

WELDRINA



Tradition book two
for Magic: The Ascension



In Memoriam: Matthew Korteling

*Here and now
Long and loud
My heart cries out
And the naked bone
Of an ankle says,
"Don't walk away!"
Reach out your hands
I'm just a step away.
How in the world can I wish for this
Never to be torn apart?
Close to you 'till
The last beat of my heart.*
—Siouxie and the Banshees, "Glose to You"

Grimmy misses you, my love!
—Krista

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VERBENA

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Between the Worlds: Samhaine Eve (Prelude)

*Issues not faced annually at Samhaine
may need to be faced at our ultimate death,
when we might not be strong enough.*

— Paddy Slade, *Encyclopedia of White Magic: A Seasonal Guide*



Black hair flying about her face, Deborah stood defiantly before the woman seated in the old rocking chair. She resented being dragged here to this old woman's front porch, where she wasn't even allowed to sit down. Arion, Thorn and Tanith formed a ring around her, forcing her into a face-off with the crone. What kind of shit was this? The severe, cold wind at the heart of the Berkshires cut through her light jacket. Frowning at the witch woman's question, Deborah sneered "What do I want out of life? That's a pretty lame question. How about wealth and power for a start?"

Mother Celene gazed at the younger woman, then slowly smiled. Neither she nor the others needed heavy coats. Their powers kept them warm, though the wind souged through the evergreens and rattled the windows.

She could read frustration and bravado in the girl's stance, as well as fear and anticipation. The young ones never guessed how much she knew just from sensing their hormonal and chemical balances.

"Be still," she whispered, "Listen. Look. Tell me what you hear and see."

To Mother Celene the vibrant greens, darkening blue sky, and orange-red sun that set the clouds afire formed a glorious

panorama. The wind, the scritch of branches against her house, even the soft scrape of Thorn's shoe on the porch step were clearly audible. Mother Celene waited, hoping Deborah would conquer her feelings and truly consider the question. If she didn't, Mother Celene would teach her to understand true pain and fear.

Deborah decided she'd had enough of games. Arion had promised her knowledge and power. Everyone knew he claimed to be a practicing witch. She should have known better than to come here with him and his weird friends — especially on Halloween. She was beginning to get really uneasy. That always made her angry.

"I don't hear anything but the wind, which, by the way, is freezing me to death," she complained. "I see you, a weird mountain top, and a grungy old cottage." She paused for breath.

"This whole thing was a mistake." She turned to Arion, "Take me home now." Summoning as much authority into her voice as she could, she willed him into obedience. She felt terribly vulnerable. Arion smiled. Thorn raised an eyebrow; Tanith laughed. Her fear escalated. Halloween. Witches. Shit. Why hadn't she realized they wanted her for a sacrifice?

Mother Celene tapped Deborah on the knee with her cane. Deborah almost screamed. This couldn't be happening.

"Pay attention!" Mother Celene commanded. "You claim you want power, but you will not essay the simplest task. How should I teach one who has no will to learn?"

"Who made you God?" Deborah's anger, and relief at hearing she was to be taught, not sacrificed, coalesced into defiance.

"Better to ask, who could make you a goddess." Mastering her own annoyance, Mother Celene stood and grasped Deborah's shoulder.

"Since you will not answer my question, I shall tell you what I hear and see."

Deborah's shoulder began to throb painfully where the old woman grasped it, but she felt powerless to remove the hand or pull herself away, Mother Celene's eyes stared into her own; cold sweat trickled down between Deborah's breasts and traced a line along her spine.

"I hear the wind, yes. But I hear much more besides. Your blood sings through your veins and pumps through your heart with a rhythm like the sea crashing on a rocky shore. Breath rasps through your throat and bellows through your lungs and rushes out again. I hear eyes blinking, hair growing, the sounds of food making its way through your bowels, and perspiration sliding along your body.

I see your shivering. Your eyes change colors and the pupils dilate in a face pale as milk with cheeks reddened by the wind. Uncertainty, fear, the very life that pumps within you is clear to me. I know more of you than you could possibly believe."

The pain in her shoulder had grown like a smoldering fire. Deborah fought to jerk herself away, moving in slow motion. How could a bony old lady be that strong?

"Hurts, does it?" the old woman crooned. "That's because I'm affecting your nerve centers directly. I could as easily stop your heart or send a blood clot into your brain."

Deborah looked at her with undisguised terror. As she struggled in panic, she felt her muscles lock and realized she was trapped.

"Please..." she whispered.

The pain stopped. She fell to her knees as her muscles were released from their paralysis.

Mother Celene lowered her hand and smiled. "That was only a minor working."

Deborah licked her lips. Shivering, but no longer from the cold, she asked, "What was that?"

Mother Celene stroked the girl's raven hair while gazing serenely at the sunset. "That," she said, "was power!"

• • •



The poet is... a semi-divine figure who by combining magic, mythology and poetry may significantly influence society.

—M. C. Flannery, *Yeats and Magic, the Earlier Works*

Teague changed into his bardic costume. He clasped his deep blue velvet cloak with a silver brooch, picked up his lap harp and examined his reflection in the mirror. The clothes and harp looked great. His thin body, pocked face, brown eyes and long brown hair looked like they always did. Mundane. He hated himself for being so ordinary. Of course, he might look a little better were he still healthy.

Stroking a melody from his harp, he cheered himself with the thought that at least his music wasn't ordinary. He loved the old Irish and Scottish ballads and songs, and so did the people at the Renaissance Fair. All summer he wandered about the fair singing and telling old stories. They paid him a little. He made up the rest in tips from the tourists. He was glad to be playing the special Autumn Fair they were holding in honor of Halloween. He could use the money.

As he drove to the fair site, he hummed a tune and thought about the boy he'd met yesterday. His words still buzzed in Teague's brain.

"Why do you waste your energies trying to recapture a time that is gone? Come with me and I will show you how to make those times come again."

He'd just stared, dazzled by the boy's good looks and flattered the boy had shown an interest in him. But Teague had thought about what the boy had said. He wasn't happy living in a world where poets and dreamers have no place. If the boy came to the fair again, Teague knew he'd go with him, wherever he took him.

Teague was in the middle of "The Elphin Knight" when he became aware of the boy standing quietly off to his left. Blond. Gorgeous blue eyes and a smile to die for. How could he have forgotten his name? Robin. Teague ended the song before he reached the last verse. The other fairgoers didn't seem to notice, but Robin smiled. When everyone else was gone, the boy approached. "Hi again," Teague said, and thought to himself, *Wonderful opening!* What happened to the great poet? *Nerves*, he thought.

Robin smiled. "Have you decided?"

"Decided what?" He knew what Robin meant, but stalled for time as he tried to sort out his true feelings.

"Please, do not play games. If you wish to know the truths of the past, if you wish to help make the world what it could be, you must trust me and come with me now. I will not ask again."

"Give me a few minutes to think about it, okay?" Teague set his harp down near a maple tree. Just a week or so ago, the maple had been ablaze with color. Now its cracked, brown leaves fluttered in the wind. "I need to be by myself. I'll be back in a few minutes. Is that cool?"

Robin nodded. Teague walked away from the fair site, moving off farther into the trees to clear his head. He knew

what he wanted to do, but would it be worth the effort? Somehow, he just couldn't believe there might be something better for him elsewhere. On the other hand, how much longer did he have left?

He didn't see them until the first one grabbed him. "Meeting another lover boy out here, faggot?" The boy who held him looked about sixteen. Dirty jeans and a sweatshirt, greasy hair. The one who'd spoken was older and wore a black leather jacket. The third held a tire iron. His eyes fixed on Teague with unforgiving hatred. A girl, probably no more than fifteen, was twined around Black Leather Jacket. She grinned as Teague tried to free himself from the armlock Dirty Jeans had him in. "Why'n't we do him all the way?" she said to Tire Iron.

"Nah. Let's make him blow all of us."

Dirty Jeans shoved him down on the ground. "I ain't no fairy," he said, "and he might have AIDS or something." *Good guess*, thought Teague as he desperately tried to throw Dirty Jeans off. Black Leather Jacket strode forward and raised his booted foot. "Hold his hand out," he commanded. Dirty Jeans grasped Teague's right wrist, forcing his hand onto the leaf-covered dirt. Teague screamed as Black Leather Jacket stomped on his hand, grinding it underfoot. He felt the bones snap as white-hot agony raced up his arm and exploded inside his head. Tire Iron moved behind him and smashed the heavy bar into his lower back. Teague vomited up the meat pie he'd had for lunch.

"Son of a bitch!" cried Black Leather Jacket, "The bastard rolfed on my boots."

"Kill him!" screamed the girl. Dirty Jeans grabbed his hair and began pounding a fist into Teague's face. Teague felt his heart shudder and skip a beat. As he floated toward unconsciousness, he saw Robin emerge through the trees. The others, intent on the beating they were giving him, didn't notice the slender blond boy. They did notice his voice.

"In ancient Ireland the person of a bard was inviolate," he called clearly, "Release him."

"Another one. Get him!" screamed the girl.

Then the sound began. As Teague slid into blackness, he heard a piercing, horrid noise and realized Robin was singing. His tormentors clutched their ears and fell to their knees as the raging sound climbed to an unearthly scream. First one, then another fell into fits as blood poured from their ears and noses. When all lay still Robin whispered one word: "Banshee."

When he came to, Teague's head was cradled in Robin's lap. He blinked several times, but still saw Robin's hair, now a brilliant crimson, lifting and thrashing through the air as though blown by gale winds. Robin noticed his gaze and said, "Paradox. What I did was vulgar magick. This," he pointed to his hair, "will stop in a little while."

Magic? Though he still hurt, Teague felt able to stand. The throbbing in his hand had lessened. "Watch it," he said to Robin, "my blood...I have AIDS."

"I know." Robin helped him up. "But you don't have to."

Teague looked at those who had beaten him. They were still breathing, but their faces reflected excruciating pain. "What about them?" he asked.

"They'll live. Of course, they will never hear again. The price for failing to hear the cries of those who are different. Now they themselves will taste that prejudice. Let's be gone from here. We have a world to remake."

Something stirred inside him at Robin's words — something that had always known this time would come — uncoiled and flexed its power.

"Let's go," he said. He linked arms with Robin and walked away from the fair, hardly noticing that his hand felt fine. No one noticed their going.

• • •

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

— Chief Seattle

Jon awakened to the shrilling of the phone.

"Yeah?" he mumbled, trying to make out the time in his darkened room. He gave it up as a lost cause and listened as Frances talked. *Damn them.* Another section had been designated for clear-cutting. They'd be moving people in for the logging operation in less than three hours. Didn't those morons realize they were destroying irreplaceable old-growth forest? They had to know. His group had been demonstrating on the property for weeks. *Some of those trees must be over two hundred years old! Couldn't they even take a break for Halloween?*

"Okay, I'll be there in about twenty minutes," he told Frances and wearily pulled on the clothes he'd discarded only four hours ago. He was still exhausted, but running on the energy his anger provided. He was tired of playing by all the polite rules.

He went down into the cellar and emerged with the tools he'd need — a bag of huge nails and spikes and a couple of sturdy hammers. Spiking the trees in strategic places sometimes caused injuries to those cutting the trees when their power tools hit the spikes. One such accident was usually enough to deter the cutters or to slow down work enough that the job became unprofitable. The trees would survive and the loggers would have to move elsewhere.

A mist rose through the trees as the sun burned off the early morning rain. It was still drizzling a little. Jon had just hammered his last spike into a magnificent old oak when he heard the shot. He turned to warn Frances and realized her body was sliding down the tree trunk, trailing a smear of blood in her wake. Half her head was gone. Looking into the eyes of the two men whose rifles now pointed at him, he read the story of his own death there. No doubt it would be explained as an unfortunate hunting accident. He ran.

Tearing through the trees, weaving among them and praying that he could outdistance the men on his trail, Jon misstepped and tumbled down a hill and into a clearing. Scrambling to his feet and limping onward, he expected to be shot in the back at any moment. As he passed the outer ring of trees surrounding a great red oak, a strong hand reached out and pulled him behind a broad beech. His rescuer was a sinewy, bearded man dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. "So, you have come at last. I am Jarrol, but there is time enough to talk later." With these words, Jarrol stepped in front of Jon and commanded, "Watch!"

Crashing through the trees to the open hilltop where Jon had lost his balance, the two men paused at the crest of the hill. One of them looked up as thunder rumbled overhead. The other said, "C'mon. We've gotta find that guy. Let's look down there."

Jarrol called out, "Go away. Tell your bosses this land is off-limits. Tell them to cut no more trees if they value their lives."

As the men raised their rifles and took aim, Jarrol thrust his arms toward the sky. As the bolt of lightning grounded into the metal of both men's rifles, the accompanying thunder deafened Jon.

When Jon came around, he saw that Jarrol had already carried one of the bodies down the hill to the red oak which formed the center of the grove. Reaching beyond him, Jarrol raised a sickle and slashed the man's throat. Blood oozed from the cut.

"As you have taken from the life of the forest, so you shall return it," Jarrol intoned. Then he turned to Jon and smiled; "Welcome home."

• • •

What was blood and darkness in an animal

Grew in us to soul and continues

To scream out loud as soul. And it screams for you.

— Rainer Maria Rilke, *Song of the Women to the Poet*

Kamaria closed her eyes and let herself drift along the moonpath in the water. The waxing moon shone down upon the girl named in her honor. She felt buoyant and graceful in the water as she never did on land. This late in the year, the water was cold, but she reveled in its feel. Waving her arms through the water, she visualized herself as she wanted to be. Not a crook-backed, hunched-over girl, but a tall, straight-limbed beauty. If the moon were only made of wishes....

Not that she didn't have pretty features: Velvet brown skin with no blemishes, deep brown eyes with thick, dark lashes and long, black hair worn in cornrows were her most attractive features; Kamaria had never been accorded the honor of being tattooed or scarified like the other girls of the tribe. Given to the missionaries the day after her birth, she had been taken from Africa six years later. They were always just "the missionaries" to her, and had given her religious tracts rather than love. While they had always



been kind, they were not people who felt comfortable with children — especially deformed ones.

Trying to swallow her bitterness, she looked at the moon and called out, "Moon, Sister, shine your magical light down and change the way I am. It's my Halloween wish. I want to be a runner. I want to leap and dance. I want to be perfected!"

"Why?" Kamaria almost leapt out of the water when she heard the soft, masculine voice. Looking toward the sound, she saw a sweet-faced boy of about thirteen. He sat on the embankment, elbows clasped around his knees, regarding her with an air of expectant curiosity.

"Why what?" she asked.

"Maybe I should have asked *how* you want to be perfected," he replied.

She was suddenly, horribly conscious of the hump rising up between the straps of her bathing suit. She climbed awkwardly out of the lake and made her way to the robe she'd left on the embankment.

"I was just dreaming," she mumbled. Then she was angry. And hurt. Nowhere was far enough away that someone didn't intrude and spoil her magical moments when she pretended she was normal.

He cocked his head to one side, studying her with a dignity no thirteen-year-old ought to be able to assume.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to anger you. I thought I could help."

"How?" She fiddled with the robe's sash as if she could distract attention from her hump that way.

"You were invoking Luna, weren't you? You know, goddess of the moon, patron of lycanthropes and shapeshifters?" He looked quite serious and she found herself responding to his lack of comment on her awkwardness or deformity. She even smiled a little.

"Yes, I guess I was," she confessed.

"Then you'd like to learn how to change yourself? Did you really mean it when you said you were seeking perfection?" His eyes picked up the moon's glow. She took a step backward, suddenly not sure if she liked this chance meeting by moonlight. Her African heritage called out to her, whispering of demons and shapechangers. Her longing held her from running from this strange boy with the moon-bright eyes.

"I want to be healed," she said, and realized she was crying.

He came to her and placed his hand on her twisted flesh. "Whatever you can visualize, you can do," he said gently.

As he spoke, he changed. The sweet-faced boy was now an older, sweet-faced woman whose eyes welcomed her.

"Come with me. You have a lot to learn, but you will find healing — and perfection."

Black hand clasped in white, the moon sisters left the sacred pool.

I am purified and free.

And I will not allow you to ignore me.

I have brought you a gift.

It is all I have but it is yours.

My name is "I am living." I am here.

— Anna Lee Walters, Pawnee-Otoc, "I Have Bowed Before the Sun"

It never stops, he thought wearily as the truck full of young men roared by. Those inside it screamed with laughter as a bottle smashed into the dirt a few feet ahead of him. *Damn fools! They should know better than to do this when tourists were crawling all over the rez. Or maybe that's what caused it,* he thought. *They keep us drinking and doing drugs or gambling. Half the tribe is ready to sell our sacred ground to the developers and the other half can't stand up straight for all the poisons in their bodies. Our children die from lack of basic medical care, but the tourists come to see the dances and our "Great Indian Heritage" every year. They never seemed to see the squalor, just the feathers and beadwork.*

Like that young redhead going into the souvenir shop. She was probably on vacation, seeing the sights and patting herself on the back for basking in all this "Native American Culture!" Harvest festival, hell. They didn't even have a harvest — they were just trying to cash in on Halloween.

Grieving for a time he had never known, Takoda raged at his own lack of power. At school, he had done well enough to qualify for pre-med, but lack of money or a scholarship closed the door to medical school. The spirit within him was silent; Takoda could not be like his grandfather, a medicine man.

His grandfather had tried to train him, but Takoda just couldn't see or hear the spirits. On his vision quest, all he saw were mental images of food and water. He tried to tell his grandfather that he "felt" the wrongness in people when they were sick or hurt, but he had no talent for telling which spirit had brought about the disharmony. Kohana had been a great man, the last great shaman of his tribe. He never berated Takoda, but the sadness in his eyes spoke clearly enough. Now the old man was dead and Takoda wondered why he stayed here.

Brakes squealed and a woman's scream was cut short by a crash. He ran toward the sound. The shrill, hysterical screams of a small child rose above the rinkle of breaking glass. The truck that had held the young men lay on its side. Several groaning figures moved nearby. A small car, half buried by the truck, was buckled into an accordion shape. One door was open and a little blond girl lay on the ground, screaming. He could see the bone protruding through her arm. A blond woman was trapped behind the wheel,

pinned in place by the front of her small car. Other people were running toward the scene.

Takoda had the urge to just stop and let others deal with things. What could he do that they couldn't? Then he moved to help. Most of the young men seemed shaken up, but not badly hurt. The gods protect those too drunk to feel pain, he thought. He turned toward the mother and child. Aside from her broken arm, the child looked fine. Then his eyes met those of the child's mother and he felt her pain and fear. She was going to die, and she knew it. Painfully, she stretched her hand out to him, an instinctive gesture that said, "Don't let me die alone." He reached for her hand, anger and helplessness washing through him, but there was another, smaller hand in the way.

The redhead he had seen entering the shop gently moved herself between him and the woman. She turned to look at him, green eyes filled with arrogant command.

"Get a crowbar or something and get her out of here," she snapped.

"Uh...it won't do any good," he whispered fiercely, trying to keep the woman from hearing him. "She's not going to make it. Especially if we start trying to move her around. Let her die with some dignity."

"She won't die, if you'll just get to work and let me do the same. I don't have time to argue with you. Just do it!" She turned back to the woman, clasped her hand and said, "Now just relax. You're not going to die. You feel cold from the shock. You aren't bleeding as badly as you think. Head injuries always look worse than they are."

Wondering if he could have misjudged the extent of the woman's injuries, Takoda called for help.

For the next hour, he watched the redhead and marveled as the garage crew twisted and pulled at the wreckage. The ambulance arrived. They took the child to the county hospital, but agreed that Takoda could bring the woman in whenever she was freed.

At last the crew lifted the woman from the car, revealing a long scratch down her right leg. The head injury the redhead had treated could hardly be seen. He helped her move to his grandfather's old car which was parked nearby. The redhead tapped him on the shoulder as he was getting in and said, "I'll meet you at the hospital."

She came up to him in the waiting room. "You're Takoda, right?"

He wondered where she'd heard his name. "Yeah. Who are you?"

"I'm an old friend of your grandfather's. He told me a lot about you. I was sorry to hear of his death. My name is Sarah, by the way."

"He never mentioned you to me..." he began.

"But then, he wouldn't," she finished. "Let's go for a drive. I think you have some questions and I may have the answers you're looking for."

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.



"Somewhere I can tell you about healers who don't have to be doctors or medicine men. Healers like me." She chanced a look at him and saw dawning understanding.

"That woman. She was dying, wasn't she," he asked, "and you saved her."

She nodded.

"Will you teach me?" He had never been good at acting humble. She laughed at the strain in his voice as he tried to simulate humility.

"That's why I'm here. But I won't take you with me if you believe you're going to fail. You gave up on spirits and you gave up on getting into med school. This is all or nothing."

I was right, she is arrogant, he thought. But she has true power and she thinks she can teach me. With grim determination he said, "I won't fail, but you'd better be damn good."

• • •

God is alive. Magic is afoot...

— Buffy Ste. Marie, "God is Alive, Magic is Afoot"

Magic is alive. The Goddess is afoot...

— several thousand Goddess worshippers

Aileen ran from the cemetery, the wind drying her tears. Behind her she could hear the voices of shocked mourners as her father called after her. Kathy was dead. Her twin; her sister. Confidante and other half. Murdered. So Kathy had sneaked out and gone to a dance club. Big deal. Was dancing such a sin that she had to pay with her life?

Aileen had often questioned the strict rules which guided her family's life, but she had never before examined her beliefs. Had Kathy "flaunted" herself? Was she "asking for it" when she wore a short skirt and high heels? Nobody deserved what had happened to Kathy. Mutilated, raped, murdered — wearing high heels just didn't qualify as a reason for that.

Her parents tried to explain: Kathy had made herself a brazen woman. Though they grieved for her, she had not been pure when she died and had lost her place as one of the chosen. Somehow, Aileen just couldn't believe in a God who only had room for a chosen few, or one who repaid a minor transgression with cruelty and death.

