

Gemini Thunder

Chris
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GEMINI THUNDER

BOOK TWO OF
THE VENEFICAL PROGRESSIONS

By

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Manus haec inimica tyrannis
This hand is an enemy to tyrants

To James Richard Page,
Plus ultra filius

A Veneficus

A veneficus is a hybrid of sorcerer, magician, hermit, alchemist, oracle, wizard, and wax-pale ghost. Each one lives for exactly one hundred years. All are born on All Hallows Day (Halloween - 31st October). Venefici cast no shadow, leave no footprint, and have an individual aura.

They do not need sleep after childhood. They do not eat food or drink liquids after childhood. They can be born to any parents but are extremely rare. Venefici do not feel physical pain but are susceptible to emotions. They can be killed, but it takes a skilled and deadly opponent - or another veneficus to do it. They have been on this earth for at least ten thousand years. The Wessex venefici are buried under their named Destiny Stones at Avebury. Each one needs to be trained by another in the use of the enchantments. It usually takes twenty years, although Twilight only had seven years with Merlin. There is at least one in Wessex at all times. There is one there now. There may be more.

Introduction

The Romans left Britain in 410 AD. From that point on, the island was caught in a ferment of conflict as myriad local warlords vied with improbable monarchs and unlikely imperators to dominate and rule. Marauding tribes of Britons, Picts, Jutes, Saxons, Celts, Angles, and Gauls tore down the more civilized vestiges of the Roman occupation in frenzied attempts to eliminate each other and establish their own dynasties. Succeeding only in establishing a plethora of mini-kingdoms, the slaughter gathered pace. Thus the period known as the Dark Ages took shape against a background of reestablished paganism and brutal dominance.

Toward the end of the Dark Ages, an even more menacing invader appeared. Led ruthlessly by Guthrum, leader and king, they slaughtered anyone who got in their way to a level of malevolent barbarism beyond anything previously experienced during the Roman occupation and subsequent conflicts. Wholesale slaughter, rapine, pillage, and slave-taking had arrived on these shores in the horned helmets of the berserker tribes of the Northmen.

Better known as the Viking.

They had to be challenged, and the only way to do it successfully was through an equal brutality, equal savagery, but with the addition of the magic and iridescent truths of the holder of the Wessex enchantments. A veneficus.

Twilight, having now taken over from his beloved mentor, Merlin, whom he buried under his destiny stone at the sacred site of Avebury three years ago, is now the defender and veneficus of the Wessex Celts. Aply assisted by his loyal pica and the troubadour Desmond Kingdom Biwater and operating under the patronage of King Alfred, he uses all his powers to assist the young king in a desperate attempt to defend Wessex against the brutal invaders.

Desmond falls head over heels in love with the warrior maiden Gode.

The vaunted Viking savages don't do cunning of any sort. Full-on frontal berserker charging with lots of deity-based howling is their stock approach, and for the early battles it has worked.

Because they also have their own enchanted venefici in the shape of the male and female twins, Go-ian and Go-uan, their brand of sorcery puts Twilight's to the test.

As the death tolls mount on both sides, King Alfred loses the first two battles and hides in the marshlands of the Summerland Levels to regroup. Twilight and Desmond continue the fight with a band of mangy mercenaries called Jack Cat's Renegades.

Freyja, queen of the Viking venefica and mother of the twins, replaces them at Guthrum's side as the conflict intensifies.

There is sadness and joy as a final battle sees a victory at great cost to both sides.

Chapter 1

Born with a hatred fuelled by an undiluted will to slaughter human beings, the invaders of Wessex from the Norse lowlands never had any intention of taking prisoners. Besides this threat, the normal everyday ability to draw breath for a suitable length of time that could be said to constitute 'a life' in medieval Wessex had no rights or time span. It was a transitory function that depended upon the individual's prowess in avoiding slashing swords, piercing arrows, flung spears, and stealthy poisons. Being on the same side as a veneficus didn't help much either. Multiple deaths stalked the venefical gift, those who opposed it and those who supported it. It was, simply, the only way of creating some sort of civilization.

A blood-soaked progression toward the future.

The arrival of the new holder of the venefical gift of enchantments in the shape of the twenty-three-winters-old Twilight was a particular case in point, for it coincided with the ravaging and murderous invasion of Wessex by one of history's most vicious and brutal tribes.

The Viking.

