with its course determined by ballistic trajectory and its own poor aerodynamics, began to tumble.

Bobbie Sue couldn't scream, for that required air in the lungs. She spun off her mount, hands ripped free of the stick from the shock of the wind and her vanishing strength. She reached for the broom, snatched at it, but her fingers caught only air. Weightless over the apex of her arc, her legs flailed, looking for any solid surface for support, finding only emptiness.

Eight point six miles, eight point seven. Her inertia carried her over its arc. Then, at eight point eight miles above the earth—slightly east of the center of town—her speed diminished enough and her arc turned earthward. She was getting light-headed from lack of air pressure and oxygen. She couldn't breathe. The ground, only moments ago something to fly over, was now something to smash into. This would be the end. Her stomach rose in her chest, and she vomited.

How could this have happened? she wondered, then found it odd that she should ask such a question. She thought it quite natural that she could fly, and then thought it odd she couldn't.

Arcing eastward over the curve of the sphere, she watched the ground coming up at her, much slower than it had departed, but surely fast enough to kill her when she met it. It was humorous, really, she thought, that she'd thought it odd she couldn't fly anymore.

But her death was coming, and it was bound to be unpleasant. How to minimize the pain? Fear took over as the helplessness of her situation grew physically in her vision: real land, rushing up at her at a good clip.

A flash of reality caught her mind: her body hitting the edge of a sidewalk, her face bashing into the hot concrete, flesh ripping away to the sides, bones and blood spattering the street, with her legs faring little better on someone's lawn. Would she make a crater? If it weren't for all that damn pasta, she might not.

She cried to the gods to please help her! Stop her descent! Hurry! *Brigid!*

Yet she fell sure and fast, her ultimate horror to hit her full in the face dimming with her oxygen-starved consciousness—

Then, a way east of town at an altitude of six point nine miles, she re-entered the magickal sphere centered around their altar. With a sound as crisp as the crack of a major league bat hitting a line drive, the wind ceased, the cold disappeared, and she could breathe again. She thrust her hand out to her left, and her broom slapped back into it, solid and safe. With a fury born of desperation, she swung a leg over, straddling it. Shaking, blurry eyed, offering no direction to her broom, she held on for dear life.

The broom responded.

Was she flying again? She turned slightly left then right. Yes, she was. And with the earth still rushing up at her, she pulled back on her stick, willing it to slow.

Timidly, carefully lest she repeat whatever grave mistake she had made only moments ago last time, she eased the plastic broom onto a downward course. Still shaking, ever conscious of her height, she descended to two thousand feet, fifteen hundred, a thousand.

My barn took shape beneath her, growing larger with her approach. Traumatic fear threatened to return. Falling from this height, the roof boards and rafters of the barn would crunch through her body, ripping her to shreds before she hit the bales of hay stacked within.

From where I stood, she looked to be flying about as well as a B-17 Flying Fortress with half a wing shot off.

I put my hands on my hips and watched my careless friend crash-land.

Somehow, I knew everything Bobbie Sue had felt. I just knew it, as if her experience were my own.

“See, class?” Faye told her students in the best final week of school they had ever had. “And this reminds us that force of impact increases as the square of the speed.”

Every student in the room was at the windows, watching Bobbie Sue’s descent.

“So I think she’d better slow it down a notch,” one of them said.

“Yeah,” said another.

“I think it would help a lot,” Faye said.

Compared with how majestic and cocksure her takeoff had been, Bobbie Sue’s touchdown was something less than graceful. Forgetting that it might be a good idea to slow down before landing, she clipped the western eaves of the barn roof, which sent her tumbling down through the doghouse and part of the chicken coop, thence through the fence and into the wheat, coming to rest under several inches of plowed dirt twenty feet in.

“Impossible,” one of Fay’s students murmured.

“Well, then I guess it didn’t happen,” Faye said.

The rest were silent, looking toward my farm.

Faye looked after them. How could she make a lesson out of this? She taught a physics class. Hell, that was written all over this object lesson.

“It’s physics, class,” she told them.

Some of them looked at her. “Nothing can happen beyond the laws of physics.” The rest of them looked at her. “If Bobbie Sue can ride her broom, then there has to be a reason why it worked, right?” No heads nodded. None. “If it happened, there had to be a way.” *Nada*. “Right?”

The class burst into energetic conversation, some yelling, some screaming, some yelling for others to stop screaming. It was fear—excitement, too, but mostly fear.

“We just don’t know enough about physics,” Faye said softly to herself as much as to anyone else. “Really, we don’t know what we don’t know.”

But no one was listening, not to anyone, apparently. They yelled back and forth, not knowing what to do. She needed to get their attention. A little visual aid ought to help. “All you need is a broom,” she said. She popped a broom into existence into her left hand, complete with a noticeable *pop* for effect. Twenty screams at once, then dead silence. “A little antigravity—” She floated up into the air a couple of feet.

Twenty voices screamed and followed forty little feet, scrambling out the door.

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CHAPTER 5

KNIGHT OF PENTACLES: The Monsignor

According to the previous pope, the First Emergence was the civilization of mankind, from four thousand years ago to the time of Christ, which involved the development of culture, the rule of law, and mankind's awareness of God Almighty through the ordained Church. That entire process brought humans from the age of blind, aimless wandering through life to an age of order and purpose. It was the species' first awareness of a need greater than that for immediate sex or sustenance.

This First Emergence was purely by the grace of God, and it set mankind's feet on the correct path.

What scared the previous pope was the possibility of a Second Emergence: one in which the species as a whole would begin to evolve its own psychic senses, able to perceive deity and work miracles on its own, without need of the Church's guidance.

Thus he founded Monsignor Maldea's department, with the innocuous name of "Pattern Recognition," for the purpose of discovering sources and trends of that evolution.

In short, he was hunting witches. Not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill sort of witches who hexed people, made their victims have sex with animals, and hastened—through their occult machinations—the general degradation and decadence of the world's great societies. He was not looking so much for evidence of individual acts of heresy, but for a new breed of witch altogether, one that seemed to be using that evolution of man's psychic sense for unChristian ends.

Or that's how his job description had been written when his position had been defined. Then, six weeks ago, the pope was called to God, a new pope elected, with whom the Monsignor had not yet met, privately.

Monsignor Maldea sat down at his desk and got to work.

He had sensed in the back of his mind that something was brewing. These recent nights, something seemed to be afoot somewhere. Something was begging for his consciousness, yet it remained shapeless in his mind. The skill for decryption that he possessed, this gift from God, was based on insights received. Things came to him sometimes, as if from somewhere else, if he looked for them in just the right way. If he felt for them. Computers, satellites, and routers? These were just tools for data acquisition and transference. They weren't analysis. To make his talent work, he had to reach something inside himself—or perhaps it came from somewhere above. He wasn't sure. If he could get his soul in tune with the cosmos, like a sort of mystic radio receiver, adjust this or that quality of reception— If he opened the door just right in his mind, or cocked his ethereal head just right to hear the faintest astral murmur, he could sometimes sense something that wasn't there.

That was the way he broke code, or the way he found patterns in chaos. That was the depth he needed beyond his vision. That was our only hope, he thought when he thought of Christendom and mankind as a whole.

He knew that to be true.

What he didn't know was what the new pope would do when the information was found.

"Good evening, Monsignor," his assistant said to him.

Maldea's mind had been drifting. He remembered being in his cable-festooned dungeon of computer terminals below "Science" at the Vatican. He turned to greet Father Demel, a reserved, aged Italian who had worked in the Congregation his whole life as far as Maldea knew. "Oh, good evening, Father," he said with barely a stumble.

Father Demel handed Monsignor Maldea some papers, which Maldea absently placed on his desk. He was not much for shuffling paper; he worked better with computer screens and files.

The youthful monsignor hesitated a few seconds before bringing up an old subject with the much older, much more experienced Father Demel. He was still uncomfortable being in charge, since he was so much younger than everyone else and newer in the department, to boot. "You don't think you could call me Tony? In private? I mean, since we work together."

"No, Monsignor," the father replied humbly, subordinately.

Maldea wanted to discuss it further—not because it was so important in itself, but because the reason behind it seemed important. After a few more seconds spent trying to drum up the courage to speak, he asked timidly, "Why? Not?" It didn't properly come out as one question.

Having been through this with his young superior before, Father Demel was ready with his answer. Serenely, with the intention of calming the nervous young man, he answered in barely accented English, "Because you need reassurance of your station, Father. You are the director of this department, but you don't accept your role, yet. There are heavy responsibilities."

"So?" Maldea asked for clarification. Again.

"You *are* this department, really, Monsignor," the father responded. He gestured to the people working at computer terminals. "We are only here to help you." The father could see that his words were having no affect, again, as usual. So he tried some more. "You have a special gift to serve God in this way."

Perhaps sensing that the young monsignor's questions were still unanswered but could not be answered—this evening, at any rate—Father Demel nodded and smiled to his insecure boss and took his leave.

Maldea tried to shut out of his mind all the racket coming from the floor of the operations center. Turning to his work for the night, he pushed the father's papers, with his fingertips, into a pile of other unread papers that totally obscured his in-box. He knew that Father Demel was helping, but paper was so—off. There were better ways.

Information and data flowed from large screens above his desk. Imagery of the earth—obviously the default imagery from three dedicated low Earth orbit satellites—filled the three screens on the upper right. The center bottom was his main interactive screen.

It was a beautiful setup. He had installed a coordination program, one he developed for the NSA in the brief time that agency had him, which fully automated and displayed input from any of his thousand sources designed to find patterns. It was speech interactive; all he had to do was talk to it. Typing, after all, was also off.

"I'm here," he said to his computer. "Paddie." He had only just made up that name and decided to use it, short for Pattern Detection by Artificial Intelligence Interface.

"Yes," she said with warm readiness. "Is that my name now?"

"Sure. Do you like it?" he asked.

"Yes, I think that will be fine." she said in comforting tones.

"Paddie, Give me the standard eight regions. Let's go through this again. I'm sure we missed something last time around. Something's not right. Give me graphic depiction of the

Earth's landmasses: red for hot, blue for cold. Correlate with change from normal EM baseline and infrared."

The computer said nothing. Each of eight screens displayed a separate geographic region of the earth: turquoise water, brown land, shades of red and blue overlying areas of land. The oceans appeared relatively untouched save for a few very localized points. *Probably some people on ships or drilling rigs*, he thought. Submarines didn't show as well if submerged more than fifty feet or so, but that could be factored out.

Most people thought the church had limited resources, but that was a laugh. The Church was a financial engine that had been running for some eighteen hundred years. Not only was it (secretly) one of the wealthiest organizations on Earth, it had its fingers in things of which most people couldn't conceive. Everyone's soul depended on it. It just pretended to be hurting to inspire giving.

With an MIT master's in computer science at age 18, Anton Maldea had programmed his computer to work with fuzzy logic, to think for itself beyond the instructions given it—that is, he had created a form of artificial intelligence. He had wanted the computer to help him, not slave for him. This made it hard to interpret the data sometimes, but it also gave him the advantage of electronically extending his own brain's capacity by a factor of trillions.

Maldea concentrated on the screen. Red showed areas of increased something; blue showed areas of decreased something, or maybe something else. He wasn't entirely sure what Paddie was tracking.

"Paddie, Give me the last twenty-four hours in five-minute segments, interval one-tenth second each."

The eight screens began a loop showing areas of red and blue, which fluctuated as the intervals changed.

"Put it on one map of the earth, on the big screen." Bottom row, center screen did so. The data came across as a jumbled mess.

Father Demel stood out on the floor and watched the monsignor work.

"Shade the nighttime." A shaded area moved as night across the map, over the instructed twenty-four-hour time frame, repeating in a loop. The EM, or electromagnetic, emissions across the globe were different during day versus night.

When building the system, Maldea had explained to his boss, Cardinal Agresti, that if witchcraft were being practiced on the earth, there would likely be some EM anomaly, or maybe some other form of aberrant radiation, that would affect the EM spectrum somehow. If witch A could affect object B through no obvious agency that anyone could see, and if the action didn't lie far outside the standard model of quantum physics as we thought we knew it, then—and this was only a hypothesis, of course—we might be able to detect the action and infer a new phenomenon by monitoring some phase variance in the EM spectrum.

Why electromagnetic force instead of that exerted by whatever dark energy there was? Monsignor Maldea suspected that—even if even if the mechanism for witchcraft was *inter-dimensional*, done in another dimension or between dimensions, such as where ghosts or the spirits of dead people might travel—if the witch's brain was still in these three dimensions that humans normally occupy, the mechanism of information transfer may have an EM base. As her or his brain was a physical, electrochemical organ. Thus, it could emanate something detectable, or interfere with something else that could be detected.

And Maldea knew witches commonly talked about energy, the spirit world, "as above, so below" or working magick "Between the Worlds." Dimensions.

Some of them may be working with something theoretical physics has been suggesting, in other ways.

If witchcraft did in fact work, there had to be a *way* that it worked. If it worked, and if it were to become a reliable something that worked, then it had to follow some laws of physics, of some kind. Maybe it followed laws we had yet to discover, but there had to be a way for the witch's brain to work, to do the thing that got done—unless, of course, the witch had only to think of it and it then just happened because it was “magic.”

Make sense? Maldea had asked the Cardinal on their initial discussion last year. The cardinal hadn't seemed confident. It sounded expensive, and His Eminence wasn't totally comfortable with one of his key personnel talking this way.

But Maldea believed this was the course to plot through the fog. If he were really going to look for this evolution of psychic ability, he needed to go in this direction.

“Screen out known sources of radiation,” he told Paddie. The computer, with its satellite systems recording everything, every day, electronically eliminated from the display all normally explainable sources of EM emissions, in all bands: from television; radio; radar and other microwave emission; infrared security beams; power grids; artificial lighting from every source including planes, cars, buildings, homes, streetlamps, and even fiber-optics; as well as stray, low-grade emissions from the myriad forms of computing and other electronic equipment; terrestrial reflections from satellite transmissions; and even lunar reflections of earth based emissions, which in turn reflect off the earth's surface.

And yet, something remained. And that had been bugging him.

“Remove known infrared,” he told her.

While the image on his big screen continued to loop, the shaded area for night over a map of the earth continually moving from right to left, thermal images were omitted—volcanoes, heat from engines, factories, tires rolling over roads, home kitchens, construction equipment, and movie theater projector light bulbs, all sources of uneven heating from the sun—to project on the map a background of the earth calculated to be bland, of uniform temperature.

“Have you painted any sources of other radiation?” he asked her.

“No.”

“No fissile radiation?”

“No.”

“Nothing fusible?” He was trying to be thorough.

“No.”

“Have you eliminated everything from meteorites?”

“That has not been depicted,” the computer responded.

“Background cosmic radiation?”

“That has not been depicted.”

“Then what's causing *that*?”

He pointed at the subtle, fluctuating areas of red on his screen, right in the middle of the United States. Very little blue. The computer did not answer.

This had become Maldea's starting point every night for the past week. When he had started, he had no idea what to look for. Go out undercover and get involved in a coven, or something? But *this* had demanded his focus, ever since he'd found it last week. And it seemed to have been happening mostly at night, just after dusk—except for yesterday, when it happened during the day, too.

The map on his screen should have had a daytime depiction of landmasses surrounded by water, with the side opposite the sun shaded as if in night. That's all there should be, and yet, areas remained.

Faint, shaded red areas, periodically emanating from different areas of the map. Usually on land, sometimes at sea. Most often in whatever area was just behind the terminus as it moved across the map on his screen. Usually in areas thought of as inhabited. Not at the poles, for example.

"What's causing that?" This time, the question was not rhetorical.

"Unknown," Paddie responded.

He sat back in his chair to ponder.

Father Demel came from the dull racket below, up the steps to Maldea's desk, to hand him another report. Distracted, Maldea motioned for him to heap them atop his in-box, somewhere over there, and absently waved the father away.

"Wait," Maldea said. The ops center was great, but he couldn't think amid all this bustle right now.

"I'm sorry for being rude," he caught himself. "But could you please ask everyone to file out? You, alone, remain?" To help him listen to his inner voice, something had to change.

The father looked at him questioningly. Wasn't their work earnest?

"Please ask everyone to leave." Maldea knew he was being curt, but he didn't want to lose even more of his train of thought in the interest of diplomacy just now.

Father Demel looked puzzled but went over to a couple of the priests working nearby and whispered to them. They, in turn, whispered to others, and within a minute, everyone had left. The only noise remaining in the room was the faint whisper of computer fans.

"Silence!" Maldea told the quiet room. It answered back, more softly, as his voice echoed off the stone walls.

Putting everything else out of his mind, including any hurt feelings he may have generated, he turned back to his screen.

"What could this be?" *Rhetorical. Musing. No answer*, the computer correctly guessed.

"Loop this image over the past week. Thirty-minute segments. Same interval."

The seven days played over the screen. The shaded red patches were similar each night, though never the same twice. Still, some overlap. Most of the red followed the terminus where night crept over the sphere of the planet.

"Loop it back for the past year."

"Unable," Paddie said. "The system came online only four months ago."

"Give me what you have."

The computer complied. There was a spike at the end. The earlier red-shaded areas started out four months ago as more of a pink, developing into a deeper red as the timeline approached spring. Then, in the past week, there seemed to be a bold red increase—almost an explosion, at least by comparison.

"And in the same area. It's a shame we can't get more."

"Not directly," Paddie said.

"What?"

"Some extrapolation can be made from geologic residue."

"Okay, sounds good. Extrapolate and postulate. Display peak annual emission for each year, as far back as you can reasonably calculate. Interval same."

"That would be a guess," Paddie told him.

“But probably a good one,” Maldea replied.

All fourteen of the screens froze for thirteen and a half seconds while the computer thought about it. Then the central screen began its new loop. A data stream across the bottom denoted the year displayed. The numbers scrolled fast, a year per one-tenth second, eight hundred years per minute. It took a minute twenty seconds to loop.

“Accuracy undetermined,” the computer told him. “Calculations could be off by a factor of four point seven per century, compounded.”

Maldea didn't even hear it.

Shades of pink appeared, as before, with shades of faded blue, painted briefly over areas of mostly land. And then, at the current rate of loop, concentrated thickly in various areas of Europe, mostly in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries but dominant during most of the Middle Ages, was blue. There was some red elsewhere on the planet—in China, India, Russia, sub-Saharan Africa, the U.S., South America, but, in Europe, mostly blue. Then it trailed off, with dim coloration in most European areas, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with pink to light rose beginning to build again thereafter in parts of the New World and Europe. Then, on this grand time scale, a sudden, massive spike at the present.

Relatively speaking, there was a flash of color right at the very end—this year. In America. And it was bold red.

Maldea sat back in his chair. His fingers tapped the desk. He wasn't quick to claim new knowledge, but he had to follow the evidence.

“Father Demel!” he yelled, forgetting that the man was standing almost beside him.

The father walked serenely up beside him, a calm, confident smile on his face.

Maldea rushed out the front of the Academy of Sciences into the sunny gardens in the center of the Vatican, trailed by Father Demel and sixteen priests he had collected in the hallways.

“Please,” he told Father Demel. “Get fourteen more and take them all them over to the east side there. Then can you find me about thirty more and put them all in a group over on the west side!”

Father Demel had no idea what was happening. This was most unorthodox, but then, the whole department was unorthodox these days, and it was exactly what the cardinal had ordered.

“Quickly?” Maldea said.

Father Demel jumped to comply but wound up darting in two directions at once.

“Okay,” Maldea said. “Sorry. Wait.”

Maldea turned to one of the priests in the group and explained. “You are—?”

“Father Espinoza.”

“Father Espinoza, will you please find about thirty priests and take them in a group over to the west? Stay there. No. Wait!” He dashed back inside the academy and came back out with an FM walkie-talkie. “Please take this group over to the west and listen for me on this.”

Father Espinoza rushed to comply, though he had no idea why. He didn't know this monsignor, but Father Demel seemed to defer to him, and that was more than enough.

Maldea gave Father Demel another FM walkie-talkie and grabbed another group of priests walking toward the Holy Offices. He bade them follow Father Espinoza, as a group, to the west. They, too, seemed unsure who this monsignor was, but Father Demel whispered to them, and their eyes widened and they went with him.

So Maldea had Demel on the east side with about thirty priests, and Espinoza with about thirty on the west wide.

Down in the dungeon, as Maldea kept calling it, he sat before Paddie and organized his experiment.

“Paddie, which satellite is approaching the Vatican?”

“Satellite number two,” she responded dutifully.

“Put satellite two on the Vatican. All of it. Capture all the gardens. Put it on the main screen.”

A monitor above and to the left displayed a graphic representation of a satellite in LEO adjusting its angle, and Maldea’s large main screen switched to display the Vatican.

“Paddie, display the same kind of information here that we’ve been looking at.”

Now the Vatican showed mostly blue, with the occasional pink area.

Maldea picked up his FM walkie-talkie and keyed the mike. “West group, begin looking at your hands. Don’t do anything. Don’t think of anything. Just look at your hands and keep looking at them.” Very mundane. It ought to do. “And Father Espinoza, please now also turn your radio off.”

“Okay,” came Father Espinoza’s confused reply. He turned the radio off. The priests readily looked at their hands. These men were all educated; they understood experiments.

“Father Demel?”

“Yes,” Father Demel answered, in his eagerness forgetting reference protocol.

“Please ask all the priests with you on the east side to hold hands and pray together for the longevity of the new pope.”

There was a pause. “Okay,” came his confused reply, for he thought the pope had been in good health.

“I mean *really*,” Maldea said. “Please guide them through a real, heartfelt, meaningful prayer with meditation, to reach out to God for his help and guidance during these new times.”

“Ok,” Father Demel replied.

Maldea sat back to watch his screen in real time.

As the satellite’s angle slowly moved with its orbit, the colors on Maldea’s screen began to change. The west group, which had started out largely blue with a few red specks in it, began to darken and become even more blue.

The east group, which had started out mostly blue grew more red.

Down in the dungeon, Monsignor Maldea called to Father Demel on his radio.

Still confused, Father Demel grabbed Father DeNova from his group, and they scurried through hallways back to the dungeon.

“Father DeNova, can you get me your reports, please. You make reports of priests in the field—on suspicious activities? Priests who, where ever they may be, observe problems?”

“Yes, Monsignor,” DeNova replied, and ran back to his desk among the many on the floor.

“Australia, Europe, and the North America,” Maldea yelled after him.

Father DeNova hurried back with a stack of papers.

Maldea asked, “Do we have any older reports, DeNova? Old ones, from years ago?”

“Millions,” he answered. “I’ve been scanning them into the system.”

“Oh.” Maldea turned from him, ignoring him unintentionally. Then to the computer, he said, “Extract and correlate field sightings and class A observations, DeNova’s database. Show prevalence on main screen by year with the current simulation. Display as black.”

Paddie complied. Scattered dots fluctuated across the screen, but built noticeably in Europe during the Middle Ages, in blue. Then the dots decreased before building again in modern times, in red.

Yet that red area in the middle of the United States largely hadn’t formed. But there have been fewer priests there, by comparison.

Monsignor Maldea rose from his chair to stand in front of his assistant and the gathering crowd of priests. He looked worried to them, but then, he always looked a bit uneasy. They were unsure what to think, until he spoke to Father Demel in an uncharacteristically sure voice.

“I need to see the cardinal.”

* * *

Colonel Dart and his eight brave volunteers, in three trucks, stood motionless on the empty Kansas highway. It was a hot, dry June afternoon. The wind was picking up enough to blow dirt onto their uniforms and collect in the sweat of their faces and armpits. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. There was no horizon. They were thirsty.

And they weren’t entirely sure this was a good idea.

There was nothing up ahead. Oh, there was something, if you counted what they saw as something, but really it was nothing. Just ask any one of them, or even all of them together as a group. The old chat road was bordered on both sides by bar ditches, uncut prairie grass, crooked barbed wire fences, and endless fields of tall, golden wheat.

The road went on and on forever, fading eventually to infinity, with nothing around it: no trees, no houses, no corner malls, no bombing ranges—nothing.

All nine of them stared, not saying a word, scarcely moving.

Colonel Dart looked again more closely, just to make sure. Yes, there was a road under his feet, with actual gravel on it.

The building wind blew a tumbleweed from left to right. A broken-off wheat beard followed. A jackrabbit after that, and after the jackrabbit, a coyote.

The road and sky seemed to blend and wave and disappear. There was road down there, and sky up there. But they didn’t seem to quite meet. It was almost as if the sky were reflecting off the road where the horizon should be, almost as if the sky were afraid to touch the hot asphalt of the road.

It was the end of the world; he didn’t have to say it. They all knew what he was thinking, and nodded their heads in unison.

“Chin up, men,” he ordered his catatonic crew. “We’ve all seen *Lawrence of Arabia*. In training, remember?” No response from the men. “The big trek across that desert whatever-it-was, and then the big battle of some kind over there?” Clearly, they didn’t respond to his inspirational speech.

“Someone may need our help,” he encouraged. That got ’em. It was hard to resist being a hero.

“Where are they?” his lieutenant asked.

“I don’t know. Somewhere, I suppose.”

“How can you tell there might be people? The wheat?”

“No. That could grow on its own.”

“The fence?”

“No. They might grow naturally in this part of the world; you don’t know.”

“The road?”

“No. Might be a natural rock formation.”

“Then what?” the lieutenant asked.

“It’s so flat,” the colonel said. “This is bloody impossible. Couldn’t be natural.”

Everyone seemed to agree with that. It made sense. “Saddle up!” the colonel ordered. “We’re ordered to explore this land west of Missouri, so let’s get to it.”

* * *

The three of us stood in the hospital room: Stormy, Bobbie Sue, and me. Bobbie was a wreck: filthy from head to toe, debris and dirt clods falling off her onto the floor. Her hair was matted with dirt and hay. Her clothes were ripped and hanging off her, both from supersonic winds and from her ungraceful landing on my farm. Part of her bra showed; part of it was missing. The tattoos on her tummy, arm, waist, and hip were exposed. I noted she didn’t have any panties on at all, just pants. She was covered with bruises and scrapes.

She’d be arrested, even in New York, if she went out looking like this. Unless, maybe, she were to die her hair orange.

The nurses and Doc Gurney stood and stared in mixed awe and fear—not at Bobbie Sue, but at another impossible sight, by the bed. Mary Lou Foul was sitting up and dressing herself, every bone mended, every cut healed, every bruise gone. Perfectly healthy—she had healed herself with a wave of her hand.

And she looked mad as hell.

“I—” Doc Gurney would have said he didn’t fucking believe it, but the words wouldn’t come.

I suppose Bobbie could have healed herself, too, if she’d been thinking—if she’d been *able* to think. Not as if that was one of her strong points, anyway. But if she was thinking, she wouldn’t have wrecked my henhouse and cratered into my wheat that way and busted herself up at all—or not gone on that damn-fool broom flight in the first place. Actually, it was kind of hard to blame her for that, but— I don’t know.

