Arret has been the Chosen for nearly 5 millennia. He is oath-bound to the sentient entity of the land, labeled by him simply as Gaia. Between awakenings, he remains dormant inside a crystal-walled cave, the 'Womb of the World'. At the time of a summons, the lifeless husk of his body is reanimated and he returns to walk among men. Throughout history he is directed to tweak events with the aid of the prime elements; Earth, Water, Fire and Air. Armed with these forces, events are influenced to fulfill the land's wishes as seemingly natural occurrences are used to tip the balance of wars, battles, and even individual lives. This awakening was different; his instructions were uncharacteristically fragmented and undecipherable. Arret wondered if the land was suffering from man's accumulated abuses.
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Oblivion, the emptiness is complete as nothingness permeates this wondrous shelter. It knows no decay; even the passage of time holds no sway within this sanctum. Darkness and silence have ruled here for millennia, keeping watch over the chamber’s charge. This is a sanctuary, perhaps like no other. No plunderer could find, much less enter, that which is protected within.

Without warning, the seal is broken, allowing a silent intruder to enter the enclosure from the East, slowly encroaching through a minute fissure in the crystal-studded wall. Momentum is gathered as it spreads and circles the chamber three times in a clockwise direction. The intruder seeks out every surface with no regard to contour. It caresses everything in the room as the total absence of light is of no consequence. Once all is explored, the intruder gathers its conscious essence to the chamber’s ceiling and settles downward upon a large rectangular stone slab which rises from the floor. The intruder senses a spot in the corner. The entity lowers its awareness into the awaiting censer. Air makes its presence known and summons the others, then patiently waits in silent anticipation.

The wait is not long as a large crystal from the southern wall of the chamber shifts ever so slightly, leaving a small breach between crystals. A tiny creature tentatively intrudes and slides to the floor and begins its trek around the slab. Three times round, as its predecessor, and then it climbs to the top of the slab. There it senses a familiar urging coming from a different corner. The creature glides its body to a specific spot which contains a small depression; Fire has arrived.

A tiny almost imperceptible sound breaks the darkness. It comes as a soft, steady drip as moisture seeps and pools near the western wall. The pool vibrates and the structure of the water slowly changes from liquid to gas, floating up and circling the slab. When the third revolution is complete, the mist floats to the ceiling and condenses upon a large crystal point. Dripping down to the slab it forms a small pool which reacts to the pull from its own corner and gracefully flows to it. In the corner sits a small chalice sunk into the stone. The chalice fills and Water abides.

The three remain in the darkness, each acutely aware of the others. From the northern wall comes a rumbling. The tremors increase and the outer wall begins to spin slowly for three cycles until a single stone slips from the ceiling and falls to the slab. The echo of the stone landing fills the chamber, as each of the four prepares for what is coming. The tiny plain stone comes to rest in the final corner. The elemental Earth communicates in the language of its kind, “All are present, let the awakening commence.”

In turn they communicate the ritual:

“I, Earth, abide in the North. Earth sinks into Water.”
“I, Water, abide in the West. Water sinks into Fire.”
“I, Fire, abide in the South. Fire sinks into Air.”
“I, Air, abide in the East. Air sinks into spirit.”
All four elementals communicate in unison, “Let the Spirit be manifest in the Chosen once again”. The chant is repeated twice more. The chamber walls are covered with crystals and from each come a steadily brightening light; the darkness is no more. The ritual continues bringing forth the resurgence of life.

The elementals each let their essence merge into the lifeless husk positioned horizontally upon the slab. The creature’s heart begins to beat erratically. Its blood, which has been dormant, now starts to liquefy and flow. Air forces its way into the long dormant lungs. The spark of life ignites and the vessel lives. The elementals return to their respective corners and wait for the Chosen to revive completely.

His early sensations are of intense pain. This is but the first of many feelings as oblivion reluctantly gives up its embrace. The Chosen remains in this supine position as his body adjusts to the awakening. He knows he is within the crystal chamber. The stone slab he rests upon is covered in ancient symbols perhaps older than mankind itself. In each corner rests a representation of an element. Other symbols cover the top and sides as well. The one directly under him is a pentagram. He understands its meaning; the symbol contains five points: the lower four are the elements; Air, Fire, Water, Earth, and the fifth point, above the rest, signifies Spirit. This essentially means, Spirit over Matter. He understands his body is a compilation of elements, but only with Spirit does it become greater than its parts.

Even with his eyes closed, he senses the light building within the Womb. A hint of a smile crosses his parched lips; the ‘Womb of the World’ is what he calls this mystical chamber. When he awakens, every time is an experience worth the pain and disappointments he has known. The Womb is an old and reliable friend, it never changes, one of the few things in his life he could count on to be there for him. This is the place where protection is certain; where his wounds will heal; where his slumber is complete, and where his memories will not haunt him.

The rejuvenation progresses, muscles begin to twinge as circulation is slowly restored. The tingling of long dormant nerves was not a pleasant sensation. He sent out his consciousness to tap into Earth’s magnetic field, giving him an approximate location. This was important, as the Womb was known to travel great distances during his dormancy. He instantly knew this was what was known as North America; a country known to him as the United States when he was last among men. One could not make assumptions as to what changes may have occurred since his last calling. Climatic shifts or wars could cause drastic changes in a very short time.

Narrowing his focus on the area of his location, he remembered a major city, Chicago. The use of the elementals gave him access to any speech made in the area and the Womb made it possible for him to assimilate this local speech. This had proven invaluable many times over as he was placed in situations facing unknown people and their languages. He quickly realized the languages and country were relatively unchanged. Sensing something amiss, he noticed his reception of the elemental’s images was somehow distorted. This puzzled him as it was something not experienced before.

He remained motionless, letting the awakening proceed until he was fully revitalized. Gaining his feet, he reached to the slab’s corners and took the four representations of the elementals. Gingerly placing them into his robe, he was filled with a sense of comradeship due to their having bonded with him. One other companion was yet to be reclaimed, his eyes found the oaken staff resting against the wall where it had been
placed years before. Yearning fingers reached out and closed on his old friend. The ancient stave was known to him simply as Oak. The wood responded with a warm vibration as visions of shared adventures caressed his mind. Twirling it with precision, he greeted his old friend. Sensing the elemental Earth's desire to proceed, he faced the northern wall. Although not necessary, his habit was to tap his staff thrice on the floor. The act, followed by his declaration, 'Arret walks the earth once more', was his personal cue for the exit tunnel to form. A rumble ensued as the crystal-studded wall split and somehow folded in upon itself. An opening appeared, and the earth receded forming a darkened pathway. The sound of stones shifting ahead into the darkness urged the man forward. He stepped away from the shining light into the dark tunnel. As he continued on the path laid out before him, behind came the sound of earth closing the tunnel behind his passing.

Stepping lively, he held the staff in front of him as a guide. Even in the total blackness of the tunnel, his trust in Oak was absolute. The staff would know the way to the surface. Feeling an unexpected reluctance from Oak, he slowed his pace; the staff gave the impression of confusion. Arret stopped walking when the rumbling ceased and then reached into his pocket, pulling out the stone which represented the elemental Earth.

Directing a questioning image, he waited for a reply; the answer came in a form of a wave of dismay. Arret got the sense of it searching for direction. The tunnel had always taken a direct route to the surface. His thoughts were brought back to the rumblings which started again and now the route was filled with acute turns. After what seemed an eternity, the rumbling ceased but Oak continued to urge him forward. Expecting the familiar beam of sunlight at the end of the tunnel, he wondered why the blackness still prevailed. Confusion tormented him, something not experienced inside the tunnel before. Arret knew something was very wrong; his location was directly under the city which in itself was not normal for the Womb. It had usually brought him to the outskirts of population centers. Rarely did it come close to even a single dwelling and only when the need was great. Perhaps the confusion had to do with the proximity to the city with its abundance of unnatural concrete and metals.

Arret moved forward and quickly became aware of a foul stench which intensified as he continued. His bare feet told him when the Womb's tunnel abruptly ended as he felt the concrete of a large man-made tube. He recognized the tube as one of the old abandoned railroad tunnels which at one time delivered coal to the city during the winter months when snow clogged the streets above. Now, erosion and years of neglect had caused much of this tunnel to collapse. The stench he quickly identified as an abundant accumulation of vermin feces. He reasoned there must be an exit ahead leading to the surface, if the vermin used this so frequently, there must be a way out.

Moving silently while navigating between fallen chunks of concrete and earth he came to the end and found large intersecting bars blocking his exit. He grabbed them and shook with all his might but they ignored his efforts. Arret asked Oak for direction but received no reply. He muttered, "It would seem this exit is as good as any other. If you will not lead me to an easier way, then it falls upon me to find my own remedy."

He knew he would need assistance with the metal grate and took out the four elementals. Unable to hold all four at once and not wanting to give them insult, he lay down in the filth and used his body as an altar. Placing them on his stomach and mentally making amends for the lack of respect, he projected an image of the barrier
being removed. The bars were formidable and he felt they would need to work in unison. Air and Water combined, causing rust to form in quick order. Fire and Air united to ignite the foul gases hoping to melt the bars but the flames could not reach temperatures hot enough to accomplish the task. Earth showed its power as pressure from outside caused the bars to stain. For whatever reason, the metal remained essentially intact.

Arret thought the elementals might be concerned with causing so much damage as to kill him if the tunnel collapsed. He sensed them communicating with each other but their images flowed too quickly for him to comprehend. He guessed the metal was resistant to the elementals but something else was inhibiting their powers. He recalled the distortion he sensed earlier, everything here was unnatural which cut off the power of nature. The blanketing of earth with concrete and metal acted like a dampening field. A strong image from the elemental Fire brought Arret's attention back, it was directed at him. Already lying flat on his back, he sheltered his head and braced himself for whatever was to come.

The earth started to shake violently, followed by sounds of great volumes of water rushing toward him. Luckily, the water was outside the tube. Somewhere nearby a water main had ruptured due to the tremors. Water rapidly eroded the surrounding soil. Appearing on the surface, a large sinkhole formed, the tube remained intact even with its supporting soil washed away. Earth and Water were not working alone, above the ground a propane tank was being blown off its stand by an intense wind. The tank then toppled into the ever-widening sinkhole. Landing directly on the exposed tube, at the bottom of the hole, the tank ruptured and a spark ignited the escaping gas. The force of the ensuing blast brought the desired effect. A section of the tube, about thirty feet across, no longer existed. Fortunately for Arret, this happened away from his position. Although dazed from the blast, he was unharmed. He made a mental note to be careful for what he asked of the elementals, it usually ended with a significant amount of destruction. Smiling to himself, he realized he had made the same note countless times before.

Arret stood and brushed off his filthy robe in a futile attempt to bring some dignity to his appearance. Placing the elementals into his pockets, he grabbed his staff and walked to the break in the tube. Climbing into the sunlight, he scanned the surrounding moderately sized buildings.

Chaos ruled in the area around the sinkhole. Sirens wailed and on-lookers gathered where the street had collapsed. Covered in mud and filth, Arret climbed from the newly formed pit. With his appearance so disgusting, he saw no reason for conversation. The authorities of this time would find any explanation for his proximity to this disaster as implausible. He had not been gone for so long as to not remember the need for identification. His last few awakenings had shown a growing paranoia among the governments of this era. Roughly forcing his way through the crowd, he quickly disappeared into an alley. Oak led him eastward toward the faint scent of water. He pressed ahead putting as much distance between himself and the disturbance as possible. He wished no more attention than absolutely necessary. Stealth was preferable to speed as he found his route plagued by numerous people and vehicles. He wondered why anyone would choose to live in such an environment. As he came to another street, a police car with lights flashing sped by. He stepped out from the alley as his eyes followed the retreating car. No more than twenty paces in the other direction stood a group of nine teens not fully adult but old enough to feel the urges of mankind. Their predatory gaze made Arret aware of the predicament he had stepped into. Cursing his
lack of attention and Oak's failure to warn him, he retreated back into the alley hoping pursuit would not follow.

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Johnny Wacker was a leader. His gang had easily replaced all the foster families who had passed him around like a hot potato. His name came from the John Doe the cops had given him and from Wacker Drive, the downtown street where they found him abandoned as an infant. Johnny had secured his leader's position with his tough and ruthless style instilling fear in those around him. Boredom was his gang's worst enemy and today the enemy was winning. They had pushed around the usual weaklings and drunks but grew tired of the game. Wandering their turf, dodging cops, and taking whatever the homeless scavenged took up only a few hours. They were heading toward the commotion when the stranger stepped out of the alley. To Wacker, this was an answer to a prayer, that is, if he was a praying person. The fool walked right into their hands and the cops were busy elsewhere. The man was ragged looking and it was doubtful he carried anything of worth but boredom ceased to be a concern. This was a stranger, someone unknown and certainly not from Johnny's turf. Wacker's and the stranger's eyes met for an instant and the stranger quickly retreated back into the alley. Johnny smiled, there was now prey for a new game.

The youths took off running in the hopes of cutting off the man's lead. This proved unnecessary as a quarter of the way down the alley the man had stopped. The pursuit ended short as they sensed something wrong, prey only stopped running if tired orcornered. Caution was screaming inside Wacker's brain as he looked for signs of an ambush. There were plenty of rival gangs who would love to catch Wacker and a small portion of his gang in an unsuspecting ambush. The alley was empty except for the stranger who stood confidently facing them with arms akimbo. On the pavement in front of him lay his stick. Johnny gave a signal and the others quickly spread out surrounding their prey and cutting off any chance of escape. Johnny was anxious, something was terribly wrong with the situation. Those who were helpless did not act this way. Johnny carefully re-scanned the buildings and doorways. Nothing was apparent; the fool had not moved a muscle since they entered the alley. Johnny figured the guy was nuts but had some savvy because once the gang deployed, the man had not taken his eyes off of Wacker.

The man knew who called the shots. Wacker spoke, “Ain't seen your mug around here before so maybe you don't know the rules. Let me explain them, old man. We owns this turf and you're trespassing without paying the toll. That's disrespect and we're gonna have to kick your old, filthy ass.” The stranger slowly surveyed those around him, when his gaze returned to the front, his reply seemed tempered with a hint of sadness, “I understand rules perhaps more than any man alive. You make demands upon me which will cost more than you can image. First, this is not your land. Second, you and your pack will not kick me for payment or sport. I have no quarrel with you but if you persist, my lesson will be painful. I must inform you that I am a warrior not to be mistaken for ill-trained street trash like yourselves. This is your one chance to leave me in peace; you delay me from my destination. Allow me passage or get on with what you will surely
regret.” The man slowly lifted his empty hands from his hips and spread them, saying, “The choice is yours, youngling.”

Johnny was impressed, the man showed no fear but then he didn’t show much sense either. They might have roughed him up some and let him be but not now, the fool had made it a challenge. The leader pulled out a butterfly knife and deftly opened it with a sudden flick of his wrist. His companions followed suit with their own various weapons of choice. Wacker set the rules, “Cut him, stomp him, make him bleed, but don’t snuff him, his life’s mine. Nobody calls me a youngling!” By design, the circle tightened while Wacker stayed outside to let the others gain experience. From behind the stranger, an attacker ran forward hoping to knock the man off his feet and let the others pile on to keep him pinned down and helpless. Without warning, a bare foot lifted with blinding speed and accurately caught the attacker’s face, standing him up straight. Another kick from the stranger snapped a knee like a dry twig. The sickening sound carried throughout the alley and all flinched with sympathetic pain. A merciful backhanded blow to the nose of the attacker-turned-victim brought needed unconsciousness almost before the pain reached his brain. The stranger toed his staff and it rose to his awaiting hands. Moving to his left, a straight jab landed the staff in the face of another. To his right, Oak struck into a teen’s solar plexus, then rose upwards and crashed into an unprotected jawbone. The force was enough to raise the, now inert, mass off its feet and tumble backwards. From behind, another rushed to his fate. The stranger did not even glance behind him as the staff instantly shifted in his hands and savagely plunged into the attacker’s manhood. The victim crumpled to the pavement while desperately trying to catch his breath. Four down in only a second or two caused the gang to break ranks and scatter for any escape possible. Wacker reached for his handgun. The gun was almost level when he realized the stranger’s staff was flying directly at him. The wooden missile struck the gun and sent it spinning away. The man approached as Wacker clutched his knife. Johnny knew he should run but saw no future in it, instead he gathered himself to meet the impending attack. It did not materialize, as the man stopped short and studied the teen’s eyes.

Arret relaxed, “You do not possess the skill to use your weapon effectively, sheath it and I will cause you no harm”. The youth reluctantly complied and frantically searched for a way out. Faking bravado, he said, “You trashed my guys, we was just having a little fun. What the hell are you some sort of leftover special forces war vet?” Arret ignored him while retrieving Oak and then answered, “I am not a war veteran but I am a battle-hardened veteran”. Arret paused as if memories of past events brought regrets. “You are to be commended for facing your fears. There are fallen comrades for you to attend to.” He indicated back to the injured, “None will perish from this, their lives will continue. I suggest you all reflect upon your mistakes and their consequences. Had you chose differently, you would still be in the world where you woke this morning. Know that a time is coming when destiny will place us together again. I know neither the time nor circumstances but destiny will not be denied. I regret the harshness of my lesson but it will be remembered long after the pain ceases. Each of the fallen may now choose to change their fates. They suffer but without my interference each would have known an early death.” The man paused and surveyed the entire alleyway as if searching for something to impart, “I am known as Arret; soon you will find an occasion where you will suffer greatly, use this time to ponder your lifestyle. There are times like this when I
am given glimpses of foresight. Until destiny calls, youngling.” Without a glance, he quickly strode from the alley and vanished from sight.

Wacker retrieved his gun and rushed to the injured. Three were in considerable pain. Curt, the first to attack, was still unconscious. Bone protruded through his skin just below the knee. Randy, who took a blow to his crotch, lay on his side. Jason was up on his knees holding his face which was a bloody misshapen mass of flesh and teeth. Johnny stepped to Ray, still down from the blow to his solar plexus. After inspecting the fallen, Johnny realized they all needed serious medical attention and ran to get aid. One thing kept repeating in his mind as he ran, “… you would still be in the world where you woke this morning”. The stranger had been right and things weren't ever going to be the same.

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Police Sergeant Vincent Doyle was not happy as he looked into the massive crater where a street once existed. Luckily, the area contained mostly small buildings. If this happened a little further north, where the skyscrapers stood, people would have surely died. Still, this was a mess. He knew his people had done an outstanding job. The Disaster Response Unit (DRU) was a team of professionals, mostly college types. Doyle had just been assigned as a liaison between the DRU and the Chicago PD. Within half an hour of being on the scene, the ruptured water main was located and shut down; networks of electrical, sewage and gas were being monitored for possible damage with the appropriate response agencies alerted. The DRU was good but Doyle just didn't feel he belonged. He'd been a good cop for over twenty years until nine weeks ago when he injured his knee in an auto crash while in pursuit of some jerk. After rehab, they gave him this desk job. Others on the team were busy compiling data and making assessments. His job was to screen the reports and notify the proper agencies as well as the mayor's office.

No one had yet determined the order of events but there had been an explosion; a broken water main; earth tremors; and a massive sinkhole. Witnesses reported a suspicious man running from the scene. Red flags went up as someone suggested a bomb. Within minutes an APB was issued for a long-haired man wearing a dirty gray robe and carrying a long stick or rod. Every cop in the city received the description along with 'Wanted in connection with possible terrorist bombing'.

Vinny's displeasure was obvious, “Lousy paperwork, I should be out looking for this creep and not playing secretary to a bunch of techies”. One of the reports said the suspect had forced his way through the crowd and fled. Now a likeness was being composed with a police sketch artist. Within fifteen minutes the DRU had ruled out the bomb theory. Even so, Doyle had a strange intuition there was more to this man than anyone imagined.

Doyle got a call to report to the nearby hospital. A local gang reported to have been attacked by a robed man carrying an unidentified weapon. When Vinny arrived he found Wacker and questioned him. Wacker told him the gang had been attacked for no reason and left out the conversation with the stranger. Vinny figured this had to be the same guy. He sensed the teen was holding back something but with the two sightings, it was clear the suspect was heading in an easterly direction toward the lake. He sent out the
updated information, narrowing the search area. Lastly, he added, 'Do not approach suspect without Sgt. Doyle being present'. He thought to himself, "If things work out, I'll show them just how valuable I am on the streets and not rotting behind a desk with a bunch of nerds".

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Arret was finding it more difficult to avoid detection. The police seemed to know he was close and were blanketing the area. Oak signaled danger and Arret crouched between two dumpsters as a squad car entered the alley. This was closely followed by two patrolmen on foot checking for unlocked doors. Although trapped, Oak urged him forward. Aware his opponents carried firearms; his only option was to use an elemental. He worried about the potential damage but there was little choice. Picking the elemental which seemed to thrive within this city, he grasped the censer and projected his request to Air. The car crept closer and there was little time. He planned his battle strategy in case the elemental did not comply. Arret noticed the air pressure changing and quickly drew a protective circle as a shield. A tremendous gust of wind shot into the alley. Anything not secured was now swirling violently as Air generated a small tornado and where Arret stood became the eye of the micro-storm. He stepped out and watched the car being slammed into the rear of a building. As Arret moved, so did the storm. The driver of the car ordered him to halt but was ignored. Beyond the car, the two patrolmen hugged the walls on either side of the alley trying not to be swept away. Arret walked by one terrified cop and as the calm of the storm's eye enveloped the man, he released the door handle he had been clinging to and spun toward Arret. He immediately received a savage shot from Oak and slumped to the pavement. Out of the alley and in the street a newspaper truck was caught in the tempest and its contents filled the street like giant confetti. Upon reaching safety, Arret dismissed the storm and thanked Air before resuming.

Twenty minutes later, the man knelt and surveyed his final obstacle. In front of him ran a busy street named Lake Shore Drive. There were no more buildings on the other side and he could see a grassy section here trees spread out on a gentle slope angling down to a thin beach. Police were everywhere and traffic was thick. His fingers closed on the salamander as he chose the Fire elemental. Suddenly, to the south, a tree burst into flames. A few seconds later another joined the first and within a minute there was a line of nine trees creating a flaming procession. They blazed about a quarter mile from Arret. Traffic stopped, sirens wailed, crowds gathered but no one noticed the robed man crossing the street.

First the grass, then the sand caressed his bare feet. The lake's breeze filled his lungs and he was revitalized. He placed Oak in the sand and dove into the chilly waters of Lake Michigan. The elemental Water went to work without prompting as it cleansed his body and clothing. After a few minutes, he was refreshed and back on shore. Air joined Fire bringing warm arid wind to dry him quickly. The elementals knew the vessel was to be cleansed before the ritual could commence.

Arret carefully checked his surroundings, the trees still blazed and the slope effectively concealed him. Time was short and his diversion was temporary. He quickly drew a large circle in the sand with Oak. On the rim, at the four directions, he made
small circles about a hand's width across and placed the elementals in their respective positions. Standing in the center, he drove Oak deeply into the sand. Spreading his arms and legs, he tilted his head back forming the star position. He began to draw energy from around him. The energy increased until it generated an eerie blue radiance. Bringing his arms down to the staff, he directed the current through it into the planet below; the time had come to contact Gaia.

Connecting to this sentient being was an adventure. No language was conveyed, only images. The elementals were the filter but these images were beyond what the elementals could produce. Each filled his senses to the fullest. Lately, Gaia's images had become difficult to decipher. An answering burst came up the staff and flooded his mind. Almost immediately, the contact ceased. Arret would sort through the images at his convenience, but for right now his priority was to evade capture. Closing the circle, he retrieved Oak and the elementals. Gaia had not given any direction so he yielded the decision to his trusty staff.

The staff's guiding vibrations led him up the grassy slope where he spied a woman peeking out from behind a tree some fifty feet away. Not knowing her intentions, he opted for confrontation. As he neared, he noted she stood close to five feet tall and had long flaxen hair. It was clear she was uncomfortable with his proximity. Halting a staff's length away, he tried to quiet her fears by setting down Oak and holding out his empty hands, saying, "I am called Arret; you are in no danger from me". Her eyes darted nervously from side to side; fear and astonishment filled her at the same time. Her reply came slowly, "Kyra, Kyra Wells. Your circle had so much power, the glow was clear even in the daylight! I never saw anything like it, not even in my coven!" A thought came to her, "You did it! You caused the trees to burn. How could you? They never ..." Arret impatiently cut her off, "Be silent woman! My presence must remain undiscovered. You mentioned a coven, I assume you to be a witch and have knowledge of power and circle. Do not concern yourself with the trees for they remembered the 'Promise' and gladly gave their essence for my needs. It was necessary to sacrifice them. Allow me to make you a trade. If you will lead me away from the authorities and provide me with sustenance, I will show you ways to focus and use nature's energy. I believe destiny drew you here. Hasten your choice for this place is too exposed for me to remain. Will you assist me, Kyra Wells, or not?"

She wanted to run, the police could be after him for anything and he was dressed so strangely but she saw honesty in his eyes. She groaned and said, "Follow me, it's a long walk". She led north to an underground parking garage. Taking her car, they traveled side streets until entering an expressway ramp heading southward. After some minutes of awkward silence, he asked, "Where are we bound? I need to be away from pursuit and yet not too distant from where we met. If you know a place where nature is uncorrupted, it would be best". She replied, "About an hour's drive south is the town of Midlothian where my parents live. They're vacationing in Europe and you'll be safe there. I don't know why I'm trusting you but you'd better behave". Arret said nothing; his thoughts were on Gaia's cryptic images.

The hour passed quickly and quietly until she broke the silence and intruded upon his meditation, "Before we get to the house, I need to know why the police are after you". Pausin for a few moments, he answered, "I believe the reasons are twofold. First, I was observed leaving the scene of a large explosion, for which they may assume I am..."
responsible. Secondly, they attempted to apprehend me and I had cause to render one unconscious with my staff.” Kyra shook her head, “If you hit a cop, you’re in big trouble. This is Chicago and they don’t take that lightly. Maybe you’d better go back where you came from.” Solemnly and with a touch of regret he said, “Such is not an option until my tasks are accomplished or at least attempted”. She still felt in her heart she’d done the right thing in helping him.

The house was well back from the road and he would be safe from prying eyes. Her parents were well-off and loved gardening. Their house sat on two and a half acres of beautiful landscaping. Covertly glancing at him, she realized she no longer felt threatened by this mystery man, only curious. She thought to herself, “He’s kind of cute except for the robe and bare feet”.

Wondering about his mentioning of destiny, she thought about her reasons for being on the beach. She remembered going to the library for an obscure book on Wicca. It wasn’t available and she aimlessly walked until her meandering brought her to the beach. She must have gone quite a distance without realizing it. She’d never done such a thing before. Could it really be destiny? Was she really meant to meet this stranger upon the beach?

Arret, asked, “Is it permitted to speak of your coven? When I last encountered witches, for them to admit being such was to court death. After the ‘hunts’ I scarcely heard of them. Is your coven near?” She shook her head, “I don’t belong to a coven anymore. I became what is known as a solitaire and now worship alone. What about you, are you some form of Wiccan?” He shrugged, “I am not certain what a Wiccan is but assume it denotes a practitioner of witchcraft or possibly someone who is somehow connected to nature. As for me, I am just a man who was given a position which allows me to use the natural forces around me. I do not espouse to the tenets of any religion; my servitude belongs something much different.” They rode in silence until Kyra said, “It isn’t far now Mister Arret, you’ll be safe soon”. He corrected, “There is no Mister, only Arret. You see, Arret is the Greek word for earth, ‘terra’ in reverse. I was given the name by one who found my connection with earth humorously fitting. As languages changed, a Greek name was more acceptable than my original.” She sensed he was loosening up and kept probing, “You mentioned Greece; are you from there? Do you have a family, a wife?” After a noticeable pause, sadness tainted his voice, “Long ago I knew wife and younglings but they have long since turned to dust”. The awkward silence returned and traveled with them until they arrived. Arret noted the spacious driveway flanked with trees and shrubs. Someone had put time and effort into this place. He thought to himself, “If she was raised by those responsible for this, she must have a deep reverence for nature”. His opinion of her was steadily improving.

She gave him a leisurely guided tour around the grounds. They strolled along slender paths between gardens and rows of shrubbery. Arret found the contact with the witch pleasing, something he had not allowed himself for a number of awakenings. Entering the house, his stomach growled and she immediately detoured toward the kitchen, saying, “I don’t know what to fix you. Are you a vegetarian? Have you got any requests?” He shrugged, “I enjoy meat and most edible plants. I leave the choice to you, perhaps something simple and quick”. Arret settled in part of the kitchen out of the woman’s way so he could observe. She seemed to know her way around and he found it pleasant to be in a domestic setting. He thought, “I hope this witch can cook”. Kyra started preparing a
meal of hamburger and vegetables; figuring it was a good opportunity to impress him. She glanced around to see him savoring the aroma of her creation. When she placed the plate before him, along with a glass of milk, she beamed with satisfaction. He took one bite of the meat and chewed. A look of utter horror came over him as he spat it out and gagged. When he regained his breath, he asked, “Woman, do you poison me?” He picked up the milk and drank deeply to drown the foul taste but then spat it out as well. He expected to see her showing signs of treachery, instead, she looked shocked and tears began to form in her eyes. Clearly, this was unexpected.

He carefully inspected the food, “I am not certain what but something is amiss. Perhaps you should try it?” She tasted the meat, “Seems fine to me. Don't you eat real meat wherever it is you come from?” She started to cry in earnest. Arret went and put his arms around her but she turned her back in an unsuccessful attempt to stop her tears from flowing. Realizing he could not console her, he re-examined the food. After a short time, he asked, “Kyra, this meat is from a cow, correct?” She just nodded and kept her back to him. “This milk is also from a normal dairy cow?” Gaining some composure, she replied, “Of course it is, I'd be crazy to bring you all the way out here just to poison you”. He tasted a bit of the meat and took a sip of the milk. After a moment, he spat them out, stating, “Krya Wells, I am truly sorry, this is my fault. You must understand, my life is linked with the natural order. My entire being is in balance with nature and what I consume must be as well. This food is contaminated with man-made chemicals which I can taste more than the food itself. My body rejects the unnatural. This meat holds flavors I would associate with sawdust and cement. The milk is filled with strange tasting chemicals. Again, Kyra, this is my fault for not realizing your food system had changed so drastically since my last calling. When I saw your gardens, I assumed your food came from natural sources.”

She was confused but knew about the chemicals and additives in everything these days. She pointed to the carrots on his plate, “They're from the garden outside and nothing was used except for compost and sweat. That's as natural as it gets around here.” She instantly regretted her tone as she watched him tentatively taste the carrots and then devour them greedily. He smiled at her as he swallowed the last tasty morsel. She filled a glass of water from the tap with a warning, “This is Chicago water and has always been bad”. He nodded, “I remember about the water here, it will not be a problem”. His hand moved purposefully atop the glass as if casting a spell. She saw nothing change but he quickly drank it down without hesitation. Arret knew she was confused as he picked up a pitcher and motioned her to follow into the backyard. There was a small slime-covered pond in the center of one of the garden plots and from it he filled the pitcher. Setting the container on the ground, he directed her to a specific spot and commenced to draw a large circle encompassing them both, saying, “We agreed to exchange your assistance for my knowledge. Are you ready, Kyra?” She appeared anxious but nodded her assent. He positioned her in the center and then drew four small circles along the edge and placed the elementals inside each. Setting the staff on the ground, he placed her trembling hands against his heart and whispered, “I ask you to trust me; no harm will befall you within this circle”. Closing his eyes, he asked the elementals for their cooperation. Spreading his arms and legs wide, he tilted his head back and assumed the star position.

Immediately he began to draw energy. The amount needed was much less than he used earlier on the beach. Power coursed through his outstretched limbs as he let it build
within him. The desired level was reached in seconds as he lowered his arms and brought his feet closer together. He opened his eyes, looking at the woman before him and the directed the energy to flow into her. Kyra's eyes widened and sparkled with the surge of raw energy. Her mouth opened but she was too awestruck to speak. Daring not to move, she kept her hands riveted to his chest. Her eyes remained locked on his while he guided her to sit. Gently, he placed her hands upon her knees. Taking Oak, he offered it to her. She broke eye contact and accepted it. The energy dancing along the wood began to move across her skin as he explained, "This is Oak, from the Sacred Grove. Do not be alarmed for it is a sentient being. Oak can communicate mostly through vibrations but sometimes with images. Feel the peaceful nature of the vibrations, not unlike the purring of a contented feline. It is apparent Oak finds you to its liking. You may keep Oak for what is to come." She reverently placed the magical object across her lap.

Arret mentally contacted the elemental Water and made his request. The chalice reacted quickly as he picked up the pitcher and drank deeply. Holding out the half-empty vessel, he gestured for her to drink as well. Kyra knew it contained the dirty pond water and although she sipped it, she did so tentatively. The taste was surprisingly cool and more refreshing than she remembered water ever tasting. She took a deeper drink and returned the container to the mystical man in front of her. He continued, "You have met Oak and now you must meet my other sentient companions. Clearly you know something of circle and ritual. By what names do you refer to those who sit on the corners where I placed the objects?" She responded, "Sometimes they are the Four Watchtowers or Guardians and each is identified with the four cardinal directions." He nodded, "They are also associated with the elements: Air, Fire, Water and Earth. In each corner you will notice a small object which represents an element: censer for Air, salamander for Fire, chalice for Water and stone for Earth. You may know these and many others which can represent the elements. However, these contained here are much more, for they are the collective sentient consciousness of the elements, the Prime Elementals. A few moments ago you witnessed the cleansing of the liquid in the pitcher. You may not understand how this occurred but you accept it did. Take a deep breath, Air has purified the atmosphere within the circle, there is no odor here except for the fragrance of the soil beneath. Remove your footwear, take Oak in your grasp and stand. Step to the East and place the end of Oak into the censer's circle." She did as directed and as Oak touched the circle her mind was flooded with images; flying through clouds, looking down upon the planet from miles above, and a fawn taking its first precious breath. The images rolled on, each with its own view of Air. The images slowed and she was left with only one remaining. There was a sensation of rising as faint plumes of smoke paraded around her in a beautiful dance. She realized the smoke came from a censer where incense burnt. The image panned out to a group of robe-clad women chanting and among them Kyra saw herself. She realized this had been a special celebration of their holy day, Samhain, when their coven held ritual. She thought back to the days when the coven was new and vibrant before petty rivalries caused her to seek other forms of worship. She recalled being drawn to a particular censer. Now, she knew the elementals had been aware as well.

The image was broken as Arret disengaged the staff, "I viewed the images with you, and the elementals use this imagery for communication. You experienced Air's peaceful aspects, clearly it approves of you. My connection with them allows you this level of
contact. I suggest you form a responsive image in return.” Kyra visualized an eagle floating lazily with no purpose beyond that of pleasure. A slight gust of wind brushed her cheek acknowledging her reply. She was still reeling as Arret gently guided her to the south. Oak’s tip touched the domain of the salamander and more images came. They flowed in a blazing procession; bubbling magna from the earth’s bowels; a signal fire fighting back the blackness of night; an old drum filled with burning papers keeping the chill from homeless people. In her mind came a single dancing flame surrounded by darkness. This was different because she became the flame itself with movements beyond what a dancer would attain. The image panned out and she beheld herself kneeling at her own altar. The elemental had been aware of her private rituals. The image changed to a scene of a raging fire. She realized this was the burning of the trees along Lake Shore Drive. Somehow she felt a vague sense of contentment from the trees. Too soon, Arret severed the connection. She formed an image of the sun’s fire and light bringing life to the plants in the surrounding garden. A warm sensation flowed through her and she smiled.

Oak pressed into the chalice’s domain in the West. Kyra received curious scenes until they slowed and became one. A small girl was standing in a garden as a warm summer rain fell. The child was whirling in circles, her tiny hands reaching toward the clouded sky. The girl’s mother was scolding her for playing in the rain. Kyra recognized her own mother and knew the child was herself when she was about two years old. As each drop fell upon her face, she thought of it as a kiss from the sky.

Arret severed the contact and Kyra made her thankful reply to Water. She had a special place in the woods and her favorite time was early in the morning when the dew would fall from the ferns. As a child she believed the drops were the fern’s tears of joy for the renewal of the sun’s life-giving light. Her mouth tasted something very sweet as the liquid elemental acknowledged her.

Oak joined the small stone in the North. Instantly, an image came with a vividness and clarity not matched by the others. Scene after scene flowed by quickly and then settled on an image of her as a small child. She had skinned her knee and was lying on her stomach crying. When cried out, she noticed her tears had dampened the soil. Forgetting her pain, she fingered the small patch of mud. Nearby was a tiny under-nourished weed. She smeared the mud into the dying plant’s base and silently wished her tears would give it strength enough to survive.

The reason for this sharpness of Earth’s contact, came to her, Earth was her chosen element. She had always been drawn to caves and her favorite animal was the armadillo, a burrower. Her entire life had been drawn to this element but she did not make the connection until now. Arret gently lifted Oak and whispered, “Say your farewells, Kyra”. She envisioned herself kneeling in the garden, scooping a handful of soil and kissing it. As she ended her message, she felt something beneath her foot. There she discovered a small crystal and knew it was a gift.

Arret took Oak from her, “You are well met by my companions which is a rare thing. Most are rejected by at least one of them, if not all. I know you wished to continue but I must end this lesson”. He led her back to the kitchen, saying, “I must eat now and rest. Ritual saps strength and I am in great need of sustenance. There is another ritual to perform but I am too weak now.” She nodded and prepared a meal quickly from the garden’s produce.
He ate in silence as she played back the recent events in her mind. When he finished, she said, “The images all made sense except the burning trees. Why would Fire show them?” He shrugged, “Perhaps, it sensed your distress and attempted to make you understand they were comfortable with the outcome. Their immolation was to provide me the means to reach the beach and hold an important ritual. If circumstances allow, I will return and retrieve living remnants and replant them elsewhere.”

She tentatively accepted his explanation. There were many things about him she did not understand, “Arret, tell me about yourself. Where are you really from? What is it you actually do? Your speech is strange and you talk in riddles about the past. You have shown me your companions but nothing of yourself. I promise I will not betray your trust.” He made his decision quickly, “You have aided me when I was in need and my companions find favor in you. I usually protect my identity but I have no qualms in sharing my story with you. There is time but soon I must rest. Before the dawning, I must hold another ritual and attempt to clarify what is expected of me. Now, let us find a place more comfortable.” They returned to the garden and sat in the grass under a dwarf fruit tree. Kyra waited patiently as he gathered his thoughts.

His voice held a distant tone which seemed to carry a touch of sadness, “I was born in the land you call Sumer. My family lived outside the city walls of mighty Erech. Our civilization had been declining since the great king Gilgamesh died. The priesthood usurped power and controlled everything with intimidation and lies. Erech had been Gilgamesh’s capital; they controlled everything with intimidation and lies. Erech had been Gilgamesh’s capital, the mightiest in the land. Our king was no longer the strong hand needed to rule and now power was in the hands of the priesthood and our system rotted from within. Other cities were rising to challenge its supremacy. To the south, along the Euphrates River, Ur and Eridu threatened. To the north, from Kish and Akkad, it was rumored armies were being raised for war. Into this time I came to be. My parents supplied grain for the city. My world consisted of: a small village; the fields we worked; the great river, with its many irrigation canals; and the outer walls of Erech. As mere farmers, we were not allowed within the city walls. Merchants took our produce and gave us a portion of their earnings. My father could have demanded entry due to his lineage, for he was of the line of Ziusudra the Great, but chose not to. Ziusudra’s deeds were shared at the fire pits where travelers and families would gather for warmth and protection. From my earliest memories, I listened to all the stories of him. The one most famous was of his being favored by the gods and building a vessel to save all from the Great Wash. For his deeds, the gods granted him immortality. The Great Wash was ages before even Erech was built. Still, Ziusudra would return and walk among men for short periods. During these visits, he performed impossible feats and carried weapons only the gods were known to command. One of the feats attributed to him was the creation of the intricate irrigation channels, by the waving of his hands. They were huge and supplied water from the great river for the massive farms supplying the population of the cities and all the lands subject to the king. It was such a visit where he sired my father’s line. When the priests gained control, most of the stories were forbidden but the people remembered. There was a tablet carved in stone which declared this lineage and was made by Ziusudra himself in front of hundreds of people. Generations had passed since that day and Ziusudra was said to have appeared at least twice since then in other cities. Needless to say, as a boy, this inflated my ego to unhealthy levels. I was taught the ways
of planting according to the seasons, the husbandry of animals, and a reverence for the land. I was resistant to this and dreamed of becoming a great warrior. My parents tried to discourage me but if my blood was the same as Ziusudra's, why would I want to be a lowly farmer?"

"In those days, a man must choose his own name when he reached maturity, until then, names were ever-changing according to the events in one's life. My name changed as the wind, from 'Egg Taker' to 'Stone Thrower' to any other silly name until my naming ceremony. Names would last for as long as the youngling's attention who gave them. When I came of age, I attended my village's naming ceremony. Every male who reached his twelfth spring was required to name himself. Without a name, a man could not take a wife or fight in battle. I stood proudly before the entire village and announced to the scribe my name from that day forward to be Ziusudra! There came a sudden silence over those assembled. The scribe dripped his stylus and I looked out and saw stunned faces of those whom I had known my entire life. Instead of approval for my bold name choice, the people saw this as sacrilege as if I had dared to name myself a god. If I had chosen 'Seed of Ziusudra' or something similar there would have been no such reaction. The priests were feared by all and everyone knew their wrath would fall upon me. I felt, since I was of Ziusudra's line, no priest could tell me what my name should be. The choice set me upon a path with immediate consequences. The villagers pronounced me dead to them. Only my parents stood with me as we quickly returned to our home."

"Father gave me supplies and told me I must leave before the priests came. He said it was not my fault for having chosen such a name. He should not have told me so many tales of my ancestor. There was no way to take back the name once spoken. He told me to travel as far from Erech as I could. The priests would hear of my blasphemy and come to sacrifice me to Enlil, Utu, or some other deity. He suggested I follow the river south to where there was said to be a great body of water. I protested saying I knew in my heart I was destined for this name. He told me I may know something in my heart but the hearts of others would not care. To them, there could be but one Ziusudra and he was favored above all me by the gods. If I stayed, the priests would come for me and my family. My parents and I would die and my siblings would become slaves to the priesthood. Only my exile would save my family and myself from the priest's wrath. My father explained the priests had long been jealous of my bloodline being known to the people and would use this to extinguish something which might someday rival their power."

"I left my home with what I could carry, never to see my family again. As the river moved south the next city was Ur. The two cities have been bickering over water, grain, territory or whatever the priests decided. My journey began when the two cities were on the verge of war. Erech had already been drafting men from the fields and quickly training them in the use of weapons. I had secretly planned to join them and become a warrior after the naming ceremony. My plans were not to be, especially after my pride destroyed the only life I had ever known."

"I traveled for five days moving mostly under the cloak of darkness. Keeping close to the river, I came upon the outlands of the city of Ur. I knew to be cautious as my dress and hair style were different from the people of Ur. I then turned inland to skirt the city and the increasing presence of soldiers. Being young and daring, I found it easy to slip by sentries and relieve them of any food or drink I needed. It was like a game to me even though it was not. If caught, my life would end quickly and violently."
Kyra had a puzzled expression on her face. Arret paused when he noticed she was having difficulty with his story as had so many others in the past. She said, “I'm not a history buff but I remember studying Sumer; you can't be from there, it doesn't exist anymore”. He nodded, “I speak the truth, Kyra Wells. I was born around 2800 B.C. by your current calendar. I know this seems inconceivable but soon you will understand.” He continued with his story, “On the sixth night of my adult life, I passed Ur and altered my course to regain the river. Smelling the water and thinking myself safe, I foolishly walked into a patrol of Ur's best. I ran like the wind as they gave chase. Running through the darkness, I felt the slope moving upwards. Bluffs were common here and they cornered me atop one. I reached the straight cliff above the river and saw no way down. My pursuit caught up and I turned to face them. They numbered nine and were fully armed. They laughed and mocked me until I drew my skinning knife and defiantly yelled, 'I am Ziusudra, come you filthy belly-crawlers and feel the sting of my blade!' The mention of my powerful name unnerved them but only for a moment. The youngling before them could not be Ziusudra. They planned to toy with me before leaving my bones to rot, but not now. There was fear in their eyes not for me but for anyone who would dare to use such a name. To declare myself as such would surely bring about a curse from the gods. They quickly overcame their shock and after a brief conference spread out in a half-circle. As credit to their training, they threw their spears as one. I was skinny and nimble, even so, three blades struck me: one through my right shoulder, one sliced my rib cage, and the last pierced my left thigh. I fell backwards off the cliff and my terrified screams shattered the moonless night. The water was cold as I plunged into the swirling darkness. For a moment I forgot the pain but only briefly. I knew I was about to die but the thought of being devoured by the monstrous river beasts seemed much more terrifying. My body numbed and all I could do was let the current take me. Somewhere in the darkness I lost consciousness and my life drifted into the hands of fate.”

“I woke next to a warm fire but when I tried to move, my wounds convinced me otherwise. Across the fire sat an old man with long unkempt gray hair and beard. When he saw me conscious, he said, 'Ziusudra, a powerful name for such a skinny pup. Do not be surprised, you spoke much in your fever.' He stood and came toward me with knife in hand and I could only lie there helplessly. He passed by and cut meat from a carcass hanging behind me, then cooked placed it upon a spit and watched it cook while ignoring me. When the meat was fairly well burnt, he threw a smoldering piece at me. I tried to catch it but pain stopped me short and it fell in the dirt; he seemed unconcerned and just ignored me. I picked up the dirty meat and ate greedily before sleep took me again.”

“With the morning light I saw he was a physical wreck. A large scar covered the left side of his face. It traveled through the socket where his eye had once been. The effect on his upper lip was frightening, it pulled his lip upwards causing an evil looking grin. My arm was bound to keep my shoulder stable, another wrap held a foul-smelling poultice to my ribs and a third covered my thigh. I heard him chuckle, ‘You look as if Enil himself had chewed you up in his foul maw and spit you out. Truth is I am in no better shape. The priests have done their best to turn the world sour for me. Rest easy and eat, Pup. I would hear your story.’ I told him and when I was finished, he asked, 'Little Pup, what makes you think you deserve such an honored name? It appears your only feats are to endanger your family and to collect spears with your body.' He laughed
and slapped his knee. I told him I wished to save the world as my ancestor had. I felt I was special because of my bloodline and my gift. He leaned closer and asked what I spoke of. I explained, 'I am able to look into some people's eyes and see their destiny or fate. This did not work with everyone but those open to me were of two types. The ones with clear images showed their destiny. Those with blurry images were of possible fates and could therefore be altered.' He pondered this and nodded his head. After a time he inspected my wounds, declaring the spears had poisoned tips and my wounds were blackening. He shrugged, saying, 'It seems death is coming to claim you, Pup'.

