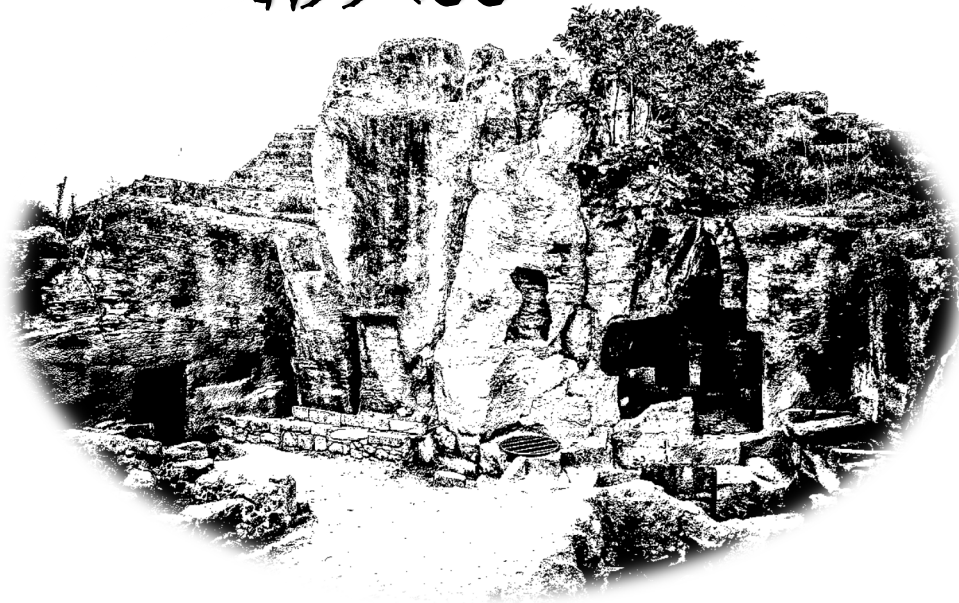


THE LAST TEMPLE OF THE GADDESS



DR. DOUGLAS COURTNEY

CHAPTER 1

Bill ruffled his feathers and shook his head. He stretched his wings out wide. He listened to them creak as the creep of night loosened the hold of day. His beak lifted into the air and his horned tail whipped. He could remember when waking from a day's sleep didn't cause so much creaking, groaning and popping in his joints. A few hundred years as a gargoyle could do that to you.

He sniffed the air. Something familiar filled his nostrils. Halloween was approaching. Bill could feel magic building. It was a good feeling. Familiar. But with it came trouble. Always had. This year even more. The child was coming of age. Bill knew personal pain and heartache, but he had never witnessed it in such measure as with Renaud and Ismerelda. His heart ached for his friends. They sacrificed so much for that child. Yet there was more sacrifice to be done. A scent familiar, yet distant filled his nostrils. "Renaud." Bill remembered.

As if to punctuate his memory a swirl of dust and wind crackled with a burst of darkness and a cackle of light. Renaud stood before him draped in his dark cape. The black of his eyes were furrowed under a lop of his raven hair. Bill looked toward Renaud. His stare solid and soulless as the granite he wore in the day.

"Today. She comes of age today." Renaud was in agony. His pace was tense, determined and something else. Something never attributed to Renaud before, fear.

"I told you to leave Ismerelda alone. Mating on Sabbath, with a witch, under a full moon and in the Dark Woods. What did you think would happen? She screamed when it happened. Don't deny it. I know. They can't help it. Usually a meaningless curse. But it can be worse." Bill ruffled his wings.

Warlocks and witches didn't mate. They just didn't. Their magics were incompatible and conflicting. Whenever the two got close their magics burned in hatred and so did their owners. Oh, they lusted after each other. Their loins burned for release. But any attempt at mating resulting in bruises, burns and torn flesh especially when a witch engaged her nails. But these two were especially cursed. They mated. They not only mated they fell in love. A greater curse could befall no one.

Renaud's glower lifted just a bit at Bill's admonition. A grin returned to his face. "You did, old friend. And we did. But she is so damned beautiful. Her soul. Her form. Her very being. That was a battle any warlock was destined to lose." Renaud's façade cracked as his mind cast back to that very night. Ismerelda did scream.

Ismerelda was a witch like no other. Her mother was of gypsy roots. Her father, who knew? It wasn't like witches kept track of the humans they bedded. But even Bill, a gargoyle, was smitten by her charm, wit and wisdom. Renaud was besotted at the first meeting. Her dark raven hair fell long over her shoulders and covered each breast. She had soft mischievous brown eyes that laughed at the day. A bit tall for her gender she was still light on her feet and would dance the nights away. Bill mostly remembered her lips, red and soft. They breathed a fire from deep in her soul that burned with passion, excitement and daring.

They had found their friend Bill when they first discovered she was with child. A child destined to be born during the Halloween season. Gargoyle's long lifespans made them quick references for those that could not or would not seek their own for counsel. Bill's experience told him Ismerelda had to have had another lover. There were no known memories or records of any witch and warlock having a child.