She kept walking, not really noticing where she was going until she reached the park. She almost left when she saw the women gathered there. Some of them looked like dykes. Others were dressed in skirts and peasant blouses. One was wearing a robe and some sort of silver moon tiara. They were dancing and singing, thanking the Goddess for all her blessings.

Yeah, thanks for nothing, she thought. She watched the women moving in a circle dance and tried not to cry. She suppressed the urge to jump into the circle and scream. Laying her forehead against a nearby tree, she tried to steady her breathing. When someone touched her arm she screamed and jumped back.

"Don't touch me," she snarled.

The woman with the tiara studied her tear-streaked face and nodded.

"Would you like to join us?" she asked. "We're about to have cider and cakes. You'd be welcome, sister."

Aileen lost it at the word "sister." The strange woman pulled her into an embrace and let her cry for a minute, then stepped back and said, "Pain shared is pain diminished. Let us help you."

Aileen allowed herself to be seated in their circle. She drank cider and ate a morsel of cake. She listened to them talk and haltingly told them her story. Their sympathy helped some, and she realized she was enjoying their company. As they packed up to leave the park, Stargazer, their high priestess, took her moon circlet off and handed it to Aileen along with a card.

"Here. You look like you need this," she said, "and here's my card. If you need me, just call — any time. The Goddess doesn't stick to office hours."

She realized how late it had gotten as she walked home. The gaily costumed children who had thronged the streets were long gone, greedily counting their Halloween spoils. As the dark closed in, she walked faster, trying to keep to well-lighted streets. A BMW driven by a handsome, well-dressed young man pulled up next to her. He rolled the window down and said, "Miss, you shouldn't be out so late all alone. Can I give you a ride home?" She looked him over. Short hair, dark blue blazer, a ready smile that showed his braces; he looked okay. At the far end of the block a grizzled man in a long coat stepped out of an alleyway and stared at her bleakly. "Thanks," she said. When she was settled in, he pulled away from the curb. Then he snapped the door locks shut and pointed a gun at her.

• "Just be cool," he ordered, "and you won't get hurt." He turned down a dark alleyway while she sat frozen, fear and shock whispering through her. He opened his door as the car rolled to a stop and grabbing her arm, pulled her across

the seat toward him. "Get out, bitch. Don't make me use this on you," he said, raising the gun slightly. She almost gave in. Then she remembered the strange abrasions the coroner had found on Kathy's body, bite marks which could have come from someone wearing braces! As he pulled her around and opened the trunk of the car, she screamed and turned in his arms, biting and scratching. He yowled as she chomped down on his thumb, then dropped her as she slammed the trunk lid on his other hand, the one with the gun. She ran as he struggled to pull his hand free. That was when she realized she still had his thumb in her mouth.

When she finished retching, she carefully picked up his thumb, wrapped it in her scarf, and ran the rest of the way home. Her father looked up from the television as she slammed the door behind her. Her mother emerged from the kitchen. Her mother's look of horror told her that the man's blood had drenched her face and chin.

Her father came over to her. She thought he was going to wrap his arms around her and hug her. The open-handed blow to her cheek rocked her backwards. She stared at him in horror.

"In the name of God, what did you think you were doing today? You embarrassed both me and your mother in front of every friend we have. My boss was there. He thinks I have a lunatic for a daughter!"

Staring at the bruise on her mother's face which matched the one she would have, she backed to the door.

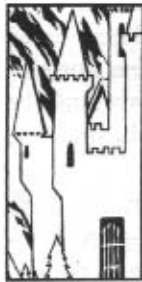
"Maybe he's right," she said, slipping outside. "Maybe that's exactly what I am." She slammed the door behind her and ignored his frantic shout as he called after her. Pulling Stargazer's card from her purse, Aileen brandished the severed thumb in the air.

"A Lunatic. Goddess nut. You betcha. About damn time."



Birth Cry: Winter Solstice (Introduction)

*Sure as the cock crows at morn
The world in stillness keeps
The secret of babes to be born*
— Loreena McKennitt, "Courtyard Lullaby"



Deborah awoke in darkness. Naked. Tied. The cold played over her body, hardening her nipples and raising goosebumps on her skin. Where the hell was she?

• • •

The gag cut into Teague's mouth as his head sagged forward. His hands weren't asleep, they were tied. He hardly noticed the cold. He always seemed to be cold these days.

• • •

Jon was pissed off. *Trust me*, he says. *Now here I am trussed up like a Christmas turkey.* Jon silenced his breathing for a moment and heard distant chanting.

• • •

The blindfold bothered Kamaria, that and her nakedness. Why were they doing this (whoever they were)? Tears of shame ran down her face. Why were they exposing her humped back this way?

• • •

Takoda tasted the remains of the drug in his mouth. He tested his bonds and worked at the gag. He was freezing. *Did I fail somehow? Am I unfit? Or is this a test, a vision quest?*

• • •

Aileen awoke screaming as her "friend" with the braces loomed over her. She screamed as he brandished the electric carving knife he'd used on Kathy. "Where's my thumb?" he roared.

Aileen awoke. Tied, gagged, naked, blind, she began to scream.

• • •

A sliver of light penetrated the blindfolds as others entered the shed. A woman's voice announced, "You are here for our Winter Solstice rites. Do not struggle. Trust and learn." Blankets were draped around them and they were walked out into the snow. Stumbling along, they were led in a circle, then pushed down into straw. Their blindfolds and gags were removed, and their bonds loosed. They

stared at a circle of lighted white candles surrounding gnarled tree. A woman dressed in white stood beside the tree, a large pile of straw next to her. An enormous red candle burned before her. Around the circle stood dark-robed men and women. At four points were set colored candles — yellow, red, blue and green. Next to each in turn stood a man in yellow holding a wand, a man in red holding a sword, a woman in blue holding a cup, and a woman in green holding a circlet.

The woman in white lifted her arms and spoke; "We stand in the sacred circle of the Mother, whose child will be born this night. Let us partake of her gifts."

She moved enough straw aside for them to see a ewe lying among the tree's roots. The ewe's distended belly rippled and she bleated with pain. The priestess motioned for them all to come forward.

Hours later, cramped and frozen, they stirred. The lamb which had struggled to be born turned to nuzzle its mother. The priestess' robes were stained crimson with the ewe's blood and soaked with her own sweat. She motioned them to go, saying, "The rite is ended. Go from this place freely and of your own will."

The others led them into the house. Frozen toes and fingers thawed and ached in the warmth of the living room fire. Warm clothing was brought for them and hot cider pressed into their hands. Delicious smells emanated from the kitchen. The feast was ready.

• • •

The priestess, no longer clad in her soiled robe, sat at the head of the table.

"Do any of you know why we just did what we did?" she asked.

"Do you mean birthing the lamb or kidnapping and torturing us?" Deborah demanded.

"It was a test." Jon said to Deborah. Takoda nodded; "Yes, a test, but also symbolic."

Aileen volunteered; "It was a rite to the Goddess." Teague nodded at the priestess. "I've heard that wisdom comes with listening. So..." he smiled, hoping she wouldn't be offended.

"Birth is a miracle," she replied. "It is the beginning of a new life. There is joy at such a beginning, but there is also pain and blood, tears, perspiration. The fluids of life. We can never know joy without sorrow, pleasure without pain, for one completes the other.

Each new life brings us another chance to attain Ascension. Each of you is a new child who holds the future of our Tradition in your hands. You have come from the womb where you were silent, blind, naked and tied to the umbilical cord. We have cut you free. Now you are new-born. Learn of us, and join with the Verbena."

Teague asked. "Where's Robin?"

"None of those who first found you and brought you to us are here," she answered. "I am Rhianna Flamedancer. I

shall be your teacher in the days to come. Do not worry. You will see your other friends again."

"They aren't my friends. They said they'd teach me power." Deborah challenged Rhianna.

Rhianna studied the younger woman. "I see. You're one of Mother Celene's?"

"She says she's the head witch, if that's what you mean."

Rhianna paused in thought. "Child, I would extend to you the chance to leave that one's Path. There are many differing Paths open to the Verbena. You need not choose one so filled with pain and violence."

Deborah sneered, "Why? What are you going to teach me, moondancing?"

"Screw you," Aileen heard herself say before she knew she was going to speak, "I 'moondance' as you call it. My sisters care about me. Just because you're twisted..." She broke off as Teague raised a hand.

"Peace. Pax. Enough. We aren't here to fight." He gestured for Rhianna to continue.

The priestess studied Deborah for another moment, then said, "Perhaps it would be best for me to give you a little background on who we are and what we're about. We'll talk after dinner."

• • •

Nature was changeable when the world was young and magic still at play.

— *The Enchanted World: Spells and Bindings*

Rhianna composed herself and began; "You may have learned parts of this before. Be patient. We will cover at least some things you don't know..."

You may have heard us called many things: witches, wiccans, pagans, new agers, druids, goddess freaks, and probably scores of others I can't remember right now. We are more and less than all of those. Some of us may espouse one or more of those philosophies, but we are something else independent of and beyond those realities. Some Verbena honor the Goddess, but not all Goddess worshippers are Verbena. And some Goddess worshippers might be surprised by how literally and savagely the Verbena among them believe in the old ways.

We most definitely are *not* Satanists! Most of us don't believe in Satan and, in any case, summoning and communing with spirits is not our primary Sphere of magick. Nonetheless, fools throughout history have insisted upon linking nature religions and magick with devil worship. Arguing with such ignorance is useless. I can only hope that changing peoples' perceptions of what is real and good will eventually eradicate that destructive and dangerous belief.

Now that I've explained what we aren't, let me explain what we are. We are the eldest. We remember when we sprang from the Pure Ones and created the magick that others would later adopt. We are the light and the darkness, the sacred within the carnal. We accept the agony inherent



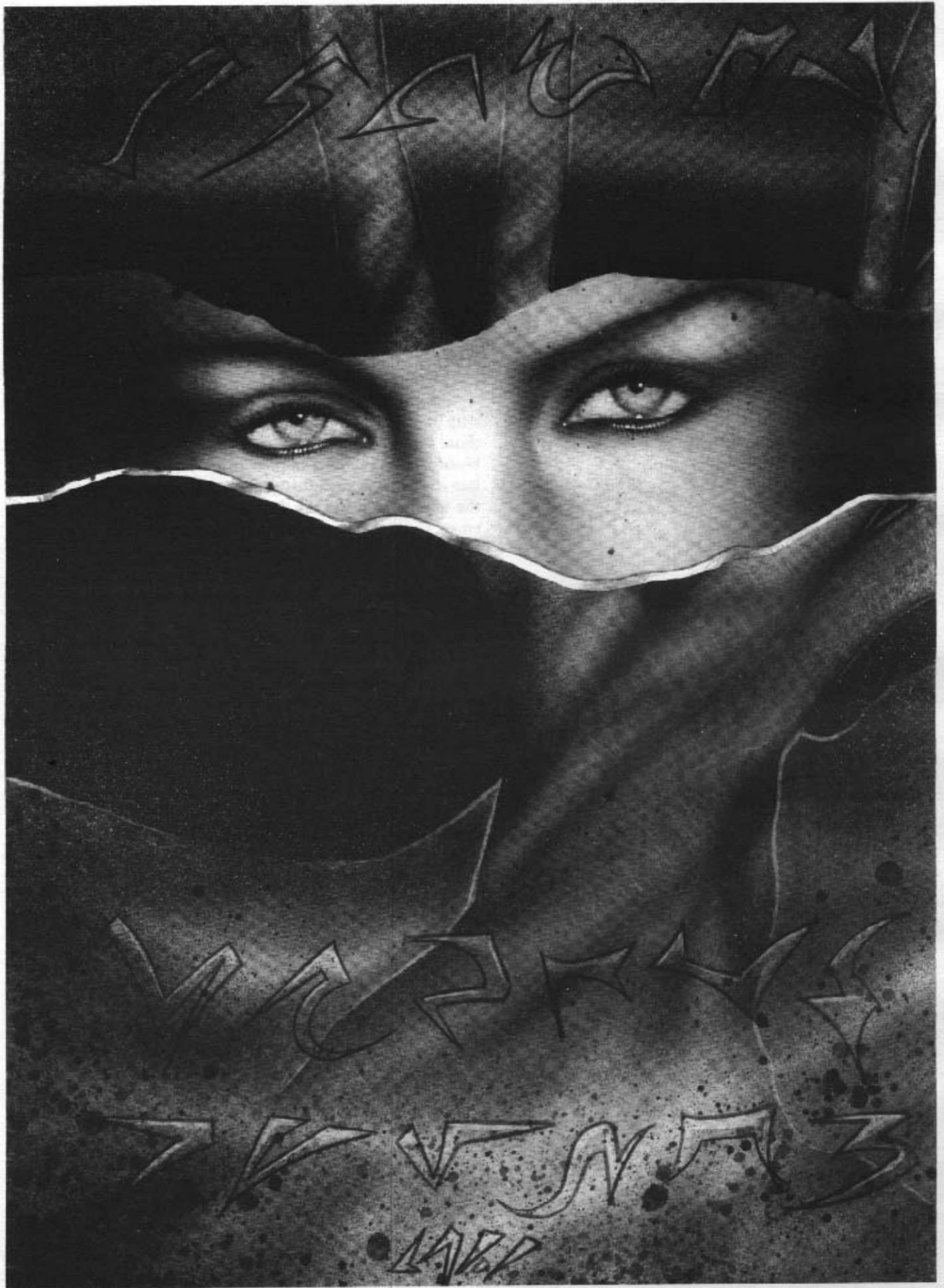
in the ecstatic and we welcome the great cycle. We know the wheel will turn from birth to death to birth again. Standing beneath the branches of our World Tree, we are the seeds from which new trees will grow. We are gardeners who water the roots and prune the branches that wither. We are the tree itself, each of us a root, trunk, branch, leaf or fruit. We are Life.

The Verbena are one of nine magickal Traditions. But only we hold the true knowledge of the nature of magick and reality. Through that knowledge, we can mold reality, changing the world and ourselves. The word 'impossible' does not exist for us. The other Traditions are joined with us because they, like we, do not accept the limitations imposed on us by the current consensual reality. While we do not always agree with one another, we *do* agree that we must stand against the evils of the Technocracy.

Paternalistic religions that declare women evil and strip us of power over our lives or bodies; the Inquisition; those who ushered in the Industrial Revolution with its brutal labor conditions and deadly smoke; those who pollute our rivers, contaminate our land, denude our forests; the warmongers; and the drug dealers — all are our enemies. Consider how alienated most people are from their bodies, how their minds are wrapped about with scientific gibberish disguised as ultimate truth. All this can be laid at the feet of the Technocracy. They would enslave us all to a static world ruled by their 'scientific laws.' Every day we work to liberate the world from the constraints of their worldview.

You must fight them by Awakening. Each of you has an Avatar, an inner self. When you become aware of and interact with that Avatar, you are Awakened. You can use your Avatar to learn magick. Sleepers, the majority of people in the world, are those who are unaware of their Avatars. We want to Awaken them all. That is Ascension. It is perfecting your understanding of the all. When someone reaches Ascension, everyone has a better chance of Ascending. Our lives are a journey we take to perfect ourselves.

Most Verbena undermine the Technocracy quietly, rather than force outright battles. We do not use the flash and bluster other Traditions embrace, but work subtly with the very essence of Life. Small changes grow and spread until they become the norm. The wheel turns. We survive and adapt, incorporate, and prevail."



Chapter One: Never Again the Burning Imbolc/Candlemas (History)

Verbena? Don't call me Verbena, boy. We could've just as easily been called Damiana, or Motherwort, or Valerian. Verbena is an herb that causes you to sweat and throw up. If you must call me something, call me Adept, or Wyckcae, or Aedina. Or just shut up and save your sweet words for someone who gives a damn.

— Sam Haine, Verbena Master



Talien grinned and motioned the new apprentices to enter his jumbled bedroom and find seats on the bed, floor, or at the computer table.

"Actually, Verbena is the Latin name for Vervain. Romans used it to consecrate their temples. It was an ingredient in love potions and a supposed deterrent to witches. The Christians thought it was used to staunch

Christ's wounds as he hung on the cross. Verbena isn't rare and it's pretty plain looking, but people throughout history have relied on it as a cure-all, a miracle plant. Since we always get tagged as healers or herbalists, the name seemed appropriate. It doesn't work for everything, by the way. At least, not since the Technocracy took over.

"I'll start by telling you I'm called Talien. That's not my real name, but then, names have power. Don't give your name away lightly."

"Yes, Obi-Wan," joked Teague.

"You have a computer?" Jon asked.

"Yeah, why not? I use it to organize my Book of Shadows, such as it is, and to keep my historical facts straight. Did you know there's a pagan BBS on the net? A lot of us black sheep like to get together in our own virtual reality and reclaim a few of the old Mythic Threads."

"Black sheep?" Kamaria looked interested.

"Yeah. Technopagans, like me. Most of the others don't consider me a true Verbena. They're convinced I'm an undercover Virtual Adept spying on them. But they certainly don't mind how organized I am, and they let me teach history. That's my real function. I'm a bard, a loremaster."

"So get to the point." Deborah stared through him.

Talien made a mock bow. "As you command, lady fair, but since it is the festival of Imbolc, I implore you to let me do so in honor of the Earth Mother. You may not have noticed yet, but the days are lengthening and spring is near. The Celts used to honor Brigit, goddess of fire, fertility and poetry at this time of year.

Just to confuse things, tomorrow is Candlemas. It's a Roman celebration in honor of Demeter. They used to light candles for her because she sought her daughter Persephone by candlelight. If you don't know that story, you'd probably better go back to Mythology 101. I like to think of both rites as a search for truth. Kind of like the tarot card with the hermit holding up the lighted lantern. Anyway, since Imbolc is associated with enlightenment and truth, what better time to teach you what we know of our past. So let me begin..."

"About time," spat Deborah, followed by a "Shhh," from everyone else...

"Let me say this: what you will hear is the truth as I know it. I will not willingly lie to you. My words mean nothing and everything. What you are about to hear is a lie. When you understand that, you will know what it is to be a mage.

We Verbena are the oldest Tradition. The Dreamspeakers are our closest cousins among the Traditions, but they were born from the fringes of our magick. We knew the original Pure Ones in their unsullied form. The Pure Ones gave the gift of blood and flesh to humanity, and shapers of their kind took on flesh and blood to guide the newborn living beings. These Bodhisattva-like Avatars mated with their charges, and the blood of the Pure Ones was mixed with that of humanity. From that wild blood, which spread across Africa, Central America, Europe and Asia, came those who today follow the path of shapeshifting through magical manipulations of the body."

Living Time: Visions



*Minnaloushe creeps through the grass
Alone, important and wise,
And lifts to the changing moon
His changing eyes.*

— W. B. Yeats, "The Cat and the Moon"

She stretched her rippling muscles and stood, jaws gaping as she caught their scent on the wind. They would be here soon, tracking her. Beastwoman they called her. Man-eater. Panther-goddess. Still, for all their cleverness, they did not know which woman she might be. She entered the sliding shadows of the jungle. Her green-gold eyes changed as her dark-vision found focus. The purity of her grace, her insistent hunger, and the thrill-fear of the hunt merged into an ecstatic whole. I am the divine huntress, her inner voice said, and we are one. The blood which caked her jaws bespoke the primordial, carnal nature she had chosen to embrace.

The beaters moved through the forest, clashing spears and whirling chewed leather noise-makers. They hoped to drive her before them so the warriors of the tribe could battle her on ground of their choosing. She leapt upward along a slanted branch and disappeared into the lower canopy. As they passed beneath her, she snuffled, tasting their blood scent and sweat. The clashing hurt her sensitive ears. Annoyed, she clawed at the branch.

As the chief tracker stopped and examined the claw marks on the slanted branch, she focused her will and began the transformation. By the time two of the warriors began climbing the tree, spears thrust before them, she was a glorious flash of color ascending on new wings. By the time they reached the

branch where she had lain in wait for them, she was back at the river with the other women. She stood tall, lithe and proud, while her changing eyes laughed.

• • •

"Kamaria?" Talien was waving a hand in front of her face as the others stared curiously. "Are you alright?"

No, I'm not alright, she wanted to scream. My perfect panther body, my wings, they are gone! I am here, alone. I am deformed. No primitive voice sings within me. She hunched over and tried to hide her back against a pillow.

"I'm fine," she answered.

"Well, some people say I'm boring, but that's the first time I've ever knocked someone out at the very start of a lesson!" Talien smiled. But his eyes spoke to hers and said, "I know you, panther-goddess. I see the truth of you that you do not yet know."

Aileen stroked her hand and whispered, "If you don't feel well, we could do this another time."

Kamaria nodded, touched by her kindness.

Takoda stared at her. *She had a vision*, he thought. *Does she know how lucky she is?*

"If we're through coddling her, can we get on with this?"

Jon glared at Deborah. "Were you born a bitch or did you have to take lessons?" he asked. Teague strummed a note on his harp and said, "To continue...!"



The Roots

*I heard an old voice say
'Don't go far from the land
The seasons have their way
No mortal can understand.'*

— Loreena McKennitt, "Courtyard Lullaby"

"To continue. From the blending of Pure Ones and humanity came the Wyck. The Wyck, who could bend fate and shape life to their choosing, were the first, Primordial Verbena. Great shaman who needed neither food nor sleep, who didn't know death, and who could heal afflictions with a touch, the Wyck often wandered into a human encampment, stayed a few days, and left again to live apart. It was said that those who crossed them died soon thereafter. Verbena tradition holds that the Wyck brought the gifts of fire, planting, wine, calendars and even written language to humanity...

In the civilizations of Sumer and Egypt, and later in Athens, Rome and Constantinople, fertility religions arose. Known as mystery cults, most had similar stories or common threads. These stories told of life, death, and rebirth or renewal which bespoke a kind of immortality. In Egypt, Isis gathered the severed parts of Osiris to restore him to life; in Greece, Dionysus' death and rebirth as the son of the fertility goddess Semele sparked an orgiastic cult in which wild dancing, overindulgence of every kind, and free-flowing drink led to an inevitable "re-creation." Children born nine months after these revels were considered to be under Dionysus' special blessing.

