

Chapter Thirteen

The mates arrived at Raven's house singly and in small groups, and by five o'clock everyone had assembled. A faint double-haloed moon hung low in the summer sky; there was an intensity in the air, a crackling psychic energy, that was palpable. Raven emerged from her bedroom and greeted the coven. In a businesslike manner, she announced, "Stone, Frank, and I will drive to the location. Delia and Tim are already there. Load your regalia into the trunks to keep it out of sight. Let's get started." Due to centuries of persecution, Old Religion rites—and the garments and tools that accompanied them—were practiced in secret, even in the tolerant Orenda Valley.

Ivy and Blanca drove with Raven in her black Impala. Rah-wing perched on her shoulder. The other cars followed at a discreet distance. As they turned onto Route 10, where it wound along the banks of the Orenda, Blanca asked, "Can you tell us where we're going?"

"We'll be there soon," Raven said. "It's a sacred spot, helpful to appealing to the Goddess and God and the spirits of stone and water." As High Priestess, Raven oversaw all rituals and determined their location. During ritual, she went into trance and became the living embodiment of the Goddess.

"Have we worshipped there before?" Ivy asked.

"Not in my lifetime, but my ancestors knew of it. We are going to the Great Spring. Legend has it that Chief Ferry shared the location with my ancestors to show his respect for our practices. So much of how we worship is the same. Both religions are primeval faiths based on the rhythms of the natural world. Native American shamans astral project into the ether to bring back knowledge from their guides, which is what I do as well."

"I didn't realize anyone knew the location of the Great Spring," Blanca said.

"In a few minutes, all the mates will know. It must remain a secret, as must the fact that Astarte is the spring's guardian spirit. Mavis McWycke had a falling out with the Chief when she borrowed Astarte for the coven."

The Impala rounded a succession of curves, driving deeper into Freeman County's forested reaches. The summer sun, still strong as evening approached, cut through the overhead branches that shaded the roadway and mottled the windshield with bursts of light, forcing Raven to concentrate on the road. After navigating several bends, she slowed down at a stone bridge that traversed a creek which ran from the opposite hillside to the river. Just beyond, she made an abrupt left turn into an abandoned country lane, overgrown with weeds. A chain barrier had been disengaged and lay across the path. The car inched forward along a rutted dirt road, with the two other vehicles following. Climbing a hill through dense brush and towering trees, Raven drove cautiously until she pulled into a clearing at the top. Level ground was covered with unkempt grass and weeds and was surrounded by white birch trees, sacred to Mother Earth in Old Religion belief. The river was visible through the tree branches. At the back of the clearing, a stone outcropping exposed a narrow entrance to a cave. Water bubbling from beneath the earth could be heard.

Delia and Tim stood in the center of the clearing beside a stone altar they had spent the afternoon erecting. Two stones of equal size formed the base, and a more substantial flat stone comprised the top. On the altar, Delia had placed the regalia, the ritual equipment required for sabbat observance. Among the items was a sword made of tempered steel, used to draw the

magic circle; Raven's athame, a black-hilted ceremonial knife; a white-handled knife, employed for utilitarian purposes; a willow wand, which extends the arm raised to summon the four guardians; a waxen pentacle containing a five-pointed pentagram, the symbol of magic; a censor; four candlesticks holding white candles; a ceremonial scourge made of knotted sisal; and ribbon-like multi-colored cords, representing the sacred laws to which all coveners are bound. In addition, two silver chalices held water and salt. Beside the altar, another stone was placed to house the sabbat offerings of flowers, fruit, cakes, red wine, and honey. Additional white candles, for purification and protection, dark blue candles for change, and green candles for money, as well as hand drums, shakers, and tambourines were kept here. Red clay urns holding sprays of wildflowers, along with sheaves of river wattles bound with scarlet silken cords, stood at each corner of the clearing. A makeshift perch of birch branches stood behind the altar.

The mates got out of the cars. "Merry meet!" Raven said.

"Merry meet!" the mates replied.

Raven placed Rah-wing on the perch and said, "This is the sacred site of the Great Spring. The location must never be revealed. You are all sworn to secrecy."

The mates looked around in wonder. "I didn't think this place was real," Andy said.

"Neither did I," Julia added.

"I've gathered wild herbs near here, but never stumbled upon it," Marsha commented.

