



The Warlock

Scott Morgan

BOOK ONE OF
THE NEXUS SERIES

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Dedication

For...

Vicky – wife, muse and the eternal flame
that warms my heart; couldn't have done it
without you

Peter – friend (definitely) and musician
(sort of)

And Benjamin – the original Everleaf; it'll
take a lifetime to fill your shoes

Chapter One

THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 7:00AM
(12/02/99 12:00PM GMT)

Dawn touched Revere Chandler like a splash of chilly water down the spine, and he awoke with a shiver that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

Pearly gray light streamed in through his bedroom window and cast his room in a tepid hue. There was his drafting table, the unfulfilled legacy of Dad's desire that his son should grow up to be an architect, and his shelves of dog-eared paperbacks with his high school fencing trophies on top. His fencing gear and his free weights were stacked neatly in the corner by the closet. Dad had even left his posters up; Brandon Lee and Trent Reznor glowered down at him from their accustomed places on the inwardly sloping loft wall above, along with a number of stolen street signs that he'd

nailed to the plaster.

Everything was just as it had been when he left home nearly two years ago, save for the full duffel bag he'd brought from college on the floor where he'd dropped it last night. He hadn't taken much notice of anything when he'd gotten in, pausing just long enough to get his sneakers off before he fumbled the bedside light off and passed out.

The faint patter of rain tapping the roof above played a quiet counterpoint to the muddle of his thoughts as he climbed out of bed and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. He felt numb and listless and alone.

The neighborhood was still sleepy and sluggish in the cold, gray December light outside his bedroom window. The faint reflection of a face that would have been attractive with a less grim expression gazed back at him, gray eyes matching the gray morning, dark hair askew with sleep. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually woken with the dawn. He'd seen it before, of course, but only when he'd stayed up all night drinking, or studying...or making love.

Veronica was gone.

That hadn't really been true for him until this moment. She'd said goodbye the night before, at the front door of their apartment—*her* apartment. He'd come to think of it as their apartment; he'd lived there ever since he and Dad had the big fight and he'd stormed out, two years ago.

But now as he stood and watched the rain fall outside the window of his old room, it was real.

Veronica was supposed to have come home with him. Dad had called two weeks before, breaking the silence of two years, to invite Rev and Veronica home to spend a weekend with himself and Summer, Rev's mother, and Faun, Rev's little sister.

What was so important about this weekend in particular,

Dad hadn't said. It was just past Thanksgiving, after all, and only a few weeks away from Christmas. Neither Rev nor Veronica had any classes Thursday or Friday that week, so it was do-able.

Rev wondered if Dad's invitation had something to do with Veronica's decision. He'd left home in the first place because Dad had referred to her as a "harlot"—Dad used some pretty weird language once he'd become a priest. Since then, Veronica had shown no interest in meeting his family.

He heard the shower start down the hall and a faint smile ghosted across his lips. Faun had made it into the shower before him, as usual. It was the cause of a lot of the fights they'd had when he was still living at home. No matter when he got up, she was a minute earlier. Dad once commented that it was probably something in their genes.

Resigned to waiting, Rev began his morning exercise with pushups, a routine he'd kept up through high school to stay fit for his ballet and fencing classes. It gave him an outlet whenever he felt stressed or depressed, which seemed to happen a lot since his parents' breakup in '87. Dad had sent him to a few counselors, but it didn't help and besides, they didn't have the money for therapy.

He flipped over on the carpet, beginning his leg lifts. Veronica's reasons for the breakup had to run deeper than just not wanting to meet Dad; surely it was more than that. He grunted as he felt his muscles heat up with the exertion.

Things had been strained between himself and Veronica ever since he'd enrolled at Bradford College in September. Veronica attended the same school, and that meant they now had the same peers. *Kind of*. Juniors didn't hang out much with freshmen, at least not first-semester freshmen, like Rev, and he had gotten the sense that some of Veronica's friends thought him a "townie."

Hostility between students at Bradford College and the town kids in Haverhill first arose when Bradford got absorbed by its larger neighbor and ceased to exist as a town. Growing up in Haverhill, before he ever met Veronica, Rev had heard all about the bad blood. Dad had told him stories of his own days as a teenager, back when Bradford was a two year women's college, how his friends hassled the students and threw rocks at their cars.

He wiped sweat from his face, dragged a pair of dumbbells from the corner and began his curls.

Veronica's dad had co-signed the student loan that paid Rev's tuition, since Rev was not about to ask his own father for help. Rev covered other costs by pumping gas at the Citgo station downtown. He'd filled up the gas tanks of several of Veronica's senior and junior friends, pretending not to hear the whispers and giggles as they drove away in their shiny, high school graduation presents.

The shower was still running when he finished his workout, so he changed into his sweats and headed downstairs.



Faun lingered at the mirror listening to her brother tramp down the stairs off the hallway. Wrapped in a faded purple towel, she wiped steam from the mirror and studied her reflection. Seconds later, she sighed. Another day, and still she had no more cleavage than when she was eight years old. Even the package of tampons she'd bought two years ago remained unopened, as if she weren't nearly fifteen years old! All the other girls in her class had breasts.

Life could really suck sometimes.

Veronica had breasts, that was for sure. Faun had met her once, when she'd gone to visit her brother at his girlfriend's

apartment. By the time Rev got home from his job at the gas station, Faun had waited in the lobby at least half an hour, watching people come and go. She'd knitted him a pair of orange mittens from heavy yarn—her friend Tracy had shown her how, and she'd thought it might break the ice a little.

But when Rev let her into the apartment, the conversation died. Not too long before, they had been each other's best friend—*only* friend. Their talks used to go on late into the nights, about school, art, dance, Japanese cartoons, rock groups, anything. Faun hadn't related to other kids when she was little. Maybe it was the messed up family life, or maybe it was her weird dreams—those strange, recurring ones where she was a “princess of fairies” or some such thing—but either way it had seemed natural that Rev was her only friend, and she was his.

But as they sat together on Veronica's beat-up beige futon, in the apartment that smelled of incense and Fendi, it seemed there was nothing to say. She could tell Rev thought the mittens were stupid.

Then Veronica came home from her job at the library.

The girl was everything Faun wasn't—tall and sexy, with a full rack. While she would probably never have a boyfriend in school, Veronica'd probably had several, and not the kind with zits, either.

Rev's girlfriend had been the embodiment of grace and hospitality, fixing a plate of spiced lemon tea cookies and a pot of chamomile, chattering about her experiences as this library assistant and college dance student extraordinaire, making it all sound so much more *interesting* than the small, boring thing Faun called a “life.”

Faun had left feeling clueless and gawky. After that, she saw Rev now and then at the gas station, but he just didn't

seem interested in talking. They'd used to go *everywhere* together, riding their bikes around the neighborhood, walking on the Audubon trails, taking the commuter rail into Harvard Square on the weekends...

After a while she gave up trying to re-establish their connection, and resigned herself to making new friends at school.

That had sucked eggs. Totally. After being the school recluse all the way through elementary, it had been really hard to make friends her first year at Whittier Middle School. Boys and girls were starting to notice each other that year, which put even more pressure on things.

But then, her big brother wasn't the first one who'd ever walked out on her. Summer started that family tradition back in '87 when she divorced Dad and moved to Philadelphia. Faun was less than two years old at the time.

Her earliest memory of her mother was of being led into an airport terminal between Dad and Rev, holding Rev's hand, wondering who was this woman waiting for them at the gate, and why was Dad letting her take them both away, while he just stood there with a sad expression on his face.

The woman called Summer had been pretty, kind, and soft-spoken. Faun had felt an instinctive pull to be near her, in spite of her initial shyness and confusion. She and Rev had spent a week with Summer, in her plush Philadelphia condo with its hand-rubbed Shaker furniture, Persian rugs and gauzy drapes, its ambiance of scented candles and lemon Pledge, all of which could not be more unlike the battered, comfortable domicile Faun shared with her father and brother up in Haverhill.

Summer had played with her, and seemed fascinated with her prattle about school, teachers, friends, what games she liked to play, what she liked to eat, what bedtime stories she loved most. Something in their time together *had* been absent

from Faun's times with her father and brother. Summer understood what it meant to be a little girl. Summer understood about dolls and tea parties, hopscotch and mud pies, the things Faun never got to enjoy at home through sharing.

Faun loved her father and brother, but by the end of her first day with Summer, she was absolutely smitten with her mother and wanted nothing more out of life than to grow up to be just like Summer. The odyssey continued throughout the week, with Faun following her newfound mother from room to room like a puppy, chattering away, peppering her with questions. For his part, Rev kept to himself as much as Summer would let him, sullenly playing with his GI Joe figures. Faun paid no mind, unwilling to let anything detract from her time with Summer.

In what seemed like no time at all, that blissful week came to an end. It was back to the airport where Dad waited to take her and Rev home to Massachusetts. Away from Summer. She cried and said some pretty mean things at the airport to both of her parents. Until then, she'd had no idea how much she'd wanted two parents—living together, a normal family. Rev had just waited in silence, looking away. She was to realize later that he'd done this before.

There were more visitations over the years, but never quite the same for Faun, who knew the time would come to an end and she'd be on a plane again, heading home. Visitations lessened in frequency, too, as Summer's new job demanded more and more of her time...that and her boyfriend, David. Dad did his best to keep it from them, but Faun and Rev caught on fast that their mother was dating the owner of the company she worked for, also her high school sweetheart, as it happened.

So Dad decided to talk to them about Why Things Were the Way They Were. Faun didn't remember much of it. She

didn't really care. By that time, she knew her family wasn't like other kids' families. She had a father who was a Catholic priest, an absentee yuppie career slave for a mother, and both were workaholics who put their jobs before their kids. In her mind, that was all she needed to know.

Now Rev was home, with his girlfriend Veronica, and Summer would fly up the day after tomorrow. It all felt seriously weird.



Revere,

Welcome home. I'm sorry I had to leave before you got up, but I have to be at the Church early to get things set up for the Christmas pageant rehearsals, and didn't want to wake you.

Faun has been waiting to see you and Veronica, and I hope you two will spend some time with her. If you are up early enough you may see her before she leaves for school, otherwise she gets home

around 3 PM.

Summer's flight is number 8155 and it gets in Saturday morning at 10:33 AM. I have to be at the church for Mass, so if you aren't too busy, I was hoping you could pick her up at the airport and help her get settled.

I'll see you tonight when I get home. Say 'hi' to Veronica for me, I look forward to meeting her.

Dad

Rev put the note back where he'd found it propped against the Japanese flower vase on the kitchen table. He saw the cracks in the vase where Dad had glued it back together, that time when he and Faun had played stickball in the house and he'd knocked over with a stray shot. Dad had been pretty mad, that time.

