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A Fool Such As I



A TAROT MYSTERY

Luke Hauser

Includes a 20-page Intuitive Tarot Handbook

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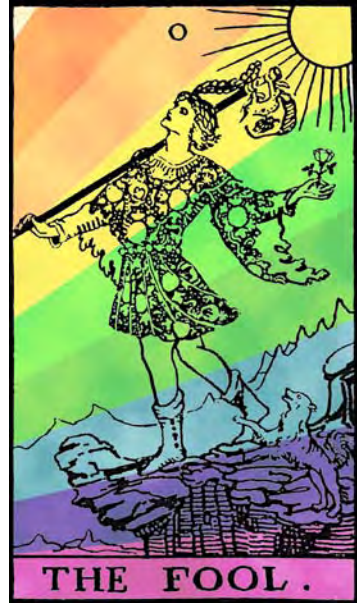
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Suggested Talking Points

- It's funny!
- It's about Tarot & magic & pagany stuff!
- Aleister Crowley makes a special guest appearance!
- All of your friends will be reading it soon – beat the rush!



Intuitive Tarot Handbook – begins page 275

- Introduction
- Workings & Games
- Tarot Jargon
- Reversals & Shadows
- Intuitive Reading
- Journey of the Spirit

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A TAROT MYSTERY

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GROUNDWORK

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Author's Notice

This is a work of parajournalism – a direct, impressionistic encounter with reality, or at least a reasonable simulacrum. The author makes no great claim to originality, and in fact might have inadvertently purloined the best parts of the book.

No character in this book is based on any person, living or dead, except those historical personalities cited in the Appendix. In particular, no character in this book portrays, depicts, satirizes, or pokes fun at anyone personally known to the author or active in contemporary Pagan circles.

Numerous details and sketches for this book appeared originally in the *Revolutionary Pagan Workers' Vanguard*, a satire page in *Reclaiming Quarterly* magazine circa 1997-2011. See page 297. Back issues at ReclaimingQuarterly.org/web/rpww

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To ancestors of all epochs, ages, races, cultures, genders, orientations, affiliations, and especially to custodians of every type – thank you.

To my descendants – apologies, and best of luck!

Other Books by Luke Hauser

Para-Fiction

Direct Action: An Historical Novel

Therefore I Am: A Philosophical Murder Mystery

The Hardy Girls Mysteries

The Mystery of Rafferty's Farm

The Mystery of the Derailed Train

The Mystery of the Sunken Sloop (TBA)

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Luke Hauser (aka George Franklin) lives in a Berkeley garage with two computers, three guitars, and his imaginary cat Picatrix. He practices in the Reclaiming Tradition of magical activism and writes copious emails about rituals, classes, and witchcamps for the Reclaiming network.

*Though the way be bleak and narrow
Cleave to the path hewn by the Tarot*

*Paracelsus taught his parrot
How to read the cards of Tarot*

*'Twas at the court of Fontainbleu
That Frenchmen deigned to play Tarot*

*In a dungeon dark and smoky
Alchemists studied the Tarocchi*

*Magi gave up playing hockey
When they learned to play Tarocchi*

*Schiller thought it was a joke
When Goethe spoke of the Tarock*

*Yet it was a greater shock,
When Nietzsche learned to read Tarock*

*All of these pronunciations
Rose in certain situations
None of this did yet I know
When first I learned to say: "Tarot"*

DRAMATIS SITUATIONIS

Date: A few years in the future, or perhaps the past.

Site: The 1300 block of Oracle Street in Key City, a mid-sized town somewhere in the continental U.S.

Characters: The characters and ideas in this book, while inspired by historical figures, are *not* biographical. Just because a character snorts lavender extract doesn't mean the ancestor was an herbal junkie.

Fact & Fiction: See Appendix C

Tarot Jargon: See Appendix D

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Prologue: The Fool

No mere fool, I.

Indeed, given my grand ambitions upon returning to Key City, one might take me for another order of fool altogether.

Days before, I resumed my old janitorial job at Arcane Wisdom Magicke Shoppe, intent on completing Volumes Two and Three of my magnum opus, *Magical Materialism: A Socio-Hermeneutico-Cultural Critique*, while saving money for a trip to Rome.

How I dreamed of visiting Rome – epicenter of the brave new Pagan

world of the Great Return and home to today's most powerful Earth-based tendencies and formations.