'I had not expected such a candid statement and told him, 'You could have lied to me. At least I would face death with the name of one who pleased the gods so well they made him immortal.' He replied, 'I would not dare to lie to Ziusudra. Pup, not everything the priests say is true. They speak with jealous tongues and hide what they do not understand. Let me ask you, if you could save the world would you give up your all?' He mocked me as I lay dying and I raged, 'I would do this and more! Does not the blood of Ziusudra run in my body?' He nodded thoughtfully and said, 'Then you might be deserving of the name. You are a tough one for being so young. Even so, pain is necessary for the lessons you must learn. So know, mighty Ziusudra, this will hurt.' From out of nowhere he smashed me in the face with a large club.'

'When I awoke, I lay on a stone inside a strange crystal chamber. My belongings lay against the wall. I looked for an exit but the walls were solid. I wondered if the gods were indeed punishing me for taking such a name. Anger rose within as I yelled, 'I am Ziusudra and I am not afraid! You dealt me a coward's blow but I survive!' A passage appeared suddenly from nowhere and I prepared for an attack but only the darkness of the tunnel greeted me. Grabbing my few possessions, I tentatively walked into the lightless shaft which eventually led me to the surface. It was only then I realized my wounds were healed. I guessed Old One-Eye was a god toying with me. I did not understand what happened but I was glad to be whole again. As I stood there, the tunnel disappeared and I knew this place was ruled by sorcery. I made haste to be elsewhere.'

'The days passed quickly as I continued down river. The city of Eridu was next and I slipped by unnoticed. After many days I came to a great body of water. I stood on a hill and watched the waves for hours. There had been tales told of beasts as large as mountains which ate men whole. They never showed themselves, I told myself, they must have feared the mighty Ziusudra.'

'Moving along the coast for five cycles of the moon, I came to a small village. There were no soldiers or priests, just common people struggling to survive. I walked in and introduced myself. My first surprise was the name Ziusudra was unknown. So, I took it upon myself to enlighten them. They had no knowledge of the Great Wash or any of the deeds attributed to my ancestor. They were not impressed but listened politely. Their only concern was if I wished to join them to farm and fish. Thus, I found a new home and soon chose a wife. Over the next three and a half cycles of seasons, I fathered twin boys and a girl. Life was hard but satisfying. I still trained as a warrior but lived as a farmer and fisherman.'

'Life is always subject to change. This time the change came when a terrified youngling brought news of an armed force approaching. He described their dress and I quickly identified them as soldiers from Ur. I reasoned they must have conquered Eridu and moved southward to expand their domain. A patrol came confidently into our land.
and found us waiting in ambush. I was no longer an unskilled youth and my weapons were sharp and swift. The blood of many dying man quenched the thirsty edges of my knife and spears that day. The battle was short and the soldiers began to retreat. As I slew one, another greeted me with a spear in my back. The point came out through my stomach and I dropped to my knees. The sounds of battle moved away and I knelt amongst the dead and dying.”

“As I watched my life’s blood slip through my fingers, a familiar voice said, ‘Do you so enjoy collecting the workmanship of Ur’s weaponry, Pup?’ I immediately recognized the voice of Old One-Eye. He surveyed those I had slain, ‘You have become a truly skilled warrior, Pup. Is this the glorious life you wished for? Did these men not have families, as you? There is no glory in killing. If your lust for blood is sated, the time has come for you to kill no more. Perhaps, you would like to start living as your namesake?’ Again, he brought out my rage, ‘I am dying, you one-eyed dung heap! Find a club and smash my head again not only to ease my pain but to rid me of your torments.’ He patiently waited for my answer. I could not bear his mocking gaze any longer and replied, ‘I give my word, since I am dying already, to kill no one else. That is, unless you come closer and I can slit your tormenting throat! How dare you mock me as I die?’ He laughed, ‘This is not your day of death, mighty Ziusdra. For I, the true Ziusdra, am here to save you.’ Without warning he jerked the spear from my body. I cried out in agony to which he remarked, ‘Pain is good, Pup, if you feel it, you know you still live’.”

“The broken old man picked me up as if I weighed nothing and carried me into the nearby woods. A dark tunnel entrance appeared in front of me, strangely, it resembled one I had used when Old One-Eye and I last met. We moved inside as he told me the pact I must make with the land itself. I must vow to never willingly take another man’s life; I must protect the Sacred Grove; and must do the land’s bidding in all things. It was hard to believe this old man was Ziusdra. He placed me on the slab and made a power sign over my head. My eyes closed and I knew nothing more. When I woke, my body was healed completely. His voice took on a weary tone, ‘The time has come and a decision must be made. Let me warn you, this is an amazing gift but just as your knife has two edges so cuts this. You must understand what is a wondrous life can also be a painful curse. Will you make your vow or have I misjudged you?’ Without hesitation or thought of the consequences, I answered, ‘I have taken your name, if sworn to by you, I could do no less.’ He nodded and then bonded me to the elementals. ‘Whenever I am called, I carry them as my companions. When I sleep in the crystal chamber, what I call the ‘Womb of the World’, they are free to do as they will.”

“Old One-Eye spent nine days giving me guidance and stories of his experiences. He lived, as I do now, by the grace of Gaia. He simply referred to the entity as ‘the land’, but I prefer to use the concept of the Greeks and refer to it as Gaia. I answer when called to attempt change according to Gaia’s wishes. I was puzzled about one thing which made no sense, Old One-Eye had many scars which should have been healed when he slept but he said he chose to keep the scars. He explained the priesthood had come close to ending his life and for him to appear as he did was a disguise for they knew he would be restored after each awakening. He said the priests had captured him through treachery and tortured him, which is why he had no eye. Before leaving, he said, ‘As you learn more of Spirit and what it wishes from your flesh, you will discover all your experiences, even those of pain and suffering, are part of your reason for being. When you are among men,
do not let your pride cause you to take credit for your deeds. Guard your name well, the
priests know of your true purpose and will be more watchful as time passes.' He looked
to the west, saying, 'My way is not of the warrior, it appears your path leads in that
direction. Fight as you must but kill none. Remember, gods and religions will pass but
the land remains.' He strode off without looking back. I have often wondered where he
went and what became of him."

"I rejoined my village, warning them of Ur's military might and how they would
return to avenge their ambushed patrol. Many had seen me impaled and once the
rejoicing ended, the questions began. I explained everything but they doubted such a
fanciful tale. I grew morose and let them believe whatever they wished. As night fell,
everyone huddled around fires for warmth. I felt a chill inside as if the hand of death was
clutching my very soul. The fire before me reared up and danced with fantastic colors.
The wind ceased around us yet beyond the fire's glow it roared with the force of a storm.
I was being summoned and everyone's eyes were upon me. I stood slowly as those
nearest cowered from my presence. I announced, 'That which I have spoken of is true. I
have become the Ziusudra of legend, touched by deity. The elementals I spoke of are
summoning me for the path I have chosen. The pact was sworn to, now it must be kept.'
I held my family briefly and felt their fear. I knew then what Old One-Eye meant by this
being a curse. There was nothing left for me but the Womb and oblivion."

"I woke on the slab and walked out into the sunlight, I recognized the area of my
village. Eagerly, I ran home but it was not there. Only small straight lines of crumbled
stone gave a hint of previous habitation. I do not know how long I slept but all trace of
my family was gone. There was nothing to do but contact the land as I was instructed
and perform what tasks were given. This was the first of countless awakenings. I only
age when outside the Womb. At the time I took my vows, I was but ten and eight cycles
of seasons. In almost five thousand years, I have aged to how I appear now."

Arret stopped and yawned as Kyra sat in silence thinking of his fantastic tale.
Suddenly, she realized they were surrounded by animals. Rabbits, dogs, even deer
crowded around. A hoot from above brought her attention up to see a large owl swoop
down and perch upon Arret's shoulder. The creature swung its head around and stared
directly at her. Arret made a gesture and silently the animals left. He explained, "When I
am at peace, especially after ritual, they sense my vibrations and are drawn to me. Their
spirit remembers the 'Promise' even though mankind has forgotten." She stood expecting
him to go back to the house but he declined, saying, "I prefer to remain under the stars".
He was asleep before she reached the house.

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Johnny peeked around the dumpster. He knew if he didn't get out of town soon, he'd
be dead. Everyone in the city seemed to be after him. What a screwed up day; the
encounter with the psycho Arret; the destruction of a large part of his gang; the
interrogation from that pig Doyle; and to top it off, his remaining gang blamed him for it
all. He had stayed back and let the others charge in. It wasn't like him and they thought
he set them up. Plus, he went one-on-one with the guy and didn't get a scratch. The
word was out all over the 'streets', Wacker had sold out his own gang and was fair game
for anyone with a grudge. Even worse, the cops were hunting him again. They'd been

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searching all over his normal hangouts, especially that nut Doyle. Rumor was some cop got his head split open by Arret. The city wasn't safe, every possible sanctuary was known to those looking for him. People he might have trusted were too afraid to help and any movement would certainly be noticed. He ended up sitting between two dumpsters in the same alley where this all started. His plan was to wait until dark and then make it to the train yards and catch a freight train out of town.

Approaching footsteps echoed in the alley. Johnny took a peek and saw a rival gang walking turf they wouldn't have dared this morning. There were too many to fight so he made a break with a thirty yard head start. Pursuit was immediate. The noise behind reminded him of some old safari movie where the natives beat the brush and flushed their prey into the awaiting hunters. The imagery wasn't lost on the actual event. In front of him stepped the rest of his ex-brothers, mixed with more of the rival gang. An alliance had been forged and he was the sacrifice needed to seal it. Readyng himself, he took a deep breath and waited. He remembered Arret saying they would meet again, now would be a good time but the stranger did not appear. He threw his unconscious body inside a dumpster and left him to die.

Wacker's eyes opened but there was nothing to see. There seemed to be a sliver of light above him but he could not make out why it was there. Only the smells and memory of where he had been brought the realization he was inside a dumpster. Johnny was amazed he was not dead. His pain was not localized, it was everywhere. Making an examination of his body, he found a rib breaking through his chest; his face was pulp; his legs were not working; and there was blood from what he realized was a stab wound in his back. It took a great effort to move only a few inches but somehow he made it. Reaching up, he pushed the dumpster lid up and cautiously peeked out. No one was waiting to give him a second helping. A painful half an hour later he fell out of the dumpster and stumbled down the alleyway. There was no place to go but he wasn't going to just lay there and die. In front of him, a squad car skidded to a halt. Johnny gave up and crumpled to the pavement as unconsciousness took him.

Wacker awoke in the hospital and found himself shackled to the bed. There was numbness in his body and he realized he was on drugs. Trying to move, he found the drugs did not block out all the pain. Across the room sat a cop who noticed movement and summoned a nurse. When she arrived, the cop whispered something to her and she left. Half an hour later Doyle showed up. It was clear he was enjoying this and had more questions in mind.

Doyle just had his butt reamed by his boss for messing up with the DRU. Instead of taking care of business, he took off and abandoned his duties. The Chief had reminded him of the importance of the DRU and how running after a suspect was for younger, healthier cops who weren't on light duty. Some important reports were lost and emergency services had been delayed due to Doyle's irresponsible actions. Chief of Police, Elias Travers, let Doyle off with a warning but only because one of their own had been assaulted. The Chief was disturbed with the whole affair. Not only had one of his own been hospitalized but there was a path of property damage and people laid out like some kind of war zone. True, most of the injured were gang members but the media would only report the injured were young men. The Chief wanted this guy bad and Wacker knew something, Doyle was certain of it. The Chief had grudgingly put Doyle on the case and temporarily off the DRU.
Doyle excused the duty cop and waited until he was alone with Wacker, then said, “You look bad kid, a little more and you'd be cured of all that ails you. I know we don't see things the same but somebody put the hurt to you and I'm thinking it might be that creep we discussed. Did he come back and teach you some manners like he done your pals? Look Wacker, this ain't about you, you're just in protective custody until I get some answers. This guy slugged a cop and cracked his head wide open, so my boss is leaning on me to nab him. Come on Wacker, if he did this to you, I can help.”

Johnny replied, “Check this Doyle, the guy was a stranger, I only saw him the one time and he wrecked my guys. I just fell down some stairs and he wasn't around. If you really want to help me, my bedpan needs changing.” Doyle moved close and pressed his thumb against the teen's ribs. He smiled as Wacker grit his teeth. This was a battle Wacker couldn’t win and he finally let out a scream causing Doyle to let up. The cop said, “Well, now we know you can yell, think you can talk or do we play some more?” Johnny gasped, “Look, I don't know nothing, the guy just kicked ass and split like he was in a hurry. You saw the others, took a few seconds and he didn't break a sweat. This wasn't his doing, I ain't seen him since.” Doyle still felt there was something missing, “Did you notice anything strange? We got reports of weird things happening wherever he turns up.” Wacker replied, “Nope, just that filthy robe and how he used that stick of his. Man, that guy moved with a 'smooth wickedness' like I ain't never seen”.

Reporting to his office, Doyle lifted the hold on Wacker and worked on a progress report. There were no new sightings, the suspect had simply vanished. Vinny was troubled with all the strange things happening, he was reminded of the stories Grammy Lu always told him. She filled his head since childhood with Irish tales of witches and such. He remembered tomorrow was his day to visit her in the rest home. Monthly, he made a point to see her and she would be expecting him. Well, this time he would be the one with a tale for her.

The following morning Vinny headed south to the suburb of Joliet. He pulled up to the rest home a little over an hour later. Grammy Lu was waiting for him all dressed up and holding a bouquet of flowers. The smile on her face put the flowers to shame. Vinny really loved this old gal, sure she was eccentric and a handful at times but the bond between them was strong. He wished she would come and stay with him but she liked her independence and would have stubbornly refused. She spoke with an Irish accent which became more pronounced whenever she became excited. Vinny gave her a big hug and kiss. Being such a tiny thing, he easily picked her up and swung her around. She let out a laugh and grabbed his arms as he gently set her down.

She was facing the street and heard birds making noise. There was a park across the street where three huge crows sat atop a tree. With one perfectly timed motion, they took flight and headed straight for her. Vinny felt her body tense and he turned. He saw the birds but was looking for something threatening in the park. The crows were about thirty feet away when they broke off and circled the couple three times. Vinny knew Grammy Lu was terrified of crows. They were about the only things she was afraid of. After the third circle, they flew off out of sight. The old woman's face was white as a sheet. She dropped the flowers and stood as still as a statue. He put his arms around her and told her they were just some crazy birds, not to worry. She seemed to shake it off and grabbed his hand with surprising strength and commanded, “Come my son's son, there be family matters to tend to”.

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Vinny knew there was no sense in arguing with her when she got into one of her moods. They drove to the one place Grammy Lu felt comfortable, Joliet State Park. The flowers were in bloom and it was such a peaceful place. Her favorite spot was where water poured over a spillway into a shallow pond. They selected a place away from anyone else and Vinny knew she was about to tell one of her stories. She just looked so serious this time and he knew the episode with the crows had really shaken her. They sat for a time and he found it strange she would not look directly at him. When she finally spoke, it wasn't with a story but a question, "How much do ye know of our family history?" He thought for a moment, "Well, your mother came from Ireland in County Westmeath, I think. Other than that, I don't know much, seems like whenever you spoke about it, I was sent from the room." She nodded, "Yes, your father did his best to shield you from the truth. What of me true name?" Vinny's face turned red as he admitted, "I really ain't sure what it is, I always called you Grammy Lu". She reached out and took his hand, proudly announcing, "Me given name be AnLuan Curry and I must tell you now, Mother left Ireland in shame with me in her belly. I was born out of wedlock. The year was 1913 when I drew me first breath. I never knew Mother's christened name but she answered to Fidelma. I've told the story of the druidess Fidelma of Sidh in Crauchan many times as handed down in the old tales. Mother got the name because she had the 'sight' and when she reached the shores of America; she changed her last name of O'Curry to Curry. I be telling you this now for a special reason. Vincent, this be not some fanciful tale. Fidelma truly possessed the 'sight' and wrote of many things to come in her diaries. This be one of her most important prophesies:

On Beltane calls
Crows of three.
Sounding change
For those who see.
A son to lose
You have but one.
Tears not, oh daughter
His time is come.
Three times round they will soar.
Spirit needs death to open the door.

"Vincent, today be Beltane and the reason for the flowers. I do not have the 'sight' as did she. Me gift be remembering the old tales word for word. Your father, God rest his soul, had no gift as sometimes they pass a generation. I watched you become a policeman solving crimes and felt you had the 'sight' as well. You see things others do not. Be it not so, Vincent?" He was thinking of his family and had to admit he knew little of them. The women always talked of strange things but his father sheltered him. When he was young and Grammy Lu had frightened him with one of her tales, his father told him, "Son, the ways of womenfolk are different from men. When I was your age your Grammy Lu told me I would die because of something or other. I worried until it came to me that I was my own man and would decide my own fate, not somebody seeing an omen and believing it will bring doom. Women are a compliment to men, do not take them lightly but also don't let their ways run yours." Vinny hadn't thought of this in years.
but the words rang clear as if his father was still living and had just spoke them. Vinny said, "Grams, I'm good at finding clues and making them fit. I don't know if it's the 'sight' but maybe. I don't understand some of what you said about crows at Beltane but I know I ain't gonna die because of no damn squawking crows flying in circles. You've told me lots of scary Irish tales and filled my head with visions of wondrous things. I'm grateful to you but they're just stories to me. Besides, I can't be dying until I make a difference in the world. That's the main reason I became a cop. Enough of this, tell me more about Fidelma. Why did she come to America? Ireland seems is a long way to travel for a pregnant woman." She replied, "Mother did whatever she set out to do. Europe was headed for war and America be a place to start anew. She wanted to be far from her kin, for they were unforgiving and she refused to give the whereabouts of the father. There be another reason as well, one more important than anything else. She knew me father would be here when the time was right. She couldn't tell when, only where. Here in America, she became one of the many mothers who, because of the war, were alone. No one knew the truth, and unlike Ireland, no one really cared. She married twice and bore no more children. She outlived both husbands and died in 1980. She was a lonely woman and many a time she said she knew but one love and everyone else was but a friend. When your father died, I believed the prophesy of losing a son be done with. There were no crows flying when he left us. I took the term 'son' to mean me own, not me grandson. Now it seems ye be the one." Vinny knew she would hold to her beliefs no matter what he said. His only recourse was to change the subject. "Grams, you're too upset. We got a nice spot here and good food. I know how much you like being by the water. Let me tell you about stuff going on with me."

AnLuAn had calmed down over the last half hour as Vinny told her about the events in his life since his last visit. He saw her attention spark when he got to the part of the robed stranger who hospitalized the street gang with his stick and about the strange twister forming while he assaulted a police officer. When her face went pale, he took out his phone to call 911 but she clutched his arm, "Vincent, I be fine. Let me set a wee moment. Tell me, did ye catch him?" He gave a negative shake of his head and saw relief in her eyes. Her color returned and she asked him to continue. He explained how they had the suspect surrounded within a couple of blocks when the trees caught fire and in the confusion he just disappeared. There were tears of joy in her eyes, "None of these things be by chance; Vincent, do this man no harm, no matter what he does. He would cause no deaths and if those hooligans and the officer be hurt there be a good reason. Promise me to restrain your police. It be possible the twister and trees burning be at his behest. This man be very powerful, Vincent, he controls the very forces of nature. You must give me your word, if by some strange chance you catch him, you must take me to him."

Vinny thought she was losing it, "Grams, you're all wound up about them birds; I think we should head back now". When they reached his car she asked if he had the police sketch of the suspect. He handed her one and she stared at the paper for a long time and began to slowly trace her finger around the face before her. Her voice was strained with emotion, "There be no doubt, this be him. Vincent, you think me an old crone with stories made up to frighten the wee ones. Believe me, there are bits of truth in them. This man you seek, I know of him and I can prove it!" Vinny frowned, "Grams, you know I'm here for you and want to believe everything you say but we both know you
tend to stretch things. It ain't possible for a man to control nature. If you know something about this guy and got proof, I'll try to protect him but only if you give me good reason.” She confidently said, “Drive on, Vincent, I've something in my room to show you. I be getting on in hears and its time you knew”.

Arriving at her room, AnLuan unlocked a large cedar chest which filled the room with the scent of mothballs. She handed him a bundle of papers, “Here be the one you seek”. He looked at the brittle yellowing pages and saw they were a collection of drawings. The first page showed a man wearing a long robe and holding a staff. His back was turned as he looked across a wooded valley. The second showed the man sitting against a tree and facing the artist. His hair was long but neat and he was surrounded by butterflies and birds. AnLuan tossed the police sketch to her grandson, “Be this familiar, Vincent?” He noted the similarity and turned the page to find eight soldiers surrounding the lone man; their uniforms appeared to be of World War One style. The next page pictured seven soldiers fallen and unconscious as the remaining stood further away with pistol drawn. A bullet struck the robed man in his chest and he dropped to his knees. The soldier was next shown lying face-down and unconscious with a young woman standing over him and holding a tree branch. The woman then helped the robed man into a cave and placed him on a slab inside a strange looking chamber. The final scene showed her crumpled against a strangely studded wall, crying, as the man lay lifeless before her.

Vinny set down the pages, “Grams, where'd you get these? Maybe this guy is part of a cult from overseas and they all wear the same type robes?” She slapped his arm in disgust, “It be amazing God made Irishmen such good fighters and yet He gave them no brains to go with”. She reached into the chest and pulled out another bundle. He turned the pages and the story continued. The couple walked out of the cave with linked arms. The man showed no signs of injury as they moved through the countryside with unrealistic scenes of animals befriendng them. AnLuan saw his look of disbelief and said, “Vincent, do not close your mind to this; those coming will be of interest”. He went back to the drawings where the couple lay hidden in some brush watching a group of soldiers. The robed man was holding something small in his hand and there appeared to be a twister forming above him. The soldiers were scattered by the winds and the couple walked through the middle of them totally unaffected by the storm. Another sequence showed the pursued hiding in a field of grain while hundreds of soldiers spread out to capture them. The robed man held what appeared to be a small lizard and pointed it toward the soldiers. The field caught fire and acted like a barrier, allowing the couple to safely flee again. The final scene had the couple in a small boat with soldiers in pursuit across a lake. The man held up his hand and a blanket of fog formed just around the boats of the soldiers. AnLuan handed her grandson a smaller packet and told him they were the last of the drawings. The man stood alone in the middle of a grove formed of massive trees. His hands were raised as if evoking something from the sky. At his feet sprang a number of small saplings which he collected and tied into a neat bundle. The couple was then pictured watching as woodcutters felled the giant trees. The final drawing showed the man walking alone into the cave entrance. At the bottom of the page in feminine script was written, 'Arret is gone. Uisneach, County Westmeath, Ireland.'

Vinny returned the packet, “Grams, I want to know about this guy and where you got these. No more drawings, no more riddles.” She stood erect and looked him in the eye, “This man you seek be known as Arret and these sketched be from the year 1912.
Vincent Alexander Doyle, I know you've doubts.” She went back and produced a well-
worn book. She handed it to him. “This diary be from the same time. The woman who
wrote this did not wish Arret to be forgotten. I ask that you read the section marked with
a ribbon. Understand the woman be in love and her verse be flowery. From me earliest
memories, this be read to me over and over. Vincent, the woman who drew these scenes
and wrote this be Fidelma, your great grandmother. The man ye seek, he be family.
Arret be my very own father and your great grandfather.” Vinny shook his head, “That
isn't possible; he'd be well over a hundred years old”. She laughed, “You be so wrong, he
be much, much older”.

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It was a little after four in the morning as Kyra stood looking out the kitchen window
to where Arret lay in the dark. Arret had told her that sometimes the power from ritual
would linger within those who shared a circle. She filled her coffee mug with tap water
and wondered if the elemental would respond to her as it had to Arret. She called to the
water elemental and asked it to purify the water but no reply came. Trying again, this
time she pictured the mug with a white light cleansing it but the cup just sat there. She
frowned and muttered, “Well, I never claimed to be a magician”. A sweet refreshing
fragrance drifted by reminding her of a pristine waterfall. In her mind came an image of
pure, clean water which was kissed and caressed by nature itself. Fingers trembled as she
took the cup and tasted the delicious liquid. Closing her eyes, she savored the feeling as
the water flowed through her body. She opened her eyes and looked around the kitchen,
wondering if she had just been dreaming or if this had actually happened. She fought the
urge to drink the remaining contents of the cup immediately. Instead she placed instant
coffee into it and set it inside the microwave. She wondered if Arret would consider this
unnatural or even if the pureness would remain with such treatment. She watched the
plumes of steam as they mingled with each other. The coffee's aroma was strong as she
thought of the elements, each one participating in the creation of the coffee beans making
this drink possible. This was something sacred and she would never look at another cup
of coffee or a simple meal as anything but magical. Even with her studies of Wicca and
her reverence for nature, she never realized just how magical every little mundane part of
life really was. She closed her eyes and thanked the elementals.

Returning to the window, she could barely make out the animals as they rested near
him. Kyra pondered the story of Ziusudra. After the experience with the elementals,
there was no doubt of this mysterious man's claims. Going over his story, she realized
there was something very familiar. Suddenly it came to her, Noah, Ziusudra must be the
Sumerian equivalent of the biblical Noah! The Great Wash was the biblical Flood! The
man sleeping in the garden had walked and talked with the original Noah. She
remembered reading about the ancient texts from Sumer, which predated the Jews, in the
story of Gilgamesh. How many thousands of years had passed? She wondered about the
man himself. How many years had he been asleep since his last calling? What great
moments in history had he witnessed? Most of all, why was he here?

Her cup was empty and she opted for a second. As she filled it, she saw Arret shift
slightly and knew he would soon rise. Deciding to impress him, she made a cup for him
as well. The water purifying came easier and the only unnatural thing she would think of
was the plastic mug which held it. She hoped it would be acceptable since he wasn’t going to eat the plastic. Kyra moved stealthily out the kitchen door, hoping to let the coffee aroma awaken him but failed when the owl gave a warning hoot. Arret sat up before the kitchen door closed. The animals faded into the darkness at her approach. She offered the cup telling of her water cleansing, asking, “Ever drink coffee before?” He nodded, “Yes, I have and enjoy an occasional cup of Joe”. She hadn’t heard the term except in World War Two movies. It seemed so out of place until she realized who had said it. She asked, “Arret, they haven’t called it that in years. Were you awake in the 40’s?” He answered, “Normally, the Womb would only implant the current language used. I had difficulty when I first woke; perhaps the process was somehow flawed”. She wanted to keep him talking, “Can you tell me about your earlier times or are they secret?” He sighed, “There is nothing secret about my activities, those times and actions are in the past and I assume long forgotten”. He took a tentative sip of coffee and let the memories flow. To him it was but a short time ago.

“In answer to your question, yes, I was awake during the 1940’s. More than once I was called to do minor things during the war. There were a number of times when I would walk out of the Womb and simply change weather patterns for no given reason. The first 40’s awakening which dealt with the Americans was in the beginning of 1943. I found myself in what was near Tunisia’s eastern coast within a very harsh mountain range called the Eastern Dorsal by the Allies. It ran north and south for over two hundred miles and was a natural barrier between Allied and German forces. I contacted Gaia and was given the task of simply observing until told differently. I was directed to the southern end of the range to a break in the ridge called Faid Pass. There were two hills called Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira near the village of Sidi Bou Zid. Upon these hilltops was placed an American force of about 2,500 soldiers, whose mission was to cover the majority of troops in the pass. The Germans quickly smashed through the untested and poorly trained American lines with their panzer tanks and rushed through the pass. The two hilltops were stranded and although some American forces remained in the pass, the main bulk had retreated back to the Western Dorsal to another pass called Kasserine. The breakthrough was due to the poor leadership of the general in charge who set up his command post miles behind the lines and never visited the front. He had only looked at maps and noted the hilltops, not realizing they were too far apart to offer any support to the valley. The commander was too busy pulling engineers from the units to build a bomb-proof bunker for himself. The same commander gave orders for the hilltops to fight to the death and then he cut the communication lines and retreated.”

“The Germans were trying to mop up the last resistance of those within the pass; I obtained a radio from a fallen soldier and listened to a Colonel Drake, who was with the remaining forces bypassed by the rapid advance of the Germans. His voice came across the radio clear and full of confidence as he directed the forces left in and around the pass. I was close when he decided to make for another high ground position called Garet Hadid. This gave the Germans three hilltops defended by those left behind. On Drake’s way there, he picked up stragglers and units which had been out on patrol. His forces, not on the two hills, numbered less than a thousand men and some three hundred of those were untrained and weaponless recruits. This began constant battles on Garet Hadid the 14th, 15th and 16th of February.”
“On the 15th, the Germans began their attack with heavy weaponry, infantry and dive-bombers. Three times during that day the Germans penetrated the lines on Garet Hadid, but were repulsed. Enemy snipers took their toll on those trapped on the heights. Drake's defense was aided by the terrain which did not allow the heavy panzers to reach their position and with the placement of his few pieces of artillery they kept the enemy at bay. I was frustrated with being idle while men fought and died in the desert.”

“On the 16th, the Germans pushed in the right flank but a counter-attack with two platoons drove the enemy back to his original position. There had been no food or water since the 13th and casualties were heavy, no medical assistance other than first aid could be given to the wounded. The night of the 16th the enemy broke through. The entire rear and right flank were driven in and losses were heavy. I heard Colonel Drake speaking on a radio as he learned the enemy was attacking Djebel Ksaira and they were doubtful they could hold out much longer. Drake contacted those in charge and was given permission to try to make it to the Allied lines at night.”

“It was at this time I received a vibration from Oak which informed me to contact Gaia. I did so immediately and received instructions to act on behalf of the Americans. Their escape plan was given to me and I was to only assist them in escaping the German siege at Garet Hadid. For me this was no problem, in short order I rendered twenty of the night sentries unconscious before the attempted breakout. The GIs crept off the hill and walked through the middle of a German tank encampment without being detected. My instructions were to offer no further assistance and to return to the Womb. I did however follow the ragged procession as they trekked for miles across the desert night. I finally turned toward the Womb and was almost back when the sound of gunfire filled the night and I knew they had been discovered though over 20 miles beyond Garet Hadid. I ran as fast as I could and made the crest of a small hill to see the Germans breaking through the final defensive line using a white flag on a vehicle as a ruse and then start shooting once inside. The resistance ended quickly as the GIs had nothing left to fight with. My vantage point was near enough to hear the German commander assure Drake his wounded would be given the best of care. As soon as Drake was placed in the commander's vehicle and driven off, the wounded not able to walk were bayonetted. There are times, Kyra, when I find it hard to keep my vow. I tried to get the elementals to do something, anything to help the poor souls but they ignored my pleas. I do not know Gaia's reasoning for my limited assistance at the battle of Faid Pass but I suspect someone in that group was meant to survive and beyond through the horrors of the POW camps in Germany. Someone who would have surely died had they not gotten off of Garet Hadid. I am seldom given reasons for my tasks. I can only say, I was there when the first American action was a disastrous defeat.” He sipped his coffee and a distant look filled his eyes, “Many awakenings were unsuccessful. I felt little regard for the Germans which made another calling more satisfying. I woke near the coast of Normandy. The weather was stormy and cold as I stood on a coastal bluff and looked out across the water. Making my circle and contacting Gaia, a single image came to me. I believe you know the day; the Allies refer to it as D-Day. I was only there for perhaps twenty minutes and was instructed to use the chalice and censer to bring about a partial clearing of the weather.”

“There was another failure not long afterwards. Have you heard of the Manhattan Project from that time? I was tasked to stop or at least hinder the development of the
atomic bomb. Earlier I had done the same with greater success on the German effort. There was a scientist who was critical to the entire American program. Without his contribution, it would have taken much longer and perhaps the expense would have proven too costly. I convinced him the weapon was too destructive and how mankind would suffer. There were other secret programs being developed which would bring the desired effect. To his credit, he not only stopped his own work but persuaded others to join him. My task should have ended but the project leader and the Army persuaded all to reconsider, forcefully. My activities were reported to the military and I was hunted as a spy. Their security became intense and there was nothing I could do with the exception of destroying the entire complex. Such a move would cost the lives of workers and I could not do such. I failed in my task and knew it was only a matter of time before the fools would find an excuse to see their new toy work. There have been many such disappointments for me. I am pleased to see mankind has not destroyed itself.” She wanted to know more, “What about you, doesn't Gaia want you to be happy and have a family?” He laughed, “Gaia does not concern itself with happiness in general or me personally. I am a tool to be used as needed. I made a vow of my own free will and I accept whatever comes with it. Truthfully, I have known love for short periods of time. Short as they were, the intensity was always heightened due to the knowledge of the limited time allowed. It is not easy to walk away from someone close but life, even as you experience it, holds no guarantees. I have adapted to this and even though I have regrets, my life is fulfilling. In my time, I have walked with kings and conquerors, fought in battles talked about centuries later. My calling places me at critical events and I was privileged to watch civilizations ebb and flow.”

He chose to change the subject, “During the night I used ritual to help decipher Gaia’s wishes. There is a large reddish metal sculpture in an open space surrounded by tall buildings somewhere in the city. Is such a place known to you?” She nodded, “Its downtown in Daley Plaza; the sculpture is a Picasso and a little further north of where we met”. He said, “This bodes well, for in two days there will be a dark-skinned woman there and I must intercept her as she walks toward her midday repast. Will it be a problem to return to the city then?” She shook her head, “Nope, I'll drive you. All I need to do is take some sick days off. Right now, I think we both could use some breakfast.”

Later in the garden Arret told her, “Time for another lesson, please lay upon the soil with your arms and legs spread out as if they were the lower points of a pentagram”. She complied and watched as he drew a circle around her. He continued, “Your appendages are the elements and your head is spirit. Now, concentrate on the center of your being. Focus your mind on your hands and feet each being an element. Your arms are the lighter elements, Air and Fire; your legs are the heavier elements, Water and Earth. Let your awareness flow to each.” Arret walked around the circle and placed the elementals where they touched her corresponding appendage. “Think of Earth, your element, and concentrate on the soil under you. Let your consciousness seep into the first few inches. Sense the life forms consuming decaying plant and animal remains, each turning death into life. You must understand the exchange between the elements as they break down the materials to bring about change to everything. Living things decay and return to dust; mountains are worn down by erosion from wind and rain. Land masses slowly shift causing new mountains to rise skyward. Oceans swallow the sediment brought from the rivers. The winds carry moisture coaxed from the oceans by the sun’s warmth and

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redistribute the life-giving water over the land. The cycle continues as each of the elements contributes to the dance of life-to death-to life again. If you truly desire to be a witch, love this planet and find the balance to be one with it. As you walk, remove your shoes and feel the pulse of Gaia with each step. Take yourself away from the city, with its metal and concrete, they are but man's attempts to separate himself from the Earth. For too long mankind has felt the need to control the Earth and its forces. Whenever you are confused or simply wish to find answers, make your circle and address the elementals or deity you recognize. There will be times when no answer will come. Even so, you will find comfort in the attempt and the answers will appear at a time when you truly need them. Remember, for most of us, the communications received are in the form of images, not words. They may come in circle or later, as in your dreams. Perhaps, this is why many religions forbid the use of images. The contact with deity by anyone other than their religious middlemen would make the priesthood, thus their influence, irrelevant. I hesitate to share specific rituals used by witches hundreds or thousands of years before. The natural forces change as does everything on Earth. With these changes, the old ways may no longer function. This is why new religions start as the old systems fail. To bring results, new ways must be found to fill the void. Only the elementals seem to be everlasting, perhaps this is due to their nature which is to bring change.” He retrieved the elementals, saying, “You are fortunate to be accepted by the elementals; the ease with which you cleansed the water shows as much”. As he pulled her to her feet, she looked into his eyes. Feeling a deep attraction to him, she knew they would be lovers if he stayed much longer.

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Johnny opened his eyes and surveyed the room. The cop was gone as were his restraints. He knew by now word must have reached the streets about his survival and the gang would be worried he might give them up for trying to kill him. They already believed he sold them out with Arret. Someone would surely show up before long to silence him; it was time to leave. A nurse came in, took his vitals and dispensed his pain medications. When she left, he made his move. Slowly he hobbled to the closet looking for his clothes but found none. He remembered his were soaked with blood and probably were burned by now. Getting out of the hospital without street clothes was almost impossible. He checked the hallway and slipped into the adjacent room. An old man lay in bed staring with eyes glazed from heavy medication. Ignoring him, Johnny went straight to the closet finding what he needed hanging inside. He painfully dressed and made his way out. As he stumbled along, he remembered a woman from his youth when he was being shuffled between foster homes.

Half an hour later he knocked on a familiar front door and an old woman's shriveled face peered out at him. He said, “Mrs. Bertram, it's me, Johnny Wacker. Remember I use to get your groceries. I ain't doing so good and could use your help. Can I come in and have some of your sassafras tea?” The door opened and the woman motioned him inside, saying, “Yes, I remember a much smaller ruffian who helped out us older folk and fed at every house he helped out. Gracious, you look like something ready to open death's door. I think sassafras tea is just what you need. Johnny, you haven't been by for such a long time.” He settled in for the afternoon knowing full well she would coax out
every detail since his last visit. He remembered many times sitting on the sofa drinking her teas. He silently congratulated himself for remembering her and was certain the gang didn't know anything about her. The older people were not in the same loop as the street people. He should be relatively safe here. Night would be the time for him to make his move.

The afternoon progressed as Johnny explained his situation. There was no use lying to her, she would just see right through him. When it was time to go, she gave him some money, saying, "Johnny, use this wisely and don't you get caught. You might take some of my late husband's clothes, they're of no use to me and they'll keep the chill off your bones. I was going to donate them anyways, just never got around to it." She let him to a closet and let him take his pick. Saying goodbye, he slowly eased outside and looked for anyone who might spot him. His injuries would make him easily identified and with so many looking for him, his choices were limited. There was no getting passed it, the train yards were too distant, his only hope was to get a bus ticket and slip out of the city quietly. Arriving at the bus station, he bought a ticket to Des Moines. Iowa should be far enough for now. He didn't know anyone there but he could heal some and then choose another destination. Right now, the main thing was to leave without being noticed. He wished he'd taken a hat for more disguise. The bus was due in only minutes, his eyes shifted between the clock and the doors of the station. Once on the bus he figured he would be safe. It was the waiting which scared him because the station was frequented by street people and this was in another gang's turf. It would not take long for word to reach those searching for him. Hopefully, he would be long gone before anyone was alerted and had time to intercept him.

The bus pulled in and started unloading; if his luck held out for a few minutes more, he'd be gone. It didn't. Suddenly, the entrances were filled with familiar faces. Someone had tipped them off, probably when he bought his ticket. There was no more fight left in his heart. At least twenty approached from all sides and Johnny's thoughts were only on how this would end as they escorted him toward the nearest exit. No words were exchanged as the announcement to board the bus for Iowa lingered in his ears. The exit loomed and two of his escort opened the double-doors into the parking lot. Wacker walked as steadily as he could, accepting his fate. From in front of him came a commotion as cops rushed in. The gang was immediately surrounded and everyone paused as they waited for the next move. A disturbance from behind the wall of cops caught everyone's attention. Blue-clad shoulders separated as Doyle appeared. The grin he was wearing seemed wider than his face should allow. Wacker's escort parted and Doyle said to Johnny, "Glad I caught you here; I got worried when I heard you weren't getting the city's medical attention. I was about to send flowers but didn't know your new address." The cop looked around at the young angry faces, "Hey Wacker, looks like I wasn't the only one thinking of flowers for you". Doyle put his arm around Wacker's sore shoulders and pulled him close, "Missed you, little buddy. We didn't get to bond while you were in the city's tender care. Well, if you're feeling good enough to travel, maybe we can have one of those intimate chats you're so fond of? I doubt your friends would mind if we left them with mine to get better acquainted."

Doyle forced Wacker out into the parking lot. It was no longer dark; there were flashing lights everywhere from numerous vehicles. Wacker pulled from the cop's grasp, "Damn Doyle, they must have opened every sty in the city, there's pigs everywhere."
Doubt if they'll be able to get the smell of doughnuts outta here for weeks.” The cop seemed impatient, “Look jerk, I just saved your ass, you're lucky we got a tip or your pals would have found you a permanent resting place. Personally, I got no problem with that but I keep getting this nagging feeling there's something you ain't telling me. When I get them feelings, they're usually right. I really need info on this robed creep. Make you a deal, give me a lead and I'll stake you enough cash for a head start and get you safely out of the city. You know you're done here, so do yourself a favor and tell me what you're holding back. I got to find this guy and you're my only lead. This ain't just about police business; it got real personal for me.”

Johnny wanted out of town and the money would take care of his needs. What the cop wanted to know was nothing to him. They went to the scene of the fight in hopes of jogging his memory. He took Doyle through the entire sequence of events, leaving out nothing. At the end, he said Arret told him something about destiny and they would meet again. Doyle smiled, “Let's see if this guy really knows the future. If he said you'd meet again, then I'll be sticking to you like glue. Think you was saying something smart about doughnuts. You better get used to them because that's what we're living on for a while.”
The world had become enchanted, from the soil at Kyra's feet to the sweet fragrance of flowers around her. The air was fresher than ever and the sunlight made her feel truly alive. Kneeling, she ran her fingers through a garden pool, absently stirring the water. Her thoughts were on Arret, during the night they had become lovers and her world had changed.

Arret joined her and she said, "I want to know how long you will stay". He replied, "For some reason, Gaia's images are very difficult to decipher and I am deeply concerned about this. When I first accepted this charge, the images were clear and I knew what was required of me. In recent awakenings, I have had difficulty understanding the increasingly cryptic images. I fear Gaia is ill, perhaps the accumulated abuses of mankind have caused too much damage. In answer to our question, there are tasks which must be accomplished before I depart. One involves the woman I mentioned yesterday, beyond this, I feel others have yet to be revealed. Before we met, I saw the destiny of a youngling and knew I would meet him before I departed. I am sorry for not having the answer you seek but there is no pattern for me to draw upon. At times I stayed for a month, others a mere hour." They spent some awkward moments in silence until she asked him to relate another calling.

He began, "I emerged into the world still dominated by Romans. My senses told me I was well to the north of Rome. The time, by your reference, was about four hundred years after the start of Christianity. Oak guided me through a dense, ancient growth of trees. The staff's vibrations were inistent until I stepped out onto a road. A crow above signaled its dismay as the sound of galloping horses broke the serenity of the wood. Four riders came into view; three wore military dress while the other wore civilian attire. The soldier's dress indicated they were 'scholai', attached to a Guard Cavalry unit. Their scabbards seemed somehow wrong and their helmets were of a different design than I had known but they were clearly Roman cavalry."

"They slowed cautiously as if expecting an ambush. Halting, the soldiers formed a defensive triangle around their charge. I nodded my head in greeting as a soldier addressed me, 'You show no cross; these are perilous grounds for those who do not embrace the One True God. Are you the worthless pagan scum sent by Arbogast the usurper as his emissary? Speak scum or move aside.' Finding his manner disrespectful, I replied in kind, 'I am scum to no man, especially to one who finds courage to speak thus when he errantly thinks himself superior. Be civil Roman, or I will be forced to teach you a lesson in humility which you most certainly will not appreciate.' I smiled as two horses charged me and each rider pulled a pilum, one-handed fighting spear. As they passed on each side of me, I deflected one spear and rolled under the second. They both turned their mounts and rode slowly toward me, knowing I was not going to outrun them. They foolishly came one at a time expecting to get individual honor from their quarry. The first was unhorsed with a wicked blow from Oak. As he hit the ground, the other was on me with his second spear. I countered and brought Oak down on his arm causing him to lose his weapon. They tried a new tactic and came at me afoot, drawing their swords. I was concentrating on their eyes and footwork but did not pay enough attention to their weapons. Their swords were not the short gladius of the infantry, each carried spathas which were longer and better suited for mounted men. I took two cuts before
realizing my mistake. After this I took no more time to toy with them and each took quick powerful shots to their legs and then to their helmets, leaving both men unconscious. I dared the third but he wisely edged his mount closer to his charge. The civilian motioned for the soldier to stay, saying, 'This man may be the one we seek; he does not appear to hold the Army of the East in very high esteem. I would speak with him alone.' The soldier protested but was silenced, 'The man is skilled enough to have slain us all. He is clearly of high training and there must be more to him than his simple appearance. Leave us to speak, Bradius, but remain alert for treachery. Trust in the Lord and pray for me.' The soldier bowed his head in obedience and backed his mount away."

"The civilian advanced his mount slowly toward me and said, 'I, Sargost, a humble minister to the Emperor Theodosius, ask your forgiveness for my escort's actions. These are times of war and courtesy is often lacking. Your robe has the look of the Isles, Briton perhaps?' I nodded, 'A gift from the Celtic Manapii people. I am no Christian, just a man called Arret.' I glanced back at the unconscious soldiers, 'The Legion has grown soft. Such lack of skill was not tolerated in the past.' Sargost laughed, 'You speak truth, the best soldiers are needed on the borderlands and much of our forces are barbarian Visigoths who fight for pay and land. Are you from Briton or Eire? Arret, the name is familiar.' His eyes widened and he made an ancient protective sign. There was recognition in his eyes and a quiver in his voice, 'Arret, I know of an Arret. Are you ... can you possibly be he, Arret the Ziusudra, who was at the fall of Mona?"

He dismounted and made a covert druid greeting sign which I returned in kind. There was no doubt this man was a druid who was knowledgeable in their teachings and history. I looked deeply into his eyes and beheld the destiny which awaited him. He enthusiastically asked, 'Can it be true? Were you really there when the druid stronghold fell to the Romans?' There was no reason to deny it, 'Yes, it was sad to watch the Romans under Suetonius crucify and burn the learned masters. I was not permitted to interfere, for their destruction was destined and I was sent to take the chosen druid back to Boudicca and the Iceni people for his triple-death sacrifice in their last attempt to stop the invader's atrocities. I was gone before the battle which saw the end of Boudicca.' He indicated his escort, 'These are but drunks who were deemed expendable for my mission. I must continue to find the one I seek. There is a villa to the west where I will rest until the dawn. I pray you will travel in a like direction to meet with me.' Oak vibrated in my hand and I knew it would be so. I nodded, 'Until then, friend, look for me after the lamps are lit.' He seemed torn between wanting to depart and the desire to converse more, saying, 'Arret, Mona fell almost four hundred years ago, you are truly immortal!' So much has been told of your comings, can they all be true? Do you dwell in uaimh na graine? Could I see this Cave of the Sun?' He stopped, realizing how he was behaving, 'I am ashamed of my actions. I will not bore you with questions of the past for I have need of your powers in the present.' The escort was mounted again and anxious to leave. I chose to cause him no further delay and stepped quickly into the forest without another word."

"The sun traversed the sky as I steadily continued moving to the west and after two unsuccessful attempts at contacting Gaia; I knew I was doing what was expected. I reached the villa as the blanket of darkness covered the valley, giving me a cushion of security. I trusted the priest/druid but his escort was another matter, they may choose to continue our earlier action and bring more backing with them. I had dodged many lone
men moving silently through the wood. They dressed as hunters but they were clearly spies making maps of the lands. I feared military forces were on the move and I did not wish to be confronted by them. After surveying the area and making certain no trap awaited, I entered the large villa where travelers were welcome. The common room was not crowded; there were only a few locals and Sargost sat with his escort in the corner facing the entrance. The priest said something to his companions and then walked over to me, 'You are most welcome, Arret. Come to my room where we may speak freely.' I accompanied him to a second floor room and we supped in private."