Just about every object here had memories for him. There were the pencil marks Dad had put on the wall of the mud room, showing the progressing heights of himself and Faun, beginning very low on the wall and rising ever higher as the years passed. The last marks were from a few months before he had left home, when he was sixteen and Faun was twelve. It didn't look as though Dad had kept up with Faun's height after that. He smiled as he noted that his little sister's last

mark on the wall was only just higher than his seven-year mark. She had always been a short kid, although she preferred the word “petite.” He wondered, as he walked on to the living room, if she had grown much in two years.

There was Great Grandfather Ezekiah’s Civil War saber, hanging on the wall over the old green couch. All over the house were little nicks and dents from the days when Rev had sneaked the weapon down off the wall and played “Zorro” as a kid. Anytime an old Errol Flynn movie came on TV he’d been there, the saber across his lap, rapt as Flynn slashed and lunged his way through thin-mustached bad guys and their evil flunkies.

Smiling faintly, he lifted it from the pegs that held it in place. The blade rasped as he slid it from its sheath, and he raised it in front of his face in a salute to an imaginary opponent.

It had been a surprise when Veronica handed him the phone and told him it was his dad. After more than two years of silence, Dad had called to invite Rev and Veronica to a family weekend get-together. Rev had been reluctant, but Veronica urged him to accept, and he came to agree that it was time to let go of old resentments. He was ready to go when he noticed Veronica hadn’t packed. Insofar as his suddenly befuddled mind could function, he realized the underlying reason for her wish to see him accept his father’s invitation—it gave her an opportunity to say goodbye.

Goodbye as in *for good*.

Dropping into a guard stance, he parried high, feinted low, beat high and then lunged, the point jabbing the air above the coffee table, blade hardly quivering. Although he hadn’t done any fencing since high school, he felt he was still in pretty good shape.

He wondered if he should call her.

What would he say?

It dawned on him that he had no better clue how to get a girl back than how to get one in the first place. Veronica was his first, and that relationship had started more by accident than design.

Rev began his Tuesday night ballet lessons at the Ann Pine studio downtown upon entering Haverhill High. Dad had been pushing for track or football, so ballet was the farthest thing from what Dad wanted that he could think of. As a result, he had to pay for it himself with what he made at the Citgo station. He was already taking varsity fencing in the school gym Thursday nights, so it made his schedule kind of crazy, but he found himself enjoying ballet, somewhat to his own surprise. It usually left him sore and aching, yet Rev found that ballet gave him an outlet for his feelings, a way of expressing himself without words. Warmed up, in motion on the black marley matting, he felt a rare sense of peace and could lose himself in the complex leaps and spins.

One day during Rev's sophomore year, the teacher called in sick. Normally, they would have cancelled class till next week, but recitals were coming up, so a substitute teacher showed up that night. A tall, slender nineteen-year-old with long dark hair and eyes the color of ocean in winter, college sophomore Veronica Smith was a former student of the Pine studio, helping out as a favor and because she needed the money.

Distracted by the beautiful coed, Rev could do nothing right. As a result, Veronica ended up giving him the better part of her time, which of course only made him screw up his steps even worse. But at least it had her attention. That was the main thing. And it gave him an excuse to approach her for private tutoring. That was how it all started.

He fainted low with the saber, and advanced twice in

rapid succession. Now that she was gone, he didn't know what to do. If he'd been one of the constantly-grinning, self-assured seniors in their polo shirts and knife-pleat khakis that always seemed to be buzzing around Veronica, he'd have known what to say, he was coldly certain of it.

Those guys always knew what to say. Rev whipped the blade around in a slash that decapitated his imaginary enemy and spun him to face the next—and noticed Faun watching him from across the coffee table.



Faun couldn't believe her brother was actually playing around with that stupid sword. It was somewhat gratifying to see his face color as he lowered the weapon. He was almost as tall as Dad now, and she could see that he'd filled out across the chest and shoulders. His face had lost the last of its baby fat, leaving his jaw line and cheekbones more pronounced. The dark stubble on his chin and upper lip hadn't been there before. The eyes were the same though, clear and gray and bemused, returning her gaze from beneath a ragged shock of dark-brown bangs.

Coming down the stairs, listening to Rev moving around in the living room, Faun had been spilling over with things to say, all the things that hadn't got said since her brother had left home—had left *her*. She'd wanted to let it all out, tell him what a jerk he was, what a total loser he was, how she hated his guts. She'd wanted to hit him. She'd also wanted to tell him how much she'd missed him, give him a hug and pretend he hadn't been gone for the last two years.

But there he was now, standing across the living room from her, sheathing his dumb sword, looking embarrassed. And the words seemed to stick in her throat.



The girl that stood across the coffee table from Rev was his sister, and she *wasn't*. She hadn't changed much physically—Faun was about the same height as she'd been two years ago, and her figure was still slim and boyish in corduroy flare pants and a ribbed turtleneck. She had her dark hair pulled back in a scrunchy, exposing a face that was heart-shaped, with fine features, wide gray eyes and a small mouth that showed a faint tightness about the corners.

It was the eyes that were different. There was a distance to them now, a sense of reservation that had been absent from the unguarded expression of the sister he remembered.

"Hi," Rev said, replacing the saber on its pegs up on the wall.

"Where's Veronica?" Faun asked, expression unchanged.

"She..." Rev began, caught off guard. "She's not here."

Faun put a hand on her hip and cocked her head to one side. "Duh, I asked where she *is*."

Rev pushed past the coffee table, into the kitchen. Faun followed him. "She's not coming," he said.

"She's *not*? What is that all about?"

"You want some breakfast? I was going to make some."

"What, you ashamed to have your preppie girlfriend meet your townie family? Is Veronica too good for us? You'll spend the weekend then go on back and pretend we don't exist again? Is that it?"

Rev turned, hot with anger, but words died on his lips at the look on Faun's face. He could see she was mad, but pain was there too, obvious in the moistness around her eyes. "She dumped me," he explained.

Faun's eyes widened. She looked away, raising a small hand to nibble absently at an already harried-looking finger-

nail. Reaching up to open the cupboard, she asked, "You want Frosted Flakes? I'm having a bowl. You still like extra sugar on yours?"

"Sure."

"I guess I should say 'Sorry.'"

Rev heated up the stove and rummaged among the pots and pans. "You still like your eggs over easy?"

"Yeah. Make sure the white is solid, please."

"I know." He set a frying pan on the burner. For some reason it pleased him to remember exactly how his little sister liked her eggs.

**THOR'S DAY 12/02/99 ISUBOTO 8:30PM
(12/02/99 12:30PM GMT)**

The night sky arched above the sleeping city of Isuboto, vast and serene. Without a single cloud to blemish its dark majesty, the stars washed the structures below in dim, ethereal light.

Down by the wharves, the sails of the fishing junks gleamed, and the waters of the bay sparkled furtively. The warehouses, the pleasure houses, the money houses, the port offices, the inns, the bath houses, the shops, the rooming houses and all the rest of the jumbled oddments that made up the city proper, shone in that pale white light that spilled from the stars and made all colors as one.

All was quiet in the streets of Isuboto, save for the infrequent wanderings of the sleepy night-watch with their pole lanterns, their breath visible in the cold air. High above it all, the palace of the Iisashis watched over the sleeping city as it had for the last sixty-three years since its construction. Higher still loomed the imposing peak of Mount Tetsute, out beyond the city walls on the inland side, its ice caps extending near to

halfway down its sheer slopes, pregnant with winter snow. The palace seemed to regard the mount's superior height with studied indifference at most.

Cross-legged within his meticulously prepared pentagram, his eye never far from the lens of the long brass looking glass, old Amhur's thoughts were on the stars, and had been all night. He sat in a palace apartment overlooking the bay. Incense sticks burned sweetly at each corner of the inscription. Nearby, a rice paper lamp provided such illumination as there was to be had, aside from that which streamed in through the open window with the cold December air. But Amhur's pentagram warded most effectively against the gusty chill.

He watched the shapes among the stars, as he had every night since his initiation into the circle of the magi some five decades past. Just as the magi of the Khitur had done for centuries beyond reckoning. The magi watched the stars with a singularity of purpose, for while calendars changed from culture to culture and ruler to ruler, the events of prophecy followed their own immutable schedule, marked by events rather than days or months. Terrestrial events could not always be observed; prolific as the Khitur were, still they were too few to spread across the Aerth such that a Khitur eye would be watching every place at every time, but the changes in the astrological alignments and configurations could be observed from anywhere, if one knew what to look for.

The magi of the Khitur knew what to look for. The first of their circle had been schooled in the arts of magik by the Nightbringer himself—many, many moons past, long before the Khitur had begun to follow the Imperial calendar that the pale ones lived by far to the west. The god of the dead had made sure to school his disciple well in the arts of astrology and divine prophecy along with the more general arts of

magik. This was the story handed down through the years.

Tonight the Moon was in the house of Kang, the Year Star was in the house of Kui, and the First Emperor was in the house of Luo. It was the year of the Hare and the hour of the Dog, by the water clock.

The time was right, and all of the celestial bodies were in the correct alignment.

Surely this was to be the night. Amhur had never seen the stars as bright as they were tonight. And he had seen many, many nights. Even so, he wasn't sure he would have had the stamina to remain focused on the sky for so long if not for the revitalizing incantations worked into the pentagram, feeding him their energy through the medium of the lazily coiling incense fumes. He sat cross-legged on a tatami mat at the center of his pentagram, painstakingly inscribed upon the hardwood floor. Without a doubt the pains in his old legs would be bothering him by now, were it not for those sustaining energies.

Far to the west, beyond the broad, ice-capped shoulders of Tetsute, in the endless grasslands above Ching, he had been a younger man, before the coming of the Genkokujin from across the endless waters. In those days when he had lived among his people, he had been young and strong and hard, in no need of a pentagram to help him keep his nightly astrological vigils. Only the magi would walk with respect among the Khitur; all other men were proud horse warriors, and spent most of their days riding.

He had been young when the Genkokujin came in their boats to colonize the unnamed shores here. Not many years after, the baby who would grow to become general Nobunaga Iisashi had been placed in the care of his people, and the Nightbringer spoke to the circle for the first time in generations beyond counting. Now Amhur served the general as

high priest of the Sect of Truths and as his chief court astrologer in the city Iisashi had claimed for his own. How many footsteps separated him from the beloved grasslands he had left behind...?

He started, put his eye to the lens more closely. Something had moved. High, high up in the cold ether above the Aerth, he had caught a glimpse of movement. Damn these old eyes—damn the wandering mind of an old man...had he missed it?

There it was again...a bright streak...moving...one of the stars was moving! A star was falling from the heavens!

Eyes alight with a religious fervor, old Amhur triumphantly seized the small mallet and struck the nearby brass gong, hammering it incessantly.

It was coming.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 7:30AM
(12/02/99 12:30PM GMT)**

Father John Chandler waved to the last of the parishioners as they pulled out of the parking lot of St James Parish.

The weekday morning Mass never drew many parishioners, and those who did attend were all retirees, most of them quiet and reclusive sorts like Anne Bidden, the lady who muttered to herself and whose annual wardrobe consisted invariably of a muumuu and beige orthopedic shoes, or Nelson Pitt, the hermit with the bad leg who was seen outside of his shack in the hills only en route to church.