I spoke of Demeter and Persephone's story that explained the renewal of Spring. The Romans honored Cybele, a fertility goddess associated with the moon, change and flux. She had three aspects — Maiden, Mother and Hag — and her counterpart, the god, changed as well. He won the hand of the Maiden and became her consort, then was sacrificed and his body laid out by the Hag. Finally, he was reborn as a son to the Mother from his union with the Maiden. In those days magick was not yet confined, so who is to say the stories were not true, the god-beings not real? Who is to say that sacrifices made to those gods in times of scarcity did not work some sympathetic magick to bring back the sun from its winter sleep or revitalize the earth with living blood!

• • •

She crumbled the clods of earth between her fingers and looked up at the elder. The people stood patiently, just at the edges of the field. Holding their pouches of seeds and their planting sticks, they awaited the decision of the priestesses.

The elder extended a hand and helped her stand. "You know what must be," she said.

The younger woman nodded her head, and they walked back to the people.

"Not today," the elder said, motioning them to disperse.

Tilting her head back to gaze at the clear blue sky, the younger priestess made a quick prayer to the Goddess to send rain. The land had lain without moisture for far too long. Usually the spring rains came early. This year, no clouds had covered the sky all spring. Grass and trees, bushes and the few crops that began to bud were all brown and withering. They had almost exhausted the few, weak streams and ponds nearby. They would need to know soon if they had to abandon their home and search for a new one.

The chieftain stood a little apart. He waited until his people had gone, then turned to the elder priestess.

"Mother?"

"Something has upset the balance," she replied, "We have been too greedy. We have not given thanks to the Mother, and we have been lazy."

He nodded. "I will tell them that we must all go without food and water today. Perhaps the Mother will hear our plea."

When he was gone, the elder turned to the younger priestess and said, "He is a fine man."

"He is your son," she replied.

"And a good husband to you," the elder woman continued.

"I will always honor him." The elder searched the younger woman's face for signs of her feelings. When she was satisfied that the sadness she found was matched by determination, they returned to the village.

Though they had eaten and drunk nothing throughout the day, priestess and chieftain celebrated the Mother's love that night. She clasped him to her, running her hands along his muscled body, tasting his sweat mingled with hers, as their bodies moved as one in the ancient dance. When she felt he was satisfied, when her magick told her that she now carried his seed within her, she pulled forth the ritual knife and slashed once, then again.

The young priestess rose. Clad only in her long, brown hair and her husband's blood, she grasped the bowl which had caught most of the hot blood and ran to the fields. Reverently, she danced and sprinkled the blood over the lifeless ground. Over the stony earth she passed and sang and screamed her pain.

Blinding light illuminated the fields. The blood-drenched woman danced and laughed, then knelt and wept as thunder rolled across the sky and rain began to fall.

• • •

Aileen's crazed laughter was followed by a scream. Tears ran down her face. Talien silently handed her a tissue. Deborah snorted in disgust. Teague moved to put a comforting arm around her.

"I...saw myself. Like in a dream when you aren't yourself, but you know it's you." Aileen almost whispered. She was shaking. "I killed my husband. I had to, to end a drought. It seemed so sensible at the time. I mean, it sounds horrible, but it worked."

"Hey, you can kill them all for all I care," smirked Deborah.



Kamaria ventured, "That's what happened to me. Like a dream, but not a dream."

"A vision," said Takoda.

Jon stared at Deborah, silently daring her to say anything more, but she gave him a superior smile and leaned back.

"Don't be too surprised at your reactions," soothed Talien. "You may be beginning to commune with your Avatars and get glimpses of a sort of universal shared consciousness, or you may be experiencing your past lives."

"Reincarnation?" asked Aileen.

"Why not? Not too long ago, you didn't believe in magick either. Also, don't underestimate the power of a true bard. There are certain harmonic frequencies and voice tones which can cause visions or hypnotize a receptive subject." Takoda sat forward attentively.

The Shaping of the Tree

With one wish we wake the will

Within wisdom.

— Dead Can Dance, "Song of Sophia"

"We were talking about fertility religions. Similar themes can be found in the old religions of India, Central America, and North America." Talien glanced at Takoda. "Your Mother Earth, Father Sky, and Rainbow Woman, to name a few, are all part of the same pattern. What is a rain dance but a fertility rite? Who is the Mayan maize god but the Corn King, the consort of the Goddess?"

The Wyck raised their children to follow the path of the Pure Ones. These mages, whom the Tradition called Aeduna, were the priestesses and priests of their cultures. They were counsellors, midwives, healers, apothecaries, astrologers, record-keepers, arbiters and philosophers: they argued with Socrates and established the secret Bacchanalian blood cults and the Eleusinian mysteries. Through their position in society, they held political as well as social power, and their mystical abilities enabled them to influence long-term policy. Since royal blood was traced from mother to child, and the Aeduna were the record-keepers, they were able to prune a royal family tree or direct its seed in a profitable direction.

At some point, the Dreamspeakers split from the Verbena. Where we saw Life to be revered in all things, Dreamspeakers saw the spirits of the natural and supranatural world. Those of us among the Verbena who pray to the Goddess pray to our inner vision of the creative and destructive force of the Tellurian. When we use the Sphere of Life, we manipulate the energies inherent in all living things. To Dreamspeakers, the Goddess is but a greater spirit and the life within living things proves that each is inhabited by a spirit. It's a subtle difference, but an important one.

Most Native Americans follow the way of the Dreamspeakers. Almost all end up as shaman, medicine men, or witch doctors. All of them have one thing in common — they deal with the spirit world. Before the Inquisition, the differences between Verbena and Dreamspeaker were not always apparent, and even today, there are strong ties between the two Traditions.

During the early dark ages, the Aeduna became wanderers, their old temples and ancient knowledge lost, their political clout dwindled. They began teaching anyone who had the barest glimmer of the Blood, spreading their knowledge and wisdom through a runic system that served as a guide for mnemonic enhancement. Despite these runes, most knowledge was handed down orally through lorekeepers.

Several Wyck had spent much time in what would later become Scandinavia. During the Norse, Saxon and Angle invasions of the area now known as France and Britain, the Verbena's ancient Wyck roots were nourished as Viking and Celtic beliefs, rituals, stories and practices merged. This mingling began long before the invasions themselves; during the Roman occupation, many Aeduna crossed the seas on both sides. When the cultures themselves crossed swords, long after the Romans had gone, the roots of our Tradition were watered with blood...

• • •

The sea lashed the coast, raging at the cliffs it could not climb. He stood at the end of the promontory waiting for inspiration. They would come soon. He must be ready. The warriors were adorned. The rites had been performed. Weapons lay close at hand. All was in readiness except for him.

Gray skies lowered over him, flowing with the brisk, cold wind. The smell of the coming storm overpowered the scents of salt spray and sea wrack. He pulled his mantle closer and began to chant.

The gray standing stones which served to tell of the movements of the stars towered over him. The wind whipped and thrashed about them, and whispered incantations in its sighing voice. Head bowed, he stood beneath the capstone in the center of the circle. Leaves blew around him and soft rain pattered on his head as thunder grumbled distantly.

"I hear you, old ones," he said quietly. "I know your secret names and the patterns of your growing. I have learned the ancient lore and the wisdom of my elders. I have studied the battles and memorized the verses. Why can I not make my own? They all depend on me, now. The old ones are all gone. The last of the great druids has surrendered to death and I am the only lorekeeper for my people. I am the last."

The young bard wept for a dying world, but when he came down from the sacred stones, he smiled and touched the warriors' shoulders in reassurance. Moving to the king, the bard blessed him. They were ready. From across the hills, they could hear the enemy marching, clashing swords on shields as they moved forward in their ordered rows.



He gave the signal and the warriors started forward. He moved ahead, and began to chant. As he saw the invaders, all fear fell from him.

In the old days, it often chanced that the strength of one bard's verses was sufficient to cause the other to surrender or agree to a truce without a battle. These cowardly Romans did not know enough to send their own bard to meet him, so the challenges could not be given properly. They lacked knowledge of the old ways and profaned the ground upon which they walked. The verses he hurled at the Romans blackened and felled them as they marched. For every one he killed, another stepped forward. Battle was joined, and he sang:

We are the inheritors, the wise, the Aeduna.

Into our hands Life has been given.

We, who know the seasons.

We, who guard the secrets.

Our learning is as old as earth and sea.

We are fire and water, earth and air.

Our blood is of the sacred Blood of the Wyckcae.

We shall spill blood this day, ours and our enemy's.

Blood

Blood which is water

Water in the ocean

Ocean-birtherd life

Life that lives

In blood.

His ecstasy ended as the short, broad sword pierced his heart.

• • •

Teague gasped and sat forward. The sheer power of the vision both repulsed and thrilled him. Deborah stood up and headed for the door.

"Call me when we get back to business," she said. Aileen patted Teague's back. Kamaria squeezed his hand.

Jon shrugged apologetically. "Wonder who's next?" he said.

"I will be," Takoda breathed, so quietly that no one heard his wistful longing.

Talien stood up. "That's it for now," he said. "You need time to digest what you've heard. We'll meet again tomorrow."

• • •

They gathered in his room the next morning. Kamaria smiled at Deborah and said, "I've been thinking about my vision, and you know what?"

"Do you think you're speaking to someone who cares what you think?" asked Deborah.

Kamaria continued, "I said, do you know what? I don't like your attitude, girl. Lay your tongue on me again and you just might find you've caught hold of a panther. Fair warning."

Jon looked both surprised and pleased.

Talien stood up, "Enough," he said. "We have things to do. If you have difficulties with one another, leave them outside this room..."

The Melding of the Arts

Trees so tall and proud

Forest so grand

How much longer will they stand

Will they stand

— Maire Brennan, "Voices of the Land"

Back to history. We ended with the merging of the ways. So. There was a sharing of old knowledge with new. Hermetic influences from Rome and Greece and the highly ordered Qabbalistic influences of the Hebrew peoples merged with the Verbena craft.

The result of this exchange of wisdom was that the Aeduna and the Wyck merged to form the Wyckcae of Italy, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, France, Britain and Ireland. All across the land the shared wisdom of the runes, the forms, the spells, the charms that had been passed down for generations now were given to a new kind of Verbena — the old wise woman in the woods who offered herbs for sickness and who drove away dark faeries, the cunning man who knew songs for the hunt and could carve arrows straight so they would pierce deep. Like the Wyck, these wise people knew about healing and life. Like the Aeduna, they were midwives, record-keepers, rememberers and arbiters. Many more traditions sprang up as magick grew and changed and adapted to new environments. We developed several disciplines of magic, which would later be called 'Spheres:' Forces, Matter, Mind, Prime, and Correspondence were all important, but we were most concerned with Life, for without Life, none of the others are possible."

• • •

The tree towered above him, its gnarled roots trailing down the embankment like grasping fingers. He washed himself in the clear pool that fed its roots. He lay back in the shallow water and gazed at the entertwining branches overhead. They stretched and yearned in all directions. Absently, he picked up an acorn which had fallen into the pool and thought, "I have not felt this young in many seasons."

When he felt cleansed and at one with the world, he stepped from the pool. The attendants were there to drape soft cloth about his body. A simple robe was all he needed. He held the acorn as he walked toward the sacred grove, weighing its life potential. Smiling, he let it drop, whispered "May you arise to shade my son," and entered the grove.

His brothers were waiting for him. Moving forward, he clasped them in turn, greeting and thanking each for attending the festival. They sat. Each took a barley cake, symbolic of the bounty of the land, and ate it. They washed it down with barley beer, then all stood and formed a circle.

In the center of the circle, the great oak, lifetree of the tribe, held reign. At the tree's foot a young man, strong-limbed and



handsome, thrashed in the throes of fever and cried out as the wise ones came near.

He knelt down beside the young man and placed a hand upon his brow. "Be still, my son," he said, "You will not suffer long now." He turned to the others. "I am ready."

They tied the rope about his neck and threw the other end over a sturdy branch. He looked at his brethren for the last time. "For the life of my son," he said and closed his eyes. They pulled the rope until he hung from the tree; they then chanted for the renewal of life. As he jerked and kicked, two grabbed his flailing arms and slashed them with their sickles. His lifeblood ran down, splattering the wise ones, the tree and his son. As the blackness took him, he thought he saw a golden light streaming from his own body to the body of his son. Content that his sacrifice would be enough, he whispered one word; "Awaken."

...

Jon opened his eyes when Aileen poked him. "Fall asleep?" she asked.

"Was it another vision?" asked Takoda. Jon nodded.

"So why aren't you screaming like everybody else?" Deborah asked. Takoda scowled at her. "Do you never think of anything but pain?" he asked. She looked away.

"I was a willing sacrifice. Somehow, I was transferring my life to my son, who was dying. But it was symbolic too."

Teague asked, "Do you want to tell us the whole story?"

"Do not," said Takoda. "The vision is yours. You must interpret it and use it to guide your life."

Kamaria nodded her agreement. "Keep it for yourself. If there is a need to share it, tell it to us then."

Talien smiled. "You're learning," he said. "Even within the Verbena, there are secrets we all keep. We don't all agree with or confide in one another. Even within cabals there are personality clashes, and no one but a fool gives away all her secrets. That said, let's continue..."

The Burning

When will I see

An end to destruction and woe

— Clannad, "Anam"

During the Inquisition, the Wise were nearly wiped out. There were only five covens left after the Burning Times. Two of those were Gardeners, the others split off and formed the other Circles. One such, the Twisters of Fate, were a radical fundamentalist group that went back to the Tradition's Primordial roots. They had help from a Wyck. To save the Tradition, the Verbena finally began Awakening Sleepers who were not of the old Blood.

As the church gained more converts and power, the Verbena were forced underground. Before the Burning Times, if someone accused a neighbor of witchcraft, the burden of proof was on the accuser. Also, before the church equated Herne the Hunter, or Cerrunos the Stag, with the devil, no one had any reason to condemn someone for



being a witch. That just meant she was a pagan or a Goddess worshipper, and might be able to brew herbal remedies or make the cow start giving milk again. Though they had lost their position as spiritual leaders of the people, the Verbena were still highly respected as healers, herbalists, midwives, and experts in agricultural matters.

The Burning Times let loose a horror of false accusation, torture and death unlike anything even dreamed of by the old ones who had practiced blood sacrifice as a sacred ritual. The blame for this goes to the Order of Hermes and their 'grand experiment' of living openly in covenants. Splits within the Order led to practices that convinced the church that all mages were demon worshippers. We blame their folly for bringing the Inquisition down on us, but save our greatest contempt for the Celestial Chorus, who in their arrogance ignored the death cries of their fellow mages. Many Verbena went to the gallows or the flames to protect others from persecution. Other victims of the fires were simple people who knew nothing of magick, but had angered a neighbor or owned land the church could steal after it had condemned them for heresy and witchcraft..."

• • •

Though the pain had mercifully receded, her head still swam. Was she floating? Mayhap her tormentors had the right of it; she was a thing accursed. The coarse shift slid over her still-bleeding body where the lash had torn her flesh. Her crushed fingers throbbed in sympathy and she awoke enough to realize she was being carried. She felt the fear and hatred of those who had gathered to bear witness to her death.

She had once believed the Inquisitors would come to understand that she was innocent. But long since then she had despaired of telling the truth and confessed to whatever they wished to hear. They said she was a witch and would hear nothing else. She had never imagined that such pain and indignity could be inflicted upon her. In the end she had signed their foul confession. She would have signed anything. When she recanted, they had raped and tortured her again until she made a new confession. In her agony and delirium, she knew she had named others — equally innocent — now doomed as she was.

The stake loomed ahead. Piles of wood lay around it, awaiting the torch to set them alight. The hooded one stood nearby. Set upon her broken feet, she would have fallen had not the hooded man put a hand out to steady her. He lifted her upward to the stake and bound her hands behind it. He pulled a rope around her legs and locked the chains across her, binding her firmly.

The grim Inquisitor who had broken her body read her death sentence; "For that this woman hath been found guilty of witchcraft and consorting with Satan and the demons of Hell, and whereby she hath recanted her confession and refused absolution, then do we condemn her to that flame which shall consume her soul forever. Amen."

Had she recanted again? She couldn't remember. She thought for a moment on the evil of those who would condemn the gifts of the old ones. The flames were kindled, and the crackling fires rose

all about her. Her screams mingled with the roar of the flames as her skin blackened and burst, showering her with her own lifeblood. Her eyes burned in their sockets. As the ropes which bound her hands and feet burned through, she danced in wailing agony

Held fast by the chains of ignorance and greed which bound her to the stake, Deborah shrieked her agony and rage.

• • •

Deborah lay on Talien's bed. Panting. Shaking. Dry eyed. *Never again*, she vowed. The others stood over her, their white faces showing shock. She smelled burnt hair, and noted with some surprise that Rhianna was there as well. Crackling bolts of energy radiated from Rhianna's fingers and eyes. Everyone except Talien stayed well away. Even he was careful not to touch the bed where Deborah lay.

"Why are you here?" Deborah croaked. Her whole body ached. She realized Talien was holding her hand. Now that she could track her surroundings, she saw scorches on the wall and felt soggy blankets under her.

"What...?" She looked to Rhianna. Rhianna frowned at Talien. The energy bolts gained power and zapped out toward him. He leaned away.

"Our bard has many powers," Rhianna began, "not least among them the power of suggestion. You imagined yourself somewhere else, didn't you?"

Deborah swallowed painfully. Her lungs still seemed blackened from the smoke. "What did I do?"

"You set yourself on fire," Talien mumbled.

Deborah shook from the memory of the flames, but said nothing.

Rhianna spoke; "I believe you have an old soul and a powerful Avatar, Deborah, but one that was horribly and painfully denied its time in your past life. Perhaps that is why you are so negative in this one. You lash out; you destroy. I hope you can learn and grow this time around. We will do all we can to help you reach Ascension. For now, Talien and Jon will carry you to your room. You need to rest."

The priestess shooed everyone out, saying, "Tomorrow, Talien will finish your history lessons." She looked at the young bard and added, "Without the visions, Talien. Understood?" Subdued, he nodded. She didn't see Takoda's face.

• • •

Rebirth

The group met again the next morning in the kitchen. All were quiet and thoughtful.

"We won't go into too much more detail," Talien said, "Especially since I'm pretty sure most of you know a lot of the rest..."

"Okay, here it is. During the Renaissance and the Age of Reason, the Verbena formed many secret groups and re-established family traditions. In many cases, Verbena were lost to the Tradition as they gathered into family groups



rather than covens. Even today, there are still people who discover their heritage when they attend a Wiccan ceremony or stumble upon descriptions of "superstitions" their family has kept alive for centuries. Many Mythic Threads, those ties to the mythic world which mages protect and keep alive, were allowed to slip during this era because of the secrecy engendered by the fear of persecution. Scientific knowledge gained ascendancy as old myths and legends were "disproven." As the memory of the Burning Times grew dim, Verbena became more bold, remaining secret but growing powerful again. Many still believe that Protestantism was the Verbena's strike against the Celestial Chorus (though no one will admit it). On the plus side, Verbena didn't have to work very hard to understand how to do coincidental magick: we'd been working 'behind the scenes' for centuries. After all, simple things like the-gifts of fire, agriculture and writing have affected humanity in a major way.

During the Industrial Revolution, the Verbena realized their secrecy had cost them the war for reality, and that the Technocracy was on its way to making the world unfit for living beings. Modern Verbena could see the value in some technological devices and had no trouble incorporating sanitation, vaccinations, indoor plumbing and other conveniences. To them, the question was not whether technology itself was evil, but whether it was used to promote life or to degrade and destroy it. Many Verbena fled the Gardeners of the Tree because they couldn't hold to such rigid traditions any longer. This led to a fracture between the Gardeners and all the other Circles that is still healing today.

Many of us have found places within the ranks of various occult groups. Gardenerian (as distinct from our Gardeners of the Tree) and Alexandrian Wiccan groups, the Rosicrucians, the Order of the Golden Dawn, Dianic Goddess worshippers, modern Druids, New Agers, crystalmancers, holistic healers, Native American medicine societies, African witch doctors, Tantric practitioners, Chinese herbalists, and even the Masons have had Verbena among them at various times.

Today we are hunted by the Technocracy. Their view of reality has become so entrenched that whenever we use our magick openly, we are assaulted by Paradox. Disbelief is a powerful force; try conjuring a dragon in a subway station if you don't believe me. Still, we make inroads. We plant seeds of ideas and let them germinate. We work for environmental concerns, hoping we can save enough to bring about a new Mythic Age. Some among us claim we will never succeed until we all agree to a set way of doing things; I say diversity is good for us.

The sun is shining. The snow is melting. Go outside. I'm through talking."

The others drifted out. Takoda still sat at the table, staring at his hands.

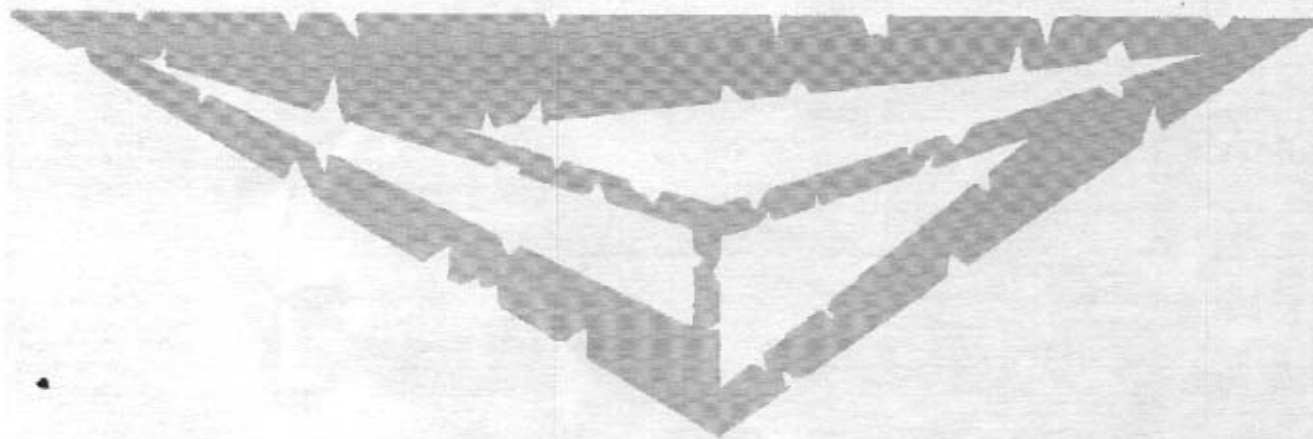
"Despite what she said, I can't do it for you." Talien spoke quietly.

