



## I Who am Dead a Thousand Years...

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The native Britons were not necessarily sorry when the Romans left, but at least they knew where they stood with the Romans; yes, the Romans had come as conquerors, but as long as the populace accepted them and their laws, the people were left in peace; and the legions defended the land. But after they left, the Saxons came raiding, killing the men and taking the women and children as slaves, stealing whatever they could carry away.

The invading Saxons were pushing their way deeper and deeper into the land. Although his kingdom was still unraided, Arthur, King of Cornwall, decided to take the war to the enemy and gathered an army to defend the country as best he could. He was an effective war leader who beat off the Saxons until his nephew's treachery killed him. Not that it gained Mordred anything; from somewhere the mortally wounded Arthur found the strength to strike one last blow, and Mordred fell dead at his uncle's feet, even as Arthur's strength failed and he too fell.

His closest friend, the wise man Merlin, bent over him, hoping for the briefest of moments to be able to do something to save the life of the war leader; knowing in that moment that there was no

chance. The wound was too severe, the blood loss too great, with more blood pumping out of Arthur's body with every weakening beat of his heart.

Arthur blinked pain-filled eyes at his friend. "You warned me... not to trust... Mordred," he whispered.

"At least you exacted your own vengeance," Merlin replied. "And wherever he is buried - if indeed we bury him, and do not leave him for the wolves - will not be anywhere near you."

"Bury him," Arthur said. "Remember... I loved him, and... I think... that when he was a child he... did love me... It was only... as he grew older... he became over-ambitious... His mother's influence... She never did... see past... being Uther's older child... Even though she married... she thought... she should have... inherited... the kingdom... "

"In peace, perhaps. Not in time of war," Merlin said. Arthur's sister Morgause might try to take the throne - but although she was a strong-willed woman, she had no training in arms; and the Britons were not people who would readily accept a leader who was unable - for whatever reason - to lead them into battle. Though now, because of Mordred's treachery, there was nobody to inherit the throne of Cornwall save an unborn child.

Arthur made no reply; his eyes drooped shut, and Merlin thought that this was the end; but after a moment Arthur's eyes blinked open again. "I will... return," he said. "When... when the people... need me... I will return." His eyes closed again, and this time Merlin knew that it was indeed the end.

The Saxons were gone, driven from the area by an army that did not yet know that its leader was dead.

Merlin looked around. Where could he bury his friend? It had to be somewhere that was safe, somewhere that couldn't be easily found, for the invading Saxons had only been driven off for the moment, and would, he knew, be happy to dig up Arthur's body and desecrate it.

In the distance, he could see the hill of Avalon, distinctive in this mostly flat land. Reputedly guarded by the spirits, surely that would be the perfect burial place! Merlin carried Arthur's body towards it, stopping when he reached the small lake that surrounded it. There was a small boat tied up nearby; probably the property of one of the local farmers who went to the island every year to tend the apple trees that grew, practically wild, on its slopes and in the autumn harvest the apples. Well, he would only need to 'borrow' it for two or three hours; its owner would never know.

Merlin carried Arthur's body to the boat, and rowed over to the island. The soil was fairly soft, for few feet trampled it; an oar served as a perfectly adequate spade.

He looked down at his friend's body for a long minute as it lay in the not-very-deep grave. Not deep, but deep enough, here on this island. "Goodbye, my friend," he murmured. "Find me again, when you return. Meanwhile, sleep in the peace you seldom knew in this life."

After filling in the grave he carefully replaced the turf; and then, without a backward glance, he returned to the boat and rowed back, tied the boat up again, careful to leave everything the way he had found it, and walked away.

He made his home within a mile of the island; no point in returning to Camelot, that now-deserted hill fort where Uther Pendragon had once ruled. Arthur had left it without a second thought, recognizing that it was too far from the Saxon landing-places to be used as a base from which to fight them (although the Saxons had been getting progressively closer) and almost all his people had followed him, even the women and children - the army needed its camp followers to cook for the fighting men and tend the injured, and the children were accustomed to foraging for food. The only two women who did not follow the army the entire distance to their final battle were Arthur's wife Guinefar and her maid. Guinefar was not quite three months pregnant, and sickly with it; and so Arthur had left her with the Wise Woman Naeve who lived beside the River Tavy.

Morgause's husband, King Lot, had his own lands, and despite Cornwall's metal deposits, he was not, Merlin knew, particularly interested in adding Cornwall to his northern kingdom; the two were too far apart. She had wanted Camelot for Mordred, because her first son was his father's heir. Merlin wasn't sure if she had known Guinefar was pregnant, but a child ruler was easily deposed.

It was possible that someone had seized opportunity and moved into Camelot, but Merlin wasn't interested in finding out. He did occasionally wonder if Guinefar had been able to carry Arthur's child to term, and whether she had stayed with Naeve thereafter or moved on, though he suspected that she had probably remained with Naeve; Guinefar was a fairly ineffectual personality, always needing someone more decisive to direct her life. And although Arthur had genuinely loved her, Merlin suspected that his friend had been quite glad to have an excuse to leave her, not wanting the needs of a sickly wife to distract him from the demands of leading a war host.

Merlin lived out the rest of his life close to Avalon, the nearest thing to a doctor the peasantry had, his knowledge of herbal medicine valued by his neighbours who undoubtedly knew he had arrived there with Arthur's army but who knew nothing of his close friendship with the war leader. They soon noticed how he spent a few minutes every evening standing at the door of his hut gazing towards the conical island of Avalon, as if somehow he revered it - but many of his neighbours revered it too, knowing that it was home to the spirits.

Eventually, nearly twenty years after Arthur's death and knowing that his own life would not continue for much longer, Merlin took an apprentice, not wanting to leave the people he had come to regard as his without a Healer. The youth he selected was the son of a woman with whom Merlin had enjoyed a brief, though satisfying, liaison some eighteen years previously; she had never said if it were so, but Merlin suspected that the boy could very well be his son. Henry was quick to learn; within a year Merlin trusted Henry to gather the herbs needed for his various potions, within two he left most of the brewing of those potions to Henry, and spent more and more time watching the island. And then one day he failed to return to the hut for the evening meal; going in search of him, Henry found him lying dead, a peaceful look on his face.

They buried him in the village graveyard, selecting a site from which there was a clear view of Avalon out of respect for the reverence they knew he felt for the isle, his grave marked only by a stone on

which someone carved 'The Healer' - for so he had been known to most of the people, his own name, although known, ignored, even by him, for as long as he had lived there.

The spirit who had once been Merlin - now called Wat - was reborn within half a mile of the hut that had once been his home, and where the community's Healer still lived. The first five years of his childhood were carefree ones - he played with the other children, and learned from that play; but on his fifth birthday his father Hob decreed that he was no longer a child, and so he was given certain chores. He had known the day would come; indeed, once he was four, he had looked forward to it. At five, no longer an irresponsible child, he was helping to support his family, though it would still be many years before he was considered adult and a fully responsible member of the community.

But he was no longer a child.

Over the next five years he watched as the men of the village, directed by the robed monks from the abbey near his home, dug ditches to drain the land, while the women and older children did the work the men would otherwise have been doing, not sure why he didn't think it a good idea - after all, it was turning useless fenland into dry fields, linking the island where apples grew to the mainland so that it would be easier to tend the trees and harvest the apples. But something made him uneasy. The island of Avalon should remain an island! It would be safer...

But why it would be safer, what would be safer, he didn't know. And young though he was, he knew better than question what the monks decreed.

He wasn't sure why he was drawn towards the Healer's hut one day not long after his tenth birthday, but his duties that day - collecting dung to feed the cooking fires - allowed him to do so without appearing to be neglecting his work.

A monk and two of the Abbey's lay workers were approaching the hut; one of the workers knocked hard on the door, and the Healer answered.

"What can I do for you, friend?"

The monk stepped forward. "Renounce your evil ways!"

Wat could easily recognize the Healer's total lack of understanding, and wondered that the monk didn't.

"Evil? I don't understand... "

"You claim to heal people, but your 'healing' gives their souls to the devil."

"I heal people in the name of our Lord," the Healer protested.

"So you might tell yourself," the monk said. "But where did you learn your 'skill'?"

"I was apprentice to Hal, the Healer before me... "

"Who learned from the healer before him, who learned from the healer before him, who learned from the 'healer' before him... Go back six or eight generations, and you reach the man who learned from the devil. The 'healer' called Merlin."

Crouching where he could remain unseen, Wat shivered. Why did the name 'Merlin' sound familiar? And then he remembered... and knew why he was so uneasy about the draining of the land.

The water protected Arthur's grave, though only he knew where it was.

"Merlin the Healer was a Wise Man," the current Healer was protesting.

"He was a wizard! A servant of the Evil One!" Even in this denunciation the monk's voice remained quiet, quiet with a menace that was chilling, and Wat knew that he must keep his new-found knowledge of who he was to himself... for now he remembered all of the skills he had possessed... how long ago?

The work of the devil? No. As Merlin he had worshipped the Lady, the Earth Mother who provided everything that Man needed; fresh water, plants that were good to eat, herbs for medicine, animals that supplied meat and milk and wool and strength and transport.

The teachings of the Christ were good; but Wat, with Merlin's memories now clear in his mind, realized how easily they could be subverted by the dogma that said that only Christianity held the truth, that the followers of any other religion were being misled by the devil, who sought to destroy everything that Christianity stood for.

Yes, some men were evil, evil through and through, but in his last years as Merlin he had come to understand that even the Saxon invaders weren't in themselves evil, but only seeking to improve their lives, provide better for their families. Their leaders, perhaps, were greedy men or men anxious to feel more important than they truly were... and Wat found himself wondering if many of the monks weren't the same - living a life of apparent poverty - for the Abbey was notably rich - while wielding power over those who lived outside it.

The thoughts passed quickly through his mind; the Healer was still protesting, "Merlin harmed no-one; he healed! As I heal!"

*\*Don't fight him!\* Wat thought at the Healer. \*Appear to accept what he says! If he chooses to accuse you of heresy, the people will be left without a true Healer!\**

But it was too late. The monk's servants were already moving forward to grab the Healer and drag him from his hut.

"Do you add to your heresy?" the monk asked coldly. "Yes, his potions, remembered over the years, may have seemed to cure the ill, but those souls who took his potions went straight to hell when they died because they trusted the devil's lies. You are still using those potions, and damning all those who come to you thinking they will be cured. The only true cures are those offered by the Church!"

As they dragged the Healer away, Wat realized that they had intended to do that from the very beginning, and the monk had encouraged the Healer to talk so that he could use the words as further evidence of his heresy.

Wat made his way back to his home, gathering dung as he went, utterly depressed. The Lady's healing gifts would be forgotten now. Oh, the Church undoubtedly knew some of them, possibly even used some; but the monks' credo was 'Faith will heal you; prayer is more effective than potions'. Their answer to the families of those who died was, 'His Faith failed; he did not trust enough in the Lord'.

Oh, the Healer's potions were far from foolproof, but no Healer had ever blamed a death on the shortcomings of the victim!

As he reached his house, Wat decided to say nothing about the Healer; the community would learn soon enough, and ignorance of the details was undoubtedly the safest way to go.

Word of the Healer's arrest by the monks spread quickly but also quietly; nobody dared say much for fear of bringing the wrath of the Abbey down on their heads. But everyone was aware that now anyone who fell ill would have no alternative but to go to the monks... who would charge them far, far more than the Healer ever had. Many would not be able to afford the fee the Abbey charged, though everyone could afford the Healer's charge. An armful of firewood, an egg or two... And that was undoubtedly the reason why the Abbey had decided to dispose of the Healer. Without him, the people would have to go to the Abbey...

Would the Wise Woman who aided the women of the community when it was time for them to give birth be the next to be dragged away? It was not impossible, Wat decided, although the monks were not supposed to lay their hands on a woman for any reason and therefore could not give pregnant women any of the assistance another woman could provide. But the monks undoubtedly thought that Faith would get a woman safely through the dangers of giving birth...

At breakfast a few days later, Hob announced that they were leaving; moving to the town of Bath. Ruled by the Saxons though it was, he obviously felt it preferable to the rule of the Abbey.

Such a move was... unprecedented. For as long as Wat could remember, nobody had moved away from the village whose male inhabitants mostly spent their time digging ditches while the women and older children worked in the Abbey's fields five days of the six, leaving the people just one day to tend their own strips of land... and most spent part of Sunday, the 'day of rest', working on their own land once their religious observance was done, hoping that the monks didn't realize that they *were* working, for it was the only way they could hope to harvest a crop large enough to feed them for the year as well as pay their tithes.

Wat spent the day of Hob's decree gathering dung again - which told him that Hob was hiding the family's departure by spending the day as normal. In the light of what he now remembered, and knowing that he wouldn't be able to return, as he worked Wat directed his footsteps in the direction of the Isle of Avalon.

He put down the sack of dung, hiding it carefully, then splashed his way through the barely ankle-deep water that had once been a deep lake. On the island, he made his way to a site that he now remembered.

There was no sign that a body was buried here, but he knew he had not mistaken the place. He knelt, bidding his friend and one-time leader farewell. "Earth Mother grant that we meet again one day," he said softly. And then he turned, made his way back across the remnants of the lake, retrieved the sack of dung and continued his work.

The family left that night, once daylight had faded, Wat entrusted with carrying the cage containing their half dozen hens. His brother Hal, two years younger, carried their youngest sibling, five-month-old Kirsty. Seven-year-old Mary helped three-year-old Tristan. His older siblings, twelve-year-old Mica and eleven-year-old Hannah, helped their parents carry as many of their possessions as could be loaded onto four backs. Hob had chosen the time of the full moon, which let them see where they were going.

Hob forced their pace, although it was difficult for Hal, burdened as he was by a sturdy baby, and Tristan, who was still rather young to make the journey. It might have made more sense for Wat to carry Kirsty while Hal took the lighter cage with the hens, but the hens were more valuable than a baby girl who had six older siblings.

The sky was beginning to show the first light of dawn before Hob let them stop, pushing them into the shelter of a thick clump of bushes near a stream. He gave the hens a double handful of corn, but for the children there was only a mug of water each. Their mother suckled Kirsty briefly, but it was obvious to Wat that she was as exhausted as her children. A day of hard work followed by an all-night walk was hard, though he could remember, as Merlin, doing something similar more than once. Anna kept Kirsty beside her, and they slept, all too tired to stay awake.

That night was the worst, however. Hob let them rest during the day and they traveled at night. It took four days - or, rather, four nights - to reach Bath.

On the morning of the fourth night, Hob didn't stop - they were close to the town. He went into the town, and straight to a house in the cramped center where the houses looked far from salubrious. He was greeted enthusiastically by a man who, Wat quickly learned, was his Uncle Edgar; Hob's brother.

Edgar lived alone - his wife had died in childbirth some years previously, the child with her, and he hadn't remarried. So there was space in this small house for Hob and his family. The children were crammed into one small room, while Hob, Anna and Edgar slept in the tiny kitchen-cum-living room.

The hens were released into the tiny yard behind the house, where Edgar already kept two hens; the exhausted children collapsed in the small bedroom - there were no beds, everyone slept on the floor. Mica, counting himself as nearly adult, refused to give in to his exhaustion, checking that the younger ones were all right before he too lay down, although Hannah - who, four days previously, had been demanding that she be treated as adult - was glad to collapse with the younger children as soon as they got the chance.

Tired though he was, Wat lay awake for some minutes, trying to overhear what the adults in the other room were saying, but their voices were too quiet. He finally fell asleep, not quite sure whether the move to Bath was a good one. This house, for example, was definitely smaller than the hut near the Abbey that they had lived in - it had been big enough for the children to be split between two bedrooms, boys in one, girls in the other, though their parents had still slept in the kitchen.

And what would they do here? How would they live, how would they find food? Wat knew that his memories of Merlin's life would be of little help. In this life he was still a child. It was up to Hob, who had brought them here, or Edgar, who lived here, to provide for the family...