John let himself back into the nave, absently drawing the big doors shut behind him. Past the rows of oak pews, on the raised sanctuary, a dozen children fussed and giggled as the three bleary-eyed volunteer mothers got them stuffed into costumes of shepherds, farm animals, angels and kings, while

the high school choir practiced “Silent Night” in the adjoining eastern wing.

They were beginning the daily Christmas pageant rehearsals, and John was pleased to have people in the church on an otherwise slow day. He waved to the choir and stopped by the sanctuary to say hello and to assure Mrs. Zelliger that Timmy would indeed be free by noon for his best friend Andy McCarthy’s birthday party.

Having seen to that important matter he continued through the door into the northern wing. With the door shut behind him, he dropped the smile he had been forcing, and leaned heavily against the wall, one hand scratching at the faint stubble on his chin.

His son Revere was home. After two years of silence and estrangement, his son was home again. With his girlfriend, that woman, Veronica.

He hadn’t expected Revere to except his offer. The boy was stubborn as a mule and always had been. Yet, he had agreed to come home. John more than half-suspected Veronica had talked him into it.

Revere was a man now, he had to remember that. He was on his own, going to college. Sooner or later Revere and Veronica would tie the knot, have kids, and make all the same mistakes John and Summer had made.

That wasn’t fair, he knew.

Summer was coming home tomorrow.

John took a slow breath and let himself into the church’s small kitchen, or “galley” as Father Bill McLane called it. The old man was at the table with a mug of coffee and the morning paper, his large red nose buried in the obituaries section like it was every morning. The two grunted at each other as John fixed himself a mug.

Father McLane was a small, wiry man with more frosty

white hair in his ears and eyebrows than could be found on his head. He had served as a navy chaplain aboard the USS Holland throughout World War II, and had in John's opinion a somewhat morbid obsession with the attrition rate of his fellow servicemen. He seemed to recall by name every man that had served with him aboard the submarine supply ship, from the lowest deck swab to the captain himself. As the years wore on, the names appeared with a greater frequency as mortality took its toll—men he had been with through the good times and the bad, kept tabs on after the war, even officiating at many of their marriages.

Any day the old man did not see a familiar name was a good day. Otherwise, he descended into a black mood, with nothing pleasant to say about anything.

Of all the names, there was one that Father McLane most dreaded seeing—that of his “little” brother Bill, comatose after an accidental munitions explosion aboard the Holland, a condition that persisted to this day. He lay in Hale Hospital, and Father McLane visited him every now and then. The old priest didn't say much about his feelings regarding Billy, but returning once to the Parish with the smell of whiskey on his breath, did let slip that he'd promised their ma he would look after his younger brother.

For a long time McLane had used alcohol to stay numb. Even in such a depressed and alcoholic locale as Haverhill, he'd been something of an embarrassment, but since taking John under his wing as a junior priest, he was off the “juice” and seemed to be doing better. By contrast, his addiction to reading the obituaries was a small enough thing.

“Your ex-wife is comin' home tomorrow, eh?”

John glanced up from the coffeemaker. “Yes.” It was no secret how the old man felt about *that*. John finished stirring cream into his coffee and sat down heavily across from him

at the table. "You going to share any of that paper?"

The older priest lowered the newspaper enough to fix him with a steady look. "You're walking close to sin, boy." He separated the local section and pushed the rest across the table. "I didn't recommend you for this parish so you could louse it up. Priests don't have carnal relations. Priests do not know women. But you're invitin' your ex back."

After being divorced from Summer for twelve years, John had called a couple weeks ago, asking her to come up for a reunion with the kids. He remembered the disbelief in her voice, the way his request had been followed instantly by a half-stifled sob and the word *yes*.

"She's just coming up for a visit. I know what I'm doing, Father," John muttered, scanning the front page listlessly.

"Do you? I wonder. Strange enough, a priest with kids and an ex-wife. If you recall, they almost didn't let you into seminary because of it. Now you're invitin' the woman back. Visit or whatever you're going to call it, it's bad form, John."

John rattled the paper in a futile effort to drown out the other's voice.

"Even if this is some harmless family event, the news media are focusing on priests gone bad these days. Never mind the ninety-nine out of a hundred still doing God's work in this world gone rotten with sin. Mark me, boy, the media will come knocking on your door, makin' you out as another priest gone bad. They won't care if you know what you're doing, or that you say you're doing nothing wrong. They'll flog you and disgrace you. Where will we be then, eh?" Wheezing the last four words, Father McLane coughed wetly into his crusty handkerchief, spilling coffee on his paper.

John looked up from his section of the paper. He thought about going over to hover with concern, but knew he would only be impatiently shooed away. Father McLane was

eighty-seven and should rightly be retired, comfortably cared for somewhere, but the old priest wouldn't hear of it. Service to the Church was his life. As long as he drew breath, no amount of urging could dislodge him as a fixture at St. James.

Before the other could resume his lecture, John said, "Father, what do you know of Armageddon?"

Leaning forward with his mouth half opened, another rebuke hanging on his lips, Father McLane paused, nonplused. With a shaky sigh he sat back. "Been on your mind, has it? It's a natural thing to be thinkin' about. The good saints know it's been discussed plenty, we being so close to year two-thousand. What do you want to know?"

Relieved at having changed the subject, John shrugged. "Do you believe in it?"

"I'm surprised we haven't talked about this before. We haven't, have we? No, I don't suppose we have. Well, what did they teach you in St. John's Seminary?"

John had enrolled back in '87, six months after the divorce. "Armageddon is a great war between the forces of Christ and the forces of Satan, and one of the events that are supposed to mark the end of the world and the second coming of Christ."

McLane nodded. "Armageddon, the Millennium and the Tribulation. Those are the milestones that announce the Rapture. The Millennium is a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The Tribulation is a seven-year reign of Satan on earth. According to Mathew, Revelation and Thessalonians, both have their time here before Christ brings the souls of the faithful up to Heaven—also known as the Rapture. Exactly when these events will occur and in what order, now, that is an argument that has gone on for as long as the Church has been in business. Do you remember the Church's position?"

“The Church holds to the theory of Amillennialism,” John said. “That the Millennium is going on right now, but that it means a balance of good and evil rather than a time of peace and bliss, and that it will continue for as long as the Church lives, according to St. Augustine in the 4th century.”

“Very good.”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“What do you believe about Armageddon? Is the Church is right?”

Father McLane sighed. “Officially, the Church is always right.”

“I asked what *you* believe.”

After a pause, McLane quoted: “*Verily I say unto you, that there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.*”

John said, “Those were the words of Jesus, Mark 9:1.”

“Yes. He was speaking to his followers. It could mean only one of three things, as I see it: One, that he was right, but that what he didn’t mention was that the actual date of Armageddon was at least two thousand years away and for some perverse reason intended for them to live that long so as to be there in the flesh to bear witness when it happened. Two, that he *thought* it would happen in the next few decades, but that being partly mortal, he had misinterpreted the will of his father, or three, that he correctly interpreted the will of the Almighty, but that the Almighty changed His mind shortly thereafter.”

John’s eyebrows rose. If he hadn’t already considered this himself, the elderly priest’s speculations would have stunned him speechless. Technically, McLane’s words were heresy. As it happened, John had done a lot of thinking on the subject of Armageddon, giving deep consideration to many

theories that were heretical.

Father McLane looked upwards, spreading his liver-spotted hands on the table top. “Which forces a body to consider three difficult possibilities. Did Jesus curse his followers to live on earth for two thousand years, denied entrance to Heaven? Did he make a mistake? Or could there be some part of the Lord’s will that remains yet hidden from man, a third Testament?” His gaze drifted down to John. “The first possibility is not only unthinkable, it makes no sense. The second is un-knowable. The third, if true, must then be by design. Since no messenger has come since Jesus, it therefore isn’t *meant* to be known, at least not yet.”

“In other words, the Bible can’t tell us when or how Armageddon will happen,” John finished.

The older man took a long sip of coffee, cleared his throat, and said, “That’s about it.”

John nodded slowly. It was the answer he had been afraid of.

“This stays between the two of us. I don’t need the Bishop hearing about it,” McLane said, gaze hard. “Understand?”

John understood.



There was nothing good on TV in the morning; just talk shows, game shows, and cooking shows. Rev clicked the “off” button on the remote. He’d seen Faun off to school, helped her get things together in time to rush out the door and onto the waiting bus. There hadn’t been much time to hang out, but it felt good to spend the rushed morning with his kid sister. He hadn’t realized how much he missed her. Things had moved so quickly once he started up with Veron-

ica.

His eye wandered to the phone on the kitchen wall.

Too soon.

He called up her image in his mind. With her white, even teeth flashing, she laughed silently in his memory, her long dark hair flowing over one shoulder in a luxuriant wave, her dark, dark green eyes drawing him in, inviting him to explore their depths. He remembered the precise weight of her hand on his knee when they'd sit together on the futon, chatting with her friends, drinking and smoking pot.

There had been a lot of good times.

He still couldn't believe it was over. He looked again at the phone, and angrily made himself look away.

Rising from the sofa, he started up the stairs.

A shower would be good.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 10:00AM
(12/02/99 3:00PM GMT)**

John watched the Christmas pageant rehearsals from the first pew, next to Father McLane and Millie Hess, the retired high school drama teacher. Millie was explaining to the old priest in great detail how the Christmas pageant of '82 had been so much more *vibrant* and *creative* than was the present one, and what a shame it was that the likes of the McCleary boys weren't to be found among the elementary school student body since those two talented *darlings* moved to Ohio with their family in '84. Such fine actors they had been—school plays just hadn't been the same since. Father McLane nodded distantly, looking as though he would have been happier to be just about anywhere else.

Mrs. Hess made a point of sitting in on just about every pageant rehearsal, every year. She attended rehearsals not so

much for the purpose of actually volunteering but rather to provide a running critique of the activities to anyone who would listen, and afterward assuring her fellow parishioners that she'd "gotten the church through another pageant."

This year's pageant seemed to be coming along pretty well, in John's opinion. It was just the traditional Nativity and Epiphany stuff, with a bunch of kids from the Greenleaf and Bradford elementary schools, and the usual loaner baby Jesus due to be provided on the day of performance by one of the town's new mothers—Jessica Holt and her infant son Michael this year, if he remembered right.

Normally John stoically endured Millie Hess' presence as he provided the obligatory oversight of the events, occasionally stepping in to take over when volunteer mothers had to step out for an hour or so, setting up props, replacing lost scripts and all of the other miscellaneous duties that he tended to as the presiding priest.

This year however he had cause to be grateful for Millie; for so long as she sat with them, Father McLane perforce had to suspend the tongue lashing he had been giving to John for just about every hour of every day over the last two weeks since John had told him about his invitation to his ex-wife, Summer. The news had not been any better received than John had expected, but he'd needed to talk to *someone*.

