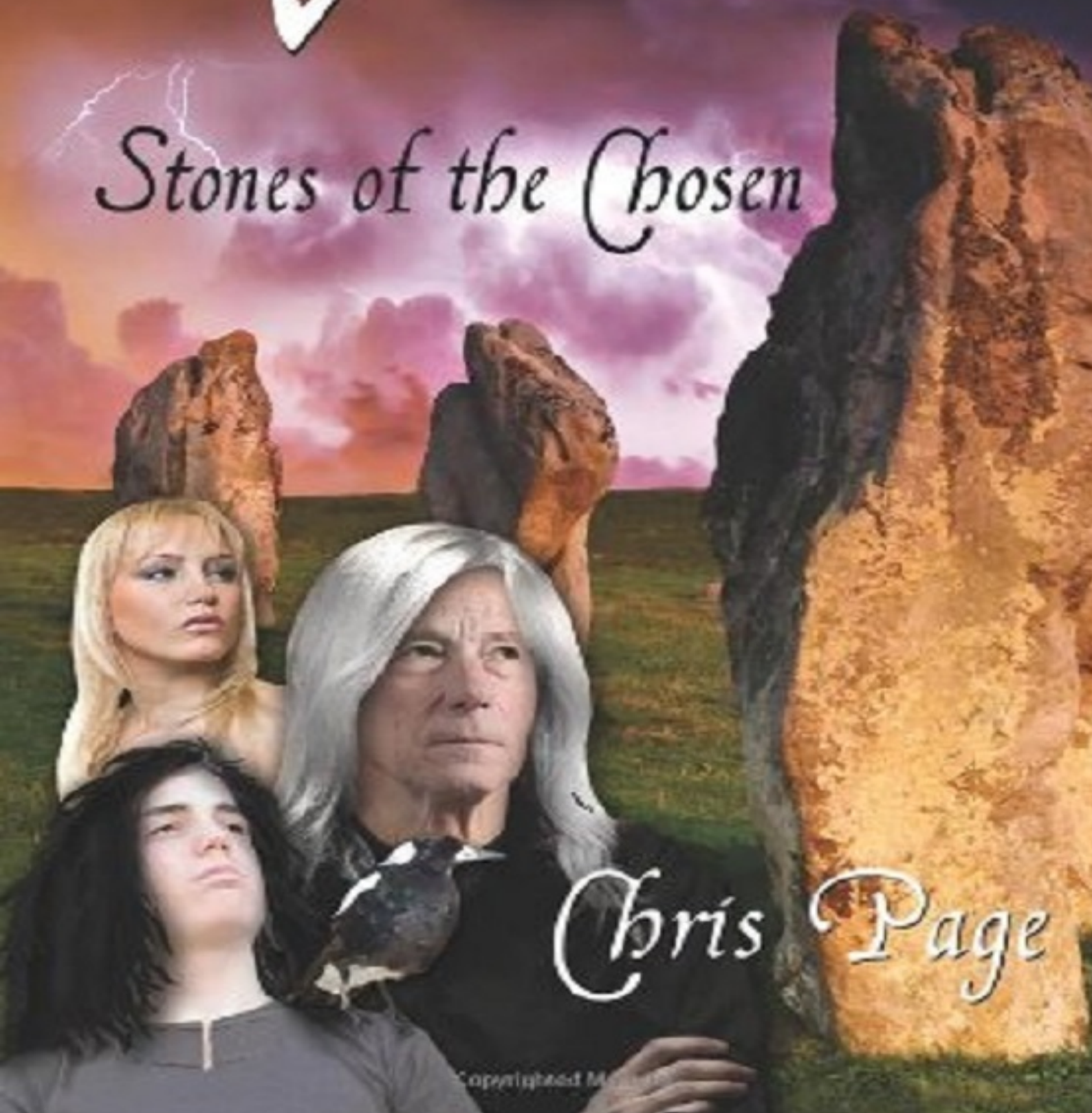


Veneficus

Stones of the Chosen



Chris Page

VENEFICUS:

STONES OF THE CHOSEN

BOOK ONE OF

THE VENEFICAL PROGRESSIONS

By

Chris Page

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Aut disce aut discede

~~Either learn or depart~~

Death stalked the venefical gift, those who opposed it and those who supported it.
There simply was no other way

To Lindy, In Saecula Saeculorum

A Veneficus

A veneficus is a hybrid of sorcerer, magician, hermit, alchemist, oracle, wizard, and wax-palace ghost. Each one lives for exactly one hundred years. All are born on All Hallows Day (Halloween 31st October). Venefici cast no shadow, leave no footprint, and have an individual aura. They do not need sleep after childhood. They do not eat food or drink liquids after childhood. They can be born without any parents but are extremely rare. Venefici do not feel physical pain but are susceptible to emotional pain. They can be killed, but it takes a skilled and deadly opponent - or another veneficus to do it. They have been on this earth for ten thousand years. The Wessex venefici are buried under their names in the Destiny Stone at Avebury.

Each one needs to be trained by another in the use of the enchantments. It usually takes twenty years, although Twilight only had seven years with Merlin.

There is at least one in Wessex at all times. There is one there now. There may be more.

Chapter One

As the late afternoon gloom of winter began to thicken, the boy, mounted behind his father on the back of a tired old horse, moved slowly, unknowingly, toward a destiny that would last for another eighty-seven blood-soaked years and see him take the lives of many thousands of people. That most of those lives were taken in an attempt to maintain an allegory of noninterference, independence, and redemption by a peaceful, poetic, and elegant Celtic nation against murderous, power-hungry invaders was a conundrum only the spell-bindery and stardust sprinkled by a veneficus could bring about.

As the boy and his father progressed through the rolling Wessex sward, they remained aware of the pitched escarpment of huge trees as the great Savernake forest loomed ever larger on the horizon. Even the old horse, head held permanently low and many years beyond the age of any form of spirited response or skittishness, began nervously switching its tail from side to side as the dark mass grew closer.

Their first set of directions, given by a gaily singing woman rinsing worn tunics in a stream, took them along a track toward the highest, darkest part of the tree line. As its own shadow stretched to embrace that thrown outward by the approaching curtain of forest, the horse faltered and bent to nose at some lush grass by the side of the track, all the while keeping one wary eye on the towering beeches that guarded the forest entry.

As they paused to consider a way into the menacing forest, they noticed the smoldering fires of a young charcoal burner. So intent was the young firewatcher in attending to his sticks and blowing in the glowing embers that the mounted man and boy stood for some time in the shadowy shafts of hazy wood smoke before he turned to acknowledge their presence. Without a word he suddenly raised his arm and pointed toward a narrow path disappearing into the dark, brooding trees. Moments later the boy looked over his shoulder from his seat on the back of the plodding old horse, just before they entered the dark forest. The young charcoal burner, his smoking camp, and piles of glowing sticks had disappeared.

It was then the boy first knew.

Time, the obstinate, irreversible, invariable witness to the history of the turning world's infinite occurrences, and its only utterly irrefutable given, was an irrelevancy under the mighty canopy of the great medieval forest. Seasonal sequences, day and night, generations of animal, plant, or human life, even centuries, were all insignificant measurements. Only history was measured here, waypoints recorded at minimum intervals of five hundred years, anything lower a transient speck of dust, an invisible incidental with a negligible contribution to the life span of such a mighty forest. The five hundred-year-old beeches just about qualified, but even they were infants. A thirty-four-year-old man and his thirteen-year-old son astride a broken old cob were an immeasurable inconsequence when placed against such fabulous leaps of time.