He fell asleep, still wondering.

Within two days Mica and Wat were apprenticed, Mica to a carpenter, Wat to a potter. By the end of the week, Hannah was apprenticed to a seamstress. They lived with their masters, and only returned to Edgar's house, where Hob and Anna continued to live with the rest of their siblings, for the occasional visit.

Time passed; Wat's apprenticeship came to an end and he continued to work for the same man as a journeyman. He didn't actually enjoy the work, but it was work... He supposed that one day he might leave, set up as a master potter, but a plague reached Bath when he was almost thirty, and he died of it, leaving his pregnant wife a widow.

Cerdic knew he was dying.

A soldier for all of his adult life, he had suffered several wounds of varying severity, but this one, he knew, was fatal.

The pain was less than he had expected, but the shock of the blow that had damaged his spine so that it was impossible for him to rise was probably responsible; he had seen many men, mortally wounded, who seemed to feel little or no pain.

Well, perhaps it was for the best. Alfred's men had already beaten off an invading force of Norwegians three weeks previously; many still had wounds from the earlier battle, wounds that were not yet fully healed. The men had fought bravely, but the forced march from Stamford Bridge to Senlac Hill had left them tired before they even joined battle with the Normans.

Cerdic did not trust the Normans. He had heard things about William of Normandy; if he had escaped uninjured, he would not have been staying in England. Better to take his family and make the journey to Wales or Scotland, or even Ireland, than remain in England to be enslaved - for that was what serfdom was. Slavery. Even men who had been relatively wealthy would be robbed of that



wealth, their lands given to Normans. At best they would be left free on a small patch of what had once been their land, to scratch a living as best they could.

His eyes drooped shut; he was very sleepy.

Yes... this was death, and it was welcome, though he regretted having to leave his wife to manage on her own. He could only hope that she and the children would be safe...

Dickon was eight when he started having strange dreams. Born in a town, having lived all of his eight years in a town, he had seldom seen the countryside, which made the dreams all the stranger. There were houses forming a small village - he knew the word, knew it was smaller than a town, but it was so very much smaller than he had ever imagined. There was a big church near the town, though not as big as the University Church; but the strangest thing was the conical hill with a small building on the top of it that was about a mile from the village. Again, he knew the word 'hill' though he had never seen one in his waking life; all the land around Oxford was quite flat.

Almost every night his dreams took him to that strange hill. It seemed to him he should know it... but how?

And then one night memory connected. He had lived there once... but how long ago? His name hadn't been Dickon... What was it? What... Wat! Yes, Wat. But he hadn't lived there for long... his family had moved away... But there was another memory, an older one... Try as he might, though, he couldn't summon up any details of that older memory. He was simply aware that there was something he should remember, but couldn't.

Unusual for a boy who was not of a rich family (although his family wasn't actually poor) Dickon was given the chance of an education, and learned easily; it was a foregone conclusion that he would attend the University as soon as he was old enough.

He did well at university, and after he graduated continued there as a teacher. It was a rewarding life, and if he sometimes felt that there was something missing, he had no idea what that 'something' was. He had a feeling that it might be connected to that hill he still sometimes saw in his dreams, but why? And where was that hill, that village, that church?

He dreamed of it the night he died peacefully in his sleep, some two years after his wife died, and leaving three sons, all of whom were also scholars.

As the two armies approached, the villagers of Branxton mostly fled, taking with them as many of their beasts and belongings as they could; there was no saying what might happen during - or after - the battle. Men whose blood was hot with combat were unlikely to stop and ask if people tending nearby fields - even women and children - were combatants, especially if the invading Scots army

won. Women and girl children were likely to be raped, their sheep and cattle slaughtered to feed the hungry men. In the face of an imminent battle, any non-combatant with sense retreated.

They returned a day or two after the battle, once they were sure the combatants had left, the winners in disciplined ranks, the losers in total disarray.

The fields were trampled flat, all chance of a second hay crop lost, and grazing for the beasts at a premium; basically winter had come some two months early.

Bodies lay over a wide area. All had been stripped of anything of value, even the few who still lived but were barely - or totally unable - to move. From a distance of some quarter of a mile, nine-year-old Ned watched one man whose guts spilled from his slashed stomach, and who was still trying to drag himself away from the battlefield. Ned shuddered, trying to ignore what he could see far too clearly. Another man lay moaning, his legs obviously totally shattered; even if he could be tended, even if he lived, he would never walk again. Death would be kinder. Ned suspected that the moans were relatively quiet - the man was clearly near death - but they sounded loud. And the stink of blood was everywhere.

Even these wounded and dying men had been stripped of anything of value; the men who took their weapons, even such clothes as were useable, had not even had the humanity to kill them.

Of course, those looting the battlefield would be the winners. They would give their own people the mercy of a quick death, even though they robbed their corpses, but these ones left alive were the enemy.

The villagers didn't even know which side had won.

It was fear of disease that led the villagers to dig a huge pit and bury the dead. They did what they could for the few who were still alive, considering it their Christian duty, but they all died within two or three days; they were buried in the churchyard. Ned overheard his father commenting that those who were injured but still able to run had undoubtedly run.

Seeing the aftermath of the battle changed Ned's plans for his future. He had not wanted to spend his life working on the land, and life as a tradesman did not appeal to him; young though he was, he had considered the army as a possible opportunity. But seeing this carnage...

At nine, Ned had had little reason to think of his own mortality, despite the teaching of the Church. But now... The idea of death in a just cause didn't frighten him; according to the Church, death in a just cause meant instant entry to Heaven. But just cause or not, to lie mortally wounded on a battlefield for days after being wounded, helpless body stripped of anything of value by men who were heartless enough to leave him dying... And there was not, he realized with a flash of insight, even the surety of dying in a just cause. A soldier followed where his Commander led. Oh, each Commander presumably thought that his cause was right, but both sides couldn't be right; God would make that decision. God would decide who was right and who was wrong, and an honest soldier might well end up in Hell because the Commander to whom he owed allegiance had been wrong, even if it had been an honest mistake.

Ned thought about it for a day or two; and then each day, after his chores were done, he began to spend time beside the village smithy, offering to help Edgar-smith with the small unskilled jobs that needed to be done. There was always water to fetch, or wood for the forge; even the bellows to pump. Edgar's wife did that, and she was glad to let someone else do it; she was no longer young, although she was not worn down, as many of the village women were, from the sheer drudgery of their lives, from bearing child after child, many of whom died in infancy. Sometimes she felt inadequate because she had proved to be barren, though Edgar had never blamed her for it.

Edgar-smith wasn't the busiest man in the village - only three local landowners had horses that needed to be kept well-shod - but there was always farm equipment that needed repair. Although he had no son to become his apprentice and - in due course - inherit the smithy, he had shown no sign of wanting to take on an apprentice, but Ned quickly made himself indispensable, and one day a year or so later found himself, with his father's blessing, apprenticed to the smith.

Ned enjoyed his work as a smith and when, in due course, Edgar died, he carried on as Ned-smith. The second of his three sons showed an interest in the work and became his apprentice; his oldest son married the oldest daughter of one of his neighbors, a man whose wife had produced only daughters, and so was considered his father-in-law's heir. His youngest son Mark proved to have a degree of wanderlust, and joined Edwin, a traveling packsman, a trader who arrived twice a year bringing goods not otherwise available to the villagers. He returned to Branxton regularly over the next ten years, but after that neither he nor Edwin showed up again. There were several possible reasons, but the religious unrest that had been rife since the King disbanded the monasteries, denying the Pope and declaring himself the Head of the Church, was probably the most likely one.

Ned had no strong religious belief. Nominally Catholic, he attended Mass on Sunday and criticized nobody, although his private belief was that the Church was in great need of some kind of reform. Many of the villagers struggled to pay their tithes to a Church that was already extremely wealthy, and seemed to do nothing with those tithes than add to its wealth. Reform was needed... but it was never easy to live through times of major reform. A wise man kept his head down and his mouth shut, and Mark had never been one to keep his opinions to himself. He had almost certainly fallen foul of the authorities somewhere.

When King Henry died and his son Edward ascended the throne, Ned was doubtful. A boy as king? But he seemed to be decisive enough, though under his rule the new Protestant religion seemed to be flourishing. And then news arrived that Edward, too, was dead, from an inflammation of the lungs. Within days Edward's declared heir had been deposed by King Henry's older daughter, who returned the country to Catholicism with a brutality that horrified even the Catholics.

Although he was not yet fifty, Ned's health was failing; he knew he had not long to live. One morning he called Will, his second son who would inherit the smithy.

"Be careful," he advised. "Offend none, for it would be too easy for someone to accuse you falsely. If it seems expedient, change the way you worship - the Queen is a devout Catholic, but her heir is her sister Elizabeth, and 'tis rumored that she is Protestant."

Will nodded gravely. "I will be careful," he promised.

Ned clasped Will's hand, "Back to work with you, now," he said, trying to sound stronger than he actually was.

Will bent and kissed his father's forehead. "I will see you again tonight."

He did; but Ned did not see him, for he died midway through the afternoon.

Mindful of his promise, Will Smith was very careful, and when Queen Mary died and Queen Elizabeth took the throne discovered that his father had been correct; the new Queen was indeed Protestant.

Like his father, Will was not particularly religious, but he knew that anyone who was not seen to attend church every Sunday could easily be accused of being a witch. He adopted Protestantism, married a Protestant girl, brought up his children to be Protestant. They in turn reared their children as Protestants.

Will's third son Tyler moved to London when he was eighteen, seeing in the move opportunity that, for a younger son, was lacking in the North of England. He hated living in the big city, but opportunity was indeed there. His grandfather had made sure that his sons could read and write; they in turn had made sure that \*their\* sons could read and write, and sheer competitiveness ensured that Tyler learned those lessons well. In London he found work as secretary to Andrew Trader, a rich merchant, and over the next five years made himself so indispensable that his master gladly married him to his youngest daughter despite the class difference.

Tyler Willsson only had one child - a daughter, Jennet - for his wife died in childbirth. Tyler grieved deeply, for he had truly loved his wife, and chose not to remarry.

Jennet's maternal grandfather doted on the child. As she neared twenty, he discussed her possible future with Tyler, who agreed to let his father-in-law choose a husband for her. Andrew chose Roger, the only son of one of his fellow merchants, Wilfred Draper, a man Jennet already knew and liked. Both men saw in the match the chance to expand his business, and they became partners.

A few years later, the sailing of the Mayflower made them realize that colonies were starting in the New World, and saw in that a chance to expand their business; and decided to send Tyler, Jennet and Roger to the New World, to oversee that end of the business.

It was the start of a successful and lucrative cross-Atlantic trade.

When his father died, Charles Draper could have continued to work in Boston with the family firm of Draper Traders; however, having heard rumors of the wealth that could be found on the other side of the continent, he decided to move west, suggesting to his uncle that he could set up a branch of the family business in the growing town of San Francisco.

Uncle James was a greedy man; already one of the richest men in Boston, he was not averse to adding to his wealth, especially since it would cost him nothing; the financial risk would fall on Charles. And so he gave his nephew a free hand to set up a branch of Draper Traders on the west coast.

Two days before Charles was due to leave Boston, Uncle James died from a heart attack.

James had never married. Basically he had been too selfish to spend money on supporting a wife. His heirs were Charles and Charles' sister Victoria.

The morning after James died, Charles was visited by the son of one of Boston's other businessmen. Andrew Brewster was not a rival; where Draper Traders dealt in textiles, Brewster dealt in wood, finding a lucrative business in supplying wooden goods to new immigrants, many of whom arrived with very little. He was sympathetic to the plight of those immigrants, and allowed them time to pay for the goods they bought; which meant that they recommended him to the next boatload of immigrants, and so on.

Andrew's son - another Andrew - explained that he wanted to marry Victoria. He knew that Charles planned to move west; and while Victoria could accompany him, Andrew suggested that not having Victoria with him would make the journey easier. In addition, he knew - as Charles did - that Victoria was happy in Boston and did not want to leave it.

In the preceding twenty-four hours, Charles had given some thought to his future. In some ways the most sensible thing to do was stay in Boston, and continue to run Draper Traders; but he had committed himself to moving west. Andrew suggested appointing a manager to run Draper Traders in Boston, leaving Charles free to move after the funeral. "If you want, I can keep an eye on whoever you appoint, because it will be Victoria's legacy too."

Charles took time to ask Victoria if this marriage was what she really wanted; when she agreed that she loved Andrew Jr and wanted to marry him, Charles let his brother-in-law buy him out of the business. Whatever business he started in San Francisco might be called Draper's, but it wouldn't be Draper Traders. Eventually, nearly a year after he had originally planned the move, Charles left Boston and headed west for San Francisco.

As he uncovered the potato clamp, Ryan O'Connell looked gloomily at the rotting mess that had been a... not good, but adequate, potato crop. What had happened? He would be unable to feed his family once the small reserve actually stored indoors was eaten; and no matter how well he - or, more accurately, his wife - rationed those potatoes, they would soon all be eaten.

But he knew what had gone wrong. The winter frosts had been severe, and the potatoes left stored outside had frozen, the straw in the clamps - wet from the rain that had soaked through the soil covering it - insufficient to protect them. Now that the thaw had come... the potatoes were ruined. The wet weather of the previous year had finally eased, but the autumn grain some farmers had

planted had rotted before it had the chance to sprout. Many animals were dying, starving to death because their owners couldn't feed them.

His wife Betsy's four chickens, ranging free, would feed well enough and supply them with eggs - four a day if all four laid - and at absolute need he could slaughter the pig, lean from the winter though it was, but the meat from it would only last a short while. And if they used the few potatoes left in the indoor store for seed, they would starve that much more quickly; they could not even say that a lean summer would lead on to a better-fed winter, because they were unlikely to survive the summer.

Ryan realized he had to leave before he and his family starved. It would make sense for him to take the family, leave this small farm... and go where?

There seemed to be little for him in Ireland. He did not want to go to England, although his great-grandfather had come from there. Scotland was a possibility... but since 1707 when Scotland became - in effect - a colony of England when its parliament combined with the English parliament, it would mean still being subject to Westminster's laws. For an Englishman born, even for a Scot, there would be no difficulty; for an Irishman, even one with at least one English ancestor... He was not sure. Even if he adopted his great-grandfather's name, the moment he opened his mouth he would be recognized as Irish. He had heard stories of the only work being made available to the Irish was low-paid and menial. Granted, somebody had to do the menial work, but to be condemned to it purely because he was Irish... No.

He had some money saved - not much, but surely enough to buy his family transport to the New World where it was said that riches awaited the man who had the will to work.

His decision made, Ryan moved quickly. He gave the pig and the chickens to a neighbor; Betsy packed up their few possessions. At five, young Keith could carry a small pack. Two-year-old Kitty... well, they could entrust her with the kettle. It wasn't heavy, and even at two, she would understand the responsibility she had been given. And then, shouldering their heavier packs, Ryan and Betsy turned their backs on the small house they had lived in since their marriage, and headed for the port of Limerick, some fifty miles away.

Without the children, Ryan and Betsy could have walked the distance in two days; but aware that Kitty, in particular, was still very young, Ryan chose to limit how far they went each day, and it took them five days to reach their destination.

Most of the boats tied up at the docks were traders, carrying goods that the American colonists still bought despite their declaration of independence sixty-odd years earlier, and bringing back goods, like cotton, from America. But the captains were more than willing to carry the odd passenger - the price they charged was a useful addition to their pay, even when it was shared with the other officers.

The crossing took twelve days. Betsy, in particular, was glad that the weather remained good; a day into the voyage, she realized she was pregnant. Neither of her previous pregnancies had been easy, and all the way across the Atlantic she feared seasickness, which so early in the pregnancy might, she believed, cause her to lose the child.

