

FROM

THE FIFTH SACRED THING

STARHAWK



A "true story" about the future..

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this story



BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND

Chapter One



In the dry time of year, the dangerous time, the risk time, an old woman climbed a hill. Like most people in the southern part of the city, she called the season *El Tiempo de la Segadora*, the Time of the Reaper. The hills were dry, the gardens dependent on the dwindling waters of cisterns, the rains still weeks away. A time of ripening, but not yet of harvesting, when nothing was certain.

She climbed the hill as she had once climbed mountains, one step at a time, planting her stick firmly in front of her and letting it bear her weight as she hoisted herself up. She was ninety-eight years old, born at the midpoint of the twentieth century. Two more years, and she would see the midpoint of the twenty-first. In her day she had climbed many things: Sierran peaks, pyramids, chain-link fences, the way back from despair to hope. And this hill, looming up above the southern corner of the city, rising like a pregnant belly above the green patchwork of houses and gardens and paths and the blue waters of San Francisco Bay. By Goddess, she could still make it up this hill!

Maya stopped to catch her breath. Around her was a moving throng of people, dressed in the greens and golds of the season, gossiping happily or chanting solemnly according to temperament. They carried baskets of offerings: bread and fruit and cheese, fresh vegetables from the gardens.

Below stretched a panorama of sculpted hills crowned by toy houses, cradling the aging skyscrapers that rose from the low ground beside the bay. The city was a mosaic of jewel-like colors set in green, veined by streams and dotted with gleaming ponds and pools. Seen from above, blocks of old row houses defined streets that no longer existed. Instead, bicycles and electric carts and the occasional horse moved through a labyrinth of narrow walkways that snaked and twined through the green. Above the rooftops, gondolas like gaily painted buckets swung from cables, skimming from hilltop to hilltop, moving between high towers where windspinners turned. To the northeast, Maya could see a long train moving across the lower deck of the Bay Bridge, bringing early grain to the central market. Beyond, the blades of the wind

generators atop the Golden Gate Bridge seemed suspended in midair, their supports invisible under a gray shroud of fog.

Beautiful, Maya thought. She had adored the city ever since her first glimpse of it in the Summer of Love, more than eighty years before. She had been seventeen then, enchanted by the fog concealing and revealing mysteries like the veils of an exotic dancer, delighted by the crowded streets where people seemed to be perpetually in costume: gypsies, pirates, Indians, sorceresses skipping down the sidewalks to the strains of the Beatles singing "Love, Love, Love."

You have been my most constant love, she told the city silently. Not monogamous but never unfaithful, sometimes a bit tawdry but never boring. And you haven't gone and died on me yet, like the others.

"Love is all you need." The song played in her mind. But the Beatles misled us, she said to the air, thick with the ghosts of her own dead lovers. It wasn't all we needed. We wanted to love, freely and without barriers. We had to remake the world in order to do it.

Sighing, she continued up the steep incline. The truth is, she admitted, this is a hell of a climb for an old hag like me. I could have spared my strength, let Madrone visit the shrines.

The shrines to the Four Sacred Things encircled the base of the hill at the cardinal directions. Maya had made a laborious circuit. She left seeds of rare herbs at the earth shrine, feathers of seabirds and roosters at the air shrine. At the fire shrine, she gave white sage and black sage and cedar, and at the water shrine, she'd left a jar of rainwater saved from the first storms of the previous autumn.

But Madrone probably wouldn't have time. I know how it goes, Maya grumbled. She's probably up to her elbows in blood and vermix, lucky if she can dash up the hill at the last minute. I'm fussy in my old age. An Orthodox Pagan, I like these rituals done right: a leisurely visit to each shrine, a walk up the processional way, time to meditate, contemplate, trañce out a bit. . . .

The path wound its way above the small reservoir dug into the side of the hill. Now she could hear the little stream that tumbled down a sculpted watercourse to feed the gardens along her own street. There were so many more gardens, these days. By necessity, now that the Central Valley farmlands were baked to rock by the heat and the fires.

Look at it! Maya paused again, breathing heavily. The city was a place of riotous flowers and clambering vines and trees, whose boughs were heavy with ripening fruit.

It looks so lush. She took a long, deep breath, then another. You'd think we had plenty of everything, plenty of land, plenty of water. Whereas we've simply learned how not to waste, how to use and reuse every drop, how to feed chickens on weeds and ducks on snails and let worms eat the garbage.

We've become such artists of unwaste we can almost compensate for the damage. Almost. If we don't think about the bodies mummifying in mass graves over the East Bay hills. If we ignore the Stewards' armies that may be gathering, for all we know, just over the border.

Well, we made our choice. She started uphill again. We chose food over weapons, and so here we sit, lovely but as unarmed as the Venus de Milo.

As she neared the crest, the path wound across the west side of the hill. In the distance, she could see Twin Peaks, poking above a patch of fog like two brown breasts sticking out of a milk bath. They reminded her of Johanna.

"You hear that, Johanna? Twin Peaks remind me of your breasts."

Johanna, dead, did not answer, but thinking of her breasts made Maya think again of Johanna's granddaughter. Madrone works too hard, Maya thought. All the healers do. But since Sandy's death, she's hardly stopped. She'll be sick herself if she doesn't get more rest. I wish she'd taken the day off, like she said she would, but then something always comes up. . . . Goddess, I hope we're not in for another epidemic! Please, Mama, you wouldn't do that to us again? We're on your team, remember? We're the good guys.

Where was Madrone?

. . .

"Get some fluid in her!" Madrone called. "Aviva, check her dilation. Holy Mother, she's burning up! I swear the ice pack is smoking! We've got to bring this fever down."