Three years after placing the long magus under his Obelisk burial stone, Twilight faced his first big test as the Wessex veneficus. There had been a number of minor, localized trials of his newly acquired skills, including the ridding of perceived demons causing cattle deaths, the extermination of wraiths inhabiting a village elder, causing him to scream nonstop for a week whilst beating his terrified wife and children with a leather flail, and the halting of a witch stoning. The last one was different. The witch woman had undoubtedly deserved to be stoned after causing the sacrificial deaths of female twins born to a village girl who was simple, but who had also proclaimed to be a true veneficus and the descendant and rightful inheritor of Merlin's former position. It was in this capacity that she claimed the right to sacrifice the lives of the twin girls on the basis that they were an abomination of an evil spirit and must be rid of. Their simple, husbandless, and frightened mother handed the girls over, and the witch carried out her own sentence by taking them to the edge of the forest and leaving them to the wild animals. By the time sensible villagers found out and forced her to take them to the spot, all that was discovered was a blood-sodden patch of dry ferns and a pile of very small bones. As the villagers were preparing to stone her to death, the witch claimed that her heritage as Merlin's successor entitled her to a face-to-face battle of the enchantments against Twilight to prove her rightful position as the Wessex veneficus. The villagers, being true Celts with a fear and suspicion of anything that smacked of ghosts and spell-bindery, had let her go on the basis that a venefical confrontation with Twilight would decide her fate.

Or his.

A large crowd gathered to witness the supposed venefical confrontation. It began with the witch woman dancing in front of Twilight, spitting bile, gesticulating, and wailing her unintelligible spells. After some minutes of this and with the crowd beginning to get restless, Twilight smiled and waved his hand in a circular motion ... and the witch suddenly found herself hanging upside down in the air with her long

brown coarse linen peasant's dress hanging down over her face and her black matted hair hanging to the ground. Kneeling down beside the still spitting and now screaming woman, Twilight lifted the dress, tapped her gently on the head to silence her, parted the dirty, matted hair, and spoke directly into her mind.

You are responsible for the deaths of two innocent babies. You will do it again. As a father of two small children myself, I can only imagine the pain caused. I will not allow it. The next time you and I will meet will be in the sarcophagal mists.

The final moment of your wretched eternity has just arrived.

The manner of his delivery caused a momentary flash of fear to replace the hate on her upside-down face.

Then she was gone.

Forever.

Hardly believing their eyes, the assembled crowd dropped to their knees and hid their faces. When they finally looked up, Twilight had also disappeared.

As the newly installed Wessex veneficus, Twilight had officiated at three annual Equinoctial Festivals of the Dead on his own since Merlin's departure. Although he'd had to build himself up for each one of them, he'd come through successfully using the long magus's tried and tested rule of *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*— say nothing but good of the dead. Placate and listen, then placate and listen again ... and again.

The big test came with the sudden arrival outside his small compound of an exhausted bird and leader of his Wessex pica called Bell. Twilight had established his home by building a small, willow-fenced compound in a small copse on a hill overlooking the hamlet of Avebury and from where he could see every one of the circle of ninety-nine venefical destiny stones with the Silbury Mound in the background. Modelled on Merlin's old compound in the mighty Savernake Forest, the living quarters were also made of woven willow with a reed roof. Sitting with his five-year-old daughter, Eleanor, on his knee whilst his wife, Rawnie, fed their two-year-old son, Harlo, Twilight quickly handed over his daughter and went to meet the exhausted bird, which had landed on the ground by the compound gates.

Bell managed a weak rising of his right claw in the traditional salutation greeting to his liege-lord. Twilight put a tender hand on Bell's back and felt the wildly beating heart through the glossy black and white feathers. Instantly the heartbeats slowed and the brightness returned to the eyes.

After a brief conversation with his lead bird, Twilight returned to Rawnie.

'Trouble?' she said, gently placing both children down on the grass and shooing them away to play.

'Tot hostes, so many enemies. Four ships, probably Vikings, landed at Lyme Regis. They are razing the settlement to the ground and killing wantonly. I must go at once.'

He bent to kiss her upturned face.

'Fortuna prospera, veneficus, our love goes with you,' she said softly.

Every time Twilight did something to justify his position as Wessex veneficus, he found himself rehearsing alibis in his head in preparation for an explanation to his mentor, the long magus. It was as if the old astounder was still standing alongside him in judgment of his actions, which, in all things other than actual presence, he was. Most days when time allowed, usually late in the evening or very early in the morning

just as dawn broke, Twilight walked every one of the ninety-nine venefical stones. Now a fully grown and developed veneficus, he didn't require sleep or food and drink. He knew every stone and its occupant by name, every deed performed, and the details behind each one of the smaller tribute stones surrounding them. Placing his hands on each large stone, the bardic runes would echo down the ages as the clarion calls of the enchantment-driven heroics of the holder zinged through his fingertips. Nine thousand, nine hundred years of venefical deeds performed by the ninety-nine holders, each buried under their own named stone, each inviolate, different, special in any number of unusual ways and, as a result, completely irreplaceable. None more so than his own mentor Merlin, the last stone in the sequence. He always stayed with this stone, named Obelisk by Merlin, for a long time, his cheek pressed up hard against its sarsen coolness. It talked to him, every word and example of sorcery, snippet of wisdom, and magical experience of the seven short years that he had sat at the great man's feet. Not that he ever forgot anything. Like all the venefici in the Avebury stone circle, he had total recall of all words spoken to him and the events, places, and circumstance within which they took place. But it gave him added strength to touch the mighty Obelisk and run their seven years together through his mind, in particular the battles with the wolf woman, Elelendise. And to lay out his actions for the metaphorical pat on the head that his old teacher would bestow if he agreed with a course of action the new Wessex miracle-monger had decided upon for a particular problem.