Renaud refused the possibility of infidelity. He begged Bill to search others of his kind. He asked him to seek any remote possibility other than abject betrayal of her love. For a friend, he agreed. His search had revealed scarce and infrequent couplings of witches and warlocks. But each had ended in still birth or an abomination that refused to live into childhood. Bill provided his sad news to Ismerelda and Renaud on the ramparts of an old castled hidden deep in the woods. He held them in his wings as Ismerelda cried for her doomed child. Renaud stoically held onto his emotion and his belief in Ismerelda.

Ismerelda had come to Bill a few months before the birth. Arrangements were made and Renaud was beside her the whole time. Then the curse happened. In the high holy week just days before Halloween. A child. A healthy baby girl cried in the soft garments laid for her birth. Her eyes sparkled with life that rivaled Ismerelda's. They named her Shauna, after Bill's mother. But their unimaginable torture had just begun.

A child born to a warlock and witch would draw attention. Her birth would cause eager speculation and a chance at great fortune. If her birth had joined the powers of witch and warlock the competition to bind and control her would be fierce. Ismerelda and Renaud had to protect her. It meant personal sacrifice.

Renaud used his powers and banished both from his life until Shauna came of age. It was powerful, agonizing and ripped his heart apart. Ismerelda was reduced to sobbing tears. But the act ensured Shauna's warlock powers would be hidden and dormant under her natural powers of a witch. No one would be aware of her dual centers of power.

Renaud left Ismerelda with a soft kiss. They never spoke or saw each other again. They denied each other's love, company and companionship for the sake of their daughter. But they also agonized over the loss. It left a deep dark hole in their souls. It was a torture Bill would not wish on anyone. To be but a moment away from your love and his touch, but unable to even risk a glance. Bill had witnessed more than one tear fall from Ismerelda's eyes.

Ismerelda returned to her village, babe in tow. She knew no one would question or ask about the father. A witch's life was cavalier about the men surrounding it. Ismerelda's mother may have questioned the gift. But she was overwhelmed with love for a grandchild and didn't ask for any explanations.

But now Shauna was to come of age. Renaud's banishment would fade in the light of new womanhood. Her warlock powers would be exposed. Competing forces would sense the imbalance in nature. Her life force would be like a beacon to moths in the night. Worse the competing internal magic would render Shauna sick and weakened as they fought a war for dominance. She wouldn't be able to defend herself. She had to run. Renaud, Bill and Ismerelda had planned for this day. But it was a weak plan at best and all they had.

"Her mother will tell her this morning. By nightfall she will have begun the journey." Renaud implored Bill.

"I will be ready. But Shauna must make the first part of the journey alone." Bill flapped his wings and headed off into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Ismerelda had told her. Shauna had become sick earlier than expected. She weakened quickly and her very being burned. When common remedies didn't work, Ismerelda confessed all. Shauna sat shocked. She was acutely aware of her distress. She wasn't naïve. She could die in a screaming burning mass. But that was the least of her problems. In a world of magic, power was the ultimate currency, unique powers even more so. She would be hunted ruthlessly by her own. They could and would rip her apart in their efforts to take what was hers in an agonizing, bloody, ruthless torture.

Only the Goddess herself could keep her alive. But she would have to plead her case to the Goddess, on Halloween, in her Temple, with her parents in tow. Nothing else would work. But where the hell was the Temple? None of her kind had seen it in centuries.

But first Shauna had to go to her father. She had to freely embrace him to balance her internal struggle. Shauna gathered her things in a large satchel. She moved through the house to the front door. She passed her mother's room, but didn't look in. Ismerelda wasn't there. She left earlier to follow an ancient lead on the Temple. They were on different paths now. They were safer splitting up.

Shauna went out the door and headed for the Ancient's Forest. To any normal it was a deep dark old forest. But Shauna and her kind knew different. No witch or warlock with any sense came here. The magic here was old, very old, and very erratic. It could drive even the most formidable wiccan mad. Only the Ancients knew the magic, but no one had seen an Ancient for centuries. It was a gamble, but the Ancient's magic might hide hers for the few moments she needed to gather her plan.

She made her way to the river. Then she cast a spell on a rowboat many years from its prime. It carried her to those dark forests. She was careful. She could feel the Ancient's magic. It was disturbing even painful. Shauna stayed on the banks of the river, close to the old magic but not in it. She made a small nest in an old oak tree in branches that spanned the river and waited for evening to fall.

Shauna's weakened state and constant pain decided her journey. She had to pass through the Fallen land, a sacred place for witch, wiccan, or warlock. A place also of past horrors. It was said here is where, centuries before, they had been hunted and burned by the 'civilized' people of the world, the normals. Those without magic.

