

PRIESTESS



DENNIS D. DUNN

ESCONDIDO, CALIFORNIA: Word Wizards®

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Published by
Word Wizards®

Communications Excellence since 1972

P.O. Box 300721

Escondido, California 92030-0721

United States of America

760/ 781-1227

Internet: <http://www.wordwiz72.com>

Cover art by Steven Dunn

ISBN: 978-0-944363-08-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Even when only a single name appears on the cover of a book as author, the reality is that many hands and many minds — and many loving hearts — contributed so much to enabling the success of the endeavor.

Support, encouragement and assistance came in many forms from many personal friends, friends from the Wiccan community, and professional advisors.

While it is not possible to list every single person whose contributions, great and small, enriched this effort, there are several names that stand out for special recognitions.

Ed Fitch and Kenny Kline are talented and successful authors of extraordinary Wiccan literature of their own, and drew upon their own rich stores of experience to share with me offerings of guidance and insight in developing this material. Barbara Ardinger, Ph.D., is not only a successful author of Wiccan literature, but also a professional literary editor who provided much technical, professional and literary guidance. My debt of gratitude to Ed, Kenny and Barbara is immense.

In addition to Wiccan and professional advisors, I also owe much to a loving and supportive family. My brother Doug assisted in much of the work preparing this project for publication, working closely with my sister Beverly who also provided insight, suggestions and experience. My brother Lowell and sister-in-law Karen also provided years of encouragement and support.

Finally, those who likely sacrificed the most on behalf of this project are those of my immediate household who had to put up with me during years of writing and re-writing and editing and all that goes with a project of this scope. My wife Shari has been a wonderful, loving and supportive companion and no man could be more fortunate to have such an amazing partner. My children Diane, James, Heather, Rebecca, Brian and Eric, have been a part of this project for most of their lives, and have also provided much encouragement and support.

To all of you — friends, Wiccans, professional advisors and my loving family — thank you so much for all you have added to make this project possible.

PART 1

CALIFORNIA Yule

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

Exodus 22:18 (King James Version)

*Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill,
An it harm none, do what ye will.*

from The Wiccan Rede

1

THE WITCHES

Darkness covered the hills. Dozing amid isolated oak trees and boulders, Dan Brestin stirred, then sat up groggily and listened. A strange, unexpected sound penetrated the pre-dawn silence of the moonless night.

Gradually becoming alert, Dan listened more closely. The sound was soft and distant, yet it carried through the heavy pre-dawn darkness. It sounded like the wind whistling, but as Dan concentrated he could hear a melody, gradually rising in pitch and volume. Straining to hear better, he heard high notes, like a melody from a distant flute.

Sleeping nearby was Carl Thurns, Dan's buddy from church and their college baseball team. Carl was still peacefully snoring near the last of the embers that had been their campfire.

Grabbing his flashlight, Dan yelled back.

"Your dad was right," said Carl. "Somebody's trespassing."

"And we're going to find 'em," said Dan.

Amid isolated oak trees and boulders, Dan shouted to his partner. Carl listened, hearing the sound growing louder.

"Let's go," said Dan, grabbing flashlights, and other equipment. "That's what we're here for."

"Head north," he said. "Stay on the firebreaks. It's something rumbling, or drumming. Their sound will lead us."

They hiked north toward the music, as the sound grew clearer. He heard a high-pitched sound, like a flute. Drumming and a flute.

They had been hired by a wealthy landowner, a member of Dan's church concerned about trespassing on valuable private property. More and more sightings were being reported of odd activities in the hills bordering Los Angeles and Orange County.

Mostly in darkness, the trail led them down the slope of a valley, and up the other side. Both men were athletes, but Dan, smaller and more agile, led the way.

"Be careful," he cautioned, shining his flashlight. "Watch for cactus hidden in the brush."

The music became clearer, leading them up the path. With each step the music grew clearer, along with another sound, a guitar.

Dan hurried ahead, the first to reach the ridge. He stared in amazement at the source of the music. He peered through his field glasses. "Hurry, Carl!" he called. "You won't believe this."

Across a ravine, flames danced around a campfire a hundred yards north where two hills merged. Dancing wildly on the ridge, three women played musical instruments. One was young and petite with black hair, playing a flute. A red-haired full-figured lady strummed a guitar. The third lady, with honey-colored hair in a ponytail and tattoos, pounded a steady rhythm on drums.

Except for jewelry, all three women were completely naked.

"What the..."

Carl stammered as he joined his partner. Both stared, unable to resist spying on a scene more bizarre than they could have imagined. The distance and darkness hampered their view. But he saw enough to hold him spellbound. With no visible amplification, they had produced that continuous sound without reading music.

Dan was cold. He tightened his coat. With binoculars, he saw they were warm, perspiring. He focused on the young flute-player as she danced. Her black hair bounced around her shoulders in wavy ringlets. Her skin was pale in contrast to her dark curls. A dainty breast glistened in the firelight. She played her flute furiously in a fiery minor key, rapidly, supporting the drums and guitar. The flautist blew effortlessly into her flute, never pausing to breathe.

Staring, Dan was becoming aroused.



Sheila Lloyd blew into her flute, energy increasing, black curls dancing along her flute. Her breath in the silver pipe became the wind, the breath of Nature, singing through canyons and valleys. Her lips and tongue caressed the flute's embouchure, uniting spirit and music.