Father McLane was a pretty good listener, and John knew he was lucky to have him as a mentor. He'd known the old man his entire life, growing up amongst the dilapidated brick hulks of shoe factories and boarded up storefronts that so predominantly characterized the town of Haverhill. John's dad had dragged him to Mass every Sunday along with all the other townsfolk who wanted—*needed*—to feel like a part of something better.

John had consequently heard Father McLane's sermons

all through his childhood, but hadn't much liked being in church, not back then. The old man was a good priest, good enough anyway, always ready to do what he could for those in need, even when he was almost too drunk to hold himself upright at the pulpit.

It wouldn't be until John met Father Aurelius Cantor that he would come to feel a need to be closer to God.



Rev let his eyes wander from the TV over to the phone. Again. He had been watching TV all day, sitting through talk shows, music videos, infomercials, and cartoons, pausing long enough to take a shower and fetch a bag of chips from the kitchen. Every time he got up to go to the phone, he ran out of nerve. He thought of going for a walk, but dismissed the idea, thinking Veronica might call while he was out. But she didn't call, and he couldn't make himself pick up the phone, and so he spent the hours watching whatever happened to be on, and wondering what his recently-ex-girlfriend might be doing.

She would be at the Haverhill library right now, checking in returned books, replacing them on the shelves. He could always get in the Camaro and drive over, just drop in on her. But what would he say? It was *her* idea, after all, to end things on such short notice. *She* should be the one to call *him*, and explain her reasons.

It was so fucking unfair.

What if he did show up, and found her laughing gaily in response to some ever-so-witty quip made by a handsome, flirtatious Bradford senior, a man on the verge of graduation and with a high paying job already lined up, just waiting to take her away from it all...

He clicked off the TV, dark thoughts roiling at the back of his mind.

Maybe I'll read something.

He headed upstairs. His father kept a rack of magazines by his desk in his bedroom; maybe there was something interesting in there.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 12:00PM
(12/02/99 5:00PM GMT)**

John watched Janey Green traipse around the stage dressed in a costume of black felt and wearing a cardboard, star-shaped hat covered in tinfoil. She was the star of the Epiphany, and she weaved around makeshift “hills”—piles of winter parkas and boots, for now, although they would be covered by sheets of green felt on the night of the performance. Following her around the piles, singing “Star of wonder, Star of night,” came Joey and David Albright, and Kevin Marshall, all wearing cotton beards and elaborate robes. They were the three magi. Janey was leading them westward toward the waiting manger in the next scene.

Millie Hess whispered, “Here it comes,” and Mrs. Zeligler turned to the high school choir waiting in the east wing. The choir took up the chorus of “Westward leading, still proceeding...” in remarkably good harmony. Millie squealed with barely restrained delight.

John glanced at Father McLane, but the aging priest appeared lost in thought, spared for the moment from Millie’s running commentary.

John’s own thoughts turned inward.

He had “met” Father Aurelius Cantor at his wedding to Summer, in 1980. “Introduced” might have been a better word—introduced by a strange wedding guest named Mord,

an old man who used no last name, who had shown up for the event uninvited.

Even more oddly, no one had seemed perturbed by the strange fellow's presence. At the reception, the old man had come up last and gripped his hand with surprising strength, looked at him with piercing blue eyes, and told John that his dreams of being a priest were *real*. It had shocked him speechless. He had watched the old man with the gray mutton chops and ponytail get up and leave in slack-jawed wonder, after quietly giving the name of a hotel where he was staying if John was interested in hearing more.

John had dreamed about the priesthood since as far back as he could remember. All of his life, he had dreamed of being someone else, in a place that was not *here*. Wherever it was, it was a place where Christianity was known and practiced, and his dream self was always powerfully drawn to it. He remembered dreams of yearning, of a great desire to take up the robe and the collar and serve the Church in this other place.

As John got older, so too did his dream self, until one day he dreamed of finally becoming a priest, and of thereupon coming to experience a great wonder and sense of purpose.

Although he had known there was something strange in all this, there had been no one to talk to about it. His family certainly couldn't afford a therapist. His mother died of a heart attack in '67, after which he'd had to support both himself and his disabled father.

So he had kept it to himself. His love for the Catholic Church existed only in dreams. He worked as a carpenter, provided for both his ailing father and a new bride, and tried not to worry too much about what his dreams might mean.

Mord changed all of that.

John learned of the man's name shortly after returning

from the honeymoon, when he drove out to the hotel and met the old man down in the lobby, where the other had been waiting as if he had known John would show up all along.

That was when he learned Mord's name, and that was also when Mord told him that the person John had dreamed of being was named Father Aurelius Cantor, and that Father Aurelius was real.

Not only had the old man called Mord shed some light on John's dreams, he put a name to them, told John that this other person existed in a "parallel reality," and told him how to contact Father Aurelius.

It had seemed so crazy. And yet, this Mord had somehow known of John's strange dreams.

One night John had decided to give it a try.



Rev flipped to the next page of the issue of Newsweek, and frowned.

The next two pages were missing.

He flipped back to the table of contents, and his frown deepened.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 3:00PM
(12/02/99 8:00PM GMT)**

Faun let herself into the mud room and dropped her heavy school bag on the floor amidst the clutter of shoes and boots that lay just inside the front door. As she wandered into the kitchen, she wondered if the house would be neater if Summer hadn't left. Getting a half-empty plastic bottle of Sprite from the fridge, she decided it definitely would have

been. *Bitch, bitch, bitch.*

Shutting the fridge and getting a glass down from the cupboard, she chided herself on being unfair. She was just mad about Tracy.

Her former best friend had totally ignored her at lunch, *again*, and so Faun had eaten lunch by herself.

Again.

Since Ricky Stavers had asked her to be his study partner, Faun had suddenly become too cool for the nerds, and too nerdy for the cool kids—and the part that really sucked, was that she hadn't *done* anything.

She sighed. "Rev?"

"Up here."

She picked up her school bag, threw it over her shoulder with a grunt, and trudged up the stairs.

There were a bunch of pre-cal problems she and Ricky hadn't been able to unravel. She sometimes felt she was more of a tutor to him than a partner, although that wasn't fair, and anyways Ricky was the most dream-i-licious and popular boy in Haverhill High.

She hoped Rev could help her with the stupid polynomial functions—what were they good for anyway?



The night John Chandler succeeded in contacting Father Aurelius Cantor in his dreams had been the beginning of the end for the life he'd led up to that point, and for his marriage to Summer. He'd since had occasion to wonder if talking to Mord had been a mistake.

But he had talked to Mord, and Mord had told him the meaning of his dreams, and he had contacted the priest named Aurelius Cantor who lived in the place called

“Aerth,” and John had felt the glory of the miracle through Aurelius, had become a priest himself so that he might feel it more directly, and nothing was ever the same again.

And now he was inviting his largely estranged family for one more visit before the world ended.

**THOR'S DAY 12/02/99 KINBAIRN MANOR 8:30PM
(12/02/99 8:30PM GMT)**

The guests milled pleasantly about in the groves and gardens of the manor grounds, and the soft murmur of elven voices floated musically to Harli's delicately pointed ears. She was sitting on the edge of a great, intricately carved marble fountain, idly trailing the fingers of one slim hand in the gently rippling water. The tiny rainbow-hued glints of wood faeries floated here and there. In warmer weather they would dance with the fireflies, but this late in the year they had to content themselves with each other. Just a few valleys away, the humans would be feeling the first onset of winter; but here, the magik of the spirits permeated the elements, keeping winters mild and summers balmy for the wood elves.

She was supposed to be mingling. She knew this evening party was being held for her. Mother intended to see her betrothed. Mother didn't care for Harli's willful ways, didn't approve of her sometimes less than dainty manners. This had been coming for a long time.

If only Father were still alive, she moped inwardly. It was a thought that occurred to her most often when she was troubled and felt alone. But he was some fifty-four years dead now. He had died defending the manor against the goblin savages; died fighting alongside the House Guard, their numbers too few to spare a single potential sword arm. Their numbers were too few because Father had alienated King

Aelach with his stubborn clinging to the old ways, and none of the other houses would come to his aid when the raiders struck.

It was her brother Culain, and Denaede Lianbradh, the Captain of the House Guard, who had finally managed to rally the last few defenders and somehow drive out the goblins. The two men had been childhood friends and they fought well together. At the time, their childhood was not far behind them. Harli was still a little girl when it happened.

Fifty-four years later she was barely a young adult, for wood elves age very slowly and can normally expect to see two or three centuries before the great sleep overtakes them...unless they take a goblin sword through the breastbone *sooner*.

Somehow the family had managed to rebuild, but they were alone. The one house that had remained loyal to Kinbairn, House Aldruin, had been overrun, destroyed down to the last maid and manservant, its territories lost now to the goblins.

Mother wanted to abandon the old ways and pledge House Kinbairn to the service of King Aelach. She invited his emissaries out to the manor to discuss the matter. But she hadn't consulted with Culain, who was now laird of the manor. When he found out, he grew incensed and sent the emissaries on their way with harsh words.

Unfortunately, he had inherited his temper from Mother, and the two had exchanged strong words. Little Harli had overheard some of it and "strong" was an understatement. In the end, Culain told Mother he wanted no part in such a House. He took Father's claymore and a few more things, and left that night on Father's warhorse. Mother of course refused to see him off. The House retainers and guards begged the young laird to stay, but he would have none of it.

He felt Mother had disgraced Father's memory and he would not stay another minute.

He'd given Harli a tearful goodbye kiss on the top of the head from his mount, then rode on into the night. In her heart of hearts she knew he had never really wanted to rule the House. So this was as much an excuse to escape his unwanted duties as a sense of outrage or injured pride.

It was the last time she'd seen her brother.

She wished he were here now.

After Culain's departure, Mother had come into her own as the House matriarch, and picked up where she had left off with King Aelach. But the king was offended by Culain's rudeness and wouldn't see her or send any more emissaries.

Mother hadn't given up. She had one last playing piece on the druage board. She had bided her time while Harli grew out of her girlhood. Harli remembered the way Mother had looked at her so measuringly, every morning as she helped her dress and groom, sniffing with disapproval at her spare curves and diminutive stature.

At least Mother seemed to approve of her deep blue eyes and silky auburn tresses; those would draw notice from potential suitors. She was a very pretty lass, if only she would fill out a bit.

Harli never had cared much for the attentions of suitors, and wasn't particularly interested in dresses or jewelry or knitting or hoops or any of the other silly things women were supposed to be obsessed over. She spent her time roaming the sunny meadows and wandering the dark woods, alone or with a few of the more adventurous servants' children. She liked to run and climb and watch, not sit and fuss and smile.

Mother had a will like iron though, and when Harli couldn't manage to escape the house, she had to endure the fine dresses with the voluminous lace and petticoats, the rings

and necklaces and tiaras. Burdened under all of that, she hadn't much choice but to sit and look demure. At least now, she only had on a spidersilk evening gown with just two petticoats underneath. It had a rich violet dye that shimmered faintly under the moonlight and set off her hair and her eyes to equal advantage. It might even be pleasant, if she could do without the petticoats.