"She's only about three centimeters," Aviva said. Above her white mask, her brown eyes looked worried. Her usual cloud of dark hair was tightly confined under a cap. Madrone had left her own face free. She believed a woman in labor needed to see a human face, and she had other ways to protect herself.

"Shit! How are we going to get this baby out of her?"

"C section?" Aviva suggested.

Madrone shook her head. "She'll die." She had one hand on the woman's throat, reading her rapid pulse, the other on her temple, feeding her *chi*, vital energy.

"She's dying anyway," Aviva said, reading the monitor. "Her blood pressure's sky high. None of the drugs have touched it."

"We can't lose her," Madrone said. "She's my neighbor, and she's Rosa's mother. I refuse to believe we're going to lose her. I won't lose her." I lost Sandy to this disease, she was thinking; that's enough. It should be enough.

"I wouldn't make statements like that on the Day of the Reaper," Aviva said.

Lou arrived at a dead run, pushing an IV cart. His narrow, delicate fingers expertly found a vein and inserted the drip line.

"Lou, work on her pressure point for dilation. I'm going to feed her *ch'i*," "Be careful," Lou said. His own mask concealed most of his face, but his black gull-wing eyes were grim.

Madrone nodded, as she took a deep breath and repeated her own secret rhyme that took her quickly into trance. Her body was like a tree with a hollow trunk; her roots could reach down to the great stores of *ch'i* in the molten mantle of the earth and bring it up. Energy pulsed through her, moving from her hands into the woman's body, feeding her, keeping her alive. For how long? As long as I can sustain it, Madrone thought, and that could be an almost infinite time if I were rested, if I could keep myself out of its way and be nothing but a hollow tube, a wire, a vehicle. What I was born to be.

Two sparks of light flickered, mother and baby, struggling to hold on in a burning, smoldering, dark place. Madrone changed the earth fire to cool water, letting it pour through her, always reaching deeper, reaching for more. She was so deep now that the voices around her were dim murmurs, calling out their litanies of alarms and demands. Down and down. But it was like pouring water down an open drain. Nothing held.

One of the lights was wriggling out of her grasp, escaping her. She struggled to hold it, but she was starting to feel herself tire.

"She's hyperventilating!"

"Pulse weak."

Madrone made a last desperate effort, drawing on her own vital energy, hurting it at the light. But the light dimmed and dissolved into the dark.

"She's gone," Lou said softly.

"Take the baby," Madrone said. How far along was Consuelo? Thirty-five, thirty-six weeks? The baby would be small but viable, if they just hurried before the placenta crashed. Why weren't they moving, doing something?

Then she realized that no sound had come out of her mouth. She was pouring all her power into the child, and she had no energy left to speak. Still, she tried again.

"Take the baby."

"Madrone's saying something," Aviva said.

"What? What is it?" Lou asked. "You okay?"

"Take the baby," she said again, this time audibly.

Lou gave her a sharp glance and nodded.

Now she was fighting to hold on, not just to the life of the child but to her own life. *Diosa*, she had gone too far down, she was too tired for this, too weak. But the child lived, she knew that, and if she could just hang on . . .

Suddenly she felt a warm hand on the nape of her neck. *Ch'i* flooded through her. It was Aviva, backing her up, feeding her as she fed the child as Lou lifted it through its dead mother's opened womb. The baby flailed weak limbs and let out a weak cry as he suctioned its lungs.

"It's a girl," Aviva said.

"Give her to me," Madrone said, taking her hands from the dead woman's temples and pulling open her own shirt. Lou cut the umbilical cord and handed her the baby. Madrone clasped the wet and bloody child to her chest, nestling her between her breasts, continuing to pump *ch'i* through her hands. The tiny body was hot, feverish. She grabbed a cube of ice from the pan and rubbed its small back, making trails through the blood. It needed coolness and warmth at the same time, and comfort, and milk. *Diosa*, it needed so much!

"Are you okay?" Lou asked.

Madrone nodded, although she felt sick and weak herself. "No, stay," she said to Aviva, who had started to withdraw her hands. "I'm not *that* okay."

"The baby?" Lou asked.

"She's breathing on her own," Madrone said. "She's small and early, but she may be all right. Don't take her yet, let me work on her some more. In a moment you can check her and weigh her."

"Take a deep breath," Aviva said.

Madrone inhaled slowly, willing her body to relax. But her mind would not comply. "Who has milk? Who could we get to nurse this kid?"

"I'd be safer to get volunteers to pump some milk. We don't know how contagious this thing is," Lou said.

"There is that," Madrone said wearily. "It's too bad. Nursing would help her."

"You really think she'll live?" Aviva asked.

"I don't know. We don't know enough about this fever yet."

"I bet my neighbor would take her," Aviva said. "She just lost a baby and her breasts are still dripping. And I'd notice if she started showing signs of fever."

"That'd be good," Lou said. "That's a good idea."

"Wait," Madrone said, as Lou started to close Consuelo's eyes. She took one last look at the dead woman's face. "I'm sorry, Consuelo. *Lo siento. Lo siento mucho.*"

"I'll get Sister Marie for the rites," Lou said.

Aviva shook her head. "She already gave the Last Blessing, when the labor started. Just in case."

"May the air carry your spirit gently," Madrone whispered to the corpse. "May the fire release your soul. May the water wash you clean of pain and suffering and sorrow. May the earth receive you. May the wheel turn again and bring you to rebirth."

"Blessed be," Aviva murmured.

Lou raised the sheet and covered Consuelo's head.

"Let me take the baby now," Aviva said. "Madrone, you are wiped out."