"He was amazed to learn I had no concept of current events. He explained there were now two emperors. Theodosius, a devout Christian, was in control of the East. The West was ruled by Arbogast and Eugenius, both pagans. Arbogast had been field marshal in charge of the Army of the West for Emperor Valentinian II. The emperor and Arbogast had an argument and when Valentinian dismissed him, Arbogast stormed out only to return shortly to butcher the emperor with his sword. Arbogast took control of the Western Empire and wanting to see its religious freedoms retained from growing Christian intolerance, named Eugenius, a well-liked intellectual, as the new Emperor of the West. This freed Arbogast to remain in charge of the army. When Theodosius learned of his counterpart's murder, he ordered his army to march on the usurpers. The two forces were converging to determine who would rule the entire empire and if all religions would be tolerated or if Christianity would be allowed to extinguish any other religious thought. I had already seen how Theodosius dealt with non-Christian theology from an earlier calling when he ordered the burning of the great library at the Temple of Serapis. I had little liking for such wanton destruction of learning. Now, I had befriended a priest who served the fanatical emperor."

"Fully apprised of the political realities Sargost faced, I gave him leave to talk about my past. I confirmed I lived in what the Celts called uaimh na graine or The Cave of the Sun. There were many places where I emerged and, for a time, the druids had somehow known of my coming. They marked the places of power where I rose from the crystal cave and where I had constructed my 'sacred rounds'. There are still many such places bearing the marking stones and even some replicas of the Womb of the World."

"Sargost wanted to know why I was here, especially if I had been sent to assist him. He had little hope for his mission. Arbogast was obsessed with the glory of battle and the right to choose his own religion. Sargost believed no matter when Arbogast did, he could not stop the tide of Christianity sweeping the land. Many of the Roman soldiers still worshiped Mithra, but the Eastern Empire had money to spend and the Visigoths were converts who were feared by all. No matter how much killing took place, the Christians were going to fill the void. The druids foretold of this and chose to secretly join the Christians and work from within to bring as much of their own beliefs as possible into the new religion they were powerless to stop. There was no other place for them to hide after the Romans destroyed their precious groves and forbade the common people from associating with them. So, they hid in front of the Roman's faces. The church needed the brightest minds and the druids were the most educated in the conquered lands."

"Sargost asked me for protection in case his mission was not received well. He reached inside his robe and pulled out a bag of coins. I refused his offer, saying, 'Your money holds no value to one such as I; you forget who I am. While here, I will do what I can, but for now, I must leave and attempt to receive instructions. Let your guards see to
you until I return.' With a nod, I left to find a suitable place to learn what was expected of me."

"An hour later I returned from my ritual totally confused. This battle between East and West would occur nearby and I was to assist the Christian army to triumph. I believed the pagans were more aligned with nature and the Christians felt themselves above such. They believed their god provided nature for their use or abuse. Now, it seemed, I must work against the forces I vowed to protect. I somberly returned to the villa. The common room held the few locals I had noted before, deep into their cups. There were others who sat more observant and I believed them to be spies. I climbed the stairs and knocked at Sargost's door. No response came so I slowly swung the door open. There was only darkness within until I obtained a hall lamp and stepped inside. Everything was in disarray; the contents of Sargost's packs were strewn about. There was no sign of the priest other than some fresh blood stains. I closed the door behind me and put out the lamp. Grasping the censer, I asked for aid in locating the priest but received no reply. This was not uncommon, the elementals are often fickle."

"As I sat in the darkness, Oak alerted me to danger coming from the hallway. I readied myself as shadows of feet showed under the door. The latch slowly lifted and two men rushed in with daggers drawn. I quickly lashed out with Oak from the darkness and rendered them unconscious. I then proceeded to drag their limp bodies out of the room and down the hall to the stairs and flung them down. I figured this would dissuade anyone else from disturbing me."

"I returned to the priest's room and sat in the darkness contemplating my next move. There came a noise from outside the window. Someone opened the wooden shutter and entered. I put Oak against the intruder's back and told him not to move or make a sound. A heavy sigh came from the man; I recognized the priest and said, 'A man of your station should not be crawling through windows in the dark of night.' He regained his composure, 'Arret, thank the Lord! After you left, two men came with one of my escort and said they were emissaries from Arbogast. I let them in but quickly realized they were not. They suddenly demanded to know if I had the money for Arbogast. I told my escort to take them away but all three pulled knives and relieved me of my coins. They bragged of killing the true emissary and also, Bracius, a decorated, loyal soldier and life-long friend to me. It was then I shoved the nearest and made for the window. As I climbed out and prepared to jump, my escort slashed my arm. They did not follow out the window and this gave me time to elude them. This area is unknown to me; the only place I had seen was the stables, so I hid there until I heard the searchers near. It was clear there were many more involved. I returned here where I hoped they would not think to find me. It pains me to think my own guards conspired in this plot.' I told him I would assist him and no harm would come to him while we were together."

"There was nothing to be gained by staying. Sargost would be safer with me in the forest. I explained this and we left the villa for cover in the surrounding woods. As we walked, Sargost told me his attackers bragged they were part of a conspiracy of soldiers from both sides who wished for war and plunder. The priest was distressed with his mission's failure but I told him the battle was destined to happen. What I had seen in his eyes and learned from Gaia told me as much. My purpose for being here was to use my powers to influence the outcome. Sargost insisted we return to Theodosius and report the
conspiracy. We would need horses for the long journey. The stables were near and with Oak's guidance we made it to the back entrance undetected."

I cautioned him to stay concealed as I went inside. A single lamp glowed at the front end of the building and the flame was purposely burning low. I sensed someone watching from the darkness of a stall so I pulled back my hood and let my face be seen. If they were after Sargost, they would not bother me. I hummed a tune from a drinking song while picking out the priest's mount. Oak's vibrations warned of threatening movement from behind. I spun around to find two men. One spoke with a sinister tone, 'This horse belongs to the priest. You wouldn't be taking it somewhere for him to escape, would you?' I gave my finest impression of fright and answered as timidly as possible, 'Look friend, I am but a poor soul in need of a horse. I was on the other side of the villa and saw men carrying the priest's body. There was a slash on his arm and they said he bled to death. I figured he would have no further use for his horse and I would travel much faster riding than walking. Rumors say armies are coming very near here and I don't wish to be caught in between. I have a wife and younglings to care for and wish to be far from here. I did hear one of the men say something about not wanting to share the reward, whatever that meant.' The two men looked at each other and took off running. We were safely away before they would realize something was amiss. We rode steadily into the night, Sargost on his mount and I on Bracius'. We feared pursuit would not be far behind. My ruse was temporary and our knowledge would condemn those behind to death. After riding through the night, we came to the war camp of Theodosius. Sargost got us an immediate audience. The priest reported the conspiracy and riders were sent after the traitors while we were told to prepare to break our fast with the Emperor of the East."

"The meal was an adventure in itself. I had no idea there would be so many Visigoths attending. They showed little respect for the Romans. I watched their leader, Alaric, as he sat with Theodosius at a table of honor. The barbarians threw their food at each other and showed no regard for where they were. I could see this was not resting well with Theodosius but he made his alliance to protect his borders and to fight battles as the one approaching. The meal was long and there was no polite way to retire from the madness so I sat and studied those around me. At one point, I locked eyes with a massive Goth across the large tent. He gave me a menacing sneer and then approached. As he stood across the table from me, I simply smiled at him. This infuriated him even more and his words were filled with disrespect, 'You, puny stranger, what right do you have to sit at a warrior's table? I hear you travel with priests and you carry no weapon other than your little stick. Where are your battle scars to show your honor and skills? There are other tables for priests, women and lesser men.'"

"Sargost rose from his own table but I stayed him with a sign. I was irritated from my long ride and decided to teach these barbarians some manners. My smile vanished, 'You are a poor judge of men. I assume you consider yourself a warrior. You think by having scars you are honorable; I would think having scars would mean you are not very good at your craft. Myself, being a good judge of men, find it hard to believe you do not walk on all fours and sniff the rears of other animals, as would any lowly cur. Then again, perhaps you do. You speak of honor while you act with none. It is surprising your masters do not keep you on a leash and feed you scraps under the table. A true man
would know I am not one to be trifled with. I give you but one warning, leave me in peace.' I watched as my words sank into his little brain."

"He slammed his massive war ax into the table and roared loud enough to silence the nearly four hundred assembled. My antagonist called to Alaric, 'This weakling dishonored me, I now claim his blood!' Alaric looked at me and said, 'For a man to sit among men, he must be prepared to prove his worth. Dishonor cannot be tolerated; we live and die by our code, so be it.' Theodosius tried to prevent this, 'The man is my guest, he journeyed all through the night. We prepare to fight our enemy and there is no need for killing our own.' I stood and rested Oak on the table next to the ax, saying, 'If it pleases the Emperor, my desire is not to kill this lowly, ignorant cur but to teach him manners. Even a dog can be valuable if a tight enough leash is used or a sufficient whipping is applied. Perhaps I can offer some entertainment.' The emperor reluctantly nodded his assent, knowing he had done all he could. The giant pulled his ax from the table and stepped back as the center of the tent quickly cleared for the show to begin. The time for talking had ended."

"We circled each other warily, as he lashed curses at me. I spun my staff as a distraction and studied his footwork. The barbarian was more than a head taller and outweighed me greatly. I was not certain how to deal with the outcome or the consequences, the Romans and Visigoths were allies and I was but a stranger. If I were to win this fight, how many and who might think to exact revenge. The giant swung his ax with a speed I underestimated and almost ended the fight with the first blow. I barely ducked under it and came up with Oak striking his jaw. His eyes rolled back and I hoped he was going down but instead he let out a roar and charged. My only move was to roll with his momentum. When he came up with the reflexes of a cat, I knew I must be careful. Twice more he tried to slice me in two and I answered both with Oak to his jaw. He was furious and the more he lost control the better I liked it. Circling, I taunted, 'You understand, a man must have a sturdy foundation to stand with honor. I doubt if you have a very good one.' The look on his face was one of puzzlement and I knew it was time to strike. I came down with Oak and smashed its end into the instep of his left foot. There was a sickening crack of bone as he let out an agonizing grunt and shifted weight from his injured foot. I moved to the right and swung Oak to the left to catch his right foot. Without waiting for a reaction, I stepped further to his right and placed a kick to the side of his exposed knee. His leg buckled and he tried to keep me at bay with his ax. I could hear the barbarians start to cheer me as I was punishing, what I found out later was, a well-known and feared bully. I then started the next strategy of striking his head from different angles with Oak. With each strike he gained fury and lost reason. Finally, he swung his ax wildly and wedged the blade deep into a log bench. A short chop from Oak left him with a broken wrist and weaponless. I placed the staff under his bloody chin and declared the fight over, as I did not kill defenseless dogs. The tent went crazy with excitement; I had won the respect of all. I received no more challenges within the camp of Theodosius. I walked to Sargost's table and nodded to the awestruck priest. If there were ever any doubts of my identity, he would surely have dismissed them now."

For two days I marched with the army. As they entered a pass near the city of Aquilia at the head of the Adriatic, the two armies became aware of each other but Arbogast's reacted quicker and seized the high ground. The stage was set and the Christian army of Theodosius would be forced to fight uphill. There were perhaps a
hundred thousand men on each side. The Battle of Frigid River was about to begin. I stood near Theodosius and waited for the battle. The Visigoths were placed in the center of the battle line. They advanced up the slope toward the entrenched army of Arbogast."

"The fighting was fierce and many man died. The reports brought back estimated ten thousand Visigoths perished with no result other than a stalemate. Theodosius was distraught at the deaths only because the Visigoths were recently Christianized. As dusk approached, Theodosius ordered a retreat back into the pass where he conferred with his generals. Alaric was furious for the losses his people suffered and for having no say in the strategy. His people were being slaughtered as other parts of the army sat and watched. Preparations began immediately for the breaking of camp and leaving the following morning."

"The noise of much rejoicing came from the army of Arbogast. Some of the braver, or perhaps, more foolish, soldiers came close enough to taunt their Christian enemy as they packed their gear. As it became clear to the bulk of Arbogast’s army of Theodosius' intentions, they began to celebrate in earnest. It was at this time I saw the need to step forward with a plan to succeed with my task. I spoke with the emperor and told him the enemy would be celebrating all night with their apparent victory. Tomorrow at the dawning would be an excellent time to attack. The Visigoths would want revenge for their dead, if not appeased by their enemies, might turn on their allies. The emperor found wisdom in my counsel and covertly prepared for the dawn. I made my way to a small ledge on one side of the pass from which I could have a better view of the battlefield. I had given good counsel to Theodosius, his spies reported the enemy was well into their cups and did not expect the Christians to return. I must give Arbogast’s men credit, after drinking all night; they still fought well and held the Christians for most of the second day. There were surges from both sides and the soldiers making headway only to find themselves cut off and surrounded with no hope of regaining their lines. Neither side was able to rout more than small sections at a time. Men fought and died with nothing decided except the tallies of the dead. I watched as the two armies separated and a hull covered the bloody ground. The line was unchanged from the day before. Only now, tens of thousands had given their flesh and blood to the soil."

"There was an eerie quiet as both armies awaited orders. The Army of the East prepared for another uphill assault. The time was at hand for me to act. I called upon Air and Earth to assist me. From deep in the pass came a tremendous howling wind. Theodosius' army was closing the gap between the two armies when the wind brought a massive whirling cloud of dust to bear directly into the faces of Arbogast's forces. His men were not able to see and their attackers had the wind at their backs. It took only moments for the tide to turn as one side was essentially blinded. The battle lines collapsed and although some sections carried effective counterattacks, it was clear the advantage belonged to Theodosius' troops. The lines swayed as individual groups surged forward but finally Arbogast's army started to flee as a whole. There was nothing left but the slaughter. I walked away from the ledge choosing not to watch the carnage."

"I had done as Gaia wished and kept my vow. Arbogast's forces were put to the sword or enslaved. I remember what I had seen in Sargost’s eyes and walked out onto the battlefield. There among the fallen, in a group of slain priests, I found his mutilated body. The priests must have seen the tide of battle turn and rushed in with their advancing troops to urge them on in their holy fight. As with most battles, nothing is
certain and a counter-surge caught them by surprise. The weapons of the soldiers were brutal on the unarmored priests. I would have liked to have known him better but his destiny was to die in a battle he could not prevent. I took his body into the nearby woods and prepared him for a burial fitting his heritage. There was no lack of sharp instruments to dig with and the soil was loose. I dug a deep hole and placed his body within. Finding a sapling, I planted it over him. As the tree would grow, his body would decompose and fill the tree with part of his spirit. The druids believed part of his soul which did not cross over would become part of the tree. When finished, I felt Oak urge me deeper into the woods and found the tunnel waiting. Once inside, I embraced oblivion once more. A few callings after, I learned Arbogast committed suicide shortly after the battle. Theodosius was pleased with his victory and gave credit to his god. It did him little good as he died within a year. Alaric was bitter and he would lead the Visigoths to sack Rome in another ten years. I also understand there are still times when the wind howls through the same pass and reaches speeds well over a hundred miles an hour.”

Kyra looked at Arret through teary eyes, “So sad, I can’t imagine how you could walk into the middle of all those bodies and find Sargost’s corpse”. He shrugged, “Death is no stranger to me. Men have always found ways to kill each other and my calling frequently places me where the carnage is great. There is no way to harden your heart to such but death comes to all, even I will know death’s embrace when fate decrees.”

The owl hooted from above and Arret’s grip on Oak tightened. He looked around as if searching for something and then asked what lay beyond the bushes walling the garden. She explained there was a field leading to a forest preserve. He declared, “I must go further from the house to contact Gaia”. As she started to accompany him, he stopped her, “No, I must do this alone. You have become a distraction to me and I must be focused”. She was angered but then realized it was also a compliment.

He walked until Oak gave a signal. Nothing seemed out of place and only the natural sounds of birds and wind rustling through the leaves of the trees came to him. Something was out there which meant him harm. Trusting the owl’s warning and Oak, he knew the threat to be real. There was only one way to deal with a hidden enemy, he ran off at an angle to his current direction. Running as quickly as possible, he moved through the terrain like a wild beast. Around him the woods picked up the disturbance. Whatever was pursuing him had now lost the element of surprise and was making noticeable racket behind him. A clearing opened up and he moved out into it to give Oak room to maneuver. The noise behind changed as the pursuing footfalls landed on the clearing’s grasses. He spun to face his foes. There were four large dogs intent on only him. They approached slowly, and spread apart slightly knowing the prey could not outrun or out maneuver them. Their bodies were lean and showed scars of many fight. Madness filled their eyes as they sensed the vibrations of his inner balance. As other animals were drawn to him for pleasure, these were drawn by total hatred for his existence.

Arret stood at the ready; many times he had fought this type of battle. There had been other animals, rogues, so out of balance they became filled with hatred and sought destruction for its own sake. These dogs now found the focal point of their hatred. Arret hoped there were only four; there may be others who were not against the balance but followed those who led. Once the battle began, they would all be as deadly as their leaders. This was the danger he sensed earlier and chose to face alone. He wished he could call on the elementals but learned long ago they did not get involved with being
such as these. He believed the elementals considered them kindred spirits who embodied change in everything and as such respected their role in the order of things.

Oak quivered with anticipation as the first dog attacked from the right. It was not of the original four. The canine met Oak’s tip as the staff acted like a skewer penetrating the dog’s throat. Arret flung the impaled carcass toward another creature leaping through the air. The dead missile connected on target with a sharp crack announcing another casualty. They rushed from all sides now; more had risen from concealment. There were perhaps twelve when they charged with one purpose, to destroy the hated vibrations. Arret swung Oak and sent another to permanent rest, then used his right foot to catch one under its jawbone. He felt pain as one got under his guard and teeth tore into his ankle. Oak came down and shattered its skull with a gruesome sounding crunch. Arret knew the animals would instinctively target his legs and neck. He fought on, almost unaware of how the battle went. There were more dogs than he had ever encountered at one time. Faint images of bones cracking and yelps of pain filled his senses as dogs met Oak or his foot. More than one beast had sunk teeth into his flesh. He knew this must end soon or he would die. His instincts took over as he continued to battle.

His battle-induced rage subsided and he took note of the carnage. Only one dog remained alive, its hind legs dragging uselessly behind. Its eyes were burning with insane hatred as it pulled its broken body forward in one final attempt to destroy the man. Arret felt no anger toward the wounded animal, as it no longer posed a threat. He reached out with Oak and let the beast bite the staff as he drew his knife and slit the creature’s throat. Only when he knew the final creature was dead did he fall to his knees and let his body unwind. After assessing his wounds, he summoned the Womb. There must have been a loss of consciousness for when he opened his eyes the tunnel was waiting. In a short time, his wounds were healed and he made his way back to the surface.

Halfway across the field he remembered his desire to contact Gaia. Forming his circle, he sent specific questions. He understood the task with the woman in the city but the other images were still a mystery. One showed Old One-Eye walking away from him for the final time. Another scene pictured three crows near Fidelma while she sat patiently as if waiting. Still more held people he had not met. No clue was given as to what was expected of him. Within moments, Gaia’s reply came and it was perfectly clear. Arret closed the circle and shakily made his way back to Kyra. He found her in the garden where he picked her up and carried her into the house to make love. Afterwards, he related the dog attack. She asked if he had made contact with Gaia, to which he replied somberly, “Yes, there is much to reflect upon. Tomorrow may be a long day”. He rolled over and was immediately asleep. Kyra lay awake wondering if Arret was being vague because he knew he was leaving. She softly prayed, “Lord and Lady, even Gaia, hear me. I love this man and ask you grant my request. Do not let him leave me so soon”.

-o00-

Wacker realized just how much he hated Doyle, especially after a sleepless night in the cop’s apartment with the police scanner blasting. Being cuffed to a cot didn’t help either. Everything Doyle owned was cop stuff. This man had no life except for his job.

GAIA’S CHOSEN by T.E. VanNorman
What a loser, the only thing obvious was that Doyle wasn't on the take. If he was, he wouldn't be living in a dump like this. Doyle came from the other room, saying, "I don't cook but I know a doughnut shop that delivers". Johnny saw the pile wrappers and knew it was a daily routine.

They ate in silence which was for the best as they had nothing in common. The cop unlocked the cuffs knowing the kid wasn't going to outrun him. Wacker was in too bad a shape even if he didn't complain about the pain. Vinny placed a bottle of aspirin on the table and left the room. He could hear Wacker open it. The cop grinned, the kid was just too proud to ask for them. The phone rang and while Doyle was talking, Wacker picked up a folder upon the table. Inside were the drawings of Arret with a woman. Doyle hastily ended his call and scolded, "That's a police file, don't be putting your grubby paws on it again. Got it?" Johnny nodded, "So, you know more about him than I do. What's his game? War vet, government agent, what? Out with it Doyle, I want him found as much as you do." The cop shook his head, "I ain't sure what the hell he is but I know someone who says they do. We're taking a side trip this morning and you better be on your best behavior or I'll turn you over to your buddies." Wacker didn't argue, instead he said, "Whatever Doyle, just get me out of town in one piece and make it quick. I'm already sick of the smell of doughnuts."

A little over an hour later Vinny introduced AnLuan to Johnny, "This is my grandmother so you better act right". Wacker nodded and looked around the small rest home room. There were all sorts of old curious things and he was reminded of the Tea Lady. The woman noticed Johnny was in pain and insisted on making him some herbal tea, even though Doyle wanted to hurry back to the city. Vinny started to object but knew she would not let the kid suffer if she could help. Johnny drank the tea as fast as he could, not wanting to piss off the cop. He wasn't sure what these women put in their teas but they sure worked wonders on him. Doyle waited anxiously until Wacker finished, "We gotta go, Grams, I got a feeling we're gonna run into Arret today. I need to get back to work right now." She stopped in mid-step and dropped her cup. She asked, "You be taking me with? Oh Vincent, do you truly feel it?" The woman had changed at the mention of Arret. Johnny realized she was the one who knew about the drawings in the file. The cop wasn't lying when he said it was personal. Doyle ushered the woman into another room and when they returned, she went straight to Johnny, "Vincent says you spoke with him. Tell me his every word, be his voice soft like willow branches in the wind or sharp and filled with power? It be said he could do both." The kid replied, "He was trashin my guys, I didn't see nothing soft. The man just said something about seeing me again and for me to think about my life. Ain't seen him since." The woman seemed flustered and wanted more but he had nothing to give. Doyle saved him, "Time to go, Wacker, you stalled long enough. I'm on duty in an hour. Grams, I was thinking about bringing you but if you're getting this excited now, it would be worse if we actually found him. Tell you what, if we nab him, I'll make arrangements for you to visit him in a cell." As they headed for the door, AnLuan barred the way. Her voice was steady and determined, "I be coming with. It be time for Arret to know his kin and I intend to be there. Your jails would not hold him very long and I'll not miss this chance." From her earliest memories her mother had one great wish, the story of Arret would be handed down until he learned his seed had survived.
Kyra woke in the morning and noticed Arret was not at her side. She found him in the garden with the owl perched protectively above. Knowing the man she loved would be hungry, she went to prepare breakfast. When he came inside, she noted his distracted look as if his mind was elsewhere. The night before had been the same, his thoughts were not on her. She felt this was a bad sign and the two ate in strained silence. She stole glances at him but he just looked straight ahead and seemed oblivious to her presence.

With breakfast finished, she went outside and sat on a bench. She feared he would come to tell her of his leaving. She made up her mind not to cry, this was something she knew would happen from the start. Arret joined her and sat quietly for a time. The images from Gaia troubled him and he was at a loss for words. He decided not to tell her, instead he said, “We have spoken of cycles and change; there will be a major change soon. Gaia’s wishes are now clearer to me. The time has come for me to prepare for the city. If you will provide me with your father’s clothes, I will exchange them for my robe.” In a few minutes Arret was transformed. He left the clothes on except for the shoes, which he put aside until needed. They took her car and headed back to Chicago. As they rode, his thoughts returned to Gaia’s message. There was no mistake in what was expected of him. First, he must find the woman and cause her to change her fated destination. Once accomplished, he was to be replaced by another. His time as Chosen had ended and his obligation was finished. Now he understood his difficulty in communicating with Gaia, the entity was telling him it was time for a change. A new perspective was needed for a world filled with computers and global communications. His time would come to an end sooner than it had for Old One-Eye as technology quickened the changes in the world. There were two men shown in the images and he was certain one was his replacement; the youngling who had faced him in the alley and another man unknown to him. Arret looked over to Kyra and thought how fortunate he was to have found her and how much easier it would be making the transition with her by his side. The temptation of telling her of his staying was great but he chose not to; he learned early about tempting fate by letting people know too much of what the future might hold. More than one disaster had been from such advanced knowledge. He felt it was best to be silent and let events unfold. It was clear Kyra feared his leaving but she would learn of it soon.

He rested his hands on Oak and hoped the confrontation with the woman would go smoothly. Even easy tasks had a way of becoming troublesome with a simple twist of fate. He explained, “Kyra, the woman I seek cannot be allowed to walk beyond the structure in the plaza, in the direction of State Street. If she continues, she will die or be severely injured in an accident. She is to bear a child in the future and if she is harmed, the timing will not be correct for its birth. The images from Gaia were very intense for this to succeed. I must see to this even if it means placing myself in danger. If something goes awry, you should go directly to the beach where we met. I fear, if I must use the elementals to do battle, my options may be limited by the proximity of so many people. When this task is complete I will return to you and begin a much more difficult task. If I am delayed over an hour’s passing, return to Midlothian and I will come to you.” She took comfort in his words because it sounded as if he were not leaving as soon
as this was finished. Silently she thanked her deities for granting her wish if only for one more day.

They parked in an underground garage and walked toward the plaza. The buildings stretched to the sky and blocked the sun. Arret found the massive structures impressive but at the cost of blocking the view of the sky seemed too heavy a price. The shoes he wore caused his feet to hurt and made him aware of being cut off from the earth. There were only two comforts, Kyra and Oak which steadily gave off vibrations to guide and reassure him. Kyra object to his bringing the staff but he refused to be parted from it. They reached the Daley Plaza early and stood watching the people rushing around like ants. The couple tried to look as inconspicuous as possible but it was Oak which drew the unwanted attention. A patrol car noticed it and reported a possible sighting. Word came back to keep the suspect under surveillance but not to apprehend until Sgt. Doyle arrived.

The man sensed he was being observed. Nothing was obvious but even without Oak's warning vibrations Arret's senses were keen enough to detect danger looming. He considered using and elemental for a diversion, perhaps Air which seemed to thrive here, and make his escape but then he would fail. His decision was made as he turned to Kyra, "Leave this instant and make your way to the lakeshore. I sense detection and soon more police will arrive. Believe me, my love, you must go now. Our time is not over, trust me." He turned and walked quickly away toward where his target would appear. Kyra stood and watched as he cut across the crowded plaza. She saw the police closing in and thought to warn him but she realized he already knew.

Arret spotted the woman and judged it would be close. He felt if he could delay her long enough, even if it meant his capture, his task would succeed. The police were converging from different angles but he reached her first, saying, "Miss, you must stop and return the way you came. I ..." The words were unfinished as he was tasered from a distance. He slumped to the pavement as the woman hurried off. The police took no notice of her as they were engrossed in catching the man who assaulted one of their own.

He felt the jolt of electricity shoot through his body. He hadn't anticipated the distance such a weapon could be used; there should have been enough time for him to engage them with Oak. They had stopped him short of his goal. Hopefully, the short confrontation caused the woman to delay long enough; if not, then the events fated for her had occurred and she was lying in a nearby street, possibly dying. He had failed, and this time would be his last. Gaia was right to replace him; someone else was needed who could succeed where he no longer could.

The robed man sat cuffed in the back of a squad car. There were cuts and bruises where he was roughly reminded of the officer he struck. As he sat there, he was aware of a heated argument outside the vehicle. The door opened from the other side and an elderly woman entered and scooted over beside him. She seemed confused for a moment as if looking for words. When she noticed the blood coming from his torn lip, she quickly overcame her uneasiness and tended to him. Another door opened and the youngling from the alley gingerly moved into the front passenger's seat. Johnny grinned at Arret, "Looks like you was right about us hooking up again. Just keep your mouth shut 'til we get outta here". The driver's door opened and a man handed the youngling Arret's staff and an evidence bag containing the elementals and his stone knife. The man glared at Arret and said to the woman, "Grams, stop fussin' over him. He's in custody,
not a hospital, so just let him bleed for a bit; a few cuts ain't gonna kill him”. The car pulled out into the street. Arret recognized the driver as the second man in Gaia's image. The driver was speaking into a small hand unit. Arret couldn't make out the conversation but heard the word 'chief' more than once. As the man finished, he looked in the rear view mirror at the woman, “I've stuck my neck way out there for you, Grams. This better be worth it because my career's on the line. The Chief gave me custody of him for twenty-four hours, no booking, no nothing. Just keep quiet 'til we're clear; I don't want to have the radio on and anyone hear civilian voices. There's cops who ain't gonna be happy when they find out old stick-boy ain't rotting in some jail cell.” Silence was the only answer given as he returned to his radio. There were squad cars in front and behind but within minutes they were redirected to an accident. The woman had taken hold of Arret's arm and affectionately squeezed which brought his attention to her. Arret smiled, “Thank you for your concern; my wounds are minor but your kindness is appreciated. Perhaps you could tell me what is happening here.” Her face erupted into a grin and her eyes sparkled with excitement. “Be still, Arret, my Vincent will find a safe place where we may speak. I am AnLuan and we're here to help.” The woman was bubbling with enthusiasm as if she were about to burst. The car turned into an abandoned factory where the driver got out and surveyed their temporary sanctuary. The youngling did the same and Arret noted the lad moved as if severely injured. Arret's door opened abruptly and strong hands yanked him out of the car onto his feet. The woman protested and stayed close to him, saying, “Vincent Alexander Doyle, take them cuffs from him this very instant!” Arret remained silent as the cop considered the request. Thinking to ease the man's concerns, he said, “Who you are and why I am here are mysteries to me. If you free my restraints, I give my word to cause you no reason to regret your decision.” Making his choice, the cop spun Arret around and keyed the cuffs. As his arms came loose, the woman wrapped hers around him and hugged with all her might. Still confused, Arret gently forced her back, “Woman, AnLuan, tell me why you cling to me as if I belonged to you”. She smiled back at him, “Arret, you're wrong, tis I who belongs to you”. She stepped back and stood proudly declaring, “I be AnLuan Curry. I have a gift from me mother, Fidelma O'Curry. Arret, I be your daughter and the big ape staring at his shoes be your great grandson, Vincent. We be family, Father. This be something Mother wanted you to know.” Arret's voice cracked with emotion, “She told me one day I would know my seed. I have lived for more generations than I care to count and until today, I have not knowingly laid eyes upon any family since I first began this journey. Thank you.”

He took AnLuan into his arms and this time returned the hug she gave minutes before. To Vinny he said, “Vincent, I see in this time it is still a difficult thing for a man to show his affection. Worry not, you are well met”. They shook hands and gauged each other's strength. Grins broke across their faces as they found a common ground. Their hands continued the power play until Vinny released. He was amazed at the strength in Arret's grip. Arret smiled, “You must understand, I am battle-hardened from the life I have led. I take it I am free from confinement.” Vinny nodded without speaking and Arret turned toward the teen, “I must speak with this one in private then we shall speak more”. He stepped to Wacker, “I see you have met the fate I saw in your eyes. Hopefully, you have heeded my words and used the time for reflection. If all goes well, your pain will be eased shortly.” He retrieved Oak and the elementals then removed the shoes and called
to Doyle, “Vincent, I need to go to the lakeshore where the trees burnt. There is someone waiting for me.” Doyle drove to where his personal car was parked and they switched.

Finding a place to park near the trees, Arret searched the beach for Kyra but she was not there. While heading back to Vincent’s car, Arret explained, “There was a woman with me and I believe we separated before I was observed. I may be mistaken but she is not where we agreed to meet. Is it possible for you to find out if she is in custody?” Doyle made a call, “Yeah, they got her but not for being with you. She’s in a holding cell until they process her. At Arret’s urging, they proceeded to the jail and Vinny went inside to try to get her released. When the two come walking out, Arret started to exit the car but AnLuan stopped him, “Father, it not be wise, you’re in Vincent’s custody, do not cause trouble by being seen”. Her words made sense and he remained seated.

Kyra was totally confused; they hadn’t explained anything to her and all she knew was a police officer was taking her somewhere unknown. Seeing Arret she climbed onto his lap and smothered him with kisses before she realized they were not alone. Her face reddened but her arms remained locked around his neck. Vinny asked where they should go next and Arret asked to return to the beach. As they rode, Kyra explained how she had seen Arret’s capture and decided to go after the woman herself. The woman was looking back toward the police when Kyra grabbed her dangling purse and took off running away from State Street. The woman screamed and gave chase; with each step, Kyra knew she was completing Arret’s mission. Unfortunately, there were too many police in the plaza and Kyra didn’t get far. Arret laughed at the simplicity of it and was relieved for not failing Gaia. A short silence followed as he realized introductions were in order. Afterwards, he noticed a strange look coming from AnLuan toward Kyra. He made a mental note to speak to his newly found daughter about his relationship with Kyra. He wanted no complications stepping from this. To himself he mused, “So many years without a family and as soon as I find mine, the troubles begin”.

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There was little remaining for the nine trees along the beach. Arret stopped to place his hands upon the charred trunks. He moved to each tree and studied the ground in search of small shoots clinging to life. As the others kept their distance, Kyra explained of Arret’s desire to replant the living roots or saplings elsewhere. They continued until he reached the site of Arret’s earlier ritual. He said, “There are things which I must attend to now. Vincent, Johnny, I have need of the two of you. I assume you know nothing of ritual or the forces used in such, I only ask for your trust. There is something I must share with only the two of you.” Each gave their consent and Arret quickly drew a circle which was considerably larger than his previous one. Motioning the two men to join him inside, he studied the shoreline for any other people but they were alone. Picking up the censer and chalice, he asked for a covering fog to mask his activities. Then he placed the elementals in their respective corners. AnLuan and Kyra remained outside and talked in low tones. Arret quietly noted them and then focused on his task. He assumed the star position and drew power from the sky and earth. With deep concentration he brought up amounts of energy seldom used. From outside, the women watched the sphere as it glowed with a bright blue radiance. Those inside were completely hidden as the lines of power merged and became deeper, richer and less transparent. The fog materialized from
the lake and moved quickly on shore, allowing the glow to only be viewed by the women close to the circle.

Arret lowered his arms, “I have separated you from the women for a specific purpose; what I disclose is for us alone. Let me explain why you are here”. Motioning with his hand to the lines of energy, “This is called a circle, although the name is misleading because it is actually a sphere. The boundary travels as far below the sand as above. The power flowing around you is the pulse of the world. I know not where it originates, only of its existence and some techniques to manipulate it.”

“The four elementals: Air, Fire, Water and Earth are represented at the four cardinal directions and each is sentient. At an early age, I made the decision to serve an entity which is the essence of this planet. I prefer to call it Gaia, which is a Greek label. I have been doing Gaia's will since accepting this charge almost five thousand years ago. You look at me as I am crazy, I am not; my physical age would be much less. The instrument responsible for my longevity is what I call the Womb of the World. You will be introduced to this very soon. My servitude will be ending shortly. Gaia has been preparing me to let another walk this path. I received an image showing when I accepted this charge from another and then the two of you which leads me to believe one of you will take my place. The image called for a replacement but which of you is difficult for me to discern. Only you two were shown, perhaps the choice is mine to make. Consider this the beginning of your training. The power flowing around you and much more will be at your command. How you react to this will likely determine who will become the next Chosen. I will ask the women to join us inside for a ritual designed to introduce you to the elementals. The others are not needed for this; however I would like to show off for my lady and newly found family.” He concentrated on the power around him and caused a rift in the circle which allowed the women to enter. Closing the portal behind them, he positioned everyone where he sensed they should be placed and asked them to sit, and then said, “I ask forgiveness of the women for having to wait while certain matters were addressed. I plan to give each of you a special gift. Vincent, you occupy the East with the elemental Air. Johnny, you are in the South with Fire. Daughter, you rest in the West with Water. Kyra will reside in the North with the elemental Earth.”

“Before we begin, I must ask the elementals to cleanse us. Do not be alarmed by their actions.” He stood in the center and assumed the star position. The atmosphere became charged as the elementals answered his call. The entities expanded their essence and coursed through the bodies of those within the circle. Each person felt heat and cold, wet and dry, all at the same instant. Their experience was both exhilarating and frightening. Every inch of their bodies and clothing was bombarded with something which passed right through them and yet there was substance because each was aware of its presence.

Arret announced the cleansing complete and then mentally asked Air if the circle remained undetected from outside. He received an affirmative reply and then continued, “Do not speak as of yet; this is not my gift but only a cleansing making you presentable to the elementals. You will note there are four objects around the circle. The number four is held sacred in every culture I have encountered. The representation of the four here is of the elementals: Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. The number four is woven into your belief system and you may recognize other representations: East, South, West, and North. Even the seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. There are many religious
representations given for the four. For example, the Archangels: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel. The four rivers of Eden: Hiddekel, Pison, Gihon, and Phrath; the four rivers of Hell: Cocytus, Phlegethon, Styx, and Acheron; even the four gospels of the New Testament. Those listed may all be associated with the elements; even the four suits within a deck of cards are linked. The list is seemingly endless.” The inside of the sphere was transformed into a giant kaleidoscope of magical translucent brilliance.

Arret sensed something was amiss; there was more power than he raised and he was having trouble controlling it. The ritual had gone well and the elementals were likely interested in linking with the new Chosen. He was certain the circle could not be penetrated by anything not invited. The atmosphere was changing and even the others began to sense something wrong. He tried to ground the energy but couldn’t. Gripping Oak, he found it humming with contentment. The colors flowing around him swirled with more intensity and speed. The intruder rose from all four corners and quickly enveloped the periphery of the sphere. Once complete, the intruder crept inward. Arret’s eyes were fixed on Oak as the intruder seemed to dissolve the staff into the ever-changing semi-opaque colors swirling within the entire sphere. Only Arret himself remained untouched, the lines of power seemed to stop an inch away from him. Arret slowly moved his arm and the entity gave way. The behavior was like a predator capturing its prey and savoring the moment before the kill. Suddenly, there was no more separation; the entity now inhabited Arret’s body as well. The touch was not what he feared; it was pleasing and filled him with ecstasy. As he searched for answers, familiar images caressed his consciousness. He relaxed, this was no stranger this was Gaia. Never had he been linked directly with this entity, only through the elementals. Now, inside this sphere, Gaia not only linked with him but the others as well. He could sense the enormity of the planet; the movement of the oceans; the currents of the wind; the churning of fires deep within its core, the methodical pressure of the land masses exerting force against each other in a constant battle to reform the surface. Arret knew the sensations would not be his alone; the others would be experiencing something similar. He realized Gaia must also be receiving sensation from the human perspective. He wondered if Gaia could process human emotions, perhaps it was a barrier which could not be breached. There was no emotion coming from Gaia, only knowledge, purpose, and power.

Without warning, the entity severed its link and withdrew as the lines of power returned to their previous state. As soon as the colors regained their translucency, Arret sent an image to the elementals and asked them to withdraw from those within. As visibility returned, Arret checked the others; each was in a state of euphoria. All Arret could think of doing was to close the circle, which he did. The four turned and picked up their respective elementals and delivered them to him.

They stood speechless and watched as the fog receded out over the lake. AnLuan was the first to break the spell as she gave her father a kiss, “Thank you, no man could have given his daughter a greater gift”. Vinny looked uncomfortable as he went next, wondering if he was supposed to hug this stranger even if he was family. Arret solved the dilemma by offering his hand. Vinny said, “I ain’t sure what just happened in there but I doubt if I’Il ever be the same. I thought this was a bunch of silly stuff but I know with this kind of power, I could really make a difference”. Arret pulled Johnny to his side, “You have seen the pulse of the world and more, youngling. What you experienced
was partially hidden from me but I would think the elementals Fire would be very impressive.” Johnny shook his head, “You got no idea well maybe you do. Man, what a rush! I could see and feel the whole damn world, anywhere it was burning. That was really awesome! Tell me what you want from me, I'll do it. Just one thing, don't call me youngling no more.” Arret laughed, “Perhaps it would be more fitting to call you what my mentor named me, Pup”. Johnny winced but said, “Whatever Magic Man, just gimme the game” They rejoined the others as Arret and Kyra made eye contact, silently agreeing to have their discussion later when alone. Arret announced it was time to leave.

As they walked to the car, Vinny told him about the deal he had made with Police Chief Travers. He was expected to turn Arret into custody no later than tomorrow. There was no way Arret could go to jail; the police would have a mess just trying to identify him. A plan was needed and time was running short. Arret made a decision, “Kyra, will you take AnLuan and Johnny to Midlothian? Vincent and I must remedy this now.” They took Doyle's car to where Kyra's was parked. As they rode, Arret was bombarded with questions concerning the circle. He answered, “This is not the time; the police business needs to be dealt with immediately. Hopefully, there will be time for questions later.” At Kyra's car, Arret donned his robe; there was no reason for wearing a deception for the moment. He felt almost whole once in his familiar attire and then placed Mr. Wells' clothing inside Doyle's trunk. The two men watched the others drive off; then Arret questioned Vinny about what he actually said to the Chief. Vinny shook his head, “Before we get into that stuff, I got some things I want to say, Arret, or should I call you Gramps, or what? I ain't sure I even know how to think of you, as family or some wizard playing with supernatural stuff. I believe you're who and what you say, it's just I ain't come to grips with what it actually means to me personally. My life was normal like and suddenly here comes elementals, circles and a great grandfather I never heard of who looks way younger than his very own daughter; it's really screwing with my head. I should thank you for making Grams happy. Before we found you, I was telling her about the things you did in the city and she knew you were the one doing all that strange stuff. She let me read Fidelma's diary and look at her drawings. Grams waited her whole life for you to show. You made her happy and let her fulfill something entrusted to her. Now, let's come up with a plan. I got until tomorrow to hand you over and I don't think I can do that now. Gotta admit, I made the deal to give Grams a little time with you and figured you'd be a disappointment, then I could just turn you in. I was wrong.”

Arret wanted to know the entire conversation concerning the deal. Vinny explained, “I convinced the Chief I found out something about you which I figured would lead to something a whole lot bigger than a lousy assault charge. To do it, I needed to get you away for a while. You wouldn't cooperate if you were sitting in a cell. I took full responsibility and unless we come up with some clever plan, they're gonna want us both real bad. In a couple of hours, I've got to call in and give a progress report. So, it you got any bright ideas, now is the time.”

Arret closed his eyes and concentrated on the problem, after a short time, he said, “Arret and deception”. Vinny waited for more but the man was once again in deep concentration. The cop threw his arms up, “What?” Arret opened his eyes and replied, “You should call me Arret, the name is one I am accustomed to and it can denote great grandfather or whatever you wish. I would hope it meant friend to you. Deception is what we will use for dealing with your superior”. Vinny smiled a genuine grin, “Well
Arret, then I guess I’d feel better if you called me Vinny. I don’t mind Grams calling me Vincent but it don’t sound right coming from anyone else.” Arret held out his hand and they shook in earnest.

The plan was worked out as they drove to the Disaster Response Unit headquarters. Arret had changed back into the clothes provided by Kyra. There were a few people still working when they entered. The two men drew attention but the look on Doyle’s face let everyone know he wasn’t in the mood for conversation. Vinny closed the door to his former office and the two men started on his computer. When finished, Vinny called Chief Travers and explained he had verified the robed man’s claims. What he uncovered was huge and the Chief would be making headlines when the story broke. The hook was set.

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Police Chief Elias Travers was more a politician than a cop and whenever the news was involved, he wanted to be there. Doyle reported he had uncovered a cult of eco-terrorists who claimed to have invented a device which created frequencies able to manipulate the forces of nature. The device had triggered the earthquake; the twister; the burning trees; and a dense fog bank which appeared and disappeared without any explanation. The suspect was willing to turn on his fellow conspirators and demonstrate how to control the natural-looking disasters. As unbelievable as it sounded, the events had occurred where they shouldn’t have and to Travers, anything which said ‘terrorist’ would be major headlines for him. The informant wanted to meet with him to discuss terms. The situation sounded strange but Doyle suggested he bring a light security force so as not to spook the man but also to bring covert tactical teams just in case something went wrong. The Chief smiled when he got off the phone. He was thinking about the word ‘terrorist’ and how the media ate that stuff up. Doyle was right about some unknown assaulting an officer would be minor but a gang of terrorists who wrought a wave of destruction upon the city could elevate his name to national prominence.

The warehouse where the meeting would take place was used for storage of city property. Arret, attired in Mr. Wells’ clothing, easily picked the lock and walked inside the unmanned warehouse. It was early, there had not been time for the police to react and get anyone here before them. Closing the door, they familiarized themselves with the building’s interior. There were aisles of stacked crates which would give cover when needed. They found a spot near the center of the building and placed stools strategically so they could observe all doors from one location. While waiting, they talked of AnLuan and Vinny’s life. Arret was interested in everything about them as well as Fidelma. Vinny offered to take him to her grave if they pulled this off.

Oak alerted Arret as the first approach came from the rear of the building. The back door lock clicked and the handle turned as the door came slightly ajar. Arret touched Vinny’s arm as he pointed to the door and then they waited for the next move. A few minutes later the main door opened and the Chief’s entourage made their entry. There were seven, plus the Chief, five were obvious security. Weapons were drawn and nervous eyes scanned the interior for anything indicating a trap. A signal was given and the Chief walked toward the pair, trailed by two aides. Arret and Vinny stood as they approached. Arret placed Oak on end and gripped it with both hands in plain view.
Vinny made the introductions and indicated Arret as Brother Ziu. He explained Brother Ziu was a member of the Assembled Weight Of God. The group was composed of radical ecological activists with scientific and religious backgrounds. They were outraged at the way technology was used to abuse the planet. Technology had become a cancer and the AWOG decided to stop the disease with its own brand of technology. Only drastic measures would bring awareness and cause a change in those who used science to plunder the world. Their founder had invented a device which used special frequencies to manipulate natural forces causing disasters on a large scale. They had chosen Chicago as their testing ground. The destructive seemingly natural incidents were the initial trials of the prototype. Doyle explained, “Brother Ziu became disenchanted with the AWOG cult after we discussed the number of years he’d be sitting in a cold dark prison cell. We came to the conclusion the AWOG needed to be stopped. Brother Ziu asked for this meeting to discuss terms. He has three conditions: immunity from prosecution; a new identity; and financial compensation of two million dollars. In return, he will provide the prototype machine and name the members of AWOG.”