She feared this part of her journey the most. Thousands of witches and warlocks had died here, suddenly, violently and viciously. Their magic, ever a living thing, was torn from their souls, lingering in agony searching and reaching for any wiccan in a desperate bid to survive. There were no easy tricks, no clever ways to avoid the powers within or without. Her presence could activate that longing. If caught, the lingering magic would rip her soul to shreds.

She waited until the last rays of the sun disappeared. She had stayed high up in the trees allowing her a bird's eye view of the vast land she had to cross. She mapped out her path in her head time and again until it was embedded in her thoughts. Shauna wanted to be able to walk through quietly, softly, even if she couldn't see the ground before her. Shauna wanted her path deep in her mind's eye.

She glided down from the tree and secured her bag across her chest. Shauna closed her eyes and took a step, then another. She was halfway through when the pull of ancient magic began to take hold. It had found her, if she didn't run, she would be consumed as each strand, each memory tried to mingle and embed with her being. The last moment of fear and agony endured by each owner of that magic would sear into her mind. Their owner's screams of horror as they were decimated by the fire burning itself into her senses driving her mad.

Shauna had to run. She had to cast to protect herself. But each movement, each cast, would be as a signal to more of the lingering magic and to the witches, warlocks, ghouls, goblins and clans that sought her. There was no choice. It was crawl and die or run and fight. She ran. Her clothing was torn by the briars and branches that reached out to her. Her shins and feet began to bleed from the sharp rocks, broken branches and hard thistles that lined her path. Suddenly she heard the clap of thunder in the skies and flashes of lightning.

Shauna looked up. This was no thunderstorm. She was being hunted. She could see four, five, no, a half dozen or more witches and warlocks descending from the skies. Greed, lust and desire filling their eyes. Shauna whipped her hand at a passing branch as she ran. It sprung into her grasp. She willed some strands of

old straw towards her. They gathered themselves around the branch. Shauna tore at her hair ribbon and whispered the spell. The ribbon gathered around the straw and bound itself to the branch. She had her broom.

A quick spell, a jump and a grab. Shana was astride the broom and shooting off into the sky just as a curse exploded into the ground near her. It was a race. A race of power and skills. Shauna bent into the wind and blessed her broom in repeated spells giving it more and more speed. But they crept closer and closer. Shauna's only escape was the dark forest ahead. She willed her broom to move faster. Then another crack of thunder split the sky. Lightning rained from the heavens targeting those who would pursue her.

A voice filled her head. A strong husky voice. A voice she knew only in her memory. "Move Shauna. Don't hesitate. To the trees. Find the gargoyle." Then it was gone. Behind her the skies continued their fury and a heavy fog rose from the forest floor. Shauna was obscured as she whipped into the dark forest. Shauna smiled as she reached a bit of safety. Her father was with her.

Shauna reached an old castle in less than an hour. As Shauna flew over the castle, she saw one, and only one, old gargoyle still intact. It sat stoic at the entrance to a long-forgotten chamber. She landed. Without her intervention her broom dissolved into the pieces from which it had assembled. The ribbon returned to her hair. Shana moved toward the gargoyle.

The gargoyle slowly rose from its pedestal, unfolded its form, and stepped down. The granite figure transformed into a being of substance with deep observing eyes. "Shauna, we must go. It is still a long walk and we cannot rest here." He moved towards the forest.

Shauna ran to catch up. "May I know the name of my benefactor?"

"Bill. I am your Godfather. Sorry. We don't fashion fancy names. Part of our culture. Spending part of your life as a rock tends to make things simple." Bill grinned and tucked his wings next to his body. His face was that of an eagle, his body a lion, with large wings attached.

"Wait. Let's go back a bit. You are my Godfather? I have a Godfather?" Another new part to her story.

"Yes. There is much to explain. But now we must move." Bill was anything but loquacious. Their trek soon turned to a quiet fast walk, occasionally interrupted by a screeching owl or an errant wolf. Shauna was not unnerved by any of it. As a wiccan she was comfortable in any part of nature. Besides she felt there was little any creature would do against a full-grown Gargoyle. Still the quiet did oppress.

"Bill. I thought I heard my father back in the Fallen land. I think he sent the lightning storm." Shauna tried again.

"I have no doubt." Bill replied as he took a sidestep around a boulder.

Shauna was beginning to appreciate her father and Bill's gifts. To cast from afar was no small feat. Shauna could feel the dawn coming. Bill noted it as well. "Stone will take me in a few moments. We are close to a cave shrouded by vines. Food and bedding have been placed inside for your use. If danger comes, just call. I can and will arise for danger. Otherwise, I will see you at evening fall. Then we will go to your father."

Shauna has taken the day to rest and refresh. Now evening fall had come. The last rays of the sun found Bill standing at the cave entrance. She had prepared for a walk. But Bill had other plans. A strong cord of vines lay at his feet. They had been twisted into a circle with a serviceable seat embedded.

"I can fly us the rest of the way. If you can maneuver the vines around you and sit within the middle. We would make your father by early morning just before sunrise." Bill looked unblinking at Shauna.