"It's sacred to the native residents, and we should respect their presence, though they've long since left the valley," Raven said.

All murmured their consent.

"We must purify the space," Raven said. "Let's change into our robes."

The mates retrieved their ceremonial garb from the car trunks. They donned long, loose-fitting black robes over their light summer clothes—black representing the summation of all color vibrations and the primordial darkness of the universe. The men wore simple silver bracelets on both wrists. Roger, as Faunus, wore a horned mask that covered his eyes and the top of his skull. The women added more elaborate ritual jewelry. Ivy donned a necklace of antique amber beads. Diana wore a silver crown set with four crescent moons. Blanca sported an Egyptian ankh around her neck, while Wanda wore a silver pentagram. Julia and Marsha positioned wreaths of ivy around their heads, into which Marsha had woven sprigs of lavender. In addition to her crystal pendant, Raven wore two gold wrist cuffs. She slung a leather pouch over her shoulder, which contained three candles in glass containers, an herbal offering to the Goddess of her own making, and quartz crystals from the Orenda River.

"Let us synchronize our breathing to achieve a singular mind," Raven said. The mates formed a circle in the clearing and joined hands. With eyes shut, they breathed in and out for several minutes, gradually finding a shared rhythm. When they breathed in unison, Raven opened her eyes and said, "With quiet and serene focus, let us prepare the circle. Delia, do you have the incense I prepared?"

"Yes, Raven," Delia replied.

"A mixture of rose, sandalwood, gardenia, frankincense, and cinnamon should please the Summertime Goddess. Add it to the censor, please."

Delia walked to the altar and placed the scent on the unlit coals.

“Mates, clear the area so I may draw the circle.”

The coveners disbursed to the back of the clearing, and Tim handed Raven a broom which he had fashioned of heather bound to a freshly cut sapling. With her features hardened into sharp focus, Raven swept the clearing from front to back to clean the ritual space. While she worked, she sang in a resonant alto:

*We are all drops of water
Wee drops from the rivers
That become the rain showers
That replenish the Earth.
Only to return
At the end of our journey
To the sea of the Goddess
Ruled by the Virgin White Moon.
Bless you, Great Goddess
Bless you, Great Goddess
Bless you, Great Goddess
All glory to you!*

She handed the pouch to Delia and retrieved the sword from the altar. She walked counterclockwise, tracing a circle nine feet in diameter along the ground with the point of the sword. Delia followed, reaching into the pouch and sowing the crystals like seeds into the earth, points facing outward to amplify the energy. To demarcate the magic ring in three dimensions, both women visualized a gossamer globe of silvery-blue light. When Raven reached the circle’s cardinal points—North, West, South, and East—Blanca, who quietly joined the procession, positioned a lit white candle to mark the spot. She then lit the white, blue, and green candles on the stone beside the altar.

Raven approached the altar. She took the silver water chalice in one hand and the athame in the other and said, “In the name of our Mother, the Goddess, and our Father, the God, I purify this water.” She touched the athame to the water as she spoke. She set down the water and picked up the salt container. She touched the athame to the salt and said, “In the name of our Mother, the Goddess, and our Father, the God, I consecrate this salt. Let only good things enter here, while casting out all that is bad.” She walked the circle counterclockwise sprinkling the water from the chalice, while Delia followed sprinkling salt. “Circle of power, the boundary between man and spirit, I conjure thee!” Raven said. “With the blessing of the Goddess, I purify this ring for the working of magic. For the North, we offer the Earth, our Mother.” She placed the wax pentacle Delia handed her next to the North node candle. Moving with Delia in tow, Raven said, “For the West, the chalice of water, sustainer of life.” Then, “For the South, my fiery knife, Magicka.” Keeping the athame in hand while completing the circle, she said, “For the East, the magic wand, ruler of air.”

She stopped, placed her feet apart, and held her hands out, palms away from her body, her elbows bent slightly. In the Goddess position, she raised the athame and cut a pentacle in the air, saying, “Guardians of the four quarters, esteemed Lords of the Watchtowers, grant us the

blessing of your presence, and protect and consecrate this circle.” She held her fellow witches in her gaze and said, “Let the work begin! Mates, enter the circle through the South node gate.”