They landed at Wilmington in North Carolina, and found a cheap lodging house close to the dock. Ryan immediately went in search of work, but quickly discovered that he would be better going further inland in search of the farm work in which he was skilled. Though... With Betsy pregnant, it might be a good idea to find work at the docks until after the child was born, saving as much as he could, and then, when the child was perhaps a year old, they could move inland. And so he took a job at the docks.

Much to his surprise he found himself promoted to overseer within the first six months. Of course, he had had some education, which most of the dock laborers lacked. The pay was better, he was able to save a surprising amount, and after his second son was born he decided to stay in Wilmington.

Ryan saw to it that his children could read and write, since that ability had - at least in part - led to his quick promotion. Keith got a job as secretary to one of the traders. Kitty, at eighteen, found work teaching the five and six year old children of the same trader. She knew that in two or three years the boy would go away to be properly schooled, but with luck she would be kept on to continue the girl's education, possibly become a companion to her as she grew up and - hopefully - continue as teacher to her children. It was a stable future that appealed to the unadventurous Kitty.

Eamonn, the youngest of Ryan's children - Betsy had two miscarriages in the five years after his birth, then never again quickened - was more restless. Although Ryan had adjusted remarkably easily to town life, Eamonn seemed to have inherited his family's rural preference - he hated living in the town - and when he was seventeen he decided to move inland. Ryan debated uprooting and accompanying him - it was what he himself had originally intended doing, after all - but was reluctant to give up a good job for the uncertainty of moving again. So he asked for a promise that Eamonn would keep in touch with his family if he could, gave him some money and sent him off with his blessing.

Eamonn shouldered his pack a week after his seventeenth birthday and set off on foot - he could have bought a horse, but walking was cheaper. He had no destination in mind, but found himself traveling in a somewhat north-westerly direction.

He stopped occasionally, taking a casual job here or there for two or three weeks so that he didn't have to spend any of the money Ryan had given him, then once he had a little saved - he lived frugally - he moved on. He wasn't sure just what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go, but the urge to keep moving was strong.

After about a year, he began to hear talk of the recently-formed Pony Express, and how they were looking for young, lightweight riders. It sounded interesting; following the talk, he found himself in Missouri, in the town of St. Joseph, and sure enough easily found a Pony Express office.

Although he was now eighteen, he gave his age as seventeen, and was immediately employed as a rider.

The next year was a surprisingly happy one for him. Riders went west, then back east, over a set route, but occasionally, if a rider fell ill, someone did a double stage; after doing this several times, Eamonn found himself a lot further west than he had been, and when, barely eighteen months after it was started, the Pony Express was replaced by the transcontinental telegraph line, he decided to

move on westwards into California. The days of practically tripping over gold (in the right area) were long past, but that still seemed to be the place to go to find the best opportunities to do well financially. To \*continue\* to do well financially. He had been able to save almost all of the very generous wage paid to the riders, and that, along with the money Ryan had given him, gave him capital to invest in - perhaps - land.

He finally set up as a farmer not too far from San Francisco and, once settled, finally managed to fulfill his promise to his father and got in touch with his family back in Wilmington, and remained in touch until he finally chose the wrong day to go to his bank in San Francisco. He stayed there overnight, and was killed in the earthquake of 1906.

The trading firm of Drapers, based in San Francisco, was one of the most successful in the city, so when Maria Draper married Wilmer Ellison, she took with her a sizeable dowry.

As the second son, Wilmer had given some thought to the future. Although not matching Drapers for size and wealth, Ellisons was financially healthy - however, it was his older brother who would inherit the business; all he could hope for, when his father died, was a reasonable sum of money. But Maria's dowry... Add that to whatever he might expect from his father's estate, and he would have the funds to set up a successful business... especially if he moved away from San Francisco and found a gap in the market someplace else. He was still debating the issue when his father contracted a chest infection. By the time he realized it wasn't just a cold, it was too late; the doctors could do nothing, and Wilson Ellison wheezed his life away within a month.

As expected, the business was left to William; Wilson's other children were left money according to their age, with Wilmer getting the largest amount, sister Wilma a little less, next brother Wilfred less again, and Wilbur, the youngest, the least - though even that was a reasonable amount. Nobody could say that he had been left only a pittance.

A few days after the will was read, Wilmer announced his intention of leaving, moving north to one of the developing towns in Washington State. William did nothing to discourage him; the last thing he wanted was an ambitious younger brother setting up in competition anywhere nearby. He wasn't too worried about Wilfred or Wilbur; neither showed any great interest in branching out on their own, and indeed both were happy to accept positions of apparent - but in actual fact relatively ineffectual - power under him. They were well-paid puppets, yes-men whose main purpose was to support William's sometimes grandiose schemes for expanding their business.

Wilmer eventually settled on the very new seaport of Cascade, and established Ellison Enterprises, acting as a middleman between the ships bringing goods into the port and the cities further inland. It proved to be an extremely fortuitous move; the 1906 earthquake that destroyed so much of San Francisco destroyed the original Ellisons (as well as Drapers); neither one started up again. Family feeling make Wilmer check on his brothers, sister and brother-in-law; but all had disappeared without trace. He could only hope that they had survived and moved elsewhere.



Wilmer's son Joseph (Wilmer had early decided that no way was he going to continue his father's decision to give all the children in the family a name beginning with 'Wil', or even 'W') proved to have an excellent instinct for the business and in due course became his father's right-hand-man; although the Great Depression of the 1930s lost them money, Ellison Enterprises survived, and before he died, Wilmer had the satisfaction of knowing that the next generation of Ellisons seemed to have inherited the family business acumen. Joseph's son William, named for his disappeared great-uncle, was born just before World War 2, and by the time he was ten was conducting a small and profitable 'business' selling cigarette cards to his schoolmates. Wilmer neither knew nor cared where William acquired his stock of cards; in fact he bought them for a cent each from the smokers who worked in the family business. He read everything that was published about them, learning that some cards were very common while others were relatively rare. The rarest he kept for himself, knowing that one day they would be worth a lot more than the cent he paid for them. He had no fear that they would ultimately be valueless - people had been collecting these cards for many years, and sets of some early ones were selling for a surprising amount of money.

William took over the running of Ellison Enterprises when he was twenty-five. Unlike his father, who continued working until he died, Joseph decided to retire when he was sixty, although he continued to take an interest in the business; and he enjoyed several years of comfortable semi-retirement, seeing William married and a son, James, born, before a drunken driver lost control of his car, causing an accident that killed himself, Joseph, and six other people.

William married twice; his first wife, Jimmy's mother, never regained her strength after giving birth, and died when her son was only a few weeks old. Some months later, William remarried, rationalizing the speed of his remarriage with the need to give Jimmy a mother; and it was some years before Jimmy discovered that Grace was actually his stepmother and his brother Steven was only a half brother.

When he found himself the absolute boss, however, the 'business acumen' that Wilmer had so admired in the ten-year-old completely took over William's life.

He had been somewhat brainwashed by his grandfather's approval of his childhood venture into buying and selling cigarette cards into thinking that financial success was the only thing that really mattered in life, and so he set out to make the already very successful Ellison Enterprises into the most successful business, not just in Cascade, but in all of Washington.

Grace, who - although she was genuinely fond of him - had seen in the successful young businessman a meal ticket to a life of luxury, found that the life of luxury she had anticipated did not in fact compensate for a husband she almost never saw, and eight years after she married William she suggested that he spend a little more time with his family. That was when she learned that, as wealthy as William was, he truly believed that unless he continued working a minimum of eighteen hours a day six days a week, Ellison Enterprises would fail and he would quickly sink into poverty. Almost reluctantly, but resigned to the realization that if anyone could persuade him that nine to five, five days a week, was a more realistic working week than the one he followed, it was not going to be her, Grace divorced him.

William decided that he would not remarry. Jimmy, after all, was almost nine, not far off the age he had been when he started looking for ways to make money, and Steven was five. A sensible

housekeeper with a fixed budget for running the house would be better than a wife who sometimes made quite unreasonable demands on the household purse; and a housekeeper would get a fixed wage. Grace - and Margaret before her - had sometimes spent a ridiculous amount of money on unnecessary fripperies.

In the days when he sold cards, he had sometimes been tempted to give some of the more common ones to the boys he called his friends. His grandfather had positively discouraged that, basically teaching him that the best way to be successful was to think primarily of himself, and that 'friends' were there to be used. Even his wives - he had been fond enough of both of them, but in a way they had been possessions. But they had given him sons, and he had to make sure that both Jimmy and Steven had the urge to succeed that had won him so much approval from his grandfather. He also tried to teach them both how fascinating it was to discover additional ways to expand the business.

He was only partially successful. Jimmy showed absolutely no interest in any of William's attempts to interest him in business; Steven showed a little interest, but made no attempt to try to start any 'business' venture at school. Well, he was still young... William himself had been ten before he saw an opportunity to set up his own 'business'.

However, one thing about Jimmy did worry William - the number of times he said something about seeing or hearing something that no normal person should be able to. William knew it wasn't imagination; there was a family... legend, he supposed he could call it - that every three or four generations someone was born into the family who could hear and see really well. He remembered his grandfather mentioning it, with a passing reference to his younger brother Wilbur who had exceptionally good eyesight; but Wilmer had never been able to tell him what had happened to Wilbur; all he had ever said was that he had lost touch with the rest of the family after he moved to Cascade.

In any case... Wilmer had been eighty when he died, and that was twenty years previously. Even if Wilbur had been ten years younger... no, he'd be at least ninety now, unlikely to be still alive. No, he couldn't look for information from him.

All right; the ability could be useful to - well, spy, on rivals, by being able to hear what they were saying without their realizing it; but if it became common knowledge that Jimmy Ellison could do that...

To give him his due, William did believe that if people knew about Jimmy's... call them abilities, they would treat him as a freak; and so he bullied Jimmy into, somehow, forgetting them, and becoming reassuringly normal - which Steven was, thank goodness.

As Jimmy entered his teens, he seemed to have - or William seemed to have successfully instilled into him - the competitive instinct that was sure to make him a force to be reckoned with when he took his place in the family business.

William was utterly shocked when, the day after his eighteenth birthday, Jimmy walked out and joined the army.

After the manner of ambitious younger sons everywhere, Terry O'Connell chose to seek his fortune somewhere other than the family home after his father Eamonn died. His older brother Sean inherited the family farm, and Terry did not grudge him it - Sean had always been more interested in working the land than Terry ever was. After thinking about it for a while, Terry decided to head back towards Wilmington, where he knew he had cousins, at least, and possibly an aunt and uncle - his father had been the youngest of his family, but he was only in his early sixties when he died; it was perfectly possible that both were still alive. He wasn't sure that he actually wanted to contact them - Eamonn had lost touch with his siblings after his father died - but it gave him a destination.

He never reached Wilmington. At St. Louis he was diverted by seeing the steamboats on the Mississippi, and he decided to head south on one. By the time he reached Vicksburg, however, he was tired of traveling down the river, and left the boat there.

At that point Terry considered his options. He could go east towards his original planned destination, or he could go west and into Texas. After thinking about what he had heard concerning Texas and the wealth to be found there, he decided to head west.

He ended up in Fort Worth - or, rather, a few miles from it, finding work at an oil well.

Along with many of his fellow workers, he went into Fort Worth on Saturday nights; and although they mostly went into the area once known as 'Hell's Half Acre', where there were still many bars and bawdy houses, Terry and a couple of his friends started looking for a more respectable part of the town. Within a year, all three were married, and had gone from working at the oil well to working in the town.

Terry had the will to work that had been so much a part of his grandfather Ryan's character, and found that working for his father-in-law gave him the scope to suggest innovations that soon had an already successful business becoming even more successful.

He had several children, and although he loved them all and tried to treat them all the same, there was something about his youngest daughter Esther that made him favor her over the others. He could, he decided, see more of himself in her than was in any of the others.

Esther loved learning, and found a job at the local library. She didn't allow her marriage, in 1941, to Paul Sandburg - who, despite his name, wasn't Jewish - and the subsequent birth of three children to interfere with that work.

Paul was medically exempt from active service during World War 2; his extreme myopia saw to that. He felt guilty about it, but working at Fort Worth Army Air Field during the war years, as what was basically a secretary to its commanding officer, did mean that he was in the army and doing something for the war effort. Esther never told him how happy she was that he was safe at home, although she thought he might have guessed - her oldest brother was killed at Pearl Harbor, less than a week after being posted there.

The youngest child in the family was a girl, Naomi, born in 1952. Naomi was a restless child - once again Terry saw a lot of himself in her, and wondered... Esther had settled happily once she married,

but Terry couldn't help wondering if Naomi would be the next member of their family to move to another part of the country, as he had done, as his father had done, and as his grandfather had done... Esther was the only one of what he liked to think was the 'direct line' who was happy to stay put.

When Naomi was sixteen, a serial rapist/killer hit Fort Worth. He targeted young teens, and it was a terrible shock for the family when Naomi became the eighth of his victims.

She was taking a short cut across a local park after spending an evening at a friend's house when she was attacked, dragged into a clump of bushes, beaten, raped, and left for dead; a few minutes after her attacker left, she somehow dragged herself out of the bushes and over some grass to a path. About half an hour later, Evan Blair, giving his dog a late walk, found her. After his first horrified gasp as he looked at the half-naked, bruised and bleeding girl, he acted quickly; spread his jacket over her, looked around, saw a pay phone not too far away, ran to it and dialed 911.

Recovering in hospital, she was able to give the police a description of her attacker, and two days later a man was arrested, charged, and eventually executed.

Naomi was only in the hospital for a week; but a few days after she got home, she realized that she was pregnant. She told her mother, who contacted their doctor; but he refused even to consider giving Naomi an abortion, despite her age, despite the circumstances that led to her pregnancy. And so, nine months later, Naomi gave birth to a healthy boy. She had already decided to call the child Blair, whether it was a boy or a girl, after the man who had helped her, and who had become a family friend.

She was surprised how fond she was of the child; she had expected to be reminded, every time she looked at him, of the man who attacked her, but young Blair quickly established his own personality, and she was finally able to put the man out of her mind. She knew right from the start that Blair would never learn that he was the result of a vicious rape.

When Paul's father Tim died (he was already a widower) he left a sizeable amount of money to each of his grandchildren. Naomi considered her inheritance, then went to talk to her grandfather - the person she was sure would understand.

"I want to do some traveling," she said. "Blair's seven now; old enough to enjoy seeing the world for three or four years. He's interested in so many things... and even at seven, he reads so much. It'll give him the chance to see some of the places he's read about. We can come home when he's about twelve to let him go back to school. The money Grandpa left me - I won't waste it. I can take jobs as we travel, live off what I earn."

Terry nodded. "There's been someone in almost every generation of our family who had itchy feet," he said. "It's skipped your mother and your uncles, but I must admit I've suspected for a while that you had the family urge to travel. I think, though, that it's hit you harder than any of the rest of us. I came here from San Francisco; my father went there from Wilmington, and to the best of my knowledge we still have relatives there. My grandfather came from Ireland. I don't know the family history earlier than that, though. Having traveled a fair way from home, my grandfather, my father and I all settled - my father and I were looking for better job opportunities, and married after we settled. My grandfather, though - he brought his whole family to America, I think because of a

famine - the country was too dependent on potatoes, and if the crop failed - which it did several times - you moved or ran the risk of dying."

"Wilmington?"

"On the Atlantic coast."

"And we might have family there?"

"It would be a place to start your travels. Not too far from home in case you decided, once you'd tried it, that travel with a seven-year-old was too difficult; your parents would be glad to keep him. Come to that, I'd be glad to look after him for you. My grandfather worked at the Wilmington docks, and Great-uncle Keith worked for a trading firm, that much I do remember." Quickly, Terry gave Naomi what little information he had. "We lost touch after my grandfather died - we let them know he'd died, of course, but it was my older brother Sean who wrote them. And the last time I tried to contact Sean, the letter came back marked 'unknown'. So we've lost touch with our Californian relatives too."