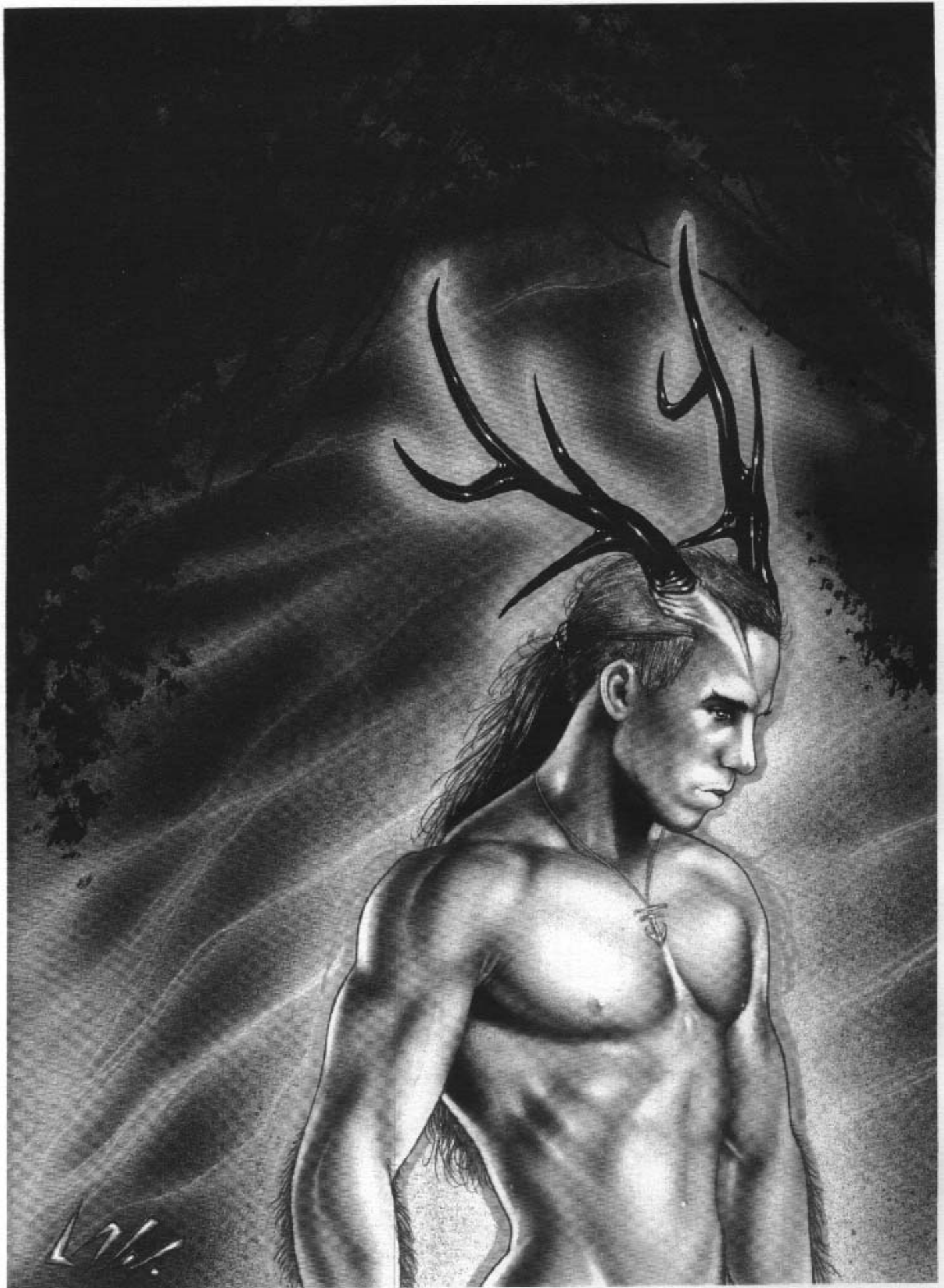
"It isn't your fault. The lack is in me." Takoda sighed, "I couldn't even see visions the time I tried peyote."

"I'm sorry." There was true regret in Talien's voice.

"I guess I'll have to settle for what I do have." Takoda tried to smile as he stood up. "After all, I can see health, and I need no vision to teach me that." He nodded to Talien and went outside.

The bard watched until Takoda, whose name means "friend to them all," was lost to view.





Chapter Two: Blessing the Fields Beltaine Eve (Culture and Politics)

*Bonfires dot the rolling hillsides
Figures dance around and around
To drums that pulse out echoes of darkness
Moving to the pagan sound
— Loreena McKennitt, "All Souls Night"*



Lindara is perfect, Kamaria decided. From Jon's and Takoda's reactions, she guessed they thought so too. Lindara's graceful body, evident health and exotic features compelled attention. It didn't hurt that she was dressed in top-flight gothic punk gear.

"The others are busy preparing for the rite. I'm going to explain a few things about us that you might not have picked up on yet."

"Like what?" asked Jon. He seemed nervous.

"Well, I'm not sure you've been told what the Verbena try to accomplish nowadays. Do you know about the factions within the Verbena? Has anyone mentioned the tenth Sphere?"

"Tenth Sphere?" Teague looked intrigued.

"You're jumping ahead. I'd rather start with what the Verbena do, rather than what we are."

Deborah spoke, "We know what we are, we've been told at great length. Can't we skip the history of paganism thing and get to the party?"

Lindara smiled; "Sure, go ahead." She motioned toward the door.

Deborah hesitated for a moment, then, afraid to back down, got up and left. The others looked at the floor or each other. Teague shook his head.

"If she doesn't want to know what I can teach her, I'm not going to force her to learn. Screw her, she'll make it or she won't. The rest of you, listen..."

Influence: Mythic Threads

Pass the word

Pass the ladle

Pass the plate to all who hunger

Pass the wit of ancient wisdom

Pass the cup of crimson wonder

— Jethro Tull, "Cup of Wonder"

In the Mythic Age, magick helped shape the world. Our wills created whatever our minds could conceive. The Technocracy changed all that. The other Traditions have a skewed picture of what we want. They think we're trying to bring back the Mythic Age. They're wrong. Let me set the record straight.

The Verbena aren't interested in bringing back the Mythic Age...that wouldn't be productive. We *do* want to establish a new Mythic Age in our own paradigm. It's important to guard and defend old Mythic Threads, since they're the seeds for the new ones. We believe that they're still there, but if no one remembers what they once were, there's no way to recreate them. The Gardeners of the Tree are the most fanatical guardians of the old Threads. My own group, the Lifeweavers, believe we can empower the Mythic Threads by finding them within ourselves and bringing them to fruition.

Verbena influence can be seen in the rising popularity of crystals, tarot cards, faeries, psychics, vampires, werewolves and medieval fantasies. The Syndicate makes shitloads of money from these crazes, but they do so at the expense of their Technocratic brethren (which plays into our hands nicely). Of course, the things they commercialize are diminished. Sleepers rarely encounter the truth behind most of the occult and fantasy items they purchase. Nonetheless, enough of them believe in such things — or wish they believed in them — that our desired reality is never wholly destroyed or forgotten.

Every instance of a true Mythic Thread in existence today is important to building a new reality. We fight for them all, hoping they'll blossom into an anchor for our reality. For example, if a unicorn was discovered sleeping in some remote area, we'd send as many initiates as we could to guard it and lead it to one of our Horizon Realms. By the way, this *does* mean the Verbena are a little close to being Marauders, but I guess that sort of goes without saying.

There aren't an awful lot of us, and we don't tend to show off our power. Most of us find flashy magick distasteful, although we'll use a vulgar magick effect if we have to. Our way of doing things is to conceal our movements and link our principles to compatible ideas proposed by others. The Verbena managed to turn the Pharmacopeist's birth control pill into something that empowers women; we continually work to ensure that women have control over



their own bodies. Our spies within Technocracy laboratories warn us of impending moves and will one day use their positions to destroy the Technocracy's stranglehold over medicine. Along with our allies, we war against those who destroy the earth. Any questions?"

Festivals

"I'd like to know a little more about Verbena society and meetings," Aileen asked.

Jon absently put his arm around Kamaria's shoulders and seemed surprised when she flinched. "Stop that. There is nothing wrong with you," he whispered fiercely. She slowly relaxed as Lindara began speaking again...

"Verbena still organize themselves around the Wheel of the Year. Once it was purely agricultural — having to do with the seasons and harvest. Now it's as much symbolic as anything, though the Gardeners of the Tree, the Moon-Seekers, and some of the Twisters of Fate might disagree with me. We have a number of meeting times which correspond to old pagan festivals.

You might expect me to begin at the beginning of the year; we tend to think of starting at the end. Naturally! We're mages, we don't have to do things logically. One of the Gardeners talked about it once in terms of "working." He said in order to perform a magickal working upon something or someone, you first had to clear out the old garbage. You don't make a dancing circle without clearing out the sticks and stones that might bruise someone's feet, and you don't start the new year or begin a new work without bidding goodbye to the old one. Besides, it's all circular anyway. The end is the beginning. For whatever reason, we begin by ending, so we begin with Samhain.

• Samhain is held on October 31st, which most people call Halloween. Despite the spelling and the Verbena who calls himself Sam Haine, the word is from Gaelic and is actually pronounced "sah-vun." Originally, it was one of the four great fire festivals that marked the year. Though it's a nature festival, it's also the time when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is thinnest. The Verbena believe strongly in reincarnation, in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and we look during this time of year for the rebirth of one or more of the old ones, the Wyck who first shared the blood of the Pure Ones. That's why we traditionally search for apprentices at Samhain. Those who can't attend the Great Gathering keep the festival in their own circles. We're always doubly on guard at Samhain as well, since our enemies know it is one of our most important gatherings. If you Awaken and become a part of us, you will be taught the way to Winter Castle, one of the four secret Verbena Horizon Realms, so you may celebrate with us there.

Winter Solstice occurs on December 21st or 22nd. This is a time of new beginnings, time to introduce our new apprentices to our Tradition. We invest our hopes for the

future and for the preservation of the ancient Mythic Threads in our new apprentices. Winter Solstice is usually a minor meetingtime for us unless we have new apprentices to welcome.

Imbolc and Candlemas are both held in February. Imbolc is celebrated on February 1st and Candlemas on the 2nd. These are other fire festivals, revolving around the re-awakening of the earth after the winter. We also see this time as the re-awakening of knowledge and of dormant Mythic Threads. At Imbolc, many honor the Maiden, the first aspect of the goddess, who bears within her the seeds planted the previous Beltaine. It is a time to share our Tradition's history with apprentices. Imbolc serves as another of our major meetings. Spring Cottage Horizon Realm is open to those Verbena who can find their way to it.

The Vernal Equinox, which usually occurs on March 21st or 22nd, is a minor festival. This is the time when dark and light share the day equally. Usually we meet to celebrate with one another. If there is great need or unfinished work from our Imbolc meeting, we get back together in a prearranged place to discuss things at this time.

Beltaine, the festival we're here to celebrate tonight, is also known as May Eve. It falls on April 30th and is the third great fire festival of our calendar. This is the time when the Young Lord fights the old one for the Maiden's hand. He then plants the seeds within the Maiden which will come to fruition at Imbolc. Beltaine is a time for ridding oneself of a problem by taking something that symbolizes the problem and throwing it into the fire. It's a time for overcoming obstacles that we've inadvertently placed in our own paths. Beltaine is our time for letting intuition rule. The word "intuition" means inner tuition, or self teaching, and we work to find strands of the Mythic Threads buried inside ourselves at this time of year. This meeting is usually held at Summer Grove, our third Horizon Realm.

Summer Solstice, on June 21st, is another minor meeting, usually held only among circle members. The modern Druids feel differently, and meet at Stonehenge for the Summer Solstice. This is the longest day of the year, and it marks the inexorable turn of the wheel back to the second half of the year.

Lammas or Lughnasad falls on August 1st or 2nd, and is the fourth great fire festival of the year. It's a harvest celebration, the time when we assess what we have accomplished during the preceding months. Lammas is usually the time we harvest what we have wrought in our apprentices. It's a time for Awakening their Avatars and initiating them into the Tradition. It is a most important meeting, since the Verbena make plans for the future at Lughnasad. Autumn Circle, the last of the hidden Horizon Realms, is used for this meeting.

The Autumnal Equinox, which falls on the 22nd or 23rd of September is another time of equality. The sun loses its potency, as the darkness overtakes it and the days shorten. Circles often schedule meetings to discuss upcoming events at the Autumnal Equinox. Traditionally, it served as a festival to mark the last of the harvest and clear the ground for the spring planting. I like to think of it as a time to dispense with old business and clear away dead wood.

That brings us back around to Samhain and the waning of the year again. We've followed the wheel of the year as it turned, but we haven't returned to the place where we began. We've changed and grown and learned all during the year..."

Lindara looked at her watch. "Just about right as far as the timing goes. The celebration is about to start. I'll see you all outside. I want to change into something more comfortable."

• • •

Challenge

Deborah clutched the butcher knife she had stolen from the kitchen. Humiliated and angry at being so easily dismissed, hating them all, but wanting desperately to belong, she had retreated to the barn. Unbidden tears dripped down her face as she used the knife to cut shallow lines across her wrists. MAYBE I SHOULD JUST KILL MYSELF, she thought. Hunched in the straw, Deborah cut patterns, runes of power Mother Celene had taught her. She licked the blood from one wrist, while drawing a wavering circle of blood with the other. If she only knew whether she wanted to make herself popular, to punish the others or to become powerful, she might be able to work magick. Within her something snarled, demanding its freedom. She washed away the coagulating blood with her tears. NOT YET, she thought...

• • •

The fire leapt and crackled. Sky-clad dancers imitated the flickering movements, flowing around the circle. Each cast a small bundle into the fire, jumping and shouting as the flames consumed the packages. Kamaria moved as well as her crippled spine allowed, longing to feel again the power she had known as a panther-woman. They had given her a chaplet of flowers and she wished she could be graceful enough to wear it with honor.

Suddenly he was by her side, rough hand at her waist, hot body pressed against her, trapping her next to him, his horned head towering above her. She looked around for help. No one else noticed, or made a move to help her.

His hot breath tickled her ear; "You are the one. I choose you as my mate. You of the humped back and the dancing eyes." She tried to pull away. "Why do you resist me?" he asked. "Did you not come here hoping to be chosen? I see beyond that which you despise in yourself. Did you not know that in the elder days, such as you were

thought to be great seers and wise ones? You are not cursed, but gifted." He spun her in the air, catching her effortlessly.

The others had stopped and stood watching them. They still made no move to help. Perhaps they did not know she wanted to resist.

"Help me!" she screamed. Aileen started toward her, but was pulled back by a member of the circle Kamaria didn't know. She couldn't see Takoda or Deborah across the glow of the fire. Teague looked as though he would help her, but two men stopped him. Jon was nearest. No one stopped him as he ran across the clearing to her.

"Put her down," he commanded her captor.

"I will fight you for her," came the reply. Jon studied the man's bulging muscles and hoped speed and agility could win the battle for him.

"No, he'll kill you!" Kamaria shouted at Jon. Privately, Jon agreed with her assessment.

"I don't think so," he said.

The horned stranger put Kamaria down, shrugging off her attempts to scratch his eyes and knee him in the groin. Two women placed hands on her shoulders and led her away.

The men circled, searching for openings. Jon fought defensively, luring his larger opponent closer to the fire. The stag man moved after him. After several backwards movements, Jon rushed in and punched the stag man in the abdomen. The stag man swung a fist and clipped Jon on the side of the head. Jon's blow seemed to have no effect. The other's fist knocked Jon back. Wondering if his jaw was broken, Jon moved farther out of reach. He almost fell over a large hummock of grass. Keeping his eyes on the stag man, he carefully stepped around it.

The stag man raced forward, clearing the hummock with an impressive leap and landing on the far side of it face-to-face with Jon. "Stay where you are. Do not run from me again," he commanded.

Jon straightened up from his crouch and faced his death. The stag man started to move toward Jon.

Deborah sprang up out of the covering of leaves and grass that both men had taken for a hummock. "Bastard! You goddamned bastard! This is just the same as everywhere else," she screamed. Slashing with the butcher knife she had considered using on herself earlier, she hamstringed the stag man's left leg. He screamed as he fell, dark blood spurting.

"Deb, no!" Jon rushed forward and just managed to pull Deborah off the stag man before she gutted him. The others moved toward them as the stag man thrashed in pain.

Jon stood before the fallen stag man; "Get up and fight me."

"I cannot," came the pain-filled reply.



"Then you've lost and I claim the maiden for myself." *Did I just say that?* he wondered.

"It is your right. I release her to you. May you have joy in your union." The stag man sat up and placed his hands on his wounded leg. As the flow of blood ceased, he seemed to grow smaller. As his stature diminished, his muscles flexed and changed, flowing to other areas of his body. His features grew indistinct and he removed the horned cap from his head. A moment later, Jon realized he was looking down at Lindara, who sat in the grass massaging her leg. She looked up at Deborah and said, half admiringly, "You really are a bitch, aren't you?"

• • •

When the others had left, Kamaria returned to the fire and found Jon poking at the embers with a stick. She still wore her chaplet.

"Jon? I'm here."

"You don't owe me anything," he said, and laughed a little; "I didn't even defeat him. Go kiss Deborah if you want to reward the champion."

"I want to be with you."

"Here?"

"Here."

Removing her light robe, she folded herself down until she was halflying in his embrace. He ran his hands over her, even caressing her hump. He felt her tears drop onto his hands as he pulled her around in front of him and gently stroked her breasts.

"Tears," he said. "Don't tell me, they're the water of life." She laughed and reached forward to cup him with her hands. "I think I can find something that deserves the title far more than tears," she teased. He gasped as her fingernails slid along his length. Moving her legs to lie atop his, he pushed forward slightly. She maneuvered him inside her. They moved together, hands, lips, and sex pulsing, seeking, wanting, knowing.

Slick with perspiration, gasping, skins ruddy and attuned to pain and pleasure, the Young Lord and the Maiden danced the eternal, ever changing renewal of life as the Beltaine fire died.

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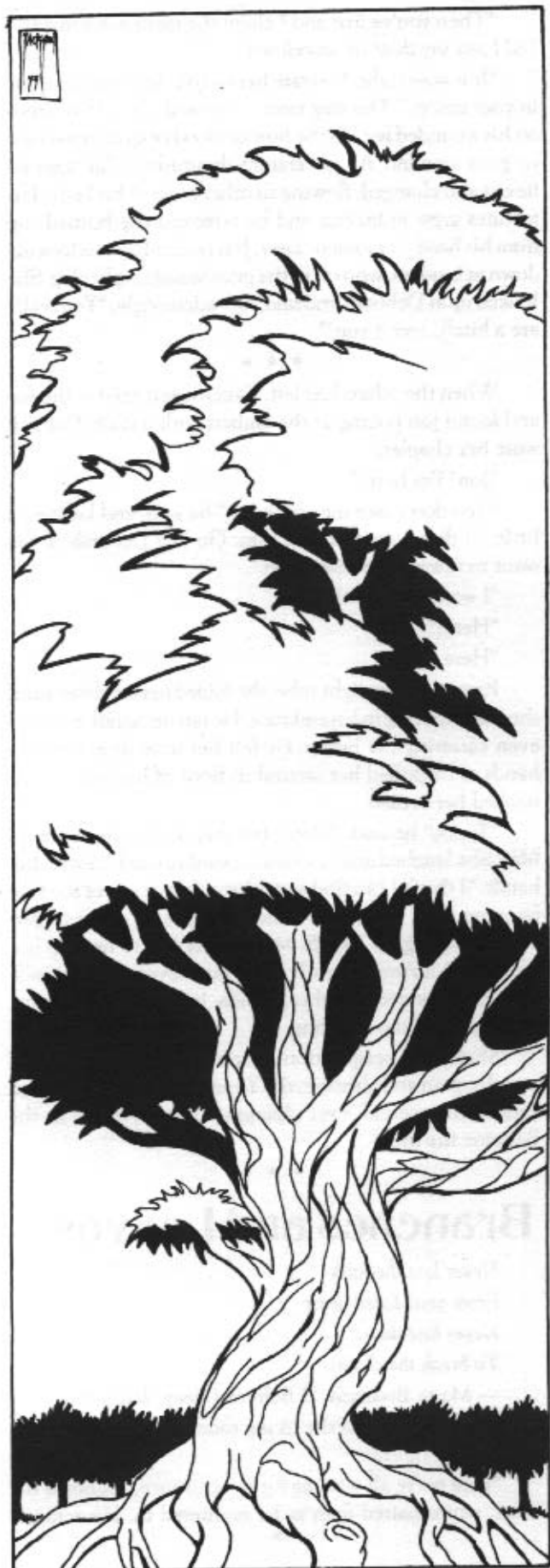
Branches and Leaves

*Never lose the faith
From your faded heart
Never lose desire
To break the chains.*

— Maire Brennan, "I Believe (Deep Within)"

They gathered in the living room after the Maying at dawn.

"I see we're all waiting for my entrance," boomed the short, white-haired man as he sauntered in. His scraggly



beard was full of food particles from breakfast and a drop of syrup had stained his shirt. "Good. I like attentive students. My name is none of your business, but you may call me Bear, it being as good a name as any." He beamed at them.

"Now before you bother me with questions, I'm getting started. You've heard the Tradition's history, beliefs and practices, but you don't know squat about the divisions. Listen up...