Chief Travers and his aides stepped back to discuss the offer. When they returned, Arret saw the man was hooked. Vinny had measured him correctly and knew he was blinded by power and fame. The Chief spoke directly to Doyle, “I believe the conditions can be met. There are covert funds which I have access to. I am willing to tap into those funds for my personal needs because the state’s policy would not permit paying a terrorist. However, I need a personal demonstration and nothing would be finalized until all the terrorists were arrested and convicted.” Arret nudged Vinny as if reminding him of something. Doyle cleared his throat and nervously said, “One more thing, Brother Ziu refuses to testify against his former colleagues”. Travers’ face turned red, “Unacceptable, without his testimony, the odds of conviction would be greatly diminished and I could end up with a major embarrassment on my hands”. Travers’ gaze now turned to Arret, “You’re nothing but a cowardly terrorist! You’ve put innocent lives in danger with your misguided ideals. I would have considered such a deal if you had shown some remorse and agreed to cooperate fully with the prosecution. I’m not making such a one-sided deal and paying you with my own money. Now, Brother Whatever, you are under arrest! We will see if your tune changes once you’re behind bars. This building is surrounded and you will cooperate with me or I’ll make your life a living hell! There will be no terms unless I dictate them and you will cooperate or find yourself facing the rest of your life in prison.”

Oak came up with a vicious strike to Doyle’s face and dropped him immediately then caught Travers’ jaw, knocking both men unconscious. Arret cued Air into action. The doors burst open as tactical squads rushed in. The Chief’s aides were running for the exit. Guns were raised and ready to fire when the first gust of wind struck and flung all their bodies into the wall. Arret cued the chalice and quickly condensation formed inside the light fixtures. This short-circuited the lights and darkness filled the building. Night-vision goggles were engaged and the tactical units immediately spread out. Whispered communications could be heard along with quiet footfalls. A loud crack, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor, was enough to cause everyone to freeze. With Oak’s guidance and his own well-honed senses, Arret had no need of light to find his targets. His angry voice broke the stillness, “Chief Travers, if you have regained your senses, know that I, Brother Ziu of the mighty Assembled Weight Of God, have lured you here to
take your worthless life as a sacrifice to our just and noble cause! I hold in my hand the
device you tried to buy with embezzled money. Your death is but the first of many, no
quarter will be given!"

Silence filled the darkness until another crack followed by a thud signaled another
unconscious body finding the floor. The sequence of sounds was repeated again and
again. Frantic radio calls were heard as queries went unanswered. The wind began to
roar and crates tipped over bringing about a hasty evacuation of police still standing. The
next assault came with hand-held lighting. They were greeted with the sight of Chief
Travers hanging from a light fixture, bound and gagged with what appeared to be a bomb
beneath his squirming body. There were unconscious officers littering the floor but no
sign of Brother Ziu. The terrorist was finally spotted atop a stack of crates which reached
almost to the ceiling. Arret called upon Earth and immediately light tremors shook the
building causing even more crates to tumble downward. As the officers retreated, they
saw the fugitive smash though a skylight and gain the roof. Shots were fired but he was
already out of sight.

Jumping from rooftop to rooftop, Arret made his way to the end of the block and
descended a drain pipe. He ran down the street while bathed in light from a helicopter
above. Pursuit was swift as squad cars left the warehouse and gave chase. Arret looked
ahead and saw a drawbridge over the Chicago River starting to rise. The ramp rose
slowly so a boat needed clearance to pass. As Arret ran up the increasingly steep ramp, it
became clear to his pursuers he could not reach the top in time to make the leap across.
He was trapped and could only reach the upper most part just as the ramp became close
to vertical. Looking below he watched as more vehicles, with their lights flashing,
arrived on scene. Arret calmly seated himself and watched the commotion below.

Above, a police chopper was circling and its spotlight was focused on Arret's every
move. The boat had long since passed but the ramp remained frozen at its apex. Arret
knew the police wouldn't release it until they were ready. A loudspeaker from above
instructed him to remain still and keep his hands in sight. Arret smiled and held out his
arms. He opened his right hand slowly, showing the chopper it contained a small object.
Suddenly, the craft was lifted by a tremendous updraft. The machine rose over two
thousand feet in a few terrifying seconds. The spotlight was momentarily off Arret until
floodlights from below took over. A megaphone addressed him, "Brother Ziu, there is no
escape for you now. Your attempt to kill Chief Travers has failed. The bomb was
defused and no one has died. You haven't killed anyone as of this moment. Don't make
this worse than it is, surrender peacefully."

Arret surveyed the area; the police chopper had disengaged, likely due to damage
from the updraft. The dynamics of the situation were changing quickly. There were now
three news choppers circling above at a distance and below there were well over a
hundred police, emergency units and a growing contingent of press. He could make out
Vinny talking to the media and knew he was being televised. This story would be major
headlines; he hoped Kyra would read between the lines. He wanted to warn her but didn't
know her phone number. Hopefully, AnLuan would know to call Vinny.

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GAIA'S CHOSEN by T.E. VanNorman 51
Kyra and AnLuan waited anxiously for word. They had given Johnny medication to ease his pain and he was quietly resting in another room. The two women talked at length about what had happened at the beach and the relationships entangling them all. Try as she might, AnLuan could not find fault with this woman. Deep in her heart she knew her mother, Fidelma, would not begrudge Kyra either. During their wait, Kyra made tea and explained her ability to cleanse water. They turned on the television to watch the late news. The major story was an attempted assassination of Chief Travers. Both watched in half-interest until the Chief was shown walking with Vincent. Even with his face bandaged, AnLuan recognized her grandson. They watched as Chief Travers made his statement, “This has been a terrifying experience for me and the peace-loving citizens of our great city. I was diabolically lured to a secluded warehouse by a clever ruse. In an attempt to expose an extremely dangerous cult of terrorists, I met with one of their members. The terrorist falsely offered to give information on this band of cowards. Taking seriously my duty to protect our great city, I placed myself in harm's way. Let me make this clear, despite the rumor circulating in the news, I offered him no deal except for possibly asking the court for leniency if he cooperated fully. The terrorist, a Brother Ziu of the Assembled Weight Of God, then became enraged at my refusal to barter and attacked us. Sergeant Doyle fought bravely but received a broken nose in the melee. We were both rendered unconscious by a martial arts weapon. My aides were chased from the building as gunfire erupted and I revived to find myself hung precariously above a bomb. Luckily, before this cowardly terrorist could detonate the device, the terrorist was engaged with a shower of bullets. Sergeant Doyle regained consciousness and even with the threat of a live bomb, stayed to free me. Our bomb squad went to work on the device and moments ago informed me it had been disabled. At this time, units have cornered the terrorist and I can assure you, this menace and his confederates will be apprehended and punished to the fullest extent of the law. I will not rest until the entire cult, this Assembled Weight Of God, what I understand the press has adapted the acronym AWOG, is securely locked behind bars. If you people will excuse me now, I wish to direct the capture of Brother Ziu personally. I will make myself available as further information develops. Thank you."

A short time later it was Vinny's turn as he was interviewed from the command post near the bridge, “I can give a little more background to the Chief's statement. In an ongoing investigation, it was discovered a number of disasters around the city were not from natural causes. At the time, I was assigned to the Disaster Response Unit, DRU for short. Within a short period of time, we had a small earthquake with a sinkhole, a tornado, and a line of trees burning without an ignition source. The police had a description of a suspect who was at or near all of these incidents. The suspect was captured in Daley Plaza, presumably attempting to cause another disaster. He was placed in a squad car and I was taking him to be booked. I read him his rights and told him he would be facing some long time for the damage and terror he had caused as well as for the officer he assaulted. At that time, he told me that he was willing to cooperate with the police and give them information on a terrorist plot which had caused all the strange phenomena around the city. The group called themselves the Assembled Weight Of God, AWOG for short. The suspect identified himself as Brother Ziu, spelled Z-I-U. I contacted the Chief and informed him the suspect was part of a larger group and he wanted to cooperate, but only with me as the intermediary. The suspect demonstrated the
device by creating a dense fog bank along the lakeshore where none should have existed. At that point the Chief placed me on special assignment to get whatever information necessary to stop these terrorists as soon as possible. The suspect asked for conditions which I didn't have the authority to guarantee, so I set up a meeting and suggested the Chief bring tactical units just in case something went wrong. Thankfully, our guys reacted quickly and stopped Ziu from activating the bomb.” The interviewer asked about Brother Ziu, Vinny answered, “The man up there trapped on the bridge is a zealot and is very unpredictable. After being around him, I can't see him giving up. He was slick enough to con me into believing he was turning on his own group in an effort to kill the Chief. I really don't think he is the sort to just give up. Ziu thinks he's a soldier fighting to save the world for God and is assured a place in Heaven if he dies for the cause. He's sitting up there alone but we think there may be other AWOG members lurking around and we don't want any civilians getting injured. That's all I got to say until we get this guy and find out how many more are out there. One more thing, he somehow disabled our chopper earlier so I want your news choppers to pull back to a safer distance. This guy ain't going anywhere.”

Arret studied the crowd and decided now was the time. Everything was set and the audience was primed for the show. He stood and his voice surprisingly carried over the distance, “Hail, Chief of Fools, Elias Travers! You have escaped from my trap and this saddens me greatly. I wished to take your worthless carcass with me when I left this world. You seem to have won this battle but this is not the end, for I will be but a footnote in the pages of history. The Assembled Weight Of God will surely triumph over you and all those who would defile the blessed Earth!”

Arret unbuttoned his shirt and revealed a pack secured to his waist. Someone below yelled as they realized it was a bomb. Arret laughed while making certain the leather strap around Oak was secured to his wrist, and then yelled, “Assembled Weight Of God, I freely offer my life to you!” The crowd collectively gasped as he pulled out a red can and doused himself with gasoline. Fire seemed to jump from his fingertips and he became enveloped in flame. The burning man stood motionless with his hands above his head holding his staff. No screams, no outward signs of pain came from him. The onlookers watched in horror as one flaming hand slowly dropped and pressed the detonator at his waist. The next instant a brilliant flash and explosion blanketed the top of the bridge ramp and lit up the entire sky. The terrorist had erupted like a volcano, shooting fireballs in every direction. Nothing remained on the ramp except a few smoldering bits of clothing.

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The two women sat totally captivated by the tv screen and even Johnny got up and hobbled in to join them. The pictures were close up and graphic of Arret's skin burning and the horrific explosion which no living being could have survived. They watched intently as the Coast Guard picked up debris with nets while dog teams combed the sides of the Chicago River. The news started to wind down as other stories captured the media's attention. Kyra sat still staring at the tv but seeing nothing. AnLuan came to her side, “Child, do not believe what you see. Father works with forces far beyond our understanding. He lives; I know it in my very heart and soul. From the stories told to me
by Mother, I cannot believe he would perish in such a way. We must trust in his ability
to survive as he has for thousands of years. Now, it be time to call Vincent.”

Vinny was in debriefing when the call came. Stepping away from the table, he took
the call. AnLuAn started to speak but he cut her off, “Yeah, its Doyle, thanks for calling,
you did the right thing. I’ve got a few things to take care of here, and then I’ll pick up the
rest of the family and will be there soon. Please, keep Grams calm and tell her
everything is fine. Let me get your number in case I get delayed. Bye.” Turning to those
at the table, he explained, “Grams saw me on the tube with my nose all over my face and
she freaked. Her caretaker called just to settle her down. I’d better go check on her and
make sure she don’t have no stroke. Think we’ve got this pretty well wrapped up. I better
take a few sick days, the Chief wants to put me in front of them cameras and kiss me or
something.”

They closed the meeting and Vinny hurried to his car. It had been over two hours
since the explosion. He had watched the tapes and still was unsure if Arret survived.
Arret had assured him this would work but the thought of his sacrificing himself for his
great grandson kept nagging at him. Arret was being replaced by Gaia and might not
have been taking this as well as he projected. This might be his way of a permanent
retirement. After all, he wouldn't be the first guy who couldn't deal with life after ending
a career, especially one that lasted over five thousand years. Vinny wondered how he
would take it if he lost all the power that Arret possessed. All Vinny could do was to
follow Arret's plan and hope. He didn't want to think what Grams would do if Arret died.

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Vinny drove nervously around the city making certain he wasn't being followed and
then headed to the beach. Grabbing Arret's robe, he walked down to the shore looking
for any sign of him. The sound
of cars passing on Lake Shore Drive was the only noise interrupting the gentle lapping of
the waves. After searching for ten minutes, he sat against a tree looking out into the
darkness. If Arret didn't show soon, he never would. Arret's own timetable figured he
would be here over an hour ago. The realization of Arret dying crept painfully into his
thoughts.

Out of the corner of his eye he detected movement. Uneasiness came over him as he
headed toward the indistinct moving shadow. His instincts told him there was danger and
he rested his hand upon his gun. As he moved closer, he could distinguish four separate
shadows. They moved in short controlled spurts as if searching for something. Vinny
could make them out now, they were dogs. Rarely were they seen during the day when
the city animal control people were about. They would not be afraid of a lone man.
Vinny recalled reports of such animals attacking homeless people in the area. As he
watched undetected, he was thankful they were not paying attention to their surroundings,
only toward the dark water. They stopped and stood silently watching the darkness
beyond the waves. Vinny remembered FidElma's diary spoke of animals which came to
Arret when he rested. These could be waiting for him now. Vinny was too far away to
hear the growls but the posture of the dogs changed as they prepared to attack.

Something rose from the water and moved toward the shore. The dogs attacked as
soon as the man came within a few feet of the beach. It was definitely Arret, the startled
yell sounded like him but the sound of his staff slicing through the air and connecting with something solid was all Vinny needed to hear. Running with gun in hand, he felt the urge to yell ‘police’ but realized the attackers wouldn’t understand. Arret was on his knees and held one dog by its throat as another clamped down on the nape of his neck. Vinny saw him rise up and then drop backwards, effectively pinning the dog behind him under the water. He then brought up the dog whose throat he held and ran Oak through its mouth. The canine’s head snapped and a short yelp signaled its demise. The dog Arret had struck first regained its footing and charged again. As it leapt, it was intercepted by a bullet from Vinny. The dog beneath Arret had given up its bite as water entered through its open jaws. Arret rolled to the side and another shot took the dog through the head. Vinny had counted three, there must be another close by, and suddenly there was pain in his wrist as canines clamped forcefully into his flesh causing him to drop his gun. The dog planted its hind legs into the sand and began wrenching its head from side to side in an attempt to rip the hand off. Vinny yelled as the teeth continued to rend muscle from bone. A loud crack ended the attack as Arret broke the animal’s spine with Oak. Arret gave an acknowledging nod to Vinny and then collapsed.

Vinny retrieved his gun and tied a handkerchief around his wrist to stanch the blood but he was more concerned about Arret than himself. Arret’s body was covered with burns and bites. He had been in the cold Lake Michigan waters for over two hours and by normal standards should be dead from hypothermia if not the burns. He was naked but for the leather pouches clinging to his neck. Vinny ran back and retrieved Arret’s robe and quickly returned. Using the robe, Vinny dabbed Arret dry as gently as possible. Arret’s hand came up and gripped the cop’s arm; with a raspy voice he asked, “Was that all of them?” Vinny nervously glanced around, “Far as I can tell, I only counted four; thought you was gonna make the body count, too”.

After checking his injured wrist, Doyle helped Arret, “Get up, Magic Man; we’re both messed up pretty bad. I hear they got some really cute nurses working in a little freeclinic not far from here.” Arret replied weakly, “No, if we do, all this will be for naught. I will try to summon aid for us”. Arret held Oak and closed his eyes in deep concentration. Moments passed before he re-opened them, “I am powerless to call for assistance from here. We must reach Midlothian, once there I can deal with our injuries. Trust me, if only we were not so close to the city, I could summon the Womb of the World to us.” Arret took his robe and gingerly donned it over his burnt skin. Doyle looked at his handkerchief, which was now drenched in blood, “Don’t think I can make it that far, I’m leaking like a sieve”. Arret noticed the blood dripping steadily, “Your wrist, show me”. Vinny complied and Arret released the wrap causing blood to spurt. A veteran of many wounds, Arret knew the correct pressure point and slowed the blood flow. He instructed Vinny to hold the spot himself and then brought out the chalice and the censer. Arret instructed his great grandson to sit and then knelt gingerly beside him. He held two elements while creating a mental image of the wound. Addressing Water, he pictured the blood coagulating to form a seal where the vessels were ruptured. Then, to Air, he formed an image of warm, arid wind flowing across the wound to help Water do its work. The blood ceased to drip and a scab began to form. Vinny released the pressure after a few minutes and both men were pleased to see the newly formed scab hold. He said, “You truly are a magic man”. There was no reply from Arret as he was requesting Oak to locate a healing plant to use as a poultice. Oak directed him away from
the beach until he stumbled to the base of a nearby bush. Bending down with considerable pain, he found a small plant unknown to him but he trusted Oak's knowledge of such things. He returned to Vinny, placed the leaves on the wound, secured the wrapping and nodded his approval at his handiwork. Weakly he uttered, "This should suffice until we reach Kyra's. We must make haste for my wounds have drained my strength and my blood loss is great". They helped each other to the car. As they approached, the light from the street lamp gave Vinny his first good look at Arret. His entire body was horribly charred; only his face remained somewhat recognizable. Even his feet were covered with bloody flakes which fell off wherever he stepped.

Arret gingerly settled into the passenger seat. Vinny noticed the blood soaked robe ooze from between body and seat. Doyle wanted to examine the wounds but Arret stopped him, "No more wasted time, get me to Kyra's before I am too far gone. I can only control my heart rate for so long." Arret told him he would give specific directions when they reached Midlothian. Vinny heard the urgency in his voice, "Your call, Arret, better hold on because we're gonna break some speed limits. It's cool though, I got a friend who's a cop". He then placed the portable police light on the car roof and sped off.

The drive to Midlothian from Chicago usually took longer than an hour but they hit the city limits in thirty-three minutes. Arret hadn't spoken since they started and when Vinny attempted to wake him for directions there was no response. Pulling over and parking, Vinny called the number AnLuan had given and got directions. Vinny knew Arret was still breathing as he moved whenever they struck one of the numerous potholes. The smell of burnt flesh sickened Vinny but it also helped to keep him awake. The blood loss made him light-headed and a couple of times he came close to passing out. Turning a corner, Arret slumped over and Vinny had to reach to catch him. The effort tore open his wrist wound which caused blood to flow noticeable. Finally, they made the driveway in front of three anxious faces. It was all Vinny had left as he passed out before he could turn off the ignition.

The women were undecided as to which man needed help the most. Arret solved the dilemma by raising his head and pointing to Vinny. They laid his unconscious body on the ground and AnLuan hurried to stop the bleeding. Kyra ran to where Johnny was talking to Arret through the open car door. She let out a gasp at the sight of him but quickly overcame her shock and with the teen's help got him out of the car. They went to Vinny as Arret asked Johnny to bring water from the house. When he returned, AnLuan propped Vinny's head up and got him to drink. Vinny seemed to stabilize with the extra fluids and whispered, "Well, Magic Man, guess we made it". Arret's reply was stern, "Do not speak, conserve your strength, we have further to travel. You suffering will not be in vain". Arret straightened and freed himself from those holding him upright, "All of you help Vinny; I will make it on my own". They lifted Vinny to his feet then followed slowly behind.

Placing one foot in front of the other, Arret knew he was using the last reserves of his strength. Mentally, he used Oak and called for the Womb. Oak answered the tunnel was close by. Arret's thoughts began to drift and he found himself thinking of Old One-Eye testing him as to how he handled pain. Now, he was with two trainees both suffering, perhaps, this was a test as had been Old One-Eye's. The memories reminded him of the rage he felt at the time but now it was what he needed to stubbornly push ahead. Arret was certain he could make the trek to the woods but feared for Vinny as AnLuan called to
him saying Vinny was losing too much blood. Arret asked Oak to relay to the Womb to come closer, perhaps the garden, due to the desperate situation. Oak gave him a different course and he weakly whispered, “Follow me if you would see Vinny survive”. They kept close as he passed the garden and through the bushes into the adjoining field. Not ten paces beyond, he vanished. The others followed and found a tunnel barely visible. There was no light, just a black hole where the only means of navigation was to run hands along the walls and listen to Arret as he urged them forward. Behind them came the sounds of earth shifting as the tunnel sealed them inside. The passage sloped downward and the descent aided their burden. They heard Arret stumble but then gathered himself and continued downward.

Suddenly, Kyra realized she could see the faint outline of Arret’s silhouette not twenty paces in front; light was coming from ahead of him. When they reached the chamber, Arret stood to one side of the slab and directed the others to place Vinny upon it. Arret handed Kyra the elementals and instructed her as to where they should be placed. Behind where Johnny stood, a soft rumble came and the tunnel no longer existed. Where the tunnel had been was now studded with crystals akin to the rest of the chamber. The women went to Arret’s side looking to help him and for direction as to what would happen next. Kyra put her arm around him to give added support and felt the blood-soaked robe. She found the gashes in the back of his neck and started to fuss over him. Arret said her hands, “The wounds are irrelevant, they will soon be remedied”. She started to protest when the crystals began to brighten. Minutes passed as everyone waited for whatever was to come. Vinny groaned and then sat up as he flexed his wrist and removed the bloody wrapping. The wound was healed, leaving only a faint redness where the scar should have been. He got off the slab and as soon as his feet touched the floor he realized he no longer had a limp, the slab had repaired his leg from the earlier car accident. Vinny help up his wrist to show Arret, “This is really something; I feel like a kid again”. AnLuan cut in, “Vincent Doyle, not now, help Arret!” Arret stopped them, “No, the youngling is next”. The others protested but he was adamant. Vinny quickly lifted the teen onto the slab, “The sooner you get done, the sooner we take care of Arret”. Johnny had barely rested his head on the stone when the crystals activated. In a few minutes, Johnny opened his eyes and examined his body and then jumped down.

Vinny already held Arret in his arms and was placing him on the slab before Wacker’s feet hit the floor. Sometime during the teen’s treatment Arret had collapsed. His body seemed lifeless as Vinny muscled him into position. The crystals began to glow with an intensity not seen in the others. The light became almost blinding and the other four had to shield their eyes. The process continued, it was taking longer than the prior two, much longer. Each knew the man was close to death and hoped it was not too late. The brightness began to wane as four sets of anxious eyes were riveted on the motionless body before them. Kyra was the first to detect a slight movement in his chest. As she rushed him, she yelled, “Yes!” The man opened his eyes and looked around. It took a moment to realize where he was, the regenerative powers of the Womb were disorienting at times and he knew he had pushed it to the limit. Kyra climbed right on top of the slab and inspected him. His skin still showed signs of discoloration but the texture was normal again. As she kissed him, she reached behind his neck and felt for the gashes from earlier. Satisfying her worries, she realized what she had done and where she was. Arret had warned her about insulting any of the entities. She jumped off the slab and
AnLuan walked away from the celebration and inspected the entire chamber. Vinny joined her and squeezed her hand. She said, “Mother, she be talented in her drawings. She captured every stone and mark. I am ashamed to admit I thought this be fanciful dreaming on her part. Now, I stand where she stood and see with my own eyes.” She turned and faced him, “Vincent, I feared for you. Now, I’ll pray Father and this magical place have broken what the black-hearted dark crows foretold. You would be dead but for this place.” Removing his nose bandage, she hugged him.

Arret announced, “This is not the place for prolonged conversation. The Womb of the World does not appreciate crowds and we would be wise to leave and let it return to its resting place away from people and structures.” He signaled his readiness to return to the surface and the answering vibrations from Oak gave him leave. Stepping to the northern wall, he waited for the tunnel to form. Then he took Kyra’s hand and they stepped into the darkness leading to the world above.

The dawn came much too soon, still Arret and Kyra were the first to rise. As she made coffee, he ventured outside to welcome the new day. When she joined him, they sat and enjoyed the peaceful setting. Animals started to gather but Arret sent them away. For the moment he wished to have some time alone with Kyra. He said, “I fear the others will wake soon and burden me with endless questions”. The two had spent much of the night discussing her experiences with the ritual on the beach. As Arret sipped his coffee, he said, “You are fortunate, when I decided to let the four of you experience the elementals, it was to give Vinny and Johnny exposure to the forces. You were already aware and my daughter showed little interest in such things. I must confess I could not resist showing off to you. Doing such a ritual with a person at each station and having them so closely matched with their respective elementals, is a first for me. What happened to you was as close to perfect balance as I can imagine with a group. True, my bonding with the elementals also aided with the event. Going back to your experience, another entity was within the circle which was totally unexpected. Gaia itself showed its presence. I had always communicated with Gaia through images; there was never an actual linking. I assumed Gaia was too incomprehensible of an entity to actually link with a human mind. Only through intermediaries, primarily the elementals, could there be any form of contact. Now, I find my assumptions were incorrect.” Kyra smiled, “I am honored to have Gaia and the elementals touch my life, even if only for a short period of time. Thank you for your gift, my love.” She leaned over and kissed him then noticed the others were in the kitchen. She got up and went back to the house. He remained and thought of how lucky he was to have found her. He could see himself growing old with her and enjoying the later years of his life. This time would be his until its culmination and she would be there to share it. There were worse endings for one who lived the warrior’s life. The only question remaining was which man would take his place.

Arret sat in contemplation until everyone came out and sat around him. He addressed them, “The day is young and I know you have questions. An explanation of the events hopefully will satisfy you.” He looked around and began, “When the five of us were in circle, you were shown a representation of the power flowing around you. I placed the four of you where an elemental held its post, attempting to find the appropriate corner for each person. As the energy flowed through you and around the sphere, you were able to
see how they interacted with each other. These lines flow around the planet. Only in our
circle, they were given color for you to see the dance. Around the world these lines carry
the force of the elementals and Gaia itself. Where they intersect, raw power is easier to
tap. Mankind found it beneficial to connect with the natural forces at these points and
built altars and temples to them. With each successive religion, they supplanted the
existing structures with their own. Many of these lines carry the force of the specific
element. For instance, Water may be dominant in one line where a spring would flow up,
bringing water which cured certain maladies. At Delphi, were the oracle dwelt, Air, Fire,
and Earth dominated and certain volcanic fumes came up through subterranean vents.
They caused altered states of consciousness which gave the priestesses visions of future
events. The place still has power but people have forgotten how to tap into it.”

Arret finished his cup of coffee and stretched. He went on to recount what happened
after they parted: the plan, using the DRU computer to pick the perfect building and then
removing the skylight from the building plans so the tactical teams would not know of its
existence; taking the explosives from the DRU storage; even the boat was arranged for by
a friend of Vinny's to cause the selected drawbridge to rise when it did to give Arret the
perfect stage for his show. “Everything went according to plan until I ignited the
gasoline. The audience needed to see a fanatic dying for his cause. It was necessary for
me to be very convincing with this time’s excellent cameras. I gave Fire the image of
what I desired and at first there was little heat from the flames but quickly they started to
burn my flesh. The pain increased and I stood it for as long as possible. Reaching my
limits of pain, I set off the explosives. Vinny had used shaped charges so they would
direct the force of the blast away from my body while a flak vest gave added protection.
As the bomb exploded, the flames shot out and blinded the crowd. I dropped off the
ramp and plunged into the river. Water made certain there was no revealing splash as it
accepted my body and then strong currents whisked me away from the scene. What went
wrong was the nature of Fire itself. The elemental was only to scorch my outer skin but
the very essence of Fire is to consume. Fire cannot be blamed for this; it must be what it
is. There is always a risk when dealing with any of the elementals, their motives are
closer to what spirit wants than to material needs and as such they are unpredictable.”

“My body was severely burnt and I was unable to swim as I had planned which left
only the pace of the water to move me along. I knew Water would see me to my
destination, just slower than I would have on the boat. Oak kept me conscious as it
reassured me with vibrations. The elementals worked together to keep me insulated from
the chilly waters. At the beach, I foolishly let Oak dangle from its tether. I might have
been warned if I still held it. The dogs were of the same ilk as those which attacked me
in the woods. Seldom have so many animals or attacks come so often. Usually it is a
single animal which senses my balance. The attacks may be linked with some special
purpose dealing with this awakening. It was during this attack when Vinny saved me.
After this we were reunited with you.”

Arret rose, “Enough, time to break our fast”. They moved to the kitchen were Kyra
declared, “Sorry, my parents left on vacation and there just isn’t enough food”. AnLuan
took charge, “Come dear, I’ll take Vincent's credit card and we'll stock up the place”. Arret
started to follow when his daughter stopped him, “You may be the master of all
them natural forces but, Father, the kitchen is more the realm of womenfolk. Stay and let
us take care of what we know”. He stopped in his tracks and wisely offered no protest.
Addressing the men, he said, “My daughter is a clever woman, she must have sensed our need to be alone. We should start to determine which of you will become the Chosen. A workout before we eat is not a bad idea. The field would seem a good place to gauge your skill levels.”

The staff was thrown to Johnny as they entered the field and Arret explained, “This is my staff, Oak. I believe you remember it and its effectiveness. It is my personal choice of weapon; however, you may find something more to your liking. In my youth, I carried a sling and used it with success. It was later when I obtained Oak and found it more fitted to my needs. The main concerns when choosing your weapons are the need to be handy, durable and contain as little metal as possible. Metals can interfere with the use of your will over the natural forces. It can also disrupt your ritual when within your circle. I note your frowns as much of the weaponry of this age is filled with metal. Make your choice wisely, the wrong one could make you weaker if you cannot use the forces at your disposal. Using the staff has been a great joy to me. Pup, let Vinny feel the balance and strength of Oak. The only meeting he had with it was a swift breaking of his nose. I am sorry for this but, as with most things I do, there is a lesson involved. I intended to have your nose healed by the Womb and not for the injuries which came later. I would have injured Johnny as well had he not already been so by others. The man, who held this position prior to me, smashed my face with a log and then brought me to the Womb for healing. For whatever reason, he left me to regain consciousness alone within the chamber and did not bother to even tell me I was being considered for the position. I assure you my methods will not be as harsh. He was a different person and from a distant age. His methods and reasons were his alone. Perhaps this is why I have not been given any direction from Gaia. You must learn the pain you feel is of no consequence, you need only endure it until you return to the Womb. I have cheated death more times than I wish to recall. The Womb can heal almost any injury. What it cannot do is regenerate limbs or major parts, such as eyes.” Johnny interrupted, “Hold it, tell me how it works, you know, the healing thing.” Arret replied, “I am not certain, there are symbols on the slab which are beyond my knowledge. I believe they must contain or channel power and the crystals somehow focus the energy to heal. My understanding of such things is limited. I was never one to question how the Womb worked, only on making it function. For example, I look at this in the same way I would your automobiles. I know enough to operate one but know little of what makes them work. There is no need for me to know.”

They resumed training as Arret showed them how to wield the staff and inflict damage without causing death. He took a piece of leather strap and made a sling. With it, he flung rocks across the clearing and struck a large boulder with amazing accuracy. The morning proceeded as Arret gave the two as much instruction as they were able to handle. He sensed a presence behind him and found the two women watching. He grinned, “I see you found us; these two are experimenting with weapons from earlier times”. AnLuan noticed the men were drenched in sweat and a large welt stood out on Vinny’s brow. Wiping the sweat from her grandson’s forehead, she said, “Father, you’re experimenting rougher than be just for pleasure. Be there something you’re not telling us poor defenseless women? I’m no child to be coddled. True, I be old and have seen better days but I’ll not shy from danger. I carry the O’Curry blood and your own. Mother fought at your side and dented a few English heads to save your life in her time. If there be a fight, I’ll not shy from it. Mother always said the O’Curry name was one to be proud
of and is why I took back my name after Vincent's father died.” She hugged Kyra, “And this lass beside me be solid as the Earth beastie she be partial to”. Arret looked at Kyra; she stared back defiantly, saying, “No secrets, we're in this together”. Arret glanced back to the man but clearly the decision was for him alone. It took but a moment, “There is no hiding from an insightful woman and even less when there are two. Gaia has shown I am to be replaced when the Womb departs. My servitude has reached its conclusion. Now, I must make certain my successor is prepared. Gaia's images showed these two outside the tunnel. I believe one will become the Chosen when all if finished here.” AnLuan looked from her father to her grandson, saying, “There be food in the house. Any thinking will be better done on full stomachs”. Her words reminded all just how hungry they were.

The meal was consumed mostly in silence. There were a few feeble attempts from Arret to start conversations but curt replies were all he could coax as all were lost in thought. When finished, AnLuan asked Arret to take a walk with her outside. He put his arm around her shoulders as they strolled along a gravel laden path. He broke the silence, “Daughter, you remind me much of your mother, I truly regret having to leave when I did. Perhaps now we can make up for the time we lost. I was without knowing she was with child, although I could not have remained even if I knew. Your mother was a secretive woman and stubborn as the Irish can be.” She rested her head against him, “No regrets, Father, life has been good to me and more importantly, it was me who fulfilled Mother's dearest wish. Now, there be something which needs saying. Let the lad be your replacement, he has not kin nor ties here. I'll not like gaining a father only to lose a grandson.” He had the same feeling about finding her and Vinny. It would be hard to lose either of them so soon. Arret said, “I agree the lad would be the best choice if feelings were the only factor but the choice may not be mine to make. Gaia may have the last say and it does not care about my concerns. It is selfish of me but I have been without family for too long. Now with the events dictating I remain, I wish to have as much family around me as possible. I will lean my training toward the youngling but I must give Vincent his chance. He made it clear he wants this position and I must respect his wishes as well.” She sighed, “There is something else we must speak of which I find more frightening then losing Vincent as Mother lost you long ago. Let us sit, Father, we must speak of crows”.

They returned to the house to find Kyra showing Johnny and Vinny some books on Wicca. She realized one of them would be taking Arret's place and thought some understanding of ritual might be useful. Arret remarked, “It would appear there will be two more assisting in your training. I seem to remember there being five participants within the circle on the beach. I have often been surrounded by persons who have been touched by fate and destiny. Surely, such things are influencing our lives here. Our meeting could not be by chance and now I believe we must work as a group to fulfill whatever the future holds for us.”

“First, I feel I must explain something of balance. Please, follow me outside where it is more comfortable.” Finding a cool spot in the shade, Arret directed them to sit and then said, “I am a creature of balance. There is a point in nature where spirit and matter exist in equal states of influence. Most animals are attuned to this and the vibrations of harmony in nature. Do not be alarmed, we will be joined by some denizens of the wild.”

Animals started arriving within minutes. Appearing first were a number of birds, then a squirrel from a nearby tree. A rabbit came from under a plant and hopped to Kyra. It
looked at her while she sat still and then settled by her thigh. Arret began to speak softly, “More will be coming, and we are attracting them as we sit. Although none of you are in true balance, the residue of the vibrations from contact with the Womb still lingers within you. Do not be alarmed by the types of animals, some may be dangerous under normal circumstances but they will not harm you here.” As if by cue a large vicious looking black dog loped into view, gave a soft whine and placed its massive head on AnLuan's lap. Arret continued, “Remember the lines of power you experienced in our circle. Where these lines intersect cause vibrations which are akin to those which radiate from me. Animals were influenced by these sites and can achieve peaceful bliss while near. Ancient man observed the behavior of the animals and realized the places were special. This was followed by the building of altars and other religious structures. The Sacred Grove which I serve is always situated on such intersections.”

Arret realized they were caught up in the spell of the animals and said, “Enough of this, we could sit here with these creatures for the entire day but there is much to learn and time may be short”. He made a power sign with his hand and the animals silently faded away. He said, “The animals are always a magical experience and I take comfort in their company whenever I can, but not now. Besides, there may be others who may be attracted, which are not of the balance. I would think there are no more around but with the number of attacks so far, I choose for caution. Due to our contact with the Womb and the subsequent vibrations emanating from us, there may be a larger attraction for those out of balance. Humans are just as susceptible to this. As mankind strays further from nature, its capacity to destroy for no reason becomes more manifest. There are many things about this which I do not comprehend; some may just be the cycle of change which must be. There may be opposing forces which choose this time of transition to disrupt the process of my replacement and are behind the attacks which have been so prevalent in this calling. I have never been given all the knowledge of what is happening or what is to happen while I am attempting my tasks. Nothing is ever a surety when it comes to the Chosen. What other forces or entities might be at work are not within my sphere of knowledge. We must simply be vigilant and prepare as best we can for whatever fate brings us.”

Arret worked the men to sharpen their skills while the woman helped whenever they could and even they were becoming adept in their own ways. After hours of a grueling workout, Vinny was exhausted while Johnny was showing off the endurance of youth. Neither man had yet to accomplish anything with the sling. The only one competent with it was Kyra. AnLuan found a friend in Oak and although not by any means proficient with the staff, she could and did place welts on Vinny and Johnny. Vinny handled the staff fairly well but after being shown up by Wacker, he went to his car and brought back his police baton. When Arret attacked him with Oak, Vinny was able to fend off most of the blows, impressing even Arret. Johnny was excellent with the staff, his reflexes were quick and he remembered every move shown him.

They called a break as morning faced into afternoon and Kyra suggested lunch. The meal was not the quiet affair as breakfast had been. Johnny enthusiastically continued to shoot questions at Arret about the staff and the powers at his command. Vinny watched from across the table and felt his chance for becoming the Chosen was slipping away. Fighting was for the young, he knew he was getting on in years and there was no way he could keep up with the kid's endurance, still he was no quitter. If he lost, it would not
mean the end of his world. There would be Grams to take care of and he would get the chance to know the man who was his great grandfather. He could remain a cop and with his leg healed, there would be no worries about medical retirement or worse, a desk job. If he didn’t become the Chosen, he would still have a life, although what he wanted most was to make a difference in the world. For as long as he could remember it was his main ambition. Being the Chosen would make it a reality.

The meal finished quickly and no one seemed in a hurry to resume training. Arret could sense everyone would benefit with a non-physical lesson. Endurance would be of use later but knowledge was just as important. Many times his battle skills were not enough. The way of the warrior only worked if there was a keen mind behind the skills. They returned to the garden where Arret sat with Oak. His fingers ran over its familiar worn surface and reflected on memories of long ago. He looked around at the others and said, “We have exerted our bodies enough for one day. I will relate to you the time when I first encountered the Sacred Grove and how I obtained my wooden companion.”
PART THREE

The air was thick with anticipation for the story about to come. Arret searched for the right words, “I awoke in the Womb and followed the tunnel to greet the sun once more. I found a suitable place to construct my ‘sacred round’. The site was protected by small hills and a spring provided me with fresh water. I performed my ritual and received a number of images. One particular image was filled with a great uneasiness as a ring of massive trees were being felled. There was no direction given and I was uncertain where the trees were. In the distance I heard the call of a hunting horn. Not knowing what was near, I used the brush and hills for cover. As I crested a hill, I spied a group of about thirty soldiers being led by twelve dogs on long leashes. In front of them I could make out their quarry as two men and a woman ran before their pursuit. It was apparent their flight was all but over as they stumbled from exhaustion. I watched as one of the hunted pointed toward a break in the hills to the south of me. One man and the woman started off while the other remained to face the soldiers. I judged the distance and realized the two would make the pass only if the one could delay their pursuit long enough.”

“The soldiers were well-armed with spears and swords. The man making his stand was weaponless and stood unsteadily. I admired his courage as he stood there sacrificing himself. The dogs pulled on their leashes when they caught sight of him. He slowly picked up a rock as the dogs were unleashed and quickly closed the distance. The dogs were well-trained and circled their prey. One feigned an attack as another closed to bite an ankle. The rock crushed the dog’s skull but it was already too late for the man. Another dog broke inside the man’s defense and caught his other ankle, causing him to drop. To my surprise the dogs ceased their attack and waited for their masters. As the soldiers leisurely walked up, the man’s arms were quickly bound as he offered no resistance. Both ankles were bloody and his captors applied tourniquets high on his thighs to stay the blood. He seemed not to notice, his eyes were on the two who were doggedly climbing.”

“The two made the pass and stopped to look back while they caught their breath. The soldiers were well aware of them and lifted their prize. One soldier pulled his sword and hacked off one and then the other of the captive’s legs, just below the tourniquets. Even from my vantage point I could hear the screams. The man fainted but was revived. They furthered his torment by tossing his severed limbs to the dogs, which were devour in moments. The soldiers were not finished with the poor man as they freed his hands and held out his arms away from his body. Two soldiers, working in unison, swung their swords and separated arms from body. His limbless body fell to the ground as the captors laughed and held up his arms for those watching from the pass. Somehow the man still lived and screamed in horror as they took to his body with skinning knives, showing no more regard than would be given a slaughtered ram. I heard him yell weakly and then thankfully no more. When the skinning was finished, the last thing they did was to remove the head and place it on a spear. The hungry dogs were given a signal to feed on the remains while the soldier raised the headed-spear toward the now vacated pass. The soldiers seemed in no hurry as they rolled the man’s skin and then packed it with a large bundle of others. The dogs were called and obediently disengaged from their feast so they could be leashed. They quickly were back on the trail and tugged fiercely on their restraints. They knew another meal awaited them and it would not be far ahead.”
“I had never seen such butchery done to a human before. War is a horrible thing, I had already seen battlefields littered with the parts of men but this was different. I could not save the one man but I felt the need to help the other two and moved to intercept them. They were exhausted and I was young and rested. Running with the speed of youth, I made it around the back of the hill where they should be but found no one. A quick examination of the ground told me they had not passed. Moving back toward the pass, I searched for tracks. Their trail led between two large boulders into a narrow sunken valley, hidden from casual view. Following the tracks, I ran down the slope into the trees below. As I entered the woods, the barking of the dogs broke through the boulders at the entrance.”

“I pulled my sling and made certain my obsidian knife was at the ready. There was no longer time to follow any tracks, if the two chose another course, the dogs would track them and make enough noise for me to hear. I covered ground quickly and wondered how I would deal with the butchers and their beasts. Old One-Eye had stressed the importance of my vow not to take human life. I would find this very difficult to keep this day. A small stream appeared and I followed it to mask my trail. I noticed fresh droplets along the bank and knew the two I sought had passed this way.”

“The barking behind me was closer now. The soldiers had loosed their dogs to bring this to an end. Ahead of me, the man was almost dragging the woman through the water. I yelled for them to quit the stream. The man reacted to my voice and dropped the woman to face me. He was thankfully surprised I did not wear the uniform of the soldiers. Between us, we easily picked her up and headed into the woods. The barking changed pitch as the hounds lost the scent but then quickly regained it. We came to a large tree and I told them to climb into the branches. The man wanted to argue but was too exhausted. We helped the woman reach the lower limbs and he started up after her. He looked down, expecting me to follow, but I just told him to continue. The sounds of the dogs drawing closer seemed to sink into his brain and he disappeared into the thick foliage.”

“My hands felt for the elementals; I knew how to use them, the problem was in knowing what to ask for. I was still a novice in the elementals usage. Earlier, I had called forth Fire and burned down half a village instead of a small bridge separating me from an angry mob. I was uncertain which elemental to use so I made a general plea to them all. Within a few minutes, there came an eerie stillness over the land. A rumble sounded deep in the ground and everything started to shake. I was thrown from my feet and heard a loud hissing sound. The distinct odor of brimstone filled the air and I knew the dogs would be unable to follow scent. As I thanked the elementals and prepared to join those in the tree, one of the dogs caught sight of me and barked to alert the others. I dropped a stone into my sling and let fly. My aim was true and the stone smashed through the dog’s eye causing instant death. Another two came crashing through brush and I dropped one of them. There was no more time to load and swing my sling so I pulled my knife as the dog left its feet and leapt at me. I deflected the side of its head with my arm and plunged the knife deep into its underbelly. Others were converging; there had been too much noise. I started to climb the tree when two more broke through the brush. I dropped back to the ground before they reached me. The sound of a hunting horn filled the valley and the dogs obediently answered their master’s call. They were indeed well-trained to break contact and return. The stench of brimstone had caused the
soldiers to stop the hunt. I knew they would return with reinforcements to locate their prey and also to find the reason for their missing dogs.”

“Introductions were made as we moved further into the valley. Edeb and Lyca were siblings and the man who stayed behind had been their older brother. They had been captured by the Assyrians in a raid eight days prior. Most of their village, the lucky ones, had been slaughtered immediately. The others had been spared for a time as the soldiers used them for hunting practice and training for their war dogs. These two were the last of over thirty people. The soldiers had split their captives and gone in small parties, only to return with headed spears and skins to be stretched out and dried in front of those remaining.”

“I assisted Edeb and we helped Lyca through the dense underbrush. Edeb knew this valley because he had accompanied his people when they came here to receive visions and insight. The end of the valley was closed off by steep cliffs but he knew a hidden trail leading up the valley wall to the plains above. We found the trail and began our ascent. I heard barking and knew the Assyrians were back in force. I told the siblings to continue on while I dealt with those below. The elementals were in my hands, Air and Water were my choices as I formed a request. I then rejoined the siblings on the cliff wall. The valley was suddenly shrouded in a dense fog. Feeling safe, we rested and I questioned Edeb about the valley. There was something familiar about it. He described how the trees grew thicker in the boxed end and in its deepest part stood a ring of giant trees where his people came to worship on their holy days. I knew at once this was the place shown to me. I announced to them I intended to return below to fulfill a vow. Their concern was noted as they reminded me of the soldiers and what capture would mean for me. I nodded and bid them a safe journey and started my descent.”

“The fog was thick and the unfamiliar trail down the wall slowed my pace. From above came Lyca’s scream and I rushed back to the rim to find no one in sight. Surveying the land, I noted small hills near the rim which spread out onto a broad plain. Tracks led off to a small depression where I found the siblings. They were ringed by more of the soldiers. Edeb was tied to a spit and being roasted alive over a slow fire. Lyca was bound to a stake while the leader of the soldiers was kissing her. He never finished the kiss as a stone from my sling smashed into his arm. I heard the sharp distinct sound of bone breaking. He yelled and fell to the ground in pain. I suddenly realized there were more than forty of them against only me. I could not count on the elementals to work so quickly which left me no alternative but to run. They were soldiers conditioned to marching long distances but could not match me in this type of race. Hoping they would be lured away from the siblings, I planned to double back for a rescue.”

“It was a good plan but it was not to be. As I made the top of the rise, I looked back and saw the leader take his sword and quickly slay both captives. It took me a long time to realize their quick death was better than what they would have endured. My thoughts were on my own survival as I surveyed the land ahead. There were grassy hills which offered little cover, to my right, the cliff dropped off into the white fog of the sunken valley. I frantically searched for a place offering concealment. The distance lengthened until my energy began to wane. It was then I heard the barking of the war hounds. Desperately, I looked for a small cave or another trail down the cliff but there was
nothing. Realizing I had a substantial lead, I took Air and asked for a wind storm but nothing happened. It was then I knew I was on my own.”