“I’m a witch, too,” Mary Lou announced to everyone, creating visible unease among the staff.

She looked at us with a defiant challenge and marched out of the room, straight over to the neighboring room where Mr. Johnson lay. All five of us followed, dog and all. A cloud of dirt and dust followed Bobbie Sue, but no one noticed.

The nurse and doctor were too stunned to register that we had violated germ protocol.

“Mr. Johnson,” Mary Lou said. He lay there in misery, near death, too weak even to answer.

“Mr. Johnson,” she insisted. He turned his head toward her. Tubes were sticking out of his nose and arms, so that he looked like a complete mess. “Do you wanna live?” she said without ceremony.

“Of course he—”

Mary Lou cut the nurse off. “It needs to come from him. This is my field. Please.”

Mr. Johnson looked at Mary Lou. A tear started to form, which was answer enough for her.

Mary Lou nodded at him. Saying not a word, she held out her right hand over his head and moved it slowly down the length of his torso and down his legs, toward his feet.

“Jesus May Alcott!” Doc Gurney exclaimed, for the miracle shook his faith.

Behind Mary Lou’s hand, inch by inch as she moved it, Mr. Johnson’s flesh returned to perfect health. Even the oxygen and IV tubes disappeared, and the IVAC rolled against the far wall. The Foley catheter vanished, too, along with the little jug it had been filling with pee. Mr. Johnson gasped as his body changed form and color from weak and thin to full and strong and radiant.

For good measure, Mary Lou even put some potatoes, corn, and roast chicken in his stomach, knowing he hadn’t eaten anything in a week, and made his stomach accept the food.

He sat up in bed, a miracle in his eyes, crying. He didn’t say thank you, because he couldn’t speak at the moment, he was so overcome with surprise and gratitude. It was in his eyes, impossible not to notice. Tears flowed down his face, which was buried in his hands.

He reached out for Mary Lou and hugged her with all his considerable newfound strength.

“Thank you, God,” Mr. Johnson said weakly. “Mary Lou—” He meant to say thank you to her, too, and his eyes said as much to everyone present. But it was hard to talk while sobbing so.

Mary Lou turned to look at the doctor and nurse, perhaps as representatives of the town. “That is all we were trying to do,” she said, referring to the night of the attack.

The hospital staff couldn’t move.

“We love you, Mr. Johnson,” Mary Lou told him through her own tears. “Thank you, Gods, too.”

Then, in remembered fury, Mary Lou turned, not to face us necessarily but, I think, more or less to let the world know she was here, victim no more. And she bellowed in a voice that literally boomed all over town, “Eddieeee! *Eddie Allen Fucking Foul!*”

* * *

Old Pa Gleaner sat on his front porch, on his wheat farm by the highway, nine miles out of town, whittling on one of his best sticks. One sliver flew just west of the bucket, another into it, another just west. He reached out with his toe and moved the bucket two inches west. He whittled again, and the sliver went right in. He looked satisfied and put a chaw of tobacco into his cheek. He offered some to his hound dog, who took a small chaw, too.

After a time, he gathered up his saliva and spit toward the bucket, but missed by two inches to the east. It splattered on the porch. He reached out with his toe and moved the bucket two inches back toward the east.

A white Dodge TV van from Kansas City raced down the highway at ninety-five miles per hour.

“It’s gotta be up ahead!” the reporter inside shouted. He looked around for other press on the road but didn’t see them. “Maybe we’re first!”

The cameraman hurriedly checked his camera. “Locked and loaded,” he confirmed, and the driver floored the pedal.

Pa shot another sliver near the bucket and looked up at the commotion.

A funny-looking white van, moving like a shot, raced down the highway from the east past the Gleaner place, bound for town, engine over-revving to beat hell. Then, for no reason, quick as a coyote in a henhouse, it slammed on its brakes, tires locked.

Old Pa Gleaner could smell the burnt rubber all the way up on the porch.

Inside the van, the reporter looked fondly at the driver and cameraman. "Hello," he said. "You're both looking well today."

"Oh, yes, I'm doing fine," they answered.

"We don't need to go to town, I don't think," the cameraman murmured.

The reporter thought about it. "No, I think you're right. There's no story here. I think we should go back."

The driver turned the van around and headed back east toward Kansas City.

Pa watched the van turn around, but upon reaching a spot just east of his porch, it turned around again and raced back to the west toward town, tires squealing on the asphalt.

"What the hell's the matter with you!" the reporter inside shouted to the driver. "The story's up ahead! Floor it!"

Just when they crossed over the town's nine-mile perimeter line, the driver hit the brakes again, befuddled.

"Oh, I don't guess it's important," the reporter said quite pleasantly to the driver.

The driver backed up on the road, past Pa's porch.

"What are you doing!" the reporter screamed. "Get back in there!"

The driver moved forward again, slowly this time, crossing the line.

As soon as they crossed the perimeter, the reporter said to the driver, "You know, it's nice country out here, when you think about it." The driver casually put the van in reverse and backed up past Pa's porch.

Pa watched the white van going forward and backward, again and again, until it finally stopped there on the highway. The driver's window rolled down, and one pissed-off newshound hollered, "Hey, mister! What the hell's going on around here?"

"Ma!" Pa called. "Looks like some of them big-city druggies come out here. Best bring my scattergun."

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CHAPTER 6

STRENGTH: Gentleness

“Can’t get out,” Howie Bark growled, slamming the phone down in it’s cradle. “Cops, press, nobody. Phone’s not dead, just got idiots on the other end.” Eddie Foul looked uneasily at him for a moment, almost as if he were going to have to think or do something else equally unpleasant and difficult.

Howie continued, “I call, get someone on the other end, and they talk to me like ‘Ain’t it a nice day’ and shit like that, and then they hang up on me.”

Howie, Johnny, and Matt stared at Eddie from the hallway of his house, hoping for his leadership.

“Here, gimme the damn phone—I’ll handle it myself!” Eddie sounded so authoritative when he got like this. Howie handed him the phone. Eddie looked around at Johnny and Matthew with that cocky attitude of “Just watch this.”

“Marge!” he said into the phone.

“Operator,” Marge replied.

“This here’s Eddie Foul”—pompous, like it was going to mean something to Marge, who couldn’t give a damn. She was over in Clearwater and didn’t care who Eddie was. “Give me over to the governor’s office. Right now.” That ought to do it.

The phone rang three times, and someone picked up. “Governor Jacobs’s office,” a woman answered.

“This here’s Eddie Foul, over in Ashfield,” Eddie told her, “and we got a problem.”

“Oh, isn’t that nice,” she said.

“I gotta speak with the governor, right away.”

“Oh, that’s not possible at the moment. He’s otherwise engaged.”

“What’s he doin’?”

“Nothin’. Well, he’s helpin’ the men install indoor plumbing in the governor’s mansion, but he told me not to say that. It’s just that he went to this public image conference last month, on the tax payer dollar, and they told him it looks better if he appears too busy to talk with unimportant constituents. He shouldn’t jump to unless it’s someone with money calling.”

Eddie said something heated.

“Have a nice day, and shit like that,” she said, and hung up the phone.

Eddie hung up the phone and walked calmly over to the closet, picked up his shotgun, walked back, and gave both barrels to the hapless phone.

“It’s the witches,” Eddie opined to his friends. “They got the whole world hexed.” He broke open the side-by-side, crammed two new shells in the breech, and locked it with a clack. He opened up his dresser drawer and pulled out an old 1911 Colt Government .45 and thrust it in the waistband of his pants.

“We’ll handle this ourselves,” he told them.

* * *

Faye Poke sat in the principal's office of Ashfield High School, having the time of her life. Well she wasn't sitting, really—she floated in the air on some invisible cushion a foot above her chair, a luxurious smile dripping off her face—and it was hard to blame her. Levitation was really such a gas, and once you got started, it was hard to go back.

With that much power in you, it would take superhuman self-restraint just to appear normal, and, well, Faye wasn't superhuman.

She continued sitting in the air a foot above her chair, opposite Principal Fudge.

As unobtrusively as he could, Principal Fudge felt beneath himself with his left hand to make sure he was sitting on an actual chair. He looked uneasy and hoped he'd be reasonably safe behind his desk. He struggled for something to say, trying to be subtle.

"So, so, we here at Ashfield High," he managed a forced smile, "feel that, until you are, um, *cured* of your disease, that is, that it would be better if you d-didn't, you know, work, um, directly, with the children." He glanced over at Vice Principal Foot for reassurance.

Vice Principal Foot had been looking at Faye float and had been sensing that something may be wrong. Not the brightest bulb even in this small pantry, he doubled as football coach in the fall. He had once been to Texas, so he thought he might run for president someday.

"Yao. Right," Foot said to his boss. "Rah rah ree; kick 'em in the—"

"Thank you! Thank you, George," the principal said, with a nice, comforting smile. "That—That was very—rousing."

The vice principal looked pleased.

Faye was sitting through the whole thing laughing quietly to herself, feeling ever so grateful to providence. There was a time when she would have worried about being called into the principal's office; now, though, she was just enjoying the show—maybe even helping it along.

"Disease," she repeated for clarification.

"Yes. Yes," Principal Fudge confirmed. "We're, we're sure." He didn't usually stammer. "We're sure that this is a temporary bug and that you won't float more than a week or two before you run out of gas. Or, or whatever." He gestured with his hand to a presumed energy cell.

"Float," Faye said, with joy in her eyes.

"Float," he confirmed. "And, and, and the popping of the brooms."

Vice Principal Foot shifted his weight to the other foot, folded his arms, unfolded them. "The brooms, too," he confirmed, apparently wanting to make sure he had weighed in on that point.

"And all the students running down the halls," President Fudge continued. "Screaming."

"Screaming," Vice Principal Foot confirmed.

"Upsetting the second-graders' milk trays," Principal Fudge continued, "and, and smearing that all over the floor, and slipping on it." He glanced at the vice principal. "And piling up against the wall, uh, on top of Marc's art class. It might be best to not teach, maybe, just until, until that quits and you're, you're back to, uh, normal." He nodded his head vigorously, apparently feeling he had gotten that out right, and looking for agreement from her.

The big smile on Fay's face didn't seem to comfort him much.

"Um," Faye felt she should note something. "This, you know, Mr. Fudge and Mr. Foot, is the last day of the school year."

"*Right!*" Principal Fudge confirmed. "Right! And with that, uh, we feel that we should go. Now. Don't you think?"

"Right," Faye said with a smile.

The principal seemed satisfied—or, rather, seemed as though he hoped he was satisfied—with his performance, and felt that it was all over now and time to go, but the vice principal butted in.

“You don’t mean to discriminate—” Faye said.

“Right, *right*,” the principal added. “We don’t want you to think we’re discriminating against you in any way just because you float. You know. We want to assure you that we’d fire a, uh, a Christian witch just as quickly as a pagan witch.”

* * *

Even though it wasn’t Sunday, a church service spontaneously formed. The ancient organ was playing earnestly. Pastor Wright was singing in front of the congregation, looking like the Apostle Paul waving his arms about. The choir was wearing street clothes. No time to dress. And the church was full to the rafters with more people than they got even on Easter. Probably a hundred people.

They all sang, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine—”

* * *

BOOM!

A mirror in the beauty parlor shattered. All the ladies inside jumped. Two bounced right out of their chairs onto the linoleum floor. Bottles of goop fell off Formica countertops.

Everybody on Main ducked for cover under anything that was nailed down.

Sheriff Cody crouched on reflex and darted behind a wheat truck sitting by the barber shop on Main.

A half second later, everyone looked upward to see the top of the church fly six miles up into the air—rafters, steeple, and all, still intact, as if it had been ripped right off the walls underneath it. It curved in a long, graceful arc to the east, to land out by Ma and Pa Gleaner’s place, 8.9 miles statute from Jess’ farm.

Pa Gleaner, Dog, and the three men from the news van watched the roof of the church fall out of the sky and crash all over the pasture just inside the line.

Sheriff Cody looked at everyone else on Main Street and tried to see if anyone was hurt. Seeing none, he ran into the church through a stampede of people rushing out.

The walls were still there. The organ was still there, with not so much as a scratch. The piano, too. But the roof was gone, with wires and a few tufts of pink insulation batting sticking out.

Eddy’s little gang of four crawled out from under the pews and backed Cody out the front door. They were limping and staggering more from the emotional shock than from any physical injury. And they were bristling with firearms.

“Whoa, now, hold on there,” Sheriff Cody told them. “No, you don’t.”

“Out the way, Cody,” Eddie told him. “We got bidness!”

“You can’t just—”

Steel slapped against steel; rubber slapped against shoulder. And Cody was staring down the muzzles of three rifles and a shotgun.

Rope hit wrists, wrists hit bark, and Cody found himself tied to a tree.

* * *

Bobbie Sue, Stormy, and I were driving my rusty-red Ford half-ton over to the high school to check on Faye. We were afraid she might be catching all hell in there, from either students or staff, when we saw a gang of scared-looking folks coming up the street, loaded for bear. They were carrying firearms of every make and description.

And we were still new to our magick.

“There’s some now!” one of them hollered.

A shot dinged the cab over the door just before I heard the crack.

“Shit!” I jerked the truck over the curb into the town square and ducked behind two skinny trees just before bullets started pinging into the truck from one end to the other. We three huddled down in the floorboards. The noise sounded like a ball-bearing hailstorm with really bad thunder.

And then I noticed the bullets weren’t hitting the cab anymore. A protective sphere had formed around each of us.

“You all right?” Faye asked. She peered in at us through the shattered window. Must have known we were coming. Lead flew around her, hitting the hood, the gas tank, the bed, but not the cab. She looked unafraid—gleeful, even.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” she said. Shotgun blasts rocked the truck at her side. The armed men, frustrated at their apparently bad marksmanship, only shot faster. “It’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of. We can do *anything*! Just think of what you want to happen, and it happens.” She paused briefly. “Gotta be an explanation for it in physics,” she said, marveling at the possibilities.

“Bitchin’,” Bobbie said, sounding a bit cocky considering her recent experience in witchcraft. It was the first word she’d spoken since her crash. “Check this out.” She got out of the truck to stand in front of the shooters, shredded clothes and all.

One would have thought they’d have run out of ammo by then, but they just kept on blasting away. And sure enough, the lead flew all around her but never touched her.

“You’re taunting them, Bobbie,” I said, hoping to moderate her a little. “You can overdo this kind of thing!”

“Yeah? Well, so can they!”

“Somebody blew the church!” I said. “Who was that?”

“I’ll take credit for it,” Bobbie Sue said. “It wasn’t me, but I’d like to have the credit.”

“You’re one stubborn dyke.” I said it as a friend.

She smiled.

Unable to control her—in fact, unable to do *anything* with her myself—I offered one more thought. The bullets got a little sparser but kept flying past us.

“Everybody! Remember the Threefold Law!” I said. “Remember the restraint we’ve learned. You think that should only exist if our powers are slim? NO! It’s because they’re great. We have to take it easy!” That seemed to slow her down a little, but not much.

Bobbie Sue spotted Howie Bark in the gang.

“Howie,” she said to him as he banged away at us with his .30-.30. You own the gas station —”

The scene switched suddenly to the gas station on the highway. Bobbie Sue transported them all mid shot to the new site, where she stood in front of the pumps while the hail of bullets kept coming.

“Stop it!” Howie hollered, but too late. The pumps exploded, billowing up into the air in one God-awful fireball.

“And, Johnny, you’re a drunk, right?”

The scene suddenly switched to his house, in front of his liquor cabinet. The men, so enraged they couldn’t stop shooting to save themselves, fired relentlessly away, breaking every bottle and window and blowing holes through every wall slat and roofing shingle.

“And, Eddie, you don’t care about nothin’ except’n that run-down hog sty you call a house, right?”

Eddie was catching on and started shouting, “Hold it! Stop right there! *Cease firing!*” but a little too late.

The scene suddenly switched to Eddie’s eyesore of a house on Maple. Bullets ripped through the porch posts, screen door, front windows, framing, door, TV—

“Wait! Wait!” Eddie told them. “Stop! Stop it!” He grabbed at their guns to stop them. “Are you guys *nuts!* What the hell are you doing?”

Sheriff Cody came running up, having worked himself loose from his bonds.

I climbed out of my pickup sieve with Stormy. We all seemed to see in our minds what was happening, even if it was clear across town.

“Boy, some people are just not too sharp,” Faye said, shaking her head.

“This could get really bad,” I said to her by way of caution.

“Oh, yeah,” she said.

“Jessie!” Sheriff Cody called as he approached. “Eddie! Everybody! Please! Stop!” Cody had a disarming nature, but he couldn’t really expect to be heard against the whole town.

“Jessie, please. Talk to me,” he said.

“I need all my witches here. Right now!” I glared at Cody and walked out into the grass in the town square. “Coven,” I called into the air, “we need to talk!”

Most of them formed in one way or another, some standing, some floating, some in traditional coven robes, one in her birthday suit.

But there were only five.

“Mary Lou!” I yelled into the air. “Mary Lou!”

* * *

The outer door of the jailhouse burst open. Eddie and his gang ran inside for their own protection, cramming themselves into the single small cell in the back. Sheriff Cody slammed the door.

“That bed’s mine,” Johnny said, drunk as usual. And he had a point, having slept in it almost as many nights as in his own at home.

Matthew Wright reached through the bars with the keys and locked them all inside, himself included. Then he threw the keys to Cody.

“Fine,” Cody said.

They looked at each other with hopeful expressions, as if seeking some sort of confirmation that they had made the right choice. Because it was just then that I came walking in with my entire coven, except Mary Lou.

“Okay. See there, now?” Cody said to us, the coven. “See? They is all locked up now? So it’s okay. You have powers, but they don’t”—he pointed with his chin at Eddie and his gang of halfwits. “And they’re all locked up now. They can’t get out no matter what, so you’re safe. They have no guns. They’re in jail. So please feel safe! Let’s everybody relax a bit, slow down, and think about this!” He looked at everyone in earnest. “Please.”

His manner was very calming, but we’d been through a lot and were still on an adrenaline high. I mean that not as an excuse but an explanation.

I stood there, arms folded, like a mother who, having scolded her children, was waiting for them to do the right thing on their own. But nobody moved.

“Now, let’s talk about this, okay?” Sheriff Cody asked. “Everybody have a seat?” He motioned kindly to us, who did sit down in some chairs. The prisoners plopped readily onto the floor in their cell.

“Howie, Matt, Johnny, Eddie,” Cody addressed some of them. “Why are you fellas trying to kill these folks?”

“What!” Eddie screamed at him, his mouth hanging open.

Bobbie Sue stepped forward. The self-incarcerated crew shrank back, away from the bars.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! Keep her away!” Howie yelled.

Bobbie held her hands out. The men screamed and cowered.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” she told them, a little condescendingly, I thought. “Jessie here said we have to be nice to you guys, because it’s our religion. So I said, ‘Aren’t they glad we’re not head-hunters,’ and she said she means it, and I said, ‘Okay,’ so we will be mostly nice, even if you don’t deserve it and you’re all assholes because you don’t know we probably aren’t going to do anything bad to you to get you back for all the bad shit you’ve done to us in the past including that whoopin’ with the bats.”

“Bobbie, shut *up!*” I said, grabbing her by the collar—what was left of it—and pulling her back. “Are you ever gonna put on some decent clothes?” I added because she still looked as if she’d been had an accident involving explosives. She smiled at me.

Faye stepped forward. “Look, you guys,” she said through the bars. “You know me. I was your teacher in high school. I passed you, Eddie, when I shouldn’t have—remember that?” She was trying to be familiar with them, get them to relax.

“You stay away from us!” Howie warned.

“You know, we have powers, too!” Johnny said. “Magical powers! Strong! You stay away, or we’ll gitcha!”

“Arrest that woman!” Eddie Foul yelled, pointing at Bobbie Sue.

“For what?” Cody asked.

“For shootin’ up my house!”

Howie piped in. “Yeah, and for shooting up my gas station.”

“Guys,” Cody shook his head, “*you’re* the ones who shot the place up.”

“Well, she made us do it!” they all chorused.

“Not the way I heard it,” Cody said. “You were the ones doin’ all the shootin’.”

“It was in self-defense!” Johnny tried hopefully.

“It was that’n!” Matthew pointed at Bobbie Sue. “She nearly wrecked the town with that broom, and blew the top plumb off the church.” He was no doubt hoping that being Cody’s younger brother might get him a more favorable hearing.

Cody had to seek peace somehow in this crazy situation. “There’s no law against flying brooms, and nothing about it in the Motor Vehicle Code. The F.A.A. prolly don’t like it, but they don’t know where Kansas is, yet. Any of you are free to do it, too”—he gave Johnny a wry look—“if you feel like giving those magical powers of yours a go.”

“Wait ‘till Dad hears that!” Matthew said.

“You know normal people can’t do that, Cody,” Johnny said.

“You ain’t normal,” Matthew said.

“I could arrange it,” Bobbie said in what sounded close to a threatening tone.

Faye took the floor again. “We’re your *friends*, guys. We live here. We don’t mean to hurt anyone. We’ve just had a little irrational exuberance, is all. We got carried away a little, but we haven’t gone shooting at anyone.”

“You don’t have to!” Matthew said.

“Look. I’ll prove it to you,” Faye said. “I’ll set you free to show you we’re not afraid of you anymore—with your promise you won’t try to hurt us, either.” She waved her hand slowly across the face of their jail cell. The men froze. The bars slowly, quietly dissolved into thin air, leaving empty anchor holes in the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Matthew stood there with his friends. There was no longer any sort of barrier between the witches and them. Three tense seconds passed before all four of them, giving the witches the widest berth possible, stampeded out of the jail and down the street.

Cody stood up and dusted himself off. “Jessie, you’ve got to put a stop to this,” he said. “It’s all just too weird.” He started walking for the door, to follow the guys and try to calm them down. “These people can’t handle this. You’re into it; they’re not. You know, to them, ‘weird’ is a cow with a extra tit. But *you* guys are popping off with all this—” He waved his hands in the air, staring at us as if we were the ones with an extra tit.

“Blowing up the church,” he said. “That did provoke them—I mean, especially considering they were in it at the time. And many of us was raised in that church, including you—”

“You mean the church that filled their tiny little minds with just how evil we are?” Jack charged. He’d actually been silent up to then.

“Look at what you’re doing!” Cody replied.

I interrupted them to stop the fight. “Bad memories, Cody. But I know what you mean.”

“And I’d always kinda hoped—” Cody looked at Jessie with something in his eye. It seemed Cody was going to say something else, but stopped.

I held my hand up for him to stop. “Cody, I think I know what you mean. I know you’re trying to find some common ground for peace here. But this Christian oppression thing? It’s been going on for thousands of years. The gods have set something up here in response.”

“The *gods*?” he said.

“You saw Brighid declare it herself. And as kind as I know you to be, I just can’t get into thinking about getting married in a Christian church right now.”

People looked between them insurprise.

I carried on, “Is there some reason we couldn’t get married out in my field? I mean if we were going to. In Circle? Fay here could officiate; she’s ordained clergy, too.”

“Gay is okay, now,” Jack said. “DOMA’s gutted.”

“I ain’t gay,” Cody said.

“I—think that’s right,” I said to Cody.

Sometimes people find unusual things hard to grasp, so I gave him another prompt into the realities of magick. I gently held up my hand and produced a small, soft hologram in it so he could see the two of us out by the lake last summer, starting to make out on a blanket. It was as accurate as if a movie camera had got it on high def video.

Cody was trying to hide his uneasiness, but I thought I could see it behind his poker face. He walked out the door without another word.

Faye shook her finger at Bobbie Sue and talked to her as if she were addressing an unruly child in school. “You better *slow it down*, hon, or I’ll slap a mustache on you.”

“And I’ll slap eighty pounds on you!” Bobbie retorted, storming out.

“Well,” I said sarcastically to them both, “I think our first day with this has gone rather well, don’t you?”

“We didn’t do it all,” Jack said, walking out the door.

“We could have stopped it,” I said.

He turned in the doorway. “And *force* people to accept us? Force them with our magick against their will? Make little puppets out of them?”

He was right.

“We need to talk to ’em,” I said. It seemed obvious—the ship needed to be steered even if it knew where it was supposed to go.

“And where the hell’s Mary Lou?” I asked. I should have been able to feel her, and I couldn’t.

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CHAPTER 7

FOUR OF SWORDS: Outsiders

“Our top story,” Connie Knight of the Swift News Network said with a little smile, “is about the electrostatic disturbance that’s been emanating in increasing strength from Kansas over the past few weeks—yes, that’s what we’re calling it. It’s a state, I think. Today it was so powerful, it blew out transformers as far away as New Delhi, bringing that city’s sandwich industry to a halt. A State Department spokesman says the effect is random, as the energy skips around the globe on the ionosphere, which occasionally focuses it like a lens back on the earth.

“The disturbance has been localized by a television crew in Ashfield, Kansas, a small wheat-farming community of a little over two hundred. Sure Thing Local News, an independent station, has gone national with the story.”

The program cut to a picture of the reporter standing with Pa Gleaner by his porch, microphone in hand. Dog lay unmoving behind Pa—stuffed, for all the reporter knew. Pa was working thoughtfully on a chew.

“The town of Ashfield, Kansas, is under attack, and it seems nothing is sacred,” the reporter said to Pa.

With a caption reading, “From Two-by’s to Toothpicks,” The TV cut to an image of the church roof falling out of the sky and splattering all over the pasture, just inside the magickal perimeter. Some of the splinters flew out from the impact, over toward the reporters, but when they got to a spot two feet in front of the news crew, the splinters flew not one inch farther and fell to the ground. The reporters nonetheless dove for cover, and this included, apparently, whoever was holding the camera.

The TV cut back to the reporter still standing on the porch with Pa Gleaner.

“So, Mr. Gleaner—”

“Everybody just calls me Pa.”

The reporter offered an ingratiating smile. “Ok, Pa. What seems to be happening here in Ashfield?”

“Well,” Pa hooked his thumbs in the bib of his overalls. “After three thousand years of persecution, and some local violence perpetrated by an angry few, a coven of witches here, demanding justice, summoned a tribunal of gods, who’ve put the whole town, right out to this nine-mile radius here”—he pointed to the grass just in front of the reporter’s feet—“under a magick spell, within which the witches have real, overt magickal powers, and there’s a fight going on with the Christians.”

The reporter turned slowly and looked at the camera, starting to say something, but Pa interrupted.

“Looks like people who don’t care about this business are unaffected—come and go into town as they please. Like the grocery truck there.” They turned to watch the truck drive blithely into town past an angry mob of reporters who were yelling and screaming at this prejudicial treatment. “But people who aren’t invited can’t get in. Seems as soon as they cross the line, they suddenly don’t know why they came, so they leave.”

The reporter still didn't say anything.

"That last part's the best," Pa added. He spit a little dark stream of tobacco off the side of the porch onto a patch of bare dirt.