The mighty medieval Savernake of Wessex was no ordinary forest. Renowned for its stillness and silence, the normal rhythms and cadences of nature's growth patterns were inverted here. Plant and sapling growth were very limited because of the lack of sunlight, but the gloom was perfect for fungi which varied from the small, deadly opaque whites, delicate pinks and purples of death cap, fly agarics, puffball and stinkhorn tubers, to the cankerous great brown-and-cream clusters of spongiforms spreading their morbid spores in ever-widening circles around the bases of the great trees. These odorous fungoid malformations had colonized parts of the forestry floor to the exclusion of all other fauna, drawing their life blood from the damp, rich humus of the yielding earth and

smothering and poisoning anything else that attempted root purchase.

~~Those who lived near the great forest seldom ventured in; tales of its dark demons and mystical wraiths abounded around the fires of the peripheral hamlets and settlements. Much of this demon could be laid at the door of the abundant fungi, the combination of poisonous delicacy and mutant gigantism perfect fare for ghoulish fable, the horrors magnified by mead and embellished by fireside recital. Add to that what had become known locally as the Lament of the Sorrows; the wind keening in a high register through the canopy like a mythical choir of female sirens trapped forever in the treetops, waiting to accompany those bold enough to venture through its menacing avenues. A soaring requiem it was said in whispers, that was a prelude to a dark, phantom-embraced death.~~

Yet, for the man and his son on the ragged old horse, the demons had to be faced, the journey made. Destiny, duty, and simple desperation on the part of the father demanded that they brave all the legendary Savernake wraiths to meet with a man who lived at the forest's epicenter, and who, according to their local holy man, was the only one who could help with their dilemma.

The mighty veneficus known as Merlin.

The dark, foreboding secrets that constituted the Savernake's legends were as nothing compared to those surrounding Merlin. Iridescent wizard, oracle, alchemist, prophet, and onetime counselor to King Arthur and the great court of Camelot - or just an old fraud and savant hermit whose day was done and undeserved reputation founded upon trickery and deceit?

Whatever he turned out to be, he was the only one the desperate man on the horse could turn to.

The dark path snaked unerringly through the grotesque fungi and the huge gray and green moss-covered trunks of the towering beeches, many of them so big that it would take eight grown men with linked hands to embrace their massive girth. It was a strangely silent, haunting world beneath the high canopy with just enough afternoon light filtering through in places to show them the way. Stillness enveloped their uncertain progress: no birds sang, no animals flashed and sought cover from their approach, no breezes stirred the mutant undergrowth, and even the plodding hooves of the old horse were muffled by the deep, mottled brown carpet of mulch that covered the forest floor. Each time the path seemed to merge into the darkness, muted shafts of light would filter down from the great spread of branches overhead to guide them onward.

Emerging suddenly into a small clearing, the old horse swished his head, let out a low snort, and stopped. Blinking in the bright afternoon light, the man urged the horse forward.

He would not budge.

Then the man, with the boy looking around him from his straddled position behind, saw why.

Standing in the shadow of a great spreading oak on the other side of the small clearing was an unkempt, gray-robed old man. His silver beard and shoulder-length hair were matted and dirty, and the length of coiled jute holding his tattered robe together was shiny with age and use. His feet were bare and dirt-encrusted, and his thin body, bent forward with age, was supported by a gnarled old staff. He did not appear to be aware of their presence, so intently did he stare at the ground by his feet.

The man on the horse was just about to call out and ask for directions when he was stilled by a sudden movement in the grass at the old man's feet. The boy, his black, luminous eyes expressionless, watched quietly and without fear as the large, flat head of a huge snake lifted itself from the grass and its tongue forking, began to coil itself around the old man's staff. The horse snorted again and was steadied by the boy's father. The fact that the snake's body was almost twice as thick as the gnarled old staff didn't impede its progress. The markings along the snake's head and back were white and black chevrons, its shiny body gray and green with a white underbelly. Perfect camouflage for the forest environment.

Slowly the snake worked its way around and up the staff until it reached the old man's withered hand. ~~Pausing momentarily to check and sniff out its route along the dirty old robe, the snake~~ continued up the old man's arm until it reached his shoulder, at which time its tail left the grass. The old man never once moved his soft gaze from that of the reptile. They seemed eye-locked.

Snapping out of his fear-frozen reverie as the snake's tongue began to fork around the old man's face, the man on the horse made as if to jump down and go to his assistance. With surprising speed for one so old and without taking his eyes from those of the snake, the old man thrust out his free arm, his hand palm out, indicating that the man should stay put.

Just when it seemed that the frail frame of the bent old man couldn't take the weight of the huge coiled serpent any longer, its head slowly moved on upwards to bridge the gap to a thick, low-hanging branch of the spreading oak tree. With its tongue flicking and the great body moving in glistening folds and curves around the old man's arm and up to the oak, the snake continued its inexorable climb until all of its length lay along the shaded branch. Then it looked down at the old man, flicked its tongue once, and closed its eyes. The old man then turned toward the mounted pair, smiled broadly, mumbled something unintelligible, and, almost absentmindedly, as if his mind was on much weightier matters began to hobble away.

A dirty old hermit suddenly confronted by other humans, the boy thought, will always take refuge in foolish mumbles. Lax in his manners to honest wayfarers, preferring the attentions of a colorful blooded serpent, such a man is not to be trusted.

As if stung, the unkempt old man suddenly snapped out of his reverie, straightened his bent old body, and turned a level, knowing gaze to the boy. Then he scowled, bowed almost mockingly, jabbed the gnarled old staff toward a gap in the trees, and leaned back against the massive trunk of the oak to watch their progress.

Tired and frozen with snake-fright, the old horse remained rooted to the spot. Still shaken himself by what he had seen, the father slapped the flanks of the beast several times before it began to move slowly forward. The boy never took his luminous dark eyes off the old man until he was lost to him, then he and his father plunged once more into the gloomy avenues of trees. After ten more minutes of slow plodding, the gloom became even more impenetrable and the old horse began once more to switch his tail in a show of nervousness. Pulling to a halt, the father dismounted and, putting one foot carefully in front of the other in the darkness, began slowly to lead the old horse by the rope around its neck, the boy moving forward to sit on the warm blanket that served as a saddle. The blackness that enveloped them was such that even the path beneath their feet became invisible as they edged carefully forward. Above them the winds in the canopy began to make a low moaning sound that quickly gained in intensity, through a wringing dirge to a full-blown plangent wail. For once the fabled underworld reality as the canopy thrashed and heaved as if inhabited by screaming hordes of invisible demons, the Lament of the Sorrows giving full reign to its tearing, breast-beating agonies.

With a loud snort the old horse dug his front legs into the deep, soft humus and refused to move another step. With the Sorrows hurling their deafening lamentations on their heads from above, the fearful father reached for his mounted son's calm hand in the glue-black earthlight and tried to squeeze it confidently. Then froze as another hand, sensuously female, slowly caressed his neck and cheek.