There are four main groups or types of Verbena. Not that there aren't about a zillion variations, but in general, these four are pretty indicative of what we're about. Follow me so far?

First there are the Gardeners of the Tree. They're Pattern folk. You've learned about the four types of Avatars, right? Well, the Verbena types sort of match those. Simple, right? Anyway, the Gardeners feel that if you aren't of the Pure Blood, you aren't a real Verbena. Of course, those fools would have let the Tradition die out during the Burning Times rather than sully their lily whites by taking in non-blooded mages. They keep to the rules and try to make everybody follow their structure. They'd have a fit if meetings weren't held on the old festival days. Don't really accept other types. Funny thing is, most of them are from the old Aeduna. Got messed in with the Greeks and Romans and stole a bunch of stuff from astrologers. Even got into runes. So they aren't as unsullied as they'd like to believe. If you think of the Verbena as a family tree, they're probably the trunk.

The Twisters of Fate are sort of neoprimaldials, if that makes any sense. The first Verbena were primordial, in touch with the original essence of everything. They were the Wyck who shaped fate, life and civilization, and were some serious healers. In a lot of ways, they were the ones most associated with fertility goddess worship. More like shaman than anything else. Some blended back in with the Aeduna and probably gave those folks the notion they should become the guardians of the Tree of Immortality. So the Twisters of Fate are the roots of the tree. They split off from the Gardeners, some say under the influence of one of the original Wyck. For the most part, they're so secretive, they don't get involved.

The Moon-Seekers are our Questing Avatars. Who knows what they're into? They worry that the Pattern folk don't accept them, and they seem inordinately concerned with following the old ways. The old new ways, I mean. A lot of them are Goddess worshippers, some are just neopagans. Some claim to be priests of Thor. Lots of them work with crystals, some swear the chakras are the key to everything, and I know of one gypsy fortuneteller who uses palmistry and magick to discover illnesses in her customers. One old man I know moves from town to town searching out potential Verbena and marking them for our first-contact people. They're the fruits of the tree, the acorns, or maybe the leaves.

Lastly, there's the Lifeweavers. They're the Dynamic Avatars. They just plain don't give a damn whether anyone accepts them or not. Always off on their own projects and beliefs. Lifeweavers don't abide by tradition — they take anyone as an apprentice and ignore the festivals and meetings whenever they feel like it. A lot of them are shifters. They alter themselves to have the best possible body they can, to be the best dancer or climber or singer there is. They claim they're trying to find the limit of what's natural. Man, woman, child, dog, old, young, in between. They don't care. I've always thought we should get them to assume the shapes of some of our Technocracy enemies and wreak havoc among the foe. Maybe they do, who knows? They're the branches of the tree, moving out and away from the rest of the Verbena, but still part of the whole.

Now don't get me wrong. Nobody gets locked into a particular group just because of her Avatar. If you have a Questing Avatar, there's no reason you can't join up with the Pattern folk if you feel more comfortable with them (assuming they accept you, of course). These are just general divisions, and they're pretty broad categories. There are other groups, too. Lots of them. Most are small circles or cabals not linked to any of the larger groups. Those include folks like Mother Celene's Avengers, the Druids of the Glade, and the Bardic College. I see some of you belong to those groups already, or will once you've Awakened. It's possible to hold membership in one of the smaller groups and still receive instruction from or have contact with a larger one. Whatever keeps the Mythic Threads alive! Next question."

"So, the main philosophy of the Verbena can be summed up by saying they work to protect the Mythic Threads?" asked Jon.

"Well, that's a part of it, but there's more to it than that. Preserving Mythic Threads is a means the Verbena use to achieve a reality modeled after their own conception of what reality should be. Verbena seek Ascension through a sort of tenth Sphere. That Sphere is Self. The Verbena believe that knowledge of the Self can bring us to Ascension and can take others along with us. This isn't what the Akashic Brotherhood mean when they experience their innermost selves, because they're only talking about the mind. Verbena view the entire Self as deity — mind, body, lusts, experiences and all. It isn't self-glorification, but becoming part of the All. Life in all its creation is guided by the inner Self. 'Do as thou wilt' isn't too far off the mark, but the phrase should be 'Be as thou wilt.' Alan Watts said, 'the outline of your body is the inline of the universe.' We don't just stop *being* at the edge of ourselves, we fold into the space around us, mold it to us, and are molded by it. We're part of it all. When we understand that fully, we'll reach Ascension, and when one Ascends, all may follow. That's why the Verbena spend so much effort locating and training potential mages. The Ascendant Self may be one of

you. Or it may be one of the blasted Virtual Adepts for all I know. Of course, Verbena aren't letting *them* know that! If you don't understand all that, don't worry. Most of us don't either." Bear laughed.

Teague broke in, "You mentioned that the Lifeweavers will take anyone as an apprentice. How do the others choose?"

"I think what you really want to know is 'how were *you* chosen?' correct?"

"Yeah."

"There are four ways the Verbena choose apprentices. They examine people touched by their Mythic Threads. New agers, people who are already involved with magick in some form — even if the magick they're studying is complete bunk. Some Verbena choose based on a person's Avatar. Some become Verbena by right of blood. Most of those become Gardeners of the Tree, since the Gardeners are the ones who trace the Wyckcan bloodlines through generations. Lastly, some are chosen because they are in pain. The pain might be physical, caused by some imbalance or infirmity, but it might be mental or emotional. Often candidates are chosen because they have some sort of blockage which prevents them from living a full life. You can stop looking around at one another now. We can all pretty much figure out why each of you was chosen. The reason you were picked doesn't matter any more. Learning what the Verbena have to teach you and moving beyond that are the important parts. Then of course, there are the Lifeweavers. A lot of them choose an apprentice because she's pretty or he has an interesting voice or because they happen to be standing outside in the rain at 2 a.m. Nobody can fathom why they choose someone."

"What about the Horizon Realms? Where are they? What are they like?" Aileen asked, a bit dizzied by the mage's rapid-fire ramble.

"I'll give you a little teaser, but you aren't really supposed to know about them yet." Bear chuckled and continued...

The Seasonal Realms

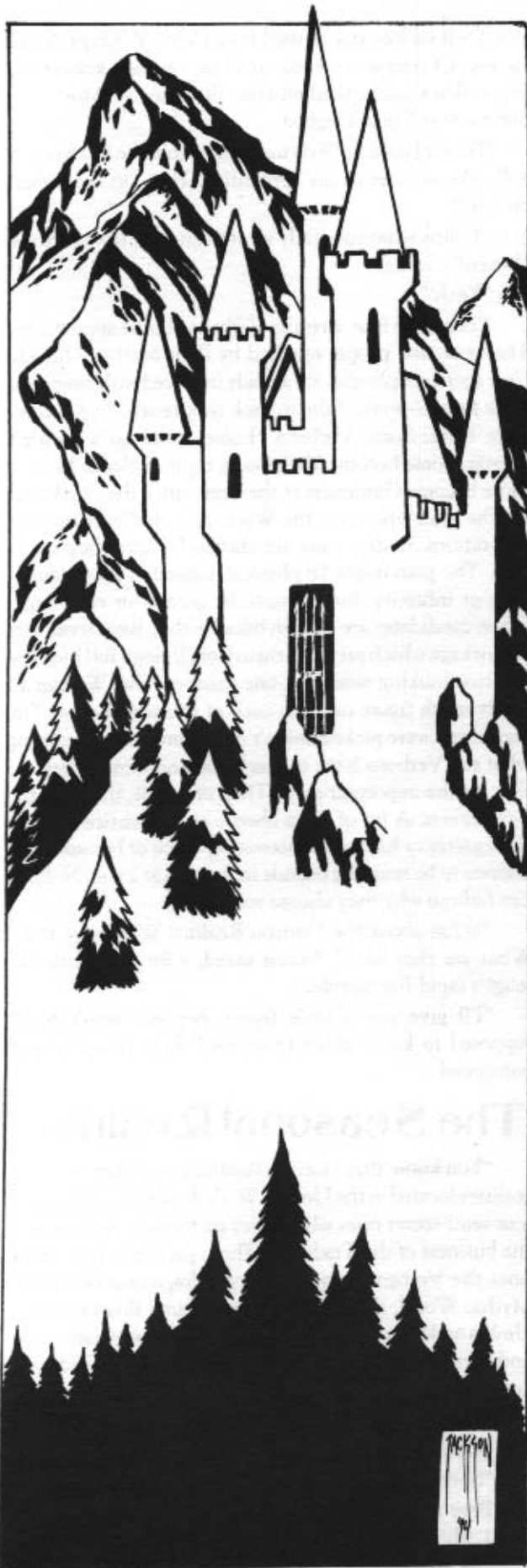
"You know that Horizon Realms are pockets of other realities located in the Umbra. Well, the Verbena maintain four semi-secret ones where they go to meet and conduct the business of the Tradition. These particular four aren't ones the Verbena created. They're fragments of the old Mythic World, shards the Verbena found floating in the Umbra and built on. Some say that Lilith placed them there and keyed them to Verbena magick so no other Traditions could reach them..."

"Lilith?" Teague interjected.

"Don't interrupt!"

"Sorry."

Bear continued: "The first one, Winter Castle, is a small white medieval castle set in an idealized winter



landscape. You know the old line from *Camelot* about the snow never starting until after sunset and stopping at exactly the right height to be interesting rather than a nuisance? Well, that's sort of what it's like. White deer and rabbits roam around, squirrels chatter at you, winter roses twine around a boxwood maze, and a dark forest silvered with snow hovers nearby. In the castle courtyard, there's an old oak with bare branches. It's crimson red. Sometimes I think that oak is the only color in the whole landscape. Mostly though, it's all very pastoral and perfect. Of course, you don't want to go off into the woods by yourself. They're dark and full of secret things.

Spring Cottage is just that, a pretty little shingled cottage set into the most wonderful garden imaginable. Blooming and budding trees form a ring around the house and shower people with petals when they walk beneath. The smells there are marvelous! There are lots of little animals there, too, and they all seem to be busy cooing at one another and mating. It reminds me a little of Disney's *Fantasia*. I swear I saw a centaur there once, but I was pretty blasted at the time, so I may have imagined it. Of course, if you imagine stuff while standing on top of a Node, who knows what you might get? Also, there's the well. It's a dank, overgrown thing that's utterly lightless at the bottom. You can drop a light in, and it goes out. I've only known one person to go down into that well, and he never came back. Stay away from it unless you want to search out the darkest part of yourselves.

Summer Grove is a large grove of sacred oaks which surround the biggest World Tree you've ever seen. There isn't much more to this Realm than the grove itself, but it spreads out and differentiates into birch and beech, hawthorne, apple, elder, maple, even cherry trees. There's a pond that has sleek, silvery fish in it and everything from bears to chipmunks come visiting when people are there. The Lifetree of Summer Grove is supposed to be the adopted form a Pure One. It talks to those who listen hard enough. Personally, I think it's some old Wyck. Of course, it could be the fey folk playing tricks on us. Don't ever take any path out of the grove except the one marked by the standing stones. That path is the gateway in and out of the grove. Taking another path leads you into the forest, where you get twisted and turned in all different directions. Some folks have been trapped in the byways, as we call them, for days, and counted themselves lucky to get out at all by stumbling back into the grove.

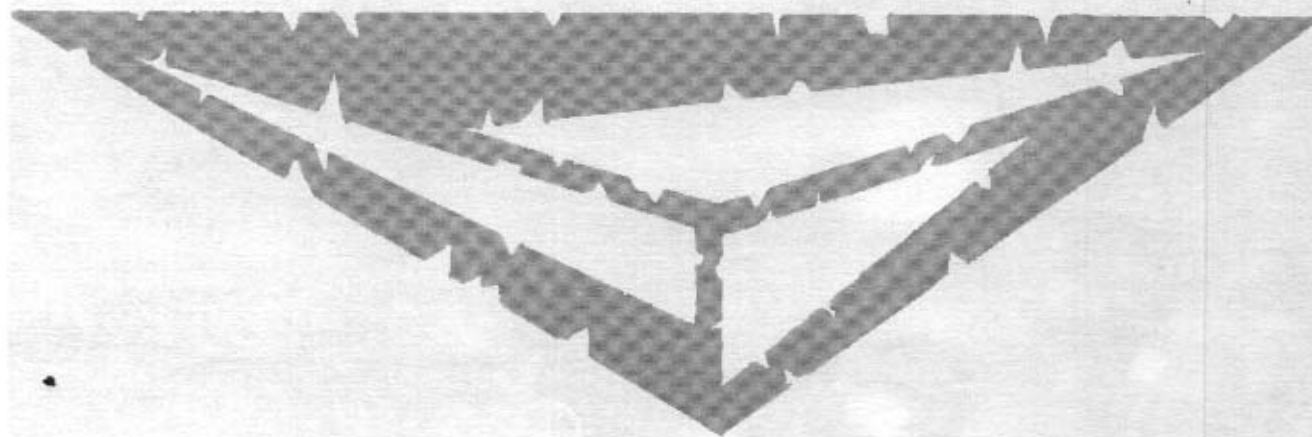
Autumn Circle is a large, cleared dancing area centered around a flat stone altar. The altar is circular, but has a hole in the middle. A World Tree grows up through the hole and shades most of the area. It's autumn there, and the tree has the most brilliantly colored leaves I've ever seen. The circle's edge is formed by a ring of trees. Outside that is a mossy greensward filled with toadstools. Some say a

person can have visions by eating one of the toadstools, but I think," he said, looking at Takoda, "they'd just give you indigestion. A couple of unicorns are rumored to live there, but I've never seen them. They say there are pools located beyond Autumn Circle which lead to other worlds...

That's it. No more questions. Hope you weren't expecting to Ascend right here and now. Have a good festival."

"Wait a minute. Which type of Verbena are you?" asked Aileen.

He turned back in the doorway. "Who says I'm Verbena at all?" he asked. He closed the door quietly, but they could hear him chuckling as he moved off down the hallway.





Chapter Three: Aligning the Spheres Midsummer Night (External Relations)

*If she floats then she is not
A witch like we had thought
A down payment on another
One at Salem's lot.*
— Nirvana, "Serve the Servants"



Below them, the lights of the city glowed. From the seventeenth floor, the marina looked like a fairyland. A slight breeze cooled the man and woman standing on the balcony.

Deborah turned to Talien. "Who are all these people?" she asked.

"Mostly people we know from other Traditions. We're throwing a private party here before a bunch of us go on to Horizon, the main meeting place, for a Midsummer Night revel. Why, do they seem strange?"

"Just different. I guess I'm feeling a little out of place here."

"Here?"

"Back in the city. I got the idea that the Verbena are pretty much a country sort of thing."

"We're anything we want to be. Mostly it's the Gardeners and the Twisters of Fate who are rural. The Moon-Seekers set up wherever they feel comfortable, while the Lifeweavers do whatever they do wherever they happen to be. Not all of them even keep a World Tree, you know."

Jon and Kamaria stepped out onto the balcony. "Hey, it's a lot cooler out here," said Jon. "Are you guys keeping that a secret so you don't have to share?"

"Well, not with you anyway." Deborah quipped. She seemed to be less hostile since the Beltaine celebration, as if she had purged some part of herself. Now, though her words were cruel, there was a certain lightness to them that told Jon she was joking.

"If you don't like the company, you can always jump," he retorted. She laughed.

Teague stuck his head out through the sliding glass doors. "Hey, has anybody seen Takoda?" he asked.

"He's gone." said Talien.

"Gone? Gone where?"

Aileen pushed past Teague. "Yeah, he left last night. He said he had something important to do."

"And they just let him go?" asked Kamaria.

"Why not?" Talien replied, "He's not a criminal or a prisoner. We don't force people to join, and the Verbena aren't for everyone."

"But he knows so much..." Jon said.

"Nothing that can really hurt us. I doubt the Technocracy knows anything about him. He isn't Awakened yet." Talien looked down at the shimmering water. "I don't think he found what he was looking for here," he said. "But let me take this opportunity to give you the lowdown on the other Traditions and a few other things besides..."

Council Brethren

See that woman in the green dress? She's built like a martial artist and probably is one. She's Akashic Brotherhood. The Akashic Brotherhood puzzles a lot of Verbena. We don't understand their tendency to place the mind above all else. Still, many Lifeweavers have learned a lot about their bodies and the pathways of the Lifeweb from the Brotherhood.

Now, that man in the white suit practically crackles with suppressed energy, doesn't he? Get the feeling he wants to stop the more lurid aspects of the party? Tense, tense, tense. Our relationship with the Chorus was shattered in the Burning Times, and yet many Verbena feel it's time to make peace with them."

A long-haired man in black leather stumbled onto the balcony and almost fell over the rail.

"Whup! Jon, Teague, hold him up will you? Let's settle him on the couch. He's a little far gone even for one of the Cult. We get along pretty well with the Cult of Ecstasy folks — until some fool brings up philosophy or history. We've worked with them since Roman times, and we learn a lot from each other, but mostly we feel that the Cult folks act like irresponsible children who've never grown up.

The woman over there is an Australian aborigine. She's a Dreamspeaker of course. There's a tremendous amount of respect between the Verbena and the Dreamspeakers. We've always been allies and probably always will be. Still, we feel they're too focused on the Other World. They need to pay more attention to this one. Also, a lot of us are really irked that so many of the other Traditions think the Dreamspeakers were the first mages, when they weren't.

Look at the guy in gray near the refreshment table. He's Euthanatos. I wouldn't drink the punch after he's been near it, that's for sure! Just kidding; everyone thinks the Euthanatos are out to kill everybody. Only the Twisters of Fate get along with them. Otherwise there's a considerable amount of opposition against the Euthanatos, even from the Moon-Seekers and Lifeweavers. Still, it's amusing to





how often the elder Verbena agree with the elder Euthanatos when the Council of the Traditions meets.

Yeah, there they are. See that group over there all dressed in torn-up black clothes? The ones with the weird hair and the jewelry. I thought they might crash the party. They're Hollow Ones. The Verbena have a hard time seeing the Hollow Ones as a Tradition. We've have seen their kind before — unfocused young mages who think they know everything. They seem unfocused, but those kind of mages helped the Verbena reestablish themselves after the Burning Times. The Gardeners don't like them one little bit, but the rest of us are actively trying to recruit them, not that the Hollow Ones give a flying fuck about us!

Look, it's an arbitrageur disguised as a mage! Actually, she's not too bad an example of the Order of Hermes. Ever since Roman times, the Verbena and the Order of Hermes have enjoyed an on-again, off-again relationship. For a time, some Verbena even joined the Order's experimental House as the Diedne...that was doomed to failure. The Order resents the Verbena because they believe we stole some of their "wisdom" to fuel the renaissance of Verbena magick after the Burning Times. Still, it's a chicken-or-egg argument; a lot of the Order of Hermes' basic beliefs, and their whole system of non-formula magick, were based on the Verbena's exploratory, shamanistic style. Aside from anything else, we still blame them for calling down the Inquisition with their excesses.

See the guy over there? Looks pretty normal, doesn't he? You'd never know that he watches *Weird Science* like it was a graduate program in experimental physics, would you? He's a Son, all right, one of the Sons of Ether. They're Technomancers, and the Verbena don't like Technomancers much. Only the most liberal Moon-Seeker or the most dynamic Lifeweaver will deal with the Sons of Ether — although they are usually intrigued by anything a Verbena is willing to show them. The Sons are constantly trying to re-create the Verbena's traditional magick with their devices — shapechanging, rapid healing, and so on, and they refuse to call what they do 'magick.' Most call it 'Science' instead. It drives the Gardeners crazy!"

"There's my date," he said, pointing to an intense young woman with short black hair. "She's a Virtual Adept. Actually, a lot of Moon-Seekers have fallen in with the Virtual Adepts because of their flexibility and cutting-edge magick. The Gardeners can't stand them, of course. Some Lifeweavers have found ways to walk into the Digital Web and many have formed covens online. I think I mentioned something about this before..."

The Others

"Who is that?" asked Kamaria, pointing her chin at a svelte dark-haired woman in black and red.

"Ah! Interesting isn't she? Feral grace, I call it," said Talien. "That's Calantha. She's a Garou. Her tribe is known as the Black Furies, and we've been loosely allied

with them, mostly on ecological issues, for some time. They suffered the same persecutions we did during the Burning Times. There are other tribes of Garou, what most people call werewolves. I've heard we have some dealings with a couple of the others. Except for those few, though, they're supposed to be savage and unpredictable. I've also heard they kill mages who snoop around their holy ground."

"Werewolves? Next you'll tell us there's a vampire at the party," laughed Aileen.

"There are vampires, you know," Talien remarked; "Most Verbena hate them. They seem foul to the Gardeners and the Moon-Seekers. Still, some Lifeweavers I know are fascinated by them. One of them even claims she hangs out with vampires from time to time. She excuses herself by telling me their blood is pure Quintessence. Maybe she uses it to power her shapechanging. I don't know about you, but I'd rather not deal with bloodsuckers, if I can help it. I need my blood myself, thank you. We do have at least one thing in common: the Inquisition still hunts both of us. Those bastards call themselves the Society of Leopold now, and we try to stay as far away from them as we can. They burned us once. Never again..."

Do you believe in ghosts? They believe in you. Lots of people know how to call the dead, but I'm not sure they enjoy it once they do. Wraiths often visit the Dark Umbra on Samhain eve. I have no idea how they feel about us, but I'd be real careful around dead folks if I were you.

The Fey still dance around the corners of our nice settled little world; Verbena have had a love-hate relationship with them for centuries. Mostly we don't trust each other. The Primordials used to trick them into lots of agreements and truces. The Fey are attracted to our life energies, I'm told, though I've never met one myself. I really don't know if they're dangerous or not, but from all the old stories, I'd suggest a good deal of caution and a quick wit when dealing with them..."

The Enemy

"What about the Technocracy?" asked Jon. "Aren't they mages, too? Why do they hate us so much?"