"What—" The reporter tried to gather his thoughts. "What's happened since then?"

"Well, 'twixt the two of them groups, they've blown up a church and a gas station, shot a few houses all to hell and gone. I reckon they thought the reporters needed some churchin' up." He nodded toward the ruins of the church roof. "They've flown around some on a broom up there, too." He looked up into the sky, and the reporter followed his gaze. Pa continued, "Mrs. Calfield got her kitchen drain stopped up, too. She blames that on 'em—figgers they hexed it. It's quite a feud, and I'm pretty sure it's gonna get worse."

The reporter looked around: gray, weathered wooden shack of a house, sagging porch, dirt driveway, no sign of life other than Pa and, perhaps, the inert dog lying behind him. If it weren't for Pa sitting there in his rocking chair like a fixture in a museum, he'd swear this place must have been abandoned fifty years ago. There weren't even any telephone or electric wires coming in from the road.

He had to ask. "You don't seem to have been in contact with anybody in the town today, Pa. How do you *know* all this?"

"Small town." He chewed his tobacco. "And by the way, our likker's hid, so don't bother tryin' to find it."

Without another word, the reporter shook off his bewildered expression and turned back to the camera. "This is Sure Thing Local, reporting for the Swift News Network," he said proudly, signing off.

The screen cut back to Connie Knight. "And apparently, there has been an immediate and, often, emotional response around the world."

The technician cut to a new camera shot.

A man on the street in New York, speaking with a strong Brooklyn accent, said, "I don't have time to talk with you; I have Big Important Things to do."

A topless woman on a Miami beach, her chest discreetly blurred, said, "This country is all about freedom. I say everything is beautiful. Leave the witches alone. It's not as if they were Republicans."

Two astronauts in the International Space Station: "I think most people's problem is they don't like to get high."

"You mean they are afraid of heights?" the other astronaut said to him.

"Right. That's what I meant."

An armed, bald civilian survival militiaman in desert camouflage: "It's 'In *God* we trust. Everybody else, we hate."

A chubby couple in Switzerland, eating: “Chocolate is love.”

In the press room at the White House, the press secretary addressed the media: “The president has informed me that he is taking this whole matter very seriously and is, at this very moment, in a meeting with his national security adviser, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the directors of the NSA, CIA, FBI, DOD, Groom Lake, and four producers from very good cable network channels, trying to figure this out.”

A reporter butted in and asked, “Did you say Groom Lake?”

“No, of course I didn’t say ‘Groom Lake.’”

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CHAPTER 8

FIVE OF SWORDS: Evolution

The two men were ancient. No one knew how old, but it was rumored they were caretakers in the Garden of Eden. Cardinal Stravato was keeper of the library, and Cardinal Marco Agresti was the Cardinal Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

They walked together, slowly, down a windowless back corridor of the library basement. Their manner, grave, their hearts, worried, they looked like men sent to do an exorcism on an unwilling rock star. Along with the hard sense of duty and commitment etched on their faces were shock, worry, and poorly concealed nervousness. Monsignor Maldea's words had hit them hard.

Cardinal Stravato stopped at the huge stone door at the end of the hall and looked uneasily back at Agresti. His question was on his face: *Do you really want to do this?* He knew he didn't have to ask out loud, just as he knew what Agresti's determined response would be.

Stravato nodded his understanding, turned, and touched the edge of the huge stone door. As if of its own volition, the door pivoted on its perfectly balanced center hinge and let them pass.

The room was small and empty, save for an old wooden table, an electric lamp, and a few ancient leather-bound books on a stone shelf.

Cardinal Stravato turned on a battery-operated lamp over the table, the only light in the room, and the only concession to the modern era. An oil lamp had been used by his predecessors, but the Cardinal knew the fumes would be hard on the manuscripts, which he cherished, so he had to give in.

Cardinal Agresti touched the door again, and it closed.

It took both men to lift the heavy book off the shelf and set it on the table, and they gasped and wheezed from the effort. Dust puffed out from under the cracked leather binding when Stravato opened it. Then he placed the lamp's light over the book for best illumination.

There was no chair to sit on. This was not a room in which to take one's leisure.

There was no title on the cover of the book—nothing whatever to indicate its contents. Part of one cracked leather corner had been lost—due to what, and in which millennium, they could only guess, for parts of the book were over three thousand years old.

Normally, guests were not allowed in that room, not even the Prefect of the Doctrine of the Faith, but for this work tonight, no copy would do; Cardinal Agresti had to see the original.

Slowly, more out of respect for the ancient tome than because of his own advanced age, Stravato lifted the cover and folded it back to rest on the tabletop. He did not brush the dust off, for he didn't want to cause the slightest abrasion. He did not blow any off, either, for he knew that, over time, the moisture of his breath could harm it.

This was the work itself, *the* work—in the hand of Imakhaten himself, high priest of the temple at Heliopolis in Ancient Egypt—which formed the basis for one of the most ancient concepts in the First Hebrew Bible, in the hills of the first Jewish Land of Canaan. Always kept secret, never released to the public, it lived as little more than a rumor in Lower Egypt, a myth beloved of slaves, rebels, and malcontents.

Cardinal Stravato read the first page of the handwritten text, careful not to touch it. His eyes moved slowly down the page. Hieroglyphs had always come hard for him. He paraphrased, haltingly, for Cardinal Agresti, that he should know, too: "It says this is the Holy Prophecy of the great priest Shekhenotep, descendant of Memshekhotepe, descendant of Amenchar, and that his words should live through this world and the next. His carved stone tablets, revered for a thousand years by the Priests of Mahakhematen, Temple now of Heliopolis, have begun to degrade and will soon be unreadable. So this papyrus is written."

He appeared to be having trouble reading the faint glyphs, so Cardinal Agresti bent the lamp closer to the book. Stravato, too tired to waste energy on unnecessary conversation, yet wanting to thank Agresti, merely nodded in unspoken appreciation.

Stravato continued: "He says the holy texts should be recarved in stone, but he doesn't want to call a stonecutter, because, as in the time of the Pharaoh Hatshepsut and the coming strife with Thutmose the Third, he would have to kill the mason afterward to ensure secrecy, and he doesn't want to do that. So he translated them onto this papyrus in his own hand, hoping they would last, protected in his temple."

Looking at the pages, Agresti could see that the ancient scroll had been cut into pages, bound, and placed in this library, because this would wear less on the papyrus than repeatedly unrolling the scroll. Even so, it was clear there would need to be another translation soon, for the faint images would not last much longer.

Stravato reached carefully to the top of each page, turning it, scanning through the glyphs, looking for the passage that, from memory, brought them down to this dark room. At length, he stopped and stared.

Cardinal Agresti set the lantern down, for it was too heavy to hold, at his age, for more than a few minutes. "You have found it, my friend?" he asked.

Stravato, overcome, said nothing for a moment. Unsure what to do next, he began to read aloud the words Shekhenotep had copied, from an ancient text of a civilization surrounding the Nile a thousand years before the pyramids, perhaps even as far back as the Great Ennead, the Great Nine Gods of ancient Egypt. With some minor simplification yet, he hoped, little distortion, Cardinal Stravato translated for Cardinal Agresti:

"...And I say to you, our leaders,
just as the flower grows,
first seed, then stalk, then budding into bloom,
the People will grow!
First seed, then to walk,
then blossoming
to become themselves
as they were meant to be by the gods themselves,
who came from the heavens,
who fashioned us from apes and set us upon this path.
Suspect we do!
Feel, we do!
Sense it, we do!
And fear
that we are a vessel for the gods,
that we are divine within,

sorcerers almost born,
that when we are ready,
we will emerge beyond the earth,
into a force flesh cannot know.
And spread like fire,
unchecked and unbound.
A bird of our evolution,
human beyond human.”

Cardinal Agresti raised his eyes to the heavens and prayed to God for man’s salvation.

* * *

Monsignor Maldea stopped in the courtyard before entering. He considered again the wisdom of his actions, but—

He shook his head and let his face fall to the stone under his feet in silent prayer, one more time. He wasn’t one to even consider going over a superior’s head, but—

His instructions had been clear.

* * *

The town seemed to settle down for the evening, as if the air, itself, was tired.

Cody cut the TV off, and we walked together out into his back yard to stare at the sunset. His house was on the west edge of town. There was nothing between us and forever—not a telephone pole, not a fencepost, and most certainly not a tree. It was Kansas. Just Morris Gardner’s field of wheat, standing tall with only the gentlest breeze to blow its earthy scent our way. It felt open, free, unrestricted.

The closer the sun got to the horizon, the faster it slid. It was a lens effect of the curved atmosphere. It might creep only fifteen degrees per hour across the sky all day, doubling that just before sunset. Then flatten and distort as it blended into the horizon, like butter melting in forward motion.

No wonder the ancients thought hell was below the earth.

I sat on a bench swing Cody had built some years earlier. The tired one-by-fours were as familiar to my ass as my own bed at home.

Cody came and sat beside me, waited for me to say something. He was the quiet type, a good listener who would really put up with a lot from me but who also had trouble getting it in gear sometimes, if you know what I mean.

What had I gotten us all into?

“I love the town, Cody,” I finally said. “I love the people.”

He sat and waited, looking at the darkening grass under his feet.

When I didn’t continue, he picked up the thread. “You were dabbling in something you didn’t understand.”

“I’m a highly trained witch, Cody. I’ve been doing this since God was a boy.”

He looked at me.

“It’s a saying.” I turned my nose up at him, just enough for him to notice. “I do believe in God, but not in the sense you think.”

“Yeah? What sense is that?” he asked.

“It’s not an old man on a throne; it’s an old woman on a throne,” I said, half cocky, half teasing, half provoking.

He just laughed, because he knew I was a smartass.

“No, really, I believe this thing ‘God’ is kind of like my vision of the All Power: the Something I can barely sense, way above and beyond my abilities.”

“You barely sense the gods?” he asked. “I thought you were all super in touch with all that.”

“I sense them,” I said. “But I think this three-D, organic, electrochemical brain isn’t designed to understand everything in the cosmos directly. God, or the All Power, is, well, it’s just beyond human capacity to comprehend, that’s all. Or touch, directly. Usually.”

“Care to give it a shot?” he asked, meaning, was I going to leave him hanging with that?

Leaning up against him, I thought about it some more. He put his arm around me, partly out of affection and partly to keep me warm in the cooling evening—which felt affectionate, too. “Actually, I think I can comprehend the All Power somewhat,” I said. “It’s the organizational force, the conscious energy *behind* the cosmos. It’s how it all works: the atoms, the quarks, quasars, galaxies, dark matter, dark energy, and life.”

He squirmed and looked uncomfortable.

“Oh!” I said, sensing the miscue. “Sorry. I don’t mean *witchy-poo* dark energy. I’m talking physics.”

He looked unsure.

“Witches can learn about the cosmos like everyone else, you know. For the one, I’m talking theorized matter, which we can’t detect directly, that makes up some twenty-three percent of the universe.”

Cody had no idea what I was talking about.

“Okay.” I looked up through the cooling air to the night sky and pointed. “You see all those stars up there?”

“Yes.”

“Well.”

He slid a little closer to me.

“There’s matter in all those stars and in all those planets that surround them—like in this solar system. We have planets and a star. This earth. You and me. Interstellar dust between galaxies: everything. All that, all *real* matter, makes up only about four percent of the whole universe.”

“Because the rest is empty space?”

“No. Because the rest is made up of something, but we don’t know what it is. Not regular matter like all that stuff we’re familiar with. There’s some other kind of matter everywhere that we can’t detect directly yet.”

“Like that rat I swear gets into my attic sometimes. You know it’s there, but you can’t find it.” He smiled at me, and I smiled back.

Cody slapped his hand against the bench. It seemed solid to him.

“This bench is standard matter,” I said. “We can detect *that*. Dark matter is something else.”

“Like what?”

“That’s the problem—we don’t know.”

“Even *physicists* don’t know?” Cody asked.

“Right. We really don’t know.”

“Voodoo physics? You know, witchy-poo physics?”

I gave him a dirty look.

“Then how do they know it’s there?”

I gathered my thoughts. The silhouette of someone’s cat crept and then ran across the western edge of Cody’s yard and disappeared into the wheat field. It didn’t make any dust, but seeing it, I swear I could smell the field better. Nothing smelled as sweet.

“You can tell by watching how galaxies rotate about their centers,” I said, “that there’s more mass there than we can detect. Or you can use Einstein’s telescopic methods. Sometimes, when there’s a distant galaxy *way* out there—like ten billion light years away—and another galaxy between there and here, we can see the light from the more distant galaxy bend around the closer one. We can tell by how much the light is bent how much mass there has to be in the closer galaxy.”

“So there has to be more matter in the universe than we can see?” Cody asked.

“Right. A *lot* more. Like twenty times more matter than we can detect. Planets and space dust would only make up a fraction of what could cause that. It all means that of everything in the whole cosmos, only a tiny percent is a kind of matter we’re familiar with. There’s another twenty-three percent of the universe that we can’t guess at.”

“And the other seventy-one percent?” he asked.

“Dark *energy*.”

“Also not witchy voodoo?”

I let that slide; that was who he was. “Not a bit.”

Cody shucked his right shoe and slid his toes through his grass. “Why are you putting me through all this, Jess?” Cody asked. How come you always have to make everything so complicated?”

“I’m just showing you there’s more to the universe than we can sense, that we aren’t designed to experience much of life directly. We can’t see some 96% of everything. You know: What’s going on? The Universe? Twenty years ago, we thought we knew about it, but now we’ve learned we have only the tiniest idea what’s going on. We’re here. We’re part of this universe. But what’s going on in the universe, and what part do we play in it? Spirits? Ghosts? Life after death? Witchypoo magick?”

“You know, I don’t know what’s going on in the universe, but whatever it is, we’re part of it, and that excites me.”

“Okay.” He nodded determinedly. “I’ll get into the spirit of the thing. Nonwitchy-type dark energy, anyway.” He smiled at me.

I smiled back.

“So with dark energy, something has a repulsive force greater than the combined gravitation of the galaxies in the universe, and it’s pushing the galaxies farther and farther apart, faster and faster.”

“Ok,” Cody said. “Meaning?”

“Meaning: All these people in history who say they know what God wants enough to kill people for it? Even over details about how we worship? How can we know God in *detail*, or the mind of God, directly, when we don’t even know what’s going on around us?”

“I can tell what’s going on around us,” he said, putting his hand on my thigh. And he was right about that.

I turned a little toward the dim glow above the horizon, which aligned me where I could cuddle better.

“Some pervasive energy we can’t perceive directly, like dark energy or the mind behind a cosmos we can’t yet understand, is kinda how I think of the All Power—or the Goddess, to

anthropomorphize it, to make it human-like, so we can visualize, so we can better connect. It's everywhere in the universe, Cody. It's through us; it's *in* us. It's everywhere—“

“Like the Force,” he said.

“Close enough. It's imminent and constant. That's why I think most religions are similar, under the skin.”

I didn't mean to preach, but I had to squeeze this in sometime if we were ever going to develop a better relationship.

“What!” Cody jumped a little bit, but he didn't take his hand off my thigh. “Jesus, Jess. You gonna say my father runs a church that's like *Wicca*?”

“In many ways, yes. With some glaring differences.”

“Really?” He sat straighter on the bench, pushing me upright. “How can you *say* that?”

“Brace yourself. Now, I'm not being critical, not trying to scare you, but let me explain, okay? Let me tell you, in just a few seconds, what I'm talking about.”

He looked at me as if he expected me to sprout horns any second.

Christianity,” I tried to say delicately for him, “is similar to a pagan religion, as pantheistic as any other.”

“Horse bloody *shit!*” he said. And this from a guy who rarely cussed.

“I'll tell you what I mean,” I braced myself on the bench, facing him, excited. “What is a pagan religion?”

He pointed at me.

“Right, but we're all different. But what do we do? Something like having a hierarchy of gods, or just a number of gods, maybe going into a spiritually safe circle, having tools and symbols we use that represent them in worshiping them, maybe meditate on related issues, ask for healing, maybe sing or play some music in worship or to promote happiness. Then we have a ceremony of Cakes and Ale?”

“Sounds about right,” he acknowledged.

“Well, what's a god?”

He shrugged, probably visualizing a crotchety old guy with a robe and a beard, sitting on a throne.

“How about—again, in the most *general* sense—immortal beings with magickal abilities?”

“Okay.”

Well, you Christians: You have God, with a pantheon of lower gods—“

“No we don't.”

“If we're talking about immortal beings with magickal abilities, yes you do. Like archangels, angels, seraphim, and cherubim. They're similar.”

Cody frowned. “And just what are those last two, exactly?”

“I don't know, but they're mentioned in the Bible. And you go into a sanctuary where you have tools and symbols—like the cross, and candles, robes for the preacher and choir. You pray to God on relevant issues, ask for healing, sing. And then you have communion.

“And there are some differences.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“A lot of people think Christianity has a supreme god of evil: Lucifer, Satan, or whatever. I don't think he really was, but that's how a lot of people see him. But there is no devil in Wicca. None at all.”

I could see Cody was having trouble getting his arms around all this, and sort of looking out the corner of his eye for errant lightning bolts from on high. “So how do you explain all the evil stuff that happens in the world?” he said.

Our train of thought was wandering, but that was because he had questions. I was trying to answer them as the best I could.

“You don’t think *people* are actually doing those things? I mean, it’s a person’s finger on the trigger, but you think the devil’s actually the one moving the finger, making evil things happen, and the people are innocents just being hijacked?”

“In Wicca, we take responsibility for our own actions.”

He almost conceded some of that, being a sheriff and all. He didn’t have much crime in this county, but he believed that when someone did something bad, it was on them—none of this “the devil made them do it” stuff.

“But you know how sometimes Christians claim something evil must be going on with Wiccans, because sometimes we’re naked or use knives or swords as a tool to cast circles, or dance around a bonfire? Well, there’s nothing evil there, but think about how much we could slander your Communion if we wished?”

“What’s wrong with Communion?” he said, getting his hackles up.

“‘For this is my body; eat this in remembrance of me. For this is my blood; drink this in remembrance of me.’ In it, you’re symbolically eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood.”

“That’s just symbolism,” Cody huffed, “to remember him by.”

“You have to *eat* him to remember him?”

“You’re not being fair, now.”

“Right. *I’m not*. That’s my point. Picked on like that is how we feel when someone insults us about some of our symbolism. And you’ll notice, Wiccans don’t go around insulting the Christians about all that.”

His look said, *why not?*

“Because it’s against the code. The Rede. It’s not right to insult you. We just want you to not do it to us.”

I stopped for a second to let him digest some of this. It was the longest he had ever listened to me about any of this, likely because of the magickal crisis the town was currently in.

“There’s a lot of similarity in our rituals because the founders of the Church in Rome, in the early centuries after Jesus, were what we now term as pagans, living in a pagan culture.”

Cody looked almost as if he was hearing me. I wanted to finish before he had a chance to cough, or blink, or something. “In the third century, the emperor Constantine edited the Bible. What’s in there today is largely what he put there, Old and New Testaments.

“And this is important, Cody.” I put my hand on his leg, which did get him to focus on me. “The new Church then defamed other religions, to promote its own developing power base. The Church, under the new popes in Rome, blasted other religions for having many gods, claiming they had the only real god—redefining their own religion as having the one god at the top, and the rest of the gods, well, they’re just helpers, messengers.”

“That’s outrageous,” he said.

“No. It’s true. The structure of the religion is very similar, different only enough so that you can tell them apart. The Christians got it primarily from the old religions, the pagans. We’re talking the greatest marketing effort in history. To promote their own religion, their own power base, they had to do certain things. It all comes together after you study it a while. They had to defame Mary Magdalene—probably an apostle and Jesus’ wife—so they wouldn’t have to deal

with women priests, place men on top. They had to defame witches—which they did, and then some—claiming all good power came only from their God, and that witches were evil.

“Do you know that ancient verse, in the original Hebrew, doesn’t seem to decry *male* sorcerers? Just the feminine. Oh, I’m not sure; I don’t speak Hebrew well. But they seem to be saying, maybe, that male sorcery isn’t what they condemned but female sorcery. Maybe more sexism than diabolism.

“Anyway, the power to improve your life, to be forgiven for ‘sins,’ to be ‘saved,’ all came from God, and you needed male priests to get to God. It put the Church in control of everyone—with a one-way information ‘cloud’ like off the internet that feeds to the Pope. It’s the broadest intelligence network in history. You could build a nice power base with that.”

Cody hadn’t run for cover, so I didn’t stop. “But they had to keep their religion similar enough to the older religions so converts would come over.”

He looked sorry he ever asked.

“I know,” I said. “You’re thinking you’re not Catholic?”

“Right.”

“Well, Protestantism came from it. It’s your history, too.”

I turned to face him more squarely on the swing and held his hand. “I run a good coven here, Cody,” I said. “Teach good values. Help others. Use magick for beneficial things. Energy you put out, good or bad, will come back to you in like form threefold. Commune with the Goddess. I’ve drawn down the moon I don’t know how many times. Taught the coven how to raise energy. Taught them the laws.” Seeing the look on his face, I decided to shut up.

He looked frustrated. “But you talk about those things as if they were real, Jess—”

“You still don’t *think* they’re real?” I asked, waiting for him to see. “After all this?”

“Aw, you’ve got me under your spell, Jess,” he said lovingly, trying to appease me enough to get to some lovemaking.

“Then it’s still real,” I told him, getting back on topic.

He was just looking for some grip on his normal reality. But I knew that he knew better. He had seen, and he wasn’t a man to lie to himself for very long. It was just completely outside his frame of reference. He had no experience to hang it on, nothing to compare it to except the Bible and his everyday reality of heat, wheat, and Main Street.

“Cody, this stuff that’s going on—it’s beyond me, too. It isn’t what I’ve always known of the Craft.

I pulled my long, wavy hair back off my face and held it behind my head.

“You ever cut your hair?” he asked.

“Not a strand.”

I rubbed my forehead. Stress was clearly on my face.

Cody stroked my hair. “No one came to any harm, today, I guess,” he said. “Take a break; don’t let it worry you.” He kissed me gently on the lips—something that tended to take my mind off things. *Other* things.

I felt his lips, his tongue, and rubbed my lips across his 5 o’clock shadow, which electrified me. “Thanks for letting me get all that off my chest,” I told him.

“I’ll be happy to help you get something else off your chest,” he said with a grin. Playful sexuality is a classic God trait, but this didn’t seem like the time to mention that.

“You know,” Cody said, “you don’t look like a guy, to me. Don’t act like one, either.”

“That’s because I’m not a guy,” I said.

“It’s your face. Your breasts help, too. But—you don’t do hormones?”

I shook my head. “I—want to be in the middle, somewhere, but hormones might soften me more than I’m looking for. And I do like to get erections.”

“Jesus, Jess! You had to say that?”

“It’s true, Cody. You know what I have here,” I said, indicating my crotch. “And I have no plans to remove it.”

“Yeah, but you look like a girl up here,” Cody mentioned my face and chest. “That’s what I’m kissing. By the way,” he said. “When you kiss me, do you get turned on?”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

“Then—” He looked at my crotch. “Do you get an erection when we kiss?”

I paused a second then nodded.

“I don’t see it,” he said.

“That’s because I tend to ‘tuck’ it back, every day, so it’s not so noticeable.”

“But you want to have sex with me?”

His face was so close, and the way he was looking at me— I was getting so aroused, I was beginning to have trouble with the conversation.

“So— How would that happen?” He asked.

“Uh— You’ve thought about it.” I put my hand on his chest and leaned in for a kiss.

He sat back a bit. “Jess, how would you come?”

Though it wasn’t my nature, I think I blushed.

“You expecting me to go down on you?” He asked.

I think I blushed some more. “I don’t think you would, no.”

“But you admit you’d be in heaven if I did?”

I moved in again for a kiss.

“It shouldn’t matter, Cody.” I sat back on the bench. “I know. It seems gay to you, but I don’t feel like a man. I’m just me, but— I’m neutrois, but when I’m in your arms, I just melt, so I feel feminine then—”

“But if you came, that wouldn’t feel male to you?”

I shook my head. “No. I know that’s odd to you, but I feel—me—inside. That’s just the apparatus I have.”

“You wouldn’t feel male if I put my hand on you?” Cody reached up to put his hand on my breast.

I almost died and leaned toward him, again, trying to kiss him.

“You wouldn’t feel male if I put my hand on you there, too?” Cody put his hand on my thigh and began to move it slowly toward my crotch.

It had been years, since I’d been loved in a physical way, and my body couldn’t wait any longer. It took over, on its own. I couldn’t stop it.

My breath shortened. My thighs tensed. “Cody!” I reached down and pulled his hand into my crotch and kissed him against my will. My hips arched toward him. I buried my face in his neck, and I came in waves, lost in the smell of his hair.

After a time, I regained consciousness and rubbed his hand deeper into my crotch.

“Jess, what are we doing?” Cody asked.

“Loving you,” I said. “I’m in love with you, is all I know.”

I reached my hand into his crotch and noticed he was full and erect, himself. I undid the buckle on his pants and reached inside to straighten out his penis in his underwear.

“Cody, I’ve got to have you! I’ve wanted you forever.”

I slipped his penis out of his pants and went down on him, groaning as I did. I'd dreamt of this for so long. It was large, barely fit in my mouth. I touched his foreskin with my teeth and swirled my tongue around it—when he came, without warning.

I went as deep as I could on him, drinking everything out of him I could, and when he finished, I kept him there, swirling my tongue around, finishing him, even after it was over.

His crotch smelled like heaven. His testicles were warm in my hand. And for the first time since I'd known him, I felt I was connecting.

After a few minutes, I raised my head and looked him in the face.

He looked happy, yet conflicted.

"What are we doing? How much of life are we going to waste?" he asked.

"You came in me, and I'm in love with you."

He sat there with his pants partly down, my hand still in his crotch.

"But what was that?"

"That was me loving you," I said.

"I guess I'm gay."

"You're really stuck on that, aren't you? But I'm not a man."

"You— You came, too?"

I nodded.

"But where?"

"In my panties."

"Do you want me to go down on you, too?"

"If you'd like. Yes, I'd love that."

"Not now. But is that the way you want me to do you in the future?" He rubbed his hand deeper into my crotch, feeling me, exploring me—beginning to arouse me again.

I leaned forward to kiss him again, brushed my lips against his.

"Jess?"

"My favorite?" I asked him. "I'd love most to be with you naked in bed, with you inside me and your hand on me, there, I think. Lets go experiment!"

"Jess, I just came."

I massaged his penis some more and began to feel a little arousal there.

"Oh, no," he said.

I kissed him again.

"Oh, Jess, this shit is so gay."

I swirled my tongue around his lips. "Really?" I gently bit his lips. "Have you ever been so satisfied with any girl?" His penis was getting harder, and the thought of being with him in bed was making me dizzy. "You're honest with yourself. Have you ever been into any man?"

Cody seemed to consider, while he played with my genitals.