Madrone considered for a moment. The child was still hot, but not burning. Her life force seemed fairly strong and stable, while Madrone's felt drained. She handed the baby to Aviva, who withdrew her hands from Madrone's neck to take the infant and cuddle her close. Unsupported, Madrone felt the full wash of her own exhaustion. There was a chair in the corner of the small bare room, and she just stumbled over to it before her legs gave way.

"You look terrible, Madrone," Lou said.

She nodded in acknowledgement. "I went a little too far."

"You take chances you shouldn't take." Lou's eyes narrowed to dark slivers. "I've told you this before."

Sandy's eyes had been shaped like that, but they had laughed and teased and seduced her into stroking his black silk hair and rooting for his lips with hers. No more.

Madrone closed her eyes. "You can't be my daddy, Lou. You're younger than me."

"You need a daddy."

"I never had one. I wouldn't know what to do with one."

"You were hatched?"

"He died fighting to free Guadalupe, where I was born. Or so my mama said. I think she lied. I believe I was a Virgin Birth."

"Hail Mary," Aviva said from the sink, where she was washing the baby.

"More like the great Goddess incarnate," Madrone corrected her. "Self-fertilizing, self-creating. That was my mother." And immortal. She should have been immortal. Not so quick to disappear and die and leave me. But enough of that. She looked up at Aviva. "Or do you think I'm Jesus, with a sex change?"

"Jesus was crucified," Lou reminded her. "If you don't do an aura repair, you'll be sick enough to wish it had happened to you."

Madrone looked up at him through her lashes. "Be an angel, Lou. Do it for me?"

"I shouldn't, you know. It only encourages you to excess."

"I didn't want to lose Consuelo," Madrone said, turning away from the white shape on the bed. Her eyes were heavy with tears she felt too tired to shed. Aviva was weighing the baby and testing its reflexes. "She was a friend. Her family lived down the walkway from mine. I grew up babysitting for her daughter. And now what's Rosa going to do? Her dad died six months ago."

"Close your eyes," Lou said. Madrone sank back in the chair, listening to Aviva croon to the child, and let him repair the breaks in the protective *ch'i* field that surrounded her. She could feel his hands moving around her head; she sighed when he dug strong fingers into the knots in her back.

"She's a cute baby," Aviva said. "I hope she lives."

"I'm going to have to tell Rosa," Madrone said. If she kept her eyes shut

long enough, maybe when she opened them everything would be different. They'd be back in the Good Reality, as Maya liked to say, in *El Mundo Bueno* where none of this had happened.

"Let somebody else tell her," Aviva suggested.

"I can't do that. I'm her friend." She sighed. Really, she could almost drift into sleep for a moment, while Lou kneaded the tension from her neck. Drift back into her dream of last night, or was it yesterday morning? She couldn't remember when she had last slept, she only remembered dreaming of Bird, and the dream left a sweet taste in her mouth. They were back in the mountains, in their watershed year, the year they gave to the forests, when they were both sixteen. They'd worked so hard, clearing firebreaks and planting new species of drought-resistant spruce and fir. But they were young, and their sweat seemed only an invitation to taste all the body's salt streams.

Funny, she still hadn't dreamed of Sandy, although he'd been dead for a month. But Bird had come several times in the last few days. Maybe Maya was right; she said he was still alive somewhere. But nobody had seen him for almost ten years, since the big epidemic when he went off with Cleis and Zorah and Tom and disappeared deep in the Stewards' territory.

Most likely Bird was dead. Like the other men in my life, Madrone thought: my mythical father, Sandy, Rio. And a goodly number of the women. Stop it! she told herself firmly. Stop wallowing in self-pity. She sighed again and then let out a squawk as Lou hit a sensitive point. "Ow! What are you doing to me?"

"That hurt?" Lou asked.

"Go easy, would you? I didn't ask to be tortured!"

"That's a point connected with the immune system. It needs strengthening."

"Is that any reason to torment the poor thing? You should call that point Lou's Revenge." His finger remained, strong and adamant, and in spite of her complaints Madrone felt some energy returning.

"All right, Madrone, answer this question correctly, and I'll let up. What are you going to do next?"

"Since I've failed to heal the sick, maybe I should learn to raise the dead. Ow! You're really hurting me! I'm not kidding!"

"What are you going to do next?"

"Rest! Sleep! I swear it! Ah, that's nice." She sighed as his fingers let up and he began massaging her shoulders. "Just as soon as I tell Rosa."

"What about the ceremony?" Aviva asked. "Aren't you representing the Healers' Council?"

"Oh, Goddess, I forgot all about it. What time is it?"

"About one o'clock in the afternoon on the first of August or, if you prefer, Third Foggy Moon," Lou said. "The Day of the Reaper. The day you

are supposed to represent us, your guildmates, in the great and glorious celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the Uprising. If you get a move on, you still have time to make it up the hill. I don't know if that's good news or bad."

"Oh, it's good," Madrone said. "Since the Council for its own unfathomable reasons has chosen me as its representative instead of Doctor Sam, I better get my ass up there."

"Sam suggested it," Lou said. "He meant it as a tribute to Sandy."

"Lou, if you get that knot out of my neck I'll . . . what! I do for you? I'll bear you a child. I'll cook you a dinner. I'll nominate you for the next public honor."

"Those aren't promises," Lou said, kneading her shoulders expertly, "those are threats."

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I look like the death hag herself, Madrone thought as she stared into the scrub-room mirror. Wisps of her curly black hair had escaped from their thick braid; there were blue circles under her eyes and a grayish tinge to her bronze skin. Streaks of blood-covered her cheeks and chest. She stripped off all her clothing and threw it into the solar disinfector, loosed her hair, and stepped into the shower. The hot water felt good on her skin, restored her sense of being back in a body. She scrubbed thoroughly, down to the roots of her hair. She could protect herself from the fever, but until they knew how it was transmitted, she wouldn't risk passing it on.