"All right," Naomi said. "I'll start by going to Wilmington, but I'm quite sure that Blair won't be any trouble."

"Just one thing, Naomi - please, keep in touch."

"I promise."

It was a promise she kept; even after her grandfather died, she wrote home regularly, although she rarely visited.

In Wilmington, Naomi found the graves of Ryan and Keith O'Connell, but was unable to find anyone related to them. She let her grandfather know, then decided to go to Ireland, see if she could track down any relatives there. Terry had been able to tell her that his grandfather had left from Limerick, but not where he had originally lived. Despite putting an ad in one of the local newspapers, however, she came up blank, and could only suppose that, because of the famines of the mid-1800s, any relatives Ryan had had either died or also emigrated. She shrugged philosophically, and moved on.

First she went to England by way of Wales, crossing from Rosslare to Fishguard; she made her way along the south coast of Wales to Bristol.

At the Tourist Information Centre there she picked up some brochures. She checked them with Blair, letting him choose where he wanted to go. He immediately chose the Cheddar Gorge and Wookey Hole, then picked up the leaflet for Glastonbury, which showed a picture of the Tor. He stared at it for a minute, then opened it and began reading. Some of the words were difficult for him - although his reading age was at least ten, the brochure was written for adults - but one thing caught his eye; in 1191 the monks of Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have found the graves of King Arthur and his

queen, Guinevere, in the grounds of the abbey church, although the bodies subsequently disappeared.

Somehow that didn't sound right, though Blair couldn't have said why. But there was something about the picture of the Tor that spoke to him... So he added Glastonbury to the list of places he wanted to see before going on to the wildlife park at Longleat.

Naomi smiled almost resignedly. She wasn't surprised at three of his four choices - caves and a safari park were a sure hook for a young boy - but she did feel that Glastonbury was an odd one - though when she glanced through the brochure and saw the references to 'King Arthur' she thought she understood; Blair had always been interested in myths and legends, and the mythical King Arthur was bound to draw his attention.

As it happened, she found the Cheddar caves and Wookey Hole fascinating, and was glad that Blair had picked them. Then they went on to Glastonbury.

Blair found the Tor drawing his attention as much as the picture of it had done. They wandered around the abbey ruins, but Blair's attention kept wandering to the Tor, about a mile and half away. "Can we go there?" he asked.

There was a well-made road to the tower at the top, but as they went up it, Blair was more and more certain that the place he actually wanted to see was lower down the hill. He wasn't sure how to tell Naomi that, if only because he wasn't sure himself what he wanted to see or why he wanted to see it.

From the top they could see for miles. Finally they went down again and back to their B & B. Finding their landlady in the garden, Blair asked her about the Tor. "I know what it says in the brochure," he said, "but are there any older stories? There's supposed to be the link with Arthur but wasn't he at least five hundred years before the monks at the abbey said they'd found his grave?"

"Yes," she said. "There is an older story, still linked to Arthur. Legend is that after he was killed at the battle of Camlann, his body was taken to the Isle of Avalon, where he sleeps until his country has need of him. All this land was marsh at one time, with a lake, and the Tor was an island in the lake; legend is that the Tor is the Isle of Avalon." She sighed. "The monks drained the marsh and the lake so that the Tor isn't an island now... and the spirits that guarded the island are long gone. Gone with the apple trees that once grew there. But Arthur..." She shook her head. "There have been times when England - Britain - needed a strong leader, but Arthur never came."

"Maybe his spirit inspired the leaders Britain did have," Blair suggested.

"Maybe," she agreed.

That night, Blair had a vivid dream. He was a man grown, standing with another man lying dead at his feet, looking at the Tor, but it was an island. And then he bent, lifted the body, and carried it to the lakeside, put it into a boat, and rowed over to the island. He buried the dead man there, on the lower slopes, and rowed back, tied the boat where it had been, turned and walked away.

In the morning the dream had almost totally faded from his mind, and when they went on towards Longleat, he was already looking forward to seeing the animal park there.

He was sixteen when he went to Rainier, and during his years there found that he had odd recurring dreams; the one where he took a body to the hill that had once been an island at Glastonbury was the most common, and he remembered having that dream when he had visited the place nine years previously. There were other dreams, some of them desperately unhappy, some relatively happy in a bittersweet sort of way. And in all of them he felt that he was missing something... someone? The man he had buried on the Tor, perhaps?

When he was seventeen he found *The Sentinels of Paraguay* in a second-hand bookstore. The store mostly carried modern paperbacks, and he suspected that the few hardbacks and older books on the shelves had come in with collections of paperbacks when someone was clearing space. The storekeeper clearly looked for a low-profit-per-item but big turnover, and Blair bought the book for exactly the same price that he'd have paid for one of the paperbacks. He found the subject fascinating, and for a while his dreams changed, focusing more on finding a sentinel than on lives that he seemed to have lived in the past. He wrote a couple of papers about sentinels, then, after getting his Masters, decided to start working towards a Ph.D. He wanted the subject to be sentinels, but knew that unless he found one, he would have to choose another subject.

And then, when he had almost given up hope, that particular dream came true; he found a sentinel. And far from being just a test subject, that sentinel became a close friend.

Jim did well in the army; eventually, as a Ranger Captain, he was sent on a mission to Peru. However, things went wrong almost from the start. They were shot down - he never did learn who was responsible, even after he discovered that their CO had deliberately given them faulty info, faulty instructions, because he was working with one of the groups infiltrating the jungle. But Jim survived, was found by one of the tribes, and was adopted by them. By the time an army unit arrived to check on him some eighteen months later, he had done the job he had been sent to do. He was unaware that during that time he used the powerful senses he had been born with, helped to use them naturally by the shaman Incacha; when he returned to 'civilization' they faded again; in self-defense he pushed them away, as he had done when he was still a child.

He returned to his native Cascade, but chose not to contact his family. Instead, he joined the police, training on the fast track because of his army service and within five years becoming one of the top detectives in Major Crime.

And then he spent several days on a solitary stake-out in the woods near a sawmill... and his senses returned.

## I Who am Dead a Thousand Years... (2)

Jim sighed as he read through the report.

Blair had somehow managed to scribble down some notes as they spoke to Mrs. Walker the previous day, and had found the time to type up a report before they quit work for the day. Now Jim read through the report, using it to remember details of their meeting with her.

It was a case that had the potential to become very nasty; the unexplained disappearance of one of Cascade's mid-level businessmen, who - although the police had never been able to pin anything onto him - was suspected of being fairly deeply involved in Cascade's criminal world.

Tom Walker's wife had reported him missing when he didn't appear for breakfast the previous morning. Although their relationship was friendly enough, Tom and Rebecca Walker didn't share a bedroom; had never shared a bedroom. If he was feeling amorous he joined her in her bedroom, and afterwards left for his own bed.

Rebecca had checked his bedroom when there was no sign of him five minutes after he usually joined her - he had a routine that normally was practically determined by stop watch - and discovered that the bed didn't appear to have been slept in; in other words, he hadn't arrived home the evening before. He'd expected to be late; she hadn't realized that he hadn't come home at all.

Although the case had originally gone to Missing Persons, when she realized just who the missing man was, Captain Raeburn had wasted no time before transferring it to Major Crime in the early afternoon.

Although Detectives Goss and Irving had spoken to Rebecca Walker in the morning, in the afternoon Jim and Blair had gone to see her as well.

The housekeeper showed them into Mrs. Walker's sitting room, where she was working on making something - small, as far as Jim could see, because her hands were hiding much of what she was doing. But against one wall he noticed several tables on which were dolls houses, and he assumed she was making something to put into one of them.

She was worried, but not panicked by her husband's disappearance.

"We've pretty much led our own lives," she told them. As she spoke, she put down the small object she had been stitching; even seeing it, Jim had no idea what it was. "When we married... we liked each other well enough, but we weren't in love; it was a marriage that suited both of us, because neither of us was ever particularly demonstrative. Tom wanted a wife who would... well, look good at social gatherings, and I've always had a good sense of fashion; I wanted a husband who wouldn't make too many demands and was wealthy enough to give me a comfortable lifestyle. Tom had the money to do that, and he only wanted sex about once a month, if that. It's possible that he had a mistress, but if he did he was very discreet about it."



"And if you had discovered that he did?" Jim asked.

"I'd have thanked her for satisfying his sexual needs so that I didn't have to. I don't enjoy sex, Detective. I don't understand how any woman *could* find sex in any way pleasurable." She shook her head. "But that isn't important."

"Well, it is insofar as it tells me you didn't discover he was unfaithful, lose your temper, kill him and then report him missing as a cover up," Jim said quietly.

She stared at him. "Don't tell me that was what those other detectives this morning thought." She sounded honestly horrified.

"Well, it's not unknown, and Missing Persons is the department most likely to encounter that kind of situation. But I'm quite sure you're telling the truth.

"So - when did you last see your husband?"

"At breakfast yesterday. He said he had a meeting in the afternoon and would be late home - he often was late after a meeting. He's always hated the... the uncertainty of that, of the variable length of time those meetings lasted; he's a man who likes routine, with everything being done at a set time, taking a set time. He complained to me, not long after we married, about business meetings going on far longer than necessary, if only because some of his colleagues were too much in love with hearing their own voices and just wouldn't stop talking. One in particular he always described as the kind of person you wanted representing your firm at a business conference, but was a pain in the neck at their own meetings because he simply never gave up worrying at some minor detail that nobody else thought was worth more than a minute's consideration."

Blair gave an amused snort at that. "I know exactly what you mean, Mrs. Walker," he said. "I've had to sit through a few meetings like that. Everything worth saying has been said in the first half hour but we're all still sitting there two, three hours later while a few self-important idiots keep on hashing out the obvious." He glanced at Jim. "Sorry, man. So what happened next?"

"After breakfast he went to the office. Usually he comes home for lunch, but on days when he has a meeting he sends one of the office girls out to get him a sandwich and works through his lunch hour to get as much as possible of his regular day's work done - the meetings are part of the job, but they do interrupt his normal routine and as I said he thinks they tend to take up too much time."

"So you weren't worried at all when you didn't see him on Tuesday night," Jim said.

"No. I'd no reason to be," she replied. "I didn't expect him home for lunch, and he'd said he expected to be late home. Although we usually eat together, the rest of the time we pretty well lead our own lives; normally after dinner we either go out separately or go to our own sitting rooms."

"And that was what you did on Tuesday night?"

"Yes. I wasn't worried that he was late, because he expected to be, and Morna - our housekeeper/cook - doesn't live in; she left a cold meal for him before she went home. That would have been about seven o'clock. She wasn't particularly concerned when she arrived in the morning and found it untouched - he often didn't bother eating if he didn't get home till nine or even later."

"Was he often as late as that?" Jim asked.

"About once every three meetings."

"Do you have any idea what the meeting was about? Or who was attending it?"

She shook her head. "Tom didn't talk much about his actual work, and any time I asked - well, in the early days I thought it my duty to show some interest in his work - he sort of... sort of metaphorically patted me on the head and said not to worry myself about it, he was well able to handle everything so that we could live in comfort. After a time or two of being patronized like that, I stopped asking."

"Did you often see the businessmen he worked with?"

"Only three or four times a year when there was some sort of formal 'do'," she replied. "Not that anyone sees some of the Board members often - several of them have chosen to work from home and only go into the office for meetings."

"I was trotted out as the perfect trophy wife, said the right things to the people I supposed were the 'right' ones... though I have to admit there were - are - some of them I don't like. There's one in particular... "

"Yes?" Jim asked.

She shook her head. "He's only been involved in the business for the last two years or so, and as far as I'm concerned that's two years too many. I can only describe him as 'slimy'. None of the wives or secretaries have ever liked him. Even some of the younger men... none of them ever seemed to feel... well, comfortable, if he singled them out. He's the sort of man you feel is mentally undressing you every time he looks at you. He wasn't so bad with older people, but anyone who was - or looked - under about thirty, tops... "

"Would he have been at the meeting on Tuesday?"

"Probably. He's not actually one of Tom's business partners, in fact I'm not sure just why he seems to have a finger in Tom's business - and not just Tom's - he seems to have a finger in several businesses. From something Darlene said a few months ago, I've wondered if he's provided funding for them all at some time, got a foot in the door that way... "

"Darlene?"

"Darlene Cummings, Tom's secretary. She's been with the firm since Tom's father started it. That would be... oh, around forty years ago. She's almost sixty now, and hopes to retire soon. Sometimes I wonder how Tom'll manage when she does."

"Perfect example of 'if the boss is off sick, things carry on as usual, if the secretary is off sick, everything falls apart'?" Blair suggested.

"Pretty much," Rebecca agreed. "Oh, Tom stays involved, there are some things he considers his responsibility, but without Darlene I think he'd struggle."

"Can you tell me this man's name?" Jim asked.

"Ivan Pescori. Darlene might be able to give you an address for him, but like I said, he's not officially part of Tom's business - or anyone else's that I know of. Just an unofficial part."

As Jim read through Blair's notes he wondered, not for the first time, at his partner's overwhelming competence. He had taken those notes, yet he had been able to make several comments (while leaving the main questioning to Jim). While Jim reported to Simon, Blair had somehow managed to type up a report in the short time that they had been back at the PD the previous afternoon. He couldn't have had time to note down more than the basic facts, yet he had been able to expand on the conversation in a way that Jim's memory told him was exact.

Jim then turned his attention back to the report from Missing Persons. He had read it before they saw Mrs. Walker; now he reread it with their own interview with her in mind.

In many ways it was similar, though Detective Goss, the senior partner, had been less inclined to trust Mrs. Walker's claim that she would not have been jealous if she had discovered her husband had a mistress.

Of course, Missing Persons and Homicide were both departments that had the potential to see relatives as the most likely suspects, so it was hardly surprising that they looked there first for a culprit. Granted, adults - and sometimes children - who went missing often did so to get away from a difficult home situation, but it was more than rare that a wealthy businessman would go missing from choice.

*Except, of course,* a suspicious part of Jim's mind murmured as he remembered a case from some years previously, *if he was going bankrupt...*

Blair had been checking something on the computer; now he looked at Jim questioningly. "What's wrong?"

"Not wrong, exactly... but I had a thought about the Walker case. What if we've been thinking about it the wrong way? We've been thinking foul play, but what if he just walked out, maybe because his business was actually failing?"

"Mrs. Walker didn't say anything about him being worried - "

"He could have kept it to himself. She did say he told her not to bother about the business, after all, that he was perfectly able to handle everything. Maybe he transferred some money to a different bank, possibly using an assumed name, and now he's walked out to make a new life for himself. She said they'd never been in love, that they lived their own lives - so it was something he could do without a second thought. She would still have the house, and if money was tight for her she could sell it, buy something a lot smaller, and have the difference to live on."

Blair thought about that for a moment. "How much demand would there be for a house like that?"

"A surprising amount," Jim said. "People like Walker - they see a big house as a sign of what they consider their status. So what if a lot of the rooms are barely furnished and never used? Who's going to know?"

"But that's a total waste of space - " Blair began.

"A lot of men who buy houses like that are themselves a total waste of space," Jim said wryly. "They have the position, but who does the actual work? You said it yourself, Chief - if the boss is off sick... Oh, I don't tar all of them with the same brush - some are genuinely hard-working, do have a finger on the pulse of their business. I'll say this for Dad, he put in long hours and he knew what was what. That was mostly why Mom left; she was married to the invisible man. She'd rather have had a little less success and seen more of her husband. Eventually she decided that she just couldn't compete with his mistress - Ellison Enterprises. I think she was hoping that he'd see her action as the desperation it was, ask her to come home and cut back on his workload. Instead, his response when she left was to pay even more attention to that demanding mistress..."

"I never did understand that drive he had to be more and more successful, to force Steven and me to attempt everything and become the best at it, whether or not we were interested in it or temperamentally suited to it, trying to make us ruthless, selfish, not trusting anyone but ourselves... Not even trusting each other," he finished, a little sadly.