Erotic voice-breath hushed into his ear, most of the words lost in the swelling requiem that seemed to fill the entire forest. The horse shuddered and whinnied in terror as the father let go of the rein and his son's hand. Raising both of his now free hands to his softly caressed cheeks to engage in a finger-dance of erotic abandon, he began to moan and sway in a form of possessed ecstasy. With the

Sorrows soaring above him, the rapt father gave in completely to the unchaste sensuality of the gossamer-soft fingers running down his cheeks and the Zephyrus endearments in his ears. Slowly, he began to step away into the surrounding darkness.

Ignore the inflamer, my father. It is an illusion that would cause you harm. Turn now; I am by your side. We will continue our journey together as we began. Our destination is close by. Turn and take my hand ... now.

The possessed father stopped, shook his head dumbly, and turned. He could see nothing in the blackness. He reached out for his son and felt the smaller, cool fingers grip his larger, work-roughened hand. As their fingers closed, the caressing hands around his face fell away, and there was a scabrous scream in his ear as the hushed, ecstatic spell was broken. At the same time the cacophony of the Lamenting Sorrows died away, and the glue-black earthlight lightened.

All was as it had been.

Except for the horse.

The loyal old cob, after a hard lifetime of wooden plough shafts between his shoulders and the burden of firewood, produce, and occasional humans, had succumbed to the surreal surroundings of the mighty Savernake. Nothing in his simple life had prepared him for this menacing journey, but he had done his duty to the last breath and had almost got them to their destination. For that he would be the first to be remembered by the boy in a special way.

The father removed the blanket from beneath the fallen horse and handed it to his son, and then he gently lifted the shaggy head and removed the jute rope rein. They stood in the forest gloom for a few moments of quiet reflection over the old cob's corpse, and then continued on their journey. Another few minutes of steady, untroubled walking brought them to a large clearing, in the middle of which stood a stockaded compound with a pair of tall, intricately woven willow gates.

They had reached their destination. This had to be the home of Merlin.

All gods, no matter how big and important their domains, reported to Zeus, who became leader and king of the gods, father of the Olympians, sky and weather, hospitality, rights of guests and supplicants, sending of omens, punishment of injustice, and governance of the universe. Governance of the universe. That covers pretty much everything a god could want. The ancients liked to have a god in place for everything. An immortal omnipotent in the Presidium of Mount Olympus who would oversee the fates, rules, and spheres of each domain. Among the nine principal gods and goddesses, Tiresias, the Seer of Thebes, was the god of the Domain of the Cowering Dead. He is the god responsible for a great deal of the trouble herein.

Chapter Two

The two most remarkable things about Merlin were his great height and deep emerald eyes. Bareheaded and straight, despite his advanced years, and tall enough to see clearly over the back of a eighteen-hands horse, the mighty wizard paced and fretted around his compound, stroking his silver-streaked black beard and twining and untwining the thick, shoulder-length mane of similarly colored hair that adorned his great head. The piercing, emerald green eyes flashed and squinted in frustration from beneath thick brows above a large, aquiline nose set in a lined, careworn face. He had known for a long time that someone special was coming to him, someone with embryonic gifts and powers as rare as his own, and someone whose destiny would eventually be that of his successor. He also knew that this person was young and would not yet understand these powers and that there was a great deal to be done by way of teaching, revelation, and enlightenment.

And that he had less than seven short years left in which to accomplish the task.

But that was all he knew. The specifics had been denied him. He had posted his conspicuous apparitions around the various routes to his compound, called fervently and often on the Three Fates that control the birth, life, and death of all beings - Clotho, the holder of the distaff of birth; Lachesis, who spins the thread of life; and Atropos, who severs the thread of life - and waited.

Using all of his many voices Merlin once again paced his compound imploring Lachesis to protect the special one from Atropos until safely in his care.

“Lachesis I need you to spin, spin, and spin
Then spin again your threads, begin again your spin,
Keep Atropos from severing the light from within.
Lachesis, my wish is that you spin, spin, and spin
In golden weft threads spin, spin, and spin,
In warp threads of silver bring my fellow in,
Then spin again your magic, spin again your spin
Keep Atropos from severing the light from within.
Keep Atropos from severing the light from within,
Bring my fellow to me with your golden spin;
And being born of Clotho he must be brought in.

All strength now, Lachesis, all strength to your spin.”

Then he was hallooed from beyond his own woven willow gates and knew, at last, that his ardent pleas to Lachesis, the spinner of the precious thread of life, had been answered with the arrival of the special one. For a brief moment he looked within himself and triggered a pure wave of pleasure. Keeping a firm hold on it, he allowed it to pulse gently up his long body until it reached his heart; then he released it in a spontaneous cry of joy. It had been so long since he had allowed himself this pleasurable indulgence, but then it had been a long time since he'd had anything this exciting over which to indulge himself. Throwing his hands heavenwards he thanked the ancient fate loudly.

“Gratia, Lachesis! Gratia, gratia.”

Hurrying to the willow gates, he flung them open with a great flourish.

“Salutem dicit!” he cried in a loud voice. “Salutem dicit.”

In front of him stood a tired, apprehensive-looking peasant with a boy by his side. The man had

flinched and taken a step backwards at the exuberance of the greeting. The boy had not moved and stood quietly with an expressionless face, his hands by his side, his coal-black eyes fixed unblinkingly on the high face of the fabled sorcerer universally known, due to his great height, as the long magus.

“You are Merlin?” said the man hesitantly, stepping forward again.

The fabled wizard rolled his eyes. “Ahhh, by the Sins of Iddog the Embroiler, I am a silly old fool, that’s who I am. A silly old fool who would now remember my manners and speak English. It is so long since I have spoken to anyone directly that I have forgotten my whereabouts. Latin is my unthinking response to the excitement of your coming, the involuntary language of the unengaged mind. Yes, before you stands the old veneficus - Latin again, you see, for sorcerer or magi-cian - who would be Merlin when, that is, he is not anyone or something else.”

The great lines of the ancient face cracked into a huge smile, and the rolling eyes twinkled as they alighted on the boy. He gazed at him from his great height for a moment, then went down on one knee and gently grasped him by the elbows.

“Ad finem nunc coram ... ad finem ... Ahhhh! There I go again.” He threw back his great head and chuckled before once more bringing his twinkling emerald gaze back to lock on to the boy’s calm dark eyes.

“At last we meet, at last. I have waited a long time for this moment.”

The father spoke hesitantly. “I am ... Sam Timms from the settlement of Malmesbury. This ... is my first-born, Will.”

“Will Timms, eh. A fine name for a fine boy.” Merlin squeezed the boy’s shoulders and studied the youthful face framed in long, unkempt black hair. After a short period of intense scrutiny the mighty wizard spoke quietly. “But I will call you Twilight. Not because you have arrived at Vespere, the time of the day when the postmeridian half-light begins to slide into darkfall. Nor because you have triumphed over the witching gloom of the mighty Savernake and its permanent night to get here. No ...” He paused and looked deep into the boy’s eyes. “I will call you Twilight because there is a unlighted candle of hope lying deep within the Cimmerian darkness of those quiet black opals. There is another, very different reason for calling you so, but now is not the time for that ... ad tem-pus.”

He turned to the father.

“You will leave the boy with me?”

“Well ... yes, if you will have him. I have five others at my hovel. This one is trouble: he moves things, makes us all do things against our will, and troubles the animals. He is driving everyone mad. He will not work on the land, and I need all the help I can get planting and harvesting the crops in order to pay the geld. The holy man and elders at our settlement said you were the only person who could help. If you cannot, I will be forced to cast him out, for I have to think of the rest of my family.”