These fine plans were about to go up in smoke when magical entrepreneur and Tarot virtuoso Arthur A. Arthur died within days of my return, and the tranquility of life on Oracle Street was shattered – perhaps forever.

Soon I would find myself embroiled in Arthur's mysterious death and the disappearance of the irreplaceable master paintings for his historic creation, the Trismegistus Meister Tarot.

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My entanglement in Arthur's death was the fault of my mentor himself, who had drawn my ire several years earlier when he rejected my offer to allow him to co-publish the 2,748-page initial volume of my ground-breaking magnum opus.

Now, with the tabloids snooping for dirt in the wake of my preceptor's tragic demise, I would have to take care not to mention that I had contemplated murdering Arthur for his theoretical shortcomings.

What do you take me for, a complete fool?

Before you answer that, perhaps I should introduce myself.

My given name is Jeff Harrison, which is about as unmagical as it gets.

My initiatory name, on the other hand, is so grandiose that I feel embarrassed using it publicly.

The nom de guerre – Lugh BroomSweeper – was awarded upon induction into the Right Ancient and Anachronistic Siblinghood of the Bristling Broom, in recognition of completion of my undergraduate degree in the Sacred Janitorial Sciences.

Could the name have been more appropriate?

* * *

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The story is told that Lugh, weary from much jacking of various and sundry trades, approached the abode of the Celtic gods and goddesses and deities of various other genders and persuasions.

He rapped on the door, and the immortals answered thus: "What skill dost thou possess that wouldst warrant accepting thee into our midst?"

"Well," Lugh respectfully replied, "I know some plumbing."

"Negatory," came the word. "We already havest a god of plumbing."

"How about tile work? I've got my own tools."

"Tiles? We havest someone. Anything else?"

Lugh pondered long and hard. "I know how to repair toaster ovens, the kind you always have to throw away because one little knob breaks."

"Impressive," came the answer. "But we havest a toaster goddess."

The ancient ones of the Celtic world were about to slam the door in Lugh's face.

But Morrígu, the shape-shifting, fortune-telling triple goddess of Irish legend, interjected: "Wait! Yes, we havest a plumber, a tile-worker, and even a toaster-oven repair deity. But havest we anyone with *all* those skills?"

The divine ones turned it over a few times and realized that Morrígu was right.

The gates were thrown open, and with much pageantry Lugh Samildánach ("skilled at many arts") was invited into the abode of the gods and goddesses.

"We welcome and grant you equal status with each and every deity in the Celtic pantheon, with all rites and privileges thereunto," declared Cernunnos, Lord of the Hunt and host of the gala reception

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for Lugh. "Oh, and by the way – there's a light out in the front lobby. Could you check on that?"

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Little wonder that a sacred custodial initiate such as I would find a kindred spirit in the legendary Lugh.

Legends aside, initiations apparently counted for naught these days. After all, no one was initiated into more secret societies than Arthur A. Arthur.

Yet, shortly, he would be found stone dead, with the master paintings for his legacy-crowning Trismegistus Meister deck missing in action.

And unless I could unravel the secrets of Arthur's final, cryptic Tarot reading, I faced the ordeal of the hot iron or dunking chair.

But I get ahead of my story....



Chapter I: Magician

Arthur barreled through the front door with a crisp wave. "Any word from Persephone?"

"I haven't heard anything." I was finishing up my third day of work since my return to Key City, mopping the main room at Arcane Wisdom Magicke Shoppe after a hard day of divination and metaphysical commerce.

My employer and former magical mentor, Arthur A. Arthur (everyone knew him as Arthur, although I was never clear whether we were calling him by his first or last name), shook his head sharply.

"I wish she'd be on time for once!"

Arthur – medium build, greying hair and thick moustache – was meeting

artist Persephone Coalschmidt to put their long-awaited new Tarot deck through its final divinatory tests and simulated spreads before sending the cards off to the printer.

"It's just past eight." I pointed to the old clock behind the counter.

"She said she'd be here 'by' eight," Arthur said as he checked the day's receipts. "Not 'around' eight."

I let it go. Although I was still upset over his inability to grasp my cutting-edge formulation of materialist magic – a failure that led directly to my departure from Key City several years previously – even I had to acknowledge Arthur A. Arthur as a living legend.