"He failed with you," Blair said softly.

"Did he, Chief? Did he really?" Jim asked. "In my own way, I'm just as driven - can you deny that?"

"No, I can't deny it," Blair murmured, "but there's driven and again there's 'driven'. Your Dad's drive was to be seen as absolutely successful. Yours is to help people. Not the same thing. It's like... " He thought for a moment, and remembered a place he had visited years previously, that had totally caught his imagination for years. "Folk tales. Remember the story of the British King Arthur? There are quite a few versions, mostly based on a degree of what is believed to be historical accuracy, though one or two are pretty obviously pure fiction. I heard one version when I really was a kid, then read up a bit about it. What I found wasn't, I think, really historically accurate, but... In it, Uther Pendragon was driven to be a successful king, to be seen to be a strong ruler, but was really only concerned with his own small kingdom; his son Arthur was driven to defend the country, all the other kingdoms, from invaders. Though it was consistent with all the other versions in that he died through treachery while his legacy lived on.

"Your father is like Uther in that version; you're more like Arthur, though please, please don't die any time soon!"

Jim smiled sadly. "I can't promise that, Chief," he said. "All cops are in danger to some degree. You know that." He looked down at his hands, then raised his head again. "That includes you, now. Don't you die any time soon either." The echo of his unspoken *'Once was enough!'* reverberated in Blair's ears.

"Come on, man, you know me - I'm a born coward!" Blair chuckled. "I'm not the one who leaps in long before he looks to see where he's going to land!"

"You could have fooled me!" Jim muttered. He glanced at his watch. "Let's head off to Walker's place of business - Ms. Cummings will probably have dealt with all her regular morning mail and email by now and have the time to speak to us without feeling we're interrupting her too much."

They spoke to the girl at Reception, who phoned ahead as they went up the stairs to the second floor office. They found Darlene Cummings busy checking something on her computer - from the reflection of the screen that he could see in the window, Jim thought it was some sort of list - and after a quick glance and nod to acknowledge them, she took a minute to finish, then called up something and hit a couple of keys before she looked up again. "Sorry, detectives," she said. "I needed to get that finished and sent off to our accountant. It's a routine thing that Mr. Tom would normally have done yesterday, but... "

"But he didn't come in to work," Blair said. "Though I'll bet you get on faster without him getting in your way."

"He's not as bad for that as his father was," she said. "Oh, don't get me wrong, Mr. John - Mr. Walker senior - was a good boss and we appreciated his interest in us all, but he had this habit of loitering, being sociable, when what the office staff wanted was for him to get the hell off to his own office so that we could get on with our work. Mr. Tom - Mr. Walker junior - is more... " She hesitated, obviously searching for the best word.

"Distant?" Blair offered.

"Yes, you could put it that way. He's still a good boss, better than a lot of them, but he's not interested in the personal life of the staff - not the way his father was. Mr. John knew the names of everyone's kids - I'm not sure Mr. Tom even knows which of the staff *have* kids."

"Both approaches have pros and cons," Blair agreed.

"I should have sent this off yesterday, but it was one of the things Mr. Tom insisted on doing himself, and I thought he'd probably be in today. When he didn't come in, I realized I had to do it, but it took me a little longer than I expected because I'm not used to doing it."

"I can understand that," Blair agreed. "Now - the thing is, Mrs. Walker reported her husband missing yesterday morning, when she realized he hadn't returned home on Tuesday night. She said he had a meeting on Tuesday?"

"Yes, a routine one to discuss tenders we should make and what kind of profit margin would be realistic. Sometimes cutting the profit margin a little makes all the difference between getting a job and losing it to a rival."

"Were you there?"

"Yes - I had to take the minutes."

"Did anything unusual come up in the discussion?"

She shook her head. "It was completely routine. The Board doesn't really have to meet to discuss those things. They accepted Mr. Tom's suggestions - they almost always do, and when they don't, the changes they suggest are usually pretty slight. They'd really only have to meet if we began to lose work to other firms on a regular basis, or began actually losing money - but several of them feel it's good business practise to meet regularly." She sighed. "But even taking that into consideration... everything could be dealt with in half an hour. But it never is."

Blair smiled sympathetically. "That was what Mrs. Walker said... and that basically her husband agreed with you."

Darlene uttered a short, unamused sound that - if one were being generous - could have been called a laugh. "He said to me once - at one of the office parties when he'd had a little too much to drink - that there were one or two of his colleagues that he could wish had a permanent case of laryngitis so that they couldn't speak. Oh - does that have to be on record?"

"No," Jim said. "All you've done is confirm what Mrs. Walker said about why some of the meetings went on for far too long."

"However, we do want to speak to the other members of the Board - we understand from Mrs. Walker said that some of them work from home; can you give us their addresses?"

"Yes, of course." She turned to her computer, her fingers danced over the keyboard at a speed that left Blair, himself no slouch at rapid typing, open-mouthed in awe. After she hit one final key, the printer beside her chugged out a sheet of paper, which she handed to Jim.

"Thanks," he said as he glanced down the list of names. "Mrs. Walker mentioned one name that you haven't listed here - Ivan Pescori?"

A look of distaste crossed her face. "He's not actually part of the firm," she said. "I really don't know why he attends all the Board meetings, but from something Mr. Tom said once, I think he might have financed something, though the firm had no financial problems that I knew of, and wants to keep an eye on his... well, investment."

"So he could be getting an income from the firm, in return for having financed something?"

"If he does, it isn't something that goes through the books," Darlene said quietly. "At least, not as 'Paid to Mr. Pescori'. If Mr. Tom paid him, it was by personal check, and he could have reclaimed it as general expenses."

"Do you have an address for him?" Jim asked.

"No. I think Mr. Tom contacted him by phone - using his cell phone, not the office one where calls are recorded."

"I see," Jim said. "And of course he would carry his cell phone with him... "

She nodded.

"If he decided to go off somewhere for a few days without telling anyone, spur of the moment kind of thing, do you know where he might have gone?" Blair asked.

Darlene shook her head. "Mr. Tom wouldn't do anything like that," she said. "He has too much sense of responsibility." She thought for a moment. "But if he did... They do have a second house in Sudden Valley, and he could have gone there... that was where they always went on holiday, and sometimes for long weekends. I can't think of anywhere else he would have thought of going."

"If you could give us that address too?" Jim said.

She hit a few keys on her keyboard and the printer chugged out another sheet of paper.

"Just one last thing," Blair asked. "Mrs. Walker said that she and her husband more or less lived their own lives - as his secretary, do you know - off the record - if he had a girlfriend on the side?"

"No, he didn't. I knew that it was pretty well an arranged marriage and that neither one was in love, but Mr. Tom took his wedding vows seriously. There's no way he was cheating on Rebecca."

"Thank you," Blair said. "You've been very helpful. I don't think we'll need to bother you again."

Back in the truck, Jim and Blair looked at each other. "Think it's worth checking Sudden Valley?" Blair asked.

Jim shook his head. "We could ask the local police to visit the house, see if there's anyone living there, but I think the answer will be that there isn't," he said, "unless maybe a housekeeper."

"I think you're right," Blair agreed.

"What we do have to do, though, is try to track down Mr. Pescori," Jim went on.

"Funny that Walker was the only one who knew how to contact him."

"I wonder if there was a little blackmail going on," Jim muttered.

"What - like Pescori knew something about Walker, like the crime connection we suspect him of having, and his price for keeping quiet was to be kept informed about board meetings?"

"Though how that could pay him..." Jim added. "Well, we can see if any of the other board members know how to contact him, and if they don't, once we get back to the station we can check up on him, see if we can find an address, then pay him a visit."

Their visits to the other board members turned up nothing; none of them had thought there was anything unusual about Walker's behavior on Tuesday, and none of them knew how to contact Pescori. Jim sighed resignedly. They were going to have to track him down themselves.

When they started checking after their return to the PD, however, they came up blank. "How can there possibly be so many people called John Smith in Cascade?" Jim exclaimed in exasperation as

they searched through the city's electoral roll. Despite Cascade's size, one name that was conspicuously missing was Ivan Pescori.

"So the guy's using a false name?" Blair suggested.

"Looks like it," Jim agreed. "Or else he doesn't live in Cascade and only comes here for those meetings he attends... "

"But from what Mrs. Walker and Ms. Cummings said, he had an interest in several businesses here," Blair objected. "How could he manage that if he doesn't live locally?"

"Phone. Didn't Ms. Cummings say Walker phoned Pescori?"

"Yes," Blair said slowly. "Phone - yes. If he had the number memorized rather than stored in the phone, and deleted the call from the memory as soon as it was made... "

"I wonder if someone at the helm of other businesses he was involved with knew how to contact Pescori the same way Walker did?" Jim sighed. "I think we need to speak to Ms. Cummings again."

"I don't think we need to actually see her again," Blair suggested. "One of us could phone her."

"Your idea - your call," Jim said.

Blair made a face, and reached for the phone.

But Darlene Cummings had no idea how other firms contacted the elusive Mr. Ivan Pescori. All she could tell Blair were the names of three of the other firms that she happened to know were of interest to the man.

After thinking about it for some minutes, Jim decided that they should go and visit the CEOs of those three firms, and see what they could discover from them.

Andrew Hardcastle looked up from the paper he was studying as Jim, closely followed by Blair, entered his office. "Detective Ellison? How can I help you? I'm not aware of any problems... "

"It's not actually a problem, sir," Jim said. "At least, not one that involves your business."

"It's not made the papers yet, but Mr. Walker, CEO of Cascade Construction, has been missing since Tuesday - he was at a board meeting that day, and didn't arrive home after it; his wife reported him missing on Wednesday morning."

"Tom? But... " He broke off, shaking his head.

"Mrs. Walker wasn't aware of any problems, but we need to speak to everyone who was at that meeting, in case something did crop up that she wasn't aware of. But there was one attendee at the meeting who wasn't actually on the board, and for whom Mr. Walker's secretary has no contact



information. What she could tell us, though, was that this man had an interest in at least three other businesses in Cascade; yours is one of them.

"We're trying to find a Mr. Ivan Pescori. The only person at Cascade Construction who ever contacted him was Mr. Walker, but there was no contact phone number in his personal phone book; we wondered if you, as CEO of Hardcastle Decorators, had a contact number for Mr. Pescori."

Hardcastle shook his head. "No," he said. "Not now. I've no idea how he finds out about them, but Pescori does still turn up at all our business meetings. He never says much, but what little he does say is usually very much to the point."

Jim could detect no alteration in the man's heart rate, and knew he was telling the truth. "Have you any idea why he's interested in your business?"

"A couple of years ago, we had a bit of a cash flow problem," Hardcastle admitted. "Pescori came to me then, offered me a loan, which I accepted - the interest he was asking was a little less than the bank's rate. Things picked up not long after that and I repaid the loan in full ten months ago. I tried to phone him a day or so later to make sure there were no problems, and discovered that the number was no longer working. I did ask around after he turned up at our next business meeting after that to see who had let him know about it, but nobody admitted to knowing how to contact him. Now... now I just accept that he turns up. I think he's just watching out for a firm he's already helped, making sure we don't run into problems again."

"What do you think of him as a person?"

"I'm... not sure," Hardcastle admitted. "He's shrewd, has a good business head on his shoulders... I've never seen anything in him to dislike, but I know some of the younger women don't like him, though I've no idea why."

*Interesting*, Jim thought, remembering Rebecca Walker's assessment of Pescori as 'slimy'. *Of course, this is an older man...* "Thank you," he said. "I wonder... if we can't get hold of him any other way - we still have two more businesses to check and someone there might be able to help us - could you let me know when your next meeting is? That way, if we come along we could make contact with him. Of course, if Mr. Walker turns up in the next day or two we won't need to, but if he doesn't - we really need to speak to Mr. Pescori to see if he noticed anything unusual... "

"Yes, of course."

They took their leave, and once back in the truck, Jim glanced at Blair. "What did you think?"

"Interesting how different Hardcastle's opinion of Pescori was from Mrs. Walker's."

"Yes, I noticed that. She did say he wasn't as bad about 'mentally undressing' older people, and Hardcastle has to be... what, in his fifties?"

"At least," Blair agreed.

"So he wouldn't be aware of that charming little trait unless someone mentioned it - "

"And everyone has to be aware that Hardcastle must be grateful to Pescori for helping him out financially, and while he might accept that others don't like the man, he's likely to react badly to a direct accusation that the man's a sleaze?"

Jim nodded. "It's a difficult situation for young secretaries," he said as he started the engine and drove off. "They want to keep their jobs, so they sometimes put up with behavior that could easily qualify as abuse... "

Their next stop was Malcolm's Double Glazing. It was a firm that Jim knew his father had used at least once, when a door in his office needed to be replaced, and William Ellison had been happy to recommend it when Steven decided to modernize the elderly rural cottage he had bought as a weekend home, replacing all the windows and doors. Jim had been a little surprised that his father had patronized a relatively small local company rather than a big national one - but Trevor Malcolm had promised that the work would be done inside a week (and it was) while neither of the national firms William had asked for a quote would promise anything inside a month.

"Ellison?" Malcolm asked when Jim introduced them. "Any relation to William Ellison?"

"My father," Jim admitted, and smiled. "My brother was the one who inherited my father's business skills; the idea of sitting behind a desk all the time horrified me. I wanted something more active, so... " He shrugged.

Malcolm laughed. "I can understand that," he said as he gestured them into seats. "Only one of my sons came into the business; the younger one is a golfing pro. He's not quite good enough for the circuit - he works for the Meadows Country Club, teaching beginners, but he's happy with that. I could wish he had a little more ambition, but the important thing is that he's content with what he's doing."

"He's lucky to have such an understanding father," Blair put in.

"I love my sons," Malcolm said. "I just want them to be happy. I'm glad that Pete chose to come into the business, but if he'd wanted to do something else, I'd have accepted that.

"Anyway, Detectives - what can I do for you?"

"We understand you have a... You might call him an unofficial board member - Ivan Pescori?"

"Unofficial. Yes, that's as good a way to describe him as any."

"Can you tell us - how did he get involved in your business?"

"I had a bit of a cash flow problem about two years ago," Malcolm said. "I'd a couple of really bad debts - firms I'd done a lot of work for - one went bust, and his creditors only got 25% of the money they were owed; the other, the owner died very suddenly. Next day his widow fired his entire staff, saying they'd be sent checks for wages due - they weren't; she locked the doors - business and house

- cleaned out the bank account and disappeared. Didn't even stay for the funeral. Both buildings are still standing empty - there's nobody to authorize selling them."

"I remember that case," Jim said. "At first the authorities thought she might have killed him, but an autopsy proved that his death was natural causes."

"Yes," Malcolm agreed. "But then there was nobody to authorize payment of outstanding bills due, unless maybe his lawyer, but even if there had been there was no money left in the account. And by the terms of his will, she inherited everything, so she couldn't even be charged with theft. Hell, there wasn't anyone to arrange for a proper funeral, or the money for one! Several of his friends shared the cost of burying him, but under the circumstances it was a very low-key affair."

"Anyway, there I was, with a second big bill unpaid, never going to be paid even in part, and not sure how I'd manage to keep going, when Ivan arrived, offering me a loan with a surprisingly low rate of interest. It kept me solvent, and letting him sit in on our board meetings - though with only four of us, including Ivan, involved, it's a bit pretentious to call them 'board' meetings - well, it was only courtesy; he had a financial interest in the company. I paid back the last of the loan four months ago, but agreed to let him continue as an unofficial member of the board."

"How do you get in touch with him?"

"I don't. Our meetings are held regularly on the second Monday of the month."

"And you never have occasion to call an extra meeting?"

"No."

"What do you think of Mr. Pescori?"

"I think of him as a friend, though I only see him once a month. I've no idea what he does, where his money comes from - I suspect he's independently wealthy - but he's been a good friend to me."