The father stopped for a few moments as if wrestling with some inner torment. Turning to his son, he continued.

“Yet, strangely, on our journey here he was different. Like a rock, firm and in control, while I trembled in fright. Nothing seemed to frighten him. The forest wraiths ran from him, and he seemed possessed by a kind of calm power, an inner sight, something I have never seen in him before.”

“How old is he, and upon what day was he born?” asked Merlin.

“He will be fourteen winters old next All Hallows Day.”

Merlin chuckled. “All Hallows - of course.”

He looked deep into the boy’s eyes again. “Moves things and makes people do things against their will, eh. Drives everyone mad, eh. A boy after my own heart. Tell me, my little skirmisher, just why do you do these things?”

The boy stared right back at him and remained silent.

~~“He ... does not talk,” the father said quietly.~~

“Ahhh ...” said Merlin, raising his great bushy brows, opening his eyes wide, and nodding in an expression of vastly over-emphasized understanding. “Is that ‘cannot’ or ‘does not choose to,’ wonder.” His emerald green eyes flashed with conspiracy.

“He has uttered no sound for six years,” the father said.

The boy’s level gaze held Merlin’s.

The answer to your first question is that I do these things because people, my mother and father, brothers and sisters, and the folk who live in the settlement, do not always understand the consequences of their foolish actions where I am concerned.

“Ahhh,” exclaimed Merlin loudly with a start. The green eyes flashed again.

And you do?

The boy’s head twitched backwards as if someone had slapped him across the face, and the black eyes registered alarm. There was a pause as he gathered himself.

Better, perhaps, than they do.

The old wizard grinned widely.

I see from your reaction that no one has ever responded to you in direct mind-speech before. You will get a false sense of your own importance that way, begin to believe your own crinkum crankum. Direct mind-speech is powerful sorcery, but it needs the balance of other voices; otherwise there is no one to challenge its view.

The expressionless look had crept back onto the boy’s face.

That’s all very well, but I have never met anyone else who could do it before.

Merlin nodded sympathetically.

I understand. It was the same for me when I was young. Now, the answer to my second question.

The boy took a deep breath and looked at his father.

“Yes,” said the one now to be called Twilight, in a strong, clear voice. “I can speak but have not chosen to do so for some time.”

A look of total incredulity spread across the father’s honest face at the sound of his son’s voice. He shook his head in amazement. The boy turned to the wizard and looked up to his face.

Do you prefer open speech?

The wizard nodded at the boy’s father.

For his sake, yes. It would be bad manners to herald any other way, especially as he has not heard the sound of your voice this last six years. It should also be used cautiously abroad: if others know that you are communicating directly all the time they will mistrust you. Even though they may not understand it, folk like to hear what is being said - they all hear the same story that way.

The boy nodded, then spoke in a clear voice again. “The woman washing tunics in the stream and the charcoal burner, they were put there by you?”

Merlin chuckled, pleased at the boy’s perception.

“Yes. A couple of conspicuous apparitions placed as signs to ensure that you took the right path. There were others at various points around the forest.”

For an instant Merlin’s face changed, and the boy saw the two faces - the smiling washerwoman and the more serious, preoccupied countenance of the young charcoal burner - subliminally replacing each other on the lined mien of the wizard, and he was suddenly aware of his formidable powers.

Sam Timms shuddered. “And the old man and the snake?”

“Oh no,” said Merlin, aghast. “Not a primitive, dirty, little old man with a gnarled staff and

large green and gray serpent?"

~~"That's him," said the father. "Frightened the life out of the horse ... and me."~~

"Old Bovey!" exploded the wizard. "By all the Treasures of Troy I'll render that pathetic old charlatan's bones down to an owl cast, turn his slimy companion into gruel, then feed them to the forest weevils."

"I thought he was you at first. He ... er ... fitted the description I had been given."

Sam Timm's honest peasant face reddened with embarrassment.

"That's exactly what the toothless old fool wanted you to think," said Merlin disgustedly. "Once late he spends his time trying to convince folk that he's me. Acts out his feeble alchemy with a venomless old serpent, which is also deluded and thinks it's a fiery dragon. Although his powers are illusory he has

succeeded in frightening people. I will talk to him."

Twilight looked at Merlin. I rebuked him.

You spoke directly into his mind?

Yes. He was stung.

Good. It's nothing more than the ragged old charlatan deserves. Nonetheless, I will add a small rebuke of my own tomorrow.

"And the Lament of the Sorrows, who almost accounted for my father and finally finished off our gallant old horse." Will, now Twilight, had reverted to speech.

"You lost your horse! I didn't know that. I will see that his sacrifice is commemorated. The Christians also celebrate a beast of burden as a bearing talisman - an ass, I believe. Carried the Nazarene prophet along a tortuous path in much the same way as your gallant horse. As for the Sorrows, you are both here, so you overcame their dark realms. To those of a venefical calling they are but a minor irritant, yet to common folk their soft caresses can lure a man to his death. Life must not be too easy; there must be dangers to encourage boldness if the entire tribe of humankind is not become cowerers."

Cowerers? The boy's dark eyes flashed the question.

All in good time, my little skirmisher, all in good time.

The mighty wizard smiled and clapped his large hands.

"Enough! I am failing in my duty as a host to tired, hungry travelers. There will be time for me to amaze you with the enchantments and the lore of miracle mongering tomorrow."

The earth was ruled by the Olympian gods, a group of nine primary immortal deities comprising Zeus, as leader, Poseidon, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite, Helios, Hermes, and Tiresias. When the world was first created from Chaos, the Titans, also known as the elder gods, ruled the earth before being overthrown by the Olympians. The Titans were punished by Zeus through banishment to Tartarus. Titans were named after planets, and their defeated ruling Presidium comprised: Gaia, Uranus, Cronus, Rhea, Oceanus, Tethys, Hyperion, Mnemosyne, Themis, Iapetus, Coeus, Crius, Phoebe, Thea, Prometheus, Epimetheus, Atlas, Metis, and Dione.

The ruler of the Titans was Cronus, who was overthrown by his son ... Zeus.

Chapter Three

“I have lived for ninety-three years,” said Merlin, making himself comfortable on a fallen bee-trunk outside the woven willow gates of his stoutly stockaded compound. It was the following day and they had just waved the boy’s father off on his return journey, mounted upon a sturdy young horse. The wizard had carefully instructed Sam Timms on the route he should take around the perimeter of the great Savernake in order to avoid any problems like those encountered on the journey there. This time he was on his own.

“You will hear many otherworld legends and whispered asides on how to extend life, various paradises where eternal life is available, magical rivers where bathing can extend life, and the sight of rare and exquisitely beautiful objects, such as the Holy Grail, which will grant the beholder extended life. All of it is rubbish, Twilight. Eternal or extended life is unobtainable. Each will occupy his place in this world for his allotted time. The human life span is far too precious to be infinite, even for a veneficus. Infinity would devalue the individual contribution. When I get to a hundred my life and powers will leave me. Sorcery cannot survive alongside frailty - it’s too serious a business for that. Even now I can feel some of my gifts waning. The ability to work magus wonders against the material laws that govern our universe requires a person who is strong in both mind and body. It is an exhausting business with no room for error - the consequences of getting it wrong can be horrific, and I will cover that subject with you very soon. That is why I have fretted over your coming for the past year or so. Now you are here, and I have just seven years left in which to impart a lifetime of experiences. I took mine from the Elder Pendragon, and you, my dark-eyed little skirmisher, are the one who has been chosen to carry the mantle of the next Wessex veneficus and holder of the enchantments.”