When Twilight had first joined the long magus, he'd hated the killing and wars. Death, in all its many forms upset him, especially by his or Merlin's hand, and he found it hard to live with. He'd actually begged Merlin to refrain from killing Penda's soldiers when they were trapped in the whirlpool, but in the ongoing bloody battle with Elelendise, he gradually began to understand that getting rid of those who would kill wantonly or for the sake of power or religious conversion was a means of saving many others, perhaps even thousands of lives.

Or, as his now dead mentor would have said, raising his right hand:

'Manus haec inimical tyrannis, eh skirmisher.'

'This hand is an enemy to tyrants.'

But he was still uncomfortable taking a life, even when ridding this turning earth of sub-human, deranged killers such as the witch, who, if allowed to live, would undoubtedly continue to sacrifice innocent lives in the name of her illicit sorcery.

How many more lives would he have to take in the next year, let alone the next seventy-seven?

Thirty paces to the right of Merlin's Obelisk was the empty space that would hold his own huge sarsen stone in seventy-seven years' time when he reached the allotted time span of one hundred. To be named Blue Horn, after the noble pica Horn with the unusual blue feathered streaks in his wings who had been so callously killed by Lupa, the wolf woman's protector, it, too, already had many tribute stones around the spot. At this point Twilight always found himself fingering the necklace of forty Wessex pica beaks around his neck that his daughter Eleanor took such great delight in fondling.

'It's a dangerous business to make friends with the likes of us,' Twilight had said when he first saw the smaller stones and the long magus had explained their meaning.

How many more small tribute stones would be accompanying his mighty Blue

Horn stone when his successor finally put it in place?

Death had always stalked the venefical gift, and the reign of Twilight would be no different. The fact that he was still somewhat uncomfortable with the taking of lives also made no difference. Many would die; opposition was everywhere.

There simply was no other way. If the Celtic way of life was to be preserved, those who would threaten it had to die by the venefical hand.

The Viking raiding party had drawn four brightly coloured long ships, dragon prows first, onto the shallow sands at Lyme Regis and shipped the oars. There were fifty oars to each side, making four hundred of them. The prow of each vessel was carved into a colourful, warlike figure from their Nordic deity. A horn-helmeted guard stood watch high on a lookout platform at the front of each ship.

The settlement was no more. Where it had stood lay shouldering piles of ashes and a pile of blackened, seared bodies, most of them covered in sword slashes that had laid them open to the bone. The air reeked of charred death. Two hundred defenceless men, women, and children, and all of their animals, killed in a wanton slaughter. A small settlement of peaceful Wessex fishermen, land workers, and their families going about their innocent day.

Their last day.

A pennant fluttered in the sea breeze on the end of a long lance stuck into the ground, its swastika denoting the crooked cross symbol of Thor, the thunder god of the Viking. Propped up against the raiding party lances and swords stuck in the ground were the brightly coloured circular metal-framed wooden shields that each owned, the design denoting the family the holder belonged to. Alongside each shield lay at least one severed head of the slaughtered inhabitants of the settlement, each face etched in a grotesque, frozen study of terror as the final moment had come. After soaking them in oils, the plunderers would take these heads away with them and hang them on the walls of their individual houses as proof to their leaders and families that they had won a great victory.

Nearby, the rabid band of murderous berserkers danced and hollered a paean to the sky in thanks to their gods for a great victory, their ale-horns held high. All of them were heavily tattooed in blues and purples with warlike inked images of their Nordic deities fighting for recognition against the encrusted dirt: Hel, their goddess of the dead, Tyr, the god of war, the messenger Hermoder, Ymir, father of the giants, and Aegir, god of the ocean. These were obviously tattoos of choice, but the one everyone seemed to have most prominently and suitably fierce across the neck and face was Thor. He was obviously the leader of the Nordic deities, rather like Zeus was for the Greek Olympian immortals.

The iron spoils of their pillage formed a pitiful pile around which they postured. A few iron cooking pots and utensils, a plough, some small axes for chopping wood, and a length of coiled chain. Such was the fishing settlement's shared ironmongery, which showed also just how poor they had been. As the Viking war party danced and whooped, they tore at the pink flesh from captured goats and sheep roasting on spits. Whole bodies and limbs of the settlement dead sizzled and exploded as they were thrown onto the fires for fuel; captured clay pots of mead were poured down throats until empty, then smashed against the nearest rock. Other bodies were piled high to form a platform upon which was mounted their leader, a huge, red-haired individual

with a long beard and horned metal helmet. At his exhortation they screamed heavenward and waved their blood-soaked hands in the air. As his oratory increased its cadence, so did their frenzy, until they almost entered a trance of post-battle exaltation.