"No."

"Fantasy? Have you had any dreams of men?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

"But this." Cody unbuckled my pants and stuck his hand down inside my panties to feel my penis, still arcing back. He pulled it up, vertical, so he could get his hand full around it.

I unbuttoned my blouse and put his other hand on my breasts.

"Jesus, Jess," he said, leaning down to take my nipples into his mouth.

He kissed me again, and when he quit, I told him, "I think I need more than that."

He kissed me again. “Better?” he asked. Then he kissed my eyes.

“I need to go to bed with you, already,” I said. I’m so limited here.”

We smooched for a while, and his hand on my breasts began a life of its own. His other hand moved my pants down a little more, to expose my penis. He bent over to take me into his mouth.

I laid my hands on the back of his head and felt myself sink as deeply as possible, rocking my hips back and forth, running my fingers through his hair.

The only thing bad about fellatio is I can’t kiss him while he’s doing it!

“How’m I doing?” Cody said with his mouth full.

“Uh!” I pressed myself inside his mouth more deeply, wringing my hands through his hair. “Cody!”

Cody sucked and gently bit, as I had.

I ran my hands over his back and his neck.

Feeling myself peak, I put my hands on the back of his head and pushed, coming deep inside him forever, emptying myself into him—raising his head back to my face so I could kiss him, tasting myself on his tongue.

Cody moved to kiss my eyes and my lips again. My hair had slipped around my face. Sweat matted part of it to my face.

He brushed part of it back over my forehead and behind my ear, then kissed my ear.

“I’ve—had fantasies of you, Jess,” he said. “Not them.”

My hand had slipped, distracted by my own orgasm.

He reached to put it back on his crotch. I eagerly held onto his penis as if for dear life.

He kissed my eyes again. “I don’t know why,” he said, “but I’ve always been into you. I’ve needed you for years. I just couldn’t let myself see that. Now I know what I’m getting into.”

“You’re what’s inside me,” I said. “And you’re all man.” My hand couldn’t move from his crotch.

“I mean in your heart.”

“But you don’t reject the man parts,” I said.

“It’s sex,” he said, as if he were astonished. “It’s part of you. It’s— It’s not even physical,” he said. “I think it’s— I’m in love with you, too.” He kissed me on the lips. “I have been for so long, I haven’t been able to say.”

“Because I’m me?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I think that’s the truth of it. I had to get over my prejudice to love you. But I do, and I can’t not say so any more. I want to hold you.” He cupped my breasts. “I want to kiss you.” He kissed me gently. “I want to get you off.” He put moved his hand in my crotch.

“You’re my girl—you mind if I say that? It’s the phrasing I was raised with.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him, nibbling his ear. Tears flooded my eyes.

“You’re the nicest person I’ve ever known,” he said. “And the sexiest. Lets go to the bedroom right now! I’m I love with Jessie Lynn Lyons, and I’m gonna fuck the daylights out of her right now so help me God. You belong in my bed. That’s the truth of it.”

I started to put myself together, to get off the bench and go inside, when he suddenly stopped and held me by my shoulders. “Jess: Will you marry me?”

“What?” My mind was floating.

“I want you in my bed forever. I want to practice making babies with you—even if none ever come. I want to kiss you in front of the whole town and wonder every day how you’ll

present. I have no idea what gender you may be 10 years from now, but if you'll let me love you, I want to marry you."

"You'd say to the whole town you love me?"

"I think they already know. It's just that now I'm trying to get you pregnant."

"And you'd tell them that, too? Will you kiss me on Main Street?" I asked.

I remember he leaned over so gently and kissed me on the lips.

"Oh, Cody!" I kissed him back. "Yes. I'll marry you. Please! Cody! Kiss me every day. Don't let them stop you!"

In an embrace, we heard a voice from the wheat: "It's about time, you two slower'n all hell."

"MOM!"

We both scrambled to put ourselves back together.

"Jesus! She's been watching?" Cody asked.

"Better 'n T.V.," Mom said from the wheat.

We scrambled clumsily to get off the bench when I noticed the sky.

"Oh, my God." I looked up past his neck at the sky, my eyes wide.

Seeing the surprise on my face, he looked up with me.

The moon hung over the town, a thousand times normal size—the most beautiful almost-full moon I'd ever seen. It looked as if you could climb a peach tree and reach up and touch it. I could see where each Apollo mission had landed. I could see the footprint of Armstrong's Apollo 11, and the place where I thought Buzz must have stood for his famous picture, in Mare Tranquilitatis—"Tranquility Base," as Neil had called it. Shepard's golf ball was lying there by the Cone Crater in the Fra Mauro Highlands, all covered with gray dust. I really wanted to reach up and pluck that thing off to keep it as a souvenir, but I figured it was best museumed right where it was. Cernan's Apollo 17 Lunar Rover lay there, probably waiting for a new battery. He was the last human up there.

Why in the hell weren't we going anymore? Did we have better things to do here on Earth? To my mind, not much.

Cody buckled his pants quickly. "This is supposed to be a small town in Kansas," he said. "Shit like this is only supposed to happen in L.A."

He looked at me still on the bench, half undressed.

"Come on," he said.

I brushed my hair back into a make-shift pony tail, re-fastened my bra, buckled my pants.

The moon hung over the town as if it were about to land. We were all going to be crushed under green cheese and Terran space junk. No one could possibly miss this. People were looking out of their windows, afraid to come out bodily onto the street. Even Stormy took notice, and he rarely showed interest in anything but food and rabbits.

* * *

I went looking for the guilty party in my old, rusty-red pickup sieve, driving up and down the streets in town. I could have repaired it entirely, or even magicked myself a new one, but I like the sieve. The holes were part of its history.

I figured maybe if I got closer to the witch responsible for the moon, I'd feel her. I checked the town square, then Town Hall, Main Street, Maple Street, Oak Street, Elm Street, the highway. I drove by my witches' houses and didn't see them there, either—at least, they

wouldn't come out. I found the telepathy business didn't work well if a skilled witch on the other end didn't want to send.

As I meandered by, people would slam their shutters or draw their curtains. I felt as if I was driving through a prairie dog town with everyone ducking out of sight in fear at the first glimpse of me.

Out on Main Street, everything was closed. It was after five.

"All right, who's messing with the moon!" I hollered out the window, amplifying my voice with magick so no one could pretend not to hear. "Bobbie?" I called. "This looks a whole lot like you!"

"I didn't do nothin'," came Bobbie's voice from somewhere in town. She obviously didn't want me to know where she was.

"That's right," Annie called out next. "Wasn't us!"

"You guys need to put the moon back where it belongs—pronto!"

"We didn't move it anywhere, Jess," Bobbie Sue said. "We just made it *look* bigger. Can't reach more'n nine miles!"

"Isn't it pretty?" Annie asked.

"Pretty as a peach," I growled. "Now, make it go back? *Please?* Whoever did it."

The moon shrank back to its normal size.

Bless the Goddess, it was amazing how quickly they grasped their powers!

Then suddenly, Mars bloomed full overhead, in impossible proximity, covering the entire sky from end to end with its brilliant rust-colored rocks and dirt. Cydonia hung huge right over the treetops, bending down the tips of some of them. The various pyramids and the "fortress" were clearly visible, all covered in the characteristic orange silt. And yes, they did indeed look constructed.

I heard someone cuss in the distance, and windows slam.

I didn't know what to say. My mouth fell open and hung there on a loose hinge.

Then the planet rotated a few degrees slowly over us to expose the great face. I stopped the truck in the middle of the street before I hit something, and got out to stare. "Jesus Christ."

There, covering the whole town, for it was about the same size, was the face on Mars for all to see. It was covered in layers of a very fine dust built up over the years in Mars' famous windstorms. The face looked weather-beaten, worn down from who knew how many eons in the wind. The line down the side of the helm—hair?—was crooked as a politician's code of ethics, but clearly, it was meant to be straight once upon a time. I saw the forehead, eyes, nose, teeth. But it was so large, I couldn't see it so well that close.

I guess Bobbie Sue felt the same way, because the planet receded a bit, turned left and right, grew a bit larger—she was looking Cydonia over—then settled huge again, right over our faces. An unnaturally large witch's hand went up from the town to brush away some of the leeward dust that had drifted over the eons.

Then the hand withdrew, and dust exploded off the face with a mighty blast of Bobbie's breath as she tried to clean the thing for a better look. Orange silt fell over the town like volcanic ash from an eruption.

I coughed and wheezed, covered my mouth with my hand, and jumped back in the truck to escape the Martian dust.

"You've got to knock this shit off, guys!" I yelled simultaneously out loud and telepathically to each of the coven members. Wherever they may have been at the time, I knew they heard me. "Our neighbors aren't ready for it!"

Then, to the whole town, I made my voice heard as if from a loudspeaker. “I know this catches you all by surprise, but we don’t want to hurt anyone. Please don’t be afraid. They’re just playing with some new abilities. It’s all really harmless.” As if that would do the trick.

Then Mars vanished and the music started. It wasn’t amplified, like my voice with magick. It was just LOUD, and coming from the high school auditorium.

I drove over and burst through the front doors, expecting to be noticed and steal attention from whatever in the hell was going on in there.

The place looked like a Las Vegas extravaganza. Deafening music was booming through unseen stadium speakers. Expensive decorations were everywhere, streamers hanging from everything, partitions bouncing to the beat. The big auditorium had been turned into a dance hall crowded with hundreds of people I’d never seen, all dancing in choreographed moves to rock-and-roll music from the seventies.

Above the auditorium, to the left, hidden by the rafters, floated an unseen astral presence. “Yes,” he said with a satisfied grin, sprinkling more party dust on the throng below. “*Play!*”

Near the center of the floor were the rest of my coven, in the midst of a real blowout, slamming their feet into the floor as they screamed together in unison, all wearing bad bedsheet ghost costumes, beer mug in one hand, grasping air with the other. Stars from various movies were running around.

They were whipping them up out of thin air, I thought, until I got closer to one. I won’t name him, but I’ve had goose pimples ever since I first saw him on TV: Tom Selleck.

Tom called over to me in his charming manner. “Hi, Jess. Good to see you.”

“I— I, uh,” I said, very properly, intending to turn his charm down a touch. “Are you the real Tom Selleck? Or an image they whipped up to play with?”

He cocked his head a bit to one side and said, “Excuse me,” then walked back to the center of the fray and jumped in, dancing his own individualized version of the wild, carefree blowout celebration.

What could I do but watch? I sure couldn’t overpower the coven.

And they were just partying, I told myself. Raising hell, having fun. They weren’t hurting anyone that I could see—except for a bunch of scared people in town, who, frankly, would be welcome if they felt like joining in.

I was astonished at how well Jack Miles could dance. I had known the man most of my life and never saw this side. He could twist and bounce his body better than a Broadway showgirl. And he wasn’t the only one. All my witches had been demonstrating skills way beyond their physical abilities. Magickally enhanced. I had to assume that it came from the mind, and in our sphere, what came from the mind happened in reality—just as in real life, only magnified.

Faye moved in ways none of her students should ever see her move. The twenty-seven-year-old sultry sex goddess stole the floor from fifty other bathing-suit babes and showed us what shakin’ it was all about. Her husband, not surprisingly, was not with her tonight.

Bobbie Sue and Annie held their own, but, as expected, Bobbie’s talents lay elsewhere. Even so, you couldn’t have told Annie that. She adored Bobbie. Bobbie Sue was maybe the first person in Annie’s life who tried to get her to let her hair down and express herself.

Mary Lou Foul was nowhere to be seen, and I couldn’t feel her anywhere.

But it was a time of celebration. They had broken through that barrier of the mind that brought their deepest wishes and desires to the surface, and they wanted to let it all out.

Hell, I figured. *It's in 'em; it's got to come out. Maybe it's best to let it go, as long as they don't actually hurt anyone.*

Then the music abruptly changed to some zombie music I'd never heard before. All kinds of people beamed in from the nethers and instantly morphed into playful caricatures of our favorite Halloween ghouls: undead, vampires, werewolves, witches (of course), dancing pumpkins. They even had bales of hay scattered around the floor. The whole motif changed in a flash.

Dada da da DA da—WHOMP! Dada da da DA da—WHOMP!

Just like that, all the windows blew, shattering outward onto the schoolyard lawns. I swear I could see the roof literally jumping up and down on the studs, trying to pound the place into the ground—this party was that loud and the joy of the partiers that infectious.

Mom sneaked in the door of the auditorium with Ned on her heels, acting as if they were sneaking into the cemetery on Samhain festival night.

“Ain't it excitin', Ned?” Mom yelled.

Ned yelled to me with a large, satisfied smile: “Your mom learned a thing or two from you tonight! Go witches! We got dead people dancin' in the schoolhouse!”

“Naw,” Mom said, looking at around her in astonishment. “Them's just werewolves—shouldn't bother us as long as they're dancin'. C'mon! Shake a leg!” With a come-on smile, she gave her plump hips a couple of suggestive gyrations.

He looked out of sorts. “Music's too loud.”

“Then we'll wear some *earmuffins*, for goodness' sake!”

Annie popped some earmuffs out of thin air and floated them over to them. After putting hers on, Mom danced her way out onto the floor, Ned in tow.

It was the first time I ever saw her dance this side of Glenn Miller, and even without being magickally enhanced like the others, she wasn't bad. Ned stood there like a scarecrow on a still night.

Suddenly, a wretched scream, louder even than the party, rent the very fabric of the hall, snapping everyone back to their senses.

All the movie stars and other manufactured characters disappeared, and the room fell instantly into silence as everyone froze to listen.

The rafters creaked as the roof settled back into place.

Hearts pounded; sweat dripped; hands shook with energy redirected. That was no party scream of exuberance. It was real, evil, and wretched.

Then it happened again, as if from the bottom of some dark psychic chasm, deep in the mind, behind our worst primal fears: a long, tortured scream in multiple registers. It ripped through the bones of the town, through every window, every wall, and every breathing soul, sleeping or awake.

* * *

“Magick Town—as it's being called—has been cut off from the world, and no one knows what's going on in there except Pa Gleaner out on the rim—”

Connie Knight was anchoring the evening broadcast for the Swift News Network, when her feed abruptly changed to a man's face, twisted in agony. His scream tore through the studio.

Connie froze in mid sentence. Crew members dropped equipment; a mike boom fell over; camera 2 lost Connie's face and swiveled accidentally to stage left.

Everyone knew in an instant that it came from Ashfield.

* * *

“Which is why God Almighty tells us not to suffer this evil, why he has shown us the way to salvation through the life of Jesus Christ, with the Bible as our guide...”

The immensely popular Reverend Dr. Benjamin Eugene McGuire, rich, famous Televangelist, had been speaking in the GBSA, the Great Big Sports Auditorium, to a crowd of nearly a hundred thousand people, when the fifty-foot TV monitor behind him cut to the same scene, with the same scream splitting the air. He jerked around to stare at the pain. Everyone in the auditorium froze.

After a minute, after he had recovered his voice, still standing in front of the microphone, he said quietly, as if to himself: “Oh, dear Jesus! Lord God almighty, they're *torturing*.”

* * *

Even though it was built new that very night, the damp stone dungeon under Mary Lou and Eddie's house looked a thousand years old. Worn, rough-hewn stones paved the floors and lined the walls, stairs, and arched ceiling. Three torches dimly lit the room in flickering orange flames. Wrought-iron shackles, like the ones holding Eddie Foul's arms and legs against the south wall, dangled from chains in the gray stone, awaiting their next victim. A rack, a spiked cage, and a cauldron filled with hot coals and a glowing iron were placed so that Eddie could not fail to see them. Lining the wall were more tools and furnishings of horrifying design, also dreamed up by Mary Lou. She didn't know what they all were, but they looked wicked, and so she wanted them there.

Mary Lou stood before her disgusting husband, Eddie, in her black coven robe, red, white, and black sash tied around her waist, purple-lined hood thrown behind her head.

Eddie hung from his chains, sweating, exhausted, terrified, but in no obvious physical pain.

“You know, Eddie?” she said softly. “I had no idea what you were when I married you. I must have been crazy or just stupid. But I sure knew after the first time you beat me, didn't I?”

Eddie didn't answer. Bullies like him didn't admit to anything.

“And I knew every time from then on, didn't I?”

Eddie kept mum.

“It's been going on your whole life, hasn't it, you piece of shit?” she demanded in the same soft voice, peering into his face. Her new magickal ability gave her unhindered access to the deepest caverns of his stunted mind.

“Remember Mrs. Wilson, Eddie?”

His face distorted in fear.

“You were eight. Mrs. Wilson. Remember her? What did you do?”

His head turned back and forth, as if trying to dodge the memory.

“You and your so-called friends trampled her roses *just for the hell of it!* To watch the petals fly. To watch her cry. You think that's *nothing*? And when she tried to stop you, you hit her in the mouth and knocked her back against her house.”

Mary Lou Clockwork Oranged his mind simultaneously with the images of his boots stomping broken rosebushes, Mrs. Wilson's distraught face, and the most putrid, painful,

disgusting, images she could imagine of his flesh burning, maggots and corpse beetles crawling and chewing under his skin, buzzards making off with his eyes and giblets.

Eddie's face twisted into a grotesque, macabre painting from hell, and with a vigor he didn't know he had, he screamed again—the long, warbling cry of someone hurt beyond his ability to survive, who begged for death but was not allowed that mercy.

Mary Lou knew that the whole town could hear, that the whole world knew, but she didn't care. She didn't mind them all knowing he was finally paying for his crimes.

She let the vision from his mind fade long enough for him to catch a breath.

“And what about Sandie Higgins?”

Eddie shook his head, whimpering for her to stop.

“Everybody knows, and nobody'll say anything to you, because they're afraid of you.”

He shook his head, too exhausted to speak.

“Back in high school. What'd you do with her, Eddie? You picked her up at her house? Took her to the Friday night high school football game? What's that you say?”

He clenched his eyes tight, and tears trickled down his cheeks.

“Get her drunk on Everclear and root beer, Eddie? Or did you just force her? You tie her hands maybe when she wouldn't give it up?”

A barely-audible “-lease” escaped Eddie's lips. He didn't have the strength to enunciate the initial “P.”

“You took her under the bleachers, didn't you, Eddie. Pulled up her dress and ripped off her drawers and raped her.”

Mary Lou's hands balled into fists. Her arms shook. Her face twitched.

“You *raped* her. That's the word for what you did: ‘rape.’”

She didn't speak her rage. Eddie did it for her with another town-shattering wail. The stones in her dungeon grounded against each other. Rafters creaked, and dust, shaken from cracks, floated down through the air and covered both of them, sticking in Eddie's sweat to cover him in a fine gray paste.

His scream reverberated, seeming to linger forever. He begged her to stop it, though no words issued from his mouth.

Finally, Mary Lou's own rage-filled voice joined his in a shriek that filled the town with terror.

She waited a while to regain her breath, no longer concerned with his. “And what'd she do afterward, Eddie? Filled with your sick seed, disgust, and self-loathing, she left.” Mary Lou raised her voice and yelled at him. “She couldn't take it. Couldn't stand to be around here anymore. Couldn't stand to see you—or even her own self. And what did she do then, Eddie?”

As the horrible visions wormed their way into Eddie's mind, he started to groan.

“Two days later, they found her car out west of town, squashed up in a bar ditch. She musta' hit it at about ninety. I guess that's one way to get away from you, Eddie?”

Another of Eddie's screams shattered the night air over Ashfield—a long, wavering, weak-yet-penetrating, begging kind of scream.

We tried to teleport to Mary Lou's house, but it wouldn't work, so the whole coven raced over in my truck. We jumped out and ran to her door, but something blocked us—we couldn't walk up the steps. There was some kind of force field, no doubt strengthened by her rage.

“Mary!” I called out. “*MARY LOU!*” I banged on the invisible barrier with my fists. It was like banging on invisible Plexiglas. I could tell she wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to me—wasn’t about to let me in. Instinctively, I knew, this had been coming for a long time. She had business with him to attend to, and no one was going to stop her.

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CHAPTER 9

TWO OF SWORDS: Churches

The morning sun grew on the eastern horizon, its bottom rim stretched flat on a straight line of wheat, rounding into a golden orb, like a butter ball melting in reverse motion. It had just begun to warm the dew. The westerly breeze hadn't kicked up yet, though it would before noon. The almost full moon was setting over Ashfield, barely visible on the western horizon. There was not a tree anywhere in the fields to block the view.

Ma and Pa Gleaner sat quietly together on their front porch to watch the show from their his-and-hers rocking chairs, Pa with his shotgun draped across his lap, the catatonic hound dog sprawled like road kill between them. The three of them had been here since just before sunup, about twenty minutes.

To their right, starting at the road's edge, a horde of people stretched in a line a half mile long north and south of the highway—thick at the boundary of the magickal sphere around Ashfield, then sparser the farther they got from the circumference.

The noise from reporters, trucks, helicopters, and onlookers was enough to wake the dead, Ma thought. She looked down at the dog, saw that he didn't move, and concluded that he must not be dead.

She looked out across Pa at the chaos. There must be hundreds of vehicles, morning sun reflecting off their windows. One TV van was stuck in the bar ditch, spinning its tires in the loose dirt, trying to get out, raising a cloud of dust. People were pushing on it. Others were parked at the "line," as the crowd called it, the invisible point beyond which no one seemed to want to go. People were running about, bumping into one another, hauling video and sound equipment, yelling contradictory instructions to each other, trying to be heard over the crowd. Every once in a while, someone would cautiously walk over the line, determined—only to get a blank look on their face, turn, and walk back. Behind them on the highway, a line of cars stretched for maybe a mile. Wheat fields on both sides had been trampled.

And the line seemed to pass right beside the Gleaners' porch. Fields to the left were empty; to the right, they were jammed with hollering reporters.

"Pa! What's going on in there?"

"Pa! Can you give us any more information?"

"Ma! Tell us what's happening!"

The questions came in rapid fire, with no one ever waiting long enough for an answer.

Ma and Pa sat quietly and watched them. Enough had already been said.

Pa gave Ma a questioning look. She knew what he wondered, and nodded ever so gently, with just the hint of a smile. Yes, the hooch was safe if they should break through.

Then Ma and Pa slowly turned their heads to the left. Something had begun to stir on the empty, quiet stretch of road toward town. Off in the distance, from town, a pickup took shape, coming at high speed toward the rim. Everyone saw it before they heard it. It must have been doing ninety-five. The bed was full of people waving shotguns, clubs, and a broom.

They were going to run the line.

The crowd outside the line dove for ditches, though they needn't have bothered, as Ma and Pa Gleaner well knew. About a hundred feet before the invisible boundary, the truck slammed on its brakes and skidded to a halt right in front of the porch. The dog raised his head, looked, and returned to his coma.

The people inside the truck looked at each other blankly, the driver smiled serenely, and the truck slowly backed up, stopping a hundred feet inside the boundary. At the hundred foot mark, the people inside the truck bed and the cab, too, erupted into angry accusations, demands, fighting words, and the driver hit the gas again, only to stop again.

The group appeared to be escape-challenged.

The people outside the line knew what was happening. "You let them go!" they demanded of the Gleaners, representatives of the whole town.

"It appears they wanna go, so they can't," Pa told them. The dog didn't do anything. "I don't make the rules."

Another pickup raced out from town and followed suit, braking and backing and trying again exactly as the first. They both sat there on the road, trucks wobbling and bouncing, with lots of swearing and shouting from within.

A man jumped out from the back of the lead truck carrying a shovel, which he proceeded to bang repeatedly against the highway, chipping asphalt and cursing up a storm with words in combinations that Ma Gleaner had never heard before.

* * *

The town was beginning to look pretty schizo to me. It was a picturesque Midwestern late spring morning, as only we can make them. The sky was clear, the sun still low, dew beginning to dry up. And even though it was a little chilly, I could tell it would become a scorcher later on.

But there was no life. No birds sang. There was no smell of sawmill gravy or biscuits or eggs and bacon from anyone's kitchen. No one watered their flowers. The streets were quiet; the café was empty. People weren't milling about getting ready for the day.

Exhausted screams still carried into air from Mary Lou's house, though they were pretty weak by now. It had been going on all night without a letup. Everyone could tell that the poor wretch's torture, whatever it was, had crossed the threshold of what the victim could endure. Eddie Foul's body groaned and cried of its own accord, pitifully screaming his anguish out to no hero, no rescuer, no sympathetic ear.

As horrible as his screams were, I really don't think there was a soul in town who had much feeling for him.

Mary Lou hovered over Eddie. She was tired, too, barely able to stand after her night's work, but too emotionally involved to sit, too driven by hate and anger. Crying, pacing back and forth before him, she kept at it.

"And what about general times, Eddie, when you were just an everyday asshole, when you'd strut into the diner, bitch at someone to get out of your way—and they'd get out of your way because '*You don't fuck with Eddie!*'?"

He hung in his chains on the dungeon wall beneath their house, unable to move. His wrists were bruised and chafed by the shackles, and blood ran down his forearms. Sweat ran down his

armpits and neck and dripped off his chin and nose. His skin was as white as a cottontail in a snow storm.

“You’re running some kind of private, small-town mafia here, Eddie,” she said.

He didn’t move, so she grabbed his chin and made him face her.

“You don’t know why it’s not a good thing to bully people? Why it’s wrong to hurt people?”

“Remember when you beat us up in circle, Eddie?” she said. She flooded his mind with unembellished images of that night: the coven in black robes standing around their little altar in the field by the barn; the car approaching, the swing of a bat at kidney level, the flame bursting into the air.

His eyes, impossibly tired, widened at the memory.

The force of her unspoken hatred flattened him against the wall and tore at his soul with invisible claws.

His mind filled once again with horrid feelings of self-loathing and disgust at how awful he had been, his whole life, against people who had done him no wrong. He sobbed like a baby, vomited bile onto his chest, and begged for it all to stop. He begged her with his last energy. He wished he had the strength to die, though his mind was too tired to form the image.

Mary Lou staggered back from his living corpse, collapsed on a crate, lowered her face into her hands, and let herself cry.

The force pinning Eddie to the wall faded. His body sagged and fell on the floor. He mercifully passed out.

* * *

I was beginning to run a little ragged. I’m the kind of person who needs her sleep, and last night I’d barely had any. I had stayed up worrying about Mary Lou and Eddie, knowing she was breaking our most sacred laws, fearing what would come of it. My hair looked like ragweed, my clothes were wrinkled, and with no shower since yesterday morning, I was getting a little gamy.

I was over at Cody’s house, pacing the floors. He was following me around like a lost puppy. He was out of his element with all this. Like I wasn’t? There was nothing anybody could do.

We’d evoked the gods in good faith, demanded justice—a cause everyone but the wicked loves—and all hell had busted loose. People I’d known and trusted all my life were now terrified of me, of my whole coven. They yelled at us, shot at us, slammed their doors when they saw us coming, and hid in their cellars.