The boy’s mouth fell open in wonder. “The Elder Pen-dragon was your teacher?” Hardly daring to believe his ears, the boy took refuge in a question.

“I sat at his feet for the last twenty years of his life, and he taught me everything. In turn I learned from Idris the Former, and Idris from the Pale Sybil, and so on back in time. Each one of them lasted exactly one hundred years.”

“I have heard stories of the Elder Pendragon and Idris the Former around the settlement fire. The Pale Sybil is a new one. It was a woman?” The boy’s dark eyes showed wonder.

“A very special one, but a woman for all that.” The old wizard’s emerald eyes flashed, and the beautiful face and long, dark tresses of a goddess-like figure replaced his craggy countenance for a brief moment. “There is no difference in the powers of sorcery between men and women - veneficus or venefica, a sorcerer or sorceress. Anyone can be chosen, and there may be several around at any one time, although some may not recognize their gift. The secret is to maintain the line of instruction for the enchantments. Once that is broken, the line of succession breaks with it, and the continuum of the enchantments will be lost forever, for they are too complicated to be guessed or simply arrived at. They must be carefully, reverently passed down over a period of years. The line from the Pale Sybil through Idris the Former, the Elder Pendragon, then me is nearly four hundred years long. And there were many others before that - ninety-eight, in fact. It is a line of succession that has endured for all known time. There has always been, must always be, at least one veneficus or venefica in existence, and it is the duty of the incumbent to ensure the succession. You are the next in that line, and the time available for me to pass on the great mysteries is getting shorter every day. The rest of us all have around twenty years to learn, but you only have seven, which is why I was getting anxious about you.”

arrival and have been imploring and calling upon all the ancient gods to speed you here. As far as I can tell I am the only old one left, although it is probable that there are others out there somewhere. You, however, are certainly not alone in being chosen as a veneficus. There are a number of other tyros abroad because, like the eggs of fledglings, not everyone will hatch. Someone else out there may be going through the exact same learning process as the one we are now embarking upon. Indeed, I had a sense of someone coming near a year ago, but the aura turned away and I lost it. Then, shortly afterwards, the resonance of your own coming took over.”

“You have been expecting me for a year?” said Twilight in surprise. “But my father only decided to bring me here two days ago.”

“Ahhh.” Merlin sighed in what the boy was beginning to recognize as his favorite expression. “You are referring to a physical decision governed by physical rules. I am talking about a metaphysical one, a rhetorical and a far more malleable existence. There will be many new words with different and perhaps strange meanings, new phenomena, and unusual events. Matters will be turned on their heads. Reactions will be gauged in opposites or imponderables. Things will mostly not be what they seem. Now that you are with me, at last many of the things that have been bothering you will be explained, begin to make sense. Tyro veneficus - novice sorcerers - are chosen before birth, before, some say, the womb. Their presence is preordained. These things you will learn.”

“And now I am here ... metaphysically,” said Twilight, looking into the distance reflectively. “You use words I have never heard before, yet somehow I know what they mean.”

Far into the secret recesses of his mind’s eye, the subliminal images of assorted figures, clarion events, and myriad brightness tangled with incantations and sharp cries as the recurring images played themselves once again across the soaring thermals of his emotions. His loneliness and silence in the settlement, the pointing fingers and slurs of the other children, the indifference of his own brothers and sisters, the rejection of the settlement elders, his father’s beatings because he would not behave like the rest of them, his mother’s protection and understanding. At last he understood, could give full vent to the poignant scenes that had taken hold of his mind over the last few years, the continuous rolling action of an inner eye that had forced him into introspection, silence, and loneliness and made him a pariah in his own family and village. Now there was a meaning and a reason for it all, one that he was now beginning to understand. He had been chosen. He was a novice magician, a genuine tyro veneficus. It was a wonderful feeling. He really was different, but in the most wonderful way, and his teacher was to be none other than the legendary Merlin himself.

Merlin watched and understood as the dawning took place in the young boy’s dark eyes.

“It is a great honor and a relief to know that I am not mad,” Twilight said finally.

“Yes it is, but an honor that must be strictly upheld.” The old wizard waggled a long, bony finger at him. “The temptations for personal benefit are legion in this business and must be steadfastly resisted. As far as madness is concerned, we all went through that stage at first until the reason for our differences was explained. It is perfectly natural to think that you are mad when everyone else is acting and thinking completely at odds to the actions and thoughts you have. It’s only when we begin to exercise some of these embryonic talents by manipulating folk, usually very clumsily at first, that we begin to destabilize their order and get into trouble. That’s why we are doomed to live on the margins of settlements, villages, and towns, outcasts forced to live the life of a hermit. When our gifts are in their infancy and lack the discipline of teaching and control, they can be frighteningly counterproductive and sow rogue fears in the simple minds of folk. As a consequence we are often perceived as ‘odd,’ and they have no alternative other than to banish us from their midst as they would any other common madman. That is what happened to you. Your father could see no alternative. You

presence had to be sacrificed for the stability of the rest of his family and, no doubt, the entire community of your settlement. The irony is that having banished us, they then plead for us to return from time to time so that our 'oddities' will manifestly save them from whatever dark demon threaten them next. This also happened to you on your journey here. It wasn't until you were both threatened by the dark wraiths of the Savernake that your father realized the strength of your gifts."

"I am at least free now to learn, understand, and pursue my gifts. Tell me, from where does all of my knowledge come? I have never been taught to read or write nor had any guidance whatsoever. I just seem to know a great many things."

Merlin smiled. "These are some of the givens of the veneficus. There are the simple truths, such as all the chosen are born on All Hallows Day - you may recall me asking your father your birth date. Then there are the truths based around knowledge, with which we venefici are all blessed. These are the necessary implants in order to absorb the difficulty of the enchantments. Without a good base of learned information you would not be able to appreciate how all the intricacies of the powers at our command fit together. Lack of knowledge cannot be allowed to divide us, or to prevent the swift absorption of the enchantments. You also have many other gifts that you have yet to discover, including total recall of everything that is or has been said to you. This means that every answer I give you or event you see remains permanently with you and is never forgotten. When my period of teaching comes to an end you will be imbued with crinkum crankum of the most spell-binding kind, the jabberwocky of the finest subtlety coupled with the imagination of Plato, the wisdom of Critias, the poetry of Solon, the virtues of Charmides, and the courage of Odysseus - a great fount of bizzarreness and knowledge that will enable you to face anything this turning world hurls at you."

"These people with the strangely hypnotic names, I do not know them. They are Gauls, Jutes, Angles, Saxons, or Celts perhaps?"

"They are ancient Greeks, one of the first great civilizations of mankind, who sought to enlarge the boundaries of the human mind through the attainment of a mental state in which the ideas of space, time, matter, and motion were proved to be contradictory and imaginary - that nothing was, or was not known, or could be spoken. The manipulation of those boundaries allows for the acceptance of the gifts bestowed upon us as venefici. It is the basis of our phenomena - what vassals call our magic, the don't-knows our sorcery, and the naysayers our witchcraft."