"Won't we be spotted?" Shauna wanted to end this dangerous trek. She did not want it to end in failure.

"A gargoyle flying in the night in our lands is of no consequence. No one would notice. A witch however, on a broom, would stick out like a sore wing. It will be safe." Bill moved to the top of the vine circle and prepared to take off.

They flew throughout the night. Bill took various routes, flying low in valleys, through ravines, and high in clouds. It would be difficult for the best witch or warlock to follow. Shauna kept her magic to herself. She felt the morning begin to rise. Suddenly Bill dove for a granite outcropping. He landed with barely a sound. His claws grasping silently to the remains of scattered moss. He'd released Shauna from his clutches just moments before his landing. Her reactions allowed her to alight before the vines collapsed in a heap at her feet.

CHAPTER 3

Renaud had heard the wings flap. He knew she was close by. He had never feared anything more than meeting his daughter. He hoped so desperately that she wouldn't hate him for what he had done. His chest was almost ready to explode.

Shauna had sensed him immediately. The bond in blood and magic surged as they grew closer. She would know where he was in the darkest of nights. She was drawn to him and could not refuse. But she was scared, anxious. She had never seen him. He had never seen her. Would he like her? Would he love her? Was she pretty in his eyes? Could she even stand to know the answers? Tears began to flow.

Renaud's hand brushed the granite boulder he was sitting on. The surface was hard, strong and cold. Night air had chilled the day's heat. His senses were rapt. He needed to see his Shauna, but he must stand guard for her safety as well. He snapped his head towards the bushes at the trail head. A small foot exposed itself in the fading starlight.

Shauna hesitated and peaked through the branches and bristles. A man sat on a boulder. The starlight and growing sunlight grew a soft haze around a strong man dressed in black. The raven hair matched hers in color and depth. A black cape of substance covered his form. His face slowly turned, and she could see the dark eyebrows sheltering a smoldering look on a rugged face. Large, strong hands graced the rock as he sat as the gargoyles in the growing sunlight. He was very handsome. She now knew her mother's desire. Even a daughter would acknowledge his heated attraction.

"No one will harm you here, daughter. I will not allow it." Renaud's voice carried the timber and depth of authority. But remained soft to her ears. It was more baritone than tenor, caring and certain. Shauna stepped out from behind the bush into the soft early morning sunlight.

Her father stood from the stone. His face melted into a smile that would rival the warmth of any sun. His eyes bore the twinkle of tears about to fall. His breath held in his chest as he looked upon the woman that was his child.

Shauna could not help it. "Daddy!" She squealed and ran to jump in his arms. They collapsed on the ground from the weight of their embrace. Daddy. A term she never expected to utter came from within her soul unbidden at his presence.

Then, in a moment his cape was thrust around them. A curse echoed from his lips. An enchantment exploded as Shauna was thrust into darkness. She had felt rather than saw the throng descend from above, greed and anger in their eyes. They had been found. Her father's senses had not betrayed them. He had transported them in a thunderous explosion.

Shauna was bewildered. She had been transported. It was warlock magic. No witch could work such magic. Still it was infrequently used, even by warlocks. The results of the transportation were not as reliable as flying. You could end up far from the location you intended, in a circumstance worse than you had left. It was powerful magic. Effective, if used correctly.

They had left the foothills and were deep in another old growth forest. A small campfire burned in a fallow a few meters away. Shauna knew who was there. So did her father. They ran to the fire. Ismerelda looked up in time to be embraced in her Renaud's arms.

Ismerelda had held her love in abeyance for 18 years. It would be denied no longer. Renaud, her Renaud was in her arms. She kissed him passionately, deeply and longingly. Shauna giggled at the expressions of love before her. For if nothing else, witches were emotion in the flesh. It was their nature and what tied them to it.

Renaud reach for Shauna and held both in his strong embrace. Shauna had never felt so safe. Finally, Renaud was able to speak. "How long do we have?"

"The spell, at best gives us but another hour. Then our powers will be revealed and easily spotted." Ismerelda gathered herself as she caught her breath.

"What is happening? Mother? Father?" Renaud glowed as he heard Shauna call is familial name.

Ismerelda spoke with deep urgency. "It is a race against time, Shauna. From those that would harm you and us. There is less than 36 hours before we must stand with you before the altar at the Temple of the Goddess. It must be done at the Witching Hour on Halloween. But first, we must find the Temple. If we don't, you would be vulnerable."

“Or the powers could consume her. Ismerelda. It is her life. She should know.” Ismerelda had shot Renaud a look. But his tone and argument eased her objections. She nodded her head in acceptance.

“Damn.” It was a simple statement, but apt. The weight of Shauna’s predicament hit her hard.

“What have you found?” Renaud and Ismerelda had been searching for years. He had run into one dead end after another. He hoped she would have better clues.