My witches, liberated in their exuberance from any concern about the effects of their powers, were blowing this whole thing out of proportion. I couldn’t believe they were doing it on their own. It was so unlike them, even in this crazy situation. The common concern and distrust of our Wicca was growing into a tension among the townsfolk that I feared could have scary consequences.

I paced Cody’s kitchen, trying with my fingers to massage a growing worry out of my face.

Cody had passed out for a couple of hours last night, so he was more rested than I. He had the sense not to ask me how I was doing or what was going on. It was clear nothing had changed, and I still had no answers. I looked at him and answered him, anyway. I was reading minds a little better than yesterday.

He tried to put his arms around me, but I shook him off.

“I don’t know what to do. Don’t know for sure what the gods are up to with all this.” What I didn’t want to say was that there was this little, itty-bitty possibility that, since I’d had no training in anything this extreme and since I’d never done this before, I may have pissed the gods off by demanding they do something that they really weren’t into. If I’d done that, then I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be around when the shit hit the fan.

“Don’t say it!” I told him. He was thinking, *well, they’re your gods!*” But I cut him off. He looked at me in surprise. “No, no,” I said. “I’m sorry. If you can’t read my mind, I shouldn’t read yours.”

“Oh, I can read your mind, all right.” He said, stepping closer to me. “You’re wearin’ it all over your face.”

I thought about changing the subject by zapping his house clean or poofing a pot of flowers together on his countertop. But he’d have none of it.

“I think you need to go over to Dad’s and talk to him.” Cody’s father, the Reverend Enos Wright, over at the church. The same one who used to scare the crap out of me on Sunday mornings.

“Oh, a hell of a lot of good that’ll do,” I said. Get that thought out of my mind. “Hell, no.” “You’re scared—”

“Shut up!” I snapped. The refrigerator rocked on its pegs. The oven door clanged, and it was already shut. A plate flew off the counter.

Why should I be scared of Enos Wright? How could that preacher man hurt me? I was the mighty high priestess of doom and caller of gods. World famous, if that throng out by Ma and Pa Gleaner’s it was any indication. I could zap Enos into a cross-eyed, three-legged newt at a hundred paces with both hands tied behind my back. I could snap my fingers and move the rest of his entire bigoted church to the nether reaches with barely a thought.

This guy couldn’t *hurt* me. Right?

After all, what had he ever done other than condemn me to hell ever since I was ass-deep to a tall hog. What power did he ever have on his side other than the power of the Almighty God and his straight-and-narrow bigoted gang of angels who thinks witches should be killed? What in the hell had he ever done other than rant from the pulpit about how horrible we all were for being sinners and how it was only through the saving grace of Jesus Christ his Lord that we could reach salvation and go to heaven?

Nothing, is what. Because that’s all he ever did.

The problem was, I had let him inside my head. I’d been told I was a sinner for hundreds of years by now, and after a while it does begin to sink in. Also, I was a child when I started this life—not the best position from which to tell him he was as full of shit as a honey wagon at the county fair.

I was young, impressionable. And he got to me.

But I’m not so young now, I thought, and I’ve gotten my act together. Ought to be able to stand up to him.

But my knees still went weak at the thought of a religious argument with the good Rev. Enos Wright. Not that I couldn’t win on logical grounds. It’s just that I knew he didn’t really run on logic, and I knew the weight of certainty with which he would condemn me.

I wanted peace and happiness in my life, that’s all. And I knew that talking to him would bring nothing other than anger, hatred, more condemnation, and who knew what else. Nothing good could come of it.

No. Talking to him would not be a good idea. I wouldn’t do it.

* * *

Cody and I walked up to the front door of the pastor's tidy Victorian almost-mansion. Right behind the church, around the corner on Oak Street, it was always so well kept and newly painted, it looked as if it were hardly ever lived in.

"This place is too pretty," I told Cody. "Don't you people ever touch the walls?"

"No-o-o-o," he said like Andy Taylor on T.V. "It's a Christian house—pops clean every time you repent."

I hesitated on the porch. It shouldn't be any different from walking into Cody's house, I tried to convince myself. Of course, Enos probably wouldn't be greeting me with a hard-on.

"It's your parents' house—you could just walk right on in, couldn't you?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure," Cody said sincerely.

I stopped because he stopped.

"And if this were even *last* month, I'd bring you right in with me, witch-bitch and all."

I waited some more because he was still stopped.

"You want me to go ahead?" he asked.

I looked at Cody, then walked resolutely up the stairs to the front door and knocked.

After an appropriate ten-second wait, Emma, Cody's mom, opened the door. If Cody hadn't been with me, I'm certain she would never have let me in.

I stood there and looked at her. Didn't say a word. I wanted to, but nothing would come out.

"We'd like to see Dad," Cody said to her.

Emma looked as though she had something to say. Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. But nothing came out.

"It's all right, Mom. Jess here just wants to talk with him." Cody gave her one of his best smiles.

Emma still looked uncertain.

"I think, under the circumstances, it'd be a good idea, and all," Cody said. "Seein's how they're both religious leaders in this mess, and all."

Emma scowled at Cody. "How dare you call him religious!" She indicated me.

"We need to talk with Dad, Mom," Cody persisted.

And on the strength of his word, Emma relented. If anyone could straighten this out, it was Enos.

Scowl firmly in place as a clear warning, she stepped aside and let us in.

I realized I still hadn't said anything. I guess my mind was trying to figure out how to defend myself from the onslaught that was sure to come. But I did give her something of a smile as I walked past her.

The study was a stellar example of someone's fine carpentry. Honey oak paneling framed two solid walls of bookshelves, each filled to capacity with dusty old volumes of God knew what, but they looked weighty, ponderous, consequential. The other two walls were covered in mementos from high school days, family pictures, and a Jesus or two. Enos playing football somewhere. Cody and Matthew playing football here at the same high school. There were two small trophies, each with a small football on them. A bugle hung on a hat tree—don't ask me what that was for. Never heard him play it. Solid oak floors. A rocking chair in the corner. Oak desk to one side in front of the shelves.

A lamp, a clock, and a cross on the wall.

We found Enos standing in the middle of the room, solid as a brick shithouse, with three of his flock: John Smith, an elder; Frank Bakes, another elder and Ned's brother; and Ethel May Pike, deaconess. For what it's worth, they looked as whacked as I did.

I couldn't help but look down at Enos's crotch—just a fleeting glance. It helped me relax. There was nothing there. Then I tried to focus on almost anything else.

The four of them looked at us—which is to say, mostly at me—defiantly, with strong upper lips.

Cody looked around the room as if he was waiting for someone to say something, for us all to realize how important it was that this was important. "Hi, Dad," he said. "John, Frank, Ethel." They still didn't talk. They stood like statues, which may not have been entirely due to fear or apprehension. There are some folks in Ashfield whom I have never actually seen move in all the time I've lived here. They sit there motionless, whether at church or at the barbershop. And some don't talk much, either, even at the town picnic every spring, which is just about as social as we get.

"Word is," Enos said to his son, "that you're a pervert, now."

Cody's eye brows raised.

Enos continued to him. "Unnatural sex acts in your back yard."

"We're in love," Cody said. He put his arm around me. "We're gonna get married."

"Oh, God, that is sick!" John said.

"He's a guy, Cody!" Enos said as if it were a revelation.

"I—don't think that's true," Cody said. "But what difference does it make?"

"He's a guy, Cody!" Frank said.

"What are you doing here?" Enos finally charged, looking straight at me.

"I came to talk," I said, relieved to find that my voice still worked. I thought it came out okay, too, considering. I tried to sound confident yet soothing, but I'm afraid it may have sounded a bit weak and strained.

I stepped away from Cody to deflect anticipated blows.

"You're the devil!" Enos snarled at me. Hatred strained the lines in his face and gave it all a pinkish effect. "You corrupted my son, and now he's sick as you! Never would I have thought I'd say that of you." He was heated. This had obviously been on his mind a while, I guess, with me running the coven in town for some ten years.

Small tears gathered in Enos's eyes, and his face took on a tremor. His hands stayed at his sides, though it looked as if that was only through sheer force of will. He stepped toward me.

I held my ground.

"I knew your father, little man," he said, working hard to restrain his voice. "We went to school together. I baptized you when you were six years old, as a boy, into the Faith of GOD." Naturally, his finger pointed up when he said that. "I held you in my hands and lowered you into the warm waters of the Womb and raised you up out of it, fresh and new, to go forth and sin no more."

Wouldn't that mean God is a woman?

I didn't say anything.

His voice began to get louder. I still held my ground. "I work my fingers to the bone day in and day out my whole life showing this flock," his hands outstretched to indicate the whole town, "the way of *Jeysus*, our sole salvation to the glory of God Almighty, our only true path to Heaven." He stopped to take a breath, "And you," his finger pointed accusingly at me, shaking with adrenaline and fear, "come back from that college with your sinister ways and subvert the

good nature of the God fearin' people of this town! You infect them like a disease with the evil ways of the Devil—condemned for thousands of years since he was thrown out of Heaven.

“You seduce them into your *witchcraft!*” He paused to catch his breath. “You chant around a fire! Cast spells! Damn people to hell! Ruin our crops—and now, you’ve got my son putting his mouth on you!”

I said nothing, just waited for him to get his word out. Cody stood strongly beside me, but didn't say anything either. Enos needed the time.

“Subversion! Destruction! Seduction! Chaos! Fear! Ruining people's lives! That's the way of Evil, 'Aridona' or whatever devil name you call yourself in those,” he flagged his hand toward my farm, “circles over there, howling at the moon.

“You are the evil the Holy Bible speaks of. You are the witch we should stone. God, himself, will cast you into the fires of hell. Look around you to see the proof of my words. The whole town is afraid to leave their homes.”

He stood there shaking in his hatred, tears running down his cheeks. Nobody moved.

That was Enos. That was exactly the kind of condemnation I was talking about. And he was good at it. He'd had a lot of practice.

The other three Enosettes broke out into song, “Rock of Ages”—No, no. Sorry. They didn't actually. But I half expected they would.

My heart felt weak and rapid, like it was gonna quit at any moment or burst a vessel in my brain. My knees were weak. I felt light headed. This, I'd always known, was my greatest fear, to be condemned to hell by the religious hierarchy.

I don't know what else he could have said. I don't know how better he could have put it.

Far overhead, maybe two or three hundred feet up and off slightly to one side, just out of phase, Sun God Lugh watched the proceedings in the house, seeing through the roof, sensing thoughts unspoken, feeling emotions unexpressed. Beside him floated a small fairy, mischievous by nature. Ready, willing, eager.

Lugh thought for a minute—maybe consulting with others not present, maybe considering the best course of action for these fragile humans—and carefully nodded to the little fairy.

Delighted, the little fairy reached into her bag of dust, swept her hand over the scene below to sprinkle a little excitement into the mix.

I moved to the side a step, rather casually, I thought, just to get a little bit away from him, without an obvious retreat. I looked at Cody for support. He turned from me and took a neutral seat behind Enos's desk, which I thought almost made it look like he supported his father. Or was he saying that someone on my side had Enos's rear? That both angered me and gave me a small measure of courage.

It was me against them. I began to remember myself. But I also felt it was supposed to be different this time.

Who were these people, anyway? Small-minded people in this small minded town. Who was I? I went through all that arrogant High Priestess stuff again for myself. I'd had college, which was more than he had. I had a “flock” of my own, too. I had a spirituality thousands of years older than his, the proof of which lived in my heart every time I communed with the Goddess. And, in this case, I also had the very real power of the Gods on my side—which just happened to be running the town at that time.

So I mustered my courage.

“Don’t give me all this go to hell shit, Enos!” I told him angrily. I bet that’s the first time anybody ever said anything like that to him.

Everyone present was aghast I’d speak that way to him.

“You’ve been trying to ram that damnation crap down my throat, scaring the hell out of me since I was old enough to pee.

“How dare you! Witch!” they all seemed to say at the same time.

Cody put his feet up on Enos’s desk.

“You get your jollies sending children away every Sunday worrying about what it’d be like to burn for all eternity? Bringing them to your faith under threat of torture? You say ‘Love the Lord Your God or he’ll throw you in the fire’? *What kind of crap is that?* If somebody threatened their kid like that, we’d throw his ass in jail for child abuse!”

The Angry Four yelled their objection at my rebuke.

But I made myself heard. “You’ve been *oppressing* the people of this town all your life, not serving them!” That took them aback, literally. The four of them backed up two or three feet.

“You’ve always pressed your own point of view on them, haven’t you!” I said to Enos.

“You always preached your brand of Christianity at them! Very limited in scope. Never anything different. Do you ever preach things like compassion toward others who are different? Do you ever suggest there are other GOOD people in the world who just might go to ‘heaven’ even though they have a different religion? Are you gonna claim all Jews are going to hell because they don’t accept ‘Jesus Christ’? What about Islam? Or Shinto? Or Hindu? Or anybody else? What about the Catholics? They going to go to hell because they don’t get properly dunked in your tank? You really think a compassionate God would let his creations go to hell forever—*forever*—” I screamed, “because they happened to be born into a Buddhist family and respected their parents enough to adopt their religion, their view points, for themselves?”

“You are being so cruel—” John Smith shot at me.

“How is that?” I asked him, honestly. “Aren’t I doing the same as he did a moment before? Only my religion is about love and doesn’t threaten people.”

“He was standing on the *Bible*, Missey!” Ethel May spat at me.

“Sacred to him. But to me, *that* is cruel!”

Jesus, I was mad. And my anger had had time to fester, also. For three hundred years.

“Oh, everybody’s got to go to hell for being different from you, right?” I walked around in a circle, my own dander in a snit, invading their personal space on purpose, daring them to fuck with me just a little bit. “This is what you’ve taught them,” I said to Enos. “But you didn’t teach them,” and this time I flung my arms wide to encompass the whole town, “about the other six billion people on this planet and what they have reason to think is true. No, it’s just your way. That’s all.”

He offered a lame, “I tried to protect them!”

“You didn’t even teach them everything in the Bible—probably safe in the knowledge,” I looked accusingly at his elders and deacon who tried to retreat, “that they’d never actually *pick the damn thing up* and read it for themselves!”

A copy of his Bible was on his desk, already open to the critical passage. He pointed at it, said nothing for a few seconds, waited for his tongue to return to him, and then spoke from memory.

“Leviticus 20:27. A witch shall be put to death.” He said, looking at me. “Her blood is upon her.”

I waited. I knew there was more. And strength grew within me, or so that's what it felt like at the time. I knew what he was gonna hit me with, and I was ready for it. This was the showdown I'd waited for all my life.

"Deuteronomy," he continued, "18:10: you can't have a wizard among you.

"Exodus 22:18: *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!*" He yelled so half the block could hear him, confident that was the wooden steak through my heart.

But I'm not a vampire.

"Here—" John began his support for Enos but quickly shut up when I glared at him.

"You ever actually read the Ten Commandments, John? In the Bible," I asked. I suspected the answer was no, but I didn't wait for his answer. "It's in Exodus, Chapter 20." They all looked at me like they expected me to burst into flames for quoting the Bible. "Ever read the chapter following that one? Chapter 21. It's the same chapter that does the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' bit. It says it's okay to buy people and have slaves. Sometimes for only a few years, sometimes forever. It says you can beat them to death as long as they live for at least two days after the beating. And in Leviticus 20:9, it says if you *insult* your parents you should be *put to death*. Over and over, things you should be killed for.

"What about stuff like that in the Bible, Enos?" My worsening mood did not occur to me.

"You're being ridiculous," Enos said. "No one would be expected to follow those commandments."

"Why not? It's always confounded me. Since when are some of God's Commandments in the Bible absolutely sacrosanct to the point of *actually killing people*, but others are to be disregarded as obviously a mistake? What? God make a type-o? Hell, Enos. Is the Bible the Word of God or isn't it? Was it written by *Him*?" Finger in air. "By the Spirit of God through the hand of man. Are there mistakes in it? Did God change his mind somewhere along the line and tell you about it, somehow forgetting to put it in writing so that the rest of us could be enlightened?"

They all seemed to take one step back.

"That's the thing, Enos. You only follow pieces of the Bible, the pieces that suit you or your purposes. You don't follow the rest, and to make sure you aren't challenged, you *keep the rest to yourself*. If you even know about it in the first place."

"Killing people for insulting their parents is *bad*. That doesn't mean what it says! But killing witches is *right*. Just look around you at the evil you've caused in this town!"

"We haven't done anything here, Enos." I knew what all he was gonna list, so I did it for him. "Bobby Sue on her broom doesn't hurt anybody. She was just excited about being able to. None of the witches shot up the town, either. It was your flock on a turkey shoot trying to kill *US*. And that party was just hell-raisin' fun! It was a gas; they were lettin' off steam."

Whoops. That might not have been the best thing to say.

"No, I guess it did hurt," I said, backing off a bit. "It scared people. The one clear thing one of us *has* done is Mary Lou is over there, now, evidently giving what for to Eddie."

"That's an example. Using your magical powers to threaten and torture us!" Enos said.

"That's just one out of six!" I defended. "And for what it's worth, it's wrong by our laws, too, and when I get my hands on Mary Lou I'm gonna wring her neck for it—and who around here doesn't think Eddie deserves it anyway? He put her in the hospital. He's been abusing her for years. He's raped women, destroyed property. Did you or your God stop him? Hell no. Cody couldn't even stop him. He's been getting away with everything this side of murder for the last

twenty years. Nobody will do anything about it,” I looked over at Cody, whose hands were really tied by Judge Hack, “and he tried to commit murder yesterday!

“Mary Lou’s one of my flock? Well Eddie’s one of yours.”

They all stood there for a few seconds trying to digest that.

“What about teaching witchcraft in school?” Ethel said quietly. “I have a son in that classroom. Doing things like that could make him want to be a warlock or something else evil like that.”

I disregarded the incorrect reference to “warlock.”

“What? You mean you don’t want him to want to learn to focus his mind? To make something better of himself? To learn how to help channel positive energy into the world?”

“That’s right!” Ethel retorted. “I don’t want him doing stuff like that. I want him learning *my* religion. I want him to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord. I want him to raise his own God-fearing children some day.”

“And he might, too. But it should be his choice. And how is he gonna choose, if he doesn’t know there’s a choice. How can he even practice Christianity, if,” I said, turning to stare at Enos in the face, “the preacher lies to him about what’s in the Bible.”

“Sacrilege!” Enos shouted. “You hear this witch!?” They each in unison shook their head uncertainly yes.

Enos acknowledged them with the barest nod. “You are trying to harm my family. Witch.” He picked up a bottle of drinking water, as if he were catholic, and began to sprinkle me with it as he spoke: “In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, I condemn you to hell to burn with all the other witches throughout history. I banish you from this house. And I banish you from this life!”

He suddenly reached into his inside jacket pocket and withdrew his .38 revolver, pointed it right between my eyes.

Cody jumped up from behind Enos’s desk to grab the gun.

I somehow—in my arrogance at bullying my way through the heated argument, beating down helpless people who were only afraid for their safety—forgot about defenses he may have had other than his sharp tongue.

“*NO!*” I instantly screamed, loud enough to shake the foundation, and cast my arms quickly out to the side throwing everything away from me, creating a protective bubble between me and everything. Enos’s desk, with Cody climbing over the top of it, instantly slammed three feet back against the window. Enos, John, Frank, and Ethel all slammed back into the wall behind them, drapes and pictures flew.

And I heard a loud crash behind me that shook the house.

I turned in time to see Matthew, Enos’s and Emma’s other son, fly as if in slow motion, across the entry foyer to smash into the stair rail. He had been coming up on me from behind, and my bubble threw him. I was looking at him through a large hole he’d just made in the wall of the study. The ceiling creaked and sagged. The support beam that had been by the door jam had been suddenly removed. Splinters large and small splattered the room and came to rest on top of everything, including Matthew’s lifeless body. His head was smashed grotesquely open on the corner of the stair. Blood covered the floor more quickly than I’d thought it could have. Matthew’s eyes stared at the ceiling, his mouth twisted in a scream he never made.

“Matthew!” Enos and Emma both screamed.

I ran to him. Cody came up behind.

Emma, who had been in the foyer, shoved me aside and began to, timidly, cradle her boy, afraid to touch him, blood everywhere, his brains falling out of his skull.

Cody, Enos, everyone else wanted to help the boy, though too late and stood in silent shock that this could have happened. That it did happen. To Matthew.

I sat in the corner by the stairs, stunned.

Cody looked at me. "Jes."

I didn't know what to think. I knew better than to ask if he was okay. I could see he was dead. He was one of our attackers, but I never meant to harm him. Wasn't even angry at him. I didn't want to hurt him.

My eyes welled up in tears. "I'm so sorry." I tried to explain, feebly. "I didn't know he was behind me. It was an instinctive reaction..."

No one was listening.

And all my witches knew, of course, what I'd done. They were aware from the start of my plans to go confront Enos and had followed the argument along, telepathically.

I ran from Enos's house, crying, stumbled down his front stairs into the yard, and then flew away, miles out into the fields. I don't even know where I was or how long I was there, surrounded by a desert of near-golden wheat, nothing under my feet but dirt, nothing overhead but blue sky and Sun. I shut my coven off, tried to hide from everyone, and cried harder than I had even when my father died.

I was disgusted with myself, mortified. I felt the weight of millions of witches I'd just defamed, crashing down around my shoulders.

I, the Big High Priestess, had attacked the helpless and killed him. It didn't matter that I felt most of what I'd said was right or that I truly felt the preacher was off his mark, promoting bigotry, limiting any hope of spiritual growth among the townspeople. It didn't matter he'd hurt me inside since I was old enough to listen, or even that he as a pompous, self-righteous ass who out of his own fears needed to twist his own religious tenants to put other religions down. Didn't matter that that sick view had caused the deaths of untold thousands of wonderful people in the past—or any of that shit.

What mattered was that in Ashfield, on that day, standing in his home, he was scared and helpless against me, and I took advantage of the opportunity to ram his sins down his throat before his friends. I hurt him when he couldn't defend himself.

And then I killed his son. Didn't matter that it was an accident.

I was mad, angry, arrogant, haughty, and I was enjoying my revenge so much I didn't think before doing something that could be dangerous.

Everything ran through my mind, everything that had happened. My powers. This whole spell the Gods had worked for us. What their meaning was behind it all.

I thought about bringing Matthew back to life. I ought to be able to do that, right? With all this obvious magick going on. But the thought scared me. I'd had a whole two days with powers of that nature, and I didn't know what all I could get away with. What the limits were supposed to be. How thoroughly could I? Sometimes when you ask for something, you get it, only to learn it's not as good as you thought. If I brought him back, would he be some sort of aberration? A zombie or something?

I loved the Gods, and I'd learned to trust them. But I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Show the people what they could do if they practiced *my* religion, my spirituality—which again seemed arrogant—or recognize a limitation on playing God myself.

I didn't know. Somehow it just felt wrong to me, and I didn't feel I should do it.

I sat in the wheat and tried to talk to Brighid, to ask her for guidance or help. Meditating in the field. Right. I wasn't in the mood, but I tried. I got no answer, no matter how long I tried. She wouldn't have me. I tried Aradia, my name-sake. I tried Cerridwen, Celtic crone goddess of knowledge, to help me figure out what to do. Normally I had no trouble at all connecting with any God or Goddess I chose, but that day I got nothing.

I was cut off entirely.

After a time in deep meditation, reaching no Goddess to help, I still felt agitated, sick to my stomach. There had to be a way to do something to fix this.

The shit was getting out of hand.

After a time, I opened my eyes, expecting to find the peaceful, familiar stocks of wheat growing in cultivated soil, a symbol of life and health, of Mother Earth, staring me in the eyes. But instead I found my next teacher.

Upon seeing my head move, a rattle snake jerked its head back a few inches and began rattling his alarm. You didn't need to be raised in Kansas to know the feeling of terror a rattler can drill into you. It had crawled through the wheat to coil about two feet in front of me. It looked to be about six feet long, so I figured it was well close enough to strike me.

I froze. Didn't move anything, my hands, feet, even my head. My legs were crossed, semi-lotus. My hands were on my knees, fingers spread, right in front of its mouth.

His rattler was shaking ninety miles an hour. It was easy to see why the Christians associated him with the devil. A vicious looking thing.

He was very displeased with me. I didn't blame him.

"Thank you for coming," I said to him, still without moving. Somehow I knew he was a male snake. "I asked for help. I didn't know it would be you." Not that I actually knew him. Didn't even know who he was supposed to be. But under the circumstances, it seemed I ought to say something.

He lay there and rattled at me, looking back and forth from one of my knees to the other as if trying to decide which he should strike first. The fingers of my left hand moved slightly, and his head jerked back further as if to strike.

The rattling increased. The dark look in his eye was a clear warning.

His coil tightened, and his head moved to look me in the face.

I quit moving my hand and held very still.

When I had learned I was to stay, and with a lisp barely discernible, the snake began to talk to me. "There was a guy I knew in Egypt, about four thousand years ago," he said. "Digging out the base of the Sphinx."

It occurred to me to be startled that the snake should talk, especially in a friendly manner, at least so far, but everything was so weird those days that my inclination to be startled vanished with the wonder of his ancient knowledge. As messed up as I was at the time, crying about the mess I'd made of things, I also felt the snake's words were important to me.

"Sand did always blow in around the bottom of it. Wonderful project," he mused half to himself. He adjusted his coil, his scales grating against one another, making it clear he was still a threat. "But they had to carve it out of the existing foundation because they had no technology to form their own.

“I was a scorpion at the time. Nasty little bastard. You think I’m scary now? Then, I didn’t even warn people before I killed them.”

“You killed him?” I asked.

“Not him, no. I just crawled up on his leg and scared the hell out of him. He jumped backward over some rubble, fell and broke a leg. Then a friend of his came over and killed me with a stone. Smashed me flat.”

He looked at me for a few seconds. Dramatic pause. Then changed his coil, rather the snake equivalent of uncrossing his legs and crossing them the other way.

“Then, in another life, I was a spider. What you call now a Sydney Funnel-Web. Ounce for ounce, the most deadly spider on Earth. Was about three thousand years ago. Australia. Bit an Aborigine on the face. Before he died, he crushed me under his foot.”

“Why did you kill him?”

“I was a spider,” saying that like it was sufficient, then realizing my disapproval. “Spiders aren’t very intelligent, you know. Not nearly as much as snakes,” he seemed to say with a hiss.

“This a history lesson? Or biology?” Guess I was still a bit cocky.

“You fear me?” the snake asked.

“Not really,” I hoped. “I understand you.”

“But part of you fears me,” he said without doubt.

“Yes—”

Faster than lightning, he struck out and bit me in my left leg. I jumped immediately, rolling onto my back, then quickly scrambling back up onto my butt, trying for the barest second to crawl away, only to find the rattle snake coiled again directly in front of me. The look in his eyes made it clear I should not dare move. His rattle shook even more fiercely, threateningly.

“Scared now?” he asked me again.