Except it had not been a battle but a wholesale slaughter of innocents. Twilight took all this in within moments from the top of a cliff. He did not need to find the warm resting place of an animal to see how events had unfolded, especially what they had done with the women before killing them. This was the human spirit at its nadir, a level of sub-species behaviour that shamed all breath-drawing *Homo sapiens* on this turning earth.

Twilight turned his attention to the beach.

Three thunderbolts blazed from his fingertips, and three of the four long ships were engulfed by deafening explosions. When the smoke cleared there was nothing left of them other than three huge craters of splintered wood, which were rapidly filling with the incoming tide. The explosions had blown the guard from his lookout platform on the fourth ship some way out to sea, where he now sank under the weight of his armor. Next Twilight turned to the myriad pile of brightly coloured shields, and in a puff of smoke they all disintegrated.

The celebrations on the hill came to an abrupt halt as the Vikings began to take in what was happening. The red-headed leader was the first to react. Jumping down from his platform of bodies, he let out a bloodcurdling scream and charged in the direction of the beach, closely followed by his men. With arms waving and battle cries streaming from their bearded lips, the weapon-less Viking hoard came to a sudden halt as two hundred long ship oars streamed, carved blade first, toward them like the lances of the Valkyrie. Uproar and confusion reigned as those at the front tried to turn as the oars sliced through them. Each oar found a lowlander target, severing heads, slicing through backs, breastplates, and stomachs. As the guts of two hundred of their comrades spilled into the Wessex earth, the remaining two hundred stopped and stared about them in numbed terror. Who or what was doing this? No enemy had appeared. What sort of man could throw oars like that? Had they angered a god? Did this place have a special deity looking after it?

A grim-faced Twilight muttered to himself.

‘The moment of your brutal destiny, invader, has just arrived.’

The red-headed leader was still alive. He struggled to his feet from under a dead comrade, looked for a long moment at the writhing bodies of his downed warriors impaled on their own oars, and called on those left to make for the remaining long ship. As the bedraggled, demoralized bunch arrived on the beach, they saw a man standing on the lookout platform of the remaining long ship.

It was not one of their guards.

Redhead held his hand up and they came to a halt, all eyes trained on the slim young figure on the platform.

Twilight addressed them in Latin.

‘You were celebrating the mindless slaughter of innocent folk who could not defend themselves. Your civilization may applaud you for that. We don’t. To us it is the height of cowardice. In return for the two hundred lives you have taken of my Wessex brethren, I have dispatched two hundred of your murdering rabble to Valhalla. If you or any of your lowland hordes come to this land again, I will take ten lives for

every one you take. You and one of your long ships have been spared in order to take this message back to your leaders.'

After a short pause the red-headed one shouted up at him hoarsely in understandable Latin, which, for such a barbarian, was a surprise to the young astounder. He alone of the remaining Viking seemed unafraid.

'Are you a god?'

'No,' replied Twilight.

'A veneficus then?'

'Yes.' He didn't know why he was again surprised that such savages would know of venefici, but he was. Then the answer came.

'We have such people as well.'

'Good, then ensure that they get my message. They will understand.'

'I wouldn't be so sure of that. They might even be worse than us,' growled Redhead.

'In which case we are all in for some turbulent times. Now leave this place on the next tide before I change my mind and use the remaining two hundred oars for something other than rowing.'

Crouching behind the flimsy wattle and daub walls of their hovels, the inhabitants of the settlement of Kennet were wondering if this was to be their last day on this green, pagan-driven Wessex earth. Clutching pitchforks, axes, stones, and anything else that would double as a weapon, they peered fearfully around the openings of their meagre hovels whilst trying to hush crying babies, still frightened children, and silence barking dogs.

Noise and movement did not seem a good idea at that moment.

The sight that they had awoken to that morning and the reason for their dread sat unconcernedly on the circular wall of the well in the centre of the settlement, gnawing contently on muddy turnips from the pile left there the previous night for washing.

Two very large brown bears.

Preoccupied with the turnips, the bears were oblivious to the fear their presence was causing. Picking up a wooden pail from the well wall, one of them dipped its great head inside and washed down the turnip with a draught of cool, clear well water. Mouth dripping, it suddenly looked up, dropped the pail, and stood high on its back legs and pawed the air. Instantly joined by its companion, the bear stared back up the track toward the settlement entrance. Ducking their heads back behind the walls of their hovels and muttering a prayer to their favourite pagan image, the villagers braced themselves for the blood and carnage of an imminent bear attack.

'Combi, Nation, there you are. I've been looking for you everywhere.'