"The Technocracy may be our most dangerous enemies. They are mages, but work toward a totally different reality than we desire. They want complete order and control of everything. Naturally, we want to impose our own version of reality instead. It's a hate based on radically different ideas vying to create the ultimate reality in the same space. Luckily, they seem as disorganized as we are, or at least, they don't all agree on a single road to domination of the Tellurian. This isn't the best place for it, but let me give you a quick overview of how we deal with each Convention — that's what they call their Traditions..."

Let's start with the Progenitors. They're probably closest to the Verbena, except what we enhance, they corrupt by claiming to 'better nature' through genetic program-



ming and manipulation. A few Moon-Seekers tried to reform some Progenitors and bring them back into the fold, but wound up sucked into the Technocracy instead. It's not a far jump for them. The Pharmacopeists especially suck these Verbena right in. Remember, you've been warned.

Iteration X believes we should all be half machine. They want to cyber us up and link our brains in with artificial intelligence. HIT Marks are the cyborgs Iteration X makes and sends out to kill their enemies. Verbena can sense the Life pattern inside them, though. Iteration X hates — and I mean *hates* — the Verbena, and the Verbena love to wipe them out...anything that unliving and cold is an abomination!

Then there's Big Brother. That's the Convention called the New World Order. We're constantly running into the N.W.O. They want to brainwash everyone into being a robot. I'm told we started the health craze as a direct assault on their mental hold on the masses through television. Pissed them off! Watch out for the Men in Black.

There's always the fun guys in the Syndicate. They've made a lot of cash selling 'new age' crap to people. Most Verbena hate to see this, even if the Gardeners of the Tree believe the patsies should get what's coming to them. Several Verbena have found themselves in the unenviable position of having to 'disprove' some of the Syndicate's claims, thus weakening any Mythic Threads which may still be in the Tapestry's weave. These guys are scary. Beyond the thug level, nobody knows who they are or how to reach them. They can destroy you without ever coming face-to-face with you.

Last are the Void Engineers. Most Verbena didn't like it when humanity landed on the moon. We want to keep the moon a thing of mystery; the scientists want to demystify it. Of course, I've heard it said that the moon landing changed the Void Engineers — now they work for space exploration as a sort of saving grace for humankind. The Moon-Seekers might know. They've occasionally worked with the Void Engineers to learn more of the deep Umbra. On the other hand, many Void Engineers work to discredit some of the fundamental elements of the Verbena's belief system, especially things like astrology, the phases of the moon, and the Wheel of the Year.

That's just a thumbnail sketch, of course. You're all free to like anybody you want to and hate anyone who pisses you off. Make your own assessments. You might even find out the people you love to hate the most are your fellow Verbena. Life's a bitch..."

• • •

The sun beat down mercilessly on his dehydrated body. His eyes swam. His parched throat cried out for moisture. The whistles the elders blew couldn't reach him where his consciousness had gone. Blood coursed down his body. One of the rawhide thongs skewered through the skin and muscle of his chest had ripped through his flesh. The other was still attached, its shortening length almost pulling him off the ground as he danced. No one from his tribe had performed a real sundance for a generation at least.

He danced, chanting and weaving in the scorching sun. As the chill of evening began to work its way across his blistered face, his grandfather approached.

"It is time now to pull the tether free," Kohana said.

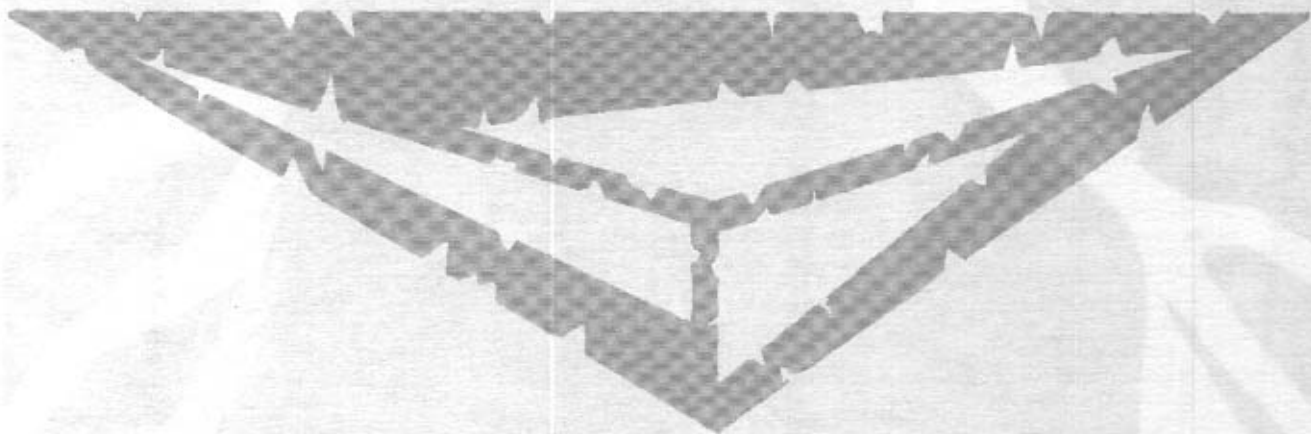
Grateful his ordeal was over, Takoda leaned back against the skewer. It began to tear through the skin of his breast. Soon he would be free of it. Then he reconsidered.

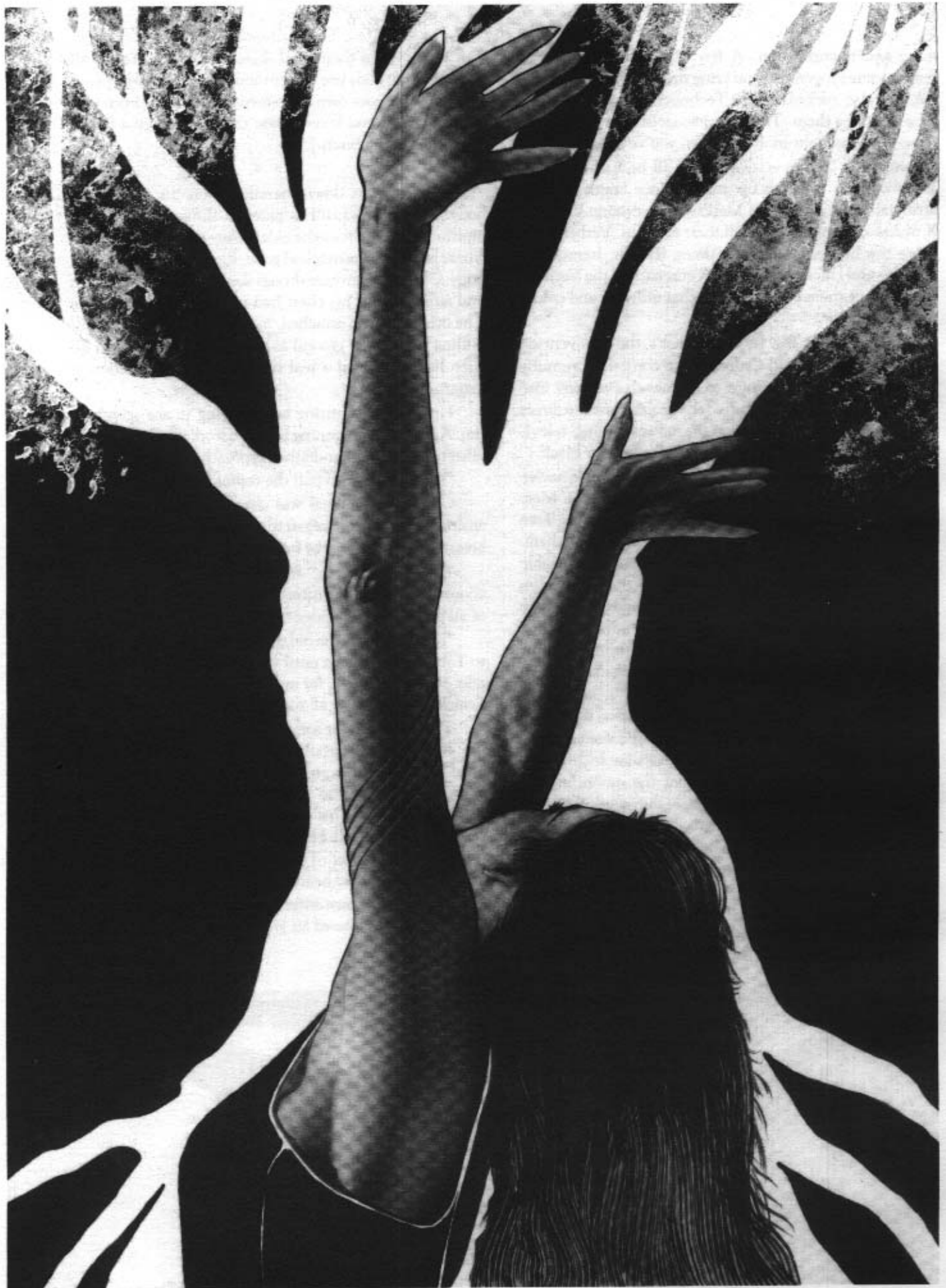
"No, Grandfather," he said sadly, "This is my last chance. I must have a vision or my life has no meaning. You of all people should understand."

"I understand," the old man sighed and sat down next to Takoda. "I will wait until you have your vision. Do not take too long, though, for my bones are old and brittle and I cannot wait outside all night."

Takoda called for some of the elders to light a fire so that his grandfather would be kept warm. He felt strengthened by the old man's presence and renewed his dance. His grandfather seemed so proud. Takoda was so happy he jerked too hard in his exertions. The remaining thong ripped out and he fell. He crawled to the fire and sat across from his grandfather. Together they shared a pipe and talked of visions and healing.

It was only as dawn arrived and the elders carried him home that Takoda remembered his grandfather had been dead for a year.





Chapter Four: Fruits of the Tree Lammas (Character Templates)

*Defying their leaders
Holding out for free will
The strong dare to echo
Nothing can stop
Nothing can stop us now
Up against the wind
Old ways up against the wind.*
— Maire Brennan, "Against the wind"



The car had been trailing them for some time before they noticed it. They'd come to town to purchase last-minute necessities for the Lammas feast. But they couldn't return to the covenhouse with a strange car on their tail. Cutting through stores and emerging onto other streets hadn't worked to throw their pursuers off the scent. Even mingling with crowds and threading in and out of clubs hadn't sufficed.

"Damn. They're good, whoever they are," Teague said.

"Too good." said Jon, the only one of them who had dealt with pursuit by government agents.

"Maybe we should split up," suggested Kamaria, "That way some of us could lead them on while the others went for help."

"Screw that. If you're too afraid to confront them, I'll ambush them at the next traffic light." offered Deborah.

"There may be a reason they've only followed us so far. They might be waiting for us to split up so they can pick us off easier," remarked Takoda. He had returned soon after the sundance, at peace with himself and determined to become a healer.

"Do any of you have an idea who they might be?" asked Aileen.

"Nope, but they have to be using some kind of magick to keep up with us," said Teague.

"Well, we need to do something," snarled Deborah.

"Look for a phone booth," Jon said. "I'll call the covenhouse and tell them what's happening."



"Great, then we just wait for them to come bail us out," grumbled Aileen.

"Do you have a better idea?" asked Kamaria.

They found a phone booth on the next corner. Jon placed the call. All of them could hear it ring and ring on the other end.

"How can nobody answer?" asked Takoda. "There were at least twelve people there an hour and a half ago." He was afraid to volunteer what he actually thought—that somehow the Technocracy had found them, and that he and his friends were the only ones still free.

Another black car screamed around the corner and drew up opposite the first. Four doors from each car opened, spilling out men in black suits and mirror shades. All of them held guns.

"Hold it!" one shouted. "Anybody moves and you all die."

"Let's live through this, folks," murmured Teague, "They obviously want us alive. We can always try to escape later."

• • •

They awoke in darkness, each remembering the sting of the needle. Hoods covered their heads and handcuffs restrained their arms behind their backs.

"Take that one first," a gruff voice said, and Teague was carried out. He called out to the others, "Be strong."

They took him to a small room and questioned him relentlessly. Who were his friends? Where was he first contacted by the Traditions? Who taught him? What had he learned so far? He answered none of the questions. His captors seemed strangely unconcerned by his refusal to talk. No one threatened or touched him until the questioning was over. Then the head Inquisitor stood and said, "He is an unrepentant witch. As he chooses to die thus, we have no more business with him. May God have mercy on his soul."

Two Inquisitors stripped him and bound his legs back beneath him so his ankle ropes were tied to the handcuffs. He was carried outside and chained atop a rough bundle of wood. More ropes were passed through under his bended knees, forcing him to back-straddle the pyre and securing him flat against it. His muscles screamed in protest.

Five more pyres were ranged around the courtyard; blackened areas showed where others had already burned down to ash and ember. The charnel smell of burnt flesh assaulted him. They'd already killed his friends from the covenhouse, then. His captors checked his bindings and left him to his thoughts.

The scene was repeated five times as the others were brought to the courtyard and chained in place. The Inquisitors stood, one next to each pyre. Clad in robes and carrying lit torches, each of them asked once again, "Will you forswear your witchcraft and join with us to hunt others such as yourselves? You may still be saved."

When they determined that none of the young unAwakened mages would willingly betray the Verbena, the Inquisitors pulled the hoods back over their victims' heads.

Soon the only sounds were the crackle of the flames racing through dry wood and the screams of those the flames consumed. Searing pain and choking smoke engulfed them as they writhed atop the pyres, desperately struggling to escape. And suddenly Deborah was free. She coalesced her will into a raging primal form and launched it at the chains that bound her. They snapped and her handcuffs fell loose about one wrist. She pulled free the rope which bound her legs and thrust the hood from her face. And there was no fire.

All around her she saw the others writhing and screaming, bucking and twisting away from flames that did not exist. An Inquisitor stretched up a hand to help her down from the pyre, and she saw he was Talien. Her Avatar snarled for her to rend and tear, but she thrust it down and slid down off the pyre.

Then Takoda broke free, and Kamaria. Jon, then Teague, came down from the pyres, the light of Awakened Avatars gleaming in their eyes. Aileen took the longest. Her shattered, insane shrieks rent the air for a full ten minutes. As Rhianna at last moved to release her from her imaginary bonds and illusory flames, Aileen finally Awoke.

No flames lit the night, nor were there other blackened areas. The pyres were just bundles of sticks; their bonds nothing but string. The new initiates were given fresh robes and led inside where a feast awaited them.

"What would have happened had any of us been willing to sell out the Verbena?" asked a subdued and shaken Aileen.

"Then you would not have been Awakened. Nor would you be accepted into our company now. Let us leave it at that," answered Rhianna, "Now it is time to celebrate. We meet for Lammas, called Lughnasad in honor of Lugh, who was slain and resurrected. Lammas is a harvest celebration when we give thanks for what we have gained during the year. You have passed from death into a new life as Awakened beings. Soon it will be Samhain again. The Wheel will have spun its course. The new year begins with the closing of the old. Your new lives begin with the shedding of the old. Tonight you will choose your names in magick. We bid farewell to all of you, and bid you welcome."

• • •

*Earth, water, fire and air
Met together in a garden fair
Put in a basket bound with skin
If you answer this riddle, you'll never begin...*
— The Incredible String Band, "Koccoaddi There"



JACKSON
77

Avenging Witch

Still the fire in my heart never leaves me.

— Maire Brennan, "Ce Leis"

Quote: *You believe this knife is purely ceremonial? Come closer. I will show you its true nature.*

Prelude: Born angry. Always an outsider. Misunderstood by everyone. That is your life. You've built a hard shell around you, and prefer making other people uncomfortable to feeling the pain of their rejection.

The occult was insidiously appealing. Thinking about witchcraft and curses to use against those who hurt or ignored you made you feel powerful. Though the spells didn't work, practicing the scowl and acid comments which became your trademarks taught you that the best way to protect yourself was to intimidate others. *They should pay for what they did.* That phrase has haunted you since birth. You never really understood where that feeling came from.

Now you know. A small cabal of secretive mages introduced you to real power. Through studying with the Verbena, you have discovered who you truly are: the reincarnation of a witch killed during the Burning Times. Your old soul cries out for revenge and magick provides you with the means to take it. Not that you're a crazed killer; you have an important and valuable role — hunting and punishing or removing the enemies of the Verbena. Death is a part of Life, and next time around the Wheel, those whose blood you cleanse now may have a change of heart. If they don't, you can always take it again.

Concept: You were a spooky kid, always playing with insects and making up charms and hexes to get your own way. You consumed everything available about witches, and always felt sympathetic towards them. Hansel and Gretel, the self-righteous little brats, pissed you off when they tricked the witch into the oven, and you cheered for the wicked witch against Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Roleplaying Tips: Be aggressive. You are not intimidated by any situation and fear no one (except your Mentor). Act elusive if anyone gets too inquisitive about your business and always try to keep the upper hand. If someone offends you too much or harms another Verbena, make him pay.

Magick: You aren't as powerful as you'd like to be, but are very inventive in using the magick you have. The Sphere of Life allows you to change, heal or destroy simple life forms. Funny how destroying the good bacteria in someone's body can have the most devastating effects, or how changing wholesome vegetables into poisonous ones can play havoc with a dinner party. Dabbling in Entropy lets you find the weakness in things, a great boon to either healing or destroying them. Control of Prime lets you fuel up and will eventually allow you to power your creative and destructive capabilities directly.

Equipment: Knife, herbs, cauldron, black witchy clothing.



VERBENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Essence: Primordial
Nature: Deviant
Demeanor: Bravo

Concept: Avenging Witch
Mentor:
Cabal:

Attributes

Physical

Strength _____ ●●●●○
Dexterity *Quick* _____ ●●●●○
Stamina _____ ●●●●○

Social

Charisma _____ ●○○○○
Manipulation _____ ●●○○○
Appearance _____ ●●●○○

Mental

Perception _____ ●●○○○
Intelligence _____ ●●●○○
Wits _____ ●●●○○

Abilities

Talents

Alertness _____ ●●○○○
Athletics _____ ●○○○○
Awareness _____ ●○○○○
Brawl _____ ●●○○○
Dodge _____ ●●○○○
Expression _____ ○○○○○
Intuition _____ ●●○○○
Intimidation _____ ●●●○○
Streetwise _____ ●○○○○
Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○

Skills

Drive _____ ●●○○○
Etiquette _____ ○○○○○
Firearms _____ ○○○○○
Leadership _____ ●○○○○
Meditation _____ ○○○○○
Melee _____ ●●○○○
Research _____ ○○○○○
Stealth _____ ●●○○○
Survival _____ ●●○○○
Technology _____ ○○○○○

Knowledges

Computer _____ ○○○○○
Cosmology _____ ○○○○○
Culture _____ ●○○○○
Enigmas _____ ○○○○○
Investigation _____ ○○○○○
Law _____ ○○○○○
Linguistics _____ ○○○○○
Medicine _____ ○○○○○
Occult _____ ●●●○○
Science _____ ○○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ○○○○○ Life _____ ●●●○○ Prime _____ ●●○○○
Entropy _____ ●○○○○ Mind _____ ○○○○○ Spirit _____ ○○○○○
Forces _____ ○○○○○ Matter _____ ○○○○○ Time _____ ○○○○○

Other Traits

Poisons _____ ●○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○

Arete

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Willpower

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Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0
Hurt -1
Injured -1
Wounded -2
Mauled -2
Crippled -5
Incapacitated

Backgrounds

Arcane _____ ●○○○○
Avatar _____ ●●●○○
Destiny _____ ●●○○○
Mentor _____ ●○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○

Experience

Study Points

Bard

On and on

Searching for a clearer view

Winning and losing an inner war

Wonder what we do it for.

— Brian May, "Back to the Light"

Quote: *Hey, have you heard this one? It's a madrigal. What do you mean 'what's a madrigal?'*

Prelude: Born at the wrong time, you should have been a troubadour or an ancient Celtic bard. Modern life never suited you very well. While other kids were learning to play guitar, you chose Celtic lap harp. Unicorns and dragons and great heroes who fought terrible battles filled your imagination. The only real battle you ever fought was against prejudice.

Truth is important, and you always sensed that grownups were lying when they said magic had never existed in the world. All your instincts told you that if magic had never existed, there wouldn't have been so many stories, poems and songs about it. Your whole life has been a search for truth and magic.

Then you met a wondrous person, a real bard like those in the tales. From him, you learned that magick has two sides and that most truths are gray, depending more on circumstance than on some pre-set law. As a lorekeeper, it is your responsibility to judge among truths and half-truths, and to preserve the ancient lore. Along the way, you hope to restore what was and what will be again.

Concept: You were the kid who asked what the nursery rhymes meant. When other kids were satisfied with a bedtime story, you wanted to know what happened to everyone else when the prince and the princess lived happily ever after. You loved fantasy whether it was in comics, stories, songs, movies or novels, and, at age ten, you wondered if you might be King Arthur reincarnated. Music has always been a part of your life and you are gifted with a great voice. Instruments were easy for you to master, so you chose one that was both ancient and a challenge to learn. Even as an adult, you tried to live in the fantasy world of the Renaissance Fair or a medieval recreation organization, rather than get a real job.

Roleplaying Tips: You are judge, facilitator and peacekeeper. Always consider both sides of a question before making a decision. Quote ancient poems and songs. Lead through inspiration and sound judgement. Your existence keeps one of the Mythic Threads alive. Act like it.

Magick: You don't have any very powerful magicks. Using Life to affect simple life forms which is the most advanced magick you know. The Spheres of Correspondence, Forces, Mind, Prime, and Time are very limited at present. As a bard, you hope to learn something about all magick and wanted to start with as firm a grounding as you can. The insights which this pot-pourri of Spheres bring to you is probably of more value than any actual power you derive from them. You are content to wait for mastery. The important thing is to realize how they all interrelate.