She closed her eyes, creating spontaneous melodies in minor and major keys. They didn't play from written music or memory, nor did her friends. Yet their music blended harmoniously, each in tune with each other's spirits and the flow of music.

Sheila led, as red-haired Gwen Morgan strummed and plucked her guitar strings. Tanya Hansen, with tattooed arms and back, brought rhythm to the favored djembe and doumbek drums of the witches. They were professional musicians, weaving their gifted voice talents as well. She had no doubts about their ability to blend seamlessly in any magical, musical ceremony.

The fire warmed them. Their music filled them with energy connecting to their most primal instincts. Nearby, ignoring the women, two large German shepherd dogs dozed peacefully, all too familiar with their human companions.

A crescent moon eased above the hills, saluting their Goddess. Her melancholy tones transitioned into a major key as they danced. Rising higher, the music changed again to a solemn hymn. They slowly brought their symphony to a conclusion. Breathing heavily, Sheila set her flute into its case.

"I love our secret drum circles," she said. "I love our other music, too. But our special ceremonies are the best." They sat on blankets in the circle they had consecrated.

"Let our circle be unbroken," she began, holding hands in sisterhood. More important than music was their bond as members of a large coven. Gwen, older than the others, was the most experienced, a leader of their Coven. Tonight was Sheila's turn to lead. She had asked her closest friends for help raising energy when the moon would be in Scorpio, her astrological sign.

Following Wiccan customs, she called to the spirits of the land. She called upon the quarters, north, east, west, and south, bringing all

together. She called other spirits having specific blessings for certain needs. Sheila then invoked her own deity.

“Mother Goddess, accept our gift of music. We ask your favor to bless our coven to overcome dissention. We pray your efforts to protect us from Christians who disrupt us.”

She paused and took a deep breath, then looked up to her deity again.

“Our Goddess,” she prayed. “I call upon the powers, spirits, and energies for harmony. You blessed me before with a vision of power. You know I’ve studied diligently. Yet my progress is slow compared to others. You found it for me before. Help me find it again I pray.”

She gazed up to the crescent moon, closing her invocation. She released the quarters and directions, and other spirits they had invited.

“So mote it be,” she said. She stood as her friends embraced her.

They smiled. “The Goddess will bless you and the energy raised with our music, as you’ve worshipped at the gates of dawn.”

“Thanks, both of you, for your support,” she replied. “I really want to believe it. The Goddess will bless you,” said Gwen.

“Be patient. Witches make progress in different ways. Those who gain the most must invest the most patience.”

She shook her head. “I should have seen more progress by now. I’ve worked hard and read everything I can find. It’s my path. But more and more, I wonder.”

Gwen replied, “Anything powerful can bring benefit or harm. Fire can warm you, or burn you. Water is essential, or you could drown. Most important is the greatest energy of all, a reverent life force, and the sexuality that creates life and its cycles with the sacred dance of wand and chalice Christians call shameful. But even that, too, can...”

Suddenly, an interruption blinded the women. From nowhere, bright lights surrounded the ridge.

“Hold it right there,” bellowed a deep, burly voice. “You’re trespassing on private property.”

2

THE CHURCHES

Walking with his girlfriend, Laura Cloggens, Dan wandered through the large Brea Mall, holding hands. They strolled through the bright lights and displays of the holiday. Turning a corner, they arrived at the food court.

“You must be hungry,” said Laura, “and tired, too,” she added. “Carl said you didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He covered his mouth, suppressing a yawn. “I took a pretty good nap earlier,” he said. “Good thing I’d finished finals. What else did he say?”

“Not much.” She adjusted her pink plastic-framed glasses. She was about a half-foot shorter than Dan, wearing short reddish-brown hair in a pixie style. Smiling, she added, “He said you’d have quite a story.”

Dan found a clean table and sat down, then ordered two large corn dogs and lemonade. Laura selected a half pizza and Diet Coke. Aromas filled the air.

Dan described the haunting music that led him and Carl to the women. He didn’t want to dwell on details that might provoke Laura, but he couldn’t leave out anything else she might hear from Carl.

“There they were,” he said. “Completely naked. It was disgusting!”

“How long were you watching?” she asked.

“Not too long. Just enough to figure out what to do.”

“And what *did* you do?”

“We broke up their revolting ceremony to find out who they were so the land owner could file a complaint. But they got away before we could catch them.”

Laura’s eyebrows wrinkled. “They got away from you and Carl? You couldn’t follow them?”

“Suddenly two huge dogs came snarling,” he replied. “The next thing we knew the campfire was out and they were gone. I was just glad the dogs vanished along with their owners.”

“What did your dad say?”

“I haven’t seen him yet. He’ll be interested in what we found, though. And quite alarmed. He’ll find a way to work that story into one of his sermons.”

After they ate, they did some window shopping, admiring the clever Christmas themes throughout the mall. But Dan was too tired to stay long. Though only nine o’clock, with the mall still bustling with shoppers, he couldn’t hold out any longer. He drove Laura to her home in the city of Orange, gave her a kiss, then drove to his home in Anaheim where he lived with his parents. As the youngest of three kids, he was the only one still at home.

Entering the living room, he heard his mom playing a rendition of one of his favorite hymns, “O Holy Night,” on their Grand piano. She was the pianist at church, and a highly-respected piano teacher. Dan also studied music, playing trombone in the university’s marching band.