“Scanning the land behind, I noted the pursuit was there but not pressing as I would have expected. They moved slowly as if herding me toward something. A flash of light caught my attention and I saw a reflector on a hill behind the advancing soldiers. They were clearly sending messages to others ahead of me. I examined the cliffs closely now, hoping for a solution to my situation. This time I made a quick circle and asked the elementals for assistance, but they still ignored me. Ahead, I could see the tips of trees protruding from the fog which still filled the valley. They must be the ones Edéb described. In my mind an image flashed of the grove I had seen in my ‘sacred round’, surely this was the Sacred Grove I had sworn to protect. The soldiers knew I was trapped and loosed four of their hounds. I stood with my back to the rim not allowing access to my ankles from behind. I reached for my sling and put all my stones inside the pouch. There would be no time to get more than one with the sling and they would be on me before I finished the first toss. One came within range, I swung the sling and the full weight of it smashed into the dog’s jawbone. It did not recover from the blow. A dog went after my left leg as another sprang unexpectedly at my chest. He struck solidly and we both plunged over the rim. I flung the dog away and watched as the whiteness swallowed me. Two of the massive trees were on either side of me. I hit branch after branch as each gave way to slow my descent. I was being tossed from one tree to the other as I dropped closer to the valley floor. The fog was thick and most of the time I felt the branches before seeing them. My fall broke after what seemed an eternity. I was suspended as the leaves spread out like a giant nest. Through the dense fog I could make out a massive limb reaching off into the mist. I crawled inward until its girth was as wide as my shoulders and then I stood and walked to the trunk. The thought of the soldiers in the valley caused me to reconsider going further below. This tree felt safe and secure, at least, until the fog lifted. Exhausted, I lay upon the branch and entered into a restless sleep haunted by the tormented faces of Edéb and Lyca.”

“A bird’s song brought me from my slumber as the sun was peeking through the leaves. I estimated to be the height of twenty men above the ground. The fog had dissipated and I heard shouting as the search continued. They looked hard but the branches seemed to move and shield me. For whatever reason, I gave thanks to the tree and was startled when I received a reply in the form of a vibration. I remained aloft watching the frustrated soldiers below. The day dragged on and my stomach reminded me of the void within. I napped hoping to forget my hunger. Awakening, I realized the tree had communicated with me in my slumber. This is where I first learned of the ‘Promise’; allow me to explain the concept.”

Arret took a few moments to gather his thoughts. “All matter has spirit. This spirit is constantly transforming from one essence to another. For example, look at this rock, it contains its own piece of spirit and collectively unite to form the essence of the rock. As the interplay between the elements break this down, pieces separate and over time become soil. The spirit is still in the particles and now its form has changed. Within the soil, a seed begins to grow and feeds upon the nutrients contained therein. The spirit transforms from inert into something living. It condenses along with the spirit taken in by the plant until it matures and comes to seed. Some of the seed will grow and continue the cycle. Most will be consumed by other living creatures.”
Arret looked up to the sky, “I believe there are other realms beyond what we know. Scientists believe in what is called the Big Bang Theory where all matter in our universe was created in a massive explosion sending all matter out across an expanding universe. My thinking is to go back further to the others realms I mention where matter does not exist, only spirit, ‘God’. At some point, the concept of matter came to spirit and through some process; it found a way to create matter. I believe matter is actually a type of vessel for spirit to dwell in our realm. From this piece of rock up through the many stages of transformation, a part of each is carried into the human soul. When we die, our spirit, due to its density, is able to return to its original realm where it carries all the cumulated experiences of its incalculable transformations. This spirit then reunites with the pure spirit of its creator and shares its experiences. Simply put, deity created matter and linked it with its own essence to experience itself. We are all part of this cycle and although we do not remember what transformations came before, the spirit does. The spirit in beings without higher reason is more able to exert its will and accepts death as part of this. The material part of their being is not overpowering to spirit and death is not the traumatic event as humans make it. I believe the human mind has attained a point where the idea of the ‘Promise’ has been overridden by our ability to reason. Deity to me is spirit and this does not translate well in the material world. I assume the promise of joining the godhead is one of spiritual unification and the dense spirits humans possess provide a vehicle to rejoin the realm where spirit is all. Think of this whenever you eat a meal or take a breath of air. You absorb spirit from matter allowing a part of it to reach its ‘Promise’ when your soul crosses over. Perhaps this has given you a very basic idea of the term, the Promise.”

Arret continued, “I sat on the branch and lost track of time. While feeling one of many hunger pangs, the tree showed me the ‘Promise’ for the very first time”. He studied those around him, “I must take the time to warn you, this may seem cruel, however, it is the natural order of things and I ask you to reserve judgment until you have considered it carefully”. Arret made a small fire and picked up two forked sticks and another to use as a spit then closed his eyes as he made a mental call. A rabbit hopped from the brush and stopped in front of him. Arret lifted it to his chest and whispered, “Remember the promise, little one”. With a quick flexing of his hands, the tiny neck snapped and only a lifeless form lay in his grasp. The others flinched, realizing what had happened. With no wasted motion, Arret pulled his knife and adeptly cleaned the carcass. Placing it on the spit and resting it on the forks, he looked around for reactions. He met approval from Johnny, who had lived a hard life on the streets. Vinny impassively looked on, Arret knew he was also hardened by years as a policeman and if he disapproved, he showed nothing outward. AnLuan was from a generation where animals were routinely slaughtered and prepared for preserving or eating and was accustomed to such things. It was Kyra who looked at him with abject horror, “You lured that poor thing in and killed it with no thought or compassion. I thought you respected nature”. Arret seemingly ignored her and gave his attention to the turning of the spit. “Have you been listening to my words?” As the Chosen, I reached its spirit and asked for its sacrifice. The spirit of this creature is to be consumed by humans, a higher form and closer to deity. This is natural, Kyra, death is needed to continue life. If you consider what I said, you will find you perform a similar act when you harvest plants from your parents' garden. The spirit is there when you kill a plant for consumption. The only difference is the plants are less
sentient, making the spirit less obvious. Kyra, do you remember the story of the Druid/priest Sargost? When he died, I buried him and planted a tree above his remains. He would have told you how happy I should have been for him. How I should have celebrated for the part of his spirit which had reunited with his deity. The other part stayed with his flesh and was destined to become a tree. Death is not a terrible finality to life; it is but a step in the natural order. The death of this rabbit was not necessary for my survival but I wanted to let the next Chosen know what to do when food is scarce. You must understand, the Chosen is much closer to spirit than anything or anyone else and as such, an animal will knowingly go to its end with the knowledge it is a large step closer to reuniting with spirit. Now, the meat is done, those who wish to eat are welcome.”

Kyra walked away as Arret thanked the rabbit’s spirit. To the men he said, “Life is precious, do not take it without good reason. Remember, spirit does not look at life as a necessity. This makes for much conflict between man and spirit. I suspect the reason for making my vow not to take human life is to keep the separation between spirit’s needs and human wants. I have always respected my vow even when it would have been easier not to.”

He looked hopefully for Kyra and then continued with his story, “I used the knowledge to sustain my life, and then I examined the trees from the ground. There stood a ring of twelve majestic trees towering above all others. Their branches seemed to intertwine and form a wall of leaves from just above my head to the valley rim. This was the Sacred Grove which I had vowed to protect. Walking the circle, I placed my hands on each, hoping to find what was required of me but no vibrations or images were given. I climbed the original tree until I was out of sight and asked what danger the trees faced. An image of a great city appeared in my head and I instantly knew its name to be Nineveh. There were hundreds of Assyrian soldiers marching from the city, each of which carried an axe. Instinctively, I knew they were coming to deforest this entire valley. The communication ended, I quickly descended and ran through the valley to the boulders where I had first entered.” Arret hesitated as he noticed Kyra had been standing away from the others and yet close enough to listen. He smiled uncertainly and continued, “Reaching the pass, I could see the open areas below as it stretched into the distance. The dust from the approaching soldiers told me I had been correct, the images from the tree had been old. These troops had been marching for quite some time. I watched as the soldiers who had been in the valley joined their brethren and pointed up toward the pass. I considered ways to dissuade them but they were soldiers with orders and would keep coming as long as possible. The trees knew this valley was destined to be plundered. I could not stop destiny and any actions taken would only slow the inevitable. The memory of the siblings came to mind and I considered destroying the Assyrians in one swift attack of the elementals but my vow remained. There was only one thing to ease my mind and it entailed ruining the advancing troops’ day.”

“As they began their climb to the pass, I stepped out in plain view. I could not resist the opportunity to taunt them. Being still a youngling and filled with anger, I shouted as I pulled my cloth up and waved my manhood as an insult. The gesture had the desired effect as they screamed with rage and charged up the steep slope. They unleashed two dogs and when in range, I loaded my sling and dropped the first with a stone to its head. My target had been the eye but I hit the skull, only stunning it. I loosed another stone at the second hound and found the mark, killing the beast in mid-stride. The first dog
regained its senses and charged; it was close enough to see the rage in its eyes. I sent another stone but again it only grazed the skull causing the hound to stumble. It was close now and it was my turn to charge. I grabbed its ears and exposed its neck to the exhausted, climbing soldiers. One slice with my knife and the throat was slit; another and the head was severed. I dropped the head and slit open the rib cage. Plunging my hand inside, I pulled out the warm heart and held it up to mock those below. I squeezed it and felt the blood course through my fingers. As I turned to make my exit, I dropped the heart and stepped on it, then scooped up the head and retreated into the valley. If I could not win the war, at least, I could say I won the battle with my cruel taunting. These people showed enormous cruelty towards others who had done nothing to them. I could not avenge those I had seen tortured and slain but I could show what it was like to see something cruel happen to something they valued. I knew the soldiers would be tired now and rage would control their actions. I hoped the trees knew what I had done. If such a thing were possible, I felt a little tormenting of my own would set well with them. I enjoyed bringing out the rage in those who had killed the siblings and would destroy the Sacred Grove.”

“Not far into the valley, I stopped and drew out Air and Water and requested a covering fog. I needed time to reach the grove and complete what must be done. There beside me lay a fallen branch, both ends were sharp, and I planted one end firmly into the earth and placed the dog’s head on the other. I asked Fire to slowly burn the beast’s head. The soldiers would find this and their rage would be further fueled. I knew I must keep an exit from the valley and the only one known was the trail used earlier. I was certain there would be soldiers stationed above the rim and if those below thought to alert them, someone would be waiting for me when I made my escape. As I ran, the fog rose on both sides of me. I reached the Sacred Grove and went to the original tree. I put my head to the trunk and whispered, “The time is now, O Great One”. The vibrations came clearly through the bark and I saw an image of men walking in the fog holding torches. This assured me the trees were aware of my actions. Another image came and left nothing to chance. The Sacred Grove could not be saved and after countless cycles within this valley, it must be relocated.”

“I stepped to the center of the grove and watched as small shoots broke through the soil and rose quickly. They numbered twelve mirroring the giants around me. I carefully pulled each from the ground and bundled the precious saplings. The approaching soldiers could be heard as they signaled each other in the fog; they would be here before long. I went to each tree to pledge my dedication and as I touched the final tree, I felt a great tremor shake the entire trunk. From above came a crashing noise as a branch fell next to me. The ends were rough but the shape was straight and true. I knew this to be a gift and thanked the tree as I picked up the staff. Moving toward my escape up the cliff, I was startled when the staff vibrated in my hand. I had no idea as to what was happening but knelt and listened to my surroundings. Almost immediately, two soldiers emerged from the fog and walked where I would have been. This was the first of countless times where Oak saved me.”

“Reaching the trail, I began my ascent carefully moving to keep from giving away my position. Still enclosed within the fog, voices could be heard above. The upper limits of the fog rested just above me and when I came out there would be no more cover. From my position, I could make out their speech and knew they had been alerted from those
below. They had once again used their mirrors outside the valley to communicate with those in front of me. My luck had run out and I felt trapped between two very angry forces. My newly acquired staff sent vibrations and I followed where it led. We had developed a crude code which took me to where I had stopped with the siblings on my earlier climb. Noise from below told me there were soldiers starting to ascend. I desperately sought a plan when a short vibration from the staff followed with an image of me holding the elementals. More images flooded my mind and I quickly understood. I sat down on the narrow ledge and placed the elementals on my lap, then made a small protective circle around me. Calling upon all four at once, I sent an image of my plan for the butchers of Nineveh. The fog cleared above me and I watched as ominous clouds appeared from clear skies and everything above turned dark and foreboding. The ground began to shake violently and all those on the rim wisely backed away; next came torrents of rain soaking the soldiers unmercifully. Lightning filled the sky with a thousand fingers of heavenly fire, each branching out with uncontrolled fury. I heard men screaming for mercy and I took comfort in knowing the protective circle shielded me. Though the trail was wet and slippery, I climbed numbly and crested the rim and let myself be seen by any who still dared to keep watch. Lightning flashed and silhouetted me against the darkened sky as I stood unaffected by the tempest and addressed the terrified mass before me. You must remember, in those times, everyone feared the gods. To incur the wrath of any deity was the worst possible fate a person could imagine. My words were filled with power and total disdain, 'Hear me, spawn of Nineveh, before you stands the mighty Ziusudra, called Utnapistim by your forefathers. Your actions displease me and I find little reason to allow you to survive.' The Assyrians knew of Ziusudra as Utnapistim and wrote of his exploits during the Great Wash. To emphasize my point, a massive lightning bolt struck a boulder to my left and split it in half with a thunderous explosion and blinding light. I was aware of their gods and those of peoples around them, 'Plead to your petty gods if you choose, they are nothing before me! I dare you to call for Ishkur, Enlil, or Kinkursag. Even great Addad and Gibil are too weak to save your worthless hides.' Sheets of lightning filled the sky; thunder became a continuous wave of deafening sound. There was a small hut which had bravely withstood the onslaught of the tempest. I pointed my staff toward it, 'Behold the wrath of Ziusudra! There is no shelter from my fury!' A bolt of lightning struck the roof scattering the men huddled inside. Everywhere men were crawling away from me and I was feeling proud of my accomplishments. I had routed the men on the rim and refrained from killing anyone. I hoped my actions would make the souls of the three siblings rest easier."

"Looking back into the valley, I saw the fog had dissipated and the soldiers were already beginning to fell trees. I considered bringing the elementals down upon them but knew it was pointless. The trees had given me a task to perform and now I must see to my duty. I made my way back to the Womb of the World and embraced oblivion. When I awoke, it was clear the Womb had traveled far. I was well to the north of Nineveh and much further to the west. There were trees reaching for as far as I could see. Oak guided me as I carried the precious bundle of saplings. I came upon an area cleared of trees where a fire had recently blazed. With Oak's direction, I mapped out the circle for the next Sacred Grove and planted the saplings. Once completed, I retraced the circle and touched each tree in turn. To my surprise, I could feel the same powerful vibrations I had
with the great trees in the valley. These contained the same sense of timelessness and wisdom. I slept in the circle for the night and basked in the pulse of the world. This was clearly a power spot where the lines intersected."

"I woke during the night but was not alone. Sitting next to me was a huge wolf, larger than any I had ever seen. My mind was filled with childhood stories of such creatures eating people. The eyes of the beast were black and unreadable. Its powerful jaw opened to expose huge menacing teeth but the motion was just the prelude to a giant yawn. I cautiously moved my hand to the staff at my side. The creature watched me with an intense frightening stare as if debating if I were edible or not. My hand reached the staff as the beast's snout was only a finger's length away. The creature's mouth opened again and a huge tongue slid out as he seemed to be laughing at me. The animal was certainly under the spell of this place and I felt a reassuring vibration from the staff. I sat up slowly without moving my hand. The wolf seemed unconcerned so I pulled the staff closer and watched as the massive beast tilted its head, as if confused by my behavior. I spoke softly to the staff with a soothing voice, 'Tell me, my wooden friend, could this fearsome creature be an ally to you?' The answering vibrations indicated an affirmative reply. I relaxed as the wolf turned its head from me and I saw two younglings playfully jump out at the signal with a she-wolf following timidly behind. The first cub sprinted too quickly and, when he tried to stop his momentum, caused it to plow into the back of the adult male. I expected the beast to snap at the offending youngling but he just ignored it and returned his attention to me. There were still signs of caution in the male but none in the cubs. They immediately deemed me a plaything and both pounced on me with reckless abandon. I found myself in a wrestling match with two bundles of energy. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the parents but they seemed to be enjoying someone else keeping their offspring occupied for a time. The tussle continued until the cubs decided it was time for their mother to provide nourishment. She dutifully obliged and left the male and myself staring at each other. I no longer feared the wolf; there had been smaller animals that had come when I was at rest. Old One-Eye had told me of such things but never had a large predator approached me. I did not understand then about the vibrations which were becoming part of me and increasing with each exposure to the Womb."

"I soon became familiar with the small pack and gave them names of Sumerian and Babylonian gods. The great male became Anu, god of the stars and heavens. His eyes were the same blackness as a moonless night's sky, lit only by the tiny lights of the stars. I named the she-wolf Inanna, for she was pale white as the moon and was truly the light in Anu's eyes. The male cub I dubbed Enki, god of magic and wisdom. The little monster was always thinking. He would never attack the same way twice; each failed maneuver was quickly discarded and a new strategy was employed. The she-cub I named Baalith, the goddess of love and the moon. This little one was a precious jewel with eyes so enchanting as to melt the coldest heart."

"I stayed with the pack for three lunar cycles and enjoyed the strange northern forest. The wolves were effective protectors of the Sacred Grove. Whenever there was a threat from animals seeking to destroy the vulnerable young trees, the pack would kill them or drive them off. My final days with the pack started as always with the siblings trotting at my heels until they could discern were I was heading and then would take the lead and only look occasionally to see if I still trailed. When I felt they had forgotten me, I would
take off to see how far I could get before they noticed. It was Enki who seemed to know where I was running before I did. I would run until I felt there was no pursuit and then look for a suitable hiding place. However, most of the times, when I rounded the final tree or rock, Enki would be sitting there with his mocking grin. This was always a signal for us to wrestle. When exhaustion took hold of me, I would call for a halt and knew Baalith would be resting on the staff waiting for us to finish. The two were still small but each had already made many a kill of smaller game. Their hunting skills were already honed but not their kill techniques. Another few cycles of the moon and the pack would be very strong. I reclined against a tree and the two cubs rested inside my arms."

"Enki was the first to sense danger. I would have known sooner had I held the staff but it lay on the ground. The small wolf sniffed the air and a threatening growl came from deep within him. Enki ran off before I could react. I retrieved the staff and felt its warning vibrations. Baalith looked to me for guidance and I sent her to bring Anu and Inanna, like a flash she disappeared through the underbrush while I headed after Enki. Ahead of me came sounds of confrontation. Approaching cautiously, I came upon a massive creature as Enki darted around it, dodging its claws. It was a bear, the first I had ever seen or smelled. A putrid stench came from the fearsome monster. The bear was already enraged with the quickness of the small wolf. Enki had become so fleet of foot as to easily keep ahead of any charge the bear made. Each time the bear lunged, Enki would sprint out of reach and stop to show his teeth at the frustrated creature. I slowed my step seeing the youngling was in no immediate danger. He seemed to know his juvenile teeth could not damage such a creature and was content to distract it. As I drew closer, the bear stopped chasing Enki and slowly turned to me. It sensed the vibrations coming from me and quickly forgot the minor irritant at its feet. Standing on hind legs, the bear stood well taller than any man. From deep within the beast came a noise so frightening I wondered if it were a tormented demon. Such stories were told to children in my youth. The bear's massive claws extended as it approached. I thought to use my sling but it was missing, it must have been dislodged in one of my wrestling matches with the cubs. Enki tried to snap at its heel but the bear ignored him. At the time I had never encountered creatures that were out of balance and hated anything within the balance. They existed only to destroy and kill, this was a rogue. I held the staff but had no idea how to use it as a weapon. I pulled out the salamander and formed my request to Fire but remembered Old One-Eye telling me about the elementals not interfering with such creatures. I put the pouch away and pointed the staff at the approaching monster. The beast let out another terrifying roar and, as its head lifted, I rammed the staff into its stomach. The noise stopped abruptly and the bear lowered. I swung the staff like a club and caught the bear alongside its head. It let out a grunt but kept advancing slowly as it savored my helplessness. Turning and running as fast as I could, I made about twenty paces when I felt him closing. There was a large rock outcropping in front of me. Placing my back to the stone, I faced my foe. The beast pulled up short and stood. My only thought was to jam the staff inside the bear's mouth when it roared again and somehow slay it. I caught movement as Enki appeared on my right and Baalith on my left. The bear looked at them but then concentrated its gaze upon me. It took a step forward and extended its claws as it closed for the kill. A shriek of intense agony came for the beast just as I was ready to make my feeble attempt with the staff. The bear's head spun around, Anu had clamped his mighty jaws on the bear's hind leg. Inanna was quick to tear into the other leg causing
the bear to drop and whip around to swipe at them. I saw my opportunity when the staff signaled me to attack. I swung the staff with all my might and caught the bear at the base of its skull. The monster did not lose its momentum as it spun back around to face me. A deadly claw swiped across my chest and luckily I was moving backward or I would have died instantly. The boulder at my back stopped my retreat as the bear moved in again for the kill. I heard the sound of bone breaking and hoped it was the bear's. The creature turned from me and let out a cry of pain as it swiped at the elusive Anu again. The monster stood and came back around to me. I forced the end of the staff right between its eyes. A blur passed by me at the same moment, as Enki saw his chance. He had studied the bear's movements and figured out his attack strategy. As I struck with the staff and knocked my foe off balance, Enki rushed in and sunk his sharp teeth into the only place they had the chance to cause serious injury, the bear's male organ. As the beast continued to fall back, its pain was expressed with a howl no animal should be allowed to make. The bear made a quick recovery and slashed at the cub. For once, Enki was not quick enough to release and dodge as a massive paw caught him. He flew through the air and landed hard. I plunged the staff into one of the bear's eyes and blinded him on one side. Inanna and Anu both continued their work on the hind legs and I saw Baalith rush to Enki's side. The bear spun once more as Anu found his mark again. I timed the bear's spin and caught the other eye with a well-placed jab of my staff. It took many strikes but death finally took it.

"I was exhausted from the battle but my attention was immediately on Enki. The cub still breathed but had a wicked cut across his face. One eye was ripped out completely and the skin on the side of his face lay open. I picked up his limp body and clutched it to my own bleeding chest. The staff guided me back to the Womb as the pack followed silently behind. I purposely left the tunnel open but the pack refused to enter. I kept Enki cradled as I lay upon the slab. I must have lost consciousness, for the next thing known to me, my face was being licked repeatedly and I sat up forcing the exuberant cub away. My wounds were healed and I took the time to examine the cub. His eye was gone and the skin had closed completely around the empty socket. The rest of his face looked the same but the loss of the eye reminded me of Old One-Eye. Enki raced to rejoin his pack as I picked up the staff, making the decision to learn to use it as a weapon. The pack and I returned to the carcass. I scarcely believed the bear could smell any worse but it did. I looked for signs of other bears, perhaps a mate, but found none. This had been a rogue, solitary, hateful, out of balance and drawn here out of hatred for what it could never attain. It is good all bears are not of this ilk or I would not have lived so long. The pack fed well that day but I chose not to eat of such a creature. I did note the feast did not seem to harm the wolves."

"My time with the pack was at an end. They remained to protect the Sacred Grove until the trees were of sufficient size to withstand attacks on their own. There would be many generations of wolves for the task and it was not my place to guard it, only to transport the saplings to another safe haven when necessary. I have moved the Sacred Grove four times in all. Oak is the same which fell to me on the first meeting. It is much smoother now from years of use. When the new Chosen is selected, he should visit the Sacred Grove and hope to find a friend as strong as this. The last time I transplanted the saplings was before leaving Fidelma in the year 1912. The trees should be of good size by now; they tend to grow much quicker than normal trees."
Arret stopped and looked at the sun, “I believe I have talked for too long”. Vinny looked at AnLuan, “Grams, I think you got some of Fidelma’s stuff that Arret might like to see”. She nodded and he left to retrieve the drawings and diary from his car. Arret examined them and explained the scenes. He tried to remain detached from Fidelma but the items created by her were just too much for him. He was lost in thought as Kyra sat beside him and picked up the drawings. She looked at each, and then said, “She was very beautiful and from what AnLuan tells me, a very special person”. He came out of his reverie, “Kyra, this is all strange for me. In my life there was one lingering regret; I told Fidelma of it one night while we were hiding from the British. I have never been able to find out what happened to my loved ones left behind. There were too many years and too few records for those I shared my heart with. Each new awakening, I learned to shut out my prior calling and the people I loved. I conditioned myself to think of them as a dream, real but always distant from the present. When I told Fidelma, she said she could see a time when I would know my family from an earlier calling. My next calling came soon after I left her and many others followed. With each, my attachment to her was still strong. I forsook any lover for those times and buried my heart in my work. Now, I find she not only granted my wish but I have been close to her and my descendants without sensing them. My heart is torn between the past and the present. Old memories are creeping back into my life and tearing at my heart. I had found it much easier to put each awakening inside a safe compartment and detach myself. There must be a way to find closure with Fidelma or I will be haunted by my feelings for her in this time. Will you help me, Kyra? I have given you my love and now suddenly it is divided with a ghost. I have no idea why her memory haunts me so, but it does. Vinny has offered to take me to Fidelma’s grave site tomorrow. Will you accompany me and give your support?” She smiled, “Yes, of course I will. My heart is yours and I want you to find closure. I have something to tell you, I also made a wish. Mine was for you not to leave and it seems mine was answered as well”.

Morning came early and it was a solemn group which went to pay their respects to Fidelma. Vinny attempted to get Arret to wear Mr. Wells’ clothes but the man adamantly refused to wear anything other than his robe. The cemetery was closer to the city and Vinny worried someone might remember the man with the robe from the news. As they walked through the graveyard, Arret was unnerved by the stones and the bodies resting in such an unnatural way. They were being separated from the earth and restricted from rejoining the cycle of nature and the chance to reach the spiritual attainment of the ‘Promise’. He thought of Fidelma and how her body had been placed inside a coffin to keep it whole and untouched by the nature she loved. So unnatural this world had become, shoes to distance feet from the earth, concrete roads and buildings to best nature, and feed for livestock made of material incompatible with their diet. This world was heading for a very rude awakening. No wonder there were so many animals out of balance and it wasn’t just animals, the people were beginning to act irrational and the reckoning will not be pleasant.

The group followed Vinny to the grave site. The stone was a simple rectangle standing on end. Nothing of the color or shape stood out, only the inscription:
HERE LIES
FIDELMA O'CURRY
BORN MARCH 21, 1895
DIED OCTOBER 31, 1980

ELEMENTALS
LET MY SOUL REMAIN
UNTIL HIS RETURN

A circle ringed the bottom section. On its rim were placed the symbols of the elementals. The center circle contained the following words:

AIR
FIRE
WATER
EARTH
SPIRIT

AnLuan said, “I gave her back the O'Curry name. She be born with it, is fittin' she die with it. She never let on but I knew it hurt being shunned by her own. As to the words, they be her own. The design at the bottom was given just before she left us. Mother surely knew when her end would come.”

Kyra spoke with a shaky voice, “Arret, do you see what she did? The four elementals are there with Spirit and contained are the letters of your name from top to bottom. She knew you’d come and read this. If she found a way to keep her spirit anchored here, then you must find a way to release her. This is the reason her memory haunts you so. Your spirit must be aware of her.” He took Oak and set it at the base of the stone. Like a startled cat, he leapt straight up and then stumbled backwards, “Her entire spirit dwells below! Oak assured me this is so.” He looked around at the people in the vicinity and declared, “There is nothing more to be accomplished now. I must find the means to release her. Let us leave until the attention of others is no longer a concern”.

Leona Pratt knelt at her brother’s grave. Whenever something important occurred in her life she came to visit Jerome. He had died at the age of six and she felt the loss of her twin with each day. Leona kept no secrets from him and could tell him anything, “Jer, I think I finally met my man. His name is Reggie and he’s a real dream. I’ve only been out with him a few times but he’s the sweetest thing I ever did see. Imagine me, Miss Prim and Proper, sleeping with him on the day we met. My god, I still can’t believe I did that! All I know is I am not going to let him get away. Anyways, I met Reg on the strangest day ever. The morning went by quickly; we had a shoot for the afternoon talk show and wrapped up before noon. I walked down by Daley Plaza for lunch but some nut case came up to me and was spouting some crap about me not going somewhere. The police
came up and tasered him right in front of me. I took off before the cops decided they might want me for a witness. I could've gotten away but some crazy bitch snatched my purse. I chased her and almost tackled her thieving ass when the cops nabbed her. My lunch was screwed and I got stuck filling out paperwork at the police station. That took twice as long due to a bus losing control and running down half a dozen people right next to the plaza, there were even three fatalities. So the cops were all dealing with that instead of my minor mishap. To top it off, I found out later the little thief knew somebody on the force and got herself released. That's when my life changed. I was waiting for a cab to get back to work and was feeling pissed about the whole mess. Up steps this honey of a man, looking like and angel! Our eyes met and I knew I should go back inside and report him for stealing my heart! Oh Jer, he's perfect. Just like that, I was in his apartment for the night. Turns out he's a lawyer and got money to burn, not that I'd care. This is my Mister Right!"

Her attention was caught by a man jumping up from above a grave not too far away. There were four others with him. Leona's eyes landed on Kyra, "Jer, it's that purse-snatching bitch!" Two of the others looked familiar, maybe she'd seen them in recent news footage she'd edited. They left and she went to the grave, "Fidelma O'Curry, doesn't ring a bell. I think I'll check out some film and see if I can find out who the bitch was with".

Back at her apartment, on her computer, she quickly found the robed man from the early police sketch and noted the similarity to the terrorist attack on Chief Travers. Her eyes narrowed when she came to the cop with the broken nose, who had saved the Chief's life. She muttered to herself, "Interesting: the bitch; the terrorist; and the cop, suddenly with no broken nose, all together after the terrorist dies in front of the whole damn city. Looks like a setup to get Travers re-elected. What a story this will make!" She made a few calls and started her plan rolling. The name Leona Pratt would be the only one with this bombshell and the whole city would be at her feet when she broke this exclusive. She'd finally be in front of the cameras instead of just a slight mention in the credits.

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Arret sat alone in the garden thinking of Fidelma and how to free her. The others had left him to his contemplations. His knowledge of spiritual matters was limited and somehow Fidelma had purposefully tied her spirit to her material remains because of her devotion to him. He knew destiny and fate were part of his calling, they usually were, but it seemed like everything during this time was hidden from him. Even the people around him were mostly closed to his ability to see their destinies. He felt he would have to attempt something for Fidelma soon. An answering image slowly crept into his awareness and he went to join the others. Vinny was just getting off his phone and said, "Something is up downtown. That's the second call in ten minutes. First, my captain called telling me to report ASAP. The second was from Jake, my ex-partner, seems Internal Affairs was nosing around about something and he called to warn me. Don't know why, maybe for pulling strings for Kyra or they can't find anything on the AWOGs and are looking closer at my story. Just hope they don't notice my nose ain't broke, maybe a bandage over it will help. I'd better get down there, if anything goes wrong,

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Jake will call you. Arret, whatever you decide about Fidelma, its fine with me.” He gave AnLuan a hug and left.

Johnny wanted to know more about the elementals and the Womb. Arret was glad for the distraction and eagerly took him out to the field for more instruction. The lad wanted to know everything about controlling the elemental forces; controlling them would make him invincible. No cops could follow where the Womb could take him. Plus, if he got hurt, the magic slab would fix him and he could go out and kick some ass again. He wanted this more than anything in the world.

Arret had been waiting for a sign from Gaia but none came. Perhaps the choice was his alone to make. Johnny's desire was apparent and his youthful vigor would be useful if channeled correctly. Old One-Eye never told him about any selection process. Arret was leaning toward Johnny but thought it would be wise to test him with limited power first. He explained his decision and had the lad make his vow not to willingly take human life. Johnny complied and was shown how to control the Womb of the World. All of the other powers were held back as Arret wanted to use them with Fidelma. When he explained this to Johnny, the teen was visibly disappointed. Arret told him it was a temporary elevation of power until the final choice was made and at any time he may be asked to relinquish his control.

The two were just exiting the tunnel when Kyra came running up, “Arret, we just heard from Vinny's partner. Somehow you were spotted with him and reported to be alive. They've arrested Vinny. They think it was all a publicity stunt for Chief Travers and they're looking for you and me. I don't know how they linked us together, but they did.” They went inside to watch the story unfold on tv. AnLuan called and found out Vinny's arraignment would be the morning after next. She said she would have him out as soon as she could arrange bail.

As night came to Midlothian, Arret took the remaining three with him. The moon rose just as they reached the cemetery. Arret set his circle surrounding the grave, making it much larger than most to make certain the bottom of the sphere contained the entire casket. The others stood back and kept watch. At first nothing was noticeable but then from below came a soft rumble. The grass split apart and opened for the soil beneath to rise. Soon the casket broke the surface and came to rest atop the disturbed plot. Arret slowly opened the lid and gazed at his old love in the moonlight. She looked to be peacefully resting but Arret could sense her trapped spirit. He tenderly placed her body inside a tarp they had brought. The elementals were instructed to replace the casket and within minutes there was nothing to suggest the plot had been disturbed.

Returning to the Wells' home, Arret carried his burden to the nearby woods and interred her in a shallow plot. Kyra asked why he had not planted a tree over her as he had for Sargost. He replied, “This is not her final resting place; I wish to provide something more appropriate. I doubt her spirit would mind but how the dead rest is more for the living and I personally wish more for my memory of her. There is also the problem of freeing her spirit and I have not been given any clue as to the process, only to remove her from the casket. I must perform another ritual and hopefully learn more.” The others returned to the house and left Arret alone as he asked once more for guidance. A familiar image came to him as he sat quietly and knew at least where he must go. Closing the circle and returning to the house, he told AnLuan, “You must remain here and see to Vinny. Bring him here and take care not to be followed. I know what must be
done for Fidelma. The rest of us must go to the Womb for a journey but I promise to return as soon as possible.”

Taking Kyra and Johnny, he retrieved the body of his former lover and asked Johnny to summon the Womb. Arret was impressed when the tunnel appeared promptly. Kyra asked if the slab could resurrect the dead, to which he curtly replied, “No”. He offered no explanations as if the question brought up old memories not welcome to him. As they moved into the crystal chamber, he placed the body reverently on the slab. Johnny closed the tunnel and was instructed as to which images to give the Womb, even though Arret was certain the destination was already known. Arret was satisfied with Johnny's actions, he then instructed they be seated and wait. Settling next to Kyra, he placed his arm around her. It was impossible to tell how quickly or in what direction, but they sensed motion. Hours passed and each drifted into a peaceful sleep.

A slight tender vibration from Oak stirred Arret and he woke the others. “This will be a special occasion for us all. Pup, if you will open the tunnel, we can proceed”. He gently lifted Fidelma and led the way. They stepped out into a thick forest on the side of a steep hill and cautioned the others to be careful. He gave Oak to Johnny and told him to let the staff be his guide, “If you venture from the correct path the staff will vibrate until you return to the proper course. The terrain has much changed since my feet trod this path, this time I must concentrate on my burden.” Oak's vibrations grew more intense as the group progressed. The trees became so dense it was impossible to move in a straight line for more than a few steps. With no warning, they suddenly broke through and stood at the edge of the Sacred Grove. There could be no mistaking this place; the massive trees stood straight and tall, reaching well over a hundred feet into the sky. Arret carefully removed the tarp and set Fidelma's body in the center of the grove. Leading his two companions to each tree, he embraced each trunk in a solemn greeting showing his respect and dedication. When the circuit was complete, Arret suggested the two concentrate upon the trees and then go to whichever one they felt drawn to and sit against it. Johnny returned Oak and made his choice quickly. Kyra was more patient and walked to each tree again until she silently sat and rested her back against the trunk. Arret turned his attention back to Fidelma.

Arret created a circle around Fidelma's remains. As he prepared for the ordeal, he kept an eye out for any protective animals but the trees were of a size where such were no longer needed. It had been over a century since he and Fidelma had collected the saplings in Ireland. Drawing energy to the level necessary, he lowered his arms and drew an inner circle around the body. Walking to the East, where Air resided, he took Oak and drew a connecting line from the elemental’s station to the inner circle. In turn, he did the same for each corner and then placed Oak upon her body as he sat outside the inner ring. He formed an image of Fidelma in his mind and addressed her spirit, “Fidelma, hear me. I know not what, nor why you have anchored your essence to this realm. Your knowledge of spiritual matters was beyond anything known to me. We are together again, a strange cycle to bring us back to the Sacred Grove.” He sensed a wraith-like presence before him. Words came slowly from the apparition, “Arret, my love, how long has it taken for you to find me?” Arret knew the voice was only in his mind and he answered in kind, “Over a hundred years since our parting and mere decades since your passing. I have received your gift as daughter and great grandson, Vincent, have graced my life. They have gladdened my heart but I do not like this choice of yours to keep your
spirit until I came for you. Your spirit deserves the 'Promise' as much as any I have known.” There was a pause before she replied, “O love, ye be so wise and yet so blind. This be not my choosing, destiny must have its way and we must all play our parts. When saving the Grove, the trees told me I must do this thing. They bestowed upon me a great honor for helping to save them. The world does not move around the wishes of the flesh, even yours, Arret. Be not concerned with the time, spirit cares little for such. To me, it be but a moment since I whispered your name and drew me last breath. It be good you know your seed. Yon trees tell me it is time to bury me and they will see to my spirit. This lass ye love now, her spirit shines like the sun. Love her as ye loved me while you can, for time nor fate be your ally.” Suddenly, he was alone and as he closed the circle, there was no doubt of being successful. As he slowly gathered the elementals, a warm breeze rustled through the leaves and seemed a fitting tribute as her spirit crossed over. Only the light inert spirit of her corpse remained. Arret stared at the body at his feet and knew she was truly gone.

He called to Kyra, “The deed is done; Fidelma's spirit is free and content”. Johnny was sound asleep against his chosen tree. Arret knew the tree would be communicating with him. The elementals buried Fidelma where she lay. Her body would break down over time and the remaining spirit would unite with the great trees. Nothing more would be accomplished here and they returned to the Womb.

It was early morning when they emerged in Midlothian. They found Vinny and AnLuan sitting in the kitchen. After greetings, Arret explained about Fidelma's spirit and the Sacred Grove. AnLuan nodded her approval and said, “It be fitting for her resting place. In truth, I did not wish to be a part of your doings. I laid her to rest once and that be painful enough. Father, you were gone far too long; we feared the worst.” Arret was puzzled, “How long has it been?” Vinny said, “It's been almost a whole month”. Arret nodded to himself, “I should have known, the journey was far and there would be no food or water. The Womb had no choice but to suspend our bodies until we arrived. We stayed in the grove less than half a day. You must know I usually slept on the slab when the Womb traveled.”

It was Vinny who changed the subject, “Some nosy broad from a tv station was visiting the cemetery; she recognized Kyra and then placed you and me together. That's where it gets screwy; she's the same one who pressed charges against Kyra. Go figure, anyways, she got Internal Affairs involved because she thinks this was a scam for the Chief to get votes. They nabbed me as soon as I stepped in the precinct. She shows up in the interrogation room, flashing her name like some big shot, Leona Pratt, like that's supposed to mean something to me. Guess she smelled a big story and come on like in some lousy detective movie. Don't know what strings she pulled but I played along. She thinks the Chief master-minded the whole thing and wanted me to turn on him. I saw my chance when she told me she could get me out of there if I helped get her the scoop, so I agreed. I told her the terrorist was really a magician friend, who even faked my broken nose. He did his vanishing act on the bridge and was picked up in the river. There was no body to be found in the water. I convinced her I could get all the info about the AWOG scandal and deliver it in a few days. Thought you would be here when I got out and we could come up with something but you were gone and all I could think of was to lay low until you got back. They're looking really hard for us and this ain't gonna be a safe place once they start checking backgrounds. Kyra's name was all over this broad's
lips and it won't take them long to locate relatives. Look Arret, I know I'm finished here, my career's shot. I should be freaked out but I don't seem to care much. I know this Gaia thing is bigger than anything I could accomplish as a cop. All I can see is me takin' the rap for the whole AWOG mess. I really need your help.” Arret nodded, “Let me think on it, there may still be a solution. You are family and I will do whatever I can for you”.

Johnny was furious, here he was ready to replace Arret and now Doyle gets into a jam and needs great grandpa to save his butt at Johnny's expense. His thoughts returned to the Sacred Grove, the tree had shown him what it would be like to become the Chosen. All he needed to do was to cinch the elementals. Arret wasn't going to take this from him for no lousy cop. Johnny left the house unnoticed and went to Doyle's car. It took a few minutes to find what he sought and then he went to the field. He placed his treasure under a rock where he could easily find it. Feeling more secure, he headed back to the house wondering what kind of line Arret would throw at him to justify the sleaze move he knew was coming.

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It was almost noon when Johnny walked back into the house. Had he not been so preoccupied, he would have noticed the footfalls behind him. Entering the kitchen, he found AnLuan and Doyle sitting at the table. The door behind him opened and there was a blinding light shining in everyone's eyes. The sarcastic voice of a female said, "The mighty Assembled Weight Of God, I presume". She stepped from behind her cameraman and said to Doyle, "You really didn't think you could hide forever, did you?" AnLuan stepped straight up to the woman, "Ye be the one Vincent spoke of". Vinny called to the other room, "Arret, Kyra, we got company; think you better get in here". Leona took a step back from the old woman in her face, "It wouldn't be wise to try anything; the station knows where we are; you're so busted".

Arret and Kyra came from the other room. He recognized the woman but not her cameraman. Kyra gave Arret a whispered warning, "The camera is recording everything". Then she addressed the woman, "I'd invite you in but it seems you've already taken the liberty. Please, turn off the camera, there is no need for this." Leona looked at her cameraman and he continued to shoot. Arret sent an image to Water, instantly the camera light exploded and water began to drip from its case. The man looked at Leona in disbelief. She yelled, "You idiot! Go back to the van and get the backup unit". The door slammed and he was gone.

Leona's eyes widened as she realized she was alone with people who were likely dangerous. The old woman continued to stand in front of her. Arret's voice was stern, "AnLuan, come sit and let the woman be. The damage is done and now it the time for reason, not anger." He turned his attention back to the newswoman, "I take it you are Leona Pratt. It is time for us to be formally introduced. You may call me Arret. The woman in front of you is AnLuan and she is Officer Doyle's grandmother. The youngling is Johnny Wacker and I believe you already know Kyra." Leona stared with hate-filled eyes at her, "Oh, I remember her. You want to try taking my purse now?" Kyra's face reddened as she answered defensively, "I know what you must think and I
can't blame you. Stealing your purse wasn't my purpose. Had you listened to Arret when he tried to warn you, I wouldn't have done something so drastic.”

Kyra told Arret, “She needs to know the truth”. He agreed and let her continue, “There are forces at work here which I know little about but I do know this, had you continued walking toward State Street, you'd have had a serious accident. We were only trying to save you. When Arret failed, the only thing I could think of was to grab your purse. It worked better than expected because you came after me and forgot about where you were headed. There was a terrible accident with a bus just minutes after our encounter. You would have surely been hurt if not killed. Because you chose to chase me, your life was saved and you also met a man and fell in love. You wouldn't have met him otherwise and you wouldn't be carrying his child now.” Kyra looked at Arret, “The tree in the Grove told me”. Leona’s voice was shaky, “How'd you know about Reg? I’m not pregnant, I'm not! There is no way you could know something like that. I just met him and we used protection. It's not possible!” Kyra smiled knowingly and said, “Yes it is, and your child is destined to be very special”. Arret saw the woman was having trouble accepting this and suggested, “Miss Pratt, perhaps you should take a walk with Kyra and listen to her carefully. You may find this story better left untold. It would seem you have become a part of it.”

Leona was flustered, “I just want some straight answers. I got Doyle out of jail and he promised to deliver. It took a whole lot of convincing to get Internal Affairs to give me access and to make a deal to let him go free. They got all sorts of concessions for TV coverage from my station. I'm willing to listen but if you try to scam me, I'll do my best to bury all of you.” Chris, her cameraman, burst through the door and raised his camera. The lights came on and then blew out instantly. Water began leaking out from the case as the man cursed his equipment and left. Studying the faces, she quickly judged the culprit, “Arret, Chris is the best cameraman I've ever worked with and never has problems with his gear. I assume you did something to it.” Arret's face betrayed a small grin, “Let Kyra provide the answers you seek. If you find afterwards you wish to report this story, we will not prevent you. Now, you must excuse me, I have other things to attend to.” He signaled Vinny and Johnny to accompany him. To AnLuan he said, “Daughter, this woman is not your enemy and may actually be able to help Vinny. I think you should assist Kyra. Tell the woman everything and let her make her own decision. You know much more about Fidelma than Kyra does.”

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The sun was bright in the cloudless sky as the men walked across the field and into the trees beyond. A wisp of wind played across the leaves making a soothing sound as they proceeded. Arret broke the silence, “I do not wish to be disturbed by the women explaining things to Leona. We have important decision to make. I felt we should meet in private and go over our options after the latest turn of events.”
Wacker exploded, "Look, I know what's happening here, poor little piggy couldn't pull off a scam and got his covers pulled by that broad. Up steps great grandpa to save the day; just dump the best choice and put in a loser just for the family honor. I see the move, you ain't slick." Arret said, "No one has suggested giving the position to another, we are looking for options. You already control the Womb and I could not take it from you even if I wanted to. The only way I know of changing control is by consent, perhaps Gaia or even the elementals could in some way make a change but if so, I do not know of it. I simply want a way to save Vinny and all of us who will be remaining here, myself included. I understand there are bad feelings between the two of you; these are irrelevant to the problems we face. Johnny, you are, as things stand, the one who will replace me but do not let your feelings take you to a situation where you forfeit what you have gained. You are very close to the elemental Fire and it shows in your every action. Do not let this affinity consume you. If you learn to control this rage inside, you will find the strength which comes from balance. Your rash and destructive impulses caused injuries to your companions, as well as to yourself. You are an intelligent and resourceful youth and when I look at you I see much of what I was when I began serving Gaia. Fire is within you and will always be there for use or abuse. Learn to control it or you may suffer very dire consequences."

Wacker seemed to calm down but Doyle was clearly livid. Arret cautioned, "Vinny, remember this is just a lad who felt you were about to take away something he desires greatly. There is no need for this hostility. Bury your past here, Johnny will be leaving with the Womb soon enough and your paths should not cross again." They made amends and then the discussion turned to the problem at hand.

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Leona shook her head, "Let me get this straight, Arret is really some ancient fossil born around 2800 BC in the land of Sumer. He took on this protector of the planet role from the actual Noah and has been poppin' up through time to tweak people and events on the orders of the planet. I don't think so." She looked at AnLuan, "You're telling me this man is your father and that your mother was messing around with him back in 1912. This is just too weird. I haven't even read stuff this far out in the gossip rags. You know I work for a tv station and do a lot of production work. One thing I picked up early was to check the validity of whatever was being claimed. You can't expect me to take the word of people who just pulled off a major scam. These fantastic stories of people being healed in some mystical cave; elementals causing earthquakes; tornadoes; and fires, just sounds to me like someone is using natural occurrences to impress people and using some good illusions to make them believe they are being healed. I ain't seen proof and I think Arret, Brother Ziu, or whatever name he claims at the moment, is just a sharp con artist who duped you into this little cult he's trying to establish. Before I put my ass on the line to help you, I want to see some solid proof, not just talk, or this party's over." Kyra understood Leona's skepticism, looking back on the events since meeting Arret; she had to admit it was unbelievable. "Leona, I know all this sounds crazy and I don't expect you to just take my word. AnLuan has some papers of her mother's for you to see. Afterwards, we should let Arret show you in his own way."
The women were surprised to find the men already waiting at the house. Arret looked hopefully to Kyra but she shook her head. He turned his attention to Leona, “It would seem there can be no solution to our problem until we know where you stand. We have not been able to think of a way to save Vincent. The sticking point is you, Miss Pratt.” Kyra told Arret, “She's unconvinced and demands something other than mere words. I figured to show her Fidelma’s papers but doubt if they’ll be enough”. Arret asked, “Very well, Miss Pratt, what would you have me show you?” Her reply was immediate, “The crystal cave with the slab”. Arret turned to his attention to Johnny, “Will you call the Womb to assist Vinny?” The youth looked at the cop as if wanting to say no, but agreed with a hesitant nod. Leading to where the tunnel would appear, he summoned the Womb. The first thing noticed was a faint rumble, then the soil dissolved and the tunnel entrance stood enticing them inside. Johnny led the way using a flashlight he had appropriated from the house. Arret was thankful the lad had brought it along; he did not believe Leona would have enjoyed walking down an unlit passage with people she did not trust. Wacker was proving to be resourceful; perhaps he would grow into the man this position required.