But Mother would be scandalized. So she sat and looked pretty, away from the party where she hoped no one would...

"Such a fine evening sky, and yet the star that shines brightest sits here before me."

Harli looked away from the fountain's pool to see a young man striding into the grove, in richly sequined doublet and hose, an elaborate felt cap with an opal brooch and the plume of some exotic bird protruding at a jaunty angle. Dark, liquid eyes glinted from a face of finely chiseled planes and curves. An easy grin parted his subtly rouged lips. The faeries swarmed about the newcomer with interest.

"Flattered, I'm sure. Please do sit with me, won't you, Prince...?"

Folding his cape under him, the elf sat beside her, perhaps just a bit closer than she would have liked. It was hard to remember everyone's names. All of the lordlings at the party looked more or less the same to her. All fine clothes and baubles and words and smiles and not a lot more. The faeries buzzed around them in a scintillating cloud.

"I am, of course, Prince Aidan of House Gleanne. You know, your eyes really do shine like the stars..."

"Do they?"

"Yes..." Aidan's eyes were very close to hers now.

She felt the dry warmth of his hand brushing hers. Abruptly, she stood up, arms folded under her small breasts where her hands could not easily be brushed against. The

faeries had just about settled down when he showed up. Harli had just begun to enjoy the solitude. “Tell me about House Gleanne. We have so few dealings with the other houses, I fear I’m quite out of touch.”

“Ahem. Well. Of course we—”

“Walk with me.” Harli started along a path into the forest without waiting for him to agree.

But sure enough he was alongside her momentarily.

Bored, most of the faeries fluttered away in search of more interesting distractions. Harli had always found it a bit incredible that her people actually descended from these tiny creatures.

“Yes, well. I was saying that my father’s estate is the second-largest in the area...”

“*Second?*”

“Well, yes. The largest house in Lanshie is House Aes-ther. A close ally of my father’s, in fact.”

The delicately crafted eaves and arches of the manor were coming into sight through the trees.

“But really, I think their house is in decline. Father has trade with the human shepherds in Morwen and *he* says...”

Harli let Aidan’s voice fade to a drone in her mind as she discreetly moved her fingers in intricate patterns just out of sight.

With the Kinbairn Manor drawing closer, Aidan appeared to grow a bit agitated; perhaps he saw a rare opportunity slipping away.

“Really, wouldn’t you care to stop for a moment? It is truly a wonderful evening and the stars...”

The complicated spell Harli was preparing was really two simple spells interwoven, made the more difficult by Aidan’s babbling. She stooped down suddenly, digging among the leaves with her fingers. “I’m sorry, I seem to have dropped

my broach.”

“Oh. Did you really? Well I’m sure it’s down there some where,” Aidan said, remaining standing while she searched.

She smiled as she stood up again. Behind her back she clutched a handful of leaves. They sparkled with the onset of her enchantment.

Aidan took her smile for encouragement and stepped closer. “You are so very pretty,” he whispered thickly. He touched the tips of his fingers to her face, drawing nearer to enfold her in his arms. As his mouth closed on hers, he tasted sweet...leaf mold?

‘Harli’ came apart in his arms in a great explosion of dry winter leaves. Her tinkling laughter could be heard far down the path as the real Harli made her escape.

She was so delighted with her trick, and the look she imagined on her would-be suitor’s face, as he stood there with leaves in his doublet and in his hair, slack-jawed and speechless, that she crashed headlong into someone approaching along the path from the other direction.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 3:30PM
(12/02/99 8:30PM GMT)**

Faun set down her book bag, joining Rev where he sat at Dad’s desk. He had a page full of Internet links up on the computer. Open books and magazines, news clippings and notepads, covered the rest of the desk, and more of the same lay on the pale green carpet around Rev’s feet.

“Check this out,” her brother said in distracted tones, as he scanned the computer screen.

Faun didn’t go often into Dad’s room. Although he’d never told her to keep out, he made it clear by keeping his door shut, and whenever she called to him, coming out into

the hallway to talk to her. Looking over Rev's shoulder at the computer screen, she read aloud: 'www.End-is-Near.com, www.apokalyps.org, www.r-u-reddy.com'.

"These are Dad's bookmarks," Rev said very low.

Faun only frowned. Dad had been spending more time than usual clicking away on his mouse and keyboard these past few months. "I don't get it," she said quizzically.

Her brother rummaged among the books and magazines and showed her a hardbound volume titled *Eschatology: Is The World Ending?*

"Dad's gone crazy," Rev said.

Faun couldn't think of a thing to say.

**THOR'S DAY 12/02/99 KINBAIRN MANOR 9:00PM
(12/02/99 9:00PM GMT)**

Breathless, Harli found herself in the arms of a stranger—dressed much like Prince Aidan, but a bit taller, broader in the shoulders. In her dazed state, he looked rather handsome.

"Here now. And who might this charming lass be?" His eyes lit up. "Ah! Of course! You could only be Princess Harli Kinbairn."

"Yes..." Harli detached herself from his grasp.

"How perfectly apropos that I should just this minute be coming to find you. Prince Drebh Aesther...at your service, milady."

She felt her hand snatched and lifted to his lips.

With a crashing of displaced undergrowth, Aidan burst out from among the brambles to the side of the path, liberally bedecked with leaves and twigs, his magnificent hat nowhere to be seen. He fixed the newcomer with a glare. "How boring of you, Drebh, to be taking advantage of a woman alone in the wood!"

“I? Take advantage? Surely Aidan, you’ve gone too far.”

“Not at all, not at all! Had I not arrived when I did—”

Exasperated, Harli renewed the invisibility spell, not in the mood for the extra flourish of leaving a simulacra behind this time. As she padded softly away, returning to the party, she heard the two of them continuing their debate, wholly unaware of her disappearance. She decided to leave the spell in effect for a while.

Almost immediately, she saw her mother amidst a crowd of other ladies, chatting animatedly while occasionally looking about. Harli knew what she was looking for; her errant daughter, wondering where the gamine lass had gotten off, when she should be here among the sparkling guests, surrounded by anxious, worthy suitors.

There were hardly any faeries here. They preferred to be in among the trees or out in the moors. They seemed to find buildings distasteful.

Lady Reanne Kinbairn was every inch the regal matriarch. Though petite in stature, she made up for it in spades with the fire of her personality and her sheer strength of will. Harli had inherited auburn hair from Reanne, though her mother’s eyes were a rare shade of forest green with gold flecks. Harli had her father’s eyes.

If Mother knew Harli was using her magik she would, of course, not approve. In fact she would be furious; she had no say in the fact that her daughter had the gift for magik (really there wasn’t so much to it, Harli had learned most of it by herself), but the family had no need of a wizard, and that was that.

Ostensibly, this evening’s gala party was being held for the purpose of matching Harli with a suitor. By joining House Kinbairn with a house that stood in King Aelach’s favor, the Kinbairns could at last return to the fold of the

elven community of northern Gaehl.

And they would never have to worry about the goblins again.

This wasn't strictly true of course. Every once in a very great while the goblin tribes would band together in sufficient numbers to threaten even the strongest houses. In times past, the elves had nearly been driven off the islands altogether. Harli had once tried suggesting to her mother that if she could get proper training and become a proper wizard, she could protect the family manor from future raids with her powers.

But Mother scoffed at that. She said it was Father who had gotten them all into this predicament in the first place by refusing to give up his ancestral title of "First Guardsman," when King Aelach demanded it. So Father kept his precious title at the cost of alienating his king, and when the goblins came, his title availed him naught. The swords and halberds of the other houses would have availed him plenty, and had Father not been such a foolish man, he would still be here today! Mother had actually let a tear escape her eye. Now her own daughter thought to protect the House with yet another title. She would not have it. Harli was to be married and that was final.

I know I could do it, she thought angrily, barely remembering to step clear of milling guests who could not see her.

And Father had been right to keep his title. Since the time of the spirits, it had been the family's responsibility to bear that title and guard these lands. Life is cheap without pride, she told herself.

THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 4:00PM
(12/02/99 9:00PM GMT)

Christmas pageant rehearsals had wrapped up, and Father John Chandler had heard the confession of sixteen-year-old Vanessa Kirenskiy, brought by her anxious mother to receive a penance that would convince her daughter not to think of other girls *that way* anymore. John had listened to Vanessa with half of his mind elsewhere.

At Mord's urging, he had invited his ex-wife and his son to come up. He wasn't convinced Mord was right, about the end of the world coming, in spite of the things Mord had seen in John, and everything that had happened with Father Aurelius. But Mord had said the prophecy of Lum required his family to be together on this particular weekend.

None of John's research into theories of the apocalypse, conducted in the library, in religious articles, or on the Internet, had produced tangible evidence that supported anything Mord had said. It was all hokum, as far as he could see.

But Mord had been right about John's dreams, and so against his better judgment, John had made the phone calls.

**THOR'S DAY 12/02/99 KINBAIRN MANOR 9:15PM
(12/02/99 9:15PM GMT)**

Harli found herself at the front gate. There was Denaede, playing throw-shoes with a few of his men, their flagons of purple wine on the flagstones, their halberds leaned against the solid rock wall. Armed men stood idly outside the gate, but stared attentively into the night beyond. Away in the center of the courtyard, wide as a palace tower at its base, stood the great stump of what had once been the family Life Tree. Since the wood elves had left the forests to live in cleared areas and grow their crops, every village and every manor bore a Life Tree at its center, standing taller and mightier than the tallest oak, and these only a shadow of the giants to be found

back on South Gaehl. Originally bred to such huge proportions to serve as pillars for the ancient tree towns, the elves had brought the precious seedlings with them when they had migrated into North Gaehl, uncounted millennia ago. By custom a Life Tree grew at the heart of every elven community, even though the Northern elves lived in tree towns no more. With the Life Trees came the faeries, ancient ancestors of the elves.

The Life Tree had been severed at the trunk by the magik of a goblin shaman in the battle that had claimed Father. The House Grower, Muir Sihde, had been able to save the remains. Tall shoots could be seen growing from the shattered stump. The faeries hadn't had much interest in the tree since its ruin, but the great stump was liberally bedecked with flowers, all carefully nurtured by Sihde, for this evening's festive occasion. It could be hoped that one day, when the tree grew back to a respectable size, the faeries would return. But that would take several hundred years. It was very fortunate the great tree hadn't died entirely, or House Kinbairn would lose its status as a noble house by elven law.

Harli let go of her spell and became visible.

Denaede's almond-shaped eyes widened before his features mellowed with a genial smile. He was used to Harli's sometimes mystical comings and goings. "Ho lass! Sit and share our wine!"

The other guards made a space for her in their circle and she happily joined them, accepted a flagon from the nearest guard. Many of these men had been her childhood playmates, not so long ago.

"Who's winning, Denny?"

"Need you ask, Princess?" one of the guards interjected, mock disgust in his voice.