“Fallen guard the entrance. Blood will set you free. After 18 years, those were the only true clues I could find. All the rest are speculation. There are no maps, books or documents showing the location of the Temple or even the enchantment to remove the curse.” Ismerelda’s shoulders shrugged her disappointment.

“Damn! How could the magical community lose the location of the Temple? It was the center of our existence. It was a seat of great power.” Renaud slammed his fist into the ground. The action drew Shauna’s attention.

“Could the temple be in Fallen land?” Her eyes grew big in the dawning sky.

“Do you know something, Shauna?” Ismerelda searched her daughter’s face.

“When I planned my path to Dad I chose going through Fallen land.” Ismerelda and Renaud about exploded at the revelation. Shauna held up her hand so they would allow her to speak. “I know about its danger. I am no fool. But I figured it would be the quickest path. But Fallen land is more terrifying than I anticipated. If I hadn’t flown out of there I would have been torn apart. The magic in there is frightening and strong.”

“You should have never gone there, Shauna.” Ismerelda was beside herself.

“I know mother, but I spent a day mapping out the course committing it to memory. I still see the course in my mind. One of my landmarks was a large mound of granite in the center of the fields. I couldn’t help but use it. Its very presence kept my attention. I avoided it because it seemed the center of the crazed magic.”

Renaud broke in. “No one talks or knows about Fallen land. No one except, Bill.”

Ismerelda looked up. “Can you reach him? Will he come?”

“We’ll have to wait for dark. But he will come. I am sure.” Renaud nodded his head toward the fire. “Our time here is almost done. We need to move. I suggest we begin walking toward Fallen land. It seems the only course of action we have. Bill will be there when we arrive.”

Their travel through the woods wasn’t uneventful. Enchantments, charms, curses and even old-fashioned camouflage was used quite often to ward off what would have seemed to be the entire enchanted community. It was difficult, treacherous and tiresome. They stopped infrequently and only for a drink of water or out of pure exhaustion. Never for more than an hour, usually quite less than that.

CHAPTER 4

With the sky darkening they came upon the border of Fallen land. Each of them could feel the lost magic reaching out. The fear, anguish and pain of magic left behind. The memories that lingered in the magic tore through them. They backed away.

“You walked in there?” Ismerelda was shocked. The burning agonies from the field tore at her soul. She could barely be on the edges. Her daughter had literally walked in the valley of death.

“Not a place for witches, warlocks or gargoyles. Wouldn’t suggest it for anyone, magic or non.” Bill lighted just feet from their position. “What do you need, Renaud?”

“Can you tell us the history of this place? What happened? What was here before?” Renaud looked deep at Bill. Bill hesitated. His wings ruffled as if to leave. Renaud grabbed his shoulder. “Bill, it may be important. It might be very important for all of us.”

“It is not something we talk about. It is not something that should be talked about. It was horrible, terrible, and very evil. Nothing good came of it, for either side. Evil remained after death had been swept away. You should do what every being does, walk away. Let Evil have this land. There is nothing you could do here that would be of any benefit.”

“Not even Shauna’s life?” Ismerelda spoke softly. Bill turned his gaze on Ismerelda. He shook, his feathers, ruffling in the effort. Then Bill sat upon his haunches on the ground. He looked every bit a gargoyle. Ismerelda, Renaud and Shauna gathered tight around.

“It was centuries ago when magic was still young and strong. Man, the normals, were determined to control what could not be controlled. To enslave those that held power and make it their own. Rogue Druids, recent religions, and powerful Kings and warlords from Vikings to Celts had a gathering and plans were made. The magic community had decided to return the favor and enslave the normals. Take their lands, free themselves from abuse, supposed and real. Witches, warlocks, wizards, and yes gargoyles gathered and formed their own army.

They were massive, opposing armies. Each intent on full and final victory. No quarter was to be given. Every weakness, each chink in the armor or power was learned and studied. Gargoyles aversion to light, witches fear of salt, random herbs, and blessed water, warlocks limited reserves of power. If there was a magical creature its weaknesses were found. The magical learned about normals bows, arrows, armor and machines of war. Nothing was left to chance. Some of the worst tortures ever devised were visited on the normals or the magical in efforts to find even one advantage.”

Bill stopped but for a moment and shuddered at the memories shared from generation to generation.

“The simple battles and skirmishes before all led to this field. Each army was sure of its righteousness and power. The normals struck first. They waited till the gargoyles were at their most vulnerable. Two hours before nightfall they took battleaxes, sledgehammers and chains to every gargoyle they could find, male, female or child. It didn’t matter. In a few hours’ gargoyles were reduced from thousands to hundreds. To mock us they took the remains and used them in their catapults. They literally threw us back as weapons on our own people.”

Bill took another sharp breath and continued. “We were enraged. Those who remained struck from the skies laying swaths of fire to light the way of our allies and burn alive those that had harmed us. We fell from the sky and clawed every normal we could find into as many pieces as we could. The blood and screams were like music to our anger.