Walking by the piano, he stopped. “Mom,” he protested. “Don’t stop. “It sounds great!”

“I didn’t expect you home yet,” she replied. “Your dad’s in the den, finishing this week’s sermon.” She was short and plump, with light gray hair worn in a bun, and a pudgy face with wire-rimmed glasses.

“I won’t disturb him,” he replied. “He doesn’t like interruptions.”

Tired, he climbed into bed, listening to his mom play favorite carols and hymns. He couldn’t fall asleep. The dreamy music stirred him. He thought of Laura, then visions of naked witches dancing, dreamlike, luring him. He couldn’t suppress a growing desire. Satan knew his weakness. The devil had too many tricks. Naked witches called to him. He began to arouse himself.

His pleasure brought guilt, then frustration. Lust had betrayed years of teachings from his family and church. In spite of sincere efforts, he had sinned again. Though twenty-one years old and reasonably handsome, he had remained a virgin, one of the few at his university. Every time he yielded to lust, he felt polluted. He wanted to pray for forgiveness, but how could he pray with sincerity when he had been unfaithful every other time?

Exhaustion finally overcame his guilt. Sleep rescued him from his conscience.

* * * *

Saturday was one morning when breakfast was unhurried by breakfast, school, work, or church. Even the baseball team, where Dan was trying to earn a spot, had a few days off for the holidays. He woke up feeling well rested and refreshed. He showered, but soap and water couldn't wash away lingering pangs of guilt.

Coming downstairs, he joined his parents for breakfast. In the kitchen, his mother was frying eggs and bacon as he sniffed the aroma. He sat down at the dining room table.

His dad was immersed in the newspaper and didn't notice as Dan sat down.

"G'mornin' Dad," he said.

His father looked up. "Hi, Dan. Good morning." He spoke softly and Dan thought he looked somber. Though often jovial and good-natured, he could also be quite stern.

"Everything okay, Dad?"

"I was reading an alarming news item," said the reverend.

From the kitchen, Mrs. Brestin joined the conversation.

"My goodness, dear. What about?" she asked from the kitchen.

"It's about Dan's school, Cal State Fullerton," said the pastor. "I worry about that secular institution. They're letting a group of witches use the campus for some kind of winter solstice festival."

"Who would let them do that?" she asked. "Why doesn't someone stop them? That's government property."

“They’re afraid to deny anyone’s freedom of speech and religion,” the pastor replied. “Even witches. But the same folks scream bloody murder if Christians try to have a public prayer!”

“The Campus Crusade for Christ and other Christian groups *do* hold regular activities, too,” Dan reminded, trying to remain quiet and non-confrontational.

His Dad frowned. “It’s time Christians stood up to how evil is permitted and encouraged. Maybe I should speak about that tomorrow in church.”

He paused again. “It’s a real shame, Dan, that you didn’t go to a good Christian college in the first place like I wanted you to.”

“You know how much I’d have liked that,” he answered. “Some opportunities I have at Cal State Fullerton are hard to beat. They have a great music program, several top bands and an excellent orchestra. A business degree there has lots of credibility for a career. Their baseball team is always in the highest rankings nationwide. I have an excellent chance of making the varsity roster this spring. Carl’s already a star player. I think I have a really good chance to join him.”

“Those things aren’t worth much compared to your soul,” said his Dad.

“That’s why the Bible Institute program is so important. Laura and I are both active. I’ve enrolled in at least two classes every semester. It’s a way to get the most out of the available resources.”

“You’ve done a fine job so far. Your mother and I are genuinely proud of you. We just want you to keep up the good work,” said his dad.

Next, he told his father about the naked musicians he and Carl had seen Friday morning. “Maybe they’re from one of the witch groups,” he wondered.

“Evil is spreading at an alarming pace,” said his father. “More and more people are adopting New Age beliefs, and practicing new forms of witchcraft. These are serious matters to the Lord. In the Bible, Exodus 22:18 and Deuteronomy, Chapter 18, God ordered witches and astrologers be put to *death*.”

“What does that mean?” Dan asked. “God’s Holy word justified the old witch hunts? Astrologers should get the death penalty?”

“Witch hunts were tricks of Satan to harm innocent victims and make Christians look bad,” he explained. “Real witches went unharmed and enjoyed their mischief. As for astrologers and fortune-tellers, our legal system won’t make laws forcing them to obey God’s word. But Christians must send a clear message about what the Bible says.”

His mom came in to join him at the table, talking about the witches. Finishing breakfast, he thought about the witches and the Bible’s crystal-clear guidance. He knew he had to help his dad find a way to oppose witchcraft. Those servants of Satan had to be kept off the campus and out of the community.

3

ECLIPSE

“Ladies and gentlemen,” announced a deep voice from the podium. “It’s my pleasure to welcome Newport Beach tonight with one of Orange County’s most popular young bands —***ECLIPSE!***”

Sheila waited behind a curtain, holding her tenor saxophone. “Goddess, help me make it through tonight,” she prayed. She felt weak. Her body ached. The lack of sleep and holiday schedules had worn them down. Their band was a team. Sheila was a key player. *The* key player. They all had the same situation. She couldn’t let an illness pull her down.

Outside, the lighting was spectacular, deep into the night. The curtain opened and lights inside the ballroom dimmed. Gwen Morgan, the female lead singer, gave a subtle cue to Sheila as her partners pounced into their opening number, a classic rock tune.