Equipment: lap harp, music books, notebook and pencil (for song and lyric ideas), library of fantasy books



VEABENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name: *Essence: Questing* Concept: *Bard*
 Player: *Nature: Judge* Mentor:
 Chronicle: *Demeanor: Visionary* Cabal:

Attributes

Physical	Social	Mental
Strength _____ ●○○○○	Charisma _____ ●●●○○	Perception _____ ●●●○○
Dexterity _____ ●●●○○	Manipulation _____ ●●○○○	Intelligence _____ ●●●○○
Stamina _____ ●●○○○	Appearance _____ ●●○○○	Wits _____ ●●●○○

Abilities

Talents	Skills	Knowledges
Alertness _____ ●○○○○	Drive _____ ●○○○○	Computer _____ ●○○○○
Athletics _____ ○○○○○	Etiquette _____ ●●●○○	Cosmology _____ ○○○○○
Awareness _____ ●○○○○	Firearms _____ ○○○○○	Culture _____ ●●●○○
Brawl _____ ○○○○○	Leadership _____ ●●●○○	Enigmas _____ ●●○○○
Dodge _____ ○○○○○	Meditation _____ ●○○○○	Investigation _____ ○○○○○
Expression _____ ●●●○○	Melee _____ ○○○○○	Law _____ ●○○○○
Intuition _____ ●●○○○	Research _____ ●●●○○	Linguistics _____ ●○○○○
Intimidation _____ ○○○○○	Stealth _____ ●○○○○	Medicine _____ ○○○○○
Streetwise _____ ○○○○○	Survival _____ ●○○○○	Occult _____ ●○○○○
Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○	Technology _____ ○○○○○	Science _____ ○○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ●○○○○	Life _____ ●●○○○	Prime _____ ●○○○○
Entropy _____ ○○○○○	Mind _____ ●○○○○	Spirit _____ ○○○○○
Forces _____ ●○○○○	Matter _____ ○○○○○	Time _____ ●○○○○

Other Traits

_____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
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 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○

Backgrounds

Avatar _____ ●●○○○
 Destiny _____ ●●○○○
 Dream _____ ●●○○○
 Library _____ ●○○○○
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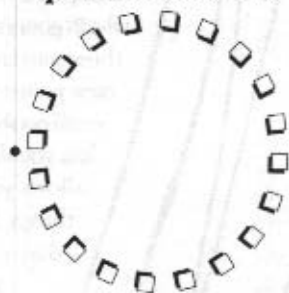
Arete

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Willpower

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Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0
 Hurt -1
 Injured -1
 Wounded -2
 Mauled -2
 Crippled -5
 Incapacitated

Experience

Study Points

Eco-Terrorist Druid

*When all the leaves have fallen and turned to dust,
Will we remain entrenched within our ways.*

— Dead Can Dance, "Severance"

Quote: *Humankind is arrogant. We ask 'if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one to hear it fall, does it make a noise?' as if the tree's only importance were in our relationship to it. The earth, the other trees, all life within the woods, hears it fall and echoes with the scream of its descent.*

Prelude: You grew up in the city among towering buildings and garbage-filled alleyways. Rats were the only animals that survived for long in your neighborhood. The only trees were the ones spaced out every mile or so to bring some "greenery" to the city. The park was unapproachable because of the gangs that ruled there. You went to the zoo once, but the animals were penned up in bare cages and looked sick and miserable. You knew exactly how they felt. At age thirteen, you were sent away to a summer camp for disadvantaged kids, and for the first time you experienced the countryside. The camp had its own lake and a small forest, which you roved through as though it was your personal kingdom. Learning everything you could about the forest, you planned to become a forest ranger someday. Then summer ended and you returned to the bleak, dead city.

Never did get to be a forest ranger! You *did* settle near the largest forest in the east. Soon it became apparent that the forest was being decimated by logging. That was when you met the eco-terrorists who were trying to stop the deforestation. You joined and soon became a leader in the movement.

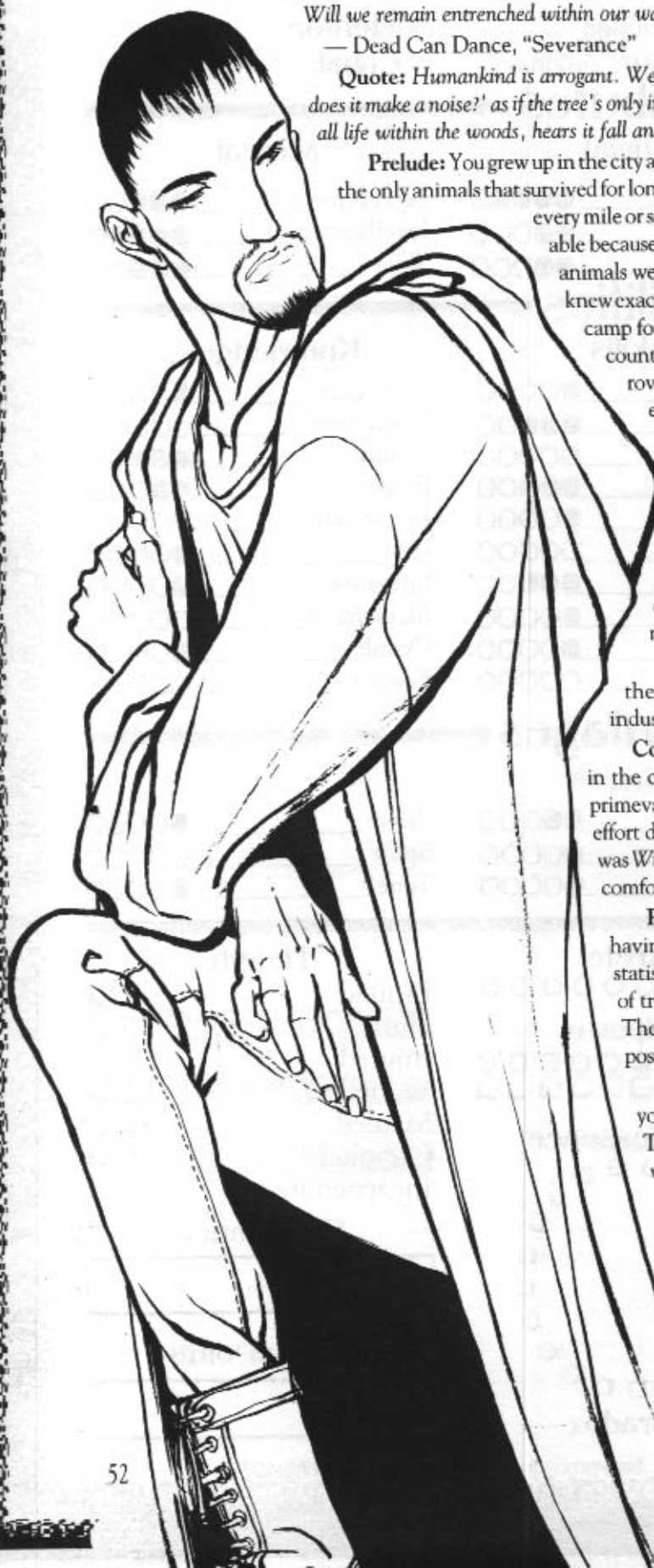
Then you met the true guardians of the forest and learned of their power to stop those who strip the forests in the name of industry and science.

Concept: You were an underprivileged city kid who longed to live in the country. You used to pretend to be an Indian who lived in the primeval forest. Trying to keep a fern alive in your apartment was an effort doomed to failure. The only television show that interested you was *Wild Kingdom*. A study in contrasts, you don't dislike people, but feel comfortable alone in the woods.

Roleplaying Tips: Read up on ecological issues, especially those having to do with the rainforest and old-growth woodlands. Quote statistics that support the contention that man will denude the planet of trees within the next fifty years. Remember you are also a Druid. The Druids were leaders and teachers in the old days. Assume these positions when you can.

Magick: Though you are only of the first circle now, eventually your magick will help shape and protect the new Mythic Reality. The Sphere of Life has provided insight into the complex patterns which govern all life on earth and you have learned to manipulate those patterns subtly. Command of Matter allows you to create new patterns to enhance the Life around it. You can make a small pool of water to feed a tree denied enough moisture. Prime lets you divert Quintessence to a needed pattern, and Forces allows you to perceive the energy flow which surrounds all things. Eventually, you will control Forces to such an extent that you can affect the weather and call lightning.

Equipment: Robes, sickle, packets of seeds, ecology pamphlets



VERBENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name: **Essence:** Pattern **Concept:** Druid
 Player: **Nature:** Visionary **Mentor:**
 Chronicle: **Demeanor:** Fanatic **Cabal:**

Attributes

Physical	Social	Mental
Strength _____ ●●○○○	Charisma _____ ●●○○○	Perception <i>Clear sight</i> ●●●○○
Dexterity _____ ●●○○○	Manipulation _____ ●●○○○	Intelligence _____ ●●●○○
Stamina _____ ●●○○○	Appearance _____ ●●○○○	Wits _____ ●●●○○

Abilities

Talents	Skills	Knowledges
Alertness _____ ●●○○○	Drive _____ ●●○○○	Computer _____ ○○○○○
Athletics _____ ●○○○○	Etiquette _____ ●○○○○	Cosmology _____ ○○○○○
Awareness _____ ○○○○○	Firearms _____ ●○○○○	Culture _____ ○○○○○
Brawl _____ ●●○○○	Leadership _____ ●●○○○	Enigmas _____ ●○○○○
Dodge _____ ●○○○○	Meditation _____ ○○○○○	Investigation _____ ○○○○○
Expression _____ ○○○○○	Melee _____ ●○○○○	Law _____ ●○○○○
Intuition _____ ●○○○○	Research _____ ●○○○○	Linguistics _____ ○○○○○
Intimidation _____ ○○○○○	Stealth _____ ●●○○○	Medicine _____ ●○○○○
Streetwise _____ ●●○○○	Survival _____ ●●○○○	Occult _____ ●○○○○
Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○	Technology _____ ●○○○○	Science _____ ●○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ○○○○○	Life _____ ●●○○○	Prime _____ ●●○○○
Entropy _____ ○○○○○	Mind _____ ○○○○○	Spirit _____ ○○○○○
Forces _____ ●○○○○	Matter _____ ●●○○○	Time _____ ○○○○○

Other Traits

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 _____ ○○○○○

Backgrounds

Allies _____ ●●○○○
 Arcane _____ ●○○○○
 Avatar _____ ●●○○○
 Influence _____ ●○○○○
 Node _____ ●○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○

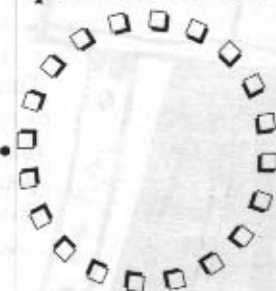
Arete

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Willpower

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Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0
 Hurt -1
 Injured -1
 Wounded -2
 Mauled -2
 Crippled -5
 Incapacitated

Experience

Study Points

Shapeshifter

And he went up and down among the lions, he became a young lion, and learned to catch prey, and devoured men.

— Ezekiel XIX, vi

Quote: *Grrrowll...*

Prelude: Born into a tribal culture, you were almost allowed to die because of your deformity. Instead those who were more “civilized” adopted and raised you. Never comfortable in their world, you always felt they expected gratitude and servitude for saving your worthless life.

Somewhere within you prowled an ancestral memory — of a sleek cat or a brilliantly plumed bird. Denied your rights as a member of the tribe, you knew that someday you would change, and in that change would find yourself as you should have been.

Meanwhile, suffering the difficulties of an infirm body, you imagined what it could be like in a more primitive, more magical world. Longing for perfection of body and spirit, you were given an answer. You are a mage now and may someday have the power to transform your body into your visions of yourself. For now, you’ll settle for curing the deformity.

Concept: You are a “primitive” tribesperson decked out in “civilized” costume; always out of place among those who are out of touch with their bodies and emotions. The deformity which ruled your life has made you more aware of your own carnal nature, even as it closed the door to the fulfillment of your desires. You crave perfection in yourself. Because you have so often been the object of pity or ridicule, you empathize with those who are hurt or treated cruelly. You once hid your deformity as though it were a curse, but now you begin to take pride in what you are.

Roleplaying Tips: The line from C. S. Lewis’ *Narnia* chronicles, “It’s not as if he were a tame lion,” suits you perfectly. Show the strength, ferocity and gentleness of the panther within you. Move to the rhythms of traditional chants and drums rather than the pulse of modern life. Walk in grace and beauty. Always look for ways to perfect yourself. Talk about shifting with anyone who will listen.

Magick: Your study of Life allows you to make changes in yourself. Soon you hope to be able to shift forms with ease. Mind magick will make certain you can retain your own personality and sanity when you become a full shapeshifter. You seek to use the Time Sphere as a means to examine the past for clues to your ancestral memories. You may one day use it to escape hunters or bring down prey. You are convinced your shapeshifting holds the key to ultimate Ascension. When everyone is everyone else, there will be no need for quarreling.

Equipment: Stretch clothing, camouflage stick, pistol (let the hunter beware)



KARABENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Essence: Dynamic
Nature: Survivor
Demeanor: Loner

Concept: Shapeshifter
Mentor:
Cabal:

Attributes

Physical	Social	Mental
Strength _____ ●●○○○	Charisma _____ ●●○○○	Perception _____ ●●○○○
Dexterity _____ ●●○○○	Manipulation _____ ●○○○○	Intelligence _____ ●●○○○
Stamina <i>Hardy</i> _____ ●●●●○	Appearance _____ ●●○○○	Wits _____ ●●○○○

Abilities

Talents	Skills	Knowledges
Alertness _____ ●●○○○	Drive _____ ●○○○○	Computer _____ ○○○○○
Athletics _____ ○○○○○	Etiquette _____ ●●○○○	Cosmology _____ ●○○○○
Awareness _____ ●●○○○	Firearms _____ ●○○○○	Culture _____ ●●○○○
Brawl _____ ●●○○○	Leadership _____ ●○○○○	Enigmas _____ ○○○○○
Dodge _____ ●○○○○	Meditation _____ ●○○○○	Investigation _____ ○○○○○
Expression _____ ○○○○○	Melee _____ ○○○○○	Law _____ ○○○○○
Intuition _____ ●●○○○	Research _____ ●○○○○	Linguistics _____ ●○○○○
Intimidation _____ ●○○○○	Stealth _____ ●●○○○	Medicine _____ ○○○○○
Streetwise _____ ○○○○○	Survival _____ ●●○○○	Occult _____ ●●○○○
Subterfuge _____ ●○○○○	Technology _____ ○○○○○	Science _____ ○○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ○○○○○	Life _____ ●●○○○	Prime _____ ○○○○○
Entropy _____ ○○○○○	Mind _____ ●○○○○	Spirit _____ ○○○○○
Forces _____ ○○○○○	Matter _____ ○○○○○	Time _____ ●●○○○

Other Traits

_____ ○○○○○
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_____ ○○○○○
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Backgrounds

Arcane _____ ●●○○○
Avatar _____ ●●○○○
Mentor _____ ●●○○○
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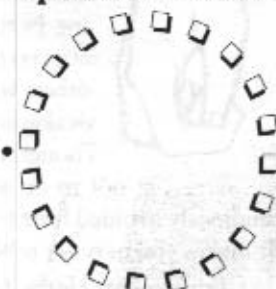
Arete

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Willpower

● ● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised _____ -0 <input type="checkbox"/>
Hurt _____ -1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Injured _____ -1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Wounded _____ -2 <input type="checkbox"/>
Mauled _____ -2 <input type="checkbox"/>
Crippled _____ -5 <input type="checkbox"/>
Incapacitated _____ <input type="checkbox"/>

Experience

Study Points

Healer/Medicine Man

Sharing... must be considered with great care by the Elders and the medicine people who carry the Sacred Trusts, so that no harm may come to people through ignorance and misuse of these powerful forces.

— Resolution of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Traditional Elders Circle

Quote: *Let me tell you of my vision.*

Prelude: You were born on the reservation and lived with your grandfather. He was a great medicine man and you wanted to be just like him. Secretly, though, you feared you lacked the power or the wisdom to ever become a healer as he was. You longed to have a vision, but fears and doubts kept you from achieving one. Lack of visions convinced you that you were not good enough to be a medicine man.

Giving up on traditional ways, you decided you could learn to be a doctor. Despite poverty and lack of opportunity, you managed to make it through school. But you couldn't get a scholarship, so that road was blocked as well. When your grandfather died, you were left alone with no money, no power and no future.

Then the Verbena came. They promised to teach you how to heal. They said you had power just waiting to be released. You left the reservation to follow your dream. Though you tried for almost a year, others had visions while you were left with none.

You returned to the reservation and renewed yourself with ancient rituals. A vision came at last and you knew you must return to the Verbena to finish your training as a mage. Though you are not a traditional medicine man, one who deals with the spirits, you are a healer who respects and understands the old ways.

Concept: You followed your grandfather around everywhere he went trying to fathom the "trick" involved in being a medicine man. The spirits never spoke to you, and you wondered if you were the only spirit-deaf person in your tribe. Embarrassed and hurt by your lack of success, you came very close to joining the Technocracy without even knowing what it was. Doing so would have killed your own spirit.

Roleplaying Tips: Although you have embraced modern medicine and the Verbena way of magick, you are more than half shaman. Quote heavily from great medicine men of the past. Walk softly on the Earth. She is your Mother. You hold the powers of life and death in your hands. Use that power wisely. Hold to the others in your cabal as though they were your tribe. They are.

Magick: You specialize in Life and Prime, and emphasis on those two Spheres allows you to make changes to simple life forms and your own body. You hope that by understanding Prime you will be able to use it to heal others more effectively. You use Entropy to locate the weaknesses in others which might cause problems, or to search for keys to weakening the hold disease and injury have on people. Though you are capable of causing injury or illness, you prefer not to do so unless absolutely necessary. Thus far, you have studiously avoided learning Spirit, as the spirits ignored you for far too long. It makes you nervous to think about using that Sphere.

Equipment: Herbs, first aid kit, medicine bag (Talisman), knife



VERBENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Essence: *Pattern*
Nature: *Visionary*
Demeanor: *Caregiver*

Concept: *Healer/Medicine Man*
Mentor:
Cabal:

Attributes

Physical

Strength _____ ●●○○○
Dexterity _____ ●●○○○
Stamina _____ ●●○○○

Social

Charisma _____ ●●○○○
Manipulation _____ ●●○○○
Appearance _____ ●●○○○

Mental

Perception _____ ●●○○○
Intelligence *Intuitive* ●●●●●
Wits _____ ●●○○○

Abilities

Talents

Alertness _____ ●●○○○
Athletics _____ ●○○○○
Awareness _____ ●○○○○
Brawl _____ ●●○○○
Dodge _____ ●○○○○
Expression _____ ○○○○○
Intuition _____ ●○○○○
Intimidation _____ ○○○○○
Streetwise _____ ●○○○○
Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○

Skills

Drive _____ ●○○○○
Etiquette _____ ○○○○○
Firearms _____ ○○○○○
Leadership _____ ○○○○○
Meditation _____ ●●○○○
Melee _____ ●○○○○
Research _____ ○○○○○
Stealth _____ ○○○○○
Survival _____ ●○○○○
Technology _____ ○○○○○

Knowledges

Computer _____ ○○○○○
Cosmology _____ ●○○○○
Culture _____ ●●○○○
Enigmas _____ ●○○○○
Investigation _____ ●○○○○
Law _____ ●○○○○
Linguistics _____ ●○○○○
Medicine _____ ●●●○○
Occult _____ ●●●○○
Science _____ ○○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ○○○○○ Life _____ ●●●○○ Prime _____ ●●●○○
Entropy _____ ●○○○○ Mind _____ ○○○○○ Spirit _____ ○○○○○
Forces _____ ○○○○○ Matter _____ ○○○○○ Time _____ ○○○○○

Other Traits

_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○

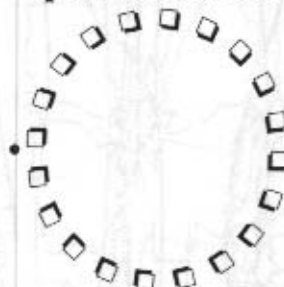
Arete

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Willpower

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0
Hurt -1
Injured -1
Wounded -2
Mauled -2
Crippled -5
Incapacitated

Experience

Study Points

Backgrounds

Avatar _____ ●●●○○
Destiny _____ ●●●○○
Talisman _____ ●○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○

Neo-Pagan

Human kind cannot bear very much reality.

— T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

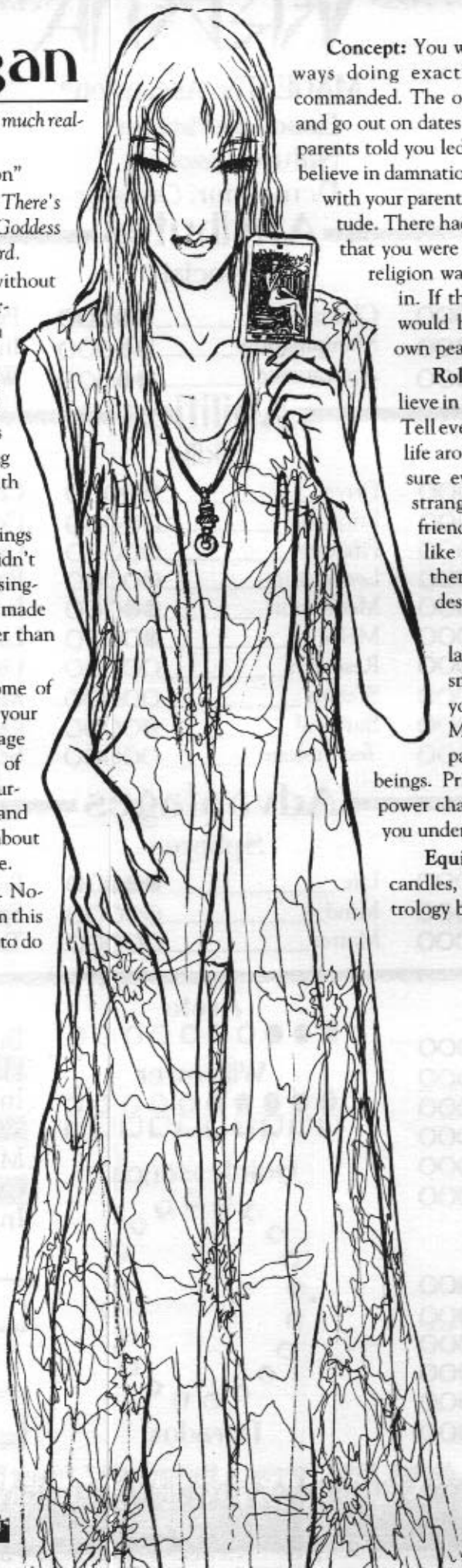
Quote: *Come to our festival. There's something there for everyone. The Goddess holds all her children in equal regard.*

Prelude: Raised in a home without joy or love, only duty — to parents, religion, and school — you couldn't believe in the all-powerful, cruel God they said ruled your every thought. Praise was rare; punishment swift. What was wrong with dancing or listening to loud music or hanging out with the other kids?