But the unchecked rage was just what the normals intended. Soon witches and warlocks joined the battle. Whatever plans that had been made were gone. We were like wild animals. Curses, enchantments, swords, black magic and pure physical force was used against all normals. We especially held our worst for the Druids and religious leaders. The land was soon red in blood. There didn’t seem to be any winners or losers. Just death. Then the kings and knights came from the woods on well trained horses. They attacked from all flanks in coordinated assault.

It was little work to complete the task and bind the magical. Most had been killed or expended in the rage before the charge. The warlocks had little to no magic left having expended it all in their heated anger. The witches had lost their connection to the nature because of the blood beneath their feet. The gargoyles, those that could, flew away. Then our real terror began. Those remaining were tied to posts. The trees were

stripped, and their branches stacked for fuel. One by one they were burned, cursed and killed. They were burned alive, their powers left to rot in the fields for lack of hosts.”

“But the Magic were not enslaved.” Renaud pressed.

“Blessings to Charlene.” Bill responded and bowed his head.

“Charlene was real? I thought she was myth. We learned about her in lessons. I just thought she was a cautionary tale.” Shauna was impressed.

“She was definitely real. Some say she is the Goddess. I wouldn’t know. She never claimed the station. But, as small ones and the defeated were rounded up for use by the normals, Charlene came to the field. She hovered above man, above the magical and above the cursed ground. Her tears fell freely. When the victorious threw chains to hold her she ignored their puny efforts. She reached with her staff to the heavens and drew down nature itself. Thunderous sounds fell from the clouds. Lightning struck and removed every combatant normal or magical, dead or living. She wiped clean the fields.

Then she freed the small ones and conflicted the minds of normals. The normals that were here wandered away, never to know of the magical again. She directed the magical to return to their shadows and lives. She challenged them to never again test the will of normals or of herself. We left and we never challenged again. The loss was too great, and Charlene was too fearful. Charlene left this field as you find it. A reminder to the magical to think not too greatly of their gifts.” Bill finished his story.

“When was this, Bill?” Ismerelda needed to know.

“What is now known as the first Halloween. Charlene left the field and returned to where she came from at midnight. No one has ever heard or seen from her again. But her words still hold in the magical community. No one dares to challenge normals head on for fear of any of her enchantments. Once was enough.”

“The first witching hour.” Ismerelda nodded.

“The same.” Bill nodded in affirmative.

“Why this field, Bill. Why did they confront the magic here?” Renaud needed to know.

“It was a center of all magic’s religions. Normals knew we would come to defend it. I was told the land was beautiful, streams, willows, fruits and grassy fields. Some even say unicorns wandered freely. If you believe in that sort of thing. It was supposed to be our Garden of Eden, I suppose. But to look on it you would never know.” Bill looked toward the field.

“Was there a temple or building?” Shauna asked.

“I wouldn’t know. Nothing was ever passed down that spoke of a building. But if it was a center of the magical religions, I would suspect there was at one time. Or at least an altar. If there was an altar it would have been marked by the light.”

Ismerelda broke in. “The orange light of calling. The only light used in the caverns and temples because it could be seen by all magics. The foundation of what normals use for their jack-o-lanterns. They see them as objects to ward off spirits. We use them to light the way.”

“Yes. If there was an altar. It would have had the light. But after this many years it would have faded and been extinguished. I know of no light to last centuries.” Bill stood and stepped toward the field.

“The sun lasts centuries. Why not the light of the temple?” Shauna wondered. “We don’t know if there is or was a temple. But we also don’t really know the power of the magic that may have been embedded in it. We need to go take a look at that rubble. If there is any light it would best be seen in the dark.”

“Shauna, we don’t know if this is a temple site. All we have is speculation, the simplest of clues, and a history. It can’t be worth risking our very sanity and lives to fly over the field.” Ismerelda desperately cautioned Shauna.

“Mom, what else do we have. There is less than 24 hours before the witching hour. There is nowhere else to look that we know. The temple being in the middle of the field would be an excellent explanation as to why its location has disappeared from magic’s memory.” Shauna looked desperately at her mother. “Besides mom, it’s getting worse. I know I have too little time not to gamble.”

“I’ll go.” Renaud stood, but Bill held him back.

“I’ll go. My flight will not cause undue attention. I will carry Shauna. We will look it over carefully and return.” Bill placed Shauna on his shoulders and took off before another protestation could be uttered.

CHAPTER 5

The mound was in the middle of the field. It had been worn down by the elements over time. Still an occasional outcropping or large boulder stood out on its crown. Shauna and Bill could feel the lost magic reach up and out to them. They were fairly high above the ground, but with Halloween and the Witching Hour approaching the intensity of magic had grown exponentially. Both Bill and Shauna wept for the lost magic and the souls of those that bore them.

Bill circled carefully. He felt the whole thing a fool's errand. How could a calling light last this long? Besides if it could last it would be buried under years of rubble and erosion. He knew, however, they had to look. Shauna would not try any other remedy until this task had been complete. So, he flew as low as they could, as slow as they could and looked down at every crack and crevice.