I didn’t think to answer. Fear was all I knew. I had to get away, but you can’t move in the face of a coiled rattler.

Then without warning he struck again, this time in my right leg.

I jumped and tried to crawl away again. My right hand went down to slap him in the head to buy me time, but he looked at it and I snapped it back. I sat, shaking, in my semi-lotus position on the plowed earth, a few feet farther away than I’d started, wheat just over my head all around me.

He was coiled right in front of me, squirming in his coil, brushing scales against my pants legs, rattler going like a chain saw, his head moving back and forth, ready to strike if I even breathed.

The fear in my face was obvious.

“‘S’matter? Don’t you understand me anymore?” He asked.

My legs began to sting mightily from his bites.

“Don’t worry about it. Much,” he said to me, as if he could read my mind. “I just ate a rat. I’m mostly out of venom.”

My eyes were raining tears. Adrenaline as much as fear. It wasn’t just his strikes. It was the pain of Eddie and Mary Lou, fighting with Enos, killing Matthew, everything. Or maybe mostly the release of being called on my shit, corrected by this small parental figure.

I needed to reach down to my sore shins and massage them, hold them, or something. I feared he’d bite me again if I did. But I had to do something.

“Are you a God?” I asked.

He laughed and slowly stretched out his head to brush against my hand. “I am just myself,” he answered vaguely. “Known to few. And angry as hell.”

I started to ask why or at what, but he didn’t give me time.

“I’m tired of watching everybody fuck up!” he yelled. “Of all the beautiful things life could be, I spend millennia watching people tear their lives apart, waste the most precious gift in the cosmos—a collection of atoms that knows itself and can reach out to change the world—to spend their precious life fighting, killing, hating.” If a snake could yell, he was doing it.

He stopped for a moment to see if I was following him. I was, but I didn’t know what he was up to.

He uncoiled and crawled up over my lap.

I invoked the name of Jesus Christ, I tell you honestly, but I don’t want you to think in my desperation I was reverting to Christianity. It’s just that it’s a common expression of fear and exasperation, and it came out of my lips faster than a bull out of the chute before I had the chance to catch it.

He wrapped himself around my left arm and climbed up around my neck, scales brushing through my hair to scrape my neck. I stiffened and jerked, but largely held my form through the most extreme force of will. Snakes have never been my favorite. His head hung a foot in front of my face, turned to look back at me.

He opened his mouth to show me his fangs. One of them slightly pricked my upper lip. I cringed, squeezed my eyes shut, peeking through the slits, waiting for the next strike in my face. Fangs piercing my cheek, digging into my gums underneath, scraping against my teeth. Kissing the inside of his mouth.

He laughed at my reaction, delighting in it. “Insecurities!” he yelled. “Fragile things you are! I know. But what of it? So I bite you in the face, and you swell up. Is it that horrible? Hasn’t Cody ever bit you?” That was mere derision. He was playing with me.

“Not the same way, not the same mouth,” I tried a little of it back. I was still scared. Never talked with a snake before, and I’d certainly never had one crawl all over me, but I sensed you gotta stand up to these things. Never let a snake see you crawl. “And what business is that of yours?”

He seemed to laugh, opened his mouth to show me his fangs—and then he suddenly vanished completely off me. Left me with the small sting on my lip, and the two flaming stings on my legs.

My breath exploded out of my lungs. I didn’t realize I was holding it. My hands clapped and held my face in an effort to massage the fear away. My skin crawled, muscles twitched. I had to get away from that awful place.

A few yards ahead of me, a small, white bunny rabbit peeked around a clump of wheat stalks then timidly hopped toward me, stopping periodically to sniff and make sure it was alright.

Normally, I would have reached out automatically to pet it, pick it up, but my hands were shaking, and I guess I was still thinking I shouldn’t move.

He hopped over to my shins and sniffed them where the snake had struck. As he did, the pain went away. He brushed his head against my legs, rather like a cat would, and the hopped up into my lap. Slowly, I allowed my hands to stroke his soft fur.

“I’m not really a snake,” he said. “And you’re not bitten.”

My stings went away.

He sat on my lap, sniffing my arm where the snake had crawled.

“I’m not actually even carnate.” He rubbed my tummy with his cheeks, nibbling at a button there.

“You—” I couldn’t think of what to say.

“I lied to you a little about all of it,” he confessed. “Never was any of those things. I’m just me.”

“Why?”

“You said you needed help, so I gave it to you—although really I should have gone ahead and killed you. You don’t deserve your powers.”

“You helped me?” I asked, still not with him.

“Yeah,” he said. “But you didn’t get it.”

My mind was scrambled. I couldn’t follow him. I just cried and held the bunny close for comfort.

He nuzzled his cheek against mine, rubbed his ears against my chin. Then he spoke the simple truth, as soft as the fur on his head, “The message is very simple. If you don’t want them to fear you, don’t scare them.”

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CHAPTER 10

KNIGHT OF SWORDS: Sheriff Cody

Enough was enough. This shit had to stop.

We never followed traffic laws in town anyway, and I certainly wasn't in the mood to start. I raced my truck through town, squealing tires and running stop signs, to find the rest of my coven. I could feel the fear in the townspeople as I drove past their houses. I was the Big High Priestess, and now I was the Big Murderess as well.

Yes, they knew. Word spreads like wildfire in a small town.

We had actually hurt them now, I knew. People behind walls, ducked under cars, loaded weapons.

I skidded to a halt in Faye's front yard. Amerach. I banged on her screen door with the flat of my hand. "Faye! Faye, get out here!"

Faye and I skidded to a halt in front of Jack's place. Gwyn Ap Nuad. He was waiting for us with Annie standing beside him, and with Bobbie Sue literally on a leash. Sirona and Scathach. "We've got to gently tell these people who we are," he said. We all knew what he meant. We'd known them all our lives, but they'd never really known who we were.

Faye said to us all, "We need to show 'em. Just because we could hurt them doesn't mean we will. Anybody can hurt anyone. But our cosmic laws forbid it, and *most of us* follow them." Her comment was really pointed at Mary Lou, and a bit at Bobbie Sue, but it still hurt me.

She saw my pain.

It was time to bring this to a head. Unified, we moved.

The basketball gymnasium down at the high school was full to overflowing. Over two hundred townsfolk were in there, scared men, women, and kids. They sat quietly on the edge of their seats, stood around the walls, and milled about the huge, glossy wood floor, fearful for their safety, their future. Mamas hugged children; husbands hugged wives; lovers held hands. Other hands clasped religious medallions and crosses. Feet shifted in uneasy tension.

Pastor Enos Wright was there, standing with his wife. She was crying. His face torn in both pain and rage at his loss earlier in the day, he held his best cross in his left hand, and his biggest Bible in his right. He stood on the floor below the home basket. "Have faith, my children, that whatever is happening is in God's grand design." He tried to sound powerful and inspiring, but it wasn't working. Two days ago, they would have known what he was talking about, but not now.

"Have faith," he exhorted the silent throng around him, "in the ultimate power of God. Have faith in Jesus Christ that whosoever accepteth Him shall have everlasting life. Know that whatever happens, there is a divine plan. God has not forsaken us! We are his devoted children, born again into his holy realm..."

My coven and I walked slowly, calmly, into the gym, from the visitors' side of the floor. We were wearing white robes this time, an effort to imply a softer aspect, or at least be less threatening. We wanted to make an effort to calm the town, apologize for our wrongs, and try desperately to find some common ground. The only witch not with us was Mary Lou, no doubt still doing something ghastly to Eddie. I could sense in the crowd that she was conspicuously absent. They had lain awake hearing his screams all last night, his voice trailing off only due to exhaustion as the new day wore on.

The crowd parted for us as we moved toward the preacher at the other end. I thought about smiling to them but decided against it—they might think I was happy I'd killed Matthew.

Cody was there, standing near his parents. He's not a weak man, mentally or physically, but he looked hurt and unsure what to do. He wasn't motivated by the masses. He wasn't going along with them because he needed their votes in the next election for sheriff. I knew him, and I could feel his mind. He was shaken by his brother's death. Maybe Judge Hack was right. Maybe the Bible was right—maybe I *was* evil.

Startled into silence by our arrival, Enos recovered. "God gives us times of peril before revealing His plan. Remember Noah. Remember Job. Remember Jesus. Time and time again, we are tested like a sword in the fire, to strengthen us, *to make us strong in the face of evil.*" He looked straight at us. "To *harden* us against those who would attack us, who would seek to shake our faith in God Almighty." He looked at the approaching coven. His voice shook with passion. "Who would kill our children—*murder them*—in wicked portent, *right before our eyes,*" he continued.

We stopped maybe fifteen feet from Enos, the crowd parting to form a twenty-foot moat of shiny varnished wood flooring between us and them.

"It was an accident!" Faye Poke told everyone, pointing a finger at Enos. "He stuck a gun in her face"—moving her finger to me—"and she reacted only to protect herself."

Jack tried to explain. "She put a protective sphere around herself, is all, but Matthew—"

"He was too fucking close," said Bobby Sue, sure she'd helped.

"Enos," I addressed him, but in a way that was also meant to shut everyone else up.

"*Witch!*" he boomed at me. "Do not talk to this devil!" he told the crowd.

"Please!" I raised my arms for attention, the large sleeves of my white robe falling back above my elbows.

There were screams and shuffling as the crowd pressed back on itself, though no one actually ran. They were trying to stand their ground against the devil, knowing they couldn't run, hoping to survive with their preacher and the Word of God to protect them.

Never had it been this bad in town. Never had these people been so utterly terrified of us.

But what could I say? "We mean you no harm"? We would sound like Martians in a 1950s B movie. "We saved Mr. Johnson from dying of cancer"? Someone would bring up the destruction of some of their homes. "We have laws"? They would counter that with Matthew's death. "Our Threefold Law prevents us from hurting you"? It hadn't sounded last night as though it was doing too good a job of protecting Eddie from Mary Lou.

I put my arms down. It was scaring them.

The preacher didn't say anything. He was probably afraid he might piss us off, or something.

"*Witch!*" someone else shouted from the crowd.

All turned to look.

"*Evil!*" someone else shouted.

The horde turned into a mob and stepped toward us as one.

I held my arms back up and projected energy toward them, just enough to push them back a foot or two. There I was, getting pissed again. “Do you think we’re here to hurt you?” I demanded of them.

They were too afraid to speak, but I knew the answer.

“You bet your ass,” someone said.

“You already have,” someone else said.

“If we wanted to hurt you don’t you think we could RIGHT NOW?” I again demanded.

Looking back, not especially diplomatic, but hey, I was scared, too.

They stared at us, wondering how to integrate the rational and the irrational.

“Don’t you think I could wave my hands right now and make you all vanish or some such thing?” I said. Bad phrasing again, but I paused for just a bit to let the possibility of that reality soak in. “Or make you all think *you’re* witches?”

The crowd murmured, with some choice obscenities carrying over the general buzz.

“God would smite you for that!” Enos Wright proclaimed.

I turned to him. “You know, Enos, every once in a while I agree with you. He would.” Enos gaped at me in some confusion for a moment.

The unseen figure hovering just outside all our perception, close above the crowd, smiled and waved his hand over all below. Black-pepper flakes of dissent drifted down on our ignorant, emotionally charged shoulders.

I whirled to face them all. “Don’t you all get it? That’s what I’ve been telling you for years. Bloody goddamn *years* it’s been!” I realized that was the wrong tack. What was wrong with me? There I was again, getting angry at helpless victims.

“Let me explain!”

“We’re not gonna let you influence us, *witch!*” Enos said.

“How terrible can it be for me to explain to you? Just let me tell you, one farmer to another, how I think this all happened. Won’t you?”

“Never!” someone in the crowd yelled.

“I won’t do anything, I promise. No spells, no hexes. Just stand here and tell you what I think happened.” I looked around at these people I had known all my life. My plea was reasonable, but the preacher said not to listen. “Just words, no magick. Okay? Please.” I tried a warm smile to engender some good feeling, or at least some feeling that wasn’t so hostile. I never got an answer, so I couldn’t say how well it was received.

“We only mean to raise energy for *good* things in life.” I gestured to my white-robed friends. “We just meant to have our own little spirituality”—there, wasn’t that more diplomatic?—“quietly communing with nature in private. We meant only to feel beautiful with nature and our deities as we saw them. Only to do good things. We’ve worked in coven for years. It’s been over a decade for me. We always strive to work magick”—I knew how bizarre this all sounded to them, but I had to try to explain—“to *positive* ends, never to hurt.”

“Do you think we’re *stupid?*”

“You’re lying to us!”

I tried to make it more brief. “When we got our powers we were elated, and some of us went too far.” At that, the people looked as though they would erupt any second now. “We’re so sorry about that. But wouldn’t some of you have gone overboard if you could do anything you want?”

“We are not at all like you witches!” someone yelled out from behind me, his voice vibrating with hatred and rage. My efforts had only made things worse. It seemed there was no stopping this.

“Don’t compare us!” someone else yelled.

The preacher spoke. “The evil you and your kind have perpetrated on men and women of God-fearing nations for millennia has been dealt with by the Bible! Scripture says you’re not to live. Scripture says you’re to be put to *death*.” Enos looked at the crowd held captive in the embrace of evil witches bent on destroying them. “Throughout history, the Church has shown us what to do. And I think we can all see why. Who knows what form of evil they endured in ancient Egypt. Canaan! Who knows what they were trying to eradicate in the Middle Ages? God has led the way in the fight for our salvation!”

And what he had just said reminded me of something. I had been distracted by the unexpected, the crazy way our obvious magick took over, by some of our evil and misguided deeds, by the conflict and the hatred.

But he was right. That was it. That was what we needed!

I turned to tell Bobbie Sue what I was thinking, when suddenly a shot rang out. Annie fell facedown on the gym floor at Bobbie’s feet, her back a minced mass of meat and blood. She’d been killed instantly by the blast from a shotgun. Her eyes open, her mouth ready to form a word never spoken. Her gentle life snuffed out, gone.

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CHAPTER 11

HIGH PRIESTESS: Desperation

Everyone stood in shocked horror at the sight. None of the townspeople moved. None of the coven moved.

High above one end of the auditorium, thinly veiled so no one could see, the sun god, Lugh, hovered, watching the birth of hysteria again, for the thousandth time. In the past, he had been known to cry at the horror and pain of oppression, but this time his worry slowly changed to hope.

A scream split the air. Alone among the crowd, Bobbie Sue shrieked in pain and fell to her knees at Annie's side. She turned her over to look at her face, begging the gods instinctively for light in her young eyes, where there was none. She shook her, demanding her life back. "AANNNIIEEEE!!!" The sound, amplified by her powers, shook the walls until I thought they would shatter.

Most of the mob jumped back at her anger.

Cody started to run forward to help.

NO! I ordered silently to him, my hand outstretched, palm out toward him.

Cody fought as if through an invisible wall to reach Annie, so I reached into Cody's mind.

Wait!

Cody watched and stood his ground, helpless.

Bobbie Sue rocked back and forth, reaching into Annie's head with her mind to find someone there, but it was a vacant shell.

After a time, she placed her hand on Annie's chest to bring her back.

"No!" I ordered. "Don't do that. Don't mess with that!"

She looked at me, rage in her eyes, and the same question the other coven members had for me.

"She doesn't need to be dead," Bobbie said through her tears. "I have a gift. I can bring her back."

But I just looked at her and shook my head. My manner was grave, stern. There was power in my edict. She'd better not do it.

"Why?" she demanded.

But my mind was full of possibilities and futures. Something had clicked inside, and I knew we shouldn't. "Don't," was all I could manage to say.

Earnestly, intently, with a voice booming in my head, I communicated on a subliminal level that we shouldn't use overt powers. That was why the people were afraid of us. That was what at the root of all this trouble. *Don't use any more powers! Not right now. Not when they fear us so. Though beloved to us, our magick is sinister to them—ungodly, unholy. Wait.*

Most of the coven understood.

Bobbie heard this silent plea, but she couldn't accept it. "She could live!" she shouted. "We don't need to leave her dead! We have *magick*, for Christ's sake!"

A woman far back in the mob screamed. Someone else pleaded with her to shut up, begging her not to rile us up.

No matter how I tried to calm things down, there was nothing I could do.

For what little it mattered, hoping to maintain some smattering of leadership, I asserted myself. Projecting the image of myself as her high priestess—and with it, hopefully, something of my insight into nonaction—I ordered Bobbie Sue to stand down. There was a threat in my tone, as if she'd face my wrath if she didn't.

And in her way, she tried to comply; I know she did. Through years of friendship and in circle, she had kept faith in me, trusted me, and yet, her lover was dead. Though it made no sense to her, she gently lowered Annie's body to the wooden gym floor, left her lying there, balled her fists as grief and hatred overtook her. She began to shake and boil. Tears ran down her tormented face, over tremors of hate and fury. The glare in her eyes, directed at the mob, could have killed even if she weren't a witch.

The wind picked up in a sudden storm—a by-product of her wrath. We in the coven knew she didn't mean to do these things, but a lot of good that did the townspeople, who had been raised to fear tornadoes. The thin line of windows over the bleachers blew in from the pressure, strewing shards of glass over the crowd. The late afternoon skies darkened to night, with ugly cumulonimbus towering up out of nowhere. From embedded thunderstorms in the black sky, lightning struck out at ripening wheat. The town water tower blew apart in a long screech of buckling steel struts, drenching half the town. Houses, struck by unnatural lightning, blew apart or burst into flames as if hit with incendiary bombs. Fires started everywhere. The west end of the gym was ablaze.

Bobbie Sue began to emit a low groan that grew into a howling screech of rage and pain.

Suddenly everyone was screaming and yelling. Some of the people began to flee. Others had their own ideas about how to deal with the crisis.

Cody looked at them, asking several to calm. Someone shoved him as a witch sympathizer.

Enos tried to shout over the mob, but no one could hear him.

Then the town's electrical power blew, leaving the gym lit only by the flames licking at its western wall.

Cody found both his tongue and his legs and ran up to Bobbie Sue. "Bobbie, stop this!" he pleaded. But she never heard him.

"Kill the witches!" the mob yelled through the wind.

"Burn 'em!"

"No!" Cody turned on them uncertainly. "We don't have to do that!"

"Kill 'em!"

"They're destroying the town, Cody!" said Howie, minus his shotgun. "Can't you *see*? Everything's burning!"

"You killed her girlfriend!" Cody said, looking at the lot of them.

"Wasn't me," Howie said defensively.

"All of you," Cody countered. "Whoever did it, you shot her in the *back*, for God's sake!"

"She's ripping the place apart!" people were shouting. "Can't you see?" The crowd looked about ready to forget reason and default to instinct. "She'll kill us all!"

I knew I had to act fast. Again I sent a telepathic message to my coven, conveying to them my sense of the importance of inaction. *Don't use your powers. No matter how bad it gets.*

There's no way to win like this. Don't make it worse! And then I asked them to stand back from me for a minute so I could do one last thing.

In focus, in my mind's eye, I saw all of us in the gym, the town, the nine-mile radius sphere of magick, the chaos at the perimeter, and the world beyond. My skin began to glow, then my robe, and finally the air around me.

People gasped and withdrew.

Electrostatic energy coalesced around me like a shroud of starlight. The crackling of the burning wall faded from my mind. To learn whether anybody around me screamed at that point, you'd have to ask someone else, because I couldn't hear a thing. I felt as if my body were swelling, ready to burst with more energy than it could hold.

"She's gonna blow!" someone yelled.

A silver-blue beam of light shot out of my whole person, from every cell in my body, through the roof, through the nine-mile sphere, and across the sky.

On the highway at the perimeter, the reporters saw the beam. "Jesus-holy-fucking-Christ!" one of them exclaimed to himself, watching it stretch out from the town and bend to the southeast, apparently forgetting that he was on live feed to Swift News at the time, unaware that his words had just gone out to nearly a billion people around the planet.

Even the Gleaners' dog opened one eye to take a look.

* * *

Celia carefully checked the lighting on the set, made a small adjustment to one floodlight high and to the left. Make the set look good for the camera—that was her job. Her natural perfectionism fueled her drive. She had worked for SNN ever since graduating from Brown University, and even though her degree was in acting and theater, she found video journalism completely engrossing. Next, she thought, she'd like to be a camera operator, then a technical director, then producer. This place was definitely where the action was.

Adjustment made, she stood back and looked at the result. Connie Knight was reviewing some notes, waiting for the feed to switch back from some on-the-spot reporting at Ashfield, Kansas, hottest hot spot on the planet. Celia was pleased with slight adjustment, which flattered Connie a little more by erasing the shadow of her nose.

Connie glanced over at her and gave a nod of appreciation. Celia gave her a thumbs-up. Connie smiled and looked back over at the monitor. It was a night shot, far into the distance past the reporter, to a spot on the horizon that glowed in flame. The reporter on the scene gave his usual commentary when a beam flashed across the sky behind his head, and SNN took the year's Turkey Award with the most inopportune prime-time comment for a worldwide broadcast.

Suddenly, Connie's face began to glow silver-blue. She sat bolt upright in her chair, ear cocked to one side as if listening to someone far away.

Watching the monitor, several people in the studio reacted, laughing at the poor guy on the scene who had screwed up, and making colorful exclamations of their own, but none took their eyes off the screen—until Brighid materialized in the studio.

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CHAPTER 12

NINE OF WANDS: Inquisition

Artie Hamm, director of the news broadcast, cussed in surprise and irritation at the irresponsible reporter outside Ashfield for his utterance. He knew, of course, that most people could be moved to cuss, but station policy was to pretend that it didn't happen, at least not on air. "Drop him. Back to Connie," he ordered, hoping to get things back on a more professional footing. The feed showed Connie Knight glowing like a Halloween costume, head cocked to one side, a faraway look in her eyes.

Oh, Christ, what's going on? he thought to himself. He touched a mike wired to her earpiece. "Connie, you're on." No effect. She sat as if turned to stone. "Connie," he tried again. Nothing. Was everybody on drugs tonight? Couldn't they wait 'till they got home to do drugs?

Connie sat silently for a few moments, Artie's voice in her ear piece muted by the image in her head. She could see into the gym and hear the voice of the high priestess. Ever the reporter, she locked in on the signal with every ounce of her focus. "Yes," she said. "I'd love to." A little smile crossed her lips, as it always did when she got a line on a good story. Usually, it was a practiced smile. This time it was real.

Artie scrambled. Everything was going haywire. *Figure it out later. Cut to something else that works.* "Get me a commercial," he said to the man on his right. The man jumped to comply, one eye still on Connie's monitor.

Then Connie's face turned to her left.

The cameraman didn't have a clue what was going on, but he knew enough to follow the anchor and set a wider field of view to include whatever she was looking at.

Swirls of light began to coalesce in the air beside Connie Knight—rich hues of purple and gold with a white corona around the edges.

"Wait!" Artie interrupted. "Hold it. Hold the commercial."

The whole studio watched in amazement—some fearful, others bemused, others with an inexplicable strange, affirmative feeling of "Yes! This beats the newspapers all to hell!"

"Brigid—" Connie said it more than asked.

The Goddess answered to the whole world, "Yes."

The cameraman wasn't about to lose any of it.

"Jesus!" Artie yelled in his booth. "This is Ashfield come to town!"

"*War cometh to my people!*" said the Goddess, in a loud alto voice that carried throughout the studio and over the airwaves to a billion people. "Death looms in their night! Fights are here!" Unreal sparks flew from indistinct radiant arms at the strength of her emotion, though without disturbing the electronics of the studio. "Torture, fear and hatred! Flesh will burn," she warned.

About time, Artie complained to himself. He'd wondered when that scrubby little farm town was gonna divvy up.

A silent, reverent circle of employees formed around Connie and Brigid. People moved quietly to see, careful not to disturb. The cameraman zoomed out to gather in the crowd.

"Yes," Connie said, not in approval of the war but in understanding of its origins.

"Aradia thinks you're the one to tell the story. *Make them SEE!*" Brigid yelled. Several people stepped reflexively back. "She trusts you."

Questions such as "Who's Aradia" or "Make them see what?" didn't enter Connie's mind. Her brief contact with the high priestess gave her a feeling for what was going on and what was needed.

Nonetheless, she was a little surprised at Jess's interest in her. She knew she was a straight shooter, but she hadn't realized Kansas had cable.

Artie stayed with the shot. Whatever this was, it was news. "Get me a psychic or something!" he hissed to his assistant, as if Brigid might hear him through the sound booth. "Find out what's going on!"

The studio was silent for a moment. To the enlightened, it seemed there may be some form of mental communication between Connie and the talking goddess. Connie nodded and smiled warmly. "Yes," she said as if to no one.

Brigid said, "Come with me."

Before the group of reporters, camera operators, floor, technical and lighting directors, gaffers, and stage hands, before nearly a billion people watching SNN, Connie Knight and Brigid vanished off the set as if by a Hollywood special effect. The people watching around the world thought this was pretty cool even if they'd seen better in the movies.

But the people in the studio marveled. Print was never this good.

"Wow," Celia muttered, shaking her head. "*Just like Endora.*"

* * *

I was thrown bodily out the door of the gym. My elbows dug into the turf when I hit the ground. My forehead scraped on the sidewalk.

Panic had gripped the town. These were no longer the people I had known all my life. They were wild, hysterical.

Hold! I thought to my coven and Cody. *Don't do anything, please. I'll explain—* My thoughts were interrupted by a violent kick to my side.

Bobbie Sue showed remarkable restraint. She refrained from killing anyone outright, from blasting their murderous hides into the next century. I'll give her that much. But she couldn't contain her pain at Annie's loss. The resulting black sky billowed with wind and thunder and portents of doom.

The mob instinctively sensed our hesitancy to act and made the most of it, pummeling our bodies with fists, feet, ax handles, brooms—whatever they had. We were the enemies of peace, evil in flesh, putrid sores to be lanced, cut out of the town. Our robes were torn, skin cut and bruised, bones broken.

I felt my coven's pain, their plea to me for help. Somehow, I didn't think it would hurt to let them know they could quell the pain. I felt their relief, all except Bobbie's—she seemed to want to hurt.

The mob, in contrast, had no single guide, no leader. It was raving, unformed hate en masse. Together they yelled, struck us down. They moved us as one, dragging Annie's body behind them, to the bleachers on the football field, beside the burning gym wall.

Lugh and Prince Llewellyn hovered out of sight, above the mob, watching.

* * *

Over the North Atlantic, at Flight level 350, a Gulfstream IV corporate jet appeared in the night, flew in a great-circle ark on an easterly heading to southern Europe, and vanished.

* * *

Enos held his Bible high over the heads of his flock to urge them on—as if they needed any help. “God knows what’s best!” he yelled at them. They knew what he meant. He had told them often enough. “Hate evil! Cut it from your heart. Burn it from your flesh!”