Clean, her wet hair clinging to her back, she changed back into her street clothes and went to look for Rosa. The girl was waiting in the corridor with Marie, another neighbor, one of the Sisters of Our Blessed Lady of the Waters who had a community house on Madrone's block. Rosa was nestled, half asleep, in Marie's arms, and Madrone squatted down to take her hand and wake her gently.

Rosa opened her eyes, large and dark in her thin face. Her hair hung in two long braids, a little frizzy and disheveled after the sleepless night, and Madrone remembered Consuelo's hands moving deftly in her daughter's hair, weaving the black, shiny strands. Never again.

"I'm sorry, Rosa," Madrone said simply. "I'm very very sorry. *Tu mamá ha muerto*. Your mother is dead."

Marie's arms tightened around the child, and her blue eyes narrowed with concern. She too had been a patient of Madrone's; she too was someone Madrone had not been able to cure and would lose. The milk-white skin of Marie's Irish ancestors wasn't made to withstand the ultraviolet that poured through the earth's weakened ozone shield. Madrone noticed a new growth next to the older woman's nose. Her skin was papery, transparent, the look of cancer.

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"I'm sorry," Madrone said again. "We did everything we could. We just don't understand this fever yet."

Now Rosa seemed to comprehend what Madrone was saying. Her eyes filled with tears. She buried her face in Marie's shoulder and began to sob.

"*Pobrecita*," Marie soothed her. "I'm so sorry." She looked questioningly at Madrone. "The baby?"

"She's alive. For now. I don't honestly know how it will turn out. We found a nurse for her. I wish I could be more optimistic."

Marie nodded. Madrone rested a hand on Rosa's back. She would have liked to curl up and cry herself. I hate this, she thought. I really hate this.

"You look exhausted," Marie said. "I'll take care of Rosa. You go and get some rest."

Nodding, Madrone stood up. If she hurried, she would have just enough time to run home, change into her festival clothes, and meet Maya before the ritual started.

° ° °

At the crest of the hill, people were descending from the bucket-shaped gondolas. Their thick cables spanned the city like a metallic spiderweb. They reminded Maya of Rio, how he had grumbled when they were first proposed after the Uprising.

"It's beyond our resources!" he had objected. "We've still got people we can't feed; how can we afford to turn the City into an eco-Disneyland?"

"I like them," Maya said. "They'll be fun. They'll cheer people up."

"Circuses! It'd be cheaper to feed a few Millennialists to the zoo lions. That'd cheer *me* up!"

"Don't be an old crock," she'd said to him, but then she noticed that tears were gathering in his eyes. The cataracts gave them a milky blue look that reminded her of an infant's glazed stare. He was still a handsome man then, in his early eighties, just a few years older than she was. His blond hair had turned silky white and made a bushy frame for the roughly sculpted planes of his face. They could still end an argument by making love, burying in each other's flesh their sorrow at all that had been done too little, too late.

Maybe he was right, Maya thought. We were carried away by our own optimism, in the first flush of victory, still thinking in the old ways, in terms of massive projects and heroic efforts: the sea dikes, the gondolas. Yet in the end the gondolas were quite practical, given the impenetrable maze that the Uprising had made of the city. And beautiful, embellished over the last two decades with bright colors and sacred designs: spirals, interlocking triangles, moons, stars, animals, and birds.

"Hi, Maya. *¡Que nunca tengas hambre!* May you never hunger!" Passesby greeted her, smiling, with the ritual blessing, and to each she replied politely, "May you never thirst! *¡Que nunca tengas sed!*" Some of them she

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knew by name, others knew her by sight or through the books she had written. A few looked inclined to stop and chat, but she nodded at them and turned away. Too much admiration became wearying at her age.

The terminus was a tall sculptural tower forged out of the metal scavenged from the old microwave tower that had once crowned the hill. It shimmered with soft metallic hues, raising extended arms in welcome, the great windspinner on its top tracing moving mandalas with its blades as it generated power.

A figure emerged from the tower's entrance and waved at Maya. At last, Madrone. The way she moved, her gait as she walked briskly over to where Maya waited, brought Johanna vividly alive again for a moment. Johanna had also liked flowing pantaloons and elaborately draped blouses and over tunics, in those same colors, maroons and purples and deep blues. There wasn't a lot else of Johanna visible in Madrone, just that hint of Africa in the exuberance of her hair and a touch of chocolate under the bronze of her skin. And when Madrone turned, to regard Maya with one eyebrow raised and her lips pursed, shifting her basket of offerings from her right hip to her left, she was Johanna incarnate, and maybe more than that. Maya could, in fact, remember that expression on Johanna's mother's face, who had gotten it from some great-grandmother of her own, and so on back to the beginning of time, that first ancestress whose mitochondria swam in the cells of us all.

"Are you all right, Maya?" Madrone asked. "Did you walk up that hill?"

"I still have the use of my legs."

"And you still don't have any sense. You know I would never have let you try that alone."

"Let me? What makes you think you could stop me?" Maya said.

"Well, for one thing, I outweigh you."

"That doesn't count for much. I'm old but tough."

"Hmph. An old nut is the hardest to crack."

"What are you implying?"

"*Nada, madrina*. Not a thing."

Madrone appraised Maya with a healer's eye. The old woman could have passed for the Crone, the Reaper, herself: her skin, pale as cake flour, protected from the sun by a broad straw hat, her hair a wispy silver corona around the spiderweb wrinkles of her face. Her lips were a thin line, firm and determined, her jaw somewhat square, her brown eyes still clear and luminous. She wore a long black dress and leaned heavily on her silver-handled stick. She did, however, look tough, Madrone admitted, or, more accurately, vital. Amazing, really, that she had survived to such an age, through such times, her wits still sharp as cheddar.