An ancient branch from a forgotten and dead tree broke and fell as they swooped over. No doubt disturbed by the rush of wind under Bill's wings. It hit the earth with a thud. The ground caved in just a bit. Shauna looked over her shoulder to ensure there were no magic's chasing them. As the dust cleared a faint orange light shot from the ground. Shauna looked again and then had Bill confirm. She didn't quite trust herself. Her luck could not be this good.

Bill turned and flew over the spot. He looked. Shauna looked. It was the Light of Calling. There was no denying it. They had both seen the Light through many services over many years. Bill took Shauna back to the clearing. They settled down in disbelief.

"The light is there. By the Goddess a Calling Light shines in the mound." Bill reported. Renaud and Ismerelda slumped in their disbelief as well. But it only took moments to recover.

"Fly me to the mound, friend. That should keep other magical at bay. I will assess the lost magic and, if needs be, create a barrier. When it is safe, bring Shauna and Ismerelda. Ismerelda, you and Shauna will need to connect with what nature is there. You will need the help of trees, bush and animal to move the rocks and brush as we may. Bill, any boulders needed to be moved needs done before dawn arrives.

Then we will secret ourselves inside what we have carved out of the mound. We will continue digging as may be allowed. Hopefully when night falls you will be able to join us in the final efforts, Bill." Bill nodded at Renaud's plan. It was quickly born, but it was all the time they had. Renaud mounted Bill and flew to the Calling Light.

There was no lost magic near the light or on the mound. Bill retrieved Shauna and Ismerelda. Renaud and Bill stood back while the lessons of witch and wiccan were called to the fore. Quietly earth moved, trees set aside, and stairs were revealed. They were blocked by two large granite stones. With effort and a little help from the witches, Bill had them removed before dawn approached. It revealed an entrance. Renaud cast a protection spell just before they descended and dawn broke. Bill had returned to his granite sleep atop the entrance just as they entered the darkened space.

By the looks of the ruins they had entered, finding the center, the source, and any confirmation this was the Temple of the Goddess would not be easy. Time, nature and destruction had filled the ruins. They had to be cleared and it was not easy work. Even with magic. Shauna, Renaud and Ismerelda grunted, groaned and sweated as they moved heaven and earth, literal earth. As the day progressed Shauna's symptoms got worse. Her stomach burned. Her heart beat fast and a fine fever gripped her.

Night soon fell again and with it their protection. The Calling Light had grown stronger in the sky as more and more debris was removed from the passageway. It was starting to attract witch, wizard and warlock as a thing of curiosity. But the fear of lost magic was keeping them at bay, along with the imposing figure of Bill.

Hours of work finally revealed one large door at the end of the passageway. It was decorated with ancient writings and beautiful carvings of boar, deer, flowers, and trees. Shauna saw a depiction of a Unicorn to the left.

"It reads 'Sanctuary' in early Wiccan. Ancient Druid is derived from it." Bill had entered the tunnel. His form almost filled it completely. "Whatever you are going to do, do it now. They are coming. Every imaginable magic creature. They have seen the light and feel Shauna's power. I blocked the entrance with stone. But it is only a matter of time."

“We need to get in. How do we open the door? Bash it down?” Shauna was doubling over in pain as the hour grew closer. Her breath was swift and short. Sweat beads dimpled her brow.

“If this is the sanctuary of the Temple of the Goddess even my strength could not break those doors.” Bill pounded upon them with his fists, but they didn’t even budge. “It is old magic my friend. Ismerelda, in your practices do you have an opening prayer or service?”

“The Blessing of the Elements!” Ismerelda flicked her fingers and gathered the items she required. Dried brush and clear water appeared before her. Shauna used her skills to fashion cups out of the surrounding clay. In short order, fire, water, and ground were placed before the door. Shauna and Ismerelda held hands and whispered the old remembered enchantments. Bill used his wings to add the element of wind. As the last blessing was spoken old hinges from ancient doors creaked loudly and tore at their bindings. The Sanctuary doors opened.

The calling light filled the tunnel and a loud explosion filled the void. Granite block place by Bill had been decimated. Maniacal screeching tore through the tunnel. Dozens of their own were descending into the tunnel. The call of Shauna’s power gripping at their greed. Renaud and Ismerelda grabbed their weakening daughter and threw themselves into the Sanctuary. Bill followed and stood as a barrier to any threat.

“All are welcome, Bill. I will not allow you to forbid entrance.” Bill turned. An altar surrounded by the plenty of the good earth with a Calling Light burning in the center greeted his eye. Hovering above all was a startlingly beautiful woman in robes of white, green and blue. Her raven hair fell about her shoulders. In her hands was a staff of carved wood.

Her demeanor commanded Bill. He stood aside. The raging horde poured into the room and made straight for Shauna. They reached for her when a powerful command filled their ears, followed by the crack of ancient power.