Delia scurried to the southern point of the circle and held out her arm to indicate an invisible doorway. The mates solemnly filed in. They turned and stared at the idyllic outdoor spectacle as if witnessing the Lammas rite for the first time. The sun had waned, and the tall birches cast long shadows that hastened the night.

Responding to a look from Raven, Delia lit the censer and traversed the inside of the circle counterclockwise, dispersing the floral incense as she went. After walking the circle three times, she placed the smoking censor on the altar and returned to Raven’s side.

“The circle is now ready for magic!” Raven said. She placed the athame on the altar. “O Triple Goddess! Maiden, mother, crone! We are grateful for the crops and for all that comes from the earth. But without the God, our Father, nothing would grow. O Faunus, Sylvester, Pan! We thank you for warming the earth, you who are the sun, the giver of life. You who are the animating spirit in trees, woods, and waters, bless us with continued sustenance. O Loving Goddess! O Boundless God! We give thanks for the bounty of the earth.”

The mates chanted, “Diana, Hecate, Isis! Come hither! Cerridwen, Artemis, Athena! We await you! Great Goddess of the Moon, we adore you! Mistress of the Green Earth, bless us!”

Roger and Diana retrieved the hand drums, shakers, and tambourines and distributed them. The group started a slow tattoo to establish the dance rhythm, accompanied by a wordless chant of a medieval-sounding dirge. As they sang, Raven moved to the center of the circle and addressed the coven. “Friends, we are here on Lammas Day not only to celebrate the fruits of the earth, but to honor the river which flows through our valley. The river which brings life to all. There is a part of the river, a dried-up tributary at Blithe Point, which needs our attention.”

“Yes!” chanted the mates, before resuming the dirge.

“Let us focus our thoughts on sending life-giving water to this section of the river so it may be revitalized and released from nature’s dominion for the production of electricity.”

“Yes!” the mates cried. Blanca and Wanda were less exuberant than the rest.

“Let us celebrate the river and the electricity that comes from harnessing its energy. It’s a small sacrifice of water and land we request, so that nuclear power will sustain us in the future.”

Blanca eyed Wanda, as if to say, “Count me out.”

“Let us say a proper goodbye to this part of the river to ensure that no crime against nature occurs, only a gentle borrowing that will benefit all. Let the dance begin!”

The dirge picked up speed and volume as the mates set down the instruments and began a counterclockwise spiral dance around the altar. They joined hands and performed the grapevine move—side step, step behind, side step, step across—which was repeated as they spun around. The dirge became a song:

*O Great Goddess
Come amongst us
Bring our goal
To light of day.
Return the water
To the stream*

*And bless the land
To make it pay—Hey!*

The singing grew more strident and the pace increased. The mates fell under the spell of the pungent incense and the flickering candlelight, the only illumination in the clearing, and their collective vision blurred. Their breathing, though labored from the dance, remained in synch, and their minds became as one. A silvery-blue electrical current radiated upwards from the ground as the dancers whirled. The cone of power was raised. A spell could now be cast. Not a spell for evil, but a prayer, a projection, a thought.

As the ethereal blue current rose over the mates' heads, Raven stepped away from the dance. "Mates, join your minds in unison," she commanded before chanting:

*River rock and river grass
If thou wilt
Come to pass
Release the Blithe Point land for me
To Starfire's realm
Blessed be!*

The mates increased the dance to a sprint. Raven continued:

*Rushing waters
Diana's bath
Wend the valley
Carve the path
Crystals bright
Bring to me
A river of money
Flowing free
Make my life a comfort be
Bay leaf, cedar, apple, oak
Rain down prosperity's
Velvet cloak
Wrap me in the garment fair
Cash and coins for my red hair
Come to me, flow again
Banish all tormenting pains*

The dancers spun faster. Raven regarded the mates with a satisfied smile and said, "Focus and—"

Holding hands as they danced, Blanca and Wanda looked at each other and acknowledged their refusal to join the group mind.

"Release!"

The mates raised their hands in the air, sent an outburst of collective breath towards the sky, and fell to the ground, signaling the end of the dance. Raven remained standing, hands extended in the Goddess position. Rather than winding down the ritual, she retrieved her leather pouch and took out three black candles. These she set on the altar and lit. The mates roused themselves and

sat upright, while Raven moved to the center of the circle. She regarded the strobing candle light and inhaled the rich incense, then closed her eyes and looked inward, summoning a frenzy of fear, which turned to furious hate, necessary for what she must do.