Arthur was Key City's founding esoteric entrepreneur. Arcane Wisdom, where on my return a few days earlier I had resumed my job as assistant maintenance associate, had incubated the revitalization of Paganism locally and globally for over two decades.

The store – twenty feet across and sparkling with fairy lights – overflowed with books, music, jewelry, vestments, and most of all divination tools and decks.

During the day, readers of all sorts offered their services at side booths, while evenings were booked for rituals, workshops, and Tarocchi slams.

Long a popular local venue, Arcane Wisdom had become since the advent of the Great Return a major Neo-Pagan pilgrimage shrine, and Arthur himself something of an icon – particularly to those who didn't have to clean up after him.

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Arthur was about to seal his legacy by publishing the Trismegistus Meister Tarot, which wove the threads of Western magical traditions – alchemy, astrology, Hermeticism, astral magic, Cabalistic studies, illusionism, and more – into a seamless tapestry that, according to advance publicity, would unfetter intuition and lay bare one's deepest secrets.

"Anything I can do to help?" I asked, although I had only the faintest notion of the tests and procedures he planned to perform on the new deck.

I was no expert on Tarot. Far from it. It didn't actually make sense to me that looking at pictures could tell you anything about your life.

But I tried to keep an open mind. Even a novice such as I could grasp the role that Tarot had played in the 20th century revival of popular occultism. No practice had proven more supple and versatile in addressing the ever-

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evolving demands of contemporary esotericism – particularly since Paganism had re-emerged as the dominant Western religion.

Arthur looked pleased by my offer to help. “Why, yes – would you set up a card table over there?”

I pushed the bucket and mop into the maintenance closet and got out our best table, proud to be of service to Arthur in the final stages of his long-labored creation.

* * *

Given my anguish at his rejection of my magnum opus, it was ironically comforting to discover on returning to Key City that my old job at the store was temporarily available.

The anchor janitor at Arcane Wisdom, a spike-haired trans woman named Johanna against whom I’d competed in interscholastic janitorial tournaments, was going on sabbatical to newly-Paganized Rome, fountainhead of the Great Return.

I envied Johanna getting to visit the Eternal City and experience the rapidly-evolving transition from moribund Christianity to a vibrant explosion of Neo-Pagan spirituality, ritual, craft, and commerce.

But after three years of wandering I was glad to be back in my adoptive hometown.

When I learned that Arcane Wisdom needed a substitute janitor I came in through the back door, grabbed a broom, and set about making myself invaluable on Oracle Street.

* * *

The front door swung open. Persephone Coalschmidt – tall and lithe, wavy brown hair tumbling over her shoulders – nodded in my direction, then greeted Arthur with a quick hug.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, not sounding especially sorry. “You should have started without me.”

“No, no,” Arthur said impatiently. “We both need to be here.”

Persephone strode over to a cabinet behind the counter, took out a wooden box, and gingerly removed a stack of card-sized paintings – the original artwork for the new deck.

The Trismegistus Meister Tarot, a compendium of Western metaphysics woven into 78 miniature masterpieces by Persephone, aimed to transfigure

the divinatory process via the richness of its images and resonances.

First, though, the co-creators had to quit bickering long enough to run the final battery of tests and simulations on the master cards.

"Let's focus on the Majors," Persephone said. "If they're okay, the Minors should be fine."

"No," Arthur shot back. "I want to know for sure that the Minors are ready."

Persephone glared at him. "Why wouldn't they be ready?"

"I'm not saying they aren't," Arthur answered without meeting her eyes. "I'd just like to run all the tests."

"Well, I'd prefer to begin with the Majors," Persephone said coolly.

Arthur gave a loud sigh. "Okay," he said. "But we're not leaving until we've done a complete verification."

"Fine," Persephone muttered. "Let's get going."

Although I was excited to be present for the final trial readings, I was feeling a bit like the proverbial third oar on the old rowboat. Did the two of them prefer to argue in private?

Did they want to be alone to conduct some sort of arcane Tarot ritual? Or were they waiting until I left to kiss and make up?

Since they began their cooperative venture several years earlier, Arthur and Persephone had been indissolubly linked in the public eye. Paparazzi seized opportunities to photograph the two together, and the tabloids loved to hint at secret ceremonies and initiations.

Both insisted that it was purely a working relationship, but in spite of their age difference people couldn't help wondering whether it was one of those Beltane/Yule affairs.