"What about the rest of your board members?"

"We all like him. But why are you asking all this?"

"He's unofficially involved with at least four businesses - that we know of - in Cascade."

Malcolm nodded. "I knew we weren't the only firm he's helped out."

"The CEO of one of them disappeared just after a board meeting earlier this week. We need to speak to everyone who was at that meeting, but nobody seems to know how to contact Mr. Pescori."

Malcolm shook his head. "Like I said, our meetings are all scheduled for the second Monday of the month. We don't need to get in touch with him. What I can do, though, is tell him at our next meeting that you want to talk to him, and why."

"Thank you - that would be good of you."

Back in the truck, Jim and Blair looked at each other. "Everyone here likes him," Jim said.

"Maybe they're all older men, though Malcolm himself doesn't seem to be more than... oh, mid-forties."

"Mrs. Walker did specify 'under thirty'," Jim said. "Anyway - let's get on and see if the boss of RIOT knows anything."

"RIOT," Blair muttered. "The things some people think are clever names for their businesses... "

"In this case it's an acronym," Jim said.

Blair glanced at him. "Ooh, he knows some big words!"

"I'll 'big words' you, Shorty," Jim told him. "Okay, I'd suspect that Renwick did a bit of thinking to come up with a name that would provide him with an acronym... it stands for 'Renwick's Inside and Outside Tiling'."

"Tiling outside?" Blair asked.

"Think fancy patio walls," Jim replied.

"Pretentious," Blair said, and Jim nodded.

After a moment, Jim went on. "I can see a builder including tiling as part of what he offers, but I really can't see someone specializing in tiling doing all that well - ah, here we are." He turned the truck into a side road, and promptly slammed on the brakes. "What the... "

The street ahead of them was blocked, but not by police.

Before Jim could do anything, a man in a neat grey suit approached the truck, holding up an ID. "FBI. What is your business here?"

"Detectives Ellison and Sandburg, Cascade PD," Jim said. "My badge is in my pocket - "

"Slowly, Detective."

Jim gave a wry grin. "I know the routine." He held up his badge.

The man nodded. "That's fine, Detective. Now, what is your business here?"

Jim looked at the vehicles in front of the RIOT building. "We wanted a word with Mr. Renwick, CEO of the tiling firm you're... checking."

"And your reason?"

"We're investigating a missing person - Mr. Walker of Cascade Construction. We've been told that a member of Mr. Walker's board is also on Mr. Renwick's, but he's a hard man to find, and we wondered if Mr. Renwick knew how to contact him. It's a simple matter of a few routine questions - "

The FBI agent was nodding understandingly. "If you'll just wait here, Detective, I think I know an agent who might be able to help you." He turned away.

Blair put a hand on Jim's thigh. "You're planning on listening in, right?"

"Yeah. I'm not entirely sure I trust this lot to give us a straight answer."

He watched the agent who had spoken to them cross to one who was standing a little apart from the main group. "We might have a little problem, Ian." His voice was very soft; unconsciously, Jim dialed his hearing up a notch.

"Problem?" As he spoke, the man glanced towards the truck.

"The Cascade cops are investigating Tom Walker's disappearance. And they're looking for you."

"They are?"

"Someone hard to track down who's on both Renwick's board and Walker's."

"Okay, Charlie, I'll have a word with these guys. What are their names?"

"The driver is Ellison. The other one is Sandburg. They're detectives."

Jim registered 'Ian's' eyebrows lifting. "I've heard of them. They're good."

The man addressed as Ian strode over to the truck, and Jim rapidly dialed his senses down to normal as Blair moved his hand away. Moments later, Ian stopped at the driver's door.

"Detective Ellison?"

Jim nodded. "And you are?"

"Ian Peters. I understand you're looking for the man known as Ivan Pescori."

"Yes. Purely a matter of a few routine questions regarding Mr. Walker of Cascade Construction, who has disappeared. Mr. Walker's secretary doesn't know how to get in touch with Mr. Pescori - apparently Mr. Walker was the only one who knew a contact phone number. We tried at Hardcastle Decorators and Malcolm's Double Glazing - apparently he has an interest in both of those firms as well, but neither of them could help us. Mr. Renwick was our last hope."

"Ah well, as you can see, Mr. Renwick has a few other things on his mind right now."

"You - the FBI - are arresting him?"

"Yes." Peters looked at them. "The FBI has known for a little more than two years that someone in Cascade's business fraternity was seriously involved in organized crime - crime that covered several states, which made it an FBI concern rather than local law enforcement. We just didn't know who it was. We managed to narrow it down to two possible firms - "

"Cascade PD has had suspicions about Walker for a while, but we couldn't prove anything," Jim said.

"He was involved, but Renwick was the brains behind it. The other two - Hardcastle and Malcolm - weren't involved. We simply used them as cover. It was really convenient that both had a cash flow problem when we were inserting an undercover agent - it made it less obvious that we were checking Walker and Renwick."

"And that was Pescori?"

"Which, I admit, is not his real name. Yes. Finally Walker - who was really only a bit player, not nearly as important as he thought he was - slipped up, and - well, we persuaded him to roll over on Renwick. In return, he's gone into witness protection."

"I see," Jim said. "So what am I supposed to tell Mrs. Walker?"

"Walker didn't think she'd be particularly concerned; their marriage was basically a business agreement, though he stuck with his marriage vows. He's got a weird sense of morality - won't break a promise, but had no qualms over robbing people... Anyway, he said she'd still have the business and his secretary knows everything about the running of it, so she wouldn't be short of money - he didn't think she'd care if he disappeared."

"Who do you think reported him missing?" Jim asked. "Mr. Peters, I'll have to tell her something. I'd agree, I doubt she'd want to go with her husband, she'll probably be relieved he's gone, but I will have to tell her something. Come to that, I'll have to tell my Captain something."

Peters looked at him, and slowly nodded. "I take your point, Detective. All right, I'll see to it that he writes to her saying something about wanting to make a new life for himself and suggesting she does the same."

"Thank you."

Back in the truck, Blair looked at Jim, who shook his head. "There's nothing we can do," he said as he started the engine, carefully turned and drove away. "If this covered several States it's definitely FBI business. What did you think of Peters?"

"Seemed a nice guy."

"You didn't feel he was 'mentally undressing' you?"

A blank look on his face, Blair shook his head.

"You're exactly the sort of person he'd do it to if it really was a part of who he is. The 'slime' aspect must have been an act... and a good one."

"He was Pescori?"

"Yeah. The one who spoke to us first? Told Peters 'They're looking for you'. He probably kept the 'mentally undressing' up at Hardcastle's, at least to some extent, in case the various secretaries actually knew each other, but all the staff at Malcolm's seemed to be a bit older. No young female secretaries."

"He didn't have to act the sleaze there quite as much as at either of the others because he wasn't trying to make himself look... well, dishonest?"

"Seems probable." Jim sighed. "It's one of the... difficulties of long term undercover work; looking like something you're not, and maintaining it. You've done a little undercover work, but nothing long term. I did a couple of stints when I was in Vice, three-four months each time, and I hated it; I can't imagine how difficult a two-year stretch would be."

They drove on in silence for a minute, then Blair said, "What are we going to tell Simon?"

"All we really can tell him is that we saw Hardcastle and Malcolm, neither one could help, and when we got to Renwick's it was to find the FBI there in the process of arresting the man. We don't need to tell Simon we spoke to 'Ivan Pescori' or that we got any info at all on Walker. It was pretty obvious that Peters trusted us, probably told us more than he should have done; anything we tell Simon won't help find Walker and would only betray Peters' trust, and I won't do that. Whether Peters realized I knew he was Pescori, I don't know... "

"The one who spoke to us first... would he have been Peters' contact while he was undercover?"

"Possibly. I can't see more people than absolutely necessary being in the know."

"Because the more people who know means more likelihood of someone accidentally betraying the man undercover."

"Yes."

Peters was as good as his word. Four days later, Jim got a phone call from Rebecca Walker.

"Detective? I wanted to let you know... I got a letter this morning - from Tom. He apologized for disappearing the way he did... said he was tired of the lie we've been living for so long, and he's left Cascade to make a new life for himself. He's not making any claims on Cascade Construction - he says it's mine, so that I won't have any financial problems."

"I see. I'm sorry, Mrs. Walker, but I'm glad he decided to let you know rather than just vanish."

"Yes... I'm not really sorry he's gone, but I'm glad he's all right."

After hanging up, Jim crossed to Simon's office and knocked.

"Come."

"Mrs. Walker just phoned, Captain. Walker's contacted her to say he's - well, left her."

"You're sure she's not just saying that? That she didn't arrange for Walker to be killed, and now she's covering up?"

"I'll swear she was telling the truth when she originally said he'd not come home and she'd no idea why, and I'm quite sure she's telling the truth about the letter. But we can always arrange for an expert to check the handwriting - assuming the letter wasn't typed."

Simon sighed and shook his head. "Hardly seems worth the trouble. We're rid of Walker - that can only help our crime rate."

Jim nodded, and went back to his desk.

It wasn't Walker's absence that would help their crime rate, but Renwick's... but to tell Simon that would betray Peters' trust.

Jim hadn't expected to hear from Rebecca Walker again. Walker had gone, and from what she had said she was content - happy - with her new life. She had the security of a steady income from Cascade Construction; Darlene Cummings ran it as efficiently as Tom Walker had ever done. Knowing that she was nearing retirement - although she discovered almost immediately that her new position had given her a renewed interest in her work - she had been quick to promote a young man she had noticed had a gift for organizing things to a position that would ensure a seam-free transfer of authority inside the company when she did retire. Cascade Construction, always successful, within mere days began to flourish in a way that was unknown when Tom Walker held the reins. He had been efficient and successful - Darlene and her new assistant were more efficient, and it took barely a week for that to produce results.

And then, some three months after Walker's disappearance, Rebecca Walker arrived at the PD asking to see Jim.

"Hello," he said when she arrived at his desk. Blair glanced up from the report he was writing, and called, "Hello."

"Detective, I..." She licked her lips and opened her purse. "I got this letter this morning. I don't understand it. I don't know if you can do anything, but..." She handed Jim an envelope.

He took out the single sheet of paper it contained, unfolded it and frowned.

"Chief."

Blair looked at him and immediately joined him, looking over his shoulder at the letter.

It had been written on a computer, and said simply, "Tell your husband that his treachery will not go unpunished." It was unsigned.

"I just don't understand," she repeated. "What treachery? But even if I knew what it's talking about, Tom's gone and I don't know how to get in touch with him."

Jim's mind was racing as he stared down at the note.



*We persuaded Walker to roll over on Renwick... witness protection...*

This had to have come from Renwick through one of his men. And Renwick obviously didn't believe that Walker had taken advantage of the situation to leave what had basically been an unwanted marriage. He most likely believed that although Walker had disappeared, because his wife now 'owned' Cascade Construction, he was receiving an income from it through her.

Mrs. Walker might be in danger. Not in the very short term - Renwick would allow a day or two for her to contact Walker before making a move. But since she couldn't contact her husband...

So... what 'punishment' would Renwick exact?

"Leave this with me," Jim said. "I'll see what I can find out. But in the short term - I think you'd maybe be better going to a safe house where we can guard you." Though he suspected that - even from prison - Renwick had someone watching the Walker house, watching Rebecca Walker's movements, and that she might be followed to wherever they took her.

Leaving her with Blair, Jim excused himself and went to Simon's office, where he showed Simon the letter and how he interpreted it. Simon nodded his understanding while saying, "I don't really understand, though. The only 'treachery' involved in the situation was Walker walking out on his wife."

"Part of the trouble..." Jim began. He had realized that he needed to give Simon at least part of the story. "Walker disappeared at the same time that the FBI arrested Stan Renwick. Might have been linked, might not. We don't know all of the ramifications. I think we need to assume it maybe was, and pass this on to them. Meanwhile, I also think we should put Mrs. Walker to a safe house."

Simon frowned. "You think she could be at risk?"

"If whoever Walker was working with believes she knows where the man is and is keeping him supplied with money, killing her would cut off that supply, maybe force him to come out into the open."

"You could be right," Simon said slowly. "But wouldn't that mean Walker was simply a link in a criminal chain, not the big boss we thought he was? With Renwick maybe the actual boss?"

"It's possible," Jim agreed. "Anyway, I think we need to do what we can to keep her safe, and pass this letter on to the FBI. Give them the responsibility, since they were the ones who arrested Renwick."

Jim and Blair lost no time in heading off to see Frank Mulroney, who was in charge of the local FBI office.

The smile with which he greeted them was totally insincere. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said, and frost would have been warmer than his voice. "What can I do for Cascade's finest?"

Resolutely holding on to his temper, Jim said quietly, "We need to speak to one of your agents - Ian Peters. He may not be based here, but it concerns an arrest made approximately three months ago, for which we believe he was responsible."

Mulroney frowned. "We certainly don't have an agent by that name based here."

"Can you find out where he is based, and let him know that we need to see him?"

"I'm quite sure that he has more important things to do than hold the hand of a Cascade cop."

"A woman's life could depend on this," Jim said. "The case in question was the FBI's; it had nothing to do with the Cascade police. It hasn't come to trial yet - or if it has, it wasn't reported anywhere. Can you please check with your main office for an Ian Peters, and let him know that I need to speak to him."

Mulroney scowled, but it was clear to Jim that he would do it, if only because he suspected that Jim would report his lack of cooperation to his superiors if he didn't.

It took Jim every ounce of his self-control to retain his poker face as Mulroney finally nodded, but Blair beamed, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Mulroney," as if Mulroney had behaved throughout in a totally friendly manner.

Blair, Jim reflected, was a master at making people underestimate him; he knew that Mulroney had no idea how completely Blair despised him.

Blair's sleep that night was restless.

Jim heard him tossing and went downstairs to check on him, wondering if he was having a nightmare, but there was no sign that he was actually in distress; although he was restless, his heart rate wasn't elevated. Jim watched him for some moments, then decided to let him sleep. Yes, his sleep was restless, but at least he was sleeping. Silently, Jim went back upstairs.

In the morning, when Blair woke he lay for some minutes thinking over the dreams that had filled his sleeping hours.

He had visited Glastonbury and its Tor. That was something he remembered doing when he was... seven? Yes, seven. But the other dreams... He had watched a man wearing what could only be called a robe being dragged from his home, declaring that he healed in the name of God; he had watched the marsh around the Tor being drained, and it left him feeling despondent. He had spent time in a university, he wasn't sure where. His father had been a farmer faced with starvation who had chosen to move to America. He had been a farmer himself... and he had died, falling from a high building during an earthquake - was that where his fear of heights originated? - when the interior stairs had been blocked by falling masonry and it had seemed that the window would offer the only escape.

Some of those dreams were familiar, almost like old friends he hadn't seen for years. He could remember having them - or dreams that were somehow similar - surprisingly often when he was younger. But after finding The Sentinels of Paraguay, his dreams had changed; he had dreamed of finding a sentinel. And he had found a sentinel.

Why were those old dreams resurfacing now? Was there something in the Walker case - or the Renwick one - that had triggered some kind of memory? And then, suddenly, he knew.

Mulroney.

Mulroney had featured in one of his dreams; Mulroney was the man in charge of the group who had dragged the healer from his home. Little wonder that he had never liked the man.

Blair gave a soundless sigh and swung his feet onto the floor. He could see many hours of meditation in his immediate future, for he was suddenly sure that the dreams were some kind of message for him.

Dreams. Or perhaps memories? Memories of past lives? For again a memory had returned to him; his certainty, when Naomi and he visited Glastonbury Tor when he was seven, that there was something there... something that he desperately wanted to see. But he hadn't known what it was, or where on the Tor it was... and then they moved on, and in the excitement of visiting the safari park at Longleat he had forgotten about wanting to see something at the Tor.