She fell into a trance used to contact her spirit guides. Yet she moved in a different direction, not summoning Astarte or Ajax, but seeking a demon of the darkest powers that would carry out her request. She invoked Chief Ferry's curse on the land, and a beast appeared in her mind's eye—wet, shiny, covered with wartlike bumps, a glistening tube of black energy. She opened her eyes, her orbs glinting sinisterly in the candlelight, and silently acknowledged the spirit's presence. In a startling basso profundo, she croaked, "Balsam bitter, baneberry, roux. Bryony, dropwort, foxglove, too. Nightshade deadly, poppy white, end a life on this fair night!"

The mates gasped and looked at Raven in confusion.

Ivy glanced up at the High Priestess and a shudder passed through her. "'An' it harm none, do what ye will.' Raven, you will harm someone!" she exclaimed.

Roger said, "Seth's not a threat—" but Raven's stone-faced stare silenced him.

"Radiant boy, who mother shunned, why do you return again?" Raven continued. "To murder me, legend tells, but I will send you straight to hell!"

Ivy rose and approached Raven, grasping her arm. "Stop before the spell is cast!" she implored.

Raven shook her off and said, "Bitter hemlock, drink it down. Choke the throat, round and round. Twist and turn in painful sight. End a life on this sweet night!"

"Raven, stop!" Blanca pleaded. Wanda shook her head in agreement.

Raven cast her eyes to the black starry sky and commanded, "Forces of the darkest night, serve me now without delay! Find and kill my only heir. In desperation, murder's fair." She addressed the conjured beast with, "Blast it! Choke it! Damn it! Evil! Blessed be, thy wondrous devil." She cast the thought of Seth lying dead in his bed into the world with a screeching yelp before collapsing to the earth, her robe billowing around her.

The clearing fell silent. Only the rustle of birds in the trees and the clicking of crickets could be heard, along with the gentle bubbling of the Great Spring. The mates climbed to their feet, mesmerized by the ceremony, but shaken by Raven's conjuring. They were ashamed to regard her as the silvery-blue cone of power dissipated at their feet.

Raven met them with a look of triumphant defiance. To earth the power that had been raised, she retrieved the dish of poppy cakes and passed them around. She poured the wine, infused with cinnamon and cloves, into earthen mugs and distributed these. As the mates ate and drank, she strode to the center of the magic circle and began the closing rites by singing:

Goddess and Horned God

Nature sprites, too

Along with the powers

Who've paid us their due

The hour has come

To bid you adieu!

She took the athame from the altar and walked the circle clockwise, making the sign of the pentagram in the air as she moved. She paused at each cardinal point to blow out the demarcating candle and continued her benediction:

*Goddess, Consort, Elementals all
If your will be it so
Please answer our call
Free the land for new use
And end my freefall.
Goddess and God
And Guardians Four
We thank you with praise
And humble amour!*

She moved to the stone beside the altar and snuffed out all but the three black candles. With only this light to work by, she poured the remaining salt into the water chalice and handed it to Ivy, who regarded her with a look of undisguised horror. Ivy poured the salt water into the earth behind the altar, muttering an invocation of forgiveness to the Goddess.

Raven retrieved the heather broom from beside the altar. The mates rose and joined hands, resuming the wordless chant that had started the ceremony. Though they were shocked by what had taken place, they were obliged to complete the ritual. As they sang, Raven swept away the remnants of the magic ring. Delia followed, picking up the crystals and placing them in the pouch. Raven walked to the opening of the Great Spring and placed a large maple leaf before it. On the leaf she scattered herbs and flowers from her garden known to draw prosperity—basil, chamomile, clover, bergamot, marjoram, and snapdragon. The offering to Mother Nature would dissolve into the earth or be blown away on the wind, leaving no trace of the sabbat, and no destructive imprint on the environment, though this seemed of dubious importance now. She turned to the mates, and in the darkening clearing, raised her hands above her head and sang:

*Magic works in twenty-one days
Or not all
That's what is said
Now it's time to gather up
Magic's regalia
And off to bed
When thou wake
In early morn
Remember tonight's spree
All join hands and wish each well
With a hearty "Blessed be!"*

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