Whatever tangled web they wove, theirs was an historic partnership. The Trismegistus Meister deck might well redefine the occult arts.

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Never before had Tarot carried such a variegated range of images, from Assyrian cuneiform to Egyptian hieroglyphics to Graeco-Roman physiques to Medieval grotesqueries to Baroque architectonics to Romantic fantasias.

Each painting was crowded with archetypes, correspondences, symbols, and sigils, as well as countless allusions to Arthur's compendious learning.

Yet on every card the deluge somehow fused into a seamless whole, an

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integrated vision that bespoke a deeper well of inspiration that Arthur had tapped – an insight into the unity of the entire Western esoteric tradition.

Was the inspiration really Arthur's? He was no artist, as attested by the crude stick-figures on Arcane Wisdom's restroom door indicating that humans of all genders were to sit while using the toilet.

No, the paintings – small-scale miracles crafted to the precise size of the cards – came from the hand of Persephone Coalschmidt, a rising young artist who had first shown her skills by illustrating posters for the sorority rush parties preceding the local Eleusinian Mysteries.

Arthur, about to create the deck that all the occult world awaited, eschewed the services of more experienced artists and persuaded Persephone – by means that neither had revealed – to illustrate his new deck.

Her gifts were undeniable, as evidenced by early sketches for the Major Arcana that I'd seen before I left on my travels.

But it was particularly her illustrations for the Minors that shone. No previous artist had brought the cards to life in such a rich and convincing manner, vibrating like archetypal aspects of the collective unconscious and awakening the querent's deepest intuition.

In fact, you had to be careful what you asked, or you might find out more about yourself than you bargained for. One of Persephone's friends did a reading about what to get her mother for her birthday and wound up needing emergency psychotherapy.

* * *

As I busied myself dusting the bookcases, the two of them ran what I gathered were standard divinatory tests: the Avicennian Sequences, the Lullian Artifice, the Asimov Rotation, the Rorschach Resonances. With a little tweaking, all produced flawless results for the Major Arcana.

Turning to the Minor Arcana, the pair put the deck through the most rigorous trials. Persephone drew a Pentacle flush to take the pot in Seven Card Stud. Arthur racked up over 120 points in one round of Gin Rummy. Blackjack dealt 21 almost half of the time.

Arthur even called me over for Three Card Monte. Laying three cards face down and naming them Past, Present, and Future, he turned up the first and showed me the Death card.

"Fine for your past," he said with a knowing nod. "But would you want to find it in the Present or Future position?"

I shook my head, figuring that was the correct answer. He turned Death face down and began to shuffle the three cards like a riverboat gambler. "Watch the cards," he said. "It's all in the cards."

After thoroughly mixing them, he finished with a flourish, holding his arms wide. "Behold," he intoned. "Where is Death now?"

I had no clue. Was it some sort of Tarot challenge? If you truly understood the meanings and interpretations of the card, how it fit into the sequence of Major Arcana as well as its resonances in the Minors, not to mention the ways the archetype echoed through the ages of Western art and culture, would you know precisely where to expect Death?

Or were you just supposed to guess?

* * *

I shook my head. "Back where it started?"

He turned up the Past position – the Seven of Wands.

"Future?"

He flipped up the Two of Discs. Giving me a sly look, he slowly turned over the Present card – the Page of Swords.

"Huh?"

With a roguish smile he reached under the table and pulled out the Death card. He held it up triumphantly for me to see, then looked at Persephone.

She yawned. "I think that does it," she said with relief.

"No," Arthur said. "One more thing."

He took the 78 miniature artworks in both hands and closed his eyes. He drew a deep breath, then seemed to wait for Persephone to breathe as well.

"This is the ultimate test of the Minor Arcana," he said solemnly. Leaning forward, he laid out a Solitaire spread.

Persephone frowned. We watched as Arthur began to turn up cards and shift them around. All four aces were soon in play, and two suits were up to court cards.

* * *

But Swords were stuck on Nine. Persephone's painting showed a frightened clown dodging knives in a carnival booth. "I knew we should have lightened up on that one," she said.

Arthur's brows furrowed. "Don't blame the cards."

At that moment Persephone spotted a move. Arthur complied, and up came the Ten of Swords, showing the same clown juggling the knives.

"Aha!" Arthur cried, playing the Ten and quickly running the rest of the deck. "That proves it's ready!"

Persephone allowed herself a tired smile. "Finally."