“Enough!” The attendant commanded. Everyone stilled. “No one wishing harm may stay.”

One agonized cretin drooling blood and oozing puss ignored the warning. In an instant his remains floated as dust out the Sanctuary door. “No one wishing harm may stay.” The attendant repeated with a tempered look. The crowd, cowed into submission, left the chamber leaving Renaud, Ismerelda, Shauna and Bill.

“I am Charlene. You have found your way to the Temple of the Goddess. What do you seek?” The attendant had a name, a name of myth and legend.

“Your Grace. It is our daughter. She is of witch and warlock. She dies as we watch. We seek her life and freedom.”

Charlene moved towards Shauna. She gently placed her fingers under her chin and raised her head to look in Shauna’s eyes. “The time has finally come. It has been a long wait.” Charlene turned to Renaud and Ismerelda. “Are you prepared to pay the cost? It is a debt of blood.”

Without hesitation Ismerelda and Renaud affirmed their commitment to their daughter. Charlene guided them to the altar. She placed Shauna at her side and took out a long silver knife. It glowed in its own bright light. Charlene placed the right arms of Renaud and Ismerelda on the altar. With a swift stroke their blood spilled.

Charlene gathered all into a chalice. She whispered an enchantment and gathered earth, then water to mix with the deep red blood of her parents. Charlene blew across the rim to add a breath of wind. Then with a snap of her fingers fire boiled the concoction in the cup. A distant bell began to chime. It was the Witching Hour. Charlene held the chalice to Shauna’s lips.

Shauna drank, she drank deep for the mixture had become the deepest pool of sweet crystal-clear cooling water. The burn in her stomach ceased. The fever sweats disappeared. On the 12th chime of the bell, wind blew through the Sanctuary. It danced as it cleansed away old pain, deep heartaches and wasted misery. The earth shook, recovered and rebuilt the Temple’s foundation. Water flowed out of the altar forming a stream that washed and replenished the earth. What was barren and dead was reborn and green. The torches along the corridors and the flame eternal under the altar reignited in joyous strength.

Shauna herself was transformed. Her raven hair once flattened and grimed grew full, long, dark and arrayed with the flowers of the forest. Her skin became the softest white. Her eyes were the dark of the cosmos with a thousand twinkling stars shining in them. Her smile radiated the sun. Her garments flowed in various shades of nature, first snow white, then soft green and even a tender brown.

Charlene waved her staff over Renaud and Ismerelda. Their wounds healed. Their bodies were refreshed. They stood in wonder as what was once underground, now stood atop the mound. What was barren hillside was fast in young trees, green grass and an abundance of nature's bounty. The temple walls were replaced with columns that circled the altar and sanctuary. The full moon could be seen from the open roof of the once enclosed chamber.

"It is time, Shauna. Let them rest." Charlene looked upon Shauna. Shauna nodded. She knew what to do. Shauna glided slowly over Fallen land. She reached out and took the lost magic into her own. Each addition, each jolt of merger pained her deeply as she felt its loss. But Shauna soothed and comforted the lost magic each in turn. Before the end of the Witching Hour she had gathered all into her bosom and offered forgiveness.

Charlene waved her staff and the Fallen land was reborn. The Calling Light pierced the night sky. Moments passed in peace, then one witch hovered above the Temple. Then another came. Gargoyles began to fill the sky. Warlocks joined the Witches. Each then came forth in solemn reverence and stood before the altar, Charlene, and Shauna.

Shauna had been freed. She would live. With the emergence of the Temple all beings of magic had a center for their religions once again. With Charlene's blessing, Shauna became Priestess to all and acolyte to the Goddess.

As the Witching Hour came to close, the naughtiness that drove the Magical's happiness came to the fore. Bonfires were lit. Music was played and dancing begun. Only the coming of dawn could end the festivities. As day rose Shauna found herself alone in the Temple with her parents.

"Not the story I had written for myself." Shauna grinned. She was at peace and happy.

"Nor the one we would have written for you." Ismerelda returned a satisfied and proud smile. "But now you can tell our story. The Magical's story of Halloween. A version not tainted by normals."

Charlene hovered. "Thank you for ending the lost magic's anguish. Only a child of witch and warlock could. I wondered if I would ever see one. One born of true love, not accidental lust. Your mother and father's love is rare. Something to be cherished. More powerful than any magic. May you all be blessed."

Charlene vanished. But with all that had happened, it was the least unexpected event. Shauna smiled at her parents. They were kissing and holding each other tight. Warm smiles filled their faces. The years of absence had not waned their love, it had enhanced it. It was a love that saved her. It had saved them all. It needed rewarded. With a wave of her hand Shauna had the winds transport them in a warm autumn embrace. It took them to a long overdue celebration of their love. A celebration done in the warmth of Ismerelda's bed.

Shauna smiled for her parents and herself. For now, Halloween was for her and them, a time of hope and love.