He quoted, partially, Psalms 38:12: “My enemies are trying to kill me. They plot my ruin and spend all their waking hours planning treachery.” He taught the mob, or at least the nearest half-dozen—there was too much noise and confusion for most of them to hear. Then Psalms 37:32 and 33: “Evil men spy on the Godly, waiting for an excuse to accuse them and then demanding their death. But the Lord will not let these evil men succeed, nor let the Godly be condemned!” And then part of 37:28: “All who love wickedness shall perish.”

I know he thought he was good and we were evil, but bloody and beaten though I was, it almost occurred to me that those phrases could be turned around. Except that we had not been so godly ourselves. Part of me, I guess, wanted them to hurt me for my recent sins. I gave myself no quarter. How could I expect any from them.

* * *

In Rome, on final approach, the G-4 appeared, landing lights on, and touched down fast, tires screeching on the dry runway.

* * *

“Burn ’em!” the mob yelled. An ax handle slammed against Jack’s back, knocking him face-first into the outside bleachers on the east end of the football field, by the burning western wall of the gym. His head bounced off the edge of a two-by-twelve seat; blood poured over his face. Someone kicked Faye in the stomach, dropping her to her knees.

Cody felt helpless. They were crazy. He knew how they felt. This whole thing was crazy, but it wasn’t right. He, too, prayed for life as he had known it to be before hell took over. In his heart, he, too, wanted to kick the witches, but *burn them*? “No, please, stop this!” he yelled at the mob, trying to fight his way to the center. He could see their plan. Bind us before the burning gym wall, stand back, and let it fall on us. “Stop this!” Cody pulled out his father’s .38 revolver and fired it into the air twice to get their attention. But the attention he got was not what he wanted. They took the gun away from him and kicked him down, too.

“We aren’t going to hurt you!” I yelled at the mob, but they didn’t hear me. Their hate had been building for a decade. This wasn’t only from the past two days. “Can’t you see we’re not even defending ourselves?” But they couldn’t see through the red mist of their own hate.

Let them do as they will! I thought to my coven. *Don’t interfere.* I sensed their trust in me, but I felt their growing fear and hate as well. They wanted to fight back, kick some ass, and for the first time in history, they really could.

* * *

A Mercedes appeared and made a mad dash through the streets of Rome, violating every traffic law, then vanished.

Car horns sounded; people yelled profanities, then stood around looking bewildered. That was crazy driving even for Italy.

* * *

Pastor Wright held a two-by-four board high amid the mob to get their attention. The wind threatened to blow out the flames on the upper end of the wall. “Round them up here!” he ordered, pointing toward the lower five steps of the bleachers.

The mob did so, holding us firmly by the arms before our inquisitor, who stood above us on a higher seat. The other hundred stood in the field, crowding around, carrying firebrands from the burning gym beside us.

“You are witches. We know by your earlier admission, your dress, your evil magic. Admit this!” he demanded of our assembled five. Mary Lou was still absent. “Admit this now!” he demanded again.

We were soaked in blood. Bobbie Sue lay sprawled on the bleachers with a broken leg. When they lost control due to their beating, I took her pain away. Others cradled broken arms. Faye had been stripped to the waist and bore a long gash across her chest, above her breasts.

Hold, I beg you, I thought to my coven. *Be silent,* I pleaded. I ordered.

A board slammed against the back of my head, and the crowd roared its hate-filled approval. It should have knocked me out, but I used a bit of my powers to stay conscious.

The mob looked at me in anticipation.

“Yes,” I said with pride. “We are. *And* farmers, and wives, and teachers—”

That set them off again.

“You’re evil!” Enos asserted.

“No,” I said.

A faint glow of immortality, beyond the sight of everyone present at the time—manipulator of life, record keeper, diviner of justice—pointed to his right, across the gym, to another part of town, and the mob heard another scream from the tortured Eddie Foul.

“*GUILTY!*” the mob cried together.

* * *

The Gulfstream IV appeared over the Atlantic again, moving west at an impossible speed, then vanished.

It appeared again, landing at Mid-Continent International, Kansas City, and vanished again.

A black SUV appeared and raced down a long stretch of flat highway surrounded by wheat fields. The wind rocked it sideways, but the driver never slowed. The SUV vanished and appeared again, approaching Ashfield's nine-mile perimeter at 110 miles per hour.

Pa stood up on his porch, somehow aware, and shouted to the horde of newspeople milling on the highway, "Make way!" They stood around and looked at him. "Clear the road!" he said again.

For some reason—perhaps because he had never told them anything before—they did, and the SUV flashed past them, toward the fiery glow nine miles up the road. Then it vanished again.

Reporters screamed their anger at the SUV and pummeled their own vans with their fists in frustration.

* * *

Someone got hold of some rope and bound our hands behind our backs—even Annie's dead body—and tied us together as we lay or knelt on the first five steps of the bleachers.

Coven minds linked. I sensed questions and fear from them. What on earth was I doing? some asked. Were they going to kill us? So I drew us closer together in our minds. The bloodthirsty shouting around us, the torches, the jeers, even the beating subsided from our awareness as I linked with Prince Llewellyn in our common meditation and shared with my coven.

Is this right? I asked the Prince.

Yes, came the quick reply.

Hold? I asked.

Yes. You are banned from using your powers. Do not use them.

Will you stay with us? I asked.

Yes, he answered again, and we could feel his love.

Talkative he was not. But he was loving. He wouldn't betray us.

The coven held its place, even if the mob didn't.

Enos looked at the western wall of the gym. A burning piece of it teetered, creaked, and fell off the top, crashing onto the upper seats of the bleachers. The whole thing was clearly about to fall outward onto the bleachers and bury us all in flaming embers. It could happen anytime.

"Look!" he ordered the crowd. It took them a while to notice that he was speaking, but eventually they listened enough between jeers. "The wall's about to fall," he said. "The witches started their own fire. Let God decide their fate!"

He stepped down off the bleachers and ushered the crowd back. Lightning struck the neighboring field. "Die, witch, die!" they chanted in unison. "Die, witch, die!" Someone threw his torch into our midst. Faye quickly kicked it away, down through the steps.

Other people threw their torches onto our robes. We tried to kick them away, with some success, but the burning wall would be another matter. Still more people threw things at us: stones, boards, anything. A rock hit me in the head. It took all my strength to stay conscious. Blood ran down my shoulder.

The crowd didn't notice a black Ford SUV pull up on the edge of the field, by the gym. Connie Knight got out, followed by her cameraman, and quietly gave him a few terse instructions, then stepped back, not wanting to interfere with the historic moment. The figure emerging from the SUV would say it all.

She leaned over and opened the back door, and out stepped a small elderly man in a white cassock, who seemed even older than he was.

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CHAPTER 13

TEMPERANCE: The Pope

Brigid floated aloft and in full view to all, beside the other two judges of her tribunal, though no one noticed, so intent were they on their hatred for the witches.

Pope Penitent the First, Vicar of Christ and the Bishop of Rome, in white cassock and white pileolus, walked toward the mob, followed at a respectful distance by Monsignor Anton Maldea, connee, and an SNN cameraman. Slow in gait but strong in purpose, the pope was aware that he spoke not only to the Protestant people of one small town but to the whole world: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, pagan, and anyone else watching the SNN feed.

A man on the edge of the mob wound back to throw his torch at the coven, when, from behind him, a thin, warm hand touched his shoulder. He turned to look.

“Friend,” the pope said in a mixed European accent.

The man looked in anger at first, ready to smash the interloper’s face with his firebrand.

Until he saw who stood there.

The man wasn’t Catholic—no one in town was—but as he recognized the pope, his mouth moved from anger to awe. *Ain’t he the pope? He’s here?*

“Please, let me pass,” the pope said softly.

The man lowered his torch and stepped aside.

As the pope walked toward us, other people noticed him and stopped to watch. It wasn’t anything he said; it was just the sight of him. He had a glow, an aura, something strong and positive in contrast to the dark ugliness around him. It wasn’t visible. It was a spiritual glow from a life dedicated to love, to practicing peace amid the chaos—an inextinguishable beacon to all who sought that peace, reassuring those who loved and shocking those who didn’t.

He walked toward us and made his way carefully, for he was in his eighties, to the third seat on the bleachers, ignoring the danger of the unstable, burning wall behind us.

Bobbie Sue, tied to us, draped over the second step, was wallowing in her misery. Her hands were balled into fists, shaking as much as her bonds would allow. I could feel her screaming silently in her mind at the heavens, demanding that harsh justice be done, lashing out at everyone around her as hard as she could within the constraints of her own warring thoughts. She was trying desperately, at my plea, to avoid killing them all. And it was a battle I wasn’t sure she would win.

Pope Penitent looked across and saw her, bound like a captured animal. He saw the rope drawn around the wrists, necks, and ankles of our assembled coven, thrown across the steps of the bleachers, blood dripping from our wounds. In the light of the flame, he saw our frightened faces, felt our pain.

The fire on the gym wall crackled louder, drawing his attention. Some studs buckled outward and fell onto the grass near us, threatening us with much more to come. The pope looked at the wall and back at the crowd, resolute in their obtuseness, standing like statues too angry to run and too afraid to continue.

Slowly, with the effort of the aged, he knelt near Faye and tried to untie her. His eyes were sharp, but his arthritic fingers couldn't work the knots, made slippery by Faye's blood. His fingers dug at them, but he couldn't get them to budge.

The fire projected a wall of heat. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. He moved over one to Jack and tried his knots, but there, too, the blood made his fingers slip. He wiped his hands on his white cassock, trying to dry them, but it did no good—each time he tried to work the knots free, more blood would slick his hands.

He reached for Bobby Sue and tried her knots. He pulled at them, but he wasn't strong enough.

A tear stained the Pope's cheek. "I need help," he said to the silent crowd, but no one made a move.

Monsignor Maldea stepped forward, silently, to try his younger fingers on the knots. They were slippery for him, too, but he made slow progress.

The pope moved over a little, making room for the Monsignor, and turned slightly to his left to look at Annie's limp body. Though dead, she was nonetheless bound hand and foot, as if they were afraid that even in death she might do something to harm them. Her limp body draped over the planks of the bleachers, eyes open, staring at nothing.

The holy father's face contorted in pain. He raised his hands to his face, pressed them there to hide the shame he felt, and cried tears of regret and great sorrow—more than he had ever shed before, more than he could bear.

Monsignor Maldea also began to cry as he worked. Yet everyone remained quiet.

Some ten feet back from the mob, Connie Knight looked on, tears streaming down her cheeks. Witches on an altar, a building in flames, a mob held at bay by a wizened, ancient holy man in red and white, crying on camera before half the world. She knew her cameraman was getting everything. Normally she would break in with commentary, but she knew better than to say a word. *Let it carry*, she thought. *Don't shove the camera in their face. Keep your distance; let them be.*

The whole assemblage could hear the pope's quiet sobs behind his bloody hands.

Watching him cry, Bobbie Sue felt her own hate dissolve into sorrow. Tears filled her eyes, too, as her mind beat against itself trying to feel his love.

Mesmerized by the scene ahead, Connie didn't notice the howling wind die down and the thunder stop its booming. The burning wall still crackled but no longer seemed on the verge of collapse. A calm, which people felt in their souls more than registered with their senses, had fallen over the field.

Amid this sudden and profound silence, the pope lifted his face from his hands, stood, and wiped his face as well as he could with his sleeves. He didn't even try to wipe the rest of the blood from his hands. He stood there and looked at the stunned crowd. This was something that should have been addressed long ago, he thought. The Church had never dealt with the shame of its past actions. Each pope always let it go undiscussed, assuming that it would fade away with time. The thought was always, *if we ignore it long enough, the world will forget.*

But here it was again. It *always* crept up again. And this time it was larger than ever before. "I knew this was coming," he said to himself as much as to everyone.

Sometimes, he thought, a sore left untreated didn't heal but only festered.

The church preached confession, but he also knew, repentance. He looked around at the mob. He asked God's guidance and felt that something had to be done.

He turned to face the mob. “The Bible is a good book,” he began in halting, accented English. It contains Word of God, beautiful and perfect.” He nodded his head. “But it was written by flawed man, and so it also has other things, which hurt if read bad.”

* * *

Billions around the globe watched their TV sets and, listening to the Vicar of Christ, sat frozen before his words.

The immensely popular Reverend Dr. Benjamin Eugene McGuire threw his pencil at the TV screen.

* * *

On the bleachers, before the town, the pope continued.

“Stories are told. Things people did in history—some were right and some were wrong. But we humans are not robots,” he said thoughtfully. “We are not programmed vit morals and function perfect lives. We are flawed, and we supposed to learn.

“One of the greatest things God has given us is ability to learn, grow in strength and goodness. We are not keep values same forever. We are constantly review history and learn from ancestors.

“If we are not perfect and we want to grow in perfect union vit God, then how can we do that if we do not improve? How can we improve vitout knowing we did not so good in past? How can we know we did not so good in past vitout admitting we were wrong?”

He looked out at the assemblage, a mob no more, and understood nonetheless that they needed the message to be painfully clear. Speaking to the whole world, he knew he must speak so he could not be misunderstood by any of the many cultures that would review his words for centuries.

“I say to you, this is wrong.” He pointed down at the witches tied there. “To do this to people is wrong.

“These people are witches,” he continued with improving English. “Not devils. One does not mean the other. *Evil* is evil. When someone hurts another on purpose, that is evil. When someone steals, that is evil. When someone murders, that is evil. Rape, hate, malice, destruction, terrorism—things that diminish the joy of God in this beautiful world—that is evil.”

“To paraphrase my Lord Jesus— I hope that is all right.” He paused a moment in humility yet continued to make his points, new tears flowing down his cheeks as he spoke, “Blessed is he who relieves suffering, for he is a kind person. It doesn’t matter if he is in a hospital or in a football field.”

He looked at the crowd to see if they were receptive.

“Blessed is he who makes peace. It doesn’t matter if she takes strength from her pentacle or from the cross.”

He reached down to touch Annie’s face for a moment, then continued. “Blessed is he who is tolerant of others, for he needs tolerance as well.

“Blessed is he who spreads love,” he continued, “for he creates the kingdom of God on Earth, all around him.” He looked at the faces around him.

“Hurting them is wrong!” he gestured to the witches, tied up, bloodied, and bound. “Remember, ‘Thou shalt not murder’?”

The crowd didn’t move.

His tears slowly continued as he shared. Nothing he could say tonight would be enough to right the wrongs, but his pain, the pain of his Church, must be shared. He began to express his anger.

“For thousands of years, people have *in the name of God—in the name of our GOD—*” he shouted accusingly at the scared people, who now stumbled backward, “—murdered others because they were different, blaming them for the bad weather, their random misfortunes, economic hardship, or even their own mistakes. Hundreds of thousands of people, slaughtered, burned, hanged, tortured. Killed by people in authority, people who run the towns and churches.”

He hesitated before continuing, but he knew he needed to. “By people in the name of Christ. But I say to you, God did not do this thing! God *could not* do this. Could not. A being of light, beauty, and knowledge God is. Not a murderer!

“*Man* did this! Sick with power and greed, ignorant of the true causes, man used God’s word to kill these people—” He flung his arms wide to encompass all the people throughout history who had been wronged in God’s name. “—out of hate and fear. Man who acted as the spokesman of God, running the Church and its unholy inquisitions.”

He paused. “I must apologize for our past. And I am as guilty as they are. I am head of the church today, and while I do not condone this, I have not specifically condemned it, either. Until now.”

The crowd looked at each other.

“So, as the pope, in the spirit of the doctrinal development—the evolution of our ethics—bearing now in this new millennium the weight of the old morality, I formally *denounce* the actions of my forebears who incited or even allowed this bigotry to take place. I pray their sin of murdering those victims goes with me beyond the grave when I go, that it should not remain here to stain this beautiful earth, and in their name I ask God’s forgiveness and mercy for our souls. I say hate is wrong, the more so when acted. I say Bible verses used against witchcraft and paganism are a lesson in what *not* to do, rather than the opposite. We are no longer simple tribesmen who need to establish law and separateness to survive disease and infiltrating culture; we are now people of the world who need to tolerate each other to live together in a world that is growing together. I say we must learn to love our brothers and sisters and let them commune with love—or not—in their own way, for one of the beautiful things about humanity is our diversity.”

He paused for a moment and let his dramatic stare at the people slowly shift into a cracked smile.

“After all,” he said with a growing smile, “we wouldn’t want them all to look like me.” He pointed to his own big nose. He got a few nervous chuckles from the crowd.

“And I ask the beauty within each of you,” he pointed to the crowd, “to know God.” He turned again to look at the witches, then turned back to the crowd, looking for any sign of movement.

“Who here can love these people?” he challenged, serious again. No one moved.

“Who can *accept* these people?” Asking slightly less now.

“Who here can at least *not kill* these people?” he tried again, demanding more than asking.

The crowd remained motionless.

Connie Knight stood silently, letting the scene carry itself, wondering if she could get an Emmy for saying nothing at all. It was impressive. SNN had stayed with this story without commercials right through the economic report, sports, and weather as well.

Finally, Cody stepped forward from the crowd. "I can," he said, and took out his pocketknife to help the Monsignor remove the rest of the ropes.

The witches began to sit up and quietly rub their sores.

I knew Cody felt ashamed for not being able to stop the crowd, and he wanted to make some amends. "Jess—" His voice choked. "I'm sorry." He shook his head in a helpless plea and begged me with his eyes for forgiveness. I began to cry as well, hugging him, kissing him, forgiving him on the spot.

There was a rustle behind them as good old Mr. Johnson stepped forward from the crowd to help. "They saved my life," he said referring to the witches, his face soaked in tears. "I'm here today because they helped me."

And to my surprise, Enos Wright, pastor of the local church, stepped out from the crowd and said, "Here, Cody. Let me help." He moved to help Faye rise.

Mass hatred is a powerful thing. But so is mass guilt, and it helped them finally see the light. We pagan witches may be weird to them, but like puppy dogs and noses, love comes in all shapes and sizes.

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CHAPTER 14

SIX OF SWORDS: A Union

The tribunal sat aloft and watched. Supernatural, yet not at all unearthly, their tears flowed spiritually down ephemeral cheeks. I could see them through the blood-caked, matted hair over my eyes—vague, wavering shapes, there for anyone to see. I felt my connection with them growing through our common trial. The pain in their hearts from thousands of years of torture flowed through me, and though I was only a part of a small coven in Kansas, I felt I was in this moment representing to humanity every enlightened witch who had ever lived, right down through history.

Someone had to be there when the challenge came to the church, and it just happened to be us. Tired though I was, I had to stay strong, hang in there, keep working for that positive outcome. As much as I wanted to vanish and leave the stress of that encounter behind, I had to stay and see it through.

I willed my strength to the tribunal, and invoked their strength for the coven. We weren't done with this problem; we were just beginning.

Enos helped Faye up, and she let him.

The crowd watched silently, and noticed, with little gasps of astonishment, the blood disappear from the pope's cassock and hands.

Pope Penitent looked at his hands and wondered if they were really clean.

Doc Gurney stepped forward and started to take a look at our wounds. He noted fractures, abrasions, contusions—and, of course, Annie's body lying beside us—and spoke to us for the whole town. "Can you forgive us?" he asked simply.

I nodded my head, unable at that moment to speak.

The fires in the whole town died out, like a gas range that had been turned off. We felt bones mend and knit in moments, and wounds heal. Clothes mended. Faye was no longer topless. The stadium lights came on.

Sorrow overcoming shock, the people moved as one to us, smothering us with apologies. I noticed that the burned gymnasium hadn't been restored, and some of our wounds hadn't been healed. I guess these reminders were to stay with us for a while.

The pope stood on the bleachers, reaching out to people flooding around him, touching them on their heads and shoulders, encouraging them, loving them. He got hugged more times than he could count, and almost more than his frail body could bear. To be sure, the average Catholic would be stunned at the lack of protocol, but the pope understood that most of these Protestants didn't know the etiquette. And anyway, it didn't matter. *Blessed are the tolerant*—or, rather, he reflected, with enough understanding there was no feeling even of tolerance, just of oneness. Heaven, in this moment, was right here, and he thanked God.

The cameraman stepped back, putting Connie in the scene with the action behind her. She stood there, wiping tears from her eyes. Noticing the cameraman but temporarily forgetting she was on camera, she said to the world, "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

A long, horrifying wail rose from amid the crowd and jarred everyone from their loving reverie back to a certain tragic reality.

Connie quickly turned back around to face the bleachers, and the cameraman adjusted his camera to get whatever was happening.

Bobbie Sue sat on the bench, cradling Annie's body in her arms, hugging her.

"You goddamned *bastards!*" Bobbie Sue cried to everyone around. People stopped and stood motionless. She put her right hand, glowing with life-giving energy, over Annie's heart. A golden aura spread over Annie's lifeless body. "Live!" Bobbie cried. She tried repairing the damage from the twelve-gauge to Annie's back. She tried to start her heart, tried to spark her oxygen-deprived brain.

But nothing she could do worked. Annie lay unmoving, and Bobbie huddled over her, sobbing to herself, oblivious of everything else.

I walked over to her and laid my hand on her shoulder. "We can help give life, Bobbie." She ignored me. "But we're not the whole affair."

"Coven?" I asked. The rest of us gathered around our two friends and linked hands. The townspeople receded a few feet to give us room, not knowing what we would do.

"We are within the circle still," I said. "The magick circle of this town, created by the tribunal—Brigid, Lugh, Prince Llewellyn—where life and death, past and future, joy and sorrow meet as one." It was impromptu, joining in circle, and brief, but our unusual circle had never been truly broken since the tribunal set it up, and I was only saying it to remind the coven of where we were, what magick we had within it, the reverence of the gods.

I half closed my eyes, entering a magickal trance to connect my mind with everyone around us.

I felt more than saw the reaction of the onlookers who stood in circle with us, within the nine-mile radius circle created around the town. We glowed, no doubt—perceptibly.

"Our friends have learned something about us these last few days," I said to everyone present. "You know a little of how we work and what we work for. Will you help us now repair this damage, this unthinking act?" The Protestants and agnostics around us hardly knew what to think, unsure what I meant, never having been knowingly brought into circle before.

"The gods of the tribunal who helped us learn these lessons today are here with us still, at our calling." I tilted my head to the left, just above the ground. All eyes turned and saw them there, for the first time, visible enough. Some recognized them from the wheat field by my barn.

"Will you join us in asking their help with Annie?"

Wanting to help, but unsure of how to do it, someone asked, "But shouldn't we pray to God?"

"Annie communed with *these* gods," I said. "This was her religion."

Heads nodded, some uncertainly.

"Would you hold hands with us as friends and ask for her life?" Some seemed sympathetic but didn't want to take part in any actual witchery. I could tell. They wouldn't step forward.

"That she saw the All Power in this manner matters so much to you that she should *die*?" I asked.

"No." Again it was the pope who took the lead. "I can stand with friends while they worship, for if I cannot, I am no friend." He stepped forward and took my left hand in his right, Faye's right in his left.

People stood in amazement at the sight of the pope holding hands with witches. They didn't know what to do, how to act. Were they actually supposed to go up there and participate in a pagan ritual?

Then slowly, hesitantly at first, Cody stepped up, taking my right hand in his left, and Jack's in his right. "I can stand with you in circle, and still be of a different religion."

I thanked him with a smile. "Everyone who feels they can, please join us." I said.

Slowly, people took each other's hands, some in actual circle with us, others just holding on any way they could, a maze of hands touching in support and healing faith. Enos looked like he might have joined us, holding our hands, but instead held hands with people near him.

Monsignor Maldea held hands with Mr. Johnson on the one side and his wife on the other.

Connie and her cameraman, at a distance to get the scene on camera, held hands, too.

We all looked at Brigid, above and to one side.

"We asked for your justice," I said, "and we got it. We've learned something about accepting people we fear, about tolerance of differences. We stand here with you in proof of that. Some of us are guilty of scaring others. Some of us are guilty of more. But we're standing together in forgiveness and trust, asking out of love for the life of our friend. 'Sirona' is her coven name: 'Star,' a sky goddess. Annie. Pure in heart, she's one of the sweetest among us."

"Yes," one of the townspeople called out. "That's right."

I noticed who that was, confidentially, and would remember that if he ever asked to join the coven.

Brigid moved closer to the assembled group. Her gentle words of love seemed to come from everywhere at once:

"The Gods are joyous at your plea, Aradia.
And in the past we would let it be.
But we are moved, as those above,
at such overt displays of love.
Magick comes a thousand ways,
like shadowed forms in distant haze.
Our power you have whenever you need,
that you can heal when others bleed."

A smaller, ghostly figure moved out from behind Brigid to stand by her side. It was the spirit of Annie James, plain to see. The crowd gasped. To our credit, the coven didn't move—not even Bobbie, who was probably ready to jump out of her skin.

"I'm sorry, Annie!" Howie blurted out. "Annie?" He ran from the group to the ground in front of her spirit and fell to his knees.

Annie looked down at him and waited, let him feel the moment. "That's all right," she finally said. "Don't worry about it. But if you ever kill me again," she said, "I'll haunt your ass till hell won't have no more!"

People laughed and cried in relief.

"And I mean it, too," Annie said. "I ain't no wall flower any more."

Howie's nodded vigorously, over and over.

"You ready to come back?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said. Then, turning to Brigid, "Thanks for having me. I had a lovely time. I'd like to visit again sometime, okay?"

She and Brigid merged, their spirits one. The colors emanating from them brightened, glowed, and sparked warm golds, reds, whites, purples, and greens. Then Annie shot down into her body, woke up immediately—her body miraculously repaired—and hugged Bobbie Sue.

"What about my son?" Enos cried out. "Wasn't he in the town circle, too?"

I was actually stunned he'd heard anything I had said, but no way was I ever going stand there and let him know he'd used one of *our* phrases. And I was stunned I'd forgotten to ask Brighid about Matthew. I guess I thought it was too long ago to bring him back, and I immediately felt ashamed of myself for corporeal thinking in a spiritual realm. Always strive for improvement.

"Yes, he was," I tried to assure Enos. "As we all are, here."

Matthew's spirit stepped out from behind Lugh, wearing a big smile. "Man, this was *awesome*, Pop. You gotta check this out!" Then his spirit vanished and he appeared in body in the middle of our circle, healthy and excited, better than new.

A cheer went up from the whole town, two hundred people shouting in joy together, whooping and hollering, knee slapping, patting each other on the back.

You'd have thought we had just won the lottery—and, actually, I think we did.

Beside Brighid, the sun god, Lugh, spoke to everyone:

"With the lessons you have learned,
all is now gone *save what you've earned*.
End the sphere, the magick show.
This *trial is done*, my friends, and we must go."

I beamed my thanks to the three of them. The coven absorbed their presence, their appearance, everything about them, as a group expressed its gratitude. The town, less aware of the importance or nature of the gods, was more absorbed in its own experience—which, at that moment, was perhaps the best thing.

The three faded from view, but I knew, they were still there for us anytime we needed them.

"The circle is open but never broken," I said as quickly as I could before the coven gave in to its own elation, and we joined the town in our own freestyle celebration.