As she placed the 78 paintings in a cabinet behind the main counter, Persephone turned to Arthur. "I'll let you take them to the printer," she said flatly.

"What?" he said. "You don't want to go along? I'd like someone to be with me."

"I have an important engagement." Her face was impassive.

Arthur scowled and looked my way. "I suppose I could ask someone else to help..."

* * *

I seized the chance to be part of magical history, agreeing to meet Arthur in the morning while bookmarking my intention to record the entire incident in the journal which I planned to begin as soon as things slowed down a bit.

Delighted as I was to accompany Arthur, I wondered why Persephone had demurred.

Was she secretly embittered that she was receiving so little credit for the monumental project? Although she inked her monogram in the corner of almost every card, her name appeared only in tiny print on the back of the box.

Meanwhile, millionaire Cornelius De Roquefort – owner of the Headstone Metaphysical Outlet chain and chief financier of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot – was emblazoned across the front as "Presenter" of the historic deck.

One might imagine Persephone wanting a smidgen more credit for her efforts.

The three of us left Arcane Wisdom at eleven. Exhausted by hours of arduous metaphysical labor, no one spoke as I locked the front door.

A taxi pulled up for Persephone. Arthur whispered a few private words, then pecked her on the cheek. She gave a quick wave and was gone.

Arthur looked at me. "Well, then," he said. "I'll see you back here at nine o'clock."

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"Definitely," I said, taking note of how crisply he stated the time. "See you in the morning."

With a nod, Arthur turned and headed toward the cluster of saloons at the end of the block.

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I woke the next morning with a start, as from a bad dream.

Stupid alarm clock. Left to my own devices I would linger abed as the first rays of rosy-fingered dawn brightened to mid-afternoon.

As my head cleared I suddenly remembered why I'd set my alarm – at nine o'clock I was meeting Arthur to deliver Persephone's hand-painted originals for the Trismegistus Meister Tarot to the printer!

I pulled on my jeans and selected a faded black T-shirt and color-coordinated grey flannel windbreaker from my clothes nook. My stubble was a bit beyond its ideal length, but on this day of days I didn't want to be late even for the sake of good grooming.

As I stepped out into the balmy Key City morning I realized I'd forgotten to ground, cast a sacred circle, invoke the elements along with their attributes, honor the First People and spirits of the land, call in allies of blood and craft who might prove supportive in circumstances seen and unforeseen, then raise, lower, adjust, balance, and center my energy, and finally re-ground myself after all of that.

Knowing time was of the essence, I drew a deep breath and did all of the steps at once, making a mental note to come back later and shore things up a bit.

Right now, I needed to stay focused on meeting Arthur and getting the master paintings to the printer.

It was a profound privilege to work with Arthur, dean of Oracle Street entrepreneurs. Over the course of two decades, my erstwhile magical mentor had helped turn Key City into something of a Holy Land for magical commerce.

In the wake of Arcane Wisdom's success, the 1300 block of Oracle Street now hosted a half-dozen independent shops as well as chains such as Headstone Eclectic Metaphysical Outlet and the Mini-Max Magic Mart.

Luminaries such as Russian theosophical seer Madame Bluebloodsky, feminist sage Wendy Womansdaughter, and cryptic author and raconteur Alabaster Crockley had come to call Oracle Street their home.

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An esoteric street faire and sacred swap meet flourished in a vacant lot. Down at the seedier end of the street huddled several divination saloons: Dionysian Dreams, Bacchus Bar & Grill, and the notorious Happy Endings.

Happy Endings wasn't really a saloon, but a house of divination. It had a reputation as the place people went when they wanted to be guaranteed a positive outcome to their readings.

* * *

I approached the store from the direction of the street faire. Vendors were setting up their booths in the big vacant lot. Mountebanks erected platforms from which to hawk ointments and cures.

The mood seemed oddly somber. Drawn faces and muted voices contrasted with brightly-painted signboards and colorful canopies.

Of course, I didn't usually pass this way until noon. Maybe it took them a while to get warmed up.

I felt a bit nervous about my impending rendezvous with history, and popped into the Mini-Max Magic Mart for a can of my favorite grounding beverage, Molten Core.

Waiting in line, I noticed "Oracle Street" in the top headline of the *Key City Post-Divinator*.