A young man of no more than seventeen with long flaxen hair twisted into two long braids strolled up to the bears, addressing them in a clear voice. The inhabitants, eyes popping in a mixture of fear and disbelief, watched as the great brown animals and young man engaged in a sort of mutual hug of joy in being together again. Dropping down to all fours, the bears then dutifully fell into place, one either side of the young man, and in a flurry of tickled ears and muzzled hands the three of them began to playfully make their way out of the village.

As if suddenly remembering something, the young man stopped before the edge of the settlement and turned to the relieved but curious inhabitants beginning to

emerge from the hovels behind him.

‘I am very sorry if these two caused you concern, but as you can see they are very tame and would not harm anyone,’ he shouted. ‘I have a small, travelling spectaculum, an entertainment show. We are camped in a clearing in the Savernake.’ He waved his arm at the mighty forest behind him. ‘We would appreciate the opportunity of entertaining you tonight to make up for the scare you have had and the turnips these two have eaten. We will return at sunset.’

With a cheery wave he turned, and the three of them walked into the forest. As they disappeared from view, a pair of pied poly demons, the name locals gave to the black and white plumaged pica, left their high perch in an overlooking beech tree and flew off toward the west in their curious dipping flight to report something interesting to their liege-lord and master.

Later that day as the sun began to dip its orange orb beneath the gray-and pink-streaked rolling Wessex horizon, the young man returned on a battered old cart. The cart, patched and mended such that it was a wonder it stayed in one piece, was pulled slowly by an old piebald horse with a multicoloured blanket draped over its flanks. The blanket wasn’t the only brightly coloured object on the horse, because sitting on top of its head, between the long pointed ears and facing haughtily backward, sat a red-crested green and gray parrot. Tagging along dutifully behind, sniffing the ground and playfully slapping each other, followed the two bears.

For the second time that day, the inhabitants grabbed their children and shrank back into their hovels.

Stopping the cart alongside the well in the centre of the settlement where the bears had sat earlier, the young man jumped to the ground, unhooked the shafts from the horse, and engaged in a friendly wrestle with both of the bears. Treating him with a gentleness that belied their great strength and bulk, the bears rolled around playfully with him in between them. Then the young man took four sharpened posts from the cart, each with tallow-soaked rags bound around the top. Banging them solidly into the ground in a semicircle around the cart, he took a flint box and sparked each of them alight. Next he hauled a large, solid-looking chest down from the cart and placed it on the ground between the blazing posts. Opening the chest he removed a battered old Roman marching drum and two hand-carved drumsticks, a long, thin wooden whistle, and a lyre wrapped in cloth. Smiling and talking softly to the two bears, who had resumed their original seat on the circular well wall, he picked up the sticks and gave a long staccato roll on the drum. At the sound of the roll, the horse with the parrot on its head and the bears presented themselves each side of the young man behind the blazing lights. As evening began to fall over the settlement, this curious, ragged little travelling spectaculum prepared to entertain the inhabitants of an area of sixth-century Briton famed for its Celtic influences, cowering sarcophagal mists, and enchantment-driven sorcery.

It also started all the settlement dogs barking again.

‘Citizens of Kennet, we bid you a very good evening,’ the young man shouted over the howling din, ‘and ask you to come and enjoy our little show.’

Another long drum roll.

‘Please do not be afraid. You will come to no harm.’

Another roll.

Curious but hesitant, some of the villagers began to emerge from their hovels and edge toward the blazing makeshift stage occupied by the young man and his animals. Further drum rolls and a short tune on the wooden whistle brought more of them out. Soon there was a crowd standing just outside the arc of light thrown by the blazing tallow posts. The dogs had been quieted, and children clung to their parents' hands and peered wide-eyed around their legs at the two bears. Putting down the drumsticks, the flaxen-haired, pigtailed young man picked up the lyre and strummed a few notes.

'I would like to introduce my little band,' he said. Pointing to the old piebald horse, he plucked a quick rising scale ending on a full chord.

'This is Sir Valiant, a faithful piebald horse and friend, but, as you will soon see, he is no ordinary horse, are you, old fellow.' Another chord and the old horse slowly dropped one forelock to the ground. As he bobbed his head in a bow, the parrot perched on his head, still facing backward away from the crowd, fluttered its wings to maintain balance.

'And, as you have no doubt noticed, perched on Sir Valiant's head and all the way from those mystic lands of the East, we have the most noble of parrots ...'

Three loud, strident chords.

'Lord Scroop!'

The parrot slowly turned around to face the crowd, bobbed its red-crested head three times, and then addressed them in a high-pitched cackle.

'Lord Scroop, King of Britain, at your service.'

There were one or two grins at the front of the crowd.

'Who did you say you are?' the young man shouted with one hand to his ear.

The parrot added more sound to the high-pitched cackle.

'Lord Scroop, King of Britain, at your service!'

This time grins broke out all over.