Denaede was best in the House at throw-shoes. The only

one who could match him...was Culain.

Harli pushed the melancholy thought from her mind. "Give me a set, and I'll put things a'right."

Denaede met her grin with his own. "Sure and your Mother expects you at the party, Lass? A'mingling and a'cozying with all the pretties?"

She was opening her mouth with a wry retort when a curious sound caught her ear. It was a whistling sound. It came from above.

There was a muttering among the guardsmen.

Denaede looked up quizzically.

The whistle had grown to a whine.

"There!"

Harli followed the pointing finger of one of the guardsmen to see a bright dot in the sky, brighter than all of the stars put together. "By Cernunnos' boughs..." She stood frozen in indecision. The dot was growing, and with it the sound grew, too.

It could be heard as a shriek now, painful to the ears. Then with a shattering roar the light flashed by, low overhead, bright as the sun and gone as fast as it had come.

They felt the blast before they heard it. Harli felt her small, frail body hurled to the ground, and tasted the grit of frozen dirt in her mouth. Lights flashed behind her eyes in a mélange of radiant colors.

And then she saw no more.

**THURSDAY 12/02/99 HAVERHILL 4:15PM
(12/02/99 9:15PM GMT)**

With a dull thud, Faun's glass dropped from her hand to bounce off the cluttered desktop, and from there to the carpet, puddles of Sprite soaking into books and magazines and

notepads, as she collapsed to the floor. Rev was out of the chair and kneeling over her before he had the presence of mind to wonder what had happened.

His sister lay limply, eyes closed, in a dark stain of Sprite. He hovering anxiously, not sure of what he should do. "Faun?"

She didn't respond. He scooped her up in his arms. She felt weightless as a rag doll, and damp with Sprite, as he carried her downstairs into the living room. Laying her on the couch, he tried to think of what could be the matter. Her breathing seemed shallow and she looked paler than normal. He touched her neck, finding her pulse. It seemed slow.

He grabbed the phone from the coffee table and dialed 911. "My sister just passed out," he told the operator, raking bangs out of his eyes in a frustrated clutching-of-hair, as panic set in.

"What happened to cause this?"

"I don't know! She was fine one minute, then she collapsed."

"Hold on, I'll put you through to EMS."

Another voice came on the line: "Haverhill Emergency Medical Services, what is the nature of the emergency?"

Rev gritted his teeth. "My sister is unconscious."

"Has she had a history of dizzy spells? Lightheadedness?"

"No. She's just lying there. No cause, nothing."

"Is she breathing properly, sir?"

"I...I think so. Can you send an ambulance?"

"I'll page a paramedic unit. What's your address?"

Rev responded and hung up. He knelt by Faun and focused on the faint susurrations of her breathing. Reassured, he fetched blankets from the linen closet and got her tucked in. She was so pale. He paced around the living room. Where was Dad? At church, his note had said! Rev called but got the

answering machine. He left a message and resumed pacing. He wished he knew what to do. He wished he'd had a course in first aid or CPR or *something* useful.

He got a few paper towels from the kitchen and dabbed the Sprite from her face and hair, ashamed to admit to himself that he desperately wished Dad were here. Here he was, eighteen years old, a man, and all he wanted was his parent. Suddenly, it no longer mattered whether Dad had been collecting books, Internet articles, and news clippings on doomsday theories—Rev just wanted someone who could take one look, know what had happened to his little sister, and make it better.

Rev kissed Faun's forehead, brushed strands of dark hair back from her temples. Her skin felt even cooler than it had minutes ago.

The red and white lights of the ambulance flooded the room through the bay window, and Rev ran to the door to let two paramedics in. For the next ten minutes he couldn't get close to Faun. She was hemmed in by busy people who knew what they were doing. One of the EMTs questioned him further about the circumstances leading to the episode, and about his sister's medical history. After that, there was nothing for him to do but sit anxiously at the foot of the stairs and wait.

A police cruiser arrived next, and then a fire truck. The house rapidly filled up with people.

"She came to a minute ago, but she's still weak. We've set up an IV feed and put a rebreather mask on her; at this point we've done all we can, and we're going to take her to the hospital so a doctor can look at her." The soft-spoken EMT had a quiet intelligence in his eyes and a drawn mouth that suggested scholarly reserve.

"Is she okay?" Rev asked, trying to get a look around

him.

“She’s doing okay at the moment, but until we have some idea as to what caused this, it’s best not to take any chances.”

Rev caught a glimpse of Faun through the press of milling bodies, most of her face obscured behind a transparent breathing mask. She was looking up at the female EMT who kneel at her side.

The woman was tall and very thin and capable-looking, her ash-blond hair pulled back in a short ponytail. Her partner spoke, calling her Grace. She responded to him as Stan. Stan said to Rev, “Let’s roll.” He and Ponytail hoisted the gurney between them and, with Rev following, loaded it into the back of the ambulance. The cruiser and the fire truck were already backing out of the driveway to give them room. Rev climbed into the ambulance, and they were off, lights flashing. He held Faun’s hand. She looked very small and pale and scared, and Rev felt a lump in his throat. *What the hell was going on?*

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Faun had never been on medication, never fainted, complained of severe headaches, vertigo, blurred vision, nothing like that! She had always been hardy and energetic, running around outdoors chasing birds and climbing trees, a complete tomboy. This just didn’t make sense.

The ride passed in a tense haze of lights and sirens. Stan made a halfhearted attempt at smalltalk, but Rev barely heard him. Something had happened to his sister, something had *hurt* her, and he didn’t know what it was. And that both angered and frightened him.

When they reached the hospital, the EMTs handed Faun over to a pair of male orderlies, and then they were through the front doors and Rev accompanied them as far as the front desk, where Faun received a wrist tag and was wheeled off to

the ER. Rev had to stay and fill out forms for her. After that, he went to the payphone and called Dad's office at the church. He got his voicemail, so he left a message letting him know what had happened and where they were.

Then there was nothing for him to do but sit in the crowded waiting room. Most of the other occupants were watching Jerry Springer on the wall mounted TV. He tried thumbing through a dog-eared issue of *Time* magazine, but gave up, too distracted to focus on the articles. He felt like a taut-stretched rope, not snapping all at once, but coming undone one thread at a time. Was this a seizure? Did Faun have some kind of condition now? Had this happened before, while he was off living with Veronica? *Maybe if I had stayed at home, I could have done something to prevent this.* He knew it was crazy to think like that. Faun was her own person, not some helpless offshoot of himself.

It seemed like hours later when Rev spotted her coming down the hall. He got up, hurried to her, and caught her in a hug. Her squeak of discomfort told him to back off. Somewhat embarrassed, he led her to a comfy sofa and sat next to her. "So. What happened?"

She still had a hospital ID tag around her wrist. "I don't know. It was like every headache I've ever had, Rev, all in one. It just hit me all of a sudden. They took some blood and kept me 'under observation' a couple hours to make sure I was okay. I guess I am."

She didn't look as worried as Rev thought she should be. "Did they say what caused it?"

"No. They said everything looked normal." They stared at each other until Faun threw a cushion at him. "It was just a freakin' headache or something. I'm okay now. Did you let Dad know?"

"I left a message at the church, he'll probably be here

pretty soon to pick us up.”

Amid the comings and goings in the waiting room, they were silent for a minute.

“Did you try calling Veronica yet?”

“No.” Rev looked away. “So. Summer’s coming up the day after tomorrow, isn’t she?”

It was Faun’s turn to look away. “Yeah.”

“When was the last time we saw her?”

“Seven months before you left, around that.”

An infomercial on the TV showed some Mediterranean-looking guy urging viewers to repent of their misguided ways and join the Church of the Four Raptures before the world ended at midnight, December 31st.

“There’s been a lot of that on TV lately,” Faun commented.

“Y2K is bringing out all the weirdoes. This is their big moment.”

“Would you go change the channel?”

Seeing that no one else appeared to be watching, Rev grabbed the remote and clicked until he found MTV. *Liquid TV* was on.

Faun chanced a smile. “Ask me how I’m doing in art class.”

Rev smiled too. Art had always been a big interest of hers. “How’s art class, Faun?”

“Really good, I’ll show you my stuff when we get home. Mrs. Rhodes thinks she can get me into Mass Art on a scholarship.”

“The Massachusetts College of Art? Wow, wouldn’t *that* be a big-time break. But isn’t it a little early to worry about college?”

“Mrs. Rhodes went there, and she says it’s never too early.”

Rev nodded a bit absently. "That's cool. I wish I'd started planning that early." It felt strange to be chatting with his little sister, watching MTV together, in a hospital waiting room. They hadn't watched TV together since he'd left home. The last two years felt like a long, strange dream...the kind that seem to last forever, but when you come to and check your watch, it's only been a few minutes.

If he called Veronica, he'd get someone who said they'd never heard of her. Wouldn't that just be so *Twilight Zone*?

He should call her. Just to see...

No way.

"Rev? You in there?"

Faun was looking at him expectantly.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"I asked are you still dancing?"

"I did a little modern dance at Bradford, but I sort of got sick of it."

"That's too bad. You were getting really good the last time I saw you dance ballet. What about fencing?"

"No, haven't done anything with that since high school."

"So what've you been spending all your time on?"

Veronica, he wanted to say. "Oh, classes. What about you? What have you been doing, besides art?"

"Umm...I have this friend, Tracy, but I haven't been over to her house in a while. I still go for my nature walks."

Back when Rev lived at home, Faun's favorite pastime had been going for walks on the Audubon nature trail with her sketchpad and colored pencils or chalk. She could easily spend an entire day at it, perched on a rock or a tree stump. The walls of her room were covered with her sketches; sometimes he thought she sketched so she could look at the outdoors even when she had to be indoors.

Dad entered the waiting room, eyes flickering over its oc-

cupants until they lighted on his kids. He seemed less massive than he had two years ago, walking with a nervous expression, a slight stoop to his broad shoulders. "I...Faun, are you all right? I was out on my home rounds when you called. Oh, Rev! Where's...?"

Faun got up and gave their Daddy a hug with a kiss on his cheek. He had to lean down for her; the men in the Chandler family tended to be as large as the women were small. "I'm fine, Dad. Don't ask about Veronica. Just say hi to Rev."

Rev got up and clasped his father's large hand. There were more lines on Dad's face, and his dark blond hair was thinner, but when he met Rev's eyes and squared his shoulders, it felt momentarily as if the past two years had never elapsed. Then Dad pulled him into a tight embrace, patted him on the back.

"You've grown."

"Nah..."

They parted, and all together, left the hospital.

**FREY DAY 12/03/99 JURMANG FOREST 2:00PM
(12/03/99 1:00PM GMT)**

Hard wood chips flew in all directions as Lukas' ax attacked the thick trunk of the oak. Cold as it was this December morning, his endeavors warmed him enough that his torso was bare save for his wool vest. His arms and shoulders rippled with each stroke of the ax, his expression was steady and his pale blue eyes clear, as he went about his work. He was strong but not burly—would have been a larger youth, save for the meals of weak broth, the scarcity of meat and cheese. Life in the village of Kresselholme rarely resolved to state that anyone would call comfortable. It was that much

less so for an orphan.