As I tilted the paper to see the rest of the headline, the clerk – an imposing woman who looked like she specialized in Earth invocations – called out: "Hey! No reading the paper until you pay for it!"

I yanked my hand away as if burned. "Sorry," I called back. "I didn't mean to use up any of your news."

She stopped counting the previous customer's change and gave me a long stare. "Are you some kind of wise guy?"

"No, sorry," I said again, this time for real. She was facing a long day at the Mini-Max. I didn't need to make things harder. "I'll just take this Molten Core."

"Oh, you'll just 'take' it, will you?"

"No, I mean I want to pay you for it."

"I should hope so! Where do you think you are?"

I looked around the little store. In addition to the usual run of convenience items, the Mini-Max Magic Mart carried crucial Neo-Pagan ritual supplies not found in other stores on the block: lighters, magic markers, sun screen, and trash bags.

"Well, I, uh, that is..."

"Look, I don't have all day! Are you going to pay for your drink?"

I handed her way too much money and fled with her shrill voice rattling around my aura.

* * *

Back on the street, I chugged my can of Core and renewed my connection to Mother Earth. Finishing it off, I jaywalked over toward 1313 Oracle Street.

A hand-painted sign on the one-story wooden building announced Arcane Wisdom Magicke Shoppe. A smaller, weather-beaten placard proclaimed: Divination for the People!

Three years earlier I capped my undergraduate degree in Sacred Custodics with a stellar internship at the shop, a stint that culminated in wiring the bookshelves so fairy lights flashed and little bells tinkled gaily when you touched selected titles.

Guileless as I was in those bygone days, I assumed this superlative effort would work to my benefit when copies of my magnum opus lined the shelves.

I pinned my hopes and expectations on Arthur rewarding my dedicated custodial work at Arcane Wisdom by joining me in co-publishing the 2,748-page first volume of my new metaphysical paradigm and featuring it in his store for the next decade or two – flashing fairy lights and all.

When he utterly failed to seize the unparalleled opportunity, the bitter dregs of artistic rejection left me too disconsolate to uphold the guild standards of the Right Ancient and Anachronistic Siblinghood of the Bristling Broom – the international order of witches and custodians into which I had been initiated near the end of my undergraduate studies.

I found myself waking up nightly with a brain full of homicidal thoughts – nothing more specific than the choice of weapon, the location, the exact timing, my get-away plan, and potential cover stories, but still enough to cause me a touch of alarm.

* * *

Given my occasionally volatile nature, I knew I needed to get away from the source of my frustration. I decided the time was right to set out on my janitorial "wanderjahre."

It is an august tradition of the maintenance trades that, upon completion of one's undergraduate degree, ambitious young custodians set out on the road

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for a period of seasoning – their wanderjahre, or wandering years.

The journeying tradition was honored to the letter by the Siblinghood of the Bristling Broom, which claimed lineal descent from an ancient multi-cultural mystery guild that served fastidious deities of many traditions.

Around the globe, lodge halls welcomed itinerant janitors, providing room, board, and gainful if grueling employment.

During my Bristling Broom initiation ceremony, I was made privy to the ultimate mystery of the custodial fellowship – the broom as the sacred bond between custodians and witches.

In awe I beheld the shimmering nexus of magical power – witches defy gravity by flying through the air on brooms, while custodians wield the broom as a mighty tool of material change.

The closing words of my consecration still rang in my ears as dozens of sacred janitors shook their brooms in the air and chanted in unison:

“May custodians take to the air – and may witches change the world!”

* * *

For the next several years, even as the Great Return unfolded, I traveled the length and breadth of Western custodiandom, visiting such legendary centers of the sacred maintenance arts as Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Edinburgh, and Prague, imbibing the traditions of my trade along with the occult knowledge of the ages.

While my Bristling Broom hosts good-naturedly assigned me the most arduous and miserable tasks in return for accommodation, many were the moments that I celebrated the benefits of my initiation during those tumultuous times.

Tumultuous? The word scarcely did justice to the past three years. What changes had taken place since I set out on my wanderjahre!

I had been on the road only a few months when a series of scandals almost too absurd to narrate shook institutional Christianity to the core. Already beleaguered by losing the War on Christmas, the West’s dominant religion of the past 1700 years simply imploded.

Pundits hailed victory for enlightenment and welcomed the dawn of an era of secularism. Yet beneath the surface another current waxed. As fast as churches went on the block, buildings were bought by Neo-Pagan groups and remodeled into temples, sanctuaries, public bath houses, and metaphysical thrift shops.