'Now then, have I missed anyone out?' The young man looked out at the crowd with a puzzled expression.

'The bears. You've missed out the bears,' came a chorus of voices, many of them from the children. A horse and parrot were all very well, but bears were altogether different.

'Ah yes, the bears. Now let me see. Do you think big brown bears should have names?'

'Yes, yes,' squealed the children.

'I know what their names are,' said a small boy at the front in a loud voice. 'I heard you call them when they were eating the turnips at the well this morning. I was hiding in that tree over there.' He pointed to a large old oak on the side of the clearing. 'That one,' he continued, pointing at Combi, 'is called Combi. And the other one is called Nation.'

'Well done! A combination of bears, eh. Here's an apple for being a brave and clever boy.'

He rolled his empty hands and produced a large, rosy red apple from the boy's ear and handed it to him.

The villagers began to clap their hands.

As the orange evening sun sank over the Silbury Mound, Twilight walked slowly along the venefical stones, thinking about Rawnie's words earlier that day.

‘The venefical duties placed upon you are onerous, especially as you only had seven years in which to learn,’ she’d said in that practical, no-nonsense tone she used when sure of her facts. ‘You need a companion. A Celtic soul friend who can share the burden with you in much the same way as you did with the long magus. Not the next in line—you’re many tens of years away from even beginning to search for a replacement to train, but a companion you can discuss matters venefical with, decisions, strategy, another viewpoint. I can’t do it; I am your wife and mother of your children and devoted to that duty. Besides, being the daughter of a king, I am not equipped to offer advice on such important matters. I was, until a certain young spellbinder spirited me away and stole my heart, surrounded by others who made every important decision for me.’

As the sun finally set and the Wessex darkness took hold, a wolf high on one of the rolling Wessex hills put back its head and howled a greeting to nightfall. It was answered by a similar cry from the other side of the ridgeway. The Wessex wolf population had begun to increase again following the slaughter of their numbers by the terminus of Elelendise, their liege-lord, and the battles with Merlin and Twilight. Old Pen, still alive but nearing the end of his days, remained their leader. He had put pride back into their loping stride and a sense of purpose in their hunting packs. There was no more whining and belly-crawling to flawed liege-lords in the Wessex wolfs’ makeup. In the ten years since Elelendise and Lupa, he had also kept a careful eye out for any pure white cubs and had them culled at birth just in case the savagery of the previous strain surfaced again.

Warming his hands over a glowing campfire, the flaxen-haired young man with pigtails looked around the small Savernake clearing at his loyal troop. Both Combi and Nation snoozed contently, their thick brown fur rising and falling in unison, whilst Sir Valiant munched noisily on a pile of grass. Lord Scroop had abandoned his usual position between Sir Valiant’s ears for an overhanging branch as he kept sliding to the floor every time the old horse bent to the ground.

Then Twilight spoke softly in his ear.

‘Do not be alarmed. I join you and your fine animals as a friend.’

Sitting down beside him, he smiled at the look of astonishment on the young man’s face, who then quickly shot a worried look at the two slumbering bears.

‘Don’t worry, they are resting and won’t disturb us,’ said the young astounder.

‘H-how do you know they won’t,’ said the flaxen-haired young troubadour, beginning to regain his composure. ‘They will fiercely protect me against intruders. Why, Combi there bit four fingers from the hand of a thief just a few days ago, and Nation chased away a bull cow that was threatening to charge us.’

‘Because they don’t know I am here.’ Twilight smiled.

‘Don’t know ...’ The young man broke off as he realized that it was true. The old horse carried on, munching away noisily at the grass without so much as raising his head, whilst Scroopy continued to preen himself on the branch as if all was as before Twilight’s arrival. The bears, if anything, were beginning to snore in an even deeper sleep.

The young man looked reflectively at Twilight.

‘Then you, sir, must be a very special person,’ he said, slowly beginning to relax.

‘My name is Twilight. What are you called?’

‘Today I am Hero the Famous of Londonium.’

‘Today?’ said Twilight.

‘Oh yes. I have different names for different days. Yesterday I was Claudius the Emperor of Rome, the day before Ignatius the Great of Athens. The day before that Merlin the Mysterious of Wessex, and before that King Arthur of the Round Table. There are many others, depends what takes my fancy.’

‘Merlin the Magician of Wessex. Of course. And what will you be tomorrow, I wonder?’ said the clearly amused veneficus.

‘Who knows.’ The young man smiled. ‘They are my stage names, part of the little spectaculum my loyal troupe and I put on. Some of them are made up, some not. I just pick them up as I go.’

‘Do you have a given name?’

‘Not that I know of,’ said the lad. ‘I was a foundling. An expositicia. Born to a mother who did not want or could not care for me. Left on the steps of the public spa in Cirencester when no more than two days old. Most people referred to me as Granny Biwater’s foundling because she was the old lady who took me in. The dear old soul died when I was twelve years old, and I had to leave. That’s when I took to travelling.’