The musicians blended as Gwen sang and danced, playing her electric guitar. Tanya Hansen played keyboard and added backup harmony. Jack Morton, the lead singer, played electric bass. Drummer Ricky Blaine sizzled at an elaborate drum set. A bass drum was illuminated with a large, shaded sun surrounded by a blazing corona and the band’s name, ***ECLIPSE.***

Quickly, she whisked her saxophone to a small stand and grabbed her silver concert flute, leading the band into the steady beat of various favorites. Between verses sung by lead singer, Jack Morton, she played favorite tunes having prominent flute interludes.

People began to dance, while others enjoyed appetizers and drinks at the bar. It was a Saturday night Christmas party for a corporation requesting an oldies format for older audiences. Classic rock was one of many styles in the band's repertoire.

Sheila's concentration kept her going. As the evening progressed, Eclipse played hits from the sixties and seventies and holiday favorites like "Jingle Bell Rock" and "Winter Wonderland." She kept a low profile, but she knew her importance to the band. Her music knowledge enabled her to create music and arrangements, in addition to her instruments.

When the band played with her piccolo she chirped lively bird calls. Her clarinet gave a velvet-smooth feel to the crowd. Sometimes she played two or more different instruments during the same song. She played many of her own favorite songs.

The band played the last song some time past midnight, a slow dance arrangement of some chestnuts roasting by an open fire. She was weary, eager to go home with Gwen. Yet she didn't feel as weak as before. She was glad she would be riding most of the way with Gwen.

As Gwen drove north along an empty Costa Mesa Freeway, she said, "You did fine, Sheila. Now let's get you home for a good rest."

"Sounds great," she replied. "I feel much better, as though the Goddess is already helping."

"We were plenty blessed," Gwen said, "just managing to get away from those rent-a-cops in the hills. I'm forever grateful to your dogs."

"Gremlin and Goblin are great protection. I'm optimistic about the ceremony and chances for improving for the better. And maybe the Christians won't interfere with our solstice celebration at the university."

"In spite of the attention Sophina brought us," said Gwen, annoyed with her priestess. "I objected to the publicity, but saw in this morning's paper she'd leaked her story to the press."

"Some good news, too," she said. "My class schedule came in today's mail. I got into the history class I wanted."

"History?" she said. "Sounds dull."

"I needed a required history class," she said. "This class didn't sound too bad. The course was Ancient European History. I'm hoping to learn some things that might help me understand witchcraft better."

"How's that?"

"Wicca is the Old Religion. Learning from the ancient people might help me understand more about witchcraft, like when I stumbled into a bookstore and bought the first witch book I'd seen. "Aradia, Gospel of the Witches."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"The class covers ideas I want to learn about. According to an article about it in the *Daily Titan*, it delves into some puzzling and ancient riddles."

"What kind of mysterious ancient riddles?"

She pulled a news clipping from her purse and aimed a reading light. "We'll study Stonehenge and thousands of massive stone monuments all over Northern Europe in places like France, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Albion, but then disappeared."

"What's Albion?" Gwen asked. "I've never heard of that."

"It's the giant island that includes England, Scotland and Wales," she said.

"So...what did happen to the Stonehenge people?"

"I'll let you know when I learn it."

Looking ahead she said, "The class examines the history and mythology of Atlantis, King Arthur, and how Rome conquered the Celts."

Gwen let Sheila off at her house. "I hope you're right. I'd love to learn more that could help me master the elusive mysteries and enchantments of Wicca."

PART 2
ANCIENT YULE
(ABOUT 2,000 YEARS AGO)

*And the angel said unto them {the shepherds},
Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which
shall be to all people.
For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which
is Christ the Lord.
And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in
swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly
host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on
earth peace, good will toward men.*

Luke 2:10-14 (King James Version)

*She is youthful and old as she pleases,
She sails the torn clouds in her barque,
The bright silver Lady of midnight,
The crone who weaves spells in the dark.*

from *The Witches' Creed*

8

CONJUNCTION

A lone horseman galloped furiously along a narrow trail through the misty woods of Albion. A dark cape fastened to the rider's tunic by a large brooch flapped wildly. Garreth the messenger rushed to deliver his urgent report. Darkness was rapidly descending.

The weary rider didn't let up. Though weary, he hastened. He was cold from the bitter chill. Yule was drawing nearer. Sunlight waned. Garreth raced to escape the cold night and the terror of darkness in the forest. Wolves, bears, and wild boar could be lurking anywhere, hidden in the forest's shadows. Far more terrifying were the spirits and demons that emerged in the night. The messenger squeezed a sacred amulet hanging from his neck. "Protect me!" he prayed. "*Protect me!*"

A trail opened into a clearing. Garreth peered through the dark moon. A hill rose above the field ahead. Atop this mound, surrounded by a great wall, was a hillfort built of wood and stone. It was the stronghold of Brioru, chieftain of the Durotrig Celts. As torches came into view Garreth exhaled a sigh of relief.

Horse and rider charged up the hill, slowing to approach the main gate. Rows of wood and metal spikes lined each side of the gate. Almost every spike bore the severed head of a foe who had been defeated in combat by Durotrig warriors. Some were recent trophies. Others were ancient skeletons. This display warned of the tribe's fighting prowess.

The messenger didn't notice. He'd seen this and others like it throughout Albion.