The trees were harder this time of year; work was harder. The sap wasn't completely frozen yet, but nearly there. It wouldn't be much longer before it'd be impossible to continue, once the sap froze and even an iron ax-head could shatter against an oak or a maple.

Lukas wasn't sure what he was going to do when that happened. Back when he'd lived with Johan and Bora, life had been a little easier. Not much, but at least he'd always had something to eat and a place to sleep. He'd spent the first thirteen years of his life with them, helping out with the odd jobs throughout the day, sleeping in the barn amongst the livestock through the night. As crofters went, Johan and Bora were fairly well off and actually had a separate shelter for the animals.

But his foster parents had seven children of their own (with another on the way) in addition to Lukas; it was hard keeping all of those mouths even marginally fed. When he turned fourteen, a man by the law of the land, Johan apprenticed him to his friend Anders, a woodman.

He was about halfway through the stubborn trunk by now. Warily he set his great wood ax down, and sat on his empty sled. He made sure to keep the ax within reach, for you never knew what you might meet in these woods. Hopefully Red or Whistle, his two sled mules, would raise a holler if something got too close, but it wasn't a certainty.

The Jurmang forest was said to stretch north all the way to the shores of the Sea of Sorrow. The things that lived among its trunks and briars weren't always indifferent to the presence of men. If you ventured far enough in, there was no telling what you might run into. Sometimes you didn't have to go in very far, especially when most of the forest creatures were safe in their burrows and pickings were scarce for the

rest. Sometimes to look for food, they would even leave the forest. There were dire wolves, great spiders, boggarts, changelings, and the tribes of goblins and kobolds—those were what you ran into if you were lucky. Then there were *others*, ancient things that lurked and hated in the moldering closeness of the inner woods, savoring the remembered taste of man flesh.

No one entered the forest casually; anyone who ventured into the Jurmang either had business there, or they were desperate, or they were insane. The only men from Kresselholme who entered the forest with any sort of frequency were the hunters and the woodmen, and they generally went about in groups for safety.

All of the other woodmen had stored away their axes in oilskin rags for the winter, though, and if one wanted to go cutting wood, one had to go alone. Firs and hemlocks and spruces made decent cordwood, but it was the oaks and maples that yielded the big logs every crofter wanted for Yuletide burning. All the more so Landholder Bechtel, who'd be wanting any number of them for his manor—and that meant going deeper in, where the bigger trees grew.

People would pay a lot for a good oak or maple log, because they knew woodcutting season was over and no woodmen would go a'cutting for you this time of year unless you made it worth his while. So, it was the oaks and maples Lukas would spend the next few weeks cutting, not the smaller trees. After Christmas everything would be pretty much frozen solid. In order to pull the heavier sled loads, he'd had to rent the two mules from Anders, but even after that expense, he'd still come out a good deal ahead of what he would stand to make on cordwood.

Lukas needed the money. The artisans were full up on apprentices, the crofters pretty much saw to their own needs

around the farm, and there was no work at the inn, either. If he could cut enough Yule logs in time for Christmas he might just have enough pfennigs to last him until the trees thawed and the woodmen started cutting again. If he was lucky he might even have enough to take a girl to the Yule festival. He'd need a finer set of clothes and enough to buy her a few pretties and sweetmeats. He'd had an eye for Aram Goodmead's sister Beckwynn lately...

If his money *didn't* last him, he'd have to walk out to Furth and look for work down at the wharves. He'd never been to the neighboring town on the Black River, but he'd heard about it from the merchants and peddlers who passed through. Someday, he thought he'd like to go find out what a real sea town looked like—one of those on the coast of the Nord Sea. Maybe he'd see if the Jurmang forest really did go all the way to the Sea of Sorrow. He could hire on with a man o' war and go to fight the Nord raiders. Or sail over to the Gaehls; he'd heard the most fantastic stories of the elves.

He'd never felt like a part of the village. In all his life he'd never had a friend.

Well, that wasn't true. Grandfather Everleaf was his friend. Grandfather was the father of all trees, lived out in the wheat fields, and watched over the village. Really, he wasn't the father of all trees but everyone wanted to think that, so that was what they said. He was so big that he cast a really huge shadow, and you would think that it would be hard to grow wheat in his shadow, but in fact the wheat grew even better there. He'd never seen another tree as big as Grandfather, or another tree that nurtured other plants in its shadow, or one that *spoke*.

That was how Lukas knew he wasn't really the father of all trees; because Grandfather had told him so.

Grandfather Everleaf did speak, if only on occasion. He

would take really long naps that tended to last for days, weeks, sometimes months. He said he was very old, older than Kresselholme, and he'd watched over the village since the first people came to live there. He said he used to be able to walk around, and there were others like him, that they were the children of really big trees called "Life Trees." Most of the Life Trees that were still around grew on the Gaehls, but there were a few here in Realm, too, that had been planted by elven travelers. He said that every now and then a Life Tree bore a seed that had a spirit in it, and when the tree grew up, it could move around and think and talk. The elven name for those kind of trees was *Aielormu*, and it meant "holy tree."

That was how Grandfather had happened; he'd started out as an acorn with a spirit in it, and grown up into an *Aielormu*. He'd begun wandering when he was only about ten feet high, being driven by the wanderlust that afflicted all *Aielormu*, and he'd gone all over Realm. But eventually he found the meadow in Kresselholme (it was a really big meadow then, back before the farmers turned it into a wheat field, which happened farther back than anyone remembered besides Grandfather), and he liked it there so much that he lost track of time and took a nap, and when he woke up he'd grown roots down into the soil and he couldn't move. Everybody loved Grandfather Everleaf and they brought him offerings and things because they thought he was a god, and he always thanked them and said he would do what he could, and they went away feeling happy.

Grandfather wasn't a god; Lukas had asked him about it once when he was very small and he was playing under Grandfather's lowest boughs. Grandfather had said that *Aielormu* weren't gods, but that he'd tried saying so before and it hadn't gone over very well, so now he just played

along and everybody was happy. Lukas thought Grandfather was very smart. But he'd still wondered as a small boy if Grandfather might really be a god and he just wasn't admitting it. After all he did somehow manage to keep the crops alive through the droughts, and he kept the locusts away; even if Lukas didn't understand how he did all of that, he supposed it must be the sort of thing that gods did.

Lukas didn't get out to see Grandfather as much as he had when he was younger, but he still managed to see him now and then, and on planting and harvest festivals when the villagers would gather around Grandfather to celebrate and ask his good wishes.

With a start, he realized he'd let his mind wander. The sun was noticeably higher in the sky than it had been when he'd sat down. Cursing, he got up off the sled and returned his thoughts to his work. The tree still stood defiantly before him, unfelled. He needed to get this oak cut down and enough logs chopped to fill up his sled, so the mules could pull it back to the village before nightfall. Desperate as he was, he wasn't desperate enough to continue cutting after dark.

He gave the oak a measuring look, sent a practiced gaze up and down its sides, choosing likely points of vulnerability in the cold-brittle wood. With a deep grunt, Lukas hurled himself shoulder-first into the side of the tree, the impact knocking the breath out of him. He heard a loud *crack!* and with a shiver that he could feel, the trunk snapped clean through at the chink of his ax, and the whole, towering mass groaned, crashing down into the undergrowth opposite him.

Red and Whistle continued placidly munching on thickets, quite used to these sort of noises from their repeated journeys with woodmen.

Lukas felt rather proud of himself. He'd heard that just

the right sidewise blow could get it done, but never on anything this thick, less than three quarters severed, in December.

"I'd think you could at least give me a 'huzzah' for that," he said dourly to his mules.

"Huzzah!" a voice called from behind him.

Lukas whirled. There stood Aram, jaunty in his fine furs, his yew longbow in one hand and a brace of winter hares hanging from his belt, smiling on one side of his mouth at Lukas' look of open surprise.

"Very good, a mighty feat of strength, truly! I'd almost wonder why you bother bringing along that great clumsy ax, when your meaty shoulder will do as well."

Lukas recovered his composure quickly. Aram wasn't even a full year his elder and had no call to be standing there so content with himself. "Shame, Aram. Haven't you better scruples than to creep about spying on woodmen, disrupting honest work?"

"You just count yourself lucky the villagers won't pay me for a nice haunch of woodman, or you noisy lot would all be extinct. You're ever so much easier to get the drop on than any other forest creature I know of. Speaking of which, did you see a stag run through this way?"

"No." Aram got his over-proud manner and cultured witticisms from all the time he spent cozying up to the Landholder's sons, Lukas knew. Aram himself was the eldest son of the innkeeper and had ideas above his station. For all of that, Lukas supposed he wasn't a bad sort. Fond of himself he might be, but he'd never treated Lukas badly—more than he could say for most of the other village boys, like Elwer and Hurst, or the Miller brothers.

Lukas hadn't been troubled during the past two years, since his arms, chest, and shoulders had filled out from all the

chopping and splitting he did. But things had been pretty bad before that.

“Sly bastard,” Aram continued. “He must’ve looped back and cut across an old deer trail. I knew I should have seen some fresh spoor by now. Well, I guess that’s one that got away.”

Lukas leaned forward on the butt of his long ax haft. He wanted to get on with his work, but he didn’t want to seem rude. “I’m sure you’ll get another chance at him sooner or later.”

“Aye, maybe I will. I hope he fattens up before then, though,” said Aram, as he unstrung his bow. “It would be the least he could do to repay me for all the bother he’s put me through. Have you heard the news back at the village?”

“What news is that?”

“Well I suppose you must have left before it happened.”

“Yes?” Lukas didn’t like to be baited, but he really was curious now.

“The Lady of Erwinst Manor rode in this morning by carriage. She said the villagers from Holte attacked the manor.”

Lukas was stupefied. “Surely you jest.”

“I swear it on my hope of salvation.”

“Why? I thought Lord Erwinst treated his serfs well.”

“I don’t know, but Lady Erwinst said he threw her in the carriage and ordered the driver to leave out the back gate. She barely got away with her life. Lord Erwinst and his men must all be dead, by now.”

It seemed unreal to Lukas.

“Well, whatever it was that drove them to it, it’s done, and King Leopold’s men will drag them off to justice. It was probably some bard showing up to put hot ideas in their heads about how they’ve been abused and taken advantage

of.”

Lukas thought those were likely the exact words of one of Lord Bechtel’s sons. But he had to admit that regardless of whether or not the Holters had grievances against their landlord, wholesale slaughter was not the answer. Those that didn’t flee would likely swing from a mass gallows within the week, and those that did wouldn’t get far at this time of year. Especially if they were foolish enough to take refuge in the forest. It seemed like an all-around pointless thing to have done.

“Well, then. I’ll leave you to your chopping. Good day.”