‘Cirencester, eh? A Roman town. How many winters do you have?’

‘Sixteen now,’ came the clear reply. ‘I learned some Latin from some of the many Roman inscriptions carved in the stone around the town. It’s a beautiful language.’ He paused. ‘I’m always trying to learn new things.’

‘Scientia est potentia, knowledge is power, my young troubadour. Never stop learning.’

‘Twilight is an unusual name. Did you think of it yourself?’

‘No, it was given to me by a very persuasive old man,’ the spellbinder said with a chuckle. ‘Someone whose name you use in your spectaculum.’

‘What, Merlin the Magician?’ The young man’s eyes opened wide in wonder. ‘He was a veneficus, the best in the whole world ... Then you must be ...’

‘Indeed so, only he was best known in these parts as the long magus,’ Twilight interrupted.

The young man studied the young veneficus for a long moment.

‘So that’s why my animals don’t know you’re here. I heard that Merlin had passed on—you must be his replacement. You must be the new Wessex veneficus. You are a proper wizard!’

Twilight nodded.

‘Imagine that,’ said the young man almost to himself. ‘I’ve had a visit from the Wessex veneficus himself.’ He shook his head in amazement before continuing. ‘To tell the truth, I’ve always fancied being called Desmond Kingdom Biwater. I made it up— took Desmond from a man called that in Salisbury, a big man and a blacksmith but a braggart and a bully. Tried to rob me having put a fresh shoe on Sir Valiant here. Didn’t realize the two bears were in the cart. He was rummaging around our few belongings when my back was turned when Combi bit him. Took four fingers off his right hand as clean as you like. Very powerful, the jaws of a fully grown bear. I wasn’t lying when I said Combi had removed a man’s four fingers, only about the date. It must have been at least a hundred days ago. You could hear his screams the other side of the valley. I don’t suppose he’s doing much blacksmithin’ now, eh?’

‘And how did you come by the bears?’

‘I joined a small travelling show. It was a bit bigger than mine here but not much. That’s where I learned magic tricks and how to entertain. I’ve always been able to play music on any instrument made. Two years I was there travelling all around. It was owned by a humpbacked Jute from Kent called Felix and his wife, Nelly, but they gradually fell to drinking the mead, and the animals began to suffer. He kept those two bears in heavy chains all the time and didn’t feed them. They got very thin and mangy and were close to dying of starvation. Then he started to beat me, and I decided it was time to go. So one dark night I left and took the bears and horse with me. Scoopy came later. Just turned up. I awoke one morning, and there he was perched on Sir Valiant’s head facing backwards. The silly old bird’s been there ever since, although I have managed to teach him to speak a few words.’

‘Well, Desmond Kingdom Biwater,’ declared Twilight solemnly, ‘you certainly have a way with animals.’

‘Thank you. Tomorrow I can be the King of the Avebury Rings in honour of this region.’ He waved his hands around to encompass the surrounding area. ‘This is a most magical and fascinating place, the like of which I have never come across before in all my travels around the West Country.’

‘Tomorrow, my friend, I will personally show you around the mighty stones of Avebury and tell you the story of each one of them, including the resting place of the mighty Merlin himself. As for magic, well, let’s just say that some people can produce a little more than an apple from a boy’s ear, eh?’

The following day they met by the stone circle, and, leaving the small cart, Sir Valiant, and Lord Scroop under the watchful eye of the two bears in the nearby Savernake, Twilight walked the agog Desmond around the mighty sarsens, giving a brief outline of each venefical inhabitant. When they finally came to Merlin’s great Obelisk they sat down.

‘And yours will be the next one?’ asked Desmond.

‘Yes, just there,’ replied Twilight, pointing to the spot.

‘I counted ninety-nine stones. You are the one hundredth Wessex veneficus?’

‘Yes, a tradition stretching back ten thousand years with my death in seventy-seven years’ time. I will repeat to you the words my teacher said to me when he first brought me to this place.’

Twilight tapped the great Obelisk stone at his back, and his dark eyes flashed a tall image of the long magus in all his silver-haired glory.

‘He said, ‘We stand now among the epic echoes of thousands of years of human folly and imagery and their mighty attempts to cease its restless quest for death; we stand among the frailty of sorcery in the face of the vitality of warfare; we stand among the bones of the few who have given their all to halt the spread of evil; we stand among those who understood, enchanted, transformed, moved, reshaped, and changed ... yet seemingly made no difference.’”

Desmond Kingdom Biwater was silent for a while as he absorbed this.

‘I want to be a veneficus like you. I will make a difference,’ said the flaxen-haired entertainer finally.

‘It cannot be so,’ replied Twilight.

‘Why not?’ There were instant tears in his eyes.

‘Because you do not have an aura.’

‘I’ll get one from somewhere, anywhere ... what is it?’