Leona’s mind was racing with all sorts of wild scenarios. She remembered the Wells woman saying something about being a Wiccan, a witch. Maybe they were taking her to an underground ceremony to sacrifice her and no one would ever find her remains so deep inside the ground. Then the teen shut off his flashlight which only fed Leona’s vivid imagination further but ahead appeared a faint glow. They moved on in silence. The crystal chamber radiated brightly. Leona was fascinated by the majesty of the ancient setting. Arret believed the Womb was showing off for the new management. He could feel a new vibrant energy fill the room and suspected it was a reflection of the young, dynamic spirit of Johnny. Arret realized he had become complacent over time and this new blood brought vitality.

The newswoman circled the chamber, touching the crystals on the wall. The slab kept attracting her attention; it stood dark and foreboding in the center of all the light. Fantastic carvings of strange symbols covered it. She wasn't versed in such things and just looked in wonder at the magical splendor. She moved closer to it and asked, “Can I touch it?” Arret nodded, “You may do as you wish in here. This is not a shrine nor religious object, although some would have it so. Examine as you please.” Her hands moved from one symbol to another as she could almost sense the countless years it represented. She spoke but her eyes remained focused on the slab, “Alive, it feels so alive! Oh, it's reacting to my touch!” Arret watched as her finger traced a symbol. Suddenly, he realized not only her material body but also a blending of her aura and some sort of spiritual radiance coming from the stone.

Arret looked to the others but they seemed completely unaware of anything unusual happening. The mystical light became brighter and more defined until it centered within her womb. He watched as the energy passed from the slab to Leona and settled within her. She removed her fingers, breaking the connection and the power transfer ceased. Her legs buckled and she collapsed. Although he did not understand what was happening, Arret knew this was something destined to be. As she lay unconscious, her aura began to lose its brilliance. He watched as it returned to normal and saw the sheen had not been lost but had concentrated in the child within her. Arret knelt beside Leona and cradled her head as she opened her eyes. He smiled and said, “Welcome back, Leona.
Pratt, you fainted from the power of the slab and the child within you. She stood and said, “I don’t understand; it felt like electricity but with no shock. I feel all right now”. She made a point to steady herself against Arret and not to touch the slab again. The women took her away from the stone. Kyra said to Arret, “She’s fine but still unconvincing. I think she believes you shocked her with some gadget”. When Leona was fully recovered, she said, “I’m impressed with all this, can’t seem to figure out how you did it but this could still be a trick. You say the slab healed you, show me. Let me see the block of stone do something besides zap me.”

Arret drew his obsidian knife and sliced himself from forearm to wrist. The wound was deep; Leona could see the bone showing through the blood. The others watched in silence, knowing what was to come. Leona was not prepared for such a demonstration and turned away. Arret placed the elementals in their stations and lay on the slab. The crystals brightened slightly and after a few anxious moments for Leona, he sat up and offered his healed arm to her. She inspected it closely, saying, “I watched you slice yourself like some fool, but there are plenty of magic acts where I’ve seen similar. This is impressive but it still could be staged.” Johnny interrupted, “Arret, it’s my show, right? Let me borrow your blade; I got an idea.” Arret reluctantly complied and with a swift motion, Wacker spun and administered a vicious slash deep into Leona’s unsuspecting shoulder. Wacker’s voice could be heard even over Leona’s screams, “Maybe what the bitch needed was to bleed some herself”. Vinny instinctively reacted by knocking the knife from Johnny. Arret and Kyra grabbed Leona and placed the screaming woman into the slab. Leona became hysterical as she watched her blood flowing on the slab. Arret grasped her head with both hands and brought her attention to him, “Miss Pratt, Leona, do not look at the blood or think of the wound, concentrate on me. The pain will subside quickly and you will be as before.” The light brightened and Arret turned to the teen, “You fool, we are trying to sway her to our cause, not torture her!” Johnny just shrugged, “You heard her, even after you carved up your arm and she still wanted more. I did what I thought was right. Hell, we could stab each other for the whole day and she might even like cutting on Kyra herself. Now we don’t need no more demonstrations.” Arret composed himself; the lad was right. Leona would have no more doubts. “Perhaps you are correct. I would have taken another course but clearly there is to be a change and it seems my ways are no longer effective.”

His attention returned to Leona, “There should be no more pain and your wound is healed”. She sat up and examined her shoulder; the only remnant of the attack was her ruined blouse. There wasn’t even a trace of blood on her clothing or the slab. She absently rubbed her shoulder as if some pain lingered but there was no discomfort. Her eyes went from Arret to Wacker, “I believe now, just keep that knife-happy creep away from me”. Arret said, “I do not condone his actions. He is rash and impulsive but I must admit he is effective. Now we must leave.” They walked to the house in silence as Arret skillfully separated Leona from Johnny and brought her to the garden to continue their conversation.

Using a calm and reassuring voice he said, “You have heard and experienced much this day. I know you came here expecting to find terrorists but there is no Assembled Weight Of God. I created it to get Vincent out of trouble. I hope the Womb has changed your perspective about us. I am no charlatan and am truly here at the behest of Gaia. When you touched the symbols on the slab, do you remember how you felt?” She
replied, “I'm not sure but it was strange and at the same time pleasurable”. He smiled, “Leona, perhaps I should not share this but it may help you make your decision. As you touched the slab, the aura around you brightened. Only a few times in my life have I known those with auras so bright. They were enlightened beings whose souls were so dense with spiritual energy they actually glowed. Throughout history individuals have appeared with such emanations. They achieved a point where they did not need to wait for the body to die before joining deity. They were linked with it even while they inhabited the flesh. Look at the early paintings of the major religions and you will find many representations of illuminated people. Sometimes only their heads glowed while others radiated from their entire body. Their comings brought new ways to contact deity and created new religions or changed existing ones. As you touched the slab, the brightness coming from you was blinding and then it withdrew inside of you. I realized the aura was not yours; it belonged to your child. This child is destined to be of great importance. Its destiny is not for us to know, however, such people tend to live short but intense lives which often end in suffering. This is because humans are adverse to change and the established religious institutions are even more so. Other such avatars in history such as Mithra, whom the ancient Persians called God of Light and Truth, or even the one called Isa or Jesus, gave their messages to humanity but it was not enough to bring about the needed change. What lit the spark for change was their sacrifice. I only say these things so you may be prepared for what may come.”

Arret continued, “I hope you would assist us, however, if you are still of a mind to pursue your story, then use me as your prime story. My arrival was the catalyst which sparked the events and brought us together. Destiny is playing a major role in this time. Saving your life and permitting you to have a child are only part of my reason for being here. There are other destinies which will be fulfilled. Please, do not begrudge these others for events caused by me.”

Leona was silent for a time, she was thinking of her baby. If she really was pregnant, she would soon know. She wondered how Reg would react to the news of being a father. These people weren't what she anticipated. Maybe they were just putting on a show trying to scam her but it was a good show. She wondered if she really experienced the healing or if perhaps she was under a very deep hypnotic spell. Such things were possible. Still, if they were for real and had made it possible for her to meet Reg, then she owed them something. She absently felt where she was slashed, “I don't know yet what I'll do, if I'm really pregnant it could be hard for me not to believe at least part of your claims. I can't say what will happen with Doyle, the investigation may be too far along. If I interfered, my superiors would think there was a cover-up and they would only look harder. Chief Travers knows about you, remember, he is political animal and won't let up until his career is secure. I'll say this, until I find out if I’m really pregnant, I'll keep your secret. One thing I won't do is ruin my career. If I’m gonna have a baby, I’ll need my paycheck. Think it is time for me to go.” They went inside and asked if anyone, other than Wacker, would drive her home. Vinny agreed and they took Kyra's car.

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Checking her messages, Leona found two from Travers' office, one from the station manager, and one from Chris, her cameraman. She called Chris first, he would send out the cavalry before long if she didn't notify him. Next, she called the station manager; he wanted to know if she finished her story. She told him no but new developments had come up and by tomorrow she expected an even bigger story. She sat at her computer and ran the group through a background check. She sent a picture of Brother Ziu to the Feds and Interpol just on the wild chance he would turn up. Her thoughts came back to the big question. Was she really pregnant? She wanted to call Reg but he was in the middle of a case and working late. Leona was thankful because it gave her time to find out about her condition. She considered calling Travers but decided to let him sweat some. On the way home she had picked up an EPT test kit and was anxiously awaiting the results. “It is true; I can't believe it, a baby!” She recalled how she and Reg had made love for the first time. Of course, they used protection but he had said something about the damn thing breaking. If Arret was right, then it didn't matter, destiny said she was going to have a baby. The clock showed 1 a.m. and she was not in the mood for sleep. As was her habit, she reflected on her options and the most important factor would be how it affected her career. This time she had to add her relationship with Reg and also her baby. Arret's group meant nothing to her, their stories would make headlines but would fade quickly. The Womb of the World was a different matter. To uncover the secret of it would be of international interest. It didn't matter what it actually was, anything which could heal would be priceless.

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Arret woke before dawn and found AnLuan sitting alone in the garden where he told her about her mother, “When I first met her I thought she was but a vision of mystical perfection. I watched her as she ran her fingers through the waters of a spring at her side. Flowers decorated her long red hair and at first I thought her too beautiful to be real. Somehow she sensed my presence and lifted her head. She stared directly at me and her green eyes bore right through to my very soul. I knew destiny had placed her there for us to meet. She rose with a flowing grace and I was captivated completely. I approached the spring and took a sip of water to bring wetness to my suddenly parched mouth. From then, until I was called away, we were as one. Her family tried to separate us but to no avail. She knew the importance of my task and never complained of the hardships as we struggled to save the trees from the English wood cutters. One day her brothers ambushed us outside her village. They tried to pull her away but she gave me leave to thrash them. Oak gave them a lesson, as I chose to hurt mainly their pride but then Fidelma grabbed a branch and gave the brothers more of a beating than I had. The last I saw of the six of her brothers, they were running away as Fidelma shouted taunts at them. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers tried to capture me, it was then Fidelma suspected her family had reported us. I did not set eyes on her family again, but I am not surprised they shunned her. She knew what she was doing and the consequences. I loved her with all my heart but she is gone and my heart still beats. I rest easier knowing she is content and part of her essence resides in the Sacred Grove.”

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The restaurant was crowded as Leona recognized a number of Chicago's elite. Reggie had made the reservations for their breakfast rendezvous and she was nervously waiting for him to show. This wasn't the setting she would have picked for their impending conversation. She knew so little about him and was terrified as to what his response might be. She started to wish he would cancel and give her more time but then he walked in. She felt trapped but didn't want to cause a scene.

Approaching the table, he immediately noticed her agitated state, "Is something wrong? You look worried". She gulped down her glass of water, "Reg, there is something we need to discuss. Let's order while I tell you what's been going on and then we should go somewhere for a private talk. Can we do that, Babe?" He agreed and she began her story. Their meal was soon finished and the couple made their way to a nearby park and found a secluded bench.

She continued her story of Arret's claims and the Womb of the World. Unbuttoning her blouse, she showed where Wacker had slashed her and where there should have been a scar. His concern was genuine but she saw his disbelief. Leona decided to tell him, "Reg, these people told me I was carrying a child who was destined to become an avatar. According to them, all the things they did were to save me so I could meet you and have a baby. I didn't believe any of this but I bought a pregnancy test and I really am pregnant! How would they know? Looks like you're going to be a father." She looked questioningly into his eyes hoping for compassion and understanding, instead the only things showing were fear and anger. His voice was bordering on hysterical, "What the hell do you mean pregnant? We took precautions. How can you be certain I'm the father?" Tears filled her eyes, "Gotta be you, I haven't slept with anyone else in months. Remember telling me the condom split? It must have been on that first night." The memory of the night came to him, "Look Le, I'm just getting my career where I want it to be. Granted, I fell in love with you from the moment we met but I've no plans to get married or have kids in the near future. Maybe in five years but right now, I'm not ready for this." He grasped his head in his hands and stood, "I can't believe you'd come at me with such a crazy story about a time traveler telling you our child would be some kind of world savior. Get a grip, woman! I'm not some chump you can pull the pregnancy gag on. I suggest you get a lawyer and have him call me. My advice to you is to get a lawyer and have him call me. My best case scenario for you would be to get an abortion and make this go away. Lady, I don't ever want to see you, not socially, not professionally, not at all!" Her hurt turned to defiant anger, "I'm gonna have this baby with or without you!" Reggie stormed out of sight and out of her life. Leona sat on the bench crying until her phone chimed. She wiped her eyes and looked at the message. It was a reminder of an appointment. She took a deep breath and muttered, "Time to see Chief Travers". She stifled another tear, held up her head and walked purposefully to her car.

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Kyra summoned everyone for breakfast. Arret went to wake Johnny but he was not in his room. They searched but found no trace. It was Vinny who discovered Kyra's car missing and came up with the most plausible scenario, "He must have went back to settle with his gang for what they done to him." They discussed what to do since Wacker held
control of the Womb. They decided Kyra should remain in case Johnny returned on his own. The remaining three would take Vinny's car to the rest home to pick up some things for AnLuan. From there they would continue to the city and try to locate Wacker using Vinny's knowledge and experience. They planned to check out the gang hangouts and hopefully spot Kyra's car. It was a gamble but it was better than just waiting for him to return. Vinny was restricted from his best resource, he couldn't call the department and use them to locate the car. The three reached the rest home and went to AnLuan's room. There were more things she wished to share with Arrett as well as some personal items for herself. Vinny grabbed a load and went to the car. It wasn't long before Arrett realized Vinny had not returned. Sprinting out to the parking area, Arrett found both Vinny and Kyra's car were missing. He called Kyra and told her they were stranded and Vinny had gone after Wacker alone.

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Chris brought the news van to a halt. There were a number of vehicles already at the staging area but none were from other news agencies. Chief Travers had kept his word to Miss Pratt and was giving her the exclusive. Midlothian was a long way from Chicago but pressure was easy to bring on the suburbs. Travers got whatever he wanted, especially if terrorists were involved. There were local, county and state police along with numerous tactical teams. Midlothian was turning into an armed police camp. The only news people allowed would be Leona Pratt and her cameraman. The others wouldn't be notified of the operation until the clean-up and they could be controlled much easier after the fact.

Chief Travers was satisfied with the initial stage, the Pratt woman would be no problem, she assured him she would make certain nothing would be aired unless he saw it first and live feeds would only occur when the assault was over. His force would be free to take whatever measures were necessary without fear of media prying into their every action. He knew Pratt wanted to use these people for her career. He had no problem with that because if she were standing on their backs to get higher, he'd be standing on hers. Earlier it looked like someone had wrecked his career but the tide had turned and with Pratt's help, this would place him in the national spotlight. The possibilities looked very bright. The Pratt woman had indicated there would be five people inside and they had bragged of training with weapons. There was a concealed underground bunker with some sophisticated medical device hidden within. He was furious about Doyle and the AWOG terrorist working together to play him for a fool. If the way they scammed him came out, he would be ruined. He knew the outcome of this would make or break him. Right now he was thinking that if he apprehended those involved in the terrorist episode, he might be able to clean it up with their capture or death. He would claim to have discovered the ruse and worked to make the city safe again.

Everyone was waiting for his signal, "Let's do this thing. Don't take chances; there are armed terrorists who assaulted a fellow officer. Take yours positions and keep the casualties to a minimum." Watching with pride, as over a hundred officers obeyed his command, he noticed the camera was still focused on him. He took a deep breath and stared at the target house giving a pose which would have made MacArthur envious. He had previously given a private briefing explaining the term 'minimum casualties' need
only apply to their side. If there was resistance, he would cover for any actions taken by
their use of force. This was his moment of triumph, if he could just pull this off and keep
a few of them alive for a spectacular trial, he would be governor come the next election.

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Kyra was washing dishes when a flash across the kitchen window startled her. She
leaned closer trying to see what it was when another blur sped by. This time she
recognized the wide wingspan of the owl. She was certain something was amiss and then
saw the armed men covertly converging toward the house. Reacting quickly, she phoned
the rest home and asked for AnLuan. When the woman answered, Kyra spoke quickly,
“Listen carefully, I don't have much time. The police are surrounding the house. Gotta
go now, I don't want to be on the phone when they barge in.” She hung up and grabbed
her half-finished cup of coffee. Going to the kitchen door, she opened it part way and
hesitated, hoping to give advance warning to those outside, then stepped out into the
seemingly empty yard. She walked straight to a bench and sat down. As she set her cup
beside her, they came from every direction and moved with hardly a sound. She sat still
not wanting to make any moves which might provoke them. Without warning she was
tackled and pinned roughly face-down with a knee to the back of her neck. Someone
yanked her arms behind her back and tightly cuffed her wrists while tape was slapped on
her mouth. She felt her ankles being bound and was carried through the bushes out into
the adjoining field. In the distance she heard glass breaking and concussion grenades
exploding. There were shouts and crashing noises as the assault on the house progressed.
Kyra was thankful the house was empty. She had seen the look in their eyes when they
rushed her. If given any excuse, they would have shot her.

Footsteps approached, accompanied by a familiar voice. Leona was speaking to the
camera about the woman trussed at her feet. She mentioned something about a petty
criminal who had been recently arrested and released under dubious circumstances.
Leona described her as being one of the minor members of the group of conspirators.
The camera shut off and Leona leaned down to whisper, “Your little cult just met its end.
You better pray your friends don't offer any resistance or they might not survive. This
will teach you not to screw around with Leona Pratt! I'm gonna expose you for what you
really are, a bunch of cons working that machine in the cave. Let's make a deal, you
show me how to open the tunnel and I'll convince my good friend the Chief you're just a
pawn and didn't know what was going on. I'm the closest thing you've got to a friendly.
How about it?” Kyra mumbled a response but she couldn't be understood. Leona
signaled one of the guards to remove the tape from Kyra's mouth. Kyra fumed, “You've
made a very bad decision, Pratt. I won't help you and you'll find nothing.” Their
attention was diverted by a large crashing noise coming from the house. Leona laughed,
“Sounds like things are getting interesting inside. Think I'll go see, don't feel left out; I
plan to have a group picture for the news tonight. I've got exclusive rights and am gonna
tear your group apart. I chose my career over you. I have a baby coming, you know.”

Chief Travers was standing by the back door when Leona came running up. His
excitement was showing as the destructive sounds came from within. She asked, “Is it
safe yet?” He nodded and followed her through the broken door. Chaos reigned, there
were people everywhere and everything was up for destruction. There were so many
cops from different areas, all looking for evidence of terrorists. People were coming up and giving reports to the Chief. Leona could see the disappointment on his face as each report was the same; there were no terrorists present. It got worse as the searchers tore apart furniture and punched holes in walls. They found nothing remotely relating towards violence. The only oddity was a pile of old drawings which looked like a fantasy story. Leona did not like the look on Travers' face. Frantically she yelled, "They must be in the underground chamber! We need to find the entrance!" Like a herd of stampeding animals they rushed to the field. As Leona indicated the spot where the tunnel had been, units equipped with ground penetration radar began their search.

The initial results came back negative. Leona realized the whole operation was going terribly wrong. In desperation she demanded, "Bring the Wells woman, she knows where the entrance is". Travers nodded and quickly the irate Kyra stood cuffed before him. Other news crews began to arrive, evidently tipped off to the unfolding story. Leona told Travers they would have to go 'live' or the other stations would be airing the story. It was too late; three news crews barged onto the field. The Chief shrugged his shoulders, "Sorry Pratt, be content with the in-house footage". He then made certain every camera present was on him as he addressed the only person in custody, "Miss Wells, a reliable source has indicated an underground chamber in this vicinity. It would be in your best interest to indicate the entrance and allow law enforcement to apprehend your terrorist comrades."

Kyra looked around at the growing press presence. She was angry at her rough treatment and dug deep within herself for courage. When she spoke, it was loud enough for all to hear, "You sir, are an ass! Do you realize what you've done to my parents' home? My folks are well respected here in Midlothian. They're on vacation right now but I'm certain they'll be on the next flight home and expecting some very detailed explanations." Travers was a veteran of on-camera battles and he reasserted command, "Now miss, before you start making threats, we have it on good authority you held weapons training exercises in this very field. The weapons cache may be right under our feet. Charges will be filed against your entire terrorist cult. We no longer allow terrorists to hide behind the guise of seemingly peace-loving people. It is my sworn duty as Chief of Police to apprehend any who would threaten the peace and security of our beloved citizens." An unexpected smile came to Kyra's face, "Chief, did this great source mention what sort of weapons these so-called terrorists used? Maybe you'd better check with our 'reliable' source before you make a bigger ass out of yourself." Travers told everyone to stop filming, but no one did. He went directly to Leona and led her out of earshot. He was visibly upset, "Well Pratt, I don't like surprises, especially on camera". Leona fumbled with her reply, "They ... they were training with a wooden staff and slings and one of them cut my shoulder with a knife!" She unbuttoned part of her blouse and showed the spot where no wound existed. Her troubles increased as the last of the special units reported no tunnels within a quarter-mile radius. Travers slowly tried to leave as the ever-increasing press crowded around Kyra. As he tried to pass, Kyra mockingly yelled, "Chief, would you like to tell everyone about those weapons? I think not. Just so it's clear, our arsenal consisted of a wooden staff and a sling. Now Chief, did Miss Pratt happen to mention she was angry at me for an earlier altercation? She discovered Police Sergeant Doyle had me released from jail and she came here looking for revenge. We treated her with respect and entertained her for the evening. I think she
may have had too much to drink. She was distraught about her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and shouldn't have been indulging in anything which might hurt her baby. I told her stories from the past and she took them out of context. Your men were searching for an underground chamber. Did they find anything with their sophisticated equipment?” He silently indicated they had not. Kyra didn't let up, “Did I see Miss Pratt show you her shoulder? I'll bet she told you she was stabbed but there was no wound. Is that correct? Did you ever consider she might be delusional?” He did not need to give a reply; the sagging shoulder and posture of a beaten man were answer enough.

Kyra addressed the press, “Inside what is left of the house, you will find some papers of one Fidelma O'Curry. She was Sergeant Doyle's great grandmother and drew them in the early 1900's. One of the weapons used here is contained in her drawings. Miss Pratt, in her intoxicated condition, must have confused fantasy with reality and sent you on a fool's errand. Chief, since you claim there are terrorists here, would you care to explain what weapons or explosives were found on my parents' ruined property?” Again, he hung his head in dejected silence. Kyra answered for him, “Oh, you don't have any comments for the press. Well, I'll be glad to tell them. There were absolutely none. There's not one firearm, not one explosive, not even nitrate fertilizer. I'll have you know we use straight manure in our once beautiful gardens, something like what Leona Pratt has been spreading around. I suggest you get your stories in order. I know my father has a very good lawyer and this raid is going to land you in court and in front of more cameras than even you'll want to see. That's about all I have to say, oh, one more thing, what am I being charged with? It better be good, these cuffs are a little too inappropriate for someone playing with sticks and stones!” Travers turned bright red and pointed at Leona, “I want her escorted to my car, now! Release the Wells woman and return everything to her.”

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He crept silently along a hallway inside an abandoned building. Each step was carefully planted before lifting another. Above, a pigeon was flushed noisily from its roost. Wacker cursed and waited for what seemed like hours. Ahead was a wall panel which stood askew from the adjoining ones. He slid his fingers into the gap causing it to pivot open. Revealed was a hidden passageway he'd found years earlier. It was common for the more dubious enterprises in Chicago to have false rooms where illicit drinking took place during Prohibition. The room at the end of the passage was such a place. It's what the old people called a speakeasy. Soon he began to hear voices; there was laughter with no regard for anyone who might be near. As he came to the final door, he listened to the occupants' conversation. There were four inside celebrating a recent robbery, two were familiar but the others were strangers. The sound of bottles being opened brought a smile to Johnny's face as he realized they were drinking. The robbery had been a local liquor store and they greedily were drinking part of the take. Silently, he cracked the door just enough to see inside. Boxes were stacked high which effectively shielded his entry. He found a four foot length of pipe, not par with Arret’s staff but good enough to take on four drunken idiots. Fighting the urge to stomp them, he waited as they bragged about their parts in the robbery. It had been an easy job; the owner had paid protection to Johnny's gang for years and hadn't been robbed for as far back as anyone could
remember. Now, with the merging gangs, these fools had just gone stupid and cut their money tree.

Wacker decided it was time to act, if he waited much longer they’d be passed out and he’d be cheated out of his revenge. Stepping into view he saw the terror grip his former companions. He concentrated on the other two unknowns, recognizing them from his earlier beating. Their guns lay on a crate they were using as a table. Johnny thrust the pipe and caught one victim in the stomach. As the recipient doubled over, Wacker spun the pipe bringing it down on the unprotected neck. This effectively put the first target out of commission. Before the body hit the floor, the pipe was swung like a baseball bat into the face of the second victim. With extreme pleasure, he landed a vicious kick into the exposed rib cage. Johnny said to himself, “Thanks for the lesson, Arret”.

Facing his former comrades, he smiled and said, “Hi guys, look who came back from the dead”. With a flick of his wrist, the pipe pushed the guns off the crate to the floor. His face carried a wicked grin which they knew well, “You don’t look like you guys missed me. It’s been a while since we got up close and personal.” Within a few very painful moments, both were beyond caring if Wacker was going to strike them again. Picking up an open bottle of whiskey, he poured the contents on one of his former gang. Gasping for breath, the terrified youth came back from the pain-saving state he’d slipped into. Seeing Johnny, he raised his arms in defense. Wacker placed the end of the pipe at the helpless teen’s throat and said, “Remember what I told you about not robbing in your own backyard? Well, you didn’t listen, did you?” Weakly the teen reached up and gripped the pipe but didn’t have the strength or will to move it. He pleaded, “Look J-man, you gotta believe, we thought you turned on us and then those new guys came in with lots of muscle and took over. You were always the one with the brains. We could have fought but then what? Without you we didn’t stand a chance. We just lost four of our guys. Truth is we were outnumbered so we made a deal to save our butts.” Johnny shook his head in disgust, “You fools, don’t you see what they just did? You two idiots went in that store without masks while the new guys wore theirs. I heard the whole thing while sitting outside. Remember, that store owner knows you. The cops are gonna have a stinking cell for you in Cook County Jail and them new guys got our turf all to themselves. They played you for suckers. Get up, I ain’t gonna hit you no more. How much was your take?” The teen crawled to the crate where he picked up the bundle of bills and handed it to him, “Just under nine grand and it’s all yours, J-man”. Wacker paged through the cash, “Here, take this, a grand should be enough to get both of you out of town. Lay low, the cops will be looking. If you see any of the others, tell them to get out before they get set up. Don’t look for help from me, I’m splitting too.” He pocketed the rest of the money and left.

Hunched behind the steering wheel, Johnny drove slowly. Familiar faces were everywhere but hopefully no one would expect him to be driving a car or wearing a hat. Pulling up in front of the house, he looked around and then quickly stepped to the front door and knocked. Mrs. Bertram came and for a moment didn’t recognize him, “Johnny Wacker, is that you? Of course it is but you’ve changed. Come in and I’ll put on some water.” Taking off his hat and coat, he settled on the couch and waited for her. She returned and sat in her rocker, “Johnny, you’re a sight; not long ago you were barely alive. Now you’re here without a scratch and what a story you must have to tell. I thought you would be out of the city by now. Let’s wait for the tea; I believe I’ll enjoy
this.” The teapot sounded and she went to fetch their tea. Johnny knew he would end up
telling her the whole story; she was much too intuitive to deceive. The only part omitted
was his encounter with his old gang members that morning. The old woman rocked in
her chair not looking at Johnny as if she were envisioning his every word. As he
finished, her eyes returned to him, “Very interesting and many would label it fantasy, yet
you are healed completely and move like a tom cat on the prowl. When I was a young
girl, in the old country, there were stories of such things. I was sitting here thinking of
ones told of a man who came from the deepest depths of the forest where even the
bravest men feared to go. He was the protector of the trees and animals. We had many
names for him, I don’t recall ever hearing the name Arret, mostly he was known as the
Green Man. I would sit by the hearth at night and listen to such tales. One was of a
village hunter who wounded a giant stag with an arrow but didn’t follow the blood trail
because it went through thick brush and down into a deep ravine. He didn’t want to carry
the carcass out. The hunter returned to the village and told how he had seen a great stag
but did not get a shot off. The following morning there was a stranger standing at the
village well with the dead creature at his feet, the hunter’s arrow still embedded in the
carcass. The man said nothing and just stood silently. Of course, the entire village came
to see what was happening. They formed a ring around the stranger until he held out his
staff and pointed to the assemblage. It moved around the circle and when it stopped, it
was directed at the hunter. The stranger put the end of his staff to the earth and released
it. Magically, it remained erect as it reached down and extracted the arrow from the
magnificent beast’s chest. The man opened his hand and the arrow swiftly took flight
with no effort from the stranger. The course was true as it penetrated the hunter’s thigh.
As the hunter collapsed, the stranger spoke to the village, ‘To be a hunter is a sacred trust.
It is acceptable to kill nature’s beasts for food; death brings forth life. This man caused
an animal to die uselessly because he was too lazy to follow his kill to its end. Those
who would be hunters, take heed. The animals give their lives so others may live; it is
the way of all things. Treat them with respect, for only through their deaths will your
families live.’ He turned to the injured man, ‘Your wound will cause you to walk with
difficulty; this will be a reminder of your transgression. To be a hunter is a special
privilege; to be a lazy hunter is unforgivable. Find a new trade, perhaps that of a priest. I
would think you would do well living off the work of others and providing little.’ He
indicated the carcass, ‘There is good meat here, feed your children. The spirit of this
creature will live on through you.” Without another word, he disappeared into the forest.
I don’t know how old the story is; it had been told for generations. It was said the Green
Man could control the winds and rains to bring feast or famine. He reportedly returned
through the ages and people revered him. There were festivals in the spring and fall
when they lit fires and put out cakes and meat for him. Over time they forgot about him
and the only places where his images remained were in hidden gardens or on ancient
churches where some vestiges of the old ways were preserved.” She took a sip of tea,
“Johnny, I’ve not thought of such stories in a long time. If what you say is true then
you’ve been chosen for a very special calling.”

Deciding to leave, he thanked her and gave her the bundle of cash, “Here, it’s about
eight grand; I won’t need it where I’m headed. I was planning to thank you for your help
when the money sort of came along. Got a few things I need to take care of and then I’ll
be long gone.” He knew she’d try to refuse the money so he made a dash for the door and was gone.

-Vinny, your luck never was this good; maybe great granddaddy is starting to wear off on you.” He sat down the block from where he’d seen Wacker enter the house. Doyle was heading to one of Wacker’s hangouts when he took a side street and spotted Kyra’s car as it parked. He covertly pulled over about half a block away and settled in. The wait wasn’t long as he watched the teen hastily put on a hat and coat while making for Kyra’s car. Vinny considered confronting the kid but decided to see what he was up to. He noted the address and stealthily followed. It didn’t take long to figure out where Wacker was heading. The hospital parking lot was large and Vinny easily parked away from where away from where Wacker was already walking toward the entrance ramp. Out of habit, Doyle turned on the police scanner and waited.

Johnny found his former gang’s wounded in the same ward recovering from Arret’s beating. Only three of the four were here. Randy had been released shortly after his arrival; the shot to his manhood hadn’t required hospitalization. The other three were a different story. Curt’s leg was broken below the knee. The smile on his face disappeared when Johnny entered, however, the smile on Johnny’s face was genuine and tensions eased when he said, “Hey Curt, see you got a new leg. This one looks better compared to the one with that bone sticking out.” Curt answered, “Word was, J-man, ya took a stomping yourself. Must of heard wrong, you look alright to me.” Wacker grinned, “It’s why I’m here; found me a secret cure and want to spread some around. Think you could get in one of them wheelchairs?” Jason and Ray came over from their beds when they realized Johnny was no threat. Jason’s face was bandaged where Arret smashed his nose and relocated his teeth. Ray’s jaw was wired but he could still talk with some difficulty. Johnny said, “Listen, I know you put it on the line for me; that guy was just too tough. Look, I’m gonna split soon but wanted to make things right before I did. If you come with me, I can fix what’s broke. Just take a look at me; I know you heard how bad they screwed me up. I ain’t got a scratch on me now. This is a one-time deal, it’s now or never.” They all agreed and Wacker grabbed an unattended wheelchair. He gave them the description of Kyra’s car, its location and instructed them to head there when the commotion started. Wacker walked to the end of the ward and after a few minutes pulled the fire alarm. He watched the three leave in the confusion and then made his own exit by a different route.

Doyle was sitting patiently when his attention was caught by three youths running into the parking lot from across the street. He immediately pegged them as gang members; another stepped from concealment and the four held a conference. One pointed at Kyra’s car and then the hospital. They split up and positioned themselves near her car. Vinny knew an ambush when he saw one and Wacker would be walking straight into it. He cursed, four to one was lousy odds and he needed Wacker in one piece. Vinny considered using his throw-away gun but realized he’d be in bigger trouble if he used it and got caught. With no other options, he got out of the car just as the alarm sounded and people began to filter out of the building. Johnny’s wounded gang reached the parking lot and began searching for the car when two of the new gang stepped from
cover and started questioning them. It was Curt who finally jogged Doyle's memory. Once he realized Curt was one of Wacker's, he placed them as Arret's victims. It was clear to Vinny the ones waiting in ambush were from the newly formed gang and they had been watching for Wacker.

Vinny's attention was diverted to a disturbance about fifty feet from Kyra's car. There were two people fighting and then only Johnny's head popped up, looked around and disappeared. Doyle realized one of Johnny's threats had been eliminated from the equation. Wacker moved to the second concealed youth where a brief struggle ensued from which only Wacker emerged. Doyle smiled to himself, the kid was taking care of his own problem and assistance wasn't necessary. With two down, Wacker stepped from cover. The remaining two adversaries were both larger than Johnny. The three held a brief discussion and then one gestured to a utility shack at the end of the parking lot. Doyle cursed and started to move across the street in order to keep Wacker in sight. By the time he got situated, Wacker was in control. One of the two was on the ground with a bloody nose and the other was crouching down while using his arms to protect his head from Wacker's pummeling fists. Doyle was impressed, he knew Wacker was tough but never saw him fight except with Arret's staff.

Johnny hadn't ceased his attack even though the fight was all but over. Doyle decided to end this before it turned deadly. Wacker seemed intent on getting revenge on those who almost killed him. The one on the ground came up with a knife from behind and sunk it deep into Wacker's thigh. Doyle heard a short cry of pain as Wacker turned and pulled out the blade. Doyle ran toward them thinking Wacker was going to kill the teen but instead Wacker hesitated and landed a savage blow to the youth's exposed head. Doyle stopped when he realized it wasn't needed. The evacuation crowds were growing and sirens wailed as emergency units responded to the alarm. With all the attention focused on him lately, Doyle realized it wouldn't be wise to be in the middle of something he really didn't wish to explain.

Johnny was furious, he'd lost his concentration and got stabbed but they paid for what they'd done to him. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Doyle running across the street. The cop must have been close during the fight. Johnny made his way back to Kyra's car and gathered his injured buddies. His leg was bleeding badly and he wanted to summon the Womb but Arret said it wouldn't come near the city. Driving from the parking lot, he made sure Doyle wasn't following. He stopped a block from the Bertram house and told the others to stay put until he returned. Mrs. Bertram was someone he wanted to keep secret from them. Johnny limped down the street and knocked on her door. She rushed him inside and when she noticed the trail of blood, she said, "What have you done now? Oh my word! You must stop this foolishness; your life is too precious to waste like this." Her tone softened, "Come to the kitchen and let me see". He told her, "I just need the bleeding stopped, once I get back, I'll be healed. I wasn't planning on coming back but some creeps jumped me and I got stuck. Sorry about this, I got three pals waiting in the car to fix up with the Womb. It's my fault they got hurt and I figure I owe them." She cut the pant leg exposing the wound. The blood was oozing but not gushing. She cleaned it and applied a poultice packed with her own special healing herbs. Finally, she wrapped it tightly with gauze and tape. She had no more clothes for him, having donated the rest of her husband's things the day before. As she was fastening the torn pant leg with pins, an ominous knock came from the front door.
Vinny had been sitting in his car listening to the police band and heard an APB issued for Vincent Doyle. He figured the time the Pratt woman promised had run out. Listening more intently, he noticed a large number of units being diverted to some operation down south. He hoped it had nothing to do with his friends. Vinny decided to confront the kid rather than just trail him around. An old woman stuck her head out of the door, “Yes, may I help you?” Vinny smiled, “Ma’am, sorry to bother you, I’m Sergeant Vincent Doyle and I am with the Chicago PD. I know Wacker is inside and I’d like to see him. He knows me; we’re sort of like partners.” After a momentary hesitation, she let him inside. They went to the kitchen where Johnny was sitting with his leg propped up. The teen was visibly angry, “Damn Doyle, don’t you ever get tired of dogging me? How’d you find me?” The cop smiled, “Just had me one of them hunches”. He gestured toward the woman, “Does she know what’s going on?” Wacker nodded, “Yeah, I told her. This is Mrs. Bertram and you can trust her. She’s good people, sort of like an aunt.” Vinny decided to convince her he wasn’t a threat, “Ma’am, you can call me Vinny if you like. I ain’t here to cause trouble, just came for the kid. He sort of ran out on the people depending on him. We were worried and I came to see him make it back in one piece. There’s a bunch of people mad at him and they’re out for blood. I’m here to get him back to where he’ll be safe.” She looked at Doyle for a long time and her eyes seemed to penetrate right through him. She said, “Mr. Doyle, I’ve heard about you and know you’ve been very hard on some of the youth around here. Not my place to say if it’s good or bad. I helped Johnny when he was younger and believe inside him beats a good heart. However, the streets have been a rough teacher and he hadn’t reached the maturity to distinguish between right and wrong. The tension between you two is fierce. I suggest you relax and try a little compassion.”

She left and returned with another cup and more tea. Vinny was a little unnerved. He felt like a kid in school who believed his teacher knew his every thought. He and Wacker made a silent truce simply by ignoring each other. She spoke sternly, “I’ve some things to say, you may not heed them but you’d better listen just the same”. Vinny shrank back into his seat thinking to himself, “She even talks like a teacher”. The woman sat in her rocker and stared at them both, “It’s time each of you took a look at what you are doing. Johnny, you’re young and want to rebel against anything contrary to what you feel or think at any given moment. You reject authority because it puts restrictions on what you’d do if left unchecked. You’re too impulsive to measure the consequences of your actions. For example, the fight with this man, Arret, and the injuries to your friends shows maturity is sorely lacking.”

Her gaze slowly centered upon Vinny as she sipped her tea, “Mr. Doyle, Vinny, you seem to agree with my assessment of Johnny. I hope you’ll find as much agreement in my words for you. When you came to my door, it was important to introduce yourself as a police officer, even though you’re not here under such authority. Johnny tells me you are currently suspended. You didn’t do this to gain entrance but to impress me with your status. One of the reasons Johnny feels as he does is this attitude you carry. Do you realize what you project to these young impressionable kids just reinforce their beliefs that they will never amount to anything, which in turn perpetuates their rebellious actions and lack of self-esteem? You feel you’re more important than anyone else simply because you are a cop. I actually, your life is no more important than any other person’s. For example, if an officer were to die in a mishap which also kills two civilians; there
would there be a difference in their funerals. The officer would be immortalized beyond all reasonable measure and the civilians would be ignored except by their loved ones. Can't you see you've placed yourself, as an officer, on a pedestal of your own imagination? You boast of how you're what brings order to our society and yet break the laws you've sworn to uphold or at least turn your head when others of your kind do. You believe that laws are only there for lesser beings and you project that upon the youth. You take liberty with the laws and rules when you see fit. I think of the European system with nobility having the same mentality. Was this not why our founding fathers did away with the titles of nobility? You forgot you're a citizen first and a cop second. Yes, you are the law, but you are not above it. Johnny is young and hasn't learned what it is to be responsible, whereas, you should know your actions and attitudes are wrong. I can't blame the boy for his transgressions; he can only be what his nature allows. Only with age can the pain and knowledge of experience override the impulsiveness of youth. You, on the other hand, have sworn an oath to follow the laws of our society. Does this mean you can walk into a story or restaurant and take whatever you desire without paying, or slap a kid around to straighten him out? From what Johnny tells me, in just a short time, you've been involved in a number of activities which are criminal in nature. Yet, how many of them do you tell yourself are acceptable because of the badge you carry? Please Mr. Doyle, don't misunderstand, I am not condemning you, just pointing out what you selectively choose to ignore. You're no more innocent than Johnny just because of your position as a peace officer. You claim you're here to make certain the boy keeps his commitments to the people depending on him. What about you? Most of us are depending on you to take care of the business you are committed to.” Vinny started to respond but she didn't give him the chance, “I'm not interested in rationalizations. I understand your way of thinking; my husband was on the force for thirty years. I simply brought it up to show there are sides to everything other than your own. Johnny's view of you is not incorrect. To him, you're a rival gang member; only your gang carries a badge and gets away with the crimes it commits because it follows a code which says it can do no wrong. Johnny believes he is behaving the way in which things are done, just as you are. I hope you will try to understand Johnny; youth does not have the limitations maturity placed upon us. I doubt you were an angel when you were his age.”

She took a sip of tea, “I am sorry, sometimes I do go on. You both need to see the world from the other's eyes. I try to find the goodness in everyone I meet. I've found those who see evil in others tend to bring out that evil. Vinny, I think you should know that Johnny was trying to take care of an earlier commitment. Perhaps it would be wise to help, rather than berate him?” The cop nodded thoughtfully and started to leave but felt he needed to say something, “Ma'am that was a strong lecture. Can't say I ever heard it in so many words but I've never done a thing I was ashamed of as a cop. I always felt I was doing the right thing.” She frowned and replied, “I know and that is the saddest part”. Johnny limped out the door but Doyle lingered as she added, “Vinny, there is something you should know; I have a calling, as well, mine is to help anyone who really is in need. That means you or anyone you know. You might say it is in my nature.”

Wacker had already driven off. Vinny was impressed with Mrs. Bertram and what she said about looking for the good in people. Maybe he'd been too hard on Wacker. After all, Wacker did come back to help the guys Arret trashed and even when he had the
guy down who had stabbed him, he showed restraint. It was a side of Wacker he had never seen before. The drive to the rest home in Joliet was uneventful. Vinny found Arret and AnLuan watching tv. The news was showing replays of the confrontation between Kyra and Chief Travers. Vinny told them what happened to Johnny. Arret wanted to call Kyra to tell her Johnny was headed there but Vinny told him the phone would be tapped. They headed back to Midlothian knowing if Wacker showed up with his bloody leg, he could ruin everything.

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Johnny quickly spotted the cop posted outside the Wells' driveway and kept going down the street until he reached the dead end leading to the woods which would take him to the field behind Kyra's parents' home. Telling the others to stay in the car, he headed through the trees. Approaching the house, he knew something major happened; everything in the yard was trashed and he saw most of the house windows were broken. Peeking in the kitchen window he saw Kyra straightening up. Moving around the house, he noted the devastation but saw on one else. Satisfied there were no more cops, he returned to the kitchen window and tapped. His welcome was anything but pleasant as Kyra motioned him inside, "Where have you been? Everyone's out looking for you and the police raided this place." He limped into the living room without a reply and made certain the cop out front was still sitting in his car. He gruffly answered, "Had stuff to do, personal stuff. Looks like a war zone in here, are you all right?" Kyra's anger deflated, "Yeah, when they found nothing, it blew up in Leona's face and they took her away. I'm left with this mess and my own watchdog out front.

She noticed the bloodstains on his ripped pants. "Are you okay? Here, let me have a look." He declined, "This ain't nothing much, just wanted to get to the slab and fix it along with three of my pals. They are the ones Arret worked over when we first met. It was my fault they got messed up." Kyra remembered how he left, "Where's my car? You didn't wreck it, did you?" He laughed, "Don't sweat it; I parked it in the woods at the end of the street. I figured the cop would freak if I pulled up out front." Johnny winced as he stood, "Got to deal with this. As soon as I'm finished, I'll bring my guys and we'll help with the house." He started to leave when Kyra said, "Johnny, you made Arret really angry when you left without telling anyone and took my car without permission". He snapped back, "Yeah right, if I had, he would have stopped me. I'm in control now and do what I want. Stop treating me like a kid. Someone told me I was impulsive, guess it could be but so what. I'm thinking if I stayed put, the cops would have us all in cuffs. Being impulsive may not be such a bad thing." She warned, "Make sure no one sees the tunnel. I think the watchdog out front is alone but there could still be reporters around. You be careful, you're not the only one who has to live with the consequences of your actions." He stormed out the door, saying, "Yeah, yeah I know, seems like everybody's telling me the same crap. I'll be glad when I split and you people ain't around to nag me."

Johnny rejoined his comrades and led them through the woods, "This way guys, I know it's a bitch with the wheelchair but Curt won't need it on the way out". Reaching the site, Johnny summoned the Womb and they rested while he explained what was going on. They listened but found his story unbelievable until the tunnel mysteriously

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appeared. Johnny beamed with importance, “Cool huh? The going gets easier now, it's dark but all downhill and there's a light at the other end.”

The trip took longer than normal as Doyle used side streets to avoid being detected by any police. Spotting the squad car parked in front of the Wells' driveway, he pulled over and parked way before he would have been noticed. Just then a news van sped by and stopped at the squad car. Moments later it turned up the driveway. AnLuan told AnLuan to go to Kyra while the two men headed into the woods. AnLuan drove up and parked beside the van. As she got out, the cop came running up the driveway, “Excuse me, Ma'am, may I see your driver's license?” She complied and asked, “How long have you been on the force, sonny?” Examining her license, he absentely answered, “Three years, Ma'am. She eyes him up and down, “My grandson Vincent, I would say he's been serving longer than you've lived.” The young officer blushed, “Yes Ma'am, speaking of Vincent Doyle, this car is registered to him and he's wanted for questioning. Do you know where he might be?” She gave him a look of dismay, “I would hope he be out catching criminals and not harassing an old woman like me. If there be nothing more, there's a friend inside who needs me. I believe you should be reporting my arrival to your superiors.” He returned her license and she went inside while the cop stood for a moment and then hurried to make his report.