Twilight was silent for some time as he absorbed this information.

"Why are we here? What purpose do venefici serve by being on this earth?"

"The answer the Elder Pendragon gave me to that question was that I would form my own opinions over time."

"And have you?"

"Yes."

"You are reluctant to tell me?"

"Not reluctant, but it is a big question, possibly the biggest of all for us and one with no strict definitions - other than as the placatory advisors to the cowering mists for one day of each year. I will address that with you tomorrow. Apart from that we are free to use our gifts at will. Let me begin to answer with what we are not. We are not the automatic guardian angels to the great and the good, kings, queens, or any other leaders. You have no ties or duties to anyone or anything other than your own inclinations. The decisions you make, the gods you call upon, the alliances, religions, or causes you support, be they on the side of good or evil, fiendish or radical, imperial or heroic, are all entirely up to you. There will always be a battle between virtue and wisdom on the one side, and evil and folly on the other. It is the way of humankind. You can even choose to forsake the enchantments and live

normal life if you wish, but once you begin to understand the great powers you have, that is very difficult. That is what the Elder Pendragon meant, and I would answer you in the same way. We do not have a different view on matters and must act as our conscience dictates. For instance, he told me that the Pale Sybil, a venefica of great understanding and compassion, considered her position and purpose should reflect that of a goddess, someone of the very highest status whose gifts were that of a divinity being placed on this earth. Indeed, some of our abilities are powerful enough to encourage that belief. She considered her rightful tomb to be on Mount Olympus - haven of the Greek deity - alongside that of the immortal goddess Thetis, who was honored for her glistening feet. This was considered the highest and most omnipotent presidium from which the immortals could look down upon the passing centuries with a sort of condescending eye. However, for all her grandeur, the Pale Sybil carried out her duties as venefica with considerable success and created a great deal of harmony during the early turbulent occupation of our lands by Caesar's Roman legions. In time you will learn more of her and other outstanding feats. You will also learn a great deal about the ancient Greeks, for I am an avid student of their ways."

"Where did the Pale Sybil live?"

"As befitted her self-status, in a rather grand castle on the Western edge of our region of Wessex," the long magus said almost apologetically.

"But I thought you said we were outcasts? A castle doesn't sound like the sort of home for an outcast."

Merlin sighed. "I agree, but the Pale Sybil didn't see it that way and exercised her own right choice. As I've said, she considered her rightful place to be among the Olympian immortals, and being a vainglorious woman with great powers was able to indulge in her own earthly deification. The only consolation is that apart from an old female hell hag of a retainer called Santa, she lived alone in the castle until Idris the Former came to sit at her feet."

"And Idris and your teacher, the Elder Pendragon, what status did they give themselves?"

The boy's dark eyes glowed with the wonder that he was part of such an august lineage.

"Idris was the son of a Celtic thane and not given to any flights of great fancy. He accepted his gifts as tools for the betterment of mankind and traveled among them, mostly in ragged beggar's clothing, doing all he could for the poor and the downtrodden. He never settled anywhere until he began to ponder on the enchantments in later age to the Elder Pendragon. Then he took up residence in what had been his father's house in Caerleon and stayed there until his one hundred years were up. As for my mentor and teacher, the Elder Pendragon himself, he was born a royal king. His father was Uther Pendragon, a name that means 'Head Dragon,' and he was the spiritual leader and outright ruler of the Welsh tribe. Recognizing his gifts rather late, in mid-life, the Elder Pendragon did not take up his rightful place as king when his father died in battle, but instead took his wife and two small sons to Caerleon to sit at the feet of Idris. His reasoning was that he could accomplish far more for his people as a venefica than he ever could leading them into one battle after another as the regional warlords of Prydein, Mercia, Deira, and Wessex fought for supremacy. Leaderless for twenty years while the Elder Pendragon learned and honed his venefical enchantments, the kingdom of Wales was soon torn apart by tyranny and the imperial evils of claimed succession that, paradoxically, the Elder Pendragon could never subdue with his learned enchantments. There are lessons to be learned there. In the end, the reclamation of the kingdom for the house of Pendragon passed through his two sons and fell to his grandson."

"Who was that?" said Twilight, sensing something special.

The old wizard's emerald eyes flashed a particular image of a tall, strong young man wearing

breastplate, a glinting raised sword in his left hand and a shield in his right.

—“Arthur Pendragon. He who became the mighty King Arthur. The head of the court of Camelot, rightful holder of Excalibur, the mighty sword of freedom, the leader of the Grail Knights, founder of the Round Table, husband of Guinevere and defender of the lands of the Celts, and one to whom I pledged my total support as counselor. Only to later realize that I had been well and truly mistaken.”

The old wizard fell silent as his bright eyes filled with sadness and swam with distant memories. Then he spoke again in a quiet voice.

“I did not learn well enough the lesson of the Elder Pendragon’s futile attempts to subdue internecine warfare through the use of enchantments. War is a floodplain that ebbs and flows with a constancy that will never allow it to dry up. The desire to conquer and dominate others is an infant engraved upon the soul of all races. As fast as one quarrel is settled, another springs up and ten others are being plotted. Wars will always date history for humans, the great battles echoing down the bardic pages of time until mankind finally extinguishes himself. Peace is, and always will be, merely a name. That is why our powers are imperfect and incomplete because we cannot stop man’s will to dominate other men. Only the universal ownership of the absolute truth will ever stop warfare, and that, I fear, is an impossibility.”

I feel your pain. Twilight intruded gently into Merlin’s mind after a long silence. It becomes my pain as well.

Do not take on my pain. You will soon have enough of your own to manage.

You spoke last night of a people called ‘cowerers.’ I sense more pain there. Is it the time for us to speak of them?

Not yet, but you are right about the pain - it accompanies them everywhere. When the season of the equinoctial mist comes, we will do more than speak of the cowerers. We must go among them.

Must?

Oh yes, that is the only matter about which we have no choice, absolutely no choice at all.

Why?

Because the survival of our species could depend upon it. Indeed, it could also provide the ultimate answer to your earlier question as to why we are here. Only venefici can confer with the cowerers.

When will I have to assume that responsibility?

In seven years’ time when you take it over from me.

Is it a big responsibility?

Only if you allow it to become so. Part of my job is to teach you otherwise.

“Let us take a walk through the forest,” said the old wizard, standing up. “See if we can find that festering old deviant Bovey and his false dragon. I’ve a mind to have a little sport with the old fool.”

“I thought you said the temptations for personal benefit must be resisted,” said the former Wizard Timms, impishly skipping along beside him.

“You learn too well, skirmisher,” Merlin said in a mock grumble. “But don’t forget what the ancient Greeks said.”

“What, how the ideas of space, time, matter, and motion were proved to be contradictory and imaginary, and that nothing was, or was known, or could be spoken?” Twilight had screwed his eyes shut as he recalled Merlin’s words. “Surely you’re not using that as the basis for a little personal sport?”

“Oh, yes I am,” said the old wizard with the twinkle back in his eye. “What’s the point of being a master sorcerer if I can’t indulge in a little selfish manipulation of matter?”

As they started to stroll gently along the Savernake's perimeter, the old wizard stopped, called Twilight closer, and gently touched both sides of his forehead.