But after they left Longleat, he had dreamed... had dreamed... dreamed about taking a body to the Tor! That wasn't one of the dreams from the previous night, but he suddenly remembered it and how vivid it had been. But the body had been in a shroud, and he hadn't seen the face. Was that the place on the Tor he had wanted to see - the place where some long-dead 'he' had buried someone... someone who must have been a friend? For if he had been a murderer disposing of a victim, he wouldn't have bothered with a shroud... or even a proper grave.

He heard Jim leave the bathroom and head back upstairs to get dressed; and made his own way to the bathroom.

Over breakfast, Jim said casually, "You were very restless last night."

"Did I disturb you? Sorry!" Blair said. "I was dreaming."

"Must have been a pretty vivid dream." Jim grinned.

"Not just one dream," Blair admitted. "Several. And this morning I remembered - some of them were pretty well repeats of dreams I had when I was younger; before I found Burton's book and turned my mind totally to sentinels.

"I need to think about them - because somehow I think they're important to me."

When they reached the PD, Simon called them into his office. "We got Mrs. Walker moved into a safe house. How did you get on with the Feds?"

Jim scowled. "Mulroney is an uncooperative - " He broke off, clearly searching for the most insulting word possible.

"The local Feds weren't responsible for arresting Renwick," Blair said. "Mulroney said he'd try to get hold of whoever was in charge of the bust, but I don't think he'll consider it urgent."

"You did make it clear to him - " Simon began.

"Yes," Jim growled.

"You know," Blair put in almost diffidently, "I wonder if he felt his nose out of joint over the case. He's the local boss, but the case, the arrest, everything was handled by the agents from a different office. Then we come along wanting to be put in touch with whoever was in charge of those agents. I don't like the man, I think his entire attitude was unprofessional, but I can sort of understand that if his professional pride was hurt... "

"Doesn't alter the fact that Mrs. Walker's life could be at risk and he didn't seem to care!" Jim snapped.

"He could have felt we were over-reacting - after all, we're just lowly cops; he's the almighty FBI."

"There are times I think you'd find an excuse for the devil," Jim said, but there was no accusation in his voice.

Blair grinned. "Just because I'm a cop now doesn't make me any less of an anthropologist," he said. "Anthropologists study people, and that includes what makes them tick. Often it isn't what would make any of us tick, but everyone has a reason for what they do, even if the rest of society doesn't understand it or what it is."

"Child abusers?" Simon asked. "Wife beaters? What possible reason can anyone have for that?"

"Something like that? Ultimately, it's fear," Blair said. "And I think that's what's wrong with Mulroney. He's afraid of looking incompetent."

"But being unwilling to help us... That's not a competent attitude!" Jim snapped.

"But it makes him feel powerful, and that's giving him... well, the illusion of feeling competent. In actual fact, of course, his attitude is showing how basically weak he is."

Simon nodded thoughtfully. Jim, however, was frowning. "You've said that a lot of my decisions are fear-based. Does that mean you think I'm weak?"

"We never did discuss that," Blair said wryly. "We should have. No, Jim, you're not weak. What you fear is failing the people who depend on you. That means that in this instance, to help the person who is depending on you - on us - to keep her safe, you'd be cooperating, driven to go above and beyond to find the person responsible for Renwick's arrest, so that we stand the best possible chance of helping Mrs. Walker."

On the way home, Jim said, "I don't feel like cooking tonight - what do you want? Chinese, pizza - "

"Whatever you want, Jim. I don't want anything."

Jim glanced at him before returning his attention to the road. "We didn't have time for lunch, you must be hungry - "

"Yes, but I want to spend the evening meditating, and while I don't always fast before I meditate, this time I think I need to. Those dreams are telling me something - something I think is important. I've got to work out what it is."

"A dream is a dream... " Jim said.

"Jim. You can't tell me that sometimes you dream about things that have affected you. You can repress memories, but sometimes your subconscious reminds you of them in dreams - or more usually nightmares."

"Well... "

"I rest my case."

"But... Okay. I admit I repress things, but you don't."

"Not in this life. But other lives?"

Jim thought about that for a moment. "You mean reincarnation? Isn't that belief just... well... a variant on the Christian church's 'life everlasting'?"

"In some ways it makes more sense than one life and at the end of it you end up in heaven or hell, depending on what sort of life you've led. Think about it. Think how many people have ever lived. Even considering the debate the Church once had regarding how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, don't you think that both heaven and hell would be pretty crowded out by now unless there was some way of limiting the number of people in there? Reincarnation solves that.

"Ever visited somewhere new, and had a sense of familiarity, a feeling that you know what's around the corner - and been right? Reincarnation would say that you *had* been there before, in another life. You've forgotten that life, maybe in the trauma of being reborn - after all, this is a new life, you can't just relive one life over and over or your mind would stagnate. But something can trigger the odd memory. You can get that even inside one life - you've experienced something that you've forgotten about, then somehow you're reminded of it, something has triggered the memory. Or you meet someone, and the two of you just click; or maybe it's hate at first sight. Reincarnation says that you can meet the same people in different lives. The relationships might alter - your brother in one life might be your grandchild in the next, and a close friend in another one.

"I told you - the dreams I had last night... I've had them before. I think something is triggering memories of past lives. I was sidetracked into dreaming about sentinels... or was I? Maybe I knew a sentinel in a past life and my dreams just changed their focus."

"All right," Jim said. "Say your dreams are about past lives - why would you remember them when most people don't?"

"Incacha," Blair said. "When he was dying... you said 'he passes the way of the shaman to you' - but that isn't what makes a shaman. I think he was giving me his blessing - your original guide to your present one; but I think too that if I had been the one to spend eighteen months with the Chopek, he would have taken me as his apprentice because he thought I had the qualities that make a shaman."

"I think I'm having those dreams because although I've never been trained, I have the potential to be a proper shaman."

"So - " as Jim halted the truck in his usual spot in front of 852 Prospect, having forgotten that he had planned to stop for take out - "I need to spend tonight meditating, to see if I can make sense out of the dreams."

Blair settled in his room to meditate, knowing that if he remained in the living room Jim would feel obliged not to disturb him.

Jim understood, and was grateful, although it wouldn't have bothered him too much to remain quiet and read, rather than watching something on television. As it was, he opened a can of soup and made himself a cheese sandwich to go with it, then turned on the television with the sound really low, selected a channel that was showing repeats of Hawaii 5-0 all evening, and settled down to watch. Within half an hour, however, his eyes closed, his head fell forward, and he slept.

Meanwhile Blair sat in half lotus breathing steadily, his eyes fixed on the steady flame of the candle sitting on the cabinet beside his bed.

The most important dream, he thought as he settled, was probably the one where he took a body to Glastonbury Tor. The landlady of the B & B where he and Naomi had stayed - he didn't think he had ever known her name - had said that the Tor had once been an island, and was believed to be Avalon, where King Arthur's body had been taken after he was killed in battle. And yes, another of his dreams had shown the ground around the Tor being drained...

He thought over what he could remember of that first dream.

The dream began with the shrouded body lying at his feet. There was nothing to say how the man had died. But if the Tor was Avalon, then the dead man had to be Arthur, and Arthur had died in battle. But if the dead man was Arthur, who was he?

A friend. A close friend, one who considered it important to bury the body secretly and safely. Who in the Arthurian legend was the most likely candidate?

Merlin.

Blair had no doubt. He had to have been Merlin - the magician. Magician... shaman? A reincarnated shaman would surely remember his past lives... though he might not serve his community as a shaman in every life.

He considered his other dreams. He had seen the lake drained so that the Tor was no longer an island. He had been a scholar. A farmer. But he had never again been a shaman... until this life.

What was it about this life that linked it to Merlin?

Someone he knew in this life that hadn't been in any of his lives in the intervening years? Well... he had recognized Mulroney, but he doubted very much that Mulroney had been the trigger; Mulroney wasn't someone he had *known*, just someone he had seen once, albeit in circumstances that let him remember - and dislike - the man.

The most likely candidate was Jim... but he couldn't remember Jim from any of his dreams. Unless...

Merlin and Arthur had been close friends. But what if circumstances had conspired to have them born totally out of sync with each other since then?

But there was something else... his obsession, in this life, with sentinels. Was it possible that... if he had been Merlin, was it possible that Arthur had been a sentinel? Certainly none of the stories had implied that Arthur had heightened senses, but he *had* been driven to protect his tribe...

He concentrated on the first dream. He saw the body lying at his feet; and then he visualized himself kneeling, reaching out and uncovering the face.

Jim...

He raised his head... and found himself staring at a candle. But for the first time he had some clear memories, and knew for certain that they were memories of past lives. And he now knew more than that.

He had been his own descendent in life after life. The probability was that Jim was also his own descendent - they had left Arthur's pregnant wife with a wise woman not too long after they left Camelot, after all - but her child would have grown up far from Avalon, far from where he might have met Merlin's son. His own family had never stayed long in one place - his dreams covered too many different places for them to have settled anywhere for more than two or maybe three generations. Jim's family could have done something similar, but until this life they hadn't been anywhere close enough for them to have met.

But when they did meet... they became friends almost instantly - for as different as they appeared to be, they had formed a friendship that was solid. Yes, there had been a few hiccups along the way... but now that he actually remembered that life as Merlin, he remembered that there had been a few hiccups in that life too. It was inevitable; they weren't clones of each other, to think and react in an identical manner. Arthur, like Jim, was a fighter; Merlin was not, as he was not.

But how much of all that could he tell Jim?

Not very much. He could tell Jim that he was now sure that the dreams were memories of some of his past lives... but that was all. Jim was too matter-of-fact; he'd probably laugh his head off if Blair said anything about Merlin or Arthur.

His decision made, Blair got to his feet, blew out the candle - which in any case had burned down to very near its base - and went back into the living room... where Jim was sleeping peacefully while on the television Jack Lord - McGarret - appeared to be discussing some aspect of a case with his fellow members of Hawaii 5-O - the sound was so low Blair could barely make out the voices, let alone what they were saying.

He checked the time - not quite 10:30. He had spent the best part of four hours meditating - a very fruitful four hours, even if he couldn't share more than a fraction of the conclusions he had reached.

He looked at the television, switched it off, then headed into the kitchen. He was hungry. Checking the fridge, he took out some cheese and made himself a quick sandwich. He was halfway through eating it when Jim grunted and straightened from his slumped position.

"Have a nice sleep?" Blair asked.

Jim nodded. "Have a helpful meditation?"

"Yeah. I'm quite sure now that the dreams I've been having are memories of past lives." He grinned. "Based on them, I could write quite an interesting history of the last thousand years."

"Your dreams go back that far?"

"At least that far - possibly even fifteen hundred years."

"How many lives would that be?"

"Not absolutely sure - twelve, fifteen? Possibly twenty? Because I think that I was always reborn inside my own family, so each rebirth would probably average three or four generations apart."

"You said that people meet the same people in different lives - do you think we've met before?" Jim asked somewhat diffidently.

"Yes."

"And we were friends?"

"Yes. We certainly weren't enemies, or we wouldn't get on as well as we do. But I don't think it happens in every life, and our spirits maybe haven't met for several hundred years."

"Why not?" Jim asked.

"It would just need two lives that were three generations apart rather than four to throw us out of sync, so that one was dying when the other was just a child. Especially if one died very young, when his son was only an infant... Also if our families moved to completely different places, there wouldn't have been much chance of us meeting either." Blair grinned. "Speculation, Jim, but this is your shaman speaking... "



Two days later Mulroney arrived at the PD. He looked far from happy as he knocked on Simon's door, deliberately ignoring Jim and Blair. As he entered Simon's office, the two glanced at each other. Blair's lips twitched. "I remember him from one of my dreams," he muttered. "He was just as much of a prick then. And come to think of it... If we're our own ancestors... the man he was then was a monk. Either he had a kid before he became a monk or he wasn't exactly faithful to his vow of celibacy... "

Mulroney only stayed in Simon's office for a few minutes, then he left and strode out, again pointedly ignoring Jim and Blair.

"Ellison! Sandburg!" Simon was standing at his door.

"Our master calls," Blair muttered as they got up and went over to join Simon and follow him into his office.

"Mulroney said the FBI will take charge of keeping Mrs. Walker safe," Simon said. "They'll arrange for her house to be sold and also make arrangements for her to get money from Cascade Construction. I didn't ask how they were going to manage that," he added.

"Just as long as she's safe," Jim said.

Two days later the offices of Cascade Construction went up in flames, just as the members of staff were beginning to arrive.

Because they had been the ones dealing with Mrs. Walker, Jim and Blair were sent to the scene. They arrived to see that the fire department was managing to control the fire... barely.

"Definitely arson," the fire chief told them as he spared a few moments to put them in the picture. "There's been an accelerant used." He nodded to where several civilians were standing on the other side of the street, watching. "Some of them were already in the building. One of them barely managed to escape, but they say everyone did get out."

"I'll go and have a word with them," Jim said, and turned to cross the road.

"If some were in the building..." Blair muttered. "Might one of them have been responsible?"

"Pretty tight timing." Jim shook his head. "No, I'm just wondering if this is Renwick's 'punishment' for Walker's 'treachery'."

"Two days... long enough for Mrs. Walker to contact her husband, assuming she could... give him the message... then destroy his source of income."

As they joined the people watching their workplace going up in flames, they were greeted by a familiar, if shaken, voice. "Hello, detectives."

"Ms. Cummings," Blair said. He glanced back across the street, then returned his attention to her. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"A couple of the other members of staff usually get into the office before me, because they use public transport and the way the buses run they're either a few minutes early or half an hour late," she said. "Today - I was first, because I had the keys; our janitor's brother died, not entirely unexpectedly, three days ago, and the funeral is today. Everything looked normal. The others began to arrive; there were four of us in the office when there was a bang - not terribly loud - from the staff room. I went to see what it was, and as soon as I opened the door... The whole room was blazing. I shut the door in the hope of containing the fire, ran back to the office and told the others to get out and stop anyone else coming in. Then I called for the fire service. I'd just finished the call when there was another bang, and the door to the walk-in cupboard where we keep the stationery blew out and some burning papers landed on the floor beside my desk. It was almost as if there was something flammable there, because the flames spread so quickly... I took a second to grab my purse, and ran. I heard - I think I heard - another explosion when I was close to the door. The first fire engine arrived just as I got outside." She looked at the burning building, then said, "It looks as if the building is completely destroyed. With Mr. Tom gone away, I wonder if Rebecca will think it worth rebuilding. She might just keep the insurance money to live on, and let the business die."

"That's possible," Jim said. "Hard on the workers, though."

Darlene took her phone from her purse. "I need to contact Rebecca." She hit speed dial. Jim and Blair glanced at each other. Surely the FBI wouldn't let Rebecca answer a phone. After a few moments, she shook her head. "Her phone's dead," she said.

"Dead? Not just switched off?" Jim asked.

"Dead. It's her home phone, a landline, so it should be ringing."

*Except when they took her to a safe house the fibbies might have unplugged the phone,* Jim thought. It seemed unlikely, though; if the phone rang and nobody answered, it meant there was nobody in the house. If someone tried to phone and the phone was dead... That could make someone suspicious.

His cell phone rang. He hauled it out, glad that it was smaller than the one he'd had a couple of years earlier.

"Ellison."

"Simon. How's it going at Cascade Construction?"

"Fire Chief says arson, and it's bad. It started with two or three explosions in different parts of the building at about the time people were arriving to start work. The ones actually in the building got out safely, and kept anyone else from going in."

"Arson. I'm not surprised. The Walker house is currently on fire too."

"What?"

"We only heard about it because the roads around it are closed. Have you finished where you are?"

"Pretty well. You want us to check out the Walker house?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Simon, we're on it." Jim hung up and turned to Blair, who was still talking quietly to Darlene.

"Mrs. Walker's house is on fire too."

Darlene's jaw dropped open. "That's why the phone is dead?" It was an unnecessary question.