Two huge guards rushed the gate. Heavy iron swords and shields blocked the entrance. Foot soldiers rushed in response to someone approaching the gate at night. The messenger held both hands above his head, empty, a gesture of peace.

"My friends," he shouted. "It is I, Garreth, messenger from the Isle of Mona. I have an urgent message for King Brioru." The guards lowered their swords and shields. They recognized Garreth's broad shoulders, wide face, and gray hair.

"Welcome to the hall of Brioru," said one guard. "We'll take your horse while you prepare to feast with us and deliver your message."

The hefty gate, reinforced with iron, opened. Garreth and his steed entered. Flames illuminated an outdoor courtyard. Men, women and children bustled about. Soldiers, craft people, workers, druids, and their families.

His horse went to the stables and Garreth went to rest and clean up. People in the hall waited for news. Though late, people gathered around. Garreth waved his husky arms as he went to his place of honor. The hall was dark and smoky with the lusty odor of beef and pork. Unlike the quiet forests, the hall was loud with rowdy boasting, feasting warriors, and laughing maidens.

Then came the music of harps, pipes, voices, and drums.

Above the other tables, along the wall opposite the main doors, Brioru and his queen faced east on lavish seats carved from wood, bronze, silver, and gold.

Garreth took his seat at a wooden table among druids. Another table hosted the clan's worthiest warriors. He was given a choice portion of pork and a cup of rich mead. Garreth ate and drank, enjoying the hearty rations and congenial atmosphere.

Garreth's eyes roamed the large, smoky hall. He noticed a young maiden watching. Their eyes met. She glanced away, then looked back at him and smiled. She had long, golden hair and a supple, full figure. Garreth returned the smile.

He finished eating as Brioru rose from his throne. The king's large stature commanded attention. His grayish hair and speckled beard

showed wisdom. Though strong and muscular, his belly testified of prosperous dining. He greeted Garreth heartily and invited him to speak.

Garreth rose and stood at his table, and responded. He faced the chieftain, then also turned and gestured toward others in the hall. The noisy clamor subsided.

“King Brioru and people of the Durotriges,” he bellowed, “I thank you for your kind hospitality. I bring greetings from the Isle of Mona, and special regards from Mulroan, Chief Druid of all Albion.” Mention of the druid leader drew a brief, low buzz through the hall.

“You’ve seen the conjunctions this year of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces,” Garreth continued. “Four days ago, Jupiter joined Saturn in Pisces for the third time since it first happened seven months ago.”

A white-bearded man approached Garreth. “I’m Elvren, our local chief druid. We’re relieved to hear from you. We’ve waited to hear from Mulroan. The conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter is rare and powerful, a great omen. It has long been foretold that in Pisces, it would be a sign of great importance for all the world.”

“We know the conjunction has great meaning,” said Garreth. “And with retrograde motions, it’s happened three times within a few months, a very sacred triune in Pisces.”

“My friend, with no further delay, please tell us the meaning of these signs we have pondered in recent months,” said Elvren.

Garreth paused, then spoke in his strong, authoritative voice. “I cannot yet reveal the meaning of these omens,” he said. “Mulroan has called a council of druids from all our tribes. Our people must assemble in seven days at the Ring of Stones, six days before the winter solstice.”

Elvren rubbed his chin. “Are we gathering to hear Mulroan’s explanation or to help him learn an answer he still seeks?”

“I don’t know,” said Garreth. “Mulroan won’t say.”

“Elvren, you must select those druids to represent the Durotrig tribe. Go to the Ring of Stones. There you will learn the meaning.”

Garreth finished his message and sat down. Clamor filled the hall as music began to play. A harpist plucked gently at the strings of his instrument. A young piper with curly dark hair blew across her flute

like the wind. A drummer began to beat her drums with wooden drumsticks, tapping into the heartbeat rhythm of Mother Earth.

The music began to quicken. Some left to get sleep, but others stayed to dance. It was late and Garreth was tired. He prepared to return to his chambers when he felt a hand on his arm. He turned and noticed the young maiden standing beside him. Her touch gave him a tingle of pleasure.

“You must be tired,” she said. “Enjoy at least one dance before you leave for the night.” He didn’t find it forward at all. Celtic women were equal with men and many enjoyed great self-confidence. Queens ruled many tribes.

Garreth danced one dance, then another, and another. When she pressed against him, he enjoyed it. But it was late, and finally he had to excuse himself.

The lass took his hand with a smile. “You’re weary. You must rest. Let me lead you to your bed, and bring you a drink. I can rub your tired shoulders and give you soothing comfort...”

A gleam in his eye, Garreth followed the maiden.

9

THE CRONE

Below the Hillfort village, women stopped in a shady area to eat and gossip. Young Grenneth was worried. “It’s been ten days since the messenger spoke. Is there any news of our druids?” She was slender except for the obvious bulge of her pregnancy.

“I’ve heard nothing,” said a middle-aged woman.

“Nor have I,” echoed another, as the women continued chatting, wearing robes, wool dresses, and shawls for the chilly December morning. Children played amid pigs, odors, and chickens. Dogs roamed freely.

Grenneth spoke again. “My Finran was among those druids,” she lamented, brushing her reddish-brown hair. “They went to learn the meaning of the conjunctions. I’ve had no news from Finran, or any others. I’m very worried.”