"What are you looking at?" Maya asked.

"You, *abuelita*. You lookin' good."

"Now don't you *'ita'* me. I'm not little, and I'm not your grandmother."

"It's a term of affection, not size. As you well know. And as for exactly what we are to each other, I don't know of a word that covers the case."

"You don't know a word that means 'the daughter of the child one of my lovers had by my other lover when my back was turned'?" Maya asked innocently. "There isn't something in Spanish for that?"

"Better settle for *madrina*. It covers a multitude of sins. Are you really okay?"

"Better than you. How much sleep did you get, anyway?"

"Don't ask."

Maya's voice softened. "How did it go?"

"We lost Consuelo."

"No."

"I can't talk about it now, I'll start to cry."

Maya placed a hand on Madrone's shoulder. She pressed it against her cheek, taking comfort. A single blast of a conch rang out, wavering on the air.

"Half an hour warning," Maya said. "Where do you want to go?"

The upper slopes of the hill were dotted with shrines to Goddesses and Gods, ancestors and spirits. Some were elaborately sculpted and painted, some as simple as an offering basket under a tree. They encompassed an eclectic mixture of traditions. A cairn of memorial stones crowned a green mound dedicated to the Earth Goddess, who could be called Gaia, or Tonantzin, or simply *Madre Tierra*, Mother Earth. Kuan Yin had a shrine and so did Kali and Buddha and many bodhisattvas, along with deities and devas, African orishas, and Celtic Goddesses and Gods. Some formed natural clusters: The Yoruba Oshun, Love Goddess, Goddess of the River, stood near Aphrodite and Inanna/Ishtar/Ashtaré, in front of a small circle of cleared ground where, at the moment, a woman danced barefoot and bare-bellied. Farther down the hill, the Virgin of Guadalupe overlooked the Stations of the Cross. Up here, the sun was welcomed at dawn on the Winter Solstice, the shofar was blown to announce the Jewish New Year, gospel music was sung on Easter morning, the call to prayer was chanted five times a day, and at almost any time of day or night someone sat in silent meditation, counting breaths.

"To the cairn," Madrone said. "I brought a stone for Sandy." Nestled under the vegetables and herbs in her basket was a rock, carved with Sandy's name and the dates of his birth and death. Sandino Shen Lotus Black Dragon, born September 15, 2019. Died on the twenty-third day of Fog-Rolls-In Moon, Year 20 (June 23, 2048). She would add it to the memorial cairn at the top of the hill, a pile growing at an alarming rate. And that would be all that

was left of him, her friend, lover, companion, *compañero*: a rock in a pile, some ashes buried in the garden, memories. There were some griefs no ritual could heal.

Maya touched her arm, lightly, like the brush of a tentative wing. "Shall we place it together?" she asked. "Or would you rather do that alone?"

"Come with me."

Maya reached for her hand. "Come on."

Around the mound, clusters of people were leaving their own stones, or placing fruit or flowers for their dead, or simply standing, weeping, holding each other for comfort.

Madrone took the stone from her basket and held it for a moment. She was trying to think about Sandy, but instead she was thinking about Bird. He was born on the Day of the Reaper; they should have been celebrating his birthday today. A Leo, but he'd had five planets in her sun sign, Scorpio. Sex and death. How old would he have been? She was twenty-eight, and he would be turning twenty-nine. Goddess, they'd been so young ten years ago! She could see his face on the night he went away, his dark skin so smooth and unmarked, his beard still a novelty.

They were going off with a raiding party, he and Cleis and Zorah and Tom. Would she say goodbye to Maya for him?

"You're going to get yourselves killed," she'd said to him.

He met her eyes, steadily. "*Claro*." At the look on her face, he softened it a bit. "Well, probably."

She'd wanted to scream at him for being a fool, for abandoning her. But his eyes had frightened her. She had seen him look like that on the night of the Uprising, as he stood over his father's bleeding body, with everybody around them screaming and the cops trying to club them down. They were only children then, but the look was old, too old.

Her own eyes were suddenly wet with tears. I'm disloyal to Sandy, she thought, I'm not focusing on him, I'm escaping from fresh pain by probing old wounds. Easier to mourn Bird, after all these years, than to face Sandy's loss. Or Consuelo's. Or the others that would come.

"I'm so sorry about Sandy," Maya said.

"It's Bird I'm thinking about," Madrone admitted. "Today's his birthday, remember?"

"I should remember." Maya smiled. "I remember his birth clearly enough. Brigid went about it quite efficiently, the way she did everything. How a daughter of mine turned out like that, I'll never understand. Four hours of labor, start to finish. I wasn't even late for the ritual that night."

"Did she have a home birth?"

"Yes, my friend Alix was the midwife. I was there, and Bird's father,

Jamie, and Marley, who had just turned three. Brigid thought it would help him bond with the new baby. But he seemed much more interested in the drum I was playing than in his new brother."

"Marley was always more interested in drums than people," Madrone said.

"But what a percussionist!" Maya said. "He could drum the rain down from the sky! I had such talented grandsons, once. Bird was a genius with any instrument he touched. That's not boasting, that's just stating a fact."

"I loved his voice," Madrone said. "I loved to hear him sing." I loved him, she thought. I loved him from the very first day I spent in San Francisco, still in shock from what happened in Grudalupe, and grieving for my mother, and scared of those strangers who called themselves Grandma Johanna, Grandpa Rio, Auntie Maya. Bird gave me his favorite stone, a flat black beach rock with the white pattern of a fossilized sand dollar on its back.

"And so handsome," Maya went on. "The boys both had my eyes, set in that clear milk-chocolate skin. Do you remember chocolate?"