AnLuan heard Kyra giving an interview to the press. This time she was showing the damage, room by room. When the tour was complete, they found AnLuan in the kitchen. She introduced herself and asked if they'd like to hear her story. They agreed and she took the stage. She led them into the remains of the living room, somehow she developed a limp, “I am a friend to Miss Wells, and luckily I was away when this terrible event took place. If I had been here, I might have suffered a heart attack or worse. It seems a guest, Leona Pratt, gave some story about us training with weapons. Would you look at me, do I seem a threat to the city of Chicago? My goodness, I live in a rest home. I came here because a friend offered to show me how to use a staff for defense as well as to help me walk. There be times when I carry an umbrella and was told it could also be used as a staff in an emergency. I am old and there are criminals who prey on elderly people like me. Why, just last week, a widow I know was robbed after cashing her Social Security check, not a block from where I live. My only income is the pension of my dead husband, a former police officer, you know. Can anyone be begrudging me to have some meager protection in these times? I think not! Be it wrong to try to find a way to defend myself? If Chief Travers spent as much time protecting the people of Chicago as he did looking for headlines and press cameras, I'd not need a staff for protection.

Kyra handed her the Fidelma's drawings which were now torn and showed boot marks on them. AnLuan let out a cry of anguish, “Oh my stars! You there, bring your camera closer and look at these. These were handed down by my mother before her death in 1980. The papers are from her life in Ireland before World War One. How could these old papers be a threat to anyone? Did you see the gardens around the house, not one plant is left standing. This is all because of one spiteful woman's lies and the promise of headlines flashing for Chief Travers. Had someone checked her story, much grief could
have been prevented. Now to you Leona Pratt, shame on you if this is your idea of revenge. I would think the good people of the city would be wise to switch to other stations which employ more responsible people.” She placed her hand over her breast and asked for a glass of water. Kyra declared the interview over. When alone, the women went to the kitchen and had a good laugh.

Arret and Vinny entered through the back door. Taking Kyra into his arms, Arret asked, “Are you all right?” She nodded, “They'd have scared me more but the owl warned me. You'd have been proud of AnLuan; she just gave the performance of her life. There will be more sympathy coming our way than the police or Leona can handle. I’m just thankful you weren’t here. I called my folks and they’re returning from Europe. I think Leona is finished; the news reported she’d been fired and the police are considering criminal charges for providing false information. She also lost her apartment and car, since they were perks provided as part of her job.” Doyle asked, “What about Wacker? He should have been here long before us.” Kyra frowned, “He's around, he was wounded and said he had others with him. We had words and he stormed off heading for the field.” Arret said, “Wacker has overstepped himself. I fear it was a mistake to choose him. Vinny, if I can regain control of the Womb from him, will you accept it?” The cop grinned, “Thought you’d never ask!”

Arret’s purposeful gait led the others to where the tunnel should appear. He created a circle for himself and sat within, but the elementals proved to be unresponsive and he got the impression they viewed such matters as irrelevant. Frustrated, he closed the circle and joined the others. Kyra asked if Johnny could take the Womb and just leave. Arret thought for a moment, “It is possible but without more training and the elementals, it would be difficult. I would think the Womb would not leave until Gaia's goals are completed. We must be patient.”

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“You said it was close and there’d be light. It can’t be much further, can it, J-man?” Johnny snapped back, “Stop your whining, it ain’t far now. You ain’t scared of the dark, are you?” From behind came, “J-man listen, this place is gonna fix us, right? My meds are wearing off and I’m hurting real bad.” About that time a glow from ahead started to show. They picked up speed as the light increased. Once they made it inside, Johnny closed the tunnel. The three started to panic, but Johnny said, “This place does what I tells it and I say heal me”. He unpinned his pant leg and removed the poultice. Showing off his wound, he said, “Remember this and watch me do my stuff”. He positioned himself on the slab and waited.

The crystals brightened but took longer than Johnny’s previous healing. He figured it might be because the elementals weren't in place but he felt the tingling and knew it was working. Once he was healed, he leapt from the slab, “See guys, just like it never happened. It's Curt's turn; help me get his fat whining butt outta that chair.” They hoisted him onto the slab and waited but the crystals did not respond. Curt started to squirm, “J-man, it still hurts”. Wacker started to sweat, “Look asshole, I’m fixed and it’ll fix you too. It must be all that whining you’ve been doing, just shut up and let it work.” Another five minutes passed with no results and Johnny didn’t know what else to do, so
he said, “That’s it, let someone else try. He went through all the injured with the same negative results. Wacker made up his mind, “The damn thing ain’t working right. I gotta see what’s wrong and you guys can’t stay here. I can push Curt myself. You remember the dude who broke you up? He turned me on to this and knows what to do. He ain’t real happy with me right now so just keep your mouths shut and let me take the heat. I figure he’s somewhere close.”

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Arret was the first to notice the rumbling. He walked to where the entrance would appear. He motioned the others to back away, he said, “Let me deal with the lad. I am responsible and will handle this in my own way.” His companions stopped when they saw Arret standing in their way. They would have retreated back into the tunnel had it not already vanished. Wacker said, “Guys, this is Arret, you’re safe, I’m the one he’s pissed at”. Wacker turned to face Arret, “What’s the deal, you screw with the Womb? Got something against me taking care of my pals?” Arret spoke in a calm voice, “What happened or did not happen below was not of my doing. Your companions had their fates altered when I injured them. The new paths of their fates showed no healing and the Womb would not change what is fated.

He asked the women to take the three injured youths to the house and see to their needs, as he wanted to be alone with Johnny and Vinny. Arret addressed them, “Johnny, I have tried to comprehend your actions and give you the freedom to make your own choices. I understand your desire to exact vengeance. This is your choice to make and the consequences are directly tied to you. However, I find it inexcusable for you to leave without a word and cause us to search for you. Furthermore, you stole Kyra's car which puts into question your integrity. Due to your behavior, Kyra was left to face the police raid by herself. From today's events, I have come to believe it was premature of me to give you control of the Womb. I am asking you to relinquish it. The fault is mine for not observing you closer before offering you such power.”

Wacker stepped back and yelled, “Hey, I earned this. I only tried to take care of my guys and get back at them others for the beating I took. I remembered what you said and didn’t kill them, even though I felt the deserved it. Maybe I didn’t report what I was doing but I ain’t yours to command. You said this was mine until I gave it up, well, I ain’t gonna!” Arret nodded, “You are correct; I cannot force you, however, I suspect the Womb may be unresponsive without the elementals. It would seem we are at an impasse.” Doyle stepped in, “Look you little punk, you ain’t got what it takes. Give it up if you know what’s good for you.” Arret gave Vinny a look of disgust as Wacker snapped back, “You ain't got no room to talk; I saw you watching when the four tried to snuff me. You sat back hoping they'd kill your competition. Now, you got the family thing going and expect me to cave. It's all I got and I ain't letting go!” The cop stepped closer and said, “You got control but that won't stop me from this!” Doyle tackled Wacker and landed three solid punches. Johnny forced him off and landed one of his own. Arret skillfully used Oak to separate the two combatants. His voice boomed, “Enough!” He shoved them apart and Wacker seemed to run away as his momentum carried him further than Arret expected. Turning to Doyle, Arret said, “What happens is
between the lad and myself, stay out of this”. He was still facing Doyle when he saw Kyra running toward him. There was a look of terror on her face as she screamed, “Arret!” He instinctively rolled to one side and came up with Oak at the ready. Wacker had used Arret’s shove to propel him to his hidden treasure. The youth pointed a handgun at Arret, “Drop the staff, drop it now!” Oak fell to the ground. Johnny grinned, “Now, step away from it nice and easy. Remember without me, if anyone gets hurt, they ain’t getting to the slab.” The gun swung to Kyra, “You, over here where I got a sure shot”. She tentatively moved to within ten feet of him. Vinny edged closer to Arret and the gun pointed to him, “Far enough”. Johnny shook the gun at him, “Does this thing look familiar, Doyle? It was hidden in your car. A throw-away for when something goes wrong? Not the kind of thing a fine upstanding member of Chicago’s finest should have.” Doyle took another step forward, “All right Wacker, fun’s over, you said it yourself and we can’t take it from you. No reason to be waving that thing around.” As he took another step forward, the gun went off and Doyle stumbled backwards with a hole in his chest.

AnLuan came running across the field and when she saw her grandson lying on the ground, she screamed. Wacker shifted the gun to her but she ignored him as she knelt beside Vinny. Arret faced Wacker, “You cannot allow him to die; remember your vow”. Wacker grinned, “Nope, the way I see it, you give me the elementals and I get Doyle to the slab. So, if I get what I want, nobody dies. That makes it your decision, not mine.” Kyra interjected, “Do it or you will be responsible, Arret”. Johnny laughed, “That’s right witch, you tell him!” AnLuan looked to Arret, “Father?” Arret stood impassively while inside he fought between his emotions and his sense of duty. He hoped Gaia or the elementals would intervene but nothing happened. Johnny wanted more leverage, “Kyra, go bring me his staff. You’re the next to get it if there’s any tricks.” She complied and set it carefully on the ground. To Arret she said, “Do exactly as he says. Trust me as I have trusted you; I know this is right.”

Arret nodded and faced Wacker, “It will be so. Help Vinny and I give my word to take no action against you.” Wacker was ecstatic, “Yeah, I want them elementals now!” Arret knelt and drew a circle with his finger than placed the elementals on the corners. He muttered something to himself and then drew lines on either side of Air. This effectively cut the elemental from the circle and then did the same with the other three. He looked at Wacker, “Their bond to me is severed, you need only to enter the circle and connect the broken lines once I am outside”. He stepped out while Wacker waited for him to move to the other side of Doyle. Wacker grabbed Kyra and forced her to stand next to the circle. With the gun trained on her, he then entered and made the circle whole. Images flooded his mind and he felt a tingling sensation throughout his body. He recognized the essence of Fire and reveled in the power he now possessed. Johnny closed the circle and retrieved the elementals. Roughly shoving Kyra to move ahead of him, Johnny went to the forming tunnel and triumphantly said, “Now, that’s more like it. The trees told me how this would feel. I thought we were friends, Arret, but then you treated me different. You plotted to put Doyle in my rightful place.” Vinny raised his head, “Screw you, Wacker, you’re just looking for power to make you feel like a man”. Wacker told Kyra to pick up Oak and then pushed her into the tunnel ahead of him. Turning back toward Arret, he said, “Thanks sucker! Screw you too, Doyle!” Without a warning, he shot Doyle a second time and then retreated inside the closing tunnel.
Arret had seen enough wounded to know Vinny was dying. AnLuan cradled her grandson's head as they heard the cawing and sadly watched the crows circle three times. Vinny muttered, “Guess Fidelma called it right. Bury me like you did that priest and pick a good tree for me. Promise me.” Arret replied, “It will be so”. Vinny turned his head to AnLuan, “Grams, I'll miss you. I wish I'd made that difference. I'm sorry for not listening to you.” She sighed, “Vincent, destiny is something we cannot avoid. I see now Mother was not trying to prevent your passing, but making sure I was strong enough to face it.” Vinny looked back to Arret, “I hope you're right about that 'Promise' thing. I'll know soon enough.” The light in his eyes faded and he crossed over.

Arret stepped to where the tunnel had been and yelled, “This is not right! Have I not given my all? Do I not deserve something for my service? Answer me Gaia!?” He waited but the only reply was a slight breeze which aided the crows flying lazily to wherever such messengers dwelt. The world continued as if nothing changed; it was only those who still breathed which mourned the loss. Arret was lost in thought until AnLuan said, “Father, I'll not be leaving his body unattended and it would not be well to report this to the police. I do not believe we could answer the questions which would be asked of us. Vincent must disappear for everyone's sake.” Arret nodded in agreement, “We still have Fidelma's tarp and night is approaching. The spot where I kept Fidelma will suffice until we locate a suitable place for him to rest.”

Once the body was secure, they returned to the house. Arret found a wooden broom handle which he gave a twirl and judged usable. The thickness and balance were off but it would suffice. He told AnLuan, “I believe the Womb remains and I can still sense the presence of Oak. I do not know what will become of Wacker breaking his vow but I believe it will not be pleasant. It is the one thing held above all others for the Chosen. I seriously doubt the elementals will assist him in any way. Without their aid I would think the Womb would not be obliged to move unless it was in its own interest. All we have left is to wait. I shall keep watch and you should try to rest. This has not been a good day for either of us.” He went to his watch while she, not wanting to sleep, busied herself with trying to make order of the ravaged house.

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The moon had yet to rise and only the stars gave off their faint light. He'd made a small fire but it had gone out for lack of attention. It reminded him of being Wacker's element and had earned his displeasure. A light breeze picked up and chilled him. To warn off the cold, he practiced with his substitute staff. Quickly he brought on a sweat as he inserted his anger and frustration into his movements.

Hearing footsteps in the dark, he turned and brought his staff to the ready until he recognized AnLuan, “It's only me bringing fruit and company. I did not want either of us to be alone.” She set for a time in silence then asked, “Why have the beasts not attacked as before?” He shrugged, “They may have been trying to prevent my replacement or it may be due to my being out of balance due to my emotional state. I would hope it is because there are no more around.” She thought for a while and said, “Father, I accept Vincent's death; you gave me much to think on earlier but it did not make sense until I was alone. He's gone but will be forever in our memories. I know a special place for him.
to be laid to rest. His favorite tree was a chestnut and there is a town south of us where people once planted many of these trees. When Vincent was little we would go there and let him play among them. There should be saplings a plenty there and I know a special knoll where we would have picnics.” Arret agreed, “We will take him there when this is finished. The authorities will be looking for him and I do not believe they will accept any explanation we may provide.”

She shivered from the cold causing Arret to rekindle the flame. His anger with Fire was useless; its nature was to consume and destroy. Johnny was just a personification of the elemental's nature. AnLuan dozed off and Arret was thankful; he knew she needed sleep. He watched the stars and knew the night had passed its midpoint. He must have dozed off as well until the sound of approaching footsteps brought him fully alert. His tensing also roused AnLuan. He fed wood to the fire and stepped back into the darkness which left his daughter alone.

The stillness of the night was sliced with a woman's cry of alarm. Arret entered the fire’s glow with Leona in tow. She looked a wreck, her hair disheveled, clothes wrinkled and her face showed signs of crying. Arret bid her to sit and warm herself. She was clearly distraught, “Had no place to go ... tried the house ... no answer ... thought maybe out here ... saw the fire ... I lost everything”. Her vision cleared and she looked at Arret, “Did you do this to me? Shit, they even froze my bank account. I had to hitchhike out here. Do you understand? Me, Leona Pratt, had to put out her black thumb and beg a ride. The guy who picked me up thought I was a hooker. A hooker, dammit! Please, Arret, I'm sorry for what I did. Don't do this to me, think of my baby.” He replied, “I am not responsible. You suffer the consequences of your own actions. Much has happened since you left us; you have caused much grief to us all. As for your child, one thing common to avatars is they tend to have humble beginnings. As a mother of such, this is your destiny and you cannot change what must be.” He placed his arm around AnLuan and continued, “What you have lost are only material things, your baby grows within. Vincent is dead and Wacker has taken Kyra against her will into the Womb. We are hoping the lad will release her before he departs. He controls the Womb and the elementals.” Arret's words sunk into Leona's consciousness. She looked at AnLuan and started to cry, “I'm so sorry, it's my fault. I didn't know, I really didn't know.” AnLuan turned her head and stared for a few long moments before answering, “This is not your doing, woman. Vincent's time had come and you could not prevent it any more than we. If it hadn't been your choices, it would have still happened, just by a different path. My mother once said, 'tis the living who needs tending, the dead need only remembering.”

Arret added wood to the fire; there were three who needed warmth and there was no desire to sleep. Hours remained before the dawning and he decided to make conversation to combat the painful silence, “Daughter, before Vincent crossed over, he said something which puzzled me. In truth, he stated this more than once, he spoke of making a difference. Do you know what he meant?” Arret noticed his daughter's lips tremble a bit before she answered, “Vincent had a dream when he was young. He dreamed one day he would make some great difference in the world around him. He hoped for something like saving a child from a burning building and then to learn that same child grew to become someone famous. He dreamed of doing something, anything to make his life meaningful. It was fanciful but he wanted it dearly; he felt his life needed purpose.”
Arret reached back into his memories and found what he was seeking, “When I accepted this position from the man I replaced, the original Ziusudra, he related this story while training me. It deals with destiny and how small things tend to lead to larger ones. We find ourselves awake and the hours tend to be longest between now and the dawning. One of the benefits of being the Chosen is to have an excellent memory of every event in my long life. I wish to tell you the tale as Ziusudra gave it to me.”
"These are the words spoken to me over five millennia ago. For many years I obeyed the land without question. There came a time when I was feeling my age and was given a task I felt beneath my worth. I awoke and sought the light of day to discover an area rich with rolling hills covered with ancient woods and flowing streams. The season was late and berries plentiful. I ate my fill and found a suitable place to receive my tasks. Inside my ‘sacred round’ I was given a single image; my task was to dig out a half-buried stone and move it exactly ninety cubits to where another stone rested and place it atop the second. Now remember, I had been a faithful servant to the land for countless awakenings and now was given this menial task. I assumed this was a test and one I found insulting. The mightiest kings trembled at my very name. How could I be reduced to moving a silly stone? Clearly, the land had forgotten how important I truly was. I sat pondering this absurdity, but knew there could be no returning to my slumber until I complied. I picked extra berries as I traveled to this great challenge of my abilities. The berries were succulent and tasty, but the indignity I felt turned them bitter in my mouth. Reaching the site, I located my rock on the side of a steep wooded hill overlooking a great river. My anger had subsided as I realized I had given my vow to do whatever was needed. I summoned the elements but they ignored my request. I found a sturdy branch and also used my knife. The digging took most of the morning and I knew the next step would take much more effort. The stone proved to be too heavy to carry and too flat to roll. My only option was to use the branch as a lever, prying up one end and tipping it over again and again. The amount of exertion for something so absurd caused my anger to return."

"Close to the setting of the sun, I reached for the other stone. My anger had subsided as I took stock of my accomplishment. Placing the stone atop the other would not be easily done, but now I had become obsessed with achieving my goal. I had put too much effort into this task and failing would be more painful than the insult of performing it. I lifted one end with my lever and placed small stones beneath it. Soil was used to fill the gaps and then I would raise the stone to the next level. Deep into the night I toiled and finally elevated the stone high enough to slide it sideways onto its new base. I immediately noticed how well the two fit together. The cap stone had a small point which protruded upwards from the center, like an upturned cone. Underneath, they matched perfectly. Exhausted, I returned to my chamber and slumber."

"I woke in the same location; the season had changed and this time I found no berries. Receiving my task, I dejectedly strode to the familiar hillside, where I was directed to a gigantic tree; it was so large the outstretched arms of eight men could not match the girth of the trunk. My task was not one of hard work, but of conscience. With my knife, I cut the bark around the trunk of the magnificent tree. I silently asked for forgiveness for my actions. The death cut was only a hand span wide but circled the entire trunk, denying nourishment to the upper reaches. A sickness filled me as I completed my foul deed. I had destroyed the life of something which had lived for countless cycles. I felt no useful purpose would be served by this. My thoughts were beginning to fear I was no longer needed to perform deeds which legends were made from. Would I be cursed to do menial tasks for thousands of cycles more? Retreating back to the chamber, I mournfully embraced oblivion."
“Sadness still engulfed my entire being as I awoke. I found no pleasure in seeking the
surface when I sensed the chamber had not moved. As I feared, my ‘sacred round’ gave
me another menial task which renewed my indignation. My strides took me to the
hillside where I discovered great changes. Recently, there had been an extensive fire.
Not a single tree survived on the hillside and only charred trunks remained. The tree I
killed must have toppled long before the fire. It showed burns only on the side facing
skyward. The branches which had spread out so majestically were gone, only the
massive straight trunk remained. Walking beside it, I came upon the stone I had set. The
tree had shattered where it fell upon the stone. The impact had crushed the stone which
now lay in broken shards next to the half-buried log. My task was to find and remove a
specific fragment of the original stone from the side of the log. It was easy enough to
find and I flung it into the brush which grew at the side of the slope. Departing, I felt
useless and wondered if next I would be pulling weeds. Occupied within my hostile
thought I blundered into a group of armed men. Their leader addressed me, ‘Stranger, we
watched you upon the hill. Are you a thief hiding loot? Let us examine what treasures
you carry. I am not the ruler of this land as yet, but I will not tolerate thievery.’ They
rudely threw me on the ground and the contents of my pouches were deposited before
me. Men were sent to search by the log but found nothing. Once again I faced the
leader, ‘So stranger, if you are a thief, you are a very poor one.’ His men found humor in
this which only added to my humiliation. He continued, ‘Are you then a spy sent by
Agga? Does the king know I am coming for him? Speak or I will loosen your tongue
with your own blade.’ One of his men pocketed three of the elementals, only fire escaped
by crawling away. I replied, ‘I am no thief, unlike your men who steal from an old man,
nor am I a spy. This land is far from my own and if this is how strangers are treated, let
me leave so I may warn others not to venture to such an inhospitable land.’ His
demeanor changed, ‘I ask our forgiveness, we are about to make camp, I invite you to my
fire. Let there be no more talk of discourtesy.’ I agreed and followed them down to the
river. I noted he did not tell his men to return my belongings.”

“I watched as sentries were posted at close intervals. These men were expecting
trouble and I had foolishly blundered into their midst. Eleven men sat around the leader’s
fire and many other fires surrounded us. Food was brought but none touched it as they
waited for the arrival of their leader. He strode regally from his tent attired in a fine
white robe with a breastplate hanging from his neck. High ranking people were such to
impress others. The plates were consisted of metal and gem stones, each depicting a deed
or attribute of the wearer or their family. Had I wore one, with all my glorious deeds, it
would have prevented me from standing. I chose not to let my host know such musings.
Taking his seat, he gave his approval for the meal to begin. Females appeared and wine
was served. The meat was of a boar killed by my host. As we ate, he said, ‘I see now
you are no enemy. You must understand, King Agga, the fat pig, is not above hiring
spies or murderers. I am cautious but know my destiny is to overthrow him and rule all
of Kish. My men and I are on our way to the city now.’ He paused as if remembering
something, I note we have not exchanged names, forgive me, I am Gilgamesh, perhaps
you have heard of me? I am said to be the son of the goddess Ninsun and the High Priest
of Kish. My destiny is to rule the largest kingdom ever known!’ I did my best to keep
from laughing, “Gilgamesh, your name is new to my ears, as is the goddess Ninsun. I
have known many who claimed divinity in one way or another. Most simply to gain a

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little power and proclaim themselves as such, I would assume this is to justify their position.’ I saw soldiers reach for their weapons but Gilgamesh raised his hand to stay them, ‘This man is my guest, let no one cause him harm.’ I decided to carry the game further, ‘Gilgamesh, I mean you no dishonor. I have learned to guard my name closely, but since you have gone to such lengths to impress me, I feel somewhat compelled.’ My expression turned to one of disdain for my host, ‘I am Ziusudra, and perhaps you have heard of me?’ The silence was a fitting tribute to my legend. No child whose sleepy eyes ever drooped at a fire could give in to slumber without hearing one of my exploits. I was likened to the gods themselves. Here I sat, a legend, sitting with a man who dreamed of becoming one.”

“My bravery was not something born of foolishness, earlier the salamander that crawled onto my foot. I was no longer a defenseless old man. My words reflected my ability to deal with these men. To the would-be king I said, ‘You speak of courtesy, yet you allow your men to steal that which is mine. Now obey my words! Return to me that which was stolen and I may spare you, heed me not and suffer my wrath. So speaks Ziusudra!’ Fire acted quickly, the campfires grew into towers of flame reaching well into the sky. The flames danced in patterns showing images of men withering in perpetual agony. One terrified soldier came crawling on his belly and held out the three elementals while another tried to bring my knife but was too terrified to come close. I walked to his side and retrieved it. Gilgamesh was on the other side of a fiery tower after going to his tent to retrieve his sword. He roared defiantly while attempting to circle the flames, ‘I fear no man, no god or anything in between. Face me Ziusudra!’ Suddenly, the tower collapsed and became a wall of flame, effectively barring him. I walked into the darkness as he shouted his rage into the night. From there, I regained the crystal chamber and oblivion.”

“Awakening as before, I was directed once more to the same hillside, where the fire raged and was now void of living things, only the husks of long-dead trees. The only exception was the huge log left from my earlier foul deed. The burn stretched up the hill only to be distinguished by heavy brush lining the edges. Walking down to the river, I stopped to drink, then came a commotion from the brush. A boar bolted by me, followed by huntsmen. They would have ignored me but their leader raised his spear and all obediently halted. He was tall and well-muscled, clothed in awe-inspiring garments even though they were in truth just hunting leathers. I saw the recognition in his eyes as he ordered his companions to continue the chase. Gilgamesh walked slowly to me. His voice was one accustomed to command, ‘Many cycles of seasons have gone since you walked from my camp. The time has not affected you, mighty Ziusudra, truly you are immortal.’ My reply was gracious, ‘Your destiny seems to have brought you the kingship you boasted of, mighty Gilgamesh. I assure you, I have dug no more stones from your lands.’ He laughed and we traded smiles. Glancing around to assure we were alone, he spoke quietly, ‘Forgive me; I was young and drunken with power. Time as king has cured the foolishness of my youth. I have greater concerns now and you are one I have long searched for.’ His men returned to make camp. The two of us walked up the hillside and stopped near the site of my earlier awaking. I leaned against the old log waiting to hear his words. He spoke as a man, not a king, ‘I thank you for not harming my men when we parted ways. The pillars of fire are talked about to this day. I hold no malice toward you, for I needed a lesson and you taught it well. These men with me
explaining but did not think he would understand. The adults came first but the young could not be contained. Balls of furry flashed at me from all sides. Maggot screamed out but I was already laughing and playing with the younglings. The boy was quick to join in and for a time it was easy to forget the earlier carnage. When the young pups tired they fell asleep.”

“I asked Maggot about his life and learned his mother had been a camp follower. The life of such was harsh even in the best of times. The women were used roughly by soldiers and lived on their generosity. Soldiers were not usually the generous type. The women trailed them and found picking the dead after battles was a way of augmenting their worth. Some women were lucky and caught the eye of a soldier who took care of them. Children were cared for in some cases, if the father chose to. Maggot’s mother had died and no one claimed the orphan. He was shunned from camp which was basically a death sentence, only something within him refused to die. He began to trade things found after the women were finished with the dead. This continued for some time but he was always looking for new ways to get trade goods and this worked until his deception was revealed. The little rascal had been sneaking into their camp at night and stealing items to resell the following day. His luck changed when he offered an unusual ring to a woman who had traded it a few days earlier. The women took this badly and beat, stripped, and then left Maggot for dead. Somehow through some twist of fate, he survived. Living off garbage, he ate what even they would not, fish tails and heads, discarded soup bones and such. This must have lasted for well over more than one entire cycle of seasons. He had lived like a ghost, trailing behind those who trailed behind the soldiers, never in sight, never speaking except to one or two women who felt sorry for him.”

“The scavengers raised their heads as one and sniffed the air, moving silently, they vanished into the darkness. From the brush came a man’s voice, ‘Be warned the camp. I hold no weapon.’ I bade him in then noticed Maggot’s stone was empty and his treasure sack was gone. The man stepped into the light. He was a friendly sort, talked too much and constantly looked around, ‘I spied your fire and the night’s chill convinced me to rest. I see you have finished your meal. I must say your fire was a welcome sight.’ He pulled a sack which hung from a strap on his hip, ‘Brought some food if you are still hungry.’ Producing a large chunk of bread, he offered some and then unhooked two wine skins and tossed one to me. I declined, ‘It is kind but I have already eaten and wine does not agree with me anymore.’ He ate his meal and drank his wine but when his meal was finished, he did not drink from the one offered to me. We chatted for a time and then he collected his gear, ‘I thank you for your company and the warmth of your fire, but I have much ground to cover and this area smells of the dead. Sleep well, old one.’ He quickly faded into the darkness. I waited for the sounds of night to return to normal and then retrieved the clementals. As I sat back, I found Maggot on his stone. ‘Man gone ... cross dead place ... no stop.’ I told him to be wary and keep watch. Somewhere in the night I drifted off to sleep believing Maggot would sense anyone, but my feeding him so well was our undoing. The extra food made him sleepy.”

“Maggot’s muffled cry alerted me and I rolled to my side just as a spear struck where I had been. I continued to roll and caught sight of Maggot being held by two men. Luckily, I rolled toward the river and had time to gain my feet and dive into the watery darkness. I stayed submerged and changed course. When I brought my head up, I
counted nine men in all. Five were at the river bank watching where they anticipated I would surface. Each had a spear ready to end my life. I watched helplessly as they plundered the camp. Quietly I swam up river and moved closer to shore until my feet touched bottom. I grasped the salamander and imaged my revenge but nothing happened, switching to the stone of earth, again no answer. I watched the thieves gather everything and scan the river once more. The man, who was my earlier guest, turned and stabbed Maggot in the stomach. They laughed as he collapsed and then they departed. I asked Air if they were truly gone and it replied they were."

"I raced to Maggot and found him clinging to life. I summoned the chamber and lifted his body, hoping to save him. He regained consciousness and whispered, 'Animal man ... Maggot sorry ... now Maggot dead ... sorry ... me no good pick.' This only made me move quicker as the tunnel appeared in front of me. I burst into the crystal room and placed him on the slab. I felt his neck for a pulse and thankfully he still lived. The healing did not take long and he opened his eyes to look around with a befuddled gaze. When his eyes rested on me, he asked 'Maggot dead?' I smiled, 'No, my little friend, but the time has come for us to part. I believe my time here has ended and you must return above.' The youngling looked at me confused but hopped off the slab and led the way to the surface without a word. We reached the tunnel's end to find the dawn. As we stepped out, the tunnel closed behind me without my consent and I realized there was more to be done. Maggot reached out and took my hand which was something he had not done before. He looked up at me and said, 'Animal man ... you come ... dead place ... rock show in head ... pretty lions.' The slab had told him to return to the hillside but there were no lions in this area."

"Once more I stood upon the hillside of death. Maggot ran ahead in a straight line as he seemed to know exactly where to go. I followed at a more moderate pace keeping an eye out for danger. There were birds feeding on carcases this morning but the bodies had been cleaned of most flesh; the scavengers had been very busy. As we approached, the birds squawked at us with indignation for interrupting their feast. Maggot followed the depression where the giant log had once rested. He stopped right where the tree had hit the rock which I had placed so long ago. As I came up, he squatted next to a hole where the base rock had been. The boy looked at me and pointed at his head, 'Maggot see ... no use eyes ... see better.' He started pulling out handfuls of soil. I heard him squeal with delight as he pulled out a large ornate leather pouch adorned with a pattern of a man fighting two lions. He poured out the contents and we were showered with a burst of colors as varied as a rainbow. The pouch was heavily laden with gems of the highest quality. I assumed they belonged to Gilgamesh which he must have hidden before going into battle. The tales of the king's battle with the two lions was known to all. I told him, 'Maggot, this belongs to the king, Gilgamesh. He still lives; you did not pick this from the dead. Do you understand?' The lad looked at me with a puzzled expression; I doubt he knew what a king was."

He gathered the stones into the pouch and started down the hill. I followed his tracks but took more care than he as to where I stepped. He led to our old camp and when I joined him, he was tying the two ends of the pouch's straps onto two juts of the special stone he had sat on the night before. Lifting the pouch and stone, he slipped his head between the straps. The pouch slid down behind his head and the stone rested on his chest. He had fastened his own breastplate. Maggot's face beamed with pride and his
smile was more precious than all the gems on his back. I believe he must have seen the
king wear his at some time while traveling with the camp followers.”

As he stepped from the brush, above us on the hillside, stood the men who had robbed
and tried to kill us. We were spotted and they started down; we could identify them and
so we must die. I looked for an escape route and saw the giant log resting on the river’s
bank. One end floated in the water but the other was solidly lodged on the shore. I
guided Maggot to the log and easily hoisted him up. He scampered as far out as he could.
Making the climb myself, I moved to the middle where I asked Earth for assistance. The
men were almost upon us when suddenly they were thrown on their faces. The earth
trembled and the land holding the log sank below the waterline. We were free but hardly
moving as the log’s massive bulk was slow to react. I switched the stone for the chalice
and Water reacted quickly as the river’s current caught the log and carried it swiftly into
the main channel. Maggot had seated himself majestically at the front of the log as it
plowed through the water. I could hear his squeals of delight. Feeling safe, I started to
join him when an arrow struck my back and propelled me into the river.”

Making the opposite shore, I examined the arrow shaft protruding out of my chest and
how quickly the water at my feet was turning red. Dragging myself further up the bank, I
looked for the attackers but they and the log were gone. I crawled as far from the shore
as I could before summoning the chamber; it appeared and I crawled to the slab. I had
not the strength to remove the shaft only enough to lie helplessly waiting to be healed. I
learned a hard lesson; the healing worked but the arrow remained embedded. I was
forced to rip it from my healed flesh which caused greater pain then the original wound.
Let the lesson be heeded; remove such things before using the slab. The deed done, I lay
back to be healed once more. This time I was rewarded as oblivion took me.”

Arret stopped again as the light of dawn touched the Midlothian sky. This time he
was interrupted by Leona. She disdainfully asked, “How can you tell such a story?
Nobody lives like that; it’s inhuman to scavenge off the dead. Why would you think up
something so horrid?” He shrugged, “Do you think in areas of the world where wars are
raging there are no people who scavenge the dead? Are there not places where small
children pick through garbage looking for scraps to eat or sell? Humanity is no different
now than five thousand years ago. If your civilization collapsed due to war or some other
disaster, you could easily find yourself doing the same to survive. This is not a
fabrication within my mind; Old One-Eye experienced this. Leona, you may choose not
to see the suffering but it exists.” AnLuan added, “There be programs on tv showing
children all over the world who have nothing; children who exist in deprivation and filth.
Woman, you worked for a tv station. Did you not see such things?” Leona replied, “Sure
they push that stuff looking or money. I figured they doctored up the pictures of found
sickly kids for sympathy.” AnLuan looked puzzled, “Father, it be strange to end with the
lad floating away”. He nodded, “Yes, Daughter, there is more to be told”.

He smiled at her and then resumed Ziusudra’s words, “I returned from oblivion. My
first realization was the chamber had finally moved. My new location was far to the
southeast from where I had been. Thinking of Maggot, I wished him well but he was
probably long dead. I had learned not to wonder about those left behind. I found an
appropriate spot for my ‘sacred round’ and eagerly sought my new task away from the
hillside of death. The land sent an image of a woman sitting next to a damaged cart. I
discerned the necessary direction and started through the woods. I came to a break in the
trees and gazed upon a large valley with a great river flowing through it. I continued on until coming to a well-traveled road. Uncertain of my path, I closed my eyes and felt a slight breeze caress my cheek and knew Air guided me.

“Journeying deeper into the valley, I found manned checkpoints spaced at regular intervals. Not wanting any confrontations with the authorities, I easily skirted them without detection. Before long, I came to the scene in my image. As I approached, the woman noticed me and, even though alone and unprotected, she greeted me without fear. She was well beyond her prime and yet was full of vitality. There was a sense of contentment which flowed from her. She bowed her head as I neared and I gestured to her cart, ‘It appears you are in need. You are fortunate to have found an honest man out where you are so unprotected. If you will allow me to examine your cart, I may possibly be able to mend it. In my younger days I was known for my carpentry skills.’ She took stock of me and said, ‘Stranger, you must be from lands afar. I have traveled these roads for many cycles of seasons and they have always been safe. I would welcome your assistance but it is not necessary. My concern is not for the cart; it will be mended soon enough, but for being late to greet my husband. I promised to be waiting when his ship docked. My companion offered to stay in my place but this is my cargo and I will not leave until it is secure. My husband named me Phrah for the river bordering ancient Eden. He is called Gihon for another such river. His calling is to water, as Phrah is linked to earth. I am one who chooses to keep my feet on land and attend to our trading business with carts while he takes to the waters and trades with his boats. We find our lives compatible by sharing our leisure time at our home upon the river’s edge.’ I returned her greeting, ‘You may call me Ziu. The broken spars are beyond my repair without proper tools. You are fortunate help is coming.’ She looked down the road and then bade me to sit and wait with her.”

“Phrah was a delight and we chatted on a number of subjects until her workmen arrived. They bowed to her and then took to replacing the broken wheel. She spoke to one of them and then addressed me, ‘My workers will see to the cargo, perhaps you will share the road with me, a walk with good conversation is preferable to one with silence. I offer you a good meal and shelter for the night. My husband will want to thank you as well.’ I accepted and we left together. She was surprised the wheel had broken, Gihon made it with his own hands and in over fifty cycles of seasons, none had ever failed. I took this to be a merchant’s boast and said nothing. The road widened and numerous people traveled in both directions. As we rounded a bend and looked down from a rise, Phrah’s home spread out before us. The term ‘home’ is somewhat misleading; it might be better described as a rural palace. At the river’s edge, stretched an intricate network of docks, each crowded with busy workers loading and unloading cargo. The house drew my attention; there were gardens and courtyards placed in convenient sites in and around the structure. Phrah saw my reaction and beamed with pride, ‘Gihon and I have labored long to make this a place of peace and prosperity.’ Everyone we passed greeted Phrah with respect and genuine affection. She explained the river was the perfect hub for trade to all the cities along the two great rivers. Her husband had built roads to the surrounding farms, giving them an outlet for their goods. They carried the crops to great cities, such as Ur, Eridu and Erech. Other ships ventured further to trade for metals and other non-perishable goods. Happily she observed her husband’s ship had not yet arrived.”
“Inside the house, I was even more impressed. I stood within a great room filled with wooden carvings, mainly of boats. There were many designs, some I had never imagined. Whoever carved these knew more about sailing vessels and water than anyone I had known. Reluctantly, I was led away as a servant showed me to my quarters. Before long, I heard the call of a horn and I stepped out onto my terrace overlooking the docks to see all work cease and everyone moving toward an empty berth. I watched Phrath quickly make her way through the gathering crowd. It was clear Gihon’s boat was arriving. I wondered what sort of man could create such an enterprise. I considered joining the event myself but felt I would be introduced when they felt it proper. Besides, I had bowls of fruit and jars of exotic wine to sample. The boat was by far the largest in the harbor. When it moored, a tall man stepped onto the dock and lifted Phrath effortlessly into the air. His hair was frosted and I could see he was well into his cycle. She gave him a kiss and then she headed back to the house by herself. Behind her, a large group of children rushed the man. I watched as he picked up and spun each one. How he kept up such an effort was beyond my comprehension. The greeting lasted for so long; I grew weary and returned to my wine. Much later, I heard laughter below my terrace. Looking out, I saw Gihon greeting workers as he walked to his home. His eyes rose to me and then he ventured inside. I waited in my room expecting my host. Darkness fell and a light tapping brought me awake as a servant entered to light the lamps and to summon me for the evening meal. I followed him to a large room where over three tens of people were present; most were seated at a long rectangular table. People continued to file in while I was shown to my seat at the table’s end. Phrath entered and anyone still standing rushed to be seated. Curiously, she did not even glance in my direction, I found this unsettling after the time we have spent together. Actually, no one had spoken to me except for servants and then only to give instructions. Perhaps these people believed a stranger was not acknowledged until recognized by the master of the house. Gihon was a ship’s master and such people lived by strict disciplinary codes.”

“My attention was returned as Gihon entered. Up close, he was much older than I assumed from a distance. The room had become totally silent as he seated himself. His eyes peered menacingly toward me, ‘You stranger, guest of my wife, what is your name?’ His voice was far from the friendly one I had heard from my terrace. Bowing my head, I answered, ‘You may call me Ziu, gracious host.’ His hostility increased, ‘I demand your name, not what I may call you! Tell me, stranger, is Ziu your true name or do you hide behind a devious lie?’ I found his manner insulting and replied, ‘Ziu is as good a name as any other, be it real or not.’ He jumped up quickly which caused his chair to fall backwards. Everyone else seemed stunned as Gihon strode purposefully to my side and glared at me. I remained seated and stared back in kind. Once more he challenged, ‘I demand you reveal your true name and where your allegiance belongs!’ There was a limit to what I would allow and he exceeded it. My reply was filled with anger, ‘Call me what you will, it is irrelevant. My allegiances are none of your business! If this is unsuitable, I will leave and trouble you no more!’ I started to rise when heavy hands held me from behind; guards had positioned themselves without my notice. Gihon returned to his seat, his orders absolute, ‘Do not attempt to rise without my permission and keep your hands in sight. You, stranger, will not depart from these grounds without my leave. I do not take kindly to spies or those who may be hired to murder me. Now, since my wife invited you into our home, I suggest you enjoy your meal in silence. Guards, watch his
hands carefully for any covert or hostile move toward me. I believe him to be a spy or even an assassin.' He then ignored me, as did everyone else, for the rest of the meal. When finished, I was escorted to my room where I was relieved of my knife and elementals. I pondered his accusations; nothing in my time with Prath could be mistaken as improper. Gihon had been insistent about my name. I had learned not to use it loosely. Sitting alone in my room, I found the wine less appealing when mixed with captivity."

"I was escorted at dawn to a small kitchen and fed a meager meal. As I ate, I started to seriously ponder the possibility and method of escape. I had but one guard and as I finished, he said, 'Master Ziusdra, your presence is requested in my master's private garden.' He led me through a maze of corridors. Finally, we stopped before a large wooden door and as he unlocked it, I sensed his fear as he gave me warning, 'I am sorry to force you inside, if you revere any deity, I suggest you make your peace with it. You are to enter alone and the door will be barred behind you. Beware the beast within.' I stepped inside and the door was quickly shut and sealed."

"I found myself in a huge majestic circular garden. I sensed a presence approaching, something not human and filled with a killing rage. Turning, I spied a massive hound, perhaps more wolf than dog, stalking me through the shrubbery. I closed my eyes and used the one ability I had been born with, to communicate with animals. I directed the balance inside me to reach out to this beast and watched as it slowed and lost its aggressive demeanor. The balance had made it docile and after I gave the attention due it, we started to explore the outer wall together. Sculptures and plants fit together as if they belonged. Small wooden boats floated in miniature ponds as brightly colored fish swam lazily beneath. I made the complete circuit to where the guard had admitted me. It was the thought of the guard which triggered the realization; he had addressed me by my true name. Someone here knew who I really was. I immediately thought of the priesthood, for only they would know my true name and possibly when I would return. I looked warily around suspecting a trap."

"Making my way toward the center of the garden, I came upon a large mound rising high above the entire circle. There was a well-worn path leading to the top where I discovered a stone pedestal with a wooden sculpture of a young boy. From behind there came a voice, 'People tell me the likeness is lacking but surely you recognize the breastplate. Do you not, Ziusdra?' I spun and there stood my host, Gihon. His eyes had lost their hostility but they belonged to a stranger. He smiled, 'Perhaps this will help, Maggot say ... learn talk good.' I yelled as the realization hit me, 'Maggot, you're alive!' We embraced and then he led me to a hidden doorway in the mound."

"Inside was a dark tunnel which slanted deep into the earth. The similarity to the tunnel of my chamber did not escape my notice. The passage opened to a room lit with torches and in the center was something I never expected to see. Gihon waved his hand as if presenting his most prized possession, 'I saved this to remind me of what brought me here.' It was a section of the great log which had carried him down the river. His voice sounded with pride, 'This is the final piece of the mighty log. I used the rest to build boats, sculptures and anything else I could imagine.' We returned to the sculpture on the mound and he pulled off the breastplate. It was the original stone he used to break the sewing box so long ago. The same I had moved across the hill and place upon another. The realization of what resulted from my seemingly meaningless tasks with the stone and

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tree was humbling. Not only was his life touched by my actions but also everyone I had
seen in this valley and countless others."

"I asked what happened after we parted, to which he replied, 'I moved down the river
for many days until the log became caught in an eddy and soldiers discovered me
unconscious still clinging to my life and the log. When they pulled me down, the pouch
of gems with the king's personal emblem was found. I do not remember much of what
happened except I was brought before King Gilgamesh and he tried to question me. I
explained as best I could. Maggot friend to Animal man ... Maggot get killed by bad
men ... Animal man no pick dead Maggot ... carry in dark hole ... shiny stones fix
Maggot ... bad men come ... Animal man make land shake ... make log go in water ...
Maggot ride ... bad men kill Animal man ... I no pick. These were the words taken by
the king's scribes at my interview. The king may not have understood much but he
recognized the use of the elementals, the crystal chamber and the healing. He ordered
that I be schooled and my needs be taken care of. He also proclaimed the pouch was
mine by right and I became rich. I was placed with a prominent family and was given the
finest education possible."

"Four cycles of seasons passed before I was again summoned before the king. I stood
alone in front of the mighty Gilgamesh, he said to me, 'Youngling, what should I call
you? The only name you spoke was Maggot and this now seems inappropriate. You
must choose a name more fitting your status.' Since I was found, I was simply called
'boy' or 'log rider'. The king asked what I was interested in and I told him, water. It was
his suggestion I take the name of a river and I became Gihon. Water was in my blood
and my story of floating down the river on a giant log was told throughout the land. The
king questioned me as to what I remembered of you. There was little I could tell him, my
last sight of you was seeing you fall into the river with an arrow in your back. The king
and I became close friends and it was from him I learned your true name. He believed
you had not perished and how he, the king, was also healed in the crystal chamber."

"We left the palace the following day; he told me wished to show me something. We
reached the spot on the river after three days travel with the current. The destination
ended where I had been found. The king had ordered the log removed from the water and
stored. He put his hand on my shoulder and said the log was as much mine as the pouch
of gems. He decreed the land on both sides of the river for two day's march was mine as
well. I quickly began cutting parts of the log and constructing river craft. Soon, I was
trading with villages along the water. My business grew and with my ties to the king, I
received contracts to supply his army and other prosperous ventures. The family, who
raised me, was rich and influential, more importantly, they and a daughter who became
my wife, Phrat. When her parents died, they controlled the majority of trade on the land
around Erech. With my marriage, this too passed to me as their only son had entered the
priesthood. This left me in control of the trade for much of the kingdom. You see around
you the result of my labors. From the world over, I invited learned men to come and

"I know you were confused when I mistreated you as my guest, I am truly sorry. One
of the things Gilgamesh has done is to set out a watch for you and he placed the
priesthood in charge of the search. In times prior he would not have let the priesthood control this but he is old and feeble and desperate to find you. I believe the priesthood is searching for you for a more sinister reason. The king is obsessed with you and immortality. Yes, the king still lives. My household has no idea of your identity and it should remain so. I told everyone you were a spy sent to steal plans for a new style ship and I had been given your name and the day of your arrival. Thus, I was curious of your name and employer. The king told me stories of how you disliked giving your true name and I used this to alienate you from my people. Seeing you from the dock, I was not certain it was you. I had not seen you in over seven tens of cycles of seasons. Until I was certain, I wanted to keep you from departing. When you would not give your name I knew you to be Ziusudra but there was one final test. This is why you were brought to the garden. The dog is friendly to only Phrath and me, anyone else would be attacked, and even my guards refuse to enter. When it befriended you, I had no more doubts. My earliest memories are of the Animal man and the young pups we played with at our camp. I had your elementals taken and knew you would not disappear until we talked. You may have them back now. We must be cautious; the priesthood has gained power as Gilgamesh ages and weakens. Their spies are everywhere and the king told them of how it was not the gods who helped you save mankind during the Great Wash. Now, they seek to punish you for blasphemy. They feel threatened by such stories, for if believed, the priesthood would lose control. If they learned you walk among men again, your life and anyone who may know the truth would be in danger. Word has come, the king is ill after a long trek to obtain a magical fruit which would have given him immortality. It is said to have been in his grasp but a serpent stole it while he slept. Of course, the story comes from the priests. I only know he returned to Erech a defeated man. Rumors say he is dying and none but the priests are allowed to see him.”