"For the next few days you will see everything as black or white. Nothing will be gray or colored. This will teach you to decipher complicated situations by filtering out the many incidentals and images that will seek to obscure the fundamental truths. By removing the shades and colors we can strip a matter down to its barest bones and uncover its carefully encoded secrets. It is a useful facility, especially when your wise counsel has been requested to rule on a complicated issue involving many diverse people and opinions, all of whom will swear an oath that they are telling the rigid truth and that theirs is the just cause."

Twilight blinked, looked around, and then smiled. "Is everything black in the darkfall of night? So, will I be unable to see anything?"

"Only if it is a genuine darkfall brought on by the onset of genuine night. If it isn't genuine it will show as shades of gray, depending upon the depth of the deception. That is how you distinguish dewfall from false dawn, rising phoenix from ghoulish specter, infidel from friend."

A small falcon swooped from the sky and landed on a bough close to Merlin's head. Stretching one barbed talon purposefully in his direction, it fluffed up its yellow neck-feathers, lifted its small beautifully formed head until its bright, filmic yellow eyes appeared to be looking down its sharp curved beak, and uttered a single piercing shriek. Out went the barbed talon again; then with a barely audible wing-beat it was gone, a yellow and brown blur against the forest backdrop before the briefest of wing movements took it into a steep climb above the tree-line, and it was out of sight.

Merlin looked at Twilight and raised his great bushy eyebrows. "And what did you make of that, my little skirmisher, eh?"

Twilight thought for a moment. "The words that come to mind are 'homage,' 'rank,' and 'message,'" he said reflectively.

"Continue." The long magus nodded.

"The talon outstretched toward you was some sort of homage, a greeting, repeated again when he departed. The fluffed-up plumage some sort of badge of rank, and the shriek was a message to you. I have seen these small hawks before, but only at a distance, for they are very fast in flight and secretive in manner. The plumage is of a golden color matched by the eyes."

"Good, very good," said the old wizard, pleased at his pupil's obvious awareness. "You are correct about the message, for that was Phi, a full-grown male Merlin falcon. Phi is the alpha male head Merlin hawk around these parts. All the Merlins in Wessex are in ligamen to me as the namesake ..."

"In ligamen ... that is Latin?" interrupted Twilight.

"It means 'allegiance.' I am their liege-lord. The outstretched talon is the equivalent of a bow of salutation."

Twilight's luminous dark eyes opened wide at the wonder of such a thing.

"How many of them are there in Wessex?" he asked breathlessly.

"One hundred and forty-five free pairs and fifty in captivity. This bird is greatly prized by falconers for its speed and ability to catch small game."

"Why don't you release the fifty in captivity?"

"Because they do not want to be released. They can release themselves every day if they wish. They are flown freely. No falconer would keep, could keep, a Merlin against its will. They are happy living that way."

"But if you needed them?"

“They would come immediately with a pair always close by in case of an emergency.”

~~Twilight went quiet for a moment. He hardly dared ask the question that was burning in his mind.~~

“Do I have any creatures in ligamen to me?”

“Yesterday, when we met for the first time, I told you there was another reason for calling you Twilight and that ad tem-pus - when the time was right - all would be revealed.”

“Yes, yes,” cried the boy excitedly.

“Well, the time isn’t right just yet,” the old wizard said flatly, walking on, leaving the boy crestfallen and looking at the ground near to tears. “And patience, my dear Twilight, is a prime virtue that a veneficus must learn to accommodate, especially when you have eighty-seven years left in which to bring your enchantments to bear on the situations around you. Always remember that time is your greatest companion. Given enough time almost anyone can accomplish almost anything. Understanding that is another simple fact that differentiates us from ordinary folk. Don’t rush anything. Consider every move very carefully, for not only is almost everything possible given the time, the consequences of getting it wrong can be catastrophic. Always take the time to think things through. The longer you ponder a problem, the less chance there is of getting it wrong.”

He stopped and turned back to face the boy, who was sullenly scuffing the dead leaves with his foot. For all his embryonic gifts he was still only thirteen years old, a mere child imbued with all the mannerisms and temperamental immaturity of a stripling.

“But the time of your knowing what species are in ligamen to you will be soon, very soon.” Merlin called back softly.

“How soon?” The boy’s head came up expectantly.

“Oh, a day or two perhaps. Now back to Phi.”

The boy skipped up to the tall wizard’s side.

“Plumage,” he said, all disappointment instantly forgotten.

“As I said, Phi is the alpha male, the leader of the pack, and being, like all falcons, a vainglorious old tar bill, he constantly needs to demonstrate the importance of that fact to all and sundry, especially me. It’s his way of saying, ‘Look at me, I’m still the finest Merlin falcon in the land, and don’t you or anyone else forget it.’”

“And the message ... it concerned the progress of my father?”

“It did. Phi is keeping an eye on him. He goes well and has not strayed from the path I gave him.”

They walked on for a while before Merlin stopped and placed his fingers to his lips, motioning the boy to silence. Walking carefully forward they picked up the sound of excited young voices punctured by the sounds of splashing. Where a clear chalk stream rounded a bend, some boys about Twilight’s age from the nearby settlement of Marlborough had hung a length of jute from an overhanging branch. Clinging to the jute rope and launching themselves from the high bank, they dropped squealing into the middle of the stream and splashed excitedly back to the bank to repeat the exercise.

With a grunt of disgust, Merlin pointed off to the right.

Bovey, with the head of his huge snake craned up from the grass, watched the frolicking boys from behind a large thorn bush. So engrossed were the pair that they were unaware Merlin and the boys were watching them.

The malodorous Bovey and his reptilian accomplice are getting ready to pull their despicable stunt again and frighten those boys. Merlin’s message flashed into Twilight’s mind. But this time it is the frightener who will be frightened.

What are you going to do?

The serpent-who-would-be-a-dragon shall become one.

~~Having checked over his head to ensure that the thick, heavy snake had a suitable branch upon which to rest, having coiled itself around his body in their macabre dance of terror, Bovey nodded toward his companion and raised one dirt-encrusted foot to step out from behind the bush and begin the charade.~~

Suddenly, a jet of orange flame shot out of the snake's mouth and ignited the soiled hem of the hermit's greasy old robe. With a cry of pain and panic, Bovey began to beat at the flames, then ran to the edge of the stream and jumped in to douse the fire that had quickly taken hold and had reached as far as his armpits. The snake's head remained raised above the long grass in stupefaction at the jet of fire that had suddenly issued from its mouth.

Crawling up the bank, the bedraggled Bovey got to his feet. In the background the children continued uninterrupted to swing out over the water on their jute rope and drop with excited shrieks into the middle of the stream.

"I do believe that's the first wash you've had in many a long year." Merlin chuckled, walking toward the dripping, dirt-streaked hermit, a blackened rim around the bottom of his grimy robe where the fire had left its mark.

Bovey spun around to face Merlin and the boy.

"Dum vivimus, vivimus," he snarled.

"While you live I will let you live, but only if you and your despicable companion stop visiting this parody of terror upon innocent folk." Merlin raised his long, bony finger at Bovey in admonishment.

The snake jerked its neck at Merlin and Twilight several times in a vain attempt to recreate the jet of flame that had so inconvenienced its master. Nothing happened.

"Ahhh," sighed Merlin. "The snake-in-the-grass again tries to be a dragon." His eyes flashed an intense emerald green at the serpent, and it instantly disappeared.

"What have you done?" Bovey wailed. "Where is my friend, my beautiful friend? What have you done with my Anguis?"