“Relax,” said a middle-aged woman. “I’ve heard rumors. I’m sure they’re fine.”

Another disagreed. “My son is a craftsman at the hillfort. He overheard warriors talking about the druid assembly.”

“What do warriors know of druid meetings?” she asked.

“Warriors returned from bringing supplies,” she said. “He says the they have no explanation. They haven’t learned anything yet. They’re bickering over meanings. Some think the spirits won’t help until Mulroan selects a druid to be sacrificed.”

“Oh dear!” Grenneth gasped. She’d worried about not being home for Yule.

Perhaps he might not return at all!

The older lady spoke again. “I think we know someone better able than the druids to explain the conjunction.”

“Yes,” another woman agreed. “Moora would know.”

Grenneth knew of a lady hermit living in an isolated cottage in a dense forest north of the village. She’d never seen her in person.

“Why would Moora know any more than the druids?”

“Druids have their limitations,” said another woman. “Moora is wise, far greater than any druid. She’s been old since the oldest of us, yet still remains self-sufficient. She’s healed those the druids couldn’t cure. She tells the future. Animals obey her. People of our village fear her, but also respect her.”

“Grenneth,” said the woman, “you should visit Moora. You’re worried about Finran. She might help you.”

“Oh, no! I dread the thought of her. From the time I was young my mother forbade me to go near her cottage. Mother warned me of danger and evil power there.”

“You’re now a grown woman with a husband, expecting a baby of your own. You can do as you wish. Your mother came from a druid family, and you have a druid husband. It’s only the druids who despise Moora because her abilities are so much greater.”

“How is it that she has such wisdom?” Grenneth asked.

“No one knows. Some believe she’s of an ancient people who lived long before the Celts. She may have special powers from that heritage.”

The women began to gossip about Moora. They told tales of the crone’s kindness and healing. Another woman told how Moora had cured her sick baby as it was dying. Others told of healed parents and livestock. There was talk of strange happenings, animals—wolves, bees, bats, crows and ravens, and other creatures—who guarded her cottage and obeyed her commands.

Grenneth listened, fascinated and curious. Then they brought up Moora's most famous achievement. Even Grenneth knew it, whenever people spoke of Moora.

"That was forty-eight years ago," said the oldest of the women. "I was a young wife, no older than Grenneth is now. Our tribe saw a great army invade our land."

Julius Caesar led a fleet of Roman ships to southeastern Albion. Warriors from British tribes joined to defend Albion. Druids gathered to call upon spirits and deities for help. The forces of Nature responded with storms and high tides, wreaking havoc on Romans. After several days, Rome withdrew and returned to Gaul. The people of Albion had witnessed the power of Rome.

Rome returned again the next year, led again by Julius Caesar. The troops arrived earlier, a half month after the summer solstice. British Celts were stunned by the size of this armada, more than eight hundred ships, easily ten times the force of the previous year. Clearly, the Roman soldiers were prepared for conquest.

Warriors and druids assembled for battle. Bad weather hampered the Romans. This time the invaders were prepared, landing safely along the coast of Albion below the estuary. They overcame every obstacle of Nature and faced the Celtic defenders in battle, winning every time. Neither warriors nor druids could match the disciplined soldiers of Rome. These invaders were unstoppable, just as they had been in Gaul.

Bad news reached the Durotriges. People gathered to hear reports. They were startled to see reclusive Moora ride into the village and address those who began to gather. She warned all those listening that they couldn't overcome the Romans in battle, nor could the prayers of the Druids drive away the Romans.

Moora told the people that specific sacrifices must be made to spare Albion. She gave the people a choice. She would raise spiritual energy from the Life Force to drive the Romans from Albion. She promised that if enough Durotrig people participated, Rome would be banished forever.

There was no other choice.

The people responded. But in spite of her promise, Romans continued to fight the Celts and advance deeper into Albion. Roman troops approached the Durotrig hillfort. The people grew angry.irate druids led a mob to her cottage. No one was there. Moora was gone.

Then her miracle began. In spite of a massive armada, and almost no resistance, she decisively proved her military dominance. Rome began to withdraw, first from the Durotrig lands, then from all of Albion.

And that was the last of the Romans.

Along with Celts throughout Albion, the Durotrig people rejoiced. Moora had worked an enchantment. She *had* kept her promise. Eventually, she returned to her cottage. She became a heroine, and remained a hermit. The druids scorned her and claimed credit for the victory.

“That was forty-seven years ago,” sighed the old woman. “Julius Caesar has long been dead. Though still strong in Gaul and the rest of the world, Rome has never returned to Albion.” The women shivered as always when recalling Moora’s greatest miracle.

“Forty-seven years ago she was already ancient,” Grenneth said. “If she’s even alive she must be old and feeble.”

“She’s rarely seen,” they told her, “but she welcomes visitors. Those who see her find her lively, and in good health. She’s much older than anyone else so no one really knows her age. Go see her for yourself. You’ll be amazed.”

Grenneth felt overwhelmed. She was very worried about her husband. Speaking slowly, she said, “Yes...perhaps I’ll visit Moora myself.”

* * * *

The next morning, Grenneth rode north. Though cold, it was free of rain or fog. She was an expert rider and didn’t hesitate to ride while pregnant. She rode through forests and fields towards Moora’s cottage. She’d never been there before, but had memorized directions from her friends. She also brought a basket filled with breads, fruits, pork, and beef.