Arret stopped and stretched, “AnLuan, do you understand now? This is not about Gilgamesh or Maggot, but of the stone and tree and the ripples which continued for years to bring both happiness and sorrow to people not even remotely linked to the original actions. We all have our 'rock' and 'tree'. Our lives may seem meaningless as an unknown hillside in the wilderness but, as with the stone and tree, they influence everything they touch and the ripples continue to expand to influence everything they touch and the ripples continue to expand to make huge differences. Gihon's boats were copied all over the known world. His reverence for the stone lingered wherever learned men would meet, as a beacon to fellowship and hope. There are societies even to this day which revere the stone or the workers of stone. It is amazing but while on a computer, I found a statue at a museum right here in Chicago which I believe was carved by Gihon himself. It was found during an excavation at the city of Ur but I am certain I saw it in Gihon's house. The ripples are still being felt to this day. When you think of Vincent, know he caused many such ripples and the effects of which will be endless. He did make a difference, we all do.” Leona interrupted, “Okay, you made your point but what happened next? Noah, Ziusudra whatever his name, didn't just leave and end it there. Did he?” Arret nodded, “There is more, but not much. Let me finish and if our vigil brings no results we should find something to eat and decide what to do if Kyra does not return.”

Arret closed his eyes for a moment and then continued with Old One-Eye's story, “Gihon wanted to take me to the king in Erech. As he explained the intrigues of the
priesthood, I knew none could know my identity and yet I must gain access to the king. Gihon said he had a plan and I must trust him. There was no hesitation as I bid him to make preparations. I was still confined to the house and the guards became my shadow when I ventured outside my room. During the days, I walked the halls and marveled at the beautiful art which filled the house. At one of my excursions, I turned a corner and found myself facing Phrath. She quickly avoided eye contact and spoke while studying a spot on the wall, 'I am sorry you were not given the true hospitality of our home. Had you been more honest, things would have been much different. If you desire, I will make a sacrifice to any god or goddess you wish.' My reply was swift, 'Do not trouble yourself with meaningless sacrifices for me. I care nothing for such foolishness. I find no fault in your husband's actions. We all carry secrets which are sometimes better left untold. I see no reason for pleasantries. Your home is a beautiful place but even with its splendor, it is but a prison to me. I think it wise if we do not speak again.' Gihon told me to keep up the appearance of being a captured spy. I felt badly for treating Phrath this way but others may have been listening."

"The morning came early and I found four very hostile guards waiting for me. They roughly marched me to the docks without even a meal. All work ceased and I was glared at with obvious animosity. The workers fell in behind my escort and shouted curses at one who would plot against their benefactor. We went directly to Gihon's boat. Once aboard, I was rudely forced inside a large wooden cage used for transporting animals. I knew this due to the smell of urine and feces which reeked from within. The crowd continued to increase and they began to throw fish entrails at me. To further my humiliation the crew, once finished with loading their cargo, used the boom to lift my cage above the deck to make a better target for the onlookers."

"I endured the onslaught until Gihon arrived. The crowd parted and he addressed them before boarding, 'I see you have extended our hospitality by sharing our food.' He paused as the assembled roared with laughter, 'Do not be too harsh upon him for he has confessed and named his employers. It would seem there are merchants as far as Akkad interested in my designs. Do they not know the true secret of our success? It is not the designs, no friends, it is the hearts of the people who build and sail them!' Cheers rang out until Gihon raised his hand, 'The law calls for his death.' This time the cheers were much louder. When they let up, Gihon continued, 'However, this treachery must be brought before the king.' There were sounds of disappointment but Gihon was their leader. He waved to the crowd and then boarded his boat. Within moments we were in the main channel and sailing away."

"I swayed in my humiliation above the deck without food or water as I watched Gihon master his boat. The man was attentive to every detail and seemed everywhere at once. We traveled some distance then turned sharply to shore. Docking, Gihon walked out to meet a number of men waiting for him. The crew gathered their belonging and went ashore as the men on the dock replaced them. Gihon said something to his old crew and then came back aboard. When we were safely away, he addressed the new crew, 'Let my prized animal down. While a guest, he misused my generosity by drinking enough wine to put me out of business. This was not enough to anger me so he wandered out and found a lion I had planned to present to the king at the harvest festival. This drunk decided to have some fun and prodded the animal with a pole. Unfortunately, the beast became enraged and injured itself. I had no choice but to destroy it. My guest paid for it.
but I felt he needed a lesson so I am taking him to the king to explain why there will be no lion to honor him this cycle. Being the forgiving man that I am, I arranged the finest view aboard my vessel. There was much laughing amongst the new crew and then they released me from my cage. From then on I was just a passenger. The plan was working well and I enjoyed the rest of the voyage receiving a number of good natured jests from the crew. Gihon spent the time telling me of Gilgamesh and of his own remarkable life.”

“We arrived in Erech with no more trouble. The cargo was unloaded and the boat made ready to sail further north with a replacement master. I regally disembarked the boat attired as a king. We quickly made the palace and the guards admitted us through the gates as Gihon spoke for me. I played my part as I looked indifferent and refused to acknowledge anyone. This tactic worked only until we entered the Great Hall. Here, advisors and administrators received all requests for indulgences and possible audiences with the king. There were many petitioners but, no matter how important, all were denied access to Gilgamesh.”

“The massive hall was also filled with priests who listened to people argue for their petitions. As our turn came, we were greeted by the king’s most senior advisor, Sasetu. Gihon was one of the king’s closest friends and was accorded special status. There were three priests listening intently as Sasetu told Gihon he could not see the king. Once of the priests whispered something to the advisor. Sasetu then asked Gihon for my identity, to which he replied, ‘This man is as powerful as our king, and he must be admitted at once. His name is withheld only to save the people from panicking.’ Immediately we were surrounded by guards and escorted to an adjoining room where officials and priests waited to question us. Gihon addressed the senior priest, ‘Arga, you know well my loyalty to the king. Be warned, do not insult my guest. He must be admitted without delay. There are powerful forces at work here which you do not wish to anger.’ The priest seemed to ignore Gihon and circled me with an evil grin upon his face. To Gihon he said, ‘Your friend, he carries a name? We are not sheep who would panic. I would be lacking in my duty to admit a stranger even on your word, most trusted Gihon.”

“Arga signaled to the guard at the door, ‘Bring in the devout one!’ A side door opened and Phratl entered flanked by two priests. This caught both Gihon and myself unprepared. Phratl looked uneasy as Arga addressed her, ‘True believer, do not be fearful in doing your sacred duty. Trust in your faith and tell us of this stranger.’ She directed her gaze at me, ‘I met him on the road coming from the western farms. My cart broke a wheel and I was waiting for workmen to come and repair it. He came from the west where I had just traveled and no one was on the road from the time I left the farms. I sent runners to every guard post and farm but none had seen such a man in two day’s travel. It was clear his movements were to conceal him from honest people.’ The priest flashed his contemptuous grin and said, ‘So this person, who is vouched to be of great importance, was lurking in the woods and suddenly appeared when your cart broke. How very convenient for him to be there when you were in need.’ She nodded, ‘The wheel was made by my husband and they have never failed. For them to suddenly break would take sorcery. I suspected more when I found myself entranced by his conversation. Later, when I offered to make a sacrifice for him at a temple of his choosing, he told me not to waste my time with such foolishness. Tell me, Arga, what is happening, my husband was bringing him here as a captive. Gihon would not bring such a man to the king of his own
free will. I fear he is under a spell. Gihon is a devout man and pays his tribute to all the
gods.' Arga smiled as her, 'Yes, I am certain he does.'

'Phrath pointed at me, 'I was suspicious of him from the beginning when he appeared
from nowhere without pack, food, or water.' Arga continued, 'Lady Phrath, did this
stranger give his name?' She replied, 'Yes, he said to call him Ziu.' Arga's eyes
narrowed, 'Ziu, such a name, would it be shortened for Ziusdra? What say you
stranger? Are you the one who blasphemes our true gods? Speak or die!' I could tell the
priests was losing control so I simply ignored him and continued to look unconcerned by
the conversations around me. Gihon stepped between us and pleaded with Arga, 'You
have known me since youth and in all that time I never misled you or betrayed a trust.
Do not push this matter any further, I warn you, Arga, let us pass before all regret this
day.' The priest's face reddened with anger as he ordered the guards, 'Seize them both!'
The order was too late for I had already grasped the salamander and the censer. With a
commanding voice, I yelled, 'Cease insignificant mortals!' My sudden outburst caused
everyone to hesitate as I formed an image and let the elementals loose. The chamber
walls were lined with torches, as Fire took control; they erupted into huge blinding
fireballs. At the next instant, Air produced a whirlwind within the room. Air and Fire
combined and the entire room became a swirling ring of fire. Inside this flaming round
only Gihon and myself stood, while Sasetu, Phrath and Arga were on their knees. All
others were pressed against the walls and held their by the churning flames. Gihon
reached down and raised the terrified Sasetu, 'Rise, old friend, you are in no danger here.
I believe we requested an audience with the king.'

'My demonstration was successful and I told the priest, 'Arga, you insignificant bug,
cause me not to foul my lips with your name again.' He raised his head but I
commanded, 'Keep your nose at my feet, spineless one. I desired to visit my daughter's
son without being noticed. Mankind has become too vile for gods to dwell among. I find
your kind disgusting and you personally beneath the lowest of men. You wield power in
the name of the gods and spin your lies to further your own goals. A sorry priest you are,
not knowing a god when one stands before you!' I looked to Phrath, who was trembling
next to him, 'For what reason, woman, would you travel so far to cast doubt on your
husband or on one who brought you no harm? Are you so blinded by the lies of this
priest as to break your vow of marriage? Speak woman, I would know your answer!'
She fearfully pleaded, 'Lord, forgive me. No dishonor was meant to my husband, my
bond to him is strong. There is another bond which brought me here. True, I spied for
Ar., the priest but for another reason, he is my blood, my only brother.'

'Gihon was motioning us to leave with Sasetu but I was enjoyed tormenting the
priest. The flaming round still spun but it would soon fade. We needed a distraction so I
told Gihon to accompany me and for Sasetu to remain. I caused the flames to cease and
then sent an image to Air. Around the walls were those who had only enough space to
stand, their flaming restraints removed, each prostrated themselves before me. I
contemptuously said, 'Mortals, hear me well, crawl away from the door to the Great Hall
and do it quietly. My ears grow weary of your whimpering.' Air answered with a blast
of wind struck the door, ripping the panels from their fastenings. Next a great ball of fire
flashed through the opening which captured everyone's attention in the hall beyond. We
stepped through the vacated doorway and beheld the awestruck assembly. Grasping three
of the elementals, I sent multiple images, instantly the Great Hall shook as if the very
world was ending. From outside came a blinding flash as lightning struck close by and this was followed by the deafening roar of thunder. The torches in the hall flared brilliantly and became life-like images of men burning in agony. Their mouths elongated into ghastly proportions. A powerful wind came screaming through the doorway and caught the blazing images and carried them above the now prostrate assembly. To Arga, I commanded, 'Come manipulating priest, crawl to me. Show these people how the gods favor you!' He obediently slithered to my side. There were nearly three tens of ten present and all were uncertain as to what was occurring. I declared in a voice amplified by Air, 'Mortals of Erech, the mighty and all-powerful god Utu stands before you!' I did not think it possible for the frightened assemblage to do so, but before my eyes they lowered themselves closer to the floor. I am somewhat ashamed for displaying myself as the father of their gods but I believe I was still feeling the effects of the humiliation I had endured on the boat anchored at Gihon's dock. The silence in the hall was complete. I stated with as much disdain in my voice as I could manage, 'Long has it been since I walked among men. I am displeased to find men, such as this thing at my feet, pretending to speak for me and my kind. They only seek to bring power and wealth to themselves. At another time, I would have destroyed this entire city, stone by stone. However, the affairs of men are no longer my concern. Instead I will only punish those who have offended me. Lowly mortals, observe the wrath of Utu!' I addressed the priest at my feet, 'Rise pest.' He made it to his knees when a tremendous blast of wind lifted him up and into the middle of the hall. His robes were separated from him and then they burst into flames below his naked, suspended body. From behind, Phrath crawled into the hall and pleaded, 'Lord please, do not slay my brother. If one must die to appease you, let your wrath fall upon me.' I had Air release the hapless priest and he dropped next to his burning clothes. To Phrath I said, 'The killing of mortals has long become tiresome to me. Your brother may live but he must find another calling.' I asked Gihon, 'What would you have me do with your deceitful wife? I owe you a debt for your assistance.' I watched her shiver as he gave his answer, 'Lord Utu, I am but a man and my choices are governed by desire. This woman has been my chosen for much of my life. Although her actions disappoint me greatly, I would ask you to spare her. I am inclined to forgive her.'

"The silence was complete as I seemed to ponder his words and ceased the fire and winds. This was not part of our plan and I hoped Gihon would understand, 'Woman, raise your head and face the judgment of Utu!' She lifted her teary eyes as I continued, 'The bond between husband and wife is not the concern of the gods. Gihon forgives you and asks for mercy, but Utu is not a merciful god. Your betrayal of his trust means nothing to me; however the lengths you went to accuse me is another matter. You did not lie with your words but slanted them to infer something sinister about my actions. I think perhaps you are too much like your brother, the former priest. This displeases me greatly and for such you shall die! You are to remain here with your brother until I conclude my business with Gilgamesh. Guards, let no harm come to these two and see they do not leave. Utu has spoken!' Satisfied with my distraction, Gihon and I joined Sasetu and sought our audience."

"We were led to the private chambers of the king. There were guards posted but none dared to look directly at us. Word of an angry god among them traveled quickly. We stepped into a small room and there sat a young man. Sasetu bowed to him and then
walked through a curtain. We followed and the youth joined us. The adjoining room contained a massive bed on which lay the man I once saved. There was little resemblance to the hero I remembered. Such a mighty man, now just a husk waiting for death to claim him. Sasetu ordered the healers and attendants to leave as I walked to the bedside and gripped the frail hand of the mightiest warrior I had ever known. He opened his eyes and recognition came slowly to him. He weakly whispered, 'I knew you would come, old friend.' He gestured to the young man, 'Son, this is someone very special.' The youngling stepped forward, 'I know Father, the great god Utu has made his presence known.' The old king let out a laugh which turned into a fit of uncontrolled coughing, 'Utu, this impostor is no god! Urlugal, my son, this is Ziusudra, hero of the Great Wash and friend who saved my life when death sought to take me early. The lad looked confused as Gilgamesh continued, 'Whatever his reason for using such a deception, it must be necessary. Now, I must be alone with Ziusudra and Gihon.'

“When left to ourselves, Gihon explained our ruse. The priesthood would have to retreat with their leader humiliated but it would be impossible to stop them forever. Too many times in the past their ilk had slunk in behind those who worked to create a better world; only to corrupt what was good and clean. They preyed on the fears of men and then manipulated their own rise to power. Gilgamesh agreed, he admitted that his son was not the strong presence needed to keep the priesthood in line but there was no one else to rule.”

“The light within the old man began to fade quickly, Urlugal and Sasetu were summoned. The king was propped up and he spoke with but a faint spark of his former self. 'Long have I searched for immortality to stay this day. I have cheated my own fate time and time again but there is no way to change destiny. I want to thank you, Ziusudra, for trying to show me the error of my quest. I regret what my life has become, had I lived to enjoy the fruits given to me, this would be a sweeter parting. Foolishly, I squandered much of what was precious to me. Urlugal, you will take the throne. There must be a purging of our records. If the priesthood continues to fear Ziusudra, in some future time, he will awaken to find himself considered a sorcerer or worse. He might even be equated to the likes of the mother of all demons, Lilith. I believe it will take many cycles before the priesthood stops looking for him. His name will be spoken by the common people and the priests will be jealous. When I am gone, you will tell the priests Utu has decreed all mention of the impostor, who met me in my youth, must be purged, for Ziusudra still resides with the gods. The story of the Great Wash is to be preserved but all other mention of him must cease to exist. Let the priesthood do the cleansing, they enjoy destroying the truth. Do not worry about Ziusudra, the people will still tell the stories and his memory will linger. I believe he would prefer not to be remembered.' He turned to me, 'My friend, I was a fool to spend my life looking to cheat death. Yet, I must tell you, as I look back it was not the goal which I find important but the quest itself.' King Gilgamesh, the mightiest king I ever met, closed his eyes and breathed his final breath.”

“The signal went out through the palace and fires were lit across the land announcing the king's passing. Gihon and I spoke briefly with the new king and Sasetu before leaving. We returned to the Great Hall where Phrath and Arga anxiously awaited the wrath of the fearsome god Utu. No one had left the hall and as we entered all prostrated themselves again. I bade the audience to rise and addressed Phrath, 'Woman, are you prepared to die?' She faintly whispered, 'Yes Lord.' To the assembled crowd I
announced, 'A great king, my grandson, has died today, all should honor his passing and acknowledge your new king, Urugal. Gihon's woman must die and I choose her manner of death to be a very slow strangulation.' There was a gasp from the crowd and I spread a cruel gaze around me. This brought a silence to the hall. Pulling out my knife, I cut a length of cord from a prostrated priest's robe and wrapped it around Phraeth's trembling neck, slowly tightening it. Her eyes grew wide with terror until I released the ends and let the cord hang loose. My gaze bore into her as I declared for all to hear, 'People of Erech, this woman must be strangled until there is no life left within her. I find it distasteful to have her death on the same day as my grandson's. I wish for her to be punished for longer than a quick death would bring. This is my decision; woman of Gihon, your husband shall inflict the punishment!' Another gasp came from the assembled and quickly silence was restored with my angry glare. Gihon started to speak but I stayed his words and continued, 'From this day forth, as each day ends, woman, you will present yourself to your husband. You will wear nothing but this cord around your neck. It will be his choice to strangle you to your death or to punish you. If you displease him, you will feel the cord tighten as it has this day. However, if his choice is punishment, as you lay under him, may his punishment be long and hard!' I turned to Gihon, 'Remove her from my sight and punish her as you will.' Gihon bowed to me and grabbed the cord to lead her away. I heard him say to his wife, 'I am not one to argue with a god, surely not one so powerful as the mighty Utu. I think we should retire to private chambers, for I detect a punishment rising.' I do not believe Phraeth understood what happened but Gihon would explain it to her. We had done our parting before coming to the hall. Only one more item required my attention."

"Lying naked upon the floor was the priest named Arga. I addressed him, 'Stand and walk behind me, spineless one.' He obeyed and made a futile attempt to cover himself as we left the Great Hall. Reaching the outer gates of the palace, I moved slowly so all could see the object of my displeasure. There were massive crowds gathering as word of a god in their midst had spread. I spoke to the humiliated priest behind me, 'Your sister is being punished severely for her behavior. Life for you as a priest is finished. We must find something more fitting your putrid status.' I stopped in the busiest part of the road to further his shame. When I felt he had suffered enough, I spoke to him one final time. 'You will do exactly as I command. Travel to the house of Gihon, food and clothing are forbidden as you travel but I will allow you water. You must go by land and if you hurry you can make it in three days. Once there, you will beg the master of the house for employment. I expect whatever you do to be the foulest, most wretched things imaginable. Inform Gihon it is the will of Utu for you to carry a name befitting your status. Behold, I name you Maggot!' I dismissed him and sought oblivion once more."

Arret was pleased the tale had taken them to the dawn's light. "It is all I can tell you. The tale ended and no more was spoken of Gilgamesh or Gihon. I believe my birth was many hundreds of cycles beyond the time of this tale. The king's legend had grown and he was revered as the greatest king ever. There were tales of him with a companion who was made especially for him by the gods, it was fashioned out of metal and was the only one who could match the king in strength and speed. In my time, the priests were in control of everything and the king's power was in name only. Our land was rotting from corruption and the great kingdom was a shadow of its former self."
He looked to where the tunnel entrance had been, “I hoped the Womb or the elementals would have forced Wacker to surface but this had not happened. I worry for Kyra and morn for Vincent; however, we must eat to live. Let us return to the house. Preparations need to be made for Vincent and there are three younglings likely to be awake as well. The owl will keep watch for the tunnel.”

AnLuan cooked breakfast while Leona helped the injured youths. After eating, Arret said, “In a few days we can expect Kyra’s parents to return. Explaining what has happened will be difficult, especially since we have no proof. With the absence of their daughter and the current state of their property, they will be very skeptical. I fear our welcome will be short-lived.”

Vincent spoke of a woman, a Mrs. Bertram, who offered assistance to anyone in need. I think Wacker’s friends should go to her. If she has no solutions, they may have to be re-admitted to the hospital.” He turned to the youths, “Either way, you must leave. Listen carefully, Wacker has gone and may not return. He made a serious mistake by involving you. I suggest you forget what happened here. Each of you has a choice to make, either return to the lives you led which will bring an early death, or change your paths and find more appealing fates.” Turning his attention to Leona, “The solutions you seek are not to be found with us. It would be wise for you to seek out this Bertram woman. The younglings need a ride to the city and the police are seeking Vincent. For his car to remain here may bring unwanted scrutiny. The policeman is no longer parked out front but he surely reported Vincent’s car. Leona, if you will follow AnLuan with Kyra’s car, she can leave Vincent’s at some obscure place. Afterwards, she can deliver the rest of you to Mrs. Bertram’s and return here. I will remain here and keep watch for Kyra.”

Arret spent the rest of the morning trying to salvage what he could and to give some order to the possessions of people he did not know. He found solace in his work and solitude. Since meeting Kyra there had not been time to examine where this calling had taken him. He wondered about his new life, his losses were many: a great grandson; the Womb of The World; his bond with the elementals; Oak; and possibly the woman he loves. It did not set well, being so helpless while things were falling apart around him. His only tool left was ritual. Hopefully, he would have better results if alone. He went to the garden and made his circle.

The power flowed freely compared to his earlier attempt as he chose to visualize the elementals in their places. Sending out questioning images he waited patiently for a response. What he received was not so much an image but more a feeling of understanding; they were listening but not responding. Once again he had failed. Disheartened, he closed the circle and was startled by the owl flapping wildly before him. Certain of danger, he palmed his makeshift staff and braced himself. None came and he looked at the owl who sat upon a nearby branch staring toward the house. Arret stealthily slipped first into the kitchen and then into the living room. He noticed the front door was ajar and he sensed a faint whiff of someone he had not noticed in the house before. Someone was here moments before and he instantly regretted not having Oak to guide him. He listened for any faint noises but he heard nothing, so I surmised someone had gone to the second floor. With his substitute staff at the ready, he moved to the flight of stairs, his senses strained to locate the intruder. As his foot reached the third step, a voice from behind caused him to spin and lunge. The front door swung open and a woman’s voice said, “… glad I came ahead and opened the door, all this luggage is …” An
elderly couple stoodpetrified at the sight of astrangely robed man charging them with a broom handle.

Kyra's parents sat nervously on the ruined sofa as a strangely dressed barefoot man nervously paced in front of them. At least, he had discarded the stick and acted somewhat rational. He tried to explain, "I know this seems bizarre to you. Kyra told me she had called you in Europe and you were coming home but I did not anticipate your returning so quickly." The woman had trouble keeping her eyes on the pacing man; she kept looking at the surrounding devastation. The same could not be said for Kyra's father, his gaze never wavered from Arret. The man interrupted, "Stop, save the long version for another time. I want to know where my daughter is and when will she be back." Arret knew there was no easy way out, saying, "I know where she is but I fear she may not return". The man was getting angry, "Your concern for her is clear but nothing else you've said is. Let's start over. I'm Vernon Wells and my wife is Lydia. This time, keep it short and simple. If I want detailed information, I'll ask. Now, who are you and why are you in my wrecked home?" The robed man closed his eyes for a moment and then answered, "I am called Arret. I was in trouble and Kyra brought me here for safety." Lydia cut in, "What kind of trouble?" Arret's shoulders sagged as he replied, "I was being sought in regards to an explosion which caused a street to collapse in Chicago". Vernon took charge again, "Was Kyra involved in this? Is she in trouble with the police?" Arret knew he was getting into a deeper hole but answered, "Kyra was not connected with the disaster, and her arrest came later". Arret watched the shock hit the couple. Vernon closed his eyes and asked, "And what exactly was she arrested for?" The stranger wanted to run and not speak the words already forming, "It was for attempting to steal a purse". Lydia stood, "Vern, I need a drink, how about you?" Her husband took the cue, "Honey, let me look and see if there is anything left to drink in the house. You, Arret, don't disappear, we're just getting started." The couple went into the kitchen and gave Arret a short respite. He was glad and eagerly sought answers which would not be so alarming. There were whispers from the kitchen and the sound of glasses being filled.

AnLuan burst in through the front door, "Father, all is done. The lads are in the hospital and Leona is with Mrs. Bertram. I parked Vincent's car by the warehouse where you fought the police. When they find it, they'll not ... Oh, hello." She had noticed the couple standing in the doorway listening. Lydia quickly downed her drink and went for a refill. Introductions were made when she returned. Lydia was the first to speak, "You called him father, is he some sort of priest? I figured he's one of them occultists Kyra ran with." AnLuan was quick to reply, "Oh no, he's my true father". She looked to Arret and received a chilling stare, then added, "Of course, being a long story, I think we should let it be for now". Vernon cleared his throat and said, "We're getting sidetracked; tell me about Kyra and this time I want straight answers". Arret searched for the right words, "She was abducted by a teen with a gun. He took her to a place where none may follow and we are hoping for her return. She has been gone for quite some time and, truthfully, we are losing hope." Lydia asked, "How dangerous is this teen?" AnLuan sadly answered, "He shot and killed me grandson, Vincent. I pray your daughter be safe".
Vernon stood, “Tell me where, if you won't go, I damn sure will!”' Arret sighed, “Sir, it is physically impossible to follow where they have gone. I know you are confused and this is my fault for not being clearer. I can only tell you, when we last saw her, she was alive and unhurt. I hope with all my heart, the one who took her will see his error and release her. If he continued his erratic behavior, I fear Kyra may be dead. You should prepare for what may come…”

From behind them came a voice, “If you're drinking for my funeral, hope you don't mind if I get a glass”. Kyra stood in the kitchen doorway. She tossed Arret his staff which, for the first time in ages, he fumbled. She ran to him and gave him a quick kiss and then rushed to her parents. Arret was at a loss for what to do but finally put his arm around AnLuan's shoulder. He held Oak and sensed a warning and called out to Kyra as he began to disengage from his daughter, “Kyra, where is Wacker? Tell me now!” Still hugging her folks, she replied, “He's in the tunnel, don't worry”. Lydia scolded Kyra, “You gave us quite a scare and you know how I hate surprises”. From the kitchen came a second voice, “Surprise! Hands up where I can see.” A young stranger stood with a shotgun leveled at Arret. The youth stepped in further as others followed and spread out into the living room. Motioning with the gun to Arret, he ordered, “Lose the stick”. The staff dropped as Arret saw no way to attack without endangering the others. The leader commanded, “Step back against the wall”. Arret complied as Ray, with his jaw wired, walked into the room. Arret recognized another as the one who was disabled by the blow to his crotch, Wacker had called him Randy. Arret surmised the others were members of the new gang. Arret chose to wait for a time when the odds were better. The gang took everyone's valuables and bound their hands. Randy picked up Oak and confronted Arret. His voice filled with bravado, “Not so tough without your stick”. Arret stared impassively straight ahead. Randy didn't like being ignored and swung the staff into Arret's stomach. Arret dropped to his knees and tensed for the next blow but the leader stopped Randy, “Not now, you can play later just tell them what we want”. Randy seemed to be their spokesman, “Here's the deal, Wacker stole our money; we want him and our cash. I heard the bitch say he's in the tunnel. That's the place Ray told us about.” Ray nodded in agreement and led them out where the entrance had been. Randy grabbed Arret by the hair, “Ray says this thing opens with some sort of magic. Make it happen or we start hurting your friends.”

Kyra interrupted, “He's not the one who can open it but I can. Let him be and I'll get you inside.” Their focus shifted to her as she said, “I can get you in but I need my hands free. Come on guys, you're not afraid of me, are you? I give you my word; I won't lift a finger against you.” Approval was given and she was freed. Earlier, they had taken the chalice and censer from her. The stone was left in her pocket and the salamander had hidden in her clothes. She asked for the two symbols, saying they were part of a special key. Re-acquiring the elementals, she said, “This is all I need, thank you.” The entrance magically appeared and Randy exclaimed jubilantly, “Yeah! Let's go!” The leader chose caution, “Hold it, this could be a trap”. He pointed to the captives, “They go too just keep them close”. The gang pulled out flashlights; Ray had briefed them well. Two of the gang took the lead, followed by the captives and trailing were the final four gang members. About ninety feet inside, the entrance sealed shut. Panic-laden shouts from the rear brought all to a halt. The lead two forced their way back. Suddenly, the space between the gang and the captives became solid rock. There were muffled sounds of
gunfire, followed by screams from the gang. Kyra quickly untied everyone and said, “Sounds like they tried shooting through the rock. It’s not smart mixing bullets and stone. Mom, Dad, I know this is a bit much but just hang in there. I know you are confused and in the dark this must be scary but there will be light further along the tunnel. I’ll do my best to explain later. Arret and I are going to take your hands and lead you. Lu, can you take my other hand?” AnLuan replied, “I would like to know what happened; it’s dead I truly believed you were”.

As they moved deeper into the tunnel, Kyra began her story. “Johnny forced me inside the tunnel as he bragged about outsmarting Arret. He now controlled everything and no one could touch him. I think he was losing his mind; some of the things he was saying were just nonsense. The tunnel seemed longer than I remembered and after what seemed an eternity, he shoved me hard and I stumbled. Before I could get up, the tunnel sealed behind me. I figured Johnny went back to torment Arret and was keeping me as a hostage. I waited in the dark for a while and then made my way down to the crystal chamber.”

As if on cue, the Womb’s glow appeared ahead. Once inside the chamber, Arret stood off to one side with AnLuan. Kyra’s parents were in awe as they took in the magnificence of the setting. Vernon said, “I never dreamed this was down here”. Kyra smiled, “Dad, this in only temporary; this is not a permanent structure, it travels. I know all this magic stuff will be a hard thing for you to understand but it is real and all I can ask is that you just observe and give it time. Let me finish my story and then I can explain all of this to you.”

She thought for a minute and then began, “When I walked into the chamber, the tunnel closed behind me and the crystals began to pulsate. I think the walls started moving but I am not certain. I remember getting dizzy and inadvertently backed into the slab and touched a symbol; this symbol right here on the side.” Arret examined it closely and said, “This symbol is new; I have not seen it before”. She nodded, “I know, when my hand touched the spot, an image filled my mind. I saw myself lying upon the slab, so I tried it. The crystals stopped pulsating and began to brighten until I was almost blinded and my mind was then bombarded by images. There were so many, it was just too much for me because I fainted. When I woke, the lights had returned to normal. I was afraid to touch anything else so I sat against the wall and waited for Johnny. As I sat there, the images started to repeat in my head. I was confused as none of this made any sense to me. One image came repeatedly; it was of the tunnel opening and closing. I developed a terrible headache and slammed my fist against the wall, wishing it was gone. Suddenly, my hand no longer touched the stone and before me stood the open tunnel. I wasn't going to wait for it to close again and just hoped Johnny was occupied on the surface and I could slip by him. I ran my fingers along the wall to find my way. Inexplicable, the tunnel stopped and I felt only stone before me. The thought came to me that Johnny might be toying with me. I tried to duplicate what I had done below but nothing worked. Feeling trapped, I sank to the floor and cried. Something creepy landed on the back of my neck and I tried to dislodge it but the thing moved down between my shoulder blades.”

Kyra shivered as if she were re-experiencing the moment. “In a panic, I ran back down the tunnel to the light of the chamber. I pulled off my sweatshirt and threw it on the floor. From out of the folds, the salamander’s head tilted and gave me a bewildered
look. Enclosed in its mouth was a twig about six inches long. The creature's head began bobbing as if trying to tell me something. I picked up the tiny creature and accepted the twig. The salamander looked at me and then back to the tunnel. No matter which way I turned, the creature's head always faced the entrance. The lights in the chamber went out and I knew it was time to leave. A few steps inside the tunnel, I was startled by a flash of light. The end of the twig had caught fire and illuminated the tunnel. When I reached where the tunnel had stopped, I found what, thankfully, I did not feel in the dark."

"Johnny hadn't returned to the surface; he was encased in the solid stone wall before me. The only parts showing were his lifeless hands. The salamander put its head down on my skin and gave the distinct impression of sadness. I assumed Fire was helping me as an act of atonement. In Johnny's hands were the other three elementals. I pried them from his fingers and tried to communicate with them. I received an image showing me inside the chamber again. This was starting to wear thin on me; I'd been going in circles and getting nowhere."

"Back at the chamber, the crystals gave off a strange light. I didn't know what was expected of me so I closed my eyes and asked for answers. Suddenly, I remembered Arret had shown me how to place the elementals on the corners of the slab. With them in place, I lay upon the slab, certain I had done my part. I understood being sent back to retrieve the elementals but now there was nothing but the slab, the elementals and me. Hopefully, the slab would help me understand. I lay there expecting something but all I got was the sound of my heart racing. I thought back to everything I had heard Arret say to Vinny and Johnny. There must be something I was overlooking. I cleared my mind and wished for clarification, suddenly, it came to me. I laid back and the words came easily as I made my vow to never willingly take another human's life. The effect was immediate as images flooded my head. Feeling like a new person, I got up and looked with different eyes at the slab and elementals. We had become closer, yet there was still something missing. I sensed it was time to leave. I made my way up the tunnel again. When I came to Johnny's tomb I stopped to pick up Oak from the floor and then created a new tunnel as I skirted Johnny's tomb. The rest you know."

Arret took Kyra's hand and led her to the slab, "You are correct, the ritual is incomplete. How you gained control is inconceivable to me. Yet, there is little doubt as to your connection. It makes sense to think there must be a way to produce a new Chosen if one were to die. What remains is a link with the other members of the equation. You already gained your link with the Womb and the elementals when you made the three trips to and from the Womb out to Wacker's remains. Three is an important number in ritual. Now, you must use three to connect the final piece, take up the elementals and make your clockwise circles around the slab. Think of the 'Promise' and of spirit as you take each step. This will connect you more fully with the essence of spirit. Man and spirit strive for different goals; you will now be in touch with both. This is the balance, Kyra. Seal what you have started and begin your journey as Gaia's Chosen."

As she walked, the light dimmed when she passed as if to acknowledge her. When she completed the final circuit, the light became bright as the sun for a moment and then returned to normal. Kyra's head tilted as if she were listening to sounds only she could hear, "Oh Arret, I feel so much. The link is complete and I understand more of what the
images were telling me.” She went to her parents, “We’re leaving now, and I’ve got nine
days to learn as much as I can from Arret. I promise to explain all this. Just look at this
place, it is called the Womb of the World. This is to be my new home.” She asked for
her father’s handkerchief and started into the darkened tunnel. The others followed and
as the glow of the chamber faded behind them, a new light came from in front of Kyra
which silhouetted her body to them. The handkerchief burned in her hands without heat.
Even Arret was impressed; he never considered such a thing. They continued on until
Kyra halted. There appeared before them a hideous sight as, out of the solid stone,
protruded Johnny Wacker’s lifeless hands. Lydia looked at them for a moment before
realizing what they were. She gasped and turned away, “That’s awful! When you said he
was in the wall ... Oh Kyra, what’s happened to you? I remember you were such a loving
person. Now, there are street gangs, dead bodies, magic rooms and who knows what
else. Why couldn’t you be happy being a veterinarian?” Kyra frowned, “Mom, I know
you want me to be safe and protected. Thanks for your concern but this is what I want.
My life, up until now, was just preparation for what I have become. You see dead hands
in a stone wall, I see an oblation. Johnny died because he didn’t have the temperament to
control the balance of the natural forces he was tasked to control. When Johnny took
Vinny’s life, he and Vinny became the sacrifice necessary for the beginning of a new
cycle. Our planet, Gaia, is in the midst of change and their sacrifice brought me to the
forefront. I won’t be saving a few plants or animals; I’ll be helping the whole world.
Mankind will have to learn another way if it is to survive. The old ways are going to
resist and the new will have an uphill struggle. I’m going to be there to make certain it
happens.” Kyra hugged her, “Mom, right now I really need your support. I’m a woman,
not a child. I’ve chosen a difficult path where only three have walked before. Think of it
as the greatest job on Earth! Be there for me, please.” Lydia hugged her back, “Okay
Honey, I’m with you but right now get me away from here”.

The tunnel began to open as it moved around Johnny’s body. Kyra stopped and sealed
the tunnel once they passed. She explained, “Johnny’s fate is not a good one; his entire
spirit will be trapped here with the material part of his body. Ages will pass before this
rock is exposed to the surface and releases him. I am told even his spirit will be aware of
his time here, which is something I do not understand. I will mourn him and his spirit
but, even more so, I will remember his lesson. Arret stressed the importance of keeping
the vow; I will not make the same mistake as Johnny did.”

They continued to where they left the gang members trapped. Kyra warned it was too
dangerous for anyone but her to enter. She handed the burning handkerchief to her
father, “Here Dad, don’t be afraid, the heat is being channeled away; just think of it as
magic”. He took the fire with trembling hands and waited for the burning his mind told
him was coming but it never did. Kyra pulled out the stone and sent an image. The wall
before her dissolved into nothingness. Arret stepped up and said, “I will make certain it
is safe”. She gave him a look of dismay, “Always the protector. This time you’d better
stay outside”. She drew a protective circle around herself and entered. Flashlights
littered the floor and terror-filled yells echoed inside the tunnel. They lay prone as if hit
by some unseen force. Kyra was unaffected due to the protective circle and she
proceeded to gather their flashlights and weapons. She brought the flashlights back and
passed them to the group. Arret asked, “How?” She gave his arm a squeeze, “My love,
your way isn’t the only way. I don’t need to beat them senseless. I have a different
understanding with the elementals. I asked Earth for a super dense mass to be shifted beneath them. The gravity caused by this holds them in place. I shielded myself from it with my circle. Glad I paid attention in science class.”

She asked Arret to lead the others to the surface as she returned to the hapless gang members, “Listen real good, you came looking for Johnny Wacker but you won’t find him. Wherever he is, I think he’ll be very hard to find. One thing I can tell you, he burned his bridges here and won’t be coming back. There’s a reason you’re stuck like this. Ray seems to have forgotten to tell you I am a Wiccan. For those who don’t know, that means I’m a witch. You came here and caused my family and friends to suffer. Ray, I’m really disappointed in you for not warning your friends about witches. Well, I’m gonna let you up, just remember, what’s happening now can occur at any time. Don’t screw with me or mine or the next time I won’t be so forgiving.” She had Earth release them and she watched as they ran up the tunnel. She trailed behind and came out to see them running across the field. A wicked smile came to her face as she called out to them, “Hey guys, remember what I said”. She sent another image and watched as they collapsed while in the midst of a dead run. Immediately releasing them, she watched as they scrambled out of sight.

As the group walked slowly toward the house, Kyra told her parents, “They won’t be back. Ray’s going to have trouble explaining why he led them here. I believe he will be encountering the fate Arret warned him about very quickly. I don’t know about anyone else but I’m hungry; it’s been a long stressful night. Let’s get something to eat.” She spoke to Arret, “Think you can do without me for a while? I need to have a long talk with my folks.” He nodded, while thinking, “Nine days, I fear it will pass too quickly”.
EPILOGUE

It was just before midnight when Arret and Kyra finally sat alone in the garden. They could see the light shining from their parents' bedroom. Kyra leaned against him, "I think they took it pretty well. It was hard not to believe after what they experienced today. Besides, I think they are more enraged about their ruined house and landscaping." She sensed his uneasiness, "Arret, what's wrong? You've been really quiet." He replied, "Nothing, I am just feeling uncomfortable with how things turned out. I expected Johnny or Vinny to take my place, not you." She stood up, "Not me, or not a woman?" He shrugged, "I do not know. I am not saying a woman could not handle the position. I have known women who were great warriors. The Celts had many who fought like men. It is not a question of worthiness; I simply did not consider you as a replacement. I realize now that there must be changes and since I have been, and will always be a warrior at heart, the change must be something different. If the world is to stop the wars and killing, it must not be led by one who follows the warrior's path." She sat and rested her head back against his shoulder, "To be truthful, I didn't either. Arret, there are reasons for this. I was given a vast number of images and I want to explain some things. When we were in this very garden, did you not tell me the story of your taking over from Old One-Eye? You must have known something, even if it was buried in your subconscious. When Gaia entered your ritual on the beach and joined with the five of us, was I not one of the five? When the elementals were introduced to me, didn't they all accept me? You said yourself just how rare it was; I think you were too close to this. You couldn't see beyond Johnny and Vinny having a part in your replacement. They were both sacrifices to the old ways, each dealt with violence and their own way. This cycle is ending and another is ready to begin. Think about it, I am a Wiccan who loves nature. My learning of ritual and the elementals was just training for this." She watched him consider her words, and then added, "Arret, do you know who old One-Eye replaced? He wasn't the first Chosen; he took over from a woman. The balance has come full circle now, woman - man - man - woman. I didn't understand why I received this information, but now I do, it was for your benefit." She smiled, "The first was Lilith, and her time was before the Great Flood, a time when few stories survived. She was Gaia's Chosen and there were many stories of her until zealous priests demonized her. She became known as the mother of demons and tormentor of babies. How convenient for the priesthood. They labeled her evil and, with an ancient version of what we call 'spin', made things difficult for her. She became hunted with each calling and was unable to function, until she was replaced by a man of wisdom. It was she who warned Ziusudra of the coming flood and handed over position to him.

Old One-Eye was successful with his own techniques, different from Lilith's but effective. He was not a warrior like you, but he found his own ways to succeed. You saw me today, I used Earth and Fire in ways you wouldn't have. We're heading into a time of madness as shown by the animals which attacked you. They are out of balance and I believe more so from the changing of the cycle. You have only been in this time for a short period. You haven't seen the way the peoples of the world have become so polarized. If you had time to watch our political system or the way people have changed in the last few decades, you would know the change must come or we will become
extinct.” Arret was silent for a time, and then added, “What you say rings of truth; your Wicca is new to me, certainly not like the old religion, but it is apparent the old ways must change”.

Time slipped by them; it was close to dawn when the owl hooted from above, breaking the spell. Kyra stretched and settled her head back against him, “There’s something else I wanted to tell you. I’m sorry for wishing you’d stay, I should have been more specific and wished for you to stay with me. Now, it is I who will be leaving.” Arret shook his head, “There is no need, from the start I was puzzled by certain events. The biggest was why the tunnel could not find a direct route to the surface. I likened it to being in King Minos’ labyrinth. The maze was built to test men’s ability to conquer their fears in the darkness. They would tell the initiate there was a monster ready to feast on his bones if he couldn’t find a way out quickly. There was supposed to be a golden thread which would lead the way out, but it was actually a metaphor for their own spirit within. I assume this was for me to accept what was to happen and also the events which I was destined to start in motion, such as the explosion which brought about the meeting with Johnny. Without the events, I would not have found you. Such is destiny, I am glad we met, Kyra Wells.”

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The nine days passed quickly as Arret gave Kyra the best of his knowledge. He had become close with her parents and they asked him to stay. The city had quickly made a generous settlement to keep from being sued. Chief Travers resigned in disgrace and it seemed like everyone was suing Leona. AnLuan and Mrs. Bertram became friends and moved in together. Vincent was placed to rest on his knoll under a chestnut sapling. The police continued to look unsuccessfully for Johnny Wacker and Vincent Doyle, both had outstanding warrants which would never be filled. There was also a warrant for Arret, aka, Brother Ziu.

Arret and Kyra entered the Womb of The World. She had said her farewells to everyone else. He ran his hand over the slab one last time while she stood at the entrance watching him. When he made his way back to her, she pulled him close, “I’ve a few surprises left. Hold out your hands.” He complied without saying a word. She reached behind her back and brought out the elementals and gave them to him. Her eyes sparkled as she said, “Here, they’re used to you, truth is, I picked some new symbols which are more to my fashion sense. You know a woman must have her jewelry. The new cycle calls for many changes and what better place to start than with my elemental symbols. I have learned you will have a great need for them once I am gone. They’ll answer to you as before, just as long as I am sleeping in the Womb.” He placed them in their familiar places and thanked her with a kiss. She held him for a long moment then spoke while looking over his shoulder, “I’m gonna miss you but I won’t be alone, Fidelma’s wish is still working. I am pregnant and your line won’t end here. I am told it is twins, a boy and a girl. How’s that for balance? I imagine they won’t be born for some time. Hopefully they’ll grow in a new cycle and not during the violent years of change. Gaia still has work for you; someone must pave the way for the changes to come. You are to be the harbinger of the new cycle, one who spreads the message of balance and respect for the land.”
The crystals in the chamber flickered and dimmed. Her voice wavered, “The Womb grows impatient. You know how this works better than I.” He nodded and kissed her one last time, then walked out of the chamber. His steps were slow but steady as he fought the urge to look back. He listened to the tunnel closing behind him with each step he took.

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Arret sat alone on the knoll where Vinny lay buried. It seemed right to save his parting until the last. Leaving AnLuan was rough but the police were intensifying their search for him. He took comfort in knowing she was with someone who could be there for her and he promised to return when circumstances allowed.

Taking a deep breath, he thought about the troubled world. His task was to teach anyone who would listen. Well, he knew some stories and even in these times, there would still be campfires burning where a stranger would be welcome. He affectionately touched the trunk of Vinny’s tree as a memory came to him of Fidelma’s spirit’s parting words, “...for time nor fate be your ally”. Arret nodded as he recognized another warning he had not heeded. There was nothing left to do so he slowly made his way down the slope. A paved road stretched off into the distance. He felt a slight vibration coming from Oak and ran his thumb over the small crystal inlaid at the center. Kyra had told him this was a gift Earth had given her after the ritual in the garden and she set into the staff the night before while he slept. Whatever it was for, would or could not be revealed to him but he knew if nothing else, it would be a constant reminder of her wherever he went. It was Oak which turned him from the road, the staff always knew best. He altered his course before reaching the pavement and walked off through the woods where his feet could feel the soil beneath. As he entered the tree line, he addressed Oak, “This time we are the ones left behind, old friend. I must be ever vigilant, for age and injury will be a concern without the Womb for protection and restoration. Well, no matter, destiny will be what it is. Find us a friendly campfire where there are ears eager for a tale.”