"We used to have it sometimes in Grudalupe," Madrone said.

"Don't outlive your descendants," Maya told her. "It's no fun. I'm only sticking it out until Bird comes back."

"You may have to live forever, then, *madrina*."

"No." Maya shook her head. "He's not dead. If he were dead, I'd feel it. Anyway, we're here for Sandy now. Say a prayer for him, and place his stone."

Faded marigolds and willing chrysanthemums dotted the mound. There were no cemeteries in the city, no land that could be spared for burial, so people brought their grave offerings here. Sandy's stone would lie in company with others, sharing their offerings in death as people shared food in life. He, at least, would not be lonely.

"What is remembered lives," Madrone said, stooping and placing the stone on the north side of the mound. "*Jiyi shi yongwan bu mie de*." She stumbled over the inflections Lou had painstakingly taught her. Sandy had come from the north side of the city, where they spoke Mandarin instead of Spanish as their second language.

"He was a good man," Maya said. "So sweet to everyone, and sensitive. His passing leaves a big emptiness." Yes, she would miss him, like she missed so many others, but the ache in the back of her throat was for Madrone. She was too young to bear so many losses.

Madrone nodded without speaking. Maya could feel the earth under her, alive like a beating heart. Or perhaps, she thought, I'm feeling my own throbbing feet? Still, it was good, at the place of the dead, to acknowledge that One to whom she had pledged herself long ago, the aliveness at the heart of things, the ever-turning wheel of birth, growth, death, and regeneration. It had oc-

curred to Maya lately that calling *that* the Goddess, even though she'd fought for the term all her life, was—what? Not so much a metaphor, more in the nature of an inside joke.

Madrone turned away abruptly. She felt a great need, suddenly, to be alone.

"I'm going to make an offering to Yemaya," she said. The Yoruba Sea Goddess was her favorite of the orishas, the old Goddesses and Gods that had come on the slave ships from Africa.

"Give me a jar of honey," Maya said. "I'll go annoy my ancestors."

"I thought 'commune with' was the operative term," Madrone said, pulling out a small jar of honey from the depths of the basket.

"Jewish ancestors don't commune. They kvetch. That means complain."
"That's one Yiddish word I know, *madrina*."

° ° °

Maya walked over to where a small crowd was gathered around the Jewish shrine, a brightly tiled and weatherproof ark under an arching pomegranate tree. A carved stone lectern provided a platform for the Torah scroll, and a young woman was chanting in Hebrew. The sounds took Maya back to her childhood, the voice of her grandfather praying in the morning, the voices of her mother and father, arguing.

"Lay off me, Betty!" she could hear her father say. "I'm not going to synagogue, I told you! I don't believe in his damn God!"

"You don't go for God, you go for him. He's an old man, Joe. For once in your life you could do something to make somebody else happy."

"Why should I? Would he do the same for me? Would he chant *The Communist Manifesto* to make me happy?"

"He's your father."

"Big deal!"

Maya slipped quietly behind the tree so as not to disturb the prayers as she placed the jar up against the slender trunk. The tree was encircled with a copper ribbon, inscribed with writing in Hebrew and English that said, *She is a tree of life to them that hold fast to her*.

"Hedging your bets, you old heretic?" whispered a crusty voice behind her. She turned and recognized Doctor Sam, one of Madrone's colleagues from the hospital. With his mane of white hair and tufted eyebrows, he reminded her a bit of her own father in his old age, an age she had now surpassed by a good three decades. Not a handsome man but interesting, she reflected, favoring him with a smile.

"Honoring my ancestors," Maya said.

"Are they impressed?"

"Who knows? If I really wanted to placate my father's ghost, I suppose I could burn some incense in front of a picture of Karl Marx."

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"You *are* a heretic."

"And what about you? Don't you claim to be the last godless atheist?"

"I come for the arguments. Is the destruction of the environment the new form of the destruction of the Temple? And which tree of life should we hold to, Torah or Asherah, the Earth Goddess?"

"And did you reach any conclusions?"

"Nah, conclusions aren't the point. You of all people should know that. If we ever came to conclusions, we'd lose the fun of the argument."

There was that spark between them, Maya realized suddenly. Could she develop a father fixation on a man twenty years her junior?

The prayer was ending and the scroll was being replaced in the ark when the conch shells blasted forth again.

"It's time," Sam said, holding out his arm. "Allow me?"

° ° °

Yemaya's shrine was on the western slope of the hill, toward the ocean, although the bulk of Twin Peaks blocked the water from view. Madrone paused for a moment, beneath the statue of the pregnant fish-tailed mermaid, the great mother, Goddess of the Sea. She laid down the last of her offerings, a perfect sand dollar she had found long ago. It reminded her of the stone Bird had given her. Fossilized sand dollars were plentiful, but these days the cast shells of live ones were rare. It made a worthy offering. She hated to part with it, to lose a link to a memory: walking with Bird on the beach below the sea dikes that protected the outer neighborhoods from the rising waters of the ocean, the light playing on the waves, his songs in her ear, his hands smoothing her wind-whipped hair.

The last warning blast of the conch rang out over the hillside. Now it was really time to leave the ghosts of her old losses and get on with the ceremony. "Original mother of life, first Ancestress, accept this offering," she murmured to Yemaya. "Preserve the lives of the living. Lend me strength. And hey, *Iya*, Mama, I'm sad, I've lost my lovers and *compañeros*, old and new. I'm lonely. Turn the tide for me."

° ° °

The sun was hot on the nape of Madrone's neck as she headed back to the gathering place. To the east, shimmering waves of heat rose from the sun-scorched valleys, and ribbons of dust twisted in the air. West of the hill, blue fog lay in bands along the slopes of Twin Peaks.