She felt guilty about her mother's prohibition. She'd always been an obedient child. Her father died before she was a year old. Her mother had never remarried. She admired her mother's dedication raising four children alone. But now she had to help Finran. She had to visit Moora.

After riding more than an hour, she rounded a curve. A cottage sat in a clearing, a wooden home with a thatched roof. She saw no wolves, nor other any other creatures. It appeared abandoned. A river flowed into a pond, and beyond that, the woods thickened into a heavy forest.

Grenneth nudged her horse closer, then turned and gasped. Two gray wolves paced back and forth, about forty feet *behind* her.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said a voice. "They won't harm you."

Grenneth glanced back to the cottage. An elderly woman appeared wearing a wool shawl and scarf over her white hair. Shiny spiral earrings glistened. Her fingers wore rings with a similar pattern. Piercing blue eyes blazed from her slender pink skin.

"I'm Moora," she said, dismounting. "Don't be bashful. Be careful of your baby."

Moora gave her a gentle embrace, adding, "I already know who you are and why you've come. I'm so happy to see you!"

10

ATLAN

“I came to seek your help,” said Grenneth, as a raven fluttered onto Moora’s shoulder. “I heard you’re a wise woman. Druids argue about the conjunctions of Jupiter, Saturn, and Pisces. My husband, Finran, is there. He could be sacrificed. He’s young and could be possible victim.”

Moora took the basket of food. “What do you think I can do for you?”

“I don’t know,” said Grenneth. “I don’t know your wisdom. Can you protect him with a charm? Or advice?”

“I can help you ease your worries. You have nothing to fear.”

“How is that?” Grenneth asked.

“Finran is safe,” Moora said. “No one will be sacrificed. In two days Mulroan will enter the altar stone at the Ring of Stones. He’ll wait all day, neither eating nor drinking. He’ll receive his answer. The next day, he’ll explain it to the other druids. They’ll return home. All of them.”

She sighed. “How do you know this?”

“I saw these things. I’ve learned to understand them.” She felt a peaceful feeling. “I believe you, and trust he’ll be safe.”

Moora touched her arm. “Before the days lengthen after the solstice, you’ll be holding him in your arms.”

“What *is* the meaning of the conjunction?” she asked.

"It's important," Moora said. "I don't know what," she paused. "But I'll find out."

"How?"

Moora paused, lowering her voice. "When the druids leave the Ring of Stones, I'll go there. That is where I will learn it's meaning."

"You can't enter the Ring of Stones," said Grenneth. "The druids would kill you!"

Grenneth was shocked that a stranger would reveal it.

"I've done it often," she said. "I'll do it again. I don't fear death. I won't be caught. No one can block my energy from the Life Force."

"I have no doubt," she replied. "But please, *please* be careful."

Moora took Grenneth's hand. "Come into my home and rest before you leave. I rarely have the pleasure of visitors."

Inside cottage, her eyes adjusted, then sat on a chair padded with furs. A brick hearth and iron cauldron simmered over a fire. Smaller pots and beakers hung on the stone of wall the hearth. The raven fluttered off Moora's shoulder to a perch in one corner.

Grenneth looked around the cottage. Moora looked through the basket.

"My goodness, child," she exclaimed. "There's more food than I could eat! We'll have to share it."

Still curious about Moora, she accepted the invitation.

Beef, pork, fruit, bread, and honey were in the basket. "I don't eat a lot of meat," Moora said. "It's a special treat. Let us give thanks to the spirits whose lives live on in us."

As Moora served food, Grenneth wondered why people thought she had special powers. "People say you're from ancient people who lived before our tribes came. Some say you're more powerful than the druids."

Moora laughed, filling a pitcher of goat's milk. "I feel honored."

She joined Grenneth at the table. "'Tis true. I'm of the ancient ones. My ancestors taught me skills and knowledge people no longer understand. I practiced skills and secrets from my mother and grandmother, hoping to pass it to young ones of my people. Children

of my heritage did not keep the old ways. They prefer to blend into the villages of the Celts. Very few, like myself, have remained.”

“Where are your children now?” Grenneth asked.

“I raised five handsome sons,” Moora answered. “They grew up and moved away. None are still alive. I’ve outlived them all.”

“They died young?”

“They lived good, full lives, with wives and children,” answered Moora. “My youngest died nearly twenty years ago.”

Moora didn’t appear old enough to have outlived her sons.

“How could that be?” she asked.

“My skills of health and healing keep my body and spirit strong,” said the crone. “I have longevity and health. I’m well over a hundred years old. Others of the ancient ones have lived longer, only passing from injury or disease too sudden to heal.”

“More than a hundred years old?” Grenneth paused. “I see why people admire your ancestry. The ancient ones must have been mighty. Were they not invincible? How could they be conquered?”

“Yet they *were* conquered,” she answered.

“How could it happen? I’m in no hurry. My husband is gone. I’m very curious about your people.”

“As you wish, my dear.”

“My people emerged thousands of years ago. They were from a great island similar in size to Albion. This land enjoyed warm waters, free from cold, called Atlan. They made it their home. There were no stone monuments then.

“The nation grew, spreading to nearby islands and the continent beyond. They navigated the seas and built ships traveling vast distances. They mastered an understanding of the night sky, navigating by stars, winds, and currents. Atlan became a wealthy empire, trading throughout the world.