‘An aura cannot be ‘got.’ True venefici are born with it. A potential veneficus has to have a signature aura in order to understand the enchantments and be able to manipulate phenomena. That is how we identify each other and the next one chosen—the tyro veneficus or novice wizard—for training to be the next in line. It is an underlying power pulse with a unique signature to each holder. This signature, in a lesser form, extends to the animals in ligamen to each veneficus—in my case the pica—and also to any images that the astounder places. My pica can detect any images I have placed because my unique aura will surround the image. They can also detect the auras of others. If it’s any consolation to you, my own children do not have it and neither, as far as I can tell, does anyone else in Wessex.’

The boy looked glum.

‘So there is absolutely no way that I can become a tyro wizard.’

‘No ... but there is something else that may interest you, something not far removed from the full role.’

‘What is it,’ said the lad eagerly, his face brightening up instantly.

‘My wife, Rawnie, a high-born girl with a sharp perception, told me recently that I need a companion. Someone to share the considerable burden of venefical decisions with. Someone with judgment, a good worldly understanding of people and the issues that matter to them, someone with an affinity with animals who ...’

‘It’s meee ... I want it, say I can be that person, say it, Mr. Twilight, oh please say it ...?’

He looked at Twilight with his blue eyes shining.

‘It could be you ...’

‘Yesssss. Yes, yes, YES.’

Desmond leapt to his feet and went on a merry dance around Merlin’s Obelisk stone, flinging his hands in the air.

Twilight, chuckling at his antics, continued.

‘Just a moment. There are some things you need to know that may change your mind. Your life will be in constant danger. You will come into contact with the most virulent, violent, bloodthirsty, obsessed, and, as I found out only a few days ago, rabid killers of innocent people on this turning earth. And you will not be popular with common folk. They will always view me, and by association, you, with suspicion.’

‘You sound as if you don’t want me to be your companion.’

‘It is important that you understand what you are getting into. This veneficus business is more than just playing with magic. I am, among other things, the venefical protector of the Wessex Celts and that means engaging with anyone who would seek to damage them or this region.’

‘Who did you engage with a few days ago that were rabid killers of innocent people?’

‘A raiding party of Viking came from the sea and killed two hundred villagers in Lyme Regis.’

Desmond’s eyes opened wide in disbelief.

‘Two hundred in Lyme Regis! My little troupe and I have entertained there.’

‘Well, now they are all dead, and the settlement has been burned to the ground,’

said Twilight gravely.

Desmond Kingdom Biwater went very quiet for a while as he digested this news.

‘Will my animals be able to stay with me?’ he asked eventually.

‘Of course,’ replied Twilight. ‘Unless I transform them elsewhere because of danger, but remember this, they are just as vulnerable as you to those who would oppose us. However, along with my pica and others, humans and animals, who would attach themselves to our cause, they will be a part of our merry little band. A bit like your spectaculum but without the entertainment.’

‘Death does not frighten me, nor them. As a small travelling group we live with its threat every day and can look after ourselves when the going gets tough. I know I speak for them. We would all like to be your companions ... please.’

Twilight’s dark eyes flashed.

‘So be it,’ he said softly.

‘I have placed pica sentinels along the coast of Wessex,’ Twilight said to Rawnie and Desmond as they sat on the long bench in the compound. ‘To keep a lookout for other Viking raiding parties.’

‘D’you think they will come again?’ asked his wife.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It’s a question of when and how many.’

They all reflected on that whilst watching Eleanor and Harlo rolling around on the ground with the two bears, who treated the two children as gently as if they were dandelion puff-balls that mustn’t have one spore damaged. Since their arrival, the children had played incessantly with the bears.

‘I do believe that those bears have put on weight in the three weeks we have been here,’ mused Desmond.

‘Nation certainly has,’ said Rawnie with a wink at Twilight.

‘Must be all that lovely food you have been giving us.’

‘Could be, or could be something else, eh, Mister Veneficus?’ Rawnie chuckled.

‘What do you mean?’ Desmond eyed Twilight with a perplexed look.

‘Nation, the female one, is going to do what only females can do.’ The astounder smiled.

Desmond Kingdom Biwater was not a young man who ran very deep; his face registered a number of emotions as he thought that through before suddenly opening up with an ear-to-ear beam.

‘Nation is going to have a baby?’ he exclaimed.

‘She is.’

‘And you knew all the time?’

‘From the moment I first saw you all performing at the settlement of Kennet from my vantage point in the trees.’

‘How can you tell such a thing? I can’t tell even now, and these bears are as close to my heart as anything ever will be.’

Rawnie answered for her husband.

‘A veneficus has amazing and sometimes perplexing powers. One of them is the ability to look inside the body—and the mind—of humans and animals. Believe you me, as a mother of two children, I have been on the receiving end of this internal body searching any number of times during my pregnancies. In both cases he knew before I did!’