"He is there, cockscum. Look hard and you may find him crawling through the grass and dead leaves. A few days as an earthworm may teach him a little humility."

Bovey dropped to his knees and began a whimpering search along the ground. He picked up the worm and held it high.

"Is that him, sorcerer? Is that my Anguis?"

"It might be, malodorous charlatan, it just might be."

Bovey cradled the earthworm in his hand and began to mutter and caress it. He glowered at Merlin.

"Your witchcraft does not frighten me, long magus. You will pay for this one day, see if you won't."

Merlin glowered at him. "Be very careful, ex-monk. Otherwise, it might be you crawling around with the insects, and I might not be so lenient with the time. And remember, no more terrorizing folk or pretending to be me."

Bovey scowled, and nodded at Twilight.

"I saw this boy yesterday, and he spoke directly into my mind. He is a tyro veneficus, your replacement?"

"He is called Twilight. If I were you I'd keep well out of his way as he will need much practice to get his enchantments working correctly. All manner of strange things will happen to those who cross

his path as he learns, some of which may not be reversible.”

“Doesn’t he have a tongue to speak for himself, or does he only take the coward’s route, direct into people’s mind?”

“I certainly do have a tongue,” said Twilight. “But if I were you I would concentrate upon other matters.”

“Such as?” Bovey spat out the words.

“Well, Merlin hawks for a start. And other birds. They like nothing more than a good, juicy earthworm in their stomach.”

Glancing fearfully skywards, the dirty old hermit closed his hand protectively around the word and, muttering dark threats, hurried off into the forest.

“He spoke Latin, and you called him an ex-monk,” said Twilight as they walked slowly back to the compound. “You were also very easy on him, it seemed to me.”

Merlin sighed.

“He is learned in the Latin tongue and like me reverts to it when taken by surprise. For many years he practiced his devotions as a monk under Paulinus, the first Christian bishop of York, in a great northern monastery there. York is known as the northern cradle of that faith. Paulinus sent Bovey as a wandering missionary to Wessex to spread their gospel, and he had a small monastery built at Glastonbury, a settlement some three days’ ride from here. Against his will he gave sanctuary to a marauding band of mercenaries said to be under the orders of a warlord of Mercia, sent here to harry and pillage. In order to get at the mercenaries, King Arthur had to sack the monastery, and Bovey and his small band of followers were cast out. They took to living in a cave on the edge of the forest, but gradually the followers deserted him until he was the only one left. Not being made of martyr stock he rather lost his faith. That was thirty years ago. Since then he has lived alone, and, in the time-honored manner of aging men living in solitude, has forgotten most of his learning and beliefs and become a deviant old man. The ridiculous serpent turned up a couple of years ago and wanted the cave for his own shelter. Somehow they reached an accommodation, which has turned into this vile partnership of terror. Luckily it has only been going on for a short time - you and your father were their third or fourth victims. Now it is finished. And yes, I was lenient with him, but there is a reason for that which he is unaware of.”

“I think I know what it is,” said the boy, interrupting. “It was upon your counsel that King Arthur sacked Bovey’s monastery, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Merlin quietly. “It was also upon my counsel that Bovey and his small band of followers were cast out and saved from the fate of the mercenaries who had occupied his small monastery, all of whom were hacked to death by Arthur’s knights. Bovey would never understand especially now, for it was a long time ago, but I actually saved his miserable life. Therefore, I must also take some blame for his subsequent actions. It is the sort of paradox that weighs heavily on the shoulders of those with our powers. We can manipulate phenomena, but we are just like everyone else when it comes to the vagaries of fate.”

“How did you change that huge serpent into an earthworm?” asked Twilight.

“I didn’t change it into an earthworm. I need to conserve my energies. Why use a complicated energy-sapping piece of wizardry when a little bit of junior sorcery - which is all instant movement - will suffice? Save the complicated stuff, and therefore your energy, for when you need it. “

“That earthworm wasn’t Bovey’s Anguis, then, just an ordinary earthworm.” Twilight bent down and rustled around under the dead leaves at the side of the track they were walking along, and then held up a worm. “The like of which can be found everywhere around here!” He held the wriggling

creature triumphantly under the old wizard's nose for a few moments before carefully replacing under the leaves.

Merlin smiled indulgently as the boy gradually worked it out for himself.

"And you didn't actually say that the worm Bovey found was the reptile, you only said that might be. But what, I wonder, did you do with Anguis?" Twilight paused in thought for a moment, and then answered his own question. "I know! Instant movement, you said ... so you put him where he was going anyway. Bovey had placed him carefully under a thick branch in order to carry out the disgusting charade ... and you put him there ... you put him up on the branch! You placed the wretched creature onto the branch and put him to sleep for a few days. Bovey never thought to look there because he was too busy scrabbling around in the leaves. Now he'll spend the next few days protecting and cooing over a genuine earthworm!"

Merlin nodded in sober appreciation of the boy's deductive powers; then the great gray-tinged dark brows rose and the emerald eyes twinkled, and they both burst out laughing. As they walked slowly and happily back to the compound, Phi suddenly appeared on a branch beside them and repeating his salutation rite as before, let out two piercing shrieks, lifted his talons, and was gone. Merlin gave a grunt of pleasure and waved after the swiftly disappearing falcon. He turned to Twilight and nodded.

"Your father is safely home with your mother and brothers and sisters."

"Thank you," the boy said simply.

They would be gathered around the hearth in the gloom of their wood and earth hovel, the smiles of palpable relief at the success of the father's mission lighting up the smoky interior. Life for them had just become a great deal easier. The loss of their "odd" brother meant they were now in control of their own movements and thoughts. No more unexplained travails, extraordinary extravagancies, and involuntary actions. Apart from his mother, Leah, of course. She wouldn't be smiling. She would keep her weary face away from them in the gloom for a while until she had composed herself. She would never reconcile the loss of her silent first-born with the subsequent wellbeing of the rest of her brood, but that had been the decision of her husband and the Settlement Council of Elders. They were wrong, and their reasoning was skewed, yet it had to be. In that instinctive way mothers have of being aware of matters beyond the bounds of simple brood familiarity, she had always understood that Will was special in some indefinable, mystical way, and that he would somehow fulfill a destiny that was far beyond her understanding. The stories Sam regaled to the rest of them when he returned of their travails on the journey to Merlin's compound were further proof. The way her Will, now renamed Twilight by the long magus, had coolly dealt with the old man called Bovey and his odious serpent and the Lament of the Sorrows told her what she had always suspected. His joyful acceptance by the old sorcerer at his compound confirmed it.

Were Will's - Twilight's - powers such that he could somehow guess her great secret? The secret that ran so very deep that she had hardly dared even to contemplate its consequences with her innermost thoughts, let alone share it with another human being. That fateful day over fourteen years ago, when the white dove had flown gently and irresistibly over the breeze-brushed grass of the green hill just two weeks before she went through the hand-fasting ritual of marriage with Sam Timms. Did the long magus, the venerable veneficus himself, know who her eldest boy really was?

To walk through the medieval mist of an autumn equinox is to walk through the remains of every life that ever lived before us on this turning earth. Each minute teardrop of floating humidity is the vaporized soul of a cowerer, a once-human inhabitant who lived out its term of prostrated avoidance in the vicinity wherein it now swirled and screamed in a silent, tortured cloud. A powerful legend of

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