“Ships sailed to large ports and small. Traders became dependent on Atlan. Her ships sailed in every ocean. They were recognized by ships bearing figureheads of a giant serpent with feathered wings. Spirals, triangles, and other symbols adorned their sails. They were admired wherever they traveled.

Grenneth asked, “Was there a meaning for the serpent with feathered wings?”

“Yes,” said Moora. “Atlan’s deity, the feathered serpent, was both male and female. The feathered serpent created fertility by untangling the gift of life and energy, the Life Force and sexuality of every living creature.”

Moora showed Grenneth a charm in the shape of a serpent with feathered wings. “It’s a symbol of my heritage from Atlan,” Moora said. “This has been handed down to me through countless generations.”

Grenneth asked, “What brought the sadness?”

“The wealthy grew complacent,” said Moora. “The brightest and best of Atlan were gone, trading and teaching others. Atlan’s seven kings grew more demanding. They spent more time indulging in pleasures as the government of Atlan began to stagnate.”

“Catastrophe struck,” said Moora. “In a single day, Atlan and its neighbors perished. The kings and advisers had ignored warnings that could have saved many lives.”

“What happened?”

“A giant comet exploded. Fiery boulders fell on Atlan and the islands. Fireballs left craters over vast areas of land. Atlan and nearby islands were gone. Tsunamis added further terror. The atmosphere was polluted. Clouds of smoke and dust continued for years and centuries to come, never to be seen.”

“Didn’t their experts warn people?” she asked.

“Most were navigating distant seas,” Moora said. “Those near Atlan weren’t watching. They overlooked the warnings of an approaching comet. Other navigators, traveling the seas, saw the comet, but could not return in time to warn the people.”

“So Atlan disappeared forever?”

“Not quite,” Moora said. “Everything within great distances of Atlan perished, but some navigators far from Atlan survived. The few who didn’t perish slowly struggled to overcome the tragedy.

“One navigator who survived was a young lady, younger than you at that time,” Moora said. “Her name was Hanra. She was a gifted

prodigy trained in navigation and the night sky. She saw the comet as it approached the island of Albion while bartering for copper, tin and flint. She saw the comet retreat rapidly from her homeland.”

“The impact was felt and heard throughout in the world. Hanra knew when it hit. She hurried to help get her ship ashore. The crew worked furiously to get people and cargo into docking boats and onto land safely, and to higher ground.”

“Tsunamis followed. Waves of destruction swept everything away. Some climbed higher, but not many. Agony and death was everywhere. For the few who survived, terrors continued—earthquakes, toxic smoke, fires. Hanra’s priority was surviving and saving others. She wondered about her own homeland, but knew she couldn’t return. Later she learned it was gone forever.

“After that, most people and living creatures perished. Only the few strongest survived the unspeakable terrors and diseases.”

“Hanra remained in Albion. She had no place to go. She helped the few survivors and comforted those who lost loved ones. Her husband, also from Atlan, helped rebuild. Albion became their home. Hanra’s gifted knowledge enabled her to teach others. She became a beloved teacher. She mastered several languages and taught them about the sky, seasons, stars, planets, and weather. She taught them to write using letters and numbers she knew from Atlan.”

“Most important,” said Moora. “She taught people to recognize the energy of their spirits, and connect to the power of the feathered serpent, the Life Force, as they did in Atlan, connecting to physical, mental and spiritual energy of the feathered serpent.

Grenneth was amazed. “She *was* a remarkable woman. But what about other survivors from Atlan who were with Hanra when she came to Albion?”

“The entire world had suffered. Only the few strongest people, plants, and animals survived. The loss of Atlan’s world trade caused a complete and total loss of shipping as people everywhere grew increasingly primitive and barbaric.”

“In Albion, Hanra and her descendants preserved arts, magic, and science. They built great henges of stone and wood to study the knowledge of stars, planets, seasons, and movements of the night sky.”

The Ring of Stones was built by Hanra's descendants.

"Centuries passed. The Celts conquered Albion. They valued strength in battle more than magic and knowledge. Hanra's descendants were forced into hiding, finding places in hills and forests. Most of Hanra's descendants, and the natives of Albion, were smaller than the husky Celts. The wee folk grew more nocturnal, hiding from the Celts and tracking the night sky. Celts became wary of these smaller night people. They began to tell tales and legends of these clever, mischievous, wee folk."

Moora smiled. "Those wee folk were your ancestors?"

"Yes," said Moora. "My ancient heritage blends freely now with the Celts. Few have preserved the ancient ways. Some have still remained faithful. Their powers are great. They remain true to the greatest magic, the feathered serpent, the Life Force.

Tears filled Grenneth's eyes. "A sad story, but thank you for sharing it. I'm amazed about your heritage. You're such a wonderful person. I can't understand why my mother kept me from you. She thought you were a bad influence."

Moora gazed into her emerald eyes. "Your mother knew me well, before you were born. She feared you might seek the ancient power of my people instead of the druids."

"How I wish I could. It seems such a wondrous gift. But why would my mother be concerned? I'm not of the proper heritage."

Moora took her hands. "Grenneth, you never knew your father, did you?"

Grenneth shook her head. "No. He died when I was still a baby. His name was Barian. I don't know much more than that."

"I remember Barian well," said Moora. "I remember holding you as a baby, too. Your father died when you were young. He was my youngest son. *You are my granddaughter!*"