At the summit, a bowl-shaped amphitheater was hollowed out. It was filled with onlookers, but Madrone saw Maya down below, in the innermost ring where those who had a part in the ceremony assembled. Sam stood beside her, and Madrone sighed softly. He'd want to know how the birth went, and she'd have to talk about it again. She left the food from her basket at the feasting site, and joined the other two. They exchanged greetings as the

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four *concheros*, bearing their shells aloft, walked proudly to the center of the circle. With eerie, dissonant harmonies, they saluted the four directions and then earth, sky, and center.

The musicians began to play, and everyone sang together, as the ritual fire was lit by four masked figures, bird, fish, coyote, and deer, who symbolized the four directions and the Four Sacred Things.

Next came dances and songs and invocations, to the Four Sacred Things, to the ancestors, to Goddesses and Gods of all the different people assembled. Madrone loved to watch the dancers, especially the Miwok and Ohlone troupes in their feather capes, but she found her eyes closing and her head drooping during a lengthy poem in praise of communal spirit declaimed by a very earnest young woman from the Teachers' Guild.

"They were supposed to have a five-minute limit on speeches," Maya whispered to Sam. "If they don't get on with it, my ass is going to atrophy."

Finally the last speaker finished and beckoned to Maya. She stepped forward. A young girl, very solemn with the weight of her responsibility, handed her the Talking Stick, an oak staff beautifully carved, beaded, and feathered, carrying in its tip a small microphone. Powerful speakers were hidden in the branches of the four sacred trees that stood at the four quarters around the outskirts of the bowl. On the Signers' platform, a man stood waiting to interpret as she spoke. All was ready.

She paused and looked at the crowd, letting her eyes roam over the brilliantly colored festival clothes and the faces of every hue and shade, eyes uplifted, heads set high and proud. This is good, Maya thought, this is what I worked for all my life, and you too, Johanna, you too, Rio. But how many more must we lose, like Consuelo, like Sandy? Like Brigid and Marley and Jamie and, yes, maybe Bird? What is this worth if we can't preserve it, protect it?

The drums began to beat, a trance rhythm, steady but just slightly syncopated, to lead the mind and then shift it in unexpected directions. Maya spoke, her voice rhythmic, musical, crooning an incantation.

"*Éste es El Tiempo de la Segadora*, the Time of the Reaper, she who is the end inherent in the beginning, scribe to the grain. The Crone, Goddess of Harvest. In this her season we celebrate the ancient feast of the Celtic sun god Lugh, his wake as he ages and descends into autumn. It is a time of sweet corn, ripening tomatoes, the bean drying on the vine. The harvest begins. We reap what we have sown."

Madrone sat up straighter, listening attentively. She always enjoyed hearing Maya work a crowd.

"The Crone, the Reaper, is not an easy Goddess to love. She's not the nurturing Mother. She's not the Maiden, light and free, not pretty, not shiny

like the full or crescent moon. She is the Dark Moon, what you don't see coming at you, what you don't get away with, the wind that whips the spark across the fire line. Chance, you could say, or, what's scarier still: the intersection of chance with choices and actions made before. The brush that is tinder dry from decades of drought, the warning of the earth's climate that sends the storms away north, the hole in the ozone layer. Not punishment, not even justice, but consequence."

A deep hush fell over the crowd. Maya went on.

"This moon brings a time of hope and danger: fire season. We watch the dry hills anxiously, knowing that the rains are weeks or months away. Those of us who are old have seen fire destroy our drought-baked cities and smoke eclipse the sun. We've seen rich croplands shrivel into glass-hard deserts, and the earth itself collapse on its emptied water table. We have seen diseases claim our children and our lovers and our neighbors. We know it can happen again.

"We hope for a harvest, we pray for rain, but nothing is certain. We say that the harvest will only be abundant if the crops are shared, that the rains will not come unless water is conserved and shared and respected. We believe we can continue to live and thrive only if we care for one another. This is the age of the Reaper, when we inherit five thousand years of postponed results, the fruits of our callousness toward the earth and toward other human beings. But at last we have come to understand that we are part of the earth, part of the air, the fire, and the water, as we are part of one another."

She paused for a moment. Her voice dropped, becoming lighter, almost conversational.

"We have had two blessed decades to remake our corner of the world, to live by what we believe. Today is the twentieth anniversary of the Uprising. I've been asked to tell you the story of *Las Cuatro Viejas*, the Four Old Women who sparked the rebellion in '28 when the Stewards canceled the elections and declared martial law.

"On Shorwell Street, down below the slopes of this hill, which in that time was called Bernal Heights, lived a woman, María Elena Gómez García, whose grandmother grew fruit trees in the back yard from peach pits and avocado pits, and she saved her tomato seeds. While the Stewards' troops were massing down on the peninsula, commandeering all stockpiles of food, and the rest of us were debating what to do and trying to work up courage to do it, María gathered together with her neighbors, Alice Black, Lily Fong, and Greta Jeanne Margolis, four old women with nothing to lose. On the morning of the first of August, they marched out in the dawn with pickaxes over their shoulders, straight out into the middle of Army Street, and all the traffic stopped, such cars as a few people could still afford to drive.

"Some of them were honking their horns, some were shouting threats, but when María raised the pickax above her head, there came a silence like a great, shared, indrawn breath. Then she let it fall, with a thud that shuddered through the street, and the four old women began to dig.

"They tore up the pavement, blow by blow, and filled the holes with compost from a sack Greta carried, and planted them with seeds. By then a crowd had gathered, the word was carried through the streets, and we rushed from our houses to join them, bringing tools or only our bare hands, eager to build something new. And many of us were crying, with joy or with fear, tears streaming enough to water the seeds.