Lukas resumed his work as Aram stole away in search of new game.

He couldn’t believe it. He’d heard talk of battle all his life, of course. The Nord sea raiders were a fact of life in northern Teutonia. The Imperium loomed at the eastern border. And, there were the occasional encounters in the Jurmang with forest creatures. But he’d never heard of mass bloodshed being committed anywhere in the village’s vicinity.

By the time he had his sled loaded with twelve heavy Yule logs, the sun was on its downward trek in the western sky, and he was beginning to feel the icy wind on his bare arms. Lukas pulled on his wool jerkin.

He unhooked the spade from the side of the sled and got to carving shallow holes in the frozen ground, then fished acorns out of his satchel and planted them, before putting away the spade, tying down the logs, and getting Red and Whistle moving. That was the only boon Grandfather asked—that the woodmen plant two for every tree felled.

They were good mules, those two. They didn’t balk, and they weren’t lazy. It was hard to find mules like that. Most he’d seen wouldn’t budge without a dangled carrot or a kick in the ribs.

South through the hilly country, between the forest's edge and the village, the high peaks of the Dragonspine mountains loomed, dominating the horizon as far as the eye could see to the east and west. Mountain dwarves lived there, had for as long as anyone in the village could remember. The dwarves were dour and reclusive, not fond of strangers, but they kept the armies of the Imperium from crossing the mountains from the south, so Lukas figured them for pretty good neighbors.

The mules knew the way back; there wasn't much for him to do on the way to Kresselholme but walk, and he was grateful for the rest.

Already, he was close enough to see thin streams of smoke winding into the sky from the smoke holes of the crofters' cottages. He looked forward to a bowl of hot stew, a heel of bread, and a tankard of spruce beer at the inn. He'd have to be up early tomorrow to sell off today's haul at the bazaar. Then it would be back to the forest for more, again and again, until Christmas.

The wooden palisade around the village hove into view through the last of the hillocks, and soon he was leading the sled along the rutted dirt main road to his stone-and-thatch cottage, to unhitch the sled, and then on to Anders' stables with the mules.

The sounds and smells of village life crowded in on his senses as they always did after returning from a sojourn in the forest; dust and fresh baked meat pie, the ringing of beaten metal from the smith's shop, the cluck of hens and snatches of conversation from the passersby. The villagers were noticeably energized in their late afternoon errands. They loitered here and there in anxious clumps, murmuring animatedly.

Horst Butcher and his son Hurst were joined at their stall

by old Fritz the cobbler, Hurst's friend Harol, Missus Goodmead and her golden-haired daughter, Beckwyn.

The girl turned and waved to him. Lukas felt a flush as he met her bright gaze. The others at the stall turned to look as well, but their expressions were not so inviting, and Lukas trudged past with a nod. He'd never been much for a crowd.

He found Anders out behind his stables, mending broken harnesses.

"Heard about the Lady Erwinst comin' in?"

Lukas opened his satchel and counted out the pfennigs he owed to Anders. Running the stables made up Anders' income through the cold months when there was no work for woodmen. "Aye, Aram told me."

"That carriage flew in here like it was the devil himself drivin'."

"Where is the Lady now?"

Anders cocked one oil-stained thumb in the direction of the Landholder's manor. "Lord Bechtel took her in. Rich folk stick together, I guess. A lot of the others think this is the end of it, but you mark my words, this isn't over."

"What d'you mean?"

Anders leaned forward and fixed Lukas with a steely look. "As long as Lady Erwinst is still alive, their job back at Holte isn't done. That means they're going to come looking for her, sooner or later. I'm thinking it's going to be sooner, if ye take my meaning."

"Well," Lukas said uneasily, "we'll just have to deal with that when it happens, won't we?"

"Aye, lad. That we *will*."

Anders' words haunted him as he headed for the inn.

FRIDAY 12/03/99 HAVERHILL 8:00AM
(12/03/99 1:00PM GMT)

John worked the pry bar between the stair tread and the innermost wall string, and gave it a hard whack with his sledge hammer. The tempered steel head of the chisel obligingly burrowed in between the two boards, and John put his shoulder into it, causing the tread to finally pop free of the wall string with a squeal of bending nails.

The outermost of the three long wall strings that formed the frame of the wooden staircase adjoining the church's fire exit had been shattered, and the center wall string was only somewhat better off. Two of the supporting newel posts had been snapped a few feet above the ground. Treads and risers hung askew or lay on the cracked asphalt below. The landing above listed to one corner, and had creaked in outrage when John put his foot on it, come to take out the garbage and not immediately noticing the state of the staircase. He'd since braced the landing with a pair of long beams, to keep it in place while he replaced the damaged staircase below.

I guess it needed fixing anyway.

The sounds of the Christmas pageant rehearsals reached him through the fire door. They had been going on since after the morning Mass. Upon discovering the broken staircase, he had taken the extreme measure of placing Millie Hess in charge of things.

Father McLane, for his part, refused to be left alone with Mrs. Hess, grumbling about how he'd prefer "the frost of winter eternal" over another hour with the former high school drama teacher. He had followed John outside, where he watched from the nearby picnic table as John went about dismantling those stairs.

"Who do you think did it?"

John straightened, letting his sledge hammer slide into its

place in his tool belt. He did it with the unconscious grace of long habit. It had been twelve years since he had been a carpenter, but there was always something needing fixing—at home or at St. James—and he still felt pretty comfortable with a level or builder's square.

Father McLane hunched protectively over a steaming mug of coffee, holding it with both of his thin hands to soak up the mug's warmth. His cane and his obituaries were on the bench beside him. The picnic table stood at one edge of the cracked and weathered basketball court behind the church, the two steel basketball posts rusted almost black. An equally rusty chain link fence bordered the court, and once upon a time it had a gate, too, but that part was long gone.

"I don't know. Probably some of the town kids."

The court behind St. James Parish was a popular spot with the kids, in spite of its dilapidated state. Teenagers, mostly, they still used the old hoops during the day, but after dark you saw a different sort back there, and the police had been called more than once to break up trouble. John would have liked to replace the tarmac—really everything back here needed replacing; the fence, the basketball hoops, it was all badly run down—but there never seemed to be enough in the budget.

John kicked the pile of wooden scraps and bent metal fasteners that he had torn down. "The breaks in the posts were all around the same height off the ground, so I'm guessing someone drove a car into it."

McLane grunted disparagingly into his coffee, then put it down, his face softening uncharacteristically. "How is Faun?"

John realized he hadn't mentioned anything about yesterday to the old priest, since he had left in a hurry after listening to Rev's message on the answering machine. He

forced a smile. “She’s awake. She’s alert. She’s in good spirits.”

“That’s a start. But why’d she pass out?”

John shrugged, returning to his work. “Don’t know. The doctor couldn’t find anything wrong with her.”

He had read Faun’s diagnosis at Hale Hospital yesterday. According to the doctor who wrote it—Dr. Schlessing, who had also delivered Faun and was a member of John’s parish—there was nothing apparently wrong with Faun, and it was recommended that she go home and take the following day off school.

Rev would be around to keep an eye on her, and call 911 if she had another episode. Meanwhile, he was going to catch hell from Summer for not telling her about it when it happened. He’d thought about calling her last night. He’d wanted to talk about it with her, only...

McLane cleared his throat with a labored rattle, and spat on the cold asphalt. “Do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Ask Faun if she heard from Little Billy while she was at Hale.”

John looked up, startled at first, then thoughtful, as he remembered. “That’s right, your brother’s at Hale.”

“Been there forty-five years, now. He’s spent his adult life in a coma, pretty much. I’m glad that didn’t happen to your daughter.”

“Thanks.”

The charge nurse who had given him the diagnosis had felt pretty sure that whatever caused Faun’s fainting episode was behind her, that she’d be fine now. But Faun wasn’t—none of them were. Because John knew what had caused his daughter to faint.

That was why he hadn’t pressed the charge nurse for

more answers, hadn't insisted on speaking to Dr. Schlessing directly—all of the sorts of things a parent normally did when his child passed out on her feet and the doctor had no answers. He knew it wouldn't have done any good. The cause of Faun's fainting spell wasn't to be found on this earth, no matter how long Dr. Schlessing might research it, no matter how many tests he subjected Faun to. The cause lay on the *other* earth, the place Mord had first told John about shortly after his marriage to Summer.

The place called Aerth.

The place where Father Aurelius had once lived.

A police siren grew in volume, overpowering the sounds of the rehearsals coming from inside the church, then receding into the general buzz of Haverhill city life. With a twist of his pry bar, he pried the last of the risers from the wall strings, and tossed it on top of the pile. Reaching up, he started on the first of the broken posts.

"Been doing any more thinkin' about the Apocalypse?"

John winced. "I guess."

He had gone up to bed last night to discover that his studies on Armageddon had been rifled through. No one had said anything—Faun's episode had overshadowed the rest of the evening, with himself and Rev hovering over her, and Faun protesting—but, it was clear the kids were onto his secret. Or rather, they had found the tip of the iceberg, and it was sure to come up again, tonight or tomorrow. He didn't have much time left to figure out what he was going to say.

Not even home a full day, and Rev had been causing trouble.

The irony was that while none of his years of surreptitious research had turned up conclusive evidence to back up Mord's predictions, Faun had confirmed the old man's dire words just by fainting.

McLane cackled dryly. “From the expression on your face, it looks like you’ve made up your mind the world’s ending. Any last wishes, Father Gloom?”

Mord had explained that Father Aurelius and himself had been bound together as *miris*, able to share each other’s thoughts, see through each other’s eyes and feel what the other felt. The bond had allowed John to feel it when Father Aurelius was ripped apart by creatures called rat wolves. He’d felt each excruciating second, with perfect clarity. He’d heard Aurelius screaming, in his mind. And he’d screamed along with him. Rev had later told him some of the words he’d said before blacking out. Apparently he had begged God to make it stop. In Latin.

Faun had a mir of her own. Mord had done something shortly after her birth, and sure enough, the girl had had the strange dreams her whole life. Yesterday, something must have happened to that mir. Her fainting could have no other cause, that he could see. At least it wasn’t fatal, whatever it was that had happened, judging by the speed with which Faun had recovered. That was some consolation.

“I guess I haven’t thought about it like that.” John looked at Father McLane, expression still and serious. “What about you, padre? Is there anything you’d like, while you’re still here?”

McLane paused, trying to read John’s expression, and then he retreated into his own musings, eyes gone distant.

John pulled down the first post and started on the next. It sounded like the rehearsals were finishing up inside.

“I’ve given my whole life to the Lord, and that’s only the truth.” McLane started slowly, but began speaking faster, as if he feared the words wouldn’t all come out if he didn’t get them said before he lost his nerve. “I know I had my troubles with the drink at one point, and those were dark days for me,

Lord knows it, but by and by I've done my best to help people and show them the way, and, well..."

John put down the hammer and looked at him.

"I would like a miracle," Father McLane said in a quiet voice. "Just one miracle, while I'm still here to see it."