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CHAPTER 15

SUN: Warmth

Pope Penitent and I walked together, away from the celebrating group of townspeople, who were drunk with their own elation.

Eddie Foul approached us, staggering on shaky legs, his face a pale white, with cold sweat sticking to his skin. His hands were shaking. He was obviously weak, barely able to walk.

We stopped to receive him. The pope, looking a little more surprised than I, reached out to help the young man.

“My wife says I have to be good,” Eddie said without fanfare. I’m sure he didn’t recognize who he was speaking to. We were just somebody, anybody, a part of everyone, to whom he owed a debt.

“Bless you and your wife,” the pope answered as no one special, knowing he had not been recognized.

I raised my hand in a Vulcan gesture. “Live long and prosper.”

Eddie staggered off, finding the next person on his winding track. “My wife says I have to be good,” he said again in his stupor, not knowing who he was talking to.

We noticed Mary Lou following him at a discrete distance, arms folded across her chest, a frown on her face, making sure her wayward husband toed the mark.

“This is a crazy town,” the pope said to me.

“I wouldn’t trade it for a million bucks,” I said, “but I don’t think the world could stand another one.”

Connie Knight was interviewing Monsignor Maldea, so the pope and I walked over to join them. We were still on camera.

“Well, I guess we should give you our story,” I told her. “The perimeter’s down, so no doubt that bunch out at Ma and Pa Gleaner’s place will be here soon. But you deserve the exclusive. Thanks for coming. And for bringing them,” I said, smiling at the pope and the monsignor.

An hour ago, Connie had been in Miami, working a normal evening shift, and since then she had flown to Rome and brought the pope to a small town in a state she hadn’t even known for sure existed. All things considered, I thought she was handling it rather well. I thought she would, which was one of the reasons I had picked her for the trip.

“Anytime,” Connie said with composure for the camera she was sure was on her. But knowing that the network would need a commercial break, she wound it up for now. “And I think I just got the exclusive. Maybe we could all get together later at your place and go over a few things.”

All three of us seemed to agree on that.

I waived a temporary good-bye to her and walked with the pope and monsignor back toward the SUV with its small detail of plainclothes Swiss Guards.

“By the way, the pope said, “you usually wear black gowns when you circle, don’t you?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Why black?” Monsignor Maldea asked. Some people have associated it with Satanism or vampires, or something.

“Oh, it could be any color, but I think black helps absorb energy and knowledge from the cosmos, making it part of me.” He accepted this with a smile. “And I think it looks good on me.”

Mom butted in, Ned in tow. She looked as if she’d been having a romp in the hay, in fact: she had actual straw in her hair.

“We havin’ a party up here, Sugar?” she said to me, dizzy as a merry-go-round mechanic.

“You weren’t here? For any of it?” I asked.

But Mom was already dragging Ned off, yakking away at him. “Say what you want about these witches,” she said, “but they do know how to throw a party. And cook? Mm-m, *day-umn!* You never had cupcakes so good. They make ’em for their goddess, you know.”

The pope chuckled. We took a few more steps to his SUV. “So, why do you wear white?” I asked him.

He stopped by the door of the car and said, “Purity. It shines with the light of God’s love.” He opened the car door and smiled at me. “And it looks good on me, too, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it does,” I said, grinning. “Thank you for coming, ever so much.”

We gave each other a big hug.

* * *

Cardinal Stravato sat with Cardinal Agresti in Agresti’s office in the Vatican, watching the television news broadcast of events in Ashfield. They heard their pope changing some of the very foundations of the religion to which they had dedicated their lives.

“I can’t believe this,” Agresti said, aghast. “It’s not possible. Impossible.”

“We’re evolving,” Stravato told him, deferring to His Holiness.

Agresti looked at Stravato in stern correction: “It’s our job to make it evolve *right*.”

* * *

I don’t even want to go into how messed up the town got when the press came in. For days they flooded the place. Why, you couldn’t swing a cat without hitting two or three of them as they went around shoving their cameras in everyone’s face. Hundreds of them. Streets normally bare of anything but the occasional rattletrap pickup were now crowded with every kind of media van, limo, and truck you could imagine, most with Missouri, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nebraska plates on them. Satellite disks stuck out of their roofs, and cables snaked across sidewalks and streets. Cameramen followed reporters around, trying not to trip.

Pestered by a group of reporters, Cody kissed me right on Main Street, in front of the court house, declaring to them all that we were to be married.

That’s my man.

There so many reporters, there was absolutely no place to park anywhere. There were only so many blocks lining people’s homes. We had vans parked on sidewalks and across people’s driveways. It got to be real trouble sometimes. Old Man Gary had to get out his shotgun and run some squatters off his yard. They were squashing his gardenias and knocking over his plastic deer. His first shot chased them away but drew a new horde within two minutes—though this bunch kept their distance, fearing the shot from the second barrel. I think he had rock salt in there, which a local would-be melon thief or two could probably confirm. He had never actually shot real lead at anybody, to my knowledge.

The president's press secretary came to visit with a group of military and civilian officials in tow. Apparently following old advice, he stopped on the highway to ask Ma and Pa Gleaner for directions, who just pointed "thataway" with one lazy hand. He finally gathered a crowd of media on the courthouse steps to make his address. After some ground rules about questions were established and their noise quieted somewhat, he began.

"We knew Kansas was here all along," he said, pausing for the murmurs of surprise. He nodded. "It's true." You could hear the reporters whispering back and forth. "But we felt it was in everyone's best interest to keep it quiet, to protect the secret techniques of growing such fine, productive winter wheat. Didn't want word to get out."

"Isn't it true that by refusing to acknowledge the existence of this place you were better able to direct industries to known territories?" a reporter asked, noting the startling lack of civilized necessities such as cell phones and shopping malls.

"I think—" The press secretary stopped to lean over and check with one of his staff. "I think they don't *want* industry in Kansas," he said.

"What about jobs?" another reporter asked. "They want jobs?"

"No—" He leaned over to check again. "No, they don't want real jobs here, either. Just farming."

"Well, how could they afford plumbing and television if they don't have jobs?" another reporter asked.

The press secretary checked again with his adviser. And then with another one. "We have it on good authority most of them already have plumbing—and have had for a good many years, since the proliferation of the industrial base and worldwide economic expansion of these successful United States in the international community. For which we can credit the president's domestic and foreign policies, both here and abroad." He nodded his head vigorously in affirmative support for such worthy deeds.

The reporters in attendance all seemed comfortable with that response.

Locals shook their heads in disbelief, or disgust, and walked away, hoping these city slickers would take that nonsense back with them when they left.

The café on the highway was hastily repaired after the War between the Gods, as it was now being called, and was constantly packed. But it wasn't geared up for such a crowd and ran out of food in four hours. They would have run out after two hours if they hadn't already ordered extra for the wheat harvest.

But that placed an extra drain on the town. With little food left at the café and having already laid the grocery store's shelves bare, the reporting masses had to send back to their stations. After all, driving a stack of pepperoni-and-sausage pizzas (half with mushrooms and one with pineapple and anchovies) two hundred miles was a small price to pay for a readymade story of Biblical proportions in the small town of Ashfield. Then the place was fuller even than before. It was no place to be for a while.

I bunked Connie and her cameraman up at my place on the proviso that they leave me alone when we were not involved in an official interview, of which I gave her plenty. I don't think I would normally cuddle up with reporters, but there was something genuine about her. She wasn't "full of shit," as my daddy would have said, and wasn't trying to take advantage of me. If she thought something was important, she asked, and if she thought something was funny, she let me know that, too. I tended to believe what she said about others, so I trusted her to relay the truth about me.

Stormy liked her a lot, too.

After a few days, the gaggle of reporters began to thin out some. The public's attention span is famously short, and after they had heard the same story a couple of thousand times, the media needed something else to report. Like world reaction to the War between the Gods. People thought about everything you could imagine and more.

Some people hated both us and the pope, and hated each other, too. Some people thought the whole thing was lovely and cried sentimental tears of joy at their on-scene reporter for the charming way we had kissed and made up. Buddhists seemed to like us.

Many Catholics and other religious fundamentalists were appalled at the pope's apology for certain passages in the Bible, apparently forgetting that he was supposed to be infallible on Church and moral doctrine. But Pope Penitent said in a subsequent public address that God does not hate, and reiterated the thought that the Bible, though inspired by God, is there to learn from, not to follow by rote. Furthermore, he told them, he was disbanding the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the modern incarnation of the office of the Holy Inquisition, just because of its historical connection.

The integrity of the Church doubled in the eyes of most of the world.

Needless to say, there were a lot of Christians who called for his head on a pike and wanted a new pope. And quick. Like yesterday. But there were others who, after considering themselves "recovering Catholics" most of their adult lives, rejoined the church, inspired by the pope's tolerance and more relaxed, personable nature, and were happier for it.

To cap off the news media frenzy, Cody and I were married the next week by his father in church. His father looked like he was making a mistake the whole time, but he did it, Lord bless him. I wore my mother's wedding gown. Cody smooched me soundly right there in front of God, SNN, and everybody. He's been trying to get me pregnant ever since.

About the time the reporters left, everyone in the coven noticed that the phones had been ringing off the hook. We hadn't noticed them amid all the commotion, but when the place quieted down we couldn't miss it. The phones wouldn't shut up. We had calls from all over the world—from the curious, to be sure, but mostly from Wiccans who wanted to know how we worked our obvious practical magick. We had been zapping things right and left, making things disappear, flying on broomsticks, and all. They wanted to do it, too. What magickal phrase did we use? How did we evoke the Goddess? What incense did we burn? Was it the way we opened the circle? What was the deal?

I tried to talk to some of them, tried to tell them that the gods had felt that the time was right and that our town would do to make a point.

The magick wasn't there to make us feel fulfilled as witches; it was there to bring the conflict to a head, and it had. We were to grow in symbolism and the power of the mind. We were to learn to develop these powers on our own as we evolved, not to have them handed to us—there was little to learn from that.

After a while, I quit answering the phone, because the town was being driven nuts—until the following Sunday morning. Just before church, all the phones went quiet. It seems someone had gone out to the highway and shot the wire down off the telephone pole that brought all the lines into town.

That's Kansas: simple answers to simple problems, and don't give me a lot of static.

It was the first bit of peace we had been able to grab, together, so Cody was late for church that Sunday. You know why. And yes, I started attending church with him—sometimes—just out of kindness and reciprocity, because he wanted me to. If he could stand with me in circle, I could stand with him in church.

We had blessed peace and quiet for a week, until they got the phones working again.

Ma and Pa Gleaner didn't even notice. They never did have a phone and weren't due to come in for groceries for another two weeks. They just watched people drive by and kept a watchful eye on their hooch, wherever they had it hidden.

The rest of the coven handled themselves admirably. Most didn't want to give interviews, preferring to be left alone, but, of course, Bobbie Sue and Annie had to make a scene. Bobbie has never been too reserved. It's a drawback for her normally, but that strong mind does make her a better witch. It seems she kissed Annie right there on the lips on national television, a growth for them.

Matthew Wright, the other recently deceased and resurrected, never seemed to shut up. You couldn't get two words in edgewise around him. He thought that was the best experience this side of sex—which blew his dad away because he thought Matt was a virgin—and started making cracks to the media about being a vampire. He got a couple of them believing it, before they caught on. Well, you never knew anymore around here, but during one particular press briefing, I noticed that he was standing in the broad June sun and wearing a very unvampirelike suntan.

The spouses of married coven members seemed to be a little more respectful of our religion, seeing it not so much anymore as some quirky thing we liked to do out in a field after dark, and more as a real religion that just happened to be different from what they were accustomed to.

After some media questioning, the principal at the school decided to forgive Faye. Faye thought she'd integrate some theories next year on how the witches' magick could have worked. How did it function? After all, it was a fact that it did. The whole town saw it. Something, clearly, had happened. How could one short, fat gal ride a plastic broom all over hell and gone—supersonically and almost nine miles high—with neither an engine nor a fuel tank?

Somebody ought to get a Nobel Prize of some sort for figuring that one out.

Jack became pretty popular as a lawyer. A firm over in St. Louis wanted to hire him, but he turned them down. He plans to put this deal with the church on his list of wins, but he doesn't want to leave the coven.

Mary Lou? *Whew.*

Not a soul in town will be the least bit rude to her. Mrs. Adams down at the bakery gave her a free birthday cake the other day. It wasn't even Mary Lou's birthday, but Mrs. Adams had it to give. And Mrs. Simpson over at the beauty shop gave her a free hairdo. It seems Eddie is a changed man, and everybody's relieved. He walks all over town, still pale and with hands shaking—I think pale's his new color—offering to help pretty much anybody with anything. He'll fix someone's flowers if the dog trampled them, carry someone's groceries to the car, almost begging people to forgive him for being such an ass for so many years. I frankly don't know if he can really make up for all the hurt he's caused, but we're all mighty pleased to watch him try.

I had to have a sit-down with Mary Lou, though, and talk with her. I know the gods rigged the whole thing and inspired people to things they wouldn't normally have done, but Mary Lou enjoyed it a little too much. If anyone ever needed an ass-kicking, it was Eddie, but her actions stretched the Rede more than a little. She sure helped the town and helped Eddie, too, but she had to hurt him to help him, you know. I think it's an abuse of her powers, even if some good seems to have come of it. So far.

She'll be the one to clean the altar for the next year, to help her refocus. Beyond that, we'll see. But overall, we're doing okay. I'm thankful to the gods for their help in this matter. I'm

thankful to be a part of the solution to an age-old problem of hate and bigotry. I'm thankful our townspeople were up to their end, as the gods thought when they laid their plan on us. I'm thankful the pope was man enough (and, maybe, pope enough) to speak true compassion even when he knew it was bound to draw him some fire, instead of overlooking it, which would have been far easier. I'm thankful folks around here were big enough to see his wisdom even though he is of a different religion from their own.

I guess I'm just sitting here being thankful all over, with this dumb smile on my face. My love for the cosmos has tripled, though I didn't know that was possible.

I'm struck with the beauty of the way things can work out when you meditate enough to see the golden path, and when you're courageous enough to walk it. With the strength of your mind and the energies around you, you can achieve anything. I know we're students, all of us. We're not masters. Yet. We won't achieve all the time, but we'll get better the more we practice. "Never give up a dream, and never give in to stress" is my message. If you fail, look again for the path you seek. Focus again. Know you can do it, and eventually, you will.

* * *

Colonel Dart stood in front of his Humvee on a desolate highway, his aide at his side. The road dead-ended into a vast expanse of plowed earth, as far as the eye could see to north, west, or south—little stalks of wheat sticking out at odd angles like a five-day beard on a logger. He turned to look east, behind him. The road there was as straight as an arrow, going on forever, blending finally into a common mirage at the horizon, melding with the thin air of the hot July afternoon. The sun god, Ra, overhead showed them no mercy, searing their flesh every nanosecond with a new quantum blast of thermal energy.

Colonel Dart looked ahead again and wondered how to proceed, took his cap off, and wiped his forehead with one dusty sleeve.

His aide tried to swallow, couldn't, and lifted his canteen from his belt for a swig. "What do you think, Lewis?" He used the colonel's first name. After all, they had been through a lot together.

"I don't know, Clark," the colonel replied to his lieutenant. "But we've got a mission to man. There are people out here. Somewhere. There's evidence. See how the fields are plowed?"

Yes, Clark could see, though he felt too tired to respond verbally.

"And they need our help." He turned back toward the Humvee. "Mount up!" he told his small detail. "I don't know where we go from here, but we're sure as hell gonna find out."

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EPILOGUE

Believe it or not, after we all got our magick and zapped the town from hither to yon, and the townspeople tried to burn us, and the pope himself showed up and set us straight, the town got rather back to country normal. Setting world injustice to rights was one thing, but getting the harvest in was another, and before anything else, Ashfield was and is a wheat-farming community.

The harvest wound up pretty good after all the hassle over it. The hail turned out not to have been as bad as everyone had gotten so worked up about. Not due to magick, though some of us wouldn't have minded taking a little credit for it. It was just good farming and good luck with the weather, as usual. Spring thunderstorms do drop hail sometimes, but they also rain, and the crops need the moisture.

The fields were full. Combines waddled through golden grades in the hot June afternoons. Streams of grain poured off the spouts into the old wooden beds of rusted wheat trucks. Chaff filled the air and collected in hair, clothes, and teeth. Trucks were weighed full then empty over at the grain elevator, and the farmers' accounts updated in the office.

And I was an old married lady. I found love strengthened my working.

The one thing that was different from the way it had been before was the way people treated us. The price of acceptance was, in some sense, a loss of secrecy. The townspeople, no longer scared, were curious. Before all the commotion, folks stayed away from my farm, allowing our coven to circle in private. Afterward, we often had spectators come and sit on the grass by the barn and watch.

It was hard to focus on our work in circle when I knew people were sitting and watching. I wondered if we should build them some small bleachers by the action, like the ones in the movie *Field of Dreams*.

Nonetheless, our coven got over all the excitement, made the adjustment to a certain limited local fame, and got back to the business at hand: thanking the gods for our bountiful harvest and for their magnificent help with our magick, invoking their aid in sending healing energy into the town and the world, loving each other for sticking together, communing with the beauty of nature around us.

Everything was settling down nicely—when the Prince showed up again.

It was our regular Friday night circle after a beastly hot August day. The air was cooler after sunset, though the ground still radiated enough heat to make us sweat under our robes. The plains wind usually died down in the late afternoon, but there was still too much breeze to leave our candles out in the open, so we had our candles shielded in our usual, homemade hurricane lamps.

We were sitting, eyes closed, hand in hand around our little altar—Cody as well—in a period of quiet guided meditation, communing with the soil, the worn grass beneath us, the old wood in the barn, the fence posts, the plowed field to our south, asking the gods to join with us in a celebration of peace and harmony. Stormy was stretched out lengthwise on the ground next to the barn, half asleep. Others, having gotten bored with all the symbols and ceremony, had wandered off, but the Hicks brothers, Steve and Brad, remained, sitting cross-legged at the edge of our awareness, watching.

I had suggested to the coven that they remember the Prince, when the Prince manifested in our mind's eye before us, within our circle above the altar.

"Thanks you for your help," I said for the group to his presence.

"My love for you is unbounded," he answered out loud.

The brothers gasped from the edge of our field.

All our eyes opened at once to see him physically before us. "Because you had within you the power to destroy, to jump to conclusions, and you did not."

"Jesus, it's the Prince!" Bobbie Sue exclaimed. Well, she was raised in the Bible belt and was now a witch. I guess we're all hybrids of one sort or another.

"Where've you been?" Faye asked.

"You didn't say good-bye," Annie chided after having felt so close to him, to them all.

I thought about saying something to turn our comments a bit more formal, less familiar, but decided against it. He didn't seem to mind, and I guess we had been personal with him.

My husband smiled happily at everyone. He'd gotten to take part in this one.

The Prince opened his see-through arms wide and seemed to embrace us all. "You could have been vengeful and you weren't. Overall, you have served your craft well," he said to each of us individually at once. "Your brethren make their love known."

We all listened intently, wondering where he was going.

"And for this, I leave you a small gift."

Faye looked over at Jack, Mary Lou to Bobbie Sue—most of us to someone in circle.

The Prince seemed to grow somewhat, glow a little brighter, before moving his hands gently over each of our heads. Stardust sprinkled down over us and settled—not on our shoulders but somehow *within* us. We all felt warmth in our hearts and something enlightening in our souls.

"Cody," the Prince asked, aware that Cody was not an avowed follower.

Cody looked at him, wonderingly.

"Would you like some, too?"

Unsure of what the Prince was offering, or if he should, Cody looked at the Prince then at me, then to all of us. "Is this right? Is it okay? Should I? I mean, I'm not really a witch."

"If you'd like. It's up to you," I told him. Because he was new to Circle, I explained for comparison, "This is like, in a Christian way, being offered a Blessing from God. It's a beautiful honor."

"What is it, exactly?" my husband asked me, while the Prince hovered over us patiently.

"I don't know," I answered.

We waited.

The Prince didn't offer any information.

Finally, I answered the best I could. "I don't know, but I sense he may give us all something we could give ourselves, or may already have, that we may not be fully aware of, yet. A helping."

Cody smiled warmly at the Prince, accepting. "Yes, then. Thank you, Prince," he said.

The Prince sprinkled stardust into Cody as well.

Cody sat charmed, aglow like I'd never seen him.

"Remember what you have learned," The Prince said to us all, as his form subtly changed into something resembling a snake and then a rabbit.

Stormy, normally quiet, barked and charged the Prince as if it was time to play and the Prince was the perfect spirit for the job.

What was left of the prince, fur and all, suddenly vanished, a contented smile on his face.

Stormy leaped over my left arm and landed on the altar, scattering stones and candles, pentacle, and cauldron over the grass. It seems our circle is always being violated by someone or something. Jack, sitting opposite me, saw him coming and hollered for him to stop, though not in time, and his arms flew up in a defensive attitude, not knowing for sure where the eighty-pound Labrador would go.

We all smiled in surprise when Stormy suddenly moved two feet to one side and the altar righted itself, everything in its place.

Bobbie let out a whoop. Everyone smiled.

“I think there is no breeze in circle tonight,” Annie said. And the breeze stopped. Our gowns relaxed calmly at our sides; sleeves dangled motionless in the calm.

Jack motioned toward the altar with his right hand. The glass shields for the candles vanished.

“Hey Jess,” Cody said with a big smile. “You remember the hologram you showed me on your palm, back over at the Jail?” He held out his hand, palm up and formed a small hologram above it displaying the group of them sitting together, that night, in circle.

The whole coven, Cody as well, whooped and hollered, laughing. It was a time for celebration.

Cody’s hologram moved to the center, to sit in the air above the altar, and glowed brighter, its radiance subtly infusing the earth with love.

Cakes and Ale served themselves to us in blessing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AIMEE NORIN WRITES novels about trans person / transsexual / transgender genderqueer experiences, in an effort to entertain, and also to illustrate lesser-known aspects of phenomena. People have different terminologies they prefer, so Aimee tries to use them all at one time or another, and ideologies vary, so in her books, characters experience lives and share views, which are all different. Usually, there are multiple views given within each novel, and some novels as a whole present views quite different from other Aimee Norin novels.

Her characters are normal in their humanity in that they also have issues in life with which they struggle while they search for love and respect.

Transgender lifestyles are not yet commonly accepted in most societies, and trans persons are usually heavily schactered on an ongoing basis, with daily diminutions, or “daily *diminutions*,” as they are sometimes felt. Prejudices and oppressions, soft and loud, misleading and painful, can exist for a trans person throughout life in more ways that can be known or counted—not just in larger, social exclusions but also in assumptions closer people make that also keep trans persons on the fringe. A person living in these lifestyles may have to deal with all that on a daily basis—while at the same time needing to wear a smile, interacting with those same, oppressive people at work, in public, or at home, in such a way as to downplay internal fear and pain: smiling while hurting.

Saying things seem fine when they’re not.

Aimee’s experience is that most people do not really understand trans persons and tend to keep them at arm’s length. People have opinions, and they may *believe* they understand—because they’ve treated patients, or known some trans persons elsewhere, or had one in the family. But those contacts are superficial and rare compared to a mutually interactive, decades-long, daily involvement, through situations good and bad, or even actually being a trans person in self.

Aimee believes if most people got to know trans persons more closely—if they gained enough trust to be admitted to inner thoughts and private experiences, if they were to show the courage to ask insightful questions, if they were open to new ideas as they emerged—a different, more human, more genuine reality could well emerge with reasons revealed for things that had, hitherto, seemed eccentric or even spurious. Instead of a trans person appearing to be someone who is unduly concerned about social rejections or prospects, real reasons may be revealed that indicate the trans person is dealing with issues of which others are unaware—still needing at the same time to function as the helpful co-worker, the friendly neighbor, the loving husband, the devoted wife, the inspiring parent, the loyal friend.

Being a trans person takes more courage and inner strength than most people begin to conceive.

As such, a greater effort is needed to peer into the heart of trans people—to see what is really there, what is really being dealt with, much of which is likely not shared—and to convey a greater and more sincere compassion than previously considered.

Finally, in order for these novels to be FREE, no editor is used, relying, instead, on feedback from people. Please email aimeenorin@gmail.com if you have comments or concerns.

NOVELS BY AIMEE NORIN

Trans Magick: Suffer a Witch to Live

In a small, oppressive town in Kansas, a transgender neutrois high priestess, along with her coven, sues the Christian god for peace in a court “Between the Worlds.” The gods materialize, encase the town in a 9 mile magickal sphere, make magick objectively demonstrable, and bring conflict to a head. The story is told in satire, humor, to elucidate religious tolerance and tolerance of difference issues that have existed for thousands of years.

Transmutation

What would happen to people and society if a machine were revealed that could rejuvenate you? Give you a new body of any kind? The wife of a Nobel Prize winner turns out to be an intersex 20,000-year-old alien from outer space, who gives a modified version of her transmuter to humanity, which brings not only longevity and health but also the desire and the ability for everyone on the planet to become transnatal as they wish.

Stealth: The Dark Side of Transsexual

A Dark Side novel: A stealth transsexual transitions early in life and marries a successful man, only to be severely treated by people in her life who don’t want her there. She becomes fearful, demeans herself and others. Outed by a young person in social media, in severe crisis, she faces her fears and learns her stealth ways are no longer serving her. She must uncover and evolve.

Out of the Closet

A transsexual war veteran, a Christian cowboy, a Muslim cross dresser, an older trans woman, and a lesbian from Texas who survived reparative therapy, become friends, participate in San Francisco’s Pride festivities, and take their lessons learned back to a small town in Arizona, where they overcome transphobia, oppression.

Hate Crimes

A young, biracial trans woman discovers her biological father, falls in love, and becomes a singing star, while dealing with transphobia and heinous crimes. This is the most violent, yet also the most sexual, of any Aimee Norin novel. Regina, who shares mistakes so openly with us in *Sliders*, is the hero of the novel, in a supporting role, working desperately to save others.

Falling in Love

A Spencer Tracy/Katharine Hepburn-style romance between a trans woman and a trans man who fall in love during a major air show. The woman is Lourdes, from *Sliders*, who gave Regina such a hard time. She fights with Jim, too, but she meets her match in him. His balance dissolves her paranoia, his manner calms her heart, and his love gives her new life.

Sliders: The Dark Side of Transgender

A Dark Side novel: A transgender woman evolves over 36 years in transition. She was a trailblazer who transitioned in 1990, who struggles without help to adjust and find her way through difficulties toward respect and happiness.

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Because I have been offering these novels for free, I must schedule most of my time for other occupations, and hence, I cannot manage most correspondence as often as I'd prefer. As a consequence, I may find it best to respond to most concerns in the aggregate on my web log, or Facebook, or Twitter, and then, perhaps, intermittently. Sometimes I do return emails directly, though. Please do write, though, as I do read them. Your comments and feedback are most appreciated and valued.

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