Christian officials spun into a panic – none more than the Vatican. Several pontiffs resigned in rapid succession before Pope Nicodemus came out as a trans woman who secretly worshipped the Celtic Goddess Brighde under the guise of “Saint Brigid” and danced the sacred spiral around the baldacchino altar at Saint Peter’s.

On Samhain Eve that year she anointed herself Hierophant Minerva, revoked the pro-Christian laws of Constantine and Theodosius, and with the blessing of all Rome revived veneration of the ancient Olympians.

Catholics everywhere were ordered to burn their Christian artifacts, buy all-new Pagan ones, and memorize appropriate invocations and blessings for Jupiter, Juno, and other Roman deities.

The impact reverberated around the fading Christian world, as one denomination after another followed suit, each according to their own kind.

Episcopagans upheld high ritual. PresbyPagans enforced discipline. FundaWiccans waved Gerald Gardner’s *Book of Shadows* and called down condemnation on other sects.

Some groups paid homage to Celtic or Norse deities, others Egyptian or Assyrian. Some were eclectic or free-form, some purist. Not a few invented novel ancient traditions.

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The media dubbed the revival of official Pagandom the “Great Return,” and soon congregations venerating the old gods, goddesses, and deities of various other genders, types, species, and proclivities were popping up all around the formerly Christian world.

True, some people had been honoring the ancient ones all along. Renaissance artists painted their myths. Romantic Era poets sang their praises. And the 1960s revived the nearly-lost tradition of dancing barefoot in the park.

But it was one thing when a bunch of hippies gathered for a maypole, and quite another when the entire apparatus of the Roman Catholic Church abjured Christianity, repealed Constantine’s Edict of Milan, and declared the restoration of the classical Roman pantheon.

In quick order, holidays were rebranded. Professional clergy changed robes. Gospel radio changed format to Goddess chants.

At first people spoke as if the Great Return affected the whole world. Indeed, with Christianity having been the Earth’s largest religion, it certainly caused a stir.

MAGICIAN

As things shook down, though, it became clear that the Great Return was largely a Christian phenomenon. Even as goddess traditions re-emerged among various religions, most Hindus remained Hindus, Moslems were still Muslims, Jews and Buddhists and Zoroastrians held to their rites, and so on.

* * *

Watching the transformation gain momentum, I yearned to go on pilgrimage to Rome, font of the Great Return and cutting edge of the Neo-Pagan revival.

Lacking the finances for even a brief visit, I heard the siren's call to return to Key City and complete Volumes Two and Three of *Magical Materialism* while saving money for a journey to the Eternal City.

Alighting a week earlier, I secured housing at the local Bristling Broom hall and pitched into my work at Arcane Wisdom.

In a few days I was ensconced in the job, which along with an hourly stipend included fringe benefits such as divinatory readings, jewelry repair, random magical advice, and the occasional opportunity to take part in secret initiatory ceremonies simply by working late.

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It also meant that I was one of the few to have seen the precious original artworks for the Trismegistus Meister Tarot, which had been veiled from all except those privileged to enter the back room at Arcane Wisdom.

Knowing the likelihood of counterfeit and forged versions of their long-rumored deck, Arthur and Persephone refused to allow even a single card to be displayed, photographed, or scanned. The only versions were the actual card-sized paintings, which we were about to deliver to the printer.

A couple of evenings earlier, on just my second day of work, I had to hold the line when a reporter from *Neo-Platonic News and World Soul Report* came by as I was closing the shop and demanded to photograph the cards.

"Just a few quick shots! We're doing a feature on Arthur A. Arthur and his lifetime of contributions to modern magic. The story simply won't be complete without images from his new deck."

"You'll need to check with him," I had said nervously.

"I'm sure he'd approve – this is an incomparable opportunity for advance publicity."

I knew she was right. But Arthur and Persephone wanted the entire deck to remain a mystery until the day it was published.

"Sorry," I said. "It's out of the question."

She had tried to push inside. "Just a few photos," the reporter insisted. "We won't print them until the deck appears." She lowered her voice. "I could make a donation to your 'college fund.'"

I recoiled. "I already graduated!"

After a bit more blustering she had departed, leaving the Trismegistus Meister Tarot paintings unphotographed.