"Looks like it." Jim thought for a moment. "Let us have your address." A crashing sound drew his attention to the burning building, where the roof had just collapsed. "I suppose all the records of addresses, etc, are - were - in there?"

"Yes."

"Get them from the people here, as far as you can - one or two might have left already. We'll notify you when we know anything more, and you can notify everyone else, but I suspect this means everyone's out of a job."

Darlene nodded. "I think you're right," she said. "I'm sure Mr. Tom would have rebuilt, but Rebecca... As I said, I don't think she'll bother."

The destruction of the Walker house was as complete as the destruction of the Cascade Construction offices. Looking at it as they approached, Blair said, "I just hope Mrs. Walker took everything she really valued when she went into the safe house."

"She wouldn't have been able to take much," Jim said.

"At least there's still the house in Sudden Valley," Blair commented. "She can probably move there."

"Assuming Renwick didn't know about it," Jim replied. They looked at each other. "I think that's our next job," he went on. "Checking on the Sudden Valley house." He glanced around, and headed towards the man who seemed to be directing the firemen. "Ellison, Major Crime," he said. "What can you tell me about this?"

"Dwight Evans; I'm the senior fire officer here. I'm surprised Major Crime is involved. All right, we do suspect arson - we'll be able to tell more clearly when we can check the building. It could be an insurance scam - "

"No. Mrs. Walker got a threatening letter a couple of days ago. We think this is a follow-up to that - especially since the office building of the business she owns also burned down this morning."

Evans drew in a sharp breath. "Is it possible she was in there - ?"

"As far as we know, the house was empty," Jim said. He looked at the still-smoking ruin of the house, flames still flickering up here and there. "Please let me know your conclusion about the arson when you can get in." He handed Evans his card. There was no point in hanging about for the length of time it would take for the gutted ruin to cool down enough to let an inspection be made. "By the way - do you know who raised the alarm?"

"One of the neighbors - Mrs. Forbes." He indicated the house immediately opposite - the only one with a reasonably clear view of the Walker house, shielded as it was from the houses on each side by high hedges.

"Thanks." Jim headed off across the road, pausing to make sure it was clear before stepping off the curb. Blair followed.

The door opened as they reached it.

The woman who stood in the doorway was possibly in her mid fifties, her hair just turning grey.

"Mrs. Forbes?" A polite enquiry; there was no doubt in Jim's mind that she was indeed the woman who had raised the alarm.

"Yes. I'm afraid I was watching to see what was happening to the Walkers' house, and saw you coming over... "

"I wouldn't blame you," Jim said. He showed her his badge. "Detective Ellison. My colleague is Detective Sandburg. I understand you raised the alarm?"

"Yes. The room I use as a living room faces this way - partly because I do like to see what's happening in the street, enjoy watching the traffic... and I knew the house was empty, so when I saw the flames... but it's taking a long time to put the fire out."

Jim nodded. "The senior fireman told us it was a very hot fire, whatever caused it. You saw the flames - did you see anyone near the house?"

"No. But I'd been in the kitchen - this is one of my cooking days. Since my husband passed, I'm afraid I've allowed my standards to slip a little... I used to make every meal fresh, every day, because I did enjoy doing it, but now I spend a morning every week or two making enough soup, for example, to do me several days - small batches, maybe three or four different kinds, and freeze it in single portion containers. Then all I need to do is take one out when I need it. I do the same with meat - cook a joint, slice it, and freeze it in single portions. Then all I need to do at mealtime is add potatoes and vegetables."

Blair nodded. "It's the most economic way of working," he agreed. "And you're not committed to eating what's in the freezer every day - if you want a change it's easy enough to boil some pasta, for example, or even get takeout occasionally."

"Yes," she said.

"So you started cooking early this morning. Your kitchen faces the other way?"

"Yes. It looks over the garden. Duncan did all the gardening when he was alive, but although I like to see it looking nice I'm not interested in gardening, so I get a gardener in two days a week to keep it tidy. It's very peaceful, looking out over it... it makes me feel a little closer to Duncan..."

"You miss him," Blair murmured.

"We were... very close. It's silly - I lost him nearly two years ago - but I do still miss him."

"Cops are like that," Blair said. "Cop partners can be very close, and if one is killed... the other is devastated. Some never really get over the loss. So we can understand."

"So," he went on more briskly, "you were working in the kitchen, but then you went through to the living room?"

"Yes. I'd just started a batch of soup, and went through to do some dusting - I have a cleaning woman, though she doesn't come every day, but in any case some of my ornaments are quite valuable and I prefer to dust them myself. I happened to glance out of the window, saw the flames, and called 911 - I didn't want to assume that someone else had."

Blair nodded. "Better two or three calls than everyone assuming someone else has raised the alarm."

"Then - well - I turned off the heat under the soup and went back through to watch."

"So if there had been anyone near the house you would have noticed."

"Yes, but because of the hedges - some of the neighbors are almost paranoid about privacy - the Walkers' house is the only one I can see clearly. If one of the other neighbors had been in her garden I wouldn't have seen her. But at this time of day it isn't likely. Too many chores to take up the morning, even for the wives of the wealthy."

Jim handed her his card. "If you remember anything else, or see anyone showing more than a casual interest in the house, call me."

"Thanks for your time," Blair said.

"It's going to be hard for the Walkers, coming back to that." She was looking at the house where the firemen's efforts were finally winning.

"We'll be trying to contact them to let them know," Blair said.

She went back into her house as Jim and Blair turned away.

Back at the PD, they reported to Simon, then, gritting his teeth, Jim phoned Mulroney. He was grimly satisfied with Mulroney's shocked response; it had been quite clear that the man had believed him (and Blair) to be over-reacting when they spoke of danger to Rebecca Walker, even though he had agreed to provide a safe house for her.

"There's one other thing," Jim said. "I don't know if she thought to mention it, but we did discover that the Walkers have a house in Sudden Valley. We don't know if whoever is responsible for torching Cascade Construction's offices and the Cascade house knows about it, but it's probably wiser to assume that that house isn't safe either; but if it's sold it needs to be done very publicly so that the arsonist knows it no longer belongs to the Walkers."

"We'll see to it." Mulroney was clearly unhappy at - well, being proved wrong, but equally clearly was aware that the PD's concerns had been correct.

Late afternoon three days later, Jim and Blair were sitting at Jim's desk reading through the reports on the arson at Cascade Construction and the Walker house - although the FBI was responsible for both Walkers, the arson fell into the hands of Cascade PD - when the bullpen door opened and a man in a neat grey suit entered. He glanced around and walked over to Jim's desk.

"Hello again, Detectives."

They glanced up. "Agent Peters!" Jim said. "I'd say 'Nice to see you again' but I'd guess this visit is in connection with the Walkers?"

Peters nodded. "You were right," he said quietly. "Their house in Sudden Valley has burned down too."

"At least Mrs. Walker is safe?" Jim couldn't have cared less about Tom Walker.

"Yes. We've put her into witness protection too. This unsub clearly neither knows nor cares that she has no way of contacting her husband; that her husband had already abandoned everything so its destruction didn't matter to him; and I think he clearly believes that if he kills Mrs. Walker, that will be further 'punishment'."

"Because he rolled over on Renwick?"

Peters nodded. "Though we haven't been able to determine how Renwick is organizing it all; he's had no contact at all with the outside world since we arrested him."

Blair frowned slightly. "Is there any chance that Renwick wasn't the boss? A top man whose arrest did a lot of damage, but not the actual boss?"

Peters' jaw dropped ever so slightly. He looked at Jim. "Is he always this insightful?"

Jim grinned. "Always. I was a good cop before he came along; with him as my partner, my solve rate went up a good thirty percent, and everyone else's here by ten to fifteen - and all due to some insight he provided."

Peters looked at Blair. "You wouldn't consider transferring to the FBI, by any chance?"

Blair laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment, but no, I'm happy where I am."

"Pity."

"All right," Jim said. "If Renwick wasn't the boss, who could have been pulling his strings? Nobody's tried to contact him in prison?"

"Not unless the entire staff at Starkville from Warden Dewar down are lying through their teeth. He's being held in seclusion, no contact with the general prison population - and even his guards are being rotated on an irregular basis. He's had no visitors apart from his mother, and she only visited him once; he hasn't sent out any letters or received any."

"His mother?" Blair asked.

"In her seventies, and pretty frail," Peters said. "According to Dewar, she arrived in a motorized wheelchair. Only spent a few minutes with Renwick and was in tears when she left, muttering something about 'Where did I go wrong?' Yes, I know, sounds like a good way of getting people to sympathize with her, but Dewar said he took her up to his office to give her a chance to pull herself together, and it took her a long time. Apparently her husband died very young and she had to bring up their sons on her own. She told him she'd thought Stan - the one we arrested - had built up a good career through hard work."

"Must be hard on her," Jim agreed.

"He's outwardly respectable... they say he cheats at cards," Blair muttered, just loud enough for Jim to hear him. He was silent for a moment, then went on. "And when they reach the scene of crime, McCavity's not there... "

Jim glanced at him. There had been a time when he thought Blair was a real innocent, too inclined to take someone at face value, too trusting for his own good... Eventually he had come to realize that Blair was far more cynical than he had believed possible. Now, it seemed, Blair was far from trusting Mother Renwick's apparent reaction. "Blair?" he asked.

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," Blair murmured.

Peters stiffened. "Sandburg, the woman is in her seventies! According to Dewar, she was devastated - "

"Just because she's over seventy doesn't mean she's not thinking straight," Blair said. "Hell, we've had a president who was over seventy when he got the job! And he was pretty effective while he was in office - accomplished quite a lot."

"Appearing to be devastated by something like her son being arrested is a great way of letting yourself be underestimated. Using a possibly unnecessary wheelchair is another. I'd suggest checking her out, Agent Peters."

Peters glanced at Jim, who grinned. "Insightful," he said.

"She *was* the only contact," Peters said slowly. "Yes... it could be worth checking her out. Thank you."

Blair grinned. "Just doing my job," he said cheerfully. "Interdepartmental co-operation. This is your case, after all."

"Yes, but I'm not sure you couldn't toss a few more helpful ideas my way," Peters admitted. "Care to join me for a cup of coffee? Both of you?"

Jim glanced at his watch. "Or you could come home with us and have something to eat," he suggested.

"Us?" Peters asked.

Jim grinned. "Blair moved into my spare room five years ago when the place where he was living blew up - long story - and we discovered almost immediately that the arrangement suited us both - so he never moved out." As he spoke he joined Blair in gathering up the reports they had been reading.

They left the bullpen together and took the elevator down to the garage.

"You're not from Cascade, are you?" Jim asked as the elevator traveled downwards.

"No. I came here by cab, so... "

"Yeah, we can fit you into the truck," Jim laughed. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm catching a plane out at 10pm. I'll have to be at the airport by 9."

"We'll get you there on time," Jim promised.

The elevator stopped and the door slid open. They had only taken a few steps before a man jumped out from between two cars.

"Traitor! How much did the pigs pay you to betray my brother? How much?" He lunged at Peters, raising what looked like a bread knife as he did.

Jim reacted as only a born protector would - he pushed Peters aside and tried to subdue the attacker. He was a fraction too slow. The descending knife slashed deep into his left arm. As he gasped with the shock of the sudden agony the attacker changed the angle of the knife and made to stab it between Jim's ribs.

A single shot rang out.

The knife clattered to the ground.

Jim collapsed.

In the seconds since he was pushed aside, Peters had regained his balance; he rushed at the attacker, grabbing him with no regard for the growing bloodstain on his right shoulder.

There was another clatter as Blair dropped his gun and fell to his knees beside Jim, yanking off his jacket to press it against the cut to slow down the bleeding.



Intent on Jim, Blair was barely aware of voices around them. Jim blinked pain-filled eyes at his friend, and whispered, so softly that Blair almost didn't hear, "Merlin?"

"Yes," Blair replied.

"I think... I might survive... this time." And then his eyes closed and he went limp.

"... take over, Blair. Blair!"

Blair raised his head, recognizing the paramedic. "Andy. Badly cut arm," he said. "I think an artery's been nicked."

"Okay. Just leave it to me."

Blair moved back a little, and felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into Peters' concerned face. "He's in good hands," Peters said.

"Yes," Blair said. "Andy's one of the best."

"Ellison saved my life."

"It's what he does," Blair murmured.

Peters handed Blair his gun. "I don't think you want to leave that lying on the garage floor."

"I never wanted to have to use it," Blair said, "but... "

"It was use it or let Ellison die."

"No choice, really." He gave a wry smile, his attention still mostly on Jim. "And now I have to deal with the three ring circus that goes with having used it... "

"You have a witness. Me."

"But I didn't give a warning - "

"In the first place, there wasn't time. In the second - he knew where he was, knew he was almost certainly attacking a police officer."

"Except his attack was initially aimed at you, and from what he said he obviously didn't know that you were in law enforcement."

"Sandburg. Blair. The man wasn't playing with a full deck of cards."

"Who is he anyway?"

"He refused to give his name, but I'd guess he's Stan Renwick's brother... and he certainly wasn't the mastermind behind Renwick's operation. I think you were right - the mastermind was the mother. Whether this attack was at her instigation, though... "

"I'd guess not," Blair said. "A criminal mastermind isn't going to be sloppy enough as to order a hit inside a police station."

Even as he spoke, Jim was lifted carefully onto a stretcher and placed inside an ambulance. Andy called, "Want to travel with us, Blair?"

"Go," Peters said. "I'll deal with things here."

"Thanks." Blair scrambled into the ambulance, the doors slammed shut, and the vehicle started off.

Jim opened his eyes and turned his head on the pillow to look up at the anxious face of his guide.

"Merlin," he whispered, a touch of awe in his voice.

"Hello, Arthur," Blair said softly.

"It's been a long time."

"Too long," Blair agreed. "At least this time I had a weapon that could stop the man before he stabbed you - and medical science is advanced enough that the doctors could save you. One of the arteries in your arm was nicked. Fifteen hundred years ago you'd probably have bled to death, even without the stab wound."

"Fifteen hundred years..." Jim sounded horrified.

"We've been reincarnated so often," Blair said.

"You knew... after that meditation you did the other night, you knew, didn't you."

"Yes, but you had to remember too - would you have accepted it if I had just said who we used to be?"

"Probably not," Jim admitted.

"We kept being born completely out of sync; as well as living in different areas, one was dying before the other was born. Obviously I don't know much about your family, but mine... One out of every generation had the urge to travel. Sometimes it wasn't my direct ancestor, though usually it was. So my family moved away from Avalon, where I stayed after you... died, eastwards. Eventually we moved west again, into Ireland. My several greats ago grandfather came to America from Ireland, settled on the east coast; his younger son was a rider with the Pony Express - and I'm pretty sure that was me - then when it folded he - I - moved to near San Francisco. I think we maybe nearly met then - there was a firm there called Ellisons. But I was getting old." He shook his head. "Before we could recognize each other, we had to be fairly close to the same age."

"We could still be forcibly separated again. This life isn't exactly a safe one for either of us; if one of us were to be killed untimely - "

"No," Jim said. "You said we're our own descendents, right?" He had no doubt that Blair - Merlin - *knew*, although after his meditation he had simply said 'speculation'. He had always been a shaman.

"Yes."

"Do you have any children?"

"No. I've always been very careful. Safe sex all the time."

"Do you plan on ever getting married?"

"No."

"I'm the same - tried it once, with Carolyn, and it was a disaster. Maybe it was a disaster because you were here although I didn't know it. And while Steven has a daughter, that's not direct descent. So for both of us, the line ends with us."

Blair nodded slowly. "If we hadn't met... we'd both have been driven to marry, have children - but it would have been at least three more generations before we were born again."

"But now that we *have* met again... There'll be no more incarnations, Chief. We'll be together in the spirit world. Till the end of time."

Blair's smile was incandescent. "That'll do me, Jim. That'll do me."