"But Alice raised her hand, and she called out in a loud voice. 'Don't you cry,' she told us. 'This is not a time to cry. This is a time to rejoice and praise the earth, because today we have planted our freedom!'

"Then we joined them, tearing up the streets as the cars backed away from us, piling up barricades on the freeways, smashing the doors of the locked warehouses. And those who supported the Stewards fled south with all the goods they could steal. And we who remained planted seeds, and we guarded the sources of our water in the valleys and the mountains, and the Stewards withdrew to starve us out.

"We were hungry, so very hungry, for a long time while we waited for the seeds to grow, and prayed for rain, and danced for rain. It was a long dry season. But we had pledged to feed one another's children first, with what food we had, and to share what we had. And so the food we shared became sacred to us, and the water and the air and the earth became sacred.

"When something is sacred, it can't be bought or sold. It is beyond price, and nothing that might harm it is worth doing. What is sacred becomes the measure by which everything is judged. And this is our measure, and our vow to the life-renewing rain: we will not be wasters but healers.

"Remember this story. Remember that one act can change the world. When you turn the moist earth over, and return your wastes to the cycles of decay, and place the seed in the furrow, remember that you are planting your freedom with your own hands. May we never hunger. *¡Que nunca tengamos hambre!*"

"May we never thirst! *¡Que nunca tengamos sed!*" the united voices of the listeners chorused.

"One act, and about a thousand hours of meetings," Sam whispered.

"Cynic," Madrone said. "Don't you know a good story when you hear one?"

"It's a great story. It's just that it bears so little resemblance to the actual history I remember."

"Quiet. It's my turn now."

Madrone and several others, representatives of various guilds and coun-

cils and work groups, stepped forward into the center of the circle. The same solemn child held the Talking Stick for each of them.

"We have come here to give an accounting of ourselves, calling on the Four Sacred Things to witness what we have made of this city in twenty years," said Salal from the Central Council. "This is how we have kept our pledges. This is what we have harvested."

As the stick passed around the circle, each person spoke, in turn, from the Gardeners' Guild, and the Water Council, and the Healers, and the Teachers, and all the interlocking circles that provided for the needs of the City.

"No one in this city goes hungry."

"No one lacks shelter."

"No child lacks a home."

When the stick came to Madrone, she hesitated for a long moment. "There is sickness here," she said finally, "but no one lacks care."

The stick moved on.

"See, the fruit hangs heavy on the bough, ready to feed the stranger."

"We have guarded our waters well, our cisterns will not run dry, no one thirsts, and our streams run clear."

"All the gifts of the earth are shared," they said in unison.

"May we never hunger!" the people responded. "*¡Que nunca tengamos hambre! ¡Que nunca tengamos sed!*"

The drums beat a hypnotic, insistent rhythm. The music rose and the drums pounded, and suddenly everyone was dancing, in the central space, up in the ringed tiers that climbed the hill, on the ridges. The sky gleamed indigo with streaks of pink and gold in the west, and against its glowing light loomed giant figures, *La Segadora* herself, fifteen feet high, with serpent head and serpent skirt and a basket strapped to her back in which she carried a mace. And Lugh, the gleaming paint of his solar disc set on fire by the dying rays of the sun, and others: ancestors, spirits, visions. Maya knew, looking up, that they were only cloth or paper, but in the twilight they came alive. The musicians were playing one of Bird's tunes, and Maya was suddenly shot through with pain like a ringing bell, the pain of missing him. The people sang:

Free the heart, let it go,

What we reap is what we sow.

The chant rose to a roar, subsided to a single harmonic tone, and ended abruptly, as if sung by a single voice. Everyone touched the earth. Silence swelled to consume all the echoes and the overtones.

"May we never hunger!" the people cried again.

Offerings of fruit and grain and cooked foods were piled in the central

circle. A young child was blessing the food and drink, while others thanked the ancestors and spirits and the Four Sacred Things to end the formal part of the ritual. But the feasting would go on for a long time.

"Are you staying?" Sam asked Madrone, coming over to them. "I can walk Maya home." In his voice was a hopeful note.

Maya could feel the spark stretching like a thread between her and Sam. He was hoping for something, an invitation, a sign from her. She could feel his loneliness as she could feel her own. It was too much. She was too old, too tired, to take on the burden of it.

"I've got to get some sleep," Madrone said. "I was up all night."

"Good night, Sam," Maya said firmly, taking Madrone's arm. "It was good seeing you. *Que nunca tengas* and all that."

"Kay noonka," Sam said. "Get some rest, Madrone."

In the dark, spirits fluttered like memories, like birds. Fog lay on the city like the silver fingers of a gloved hand, as the moon lit their way down the hill.

DECLARATION OF THE FOUR SACRED THINGS



The earth is a living, conscious being. In company with cultures of many different times and places, we name these things as sacred: air, fire, water, and earth.

Whether we see them as the breath, energy, blood, and body of the Mother, or as the blessed gifts of a Creator, or as symbols of the interconnected systems that sustain life, we know that nothing can live without them.

To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends, that they themselves become the standards by which our acts, our economics, our laws, and our purposes must be judged. No one has the right to appropriate them or profit from them at the expense of others. Any government that fails to protect them forfeits its legitimacy.

All people, all living things, are part of the earth life, and so are sacred. No one of us stands higher or lower than any other. Only justice can assure balance: only ecological balance can sustain freedom. Only in freedom can that fifth sacred thing we call spirit flourish in its full diversity.

To honor the sacred is to create conditions in which nourishment, sustenance, habit, knowledge, freedom, and beauty can thrive. To honor the sacred is to make love possible.

To this we dedicate our curiosity, our will, our courage, our silences, and our voices. To this we dedicate our lives.