Secretly, you tried all the things your parents forbade. And God didn't strike you down. Dancing and singing made you happy. Loud music made you feel alive. Being kind rather than competitive brought you joy.

Your parents found out some of what you'd been up to when your sister was murdered. Their rage pushed you too far. A group of pagans welcomed you and encouraged you to join. You left home and never looked back, you learned about love, sharing — and self-defense.

The pagan attitude is cool. Nobody will ever take you away from this and nobody will ever forbid you to do what you want.



Concept: You were a straight-laced rich kid, always doing exactly what Mommy and Daddy commanded. The other kids you knew could dance and go out on dates and do a lot of other things your parents told you led to damnation. You didn't really believe in damnation — unless damnation was living with your parents and their holier-than-thou attitude. There had to be something more. It wasn't that you were irreligious, it was just that their religion wasn't what you wanted to believe in. If there hadn't been a Goddess, you would have had to invent her for your own peace of mind.

Roleplaying Tips: You fervently believe in the Goddess and all Her blessings. Tell everyone about them. Schedule your life around the pagan festivals and make sure everyone knows you do so. Call strangers "sister" and "brother." Be friendly and supportive unless you feel like you're being taken advantage of, then warn the sleazeball of the Goddess' wrath when crossed.

Magick: Life lets you manipulate simple life forms and correct small defects in yourself, allowing you to embody the Mother's beauty. Mind allows you to receive empathic feelings from other living beings. Prime and Forces may eventually power changes you wish to make and help you understand the weather.

Equipment: Athame, wand, robes, candles, bell, crystal, herbs, cauldron, astrology book

VERBENA

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name:

Essence: *Questing*

Concept: *Neo-Pagan*

Player:

Nature: *Architect*

Mentor:

Chronicle:

Demeanor: *Conformist*

Cabal:

Attributes

Physical

Strength _____ ●○○○○
 Dexterity _____ ●●○○○
 Stamina _____ ●●○○○

Social

Charisma *Persuasive* ●●●●○
 Manipulation _____ ●●○○○
 Appearance *Pretty* ●●●●○

Mental

Perception _____ ●●●○○
 Intelligence _____ ●●○○○
 Wits _____ ●●●○○

Abilities

Talents

Alertness _____ ●○○○○
 Athletics _____ ○○○○○
 Awareness _____ ●●●○○
 Brawl _____ ●○○○○
 Dodge _____ ○○○○○
 Expression _____ ●●○○○
 Intuition _____ ●○○○○
 Intimidation _____ ○○○○○
 Streetwise _____ ○○○○○
 Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○

Skills

Drive _____ ●●○○○
 Etiquette _____ ●●○○○
 Firearms _____ ○○○○○
 Leadership _____ ○○○○○
 Meditation _____ ●○○○○
 Melee _____ ○○○○○
 Research _____ ○○○○○
 Stealth _____ ●○○○○
 Survival _____ ●●○○○
 Technology _____ ○○○○○

Knowledges

Computer _____ ○○○○○
 Cosmology _____ ●○○○○
 Culture _____ ●○○○○
 Enigmas _____ ●○○○○
 Investigation _____ ○○○○○
 Law _____ ○○○○○
 Linguistics _____ ○○○○○
 Medicine _____ ●○○○○
 Occult _____ ●○○○○
 Science _____ ○○○○○

Advantages

Spheres

Correspondence _____ ○○○○○ Life _____ ●●●○○ Prime _____ ●○○○○
 Entropy _____ ○○○○○ Mind _____ ●●○○○ Spirit _____ ○○○○○
 Forces _____ ●○○○○ Matter _____ ○○○○○ Time _____ ○○○○○

Other Traits

Dancing _____ ●●○○○
 High Ritual _____ ●●○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○

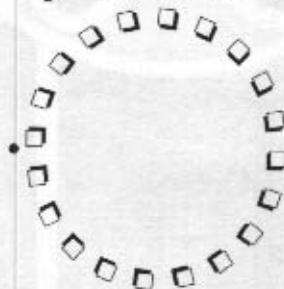
Arete

● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Willpower

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
 □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0
 Hurt -1
 Injured -1
 Wounded -2
 Mauled -2
 Crippled -5
 Incapacitated

Backgrounds

Allies _____ ●●○○○
 Avatar _____ ●●●○○
 Dream _____ ●●○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○
 _____ ○○○○○

Experience

Study Points



Appendix One: Ancient Wisdom Verbena Magick

No living organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream.

— Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

The Spheres of Magick



Verbena view magick somewhat differently than the other Traditions. As they originated many of the Spheres, they have a more primitive conception of how magick works, yet their use of various Spheres often shows a brilliance unparalleled even by the Traditions which nominally specialize in those areas.

Correspondence — The Art of the Pathways

Verbena see Correspondence as a way of moving from place to place — not as a rigid hierarchy of space/time. They see the ley lines and move through the paths much like a spider moves through her web.

Entropy — The Art of the Fates

Life...and death. The Art of the Fates is the art of knowing about death, decay and the path that Life must take. The most powerful Verbena have mastered this art because they realize that knowledge of Life is nothing without knowledge of Death, just as knowledge of Time is nothing without knowledge of Fate. Verbena see the Fates as lines of possibility streaming out from the now, and revere the teachings which show them how to choose, measure out and cut the twines of Fate.

Forces — The Art of Winds

Dancers on the edge of ecstasy, Verbena hold that they first shaped the forces of weather to allow early humans to survive, and later to provide good weather for crops. Despite the advent of technology and electricity, Verbena

largely see the Art of Winds as control over the forces of weather, although many of them recognize the tides and flows of electricity to be very like the blowing of the wind.

Life — The Art of Blood

This primordial Sphere is the focus of the initial Verbena training. Verbena use the Art of Blood to gently shape bodies so that they grow stronger, better, more beautiful. They work with the Lifeflow, the tendency for life to keep moving, changing, dying, and reproducing itself. This is the problem they have with the Progenitors: the Progenitors believe either that the Lifeflow is a superstition, or that they themselves have discovered the means by which to control it.

Matter — The Art of Crafting

Long ago, Verbena shaped the first stone cutters and knives with their power. Now the Art of Crafting serves them to create tools and craft things of beauty or power. The Art also deals with the use of herbs, roots, seeds, and non-living organic things.

Mind — The Art of Sight

Though long neglected by Verbena, the Art of Sight helped them to survive during the Burning Times through the careful shaping of minds. Curiously enough, many Primordial Verbena specialize in this art, claiming that the Wyck used it before they were Embodied.

Prime — The Art of Power

Many Verbena consider the Art of Power important but secondary, although some of the most powerful Verbena are Masters of this art. Many young mages try to master it as well, thinking they can outdo their older mentors through studying the base nature of magick.

Spirit — The Art of Calling

Also called the Art of Drawing, this is the body of chants, songs, dances and poetry that reaches back to the first times. Summoning spirits is now the specialty of Dreamspeakers, and has stagnated among Verbena except among those of Questing natures.

Time — The Art of Turning

Verbena feel that time is a wheel, always repeating and always moving ahead. Farther back in time, it becomes a spiral: a circle with no end that continually moves down into the past. When you step back through Time, you ride that spiral. Many of the pattern-oriented Verbena were shocked at the Progenitors' use of the double-spiral as a symbol for DNA. The double-spiral has long been the symbol that represented both the Lifeflow and the Timeflow — as they are linked together. Because of this belief, the Verbena hold certain times of the year to be special, and created the first calendars to mark these times.

Shapechanging

Although true shapechanging requires ●●●●● Life, many with ●●●● Life risk taking on higher-mammal forms (such as wolves, dolphins and whales) without the special



Mythic Threads

Magickal footholds in modern belief, Mythic Threads embody supernatural or paranormal trappings that remain a part of the collective unconscious. Something "special" within these concepts calls to modern minds, and they retain some power even in the most industrialized societies.

In game terms, a Mythic Thread is something that shapes a mage's magick style and philosophy. Used cleverly, Mythic Threads can turn otherwise vulgar Effects into coincidental ones; a Sleeper is much more likely to believe in a fortune teller reading his mind through tarot cards than in some stranger who just glances at him and learns the same things without effort. Mythic Threads tie into cultural beliefs — concepts that can work in a mage's favor.

The different Traditions have different Mythic Threads — to a certain extent Do and the Digital Web are Mythic Threads the Akashics and Virtual Adepts use. These ideas reflect and color the way a given mage views his magick; they are symbols of his or her philosophy. The "Personalizing Magick" section in *The Book of Shadows* goes into this subject in more detail, although it does not use the term Mythic Threads *per se*. Thread concepts shape the method of one's magick.

By creative use of Mythic Threads, a mage may pass off some Effects as coincidental (see the Blatancy and High Ritual Abilities in *The Book of Shadows*). This is largely a matter of Storyteller discretion, and will depend on the mage's presentation, location and conviction. A Verbena on Wall Street in a three-piece suit would have a harder time utilizing Mythic Threads than if she were on the moors in a midnight-blue cloak, her hair unbound and blowing dramatically. Grossly vulgar Effects — fire from one's fingertips, summoned demons, etc. — cannot be passed off under most circumstances, though this too can vary. Conjuring up the Loch Ness Monster in a Scottish loch would be more coincidental than creating a Tyrannosaurus in the Oval Office. As always, subtlety and reason should guide reality.

Mythic Threads of the Verbena include:

Mythic Creatures: The Loch Ness Monster, unicorns, werewolves, vampires, ghosts, and even angels and demons remain a part of common belief. These legendary creatures live on in folklore (or other ways), despite the encroachment of the static reality imposed by the Technocracy. Mages utilizing this Thread must be wary, however; Paradox abhors a dramatic paradigm change.

Crafts: Witchcraft, astrology, divination (by tarot cards, runes, or I Ching), herbalism, candle-spells, poppet-making, crystals and gemstones, hypnotism, psychics, curses, and blessings all have a place in a mage's magickal workings. Use of any of these in the appropriate circumstances should lower the difficulty of the magick being cast.

Times: Samhain, Beltaine, Friday the 13th, Midnight, Dawn, Eclipses — all are times of power, especially for the Verbena. Magick used during these times should have increased power — though not always of a predictable sort! Naturally, other times such as Sunday mornings, midday, or during the Ides of March might decrease the power of the magick, making it more difficult for the Verbena to use. Such fluctuations in power would increase or decrease magick difficulty by one or two (never more than three) places.

Superstitions: The number 13, black cats, an upside-down horseshoe, ravens and four-leaf clovers have been viewed as explanations for things beyond mortal ken. Sighting any of these portents or carrying such talismans as a rabbit's foot might increase the efficacy of magicks cast by Verbena. Conversely, bad omens might make their magick less strong or prevent the Verbena from casting at all (see the Echoes Flaw).

benefits that come with those forms (water breathing, flight, etc.). Such mages risk leaving their sentience behind, as they do not fully understand what they are doing. Shapechanging is very difficult to do coincidentally. Many Verbena specialize in specific forms by purchasing that form as a Knowledge (**Mage**, pgs 145-146). A specialty form lowers the difficulty by 1 when the mage is trying to change into that animal.

Rotes

Sense the Fleeting Moment (• Time)

This rote allows a Verbena to sense the proper moment in which to act. By using the Mythic Thread of astrology, a Verbena may choose the perfect time and place to do a

specific thing, and may even be successful at discerning whether or not the thing should be done at all.

[Each success on the magick roll lowers the difficulty for one specific non-magickal task by 1. This is usually coincidental. Once this single action ends, the magick ends as well.]

Bloodsight (• Life)

This rote allows a Verbena to sense how healthy a person is, what diseases (if any) she has, whether she is insane or pregnant or how old she really is, and alerts him to the presence of any foreign substances including bullets, drugs, and alcohol. The Verbena also use this rote to determine someone's lineage.

[Each success provides one fact about the target's physical state.]

Dousing (• Life, • Correspondence)

Using a forked stick (hazel is best) and this rote, a Verbena can search an area for the presence of water (or oil), by sensing both the presence of minute life forms attracted to the moisture, and the volume of liquid present. This is useful both for discovering underground resources and for finding water in an arid environment.

[Each success provides one more piece of information about the liquid, i.e. if there is liquid present, how close to the surface it is, how much there is, if it is safe to drink, etc.]

Banishing Blessing (•• Entropy, •• Mind)

Verbena often use this to rid themselves of people who are annoying but not actually threatening. By controlling the randomness of everyday events and offering mental suggestions, a Verbena can cause things to happen which will send the target away. These things are usually positive: the target wins the lottery and moves away, or finds a free airline ticket voucher and flies to Paris for a week, or wangles a car ride even when the last possibility has dried up.

[Each success sends the target away for more and more time. The Effect is always beneficial rather than baneful; this is seen as a more subtle means to be rid of others.]

Calling the Wind Lords (•• Forces, •• Spirit)

This rote summons spirits of the wind, who will then influence the local weather. The Verbena use this to alter the weather slightly: a sunny day becomes cloudy, clouds become rain, rain becomes a thunderstorm. Since the weather is still not completely predictable even by the science of meteorology, this Effect is usually coincidental.

[Each success on the roll enables the Verbena to alter the local weather; the more successes she rolls, the greater the change. Getting a cloud to block the sun for a moment would require one success, while summoning a full-blown storm would require five. These changes must be gradual and slow; speeding the Effect can result in vulgar magick. This weather-alteration affects the sky within immediate sight of the Verbena, lasts for a "normal" length of time, and cannot create phenomena out of nothing. Especially powerful storms (hurricanes, tornadoes) are beyond the power of this rote. Note that a larger weather pattern may evolve after the rote is over: the weather is not a system one tweaks without consequences.]

Circle Ward (•• Spirit, • Mind, •• Prime)

This rote creates a circle of power within which a Verbena can safely work. The ward itself is created by summoning four separate and distinctly powerful spirits (usually allied with one of the four directions, seasons, or classical elements) and weaving a circular pattern out of their spiritual essences. The result is a very strong ward that can hold up against many kinds of direct magickal attacks.

[Each success on the roll gives the Verbena +1 to her countermagick roll for the scene, as long as she stays within the circle. This rote cannot be maintained for more than one scene per point of Stamina].

Taliesin's Song (••• Life, •• Mind)

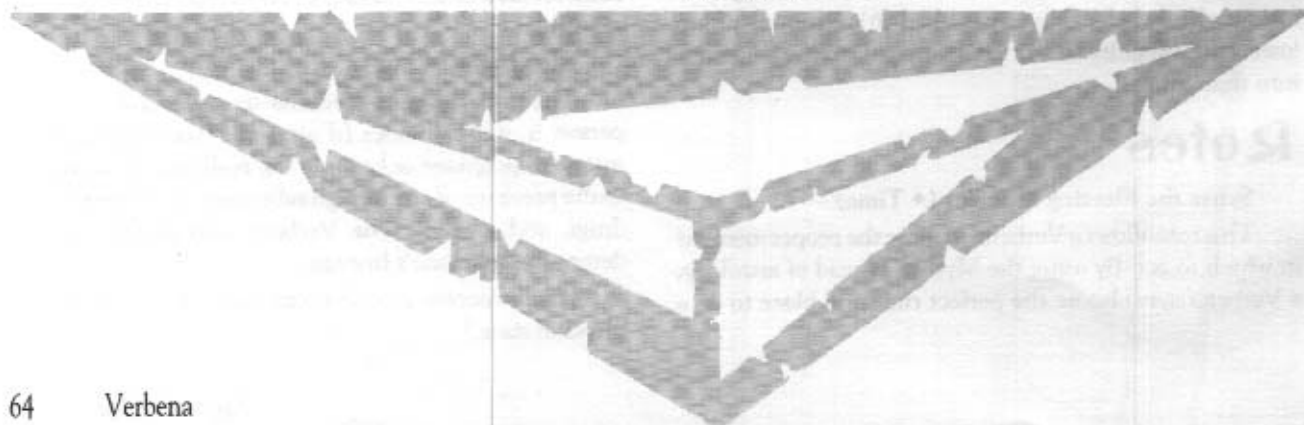
A Verbena may completely sway another's mind, simply by altering his vocal chords and singing. This control is coincidental, and allows the Verbena to influence others. Usually those who use this rote do so only when absolutely necessary. The target must be able to hear the music sung or words spoken for this rote to be successful.

[Each success on the roll adds an automatic success to the Verbena's Social rolls against the target or targets within range, for the magick's usual duration. This Effect can be resisted by Willpower if the target is aware that some coercion is being used, of course. **Taliesin's Song** is not terribly effective against other mages (who may be aware that they are being bewitched), but is quite useful when dealing with Sleepers.]

Merlin's Ride (••• Correspondence; •••• Correspondence to move others)

It is said this rote was first used to transport Arthur and his army to Badon Hill when Arthur needed magickal aid to defeat those who would not join him. To achieve this Effect, the Verbena begins to walk, run, or ride (a horse is preferable, although some Verbena have learned to do this while driving a car). Slowly, the scenery begins to blur around her as she travels toward her destination. The traveler does not appear "differently" to outside observers, as the Effect speeds and slows the traveler gradually.

[Each success on the Effect roll reduces travel time by 20%. Five successes on the roll cause the user to arrive almost instantaneously. Note that this Effect can be coincidental if done late at night or with very few witnesses, and the area around the traveler is in deep wilderness or on a lonely road.]



Appendix Two: The Center of the Wheel Famous Verbena

*And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every
beast of the earth...*

—Genesis IX, ii

Lilith



Known as the Damned Queen or the Lady of Night, Lilith is counted the first Verbena. Indeed, many view her as the first feminist and the first mage. The greatest of the Wyck, Lilith was said to be Adam's first wife. She refused a subservient position and was driven from the Garden. Lacking any comforts, she had to create what she needed to sustain herself in the darkness.

Lilith created a palace for herself in the Umbra. It was, essentially, the first Horizon Realm. She gave birth to a number of children, one of whom supposedly became the ancestress of the Garou. When Cain was driven out, Lilith sheltered and Awakened him. Because of the curse upon him, he was changed into a vampire by his Awakening. Lilith taught him her magick, which became the vampiric Disciplines.



It is said that Lilith could read the twines of Fate and would share her knowledge with any who asked. Such knowledge always came with a price, however. The beautiful, dark woman whose eyes pierce through darkness and disguise to read the soul is rumored to survive in her hidden Realm. Tales abound of mages who learn deep magicks at the feet of a goddess — a goddess with no navel, for Lilith was created, not born.

Verbena acknowledge Lilith as the mother of all Verbena and the originator of all Spheres of magick. She is believed to have rescued the four secret Horizon Realms of the Verbena from the shattered remains of the Mythic World and set them floating in the Umbra, keyed-to Verbena magick. If this is true, Lilith may still have dealings with the Tradition today.

Heasha Morningshade



Heasha, an Adept, is the quintessential Celtic earth mother type. In her mid-thirties, she still looks youthful, with clear blue eyes and a mane of flaming red hair which falls to her waist. Though she is not ravishingly beautiful, Heasha's dignity and grace command attention and respect.

She learned her magicks from Nightshade, the Verbena member of the Council of Nine. Her vision of the future for Verbena has led her to become a spokesperson for the Verbena to other Traditions, and she is pursued as a teacher by many young initiates. Her eloquence and passion speak for themselves, and many older Verbena find themselves quoting her or using one of her arguments when proving a point.

In recent years, Heasha has led the campaign to locate and integrate Orphans into the Verbena. Unlike many of her elders, Heasha recognizes the power Orphans have to offer and wants to encourage all mages to embrace the cause of Ascension rather than waste themselves in angst and party tricks.



Sam Haine



The gruff, dour fellow who calls himself Sam Haine is a troubleshooter for the Verbena. He doesn't agree with most of the witchy trappings and rituals so many of the Verbena enjoy. He travels the world looking for pieces of the Mythic Threads and coaxing them back into reality or to Verbena Horizon Realms where they can be preserved. His secondary job is as a debunker of the false

occult items and ideas the Syndicate sells to a gullible public.

Because he sees himself as a lone crusader doing the Verbena's dirty work, he is rude, intolerant and difficult to understand. Most Verbena would just as soon he shut up and joined the Technocracy (except he knows too much). Sam has been captured by the Technocracy more than once and somehow managed to escape each time. Many Verbena suspect he has allies or sympathizers within the Technocracy, but if he does, he keeps his own counsel. The only reason most Verbena trust him is that Sam Haine has never been known to tell a lie or to repeat sensitive information that someone asked him to keep quiet.

Sam is able to change his appearance magickally and likes to scout out new territories or situations in various forms before he commits himself to action. To many acquaintances, he is simply known as Changing Man.





Beneath the Tree, we Dance

The moon peers between the branches of the World Tree, the Verbera seek the Sacred within the Self. After centuries of persecution, the Verbera have regained a foothold on the path to Ascension. The Verbera Tradition Book shows each the curtain of myth falling from the mountain of time.

The Magick is Within Ours!

This Mage Tradition book tells of the origins and practices of the Verbera, their allies and enemies, and their quest for understanding the Self in all its forms.

The Verbera Tradition Book includes:

- Six Verbera character templates
- An Insider's history of the Verbera Tradition
- Insights into Verbera magick, new spells, and lore!

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