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Now, picking up my step, I savored anticipation of the impending historic moment when Arthur and I delivered those paintings to the printer – a story I would tell and re-tell to the grandchildren I planned to have once my schedule cleared out a bit.

I bypassed the front door. You'd think as the all-but-official substitute janitor of Arcane Wisdom, I would have a key.

But I had something better. I was privy to one of Arcane Wisdom's deepest secrets – the back lock didn't work. A good solid kick just below the handle would open it every time.

I put my foot to the task and felt the lock give.

Stepping inside, I was surprised that the back room was dark.

* * *

Hoping I wasn't late to meet Arthur – I didn't want to gain a reputation as one who kept history waiting – I groped for the light switch. Energy saving bulbs flashed a distinctly unmystical light on the back room.

Bulletin boards covered the right wall with a thousand scraps of paper, most of which looked like relics from a bygone era.

To the left hung Arthur's first great magical achievement, the one which made his reputation in the occult cosmos – the Periodic Table of the Tarot, which used magical valences and energies of transmutation to illustrate relations among the 78 cards.

Rows and columns of Major and Minor Arcana highlighted recurring patterns as well as elucidating puzzling incongruities such as why there's a lobster on the Moon card.

The Periodic Table of the Tarot soon appeared on the front wall of every alchemical lab and in the back pages of every magical text, and had a profound effect on divinatory readings, illuminating the many cross-currents

of the typical spread.

As I started toward the front room, a bizarre spectacle leapt out at me, the likes of which I never expected to see in Arcane Wisdom.

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A Tarot spread covered most of Arthur's workbench. That wasn't unusual. Most mornings before he opened the shop he did a reading to assess the energy on the block.

Although his interpretations were private (or shared only with Persephone), he generally left the cards out, and his favorite Bergamo Renaissance Tarocchi deck was a familiar sight in the back room.

But the present reading was harshly dissonant. In addition to two cards from Arthur's usual deck, a hodgepodge from other decks were laid as a mandala: Motherpeace, Thoth, Marseilles, and Gnostic Gnowers.

In the center sat an empty box from an outlawed deck that for reasons of common decency and the general good of humanity had never been put into production – the Fast Food Tarot.

I sucked in a breath and stepped back. There is a reason that centuries of tradition prohibited multi-deck readings.

Authorities have long recognized Tarot arcana as living beings. Each deck is, as it were, a unique species of the broader genus, Tarot.

Mixing decks is the occult analogue of genetic engineering, of tampering with the integrity of living beings.

Standing under the glaring fluorescents in Arcane Wisdom's back room, I studied the disconcerting multi-deck spread, apparently created by one of the epoch's foremost devotees of the time-honored customs of Tarot.

Had Arthur done a reading to forecast the fate of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot – using the very decks his own was likely to supplant?

Realizing that I was not meant to be looking at the uncanny layout in the first place, I passed through the curtain into the main space.

* * *

Darkness.

Or close enough to indicate the likely absence of my employer.

The store was several steps below street level. The front windows, cluttered with displays and paraphernalia, admitted only stray sunbeams.

I turned on the lights, which cast a fairy glow through the space. The main counter stood to the left. Shelves and stands filled most of the scuffed wood floor.

Greeting cards for Wheel of the Year holidays brightened a rack near the counter. Arthur's customary array of dragon pendants, pentacle necklaces, and Celtic knot nose-rings rested on their plinths.

The bookshelves, too, were irritatingly unchanged. Where by all rights I might have expected an eye-grabbing display of my magnum opus I saw instead the usual assortment of magical texts, self-help tomes, and fantasy novels.

A row of tables demarcated by low dividers lined the right wall. During store hours, these cubicles were home to Tarot readers, palmists, tea-leaf diviners, and esoteric card sharks.

Card sharks did the crispest business. The house share was fifteen percent, as prescribed by law, and I respected that Arthur kept the stakes low.

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I looked at the clock – half past. Unusual for Arthur to be late. Especially on this of all days.

Arthur had his faults, but tardiness was not one of them, as I knew from my undergrad internship at the renowned divination shop.

I'd originally found the part-time position quite by chance when I was required to do a six-month practicum to complete my Sacred Janitorial Sciences degree.

Being prior to the Great Return, I assumed I'd be mopping some musty old cathedral or understudying for the shovel brigade at a religious cemetery.

Instead, what popped up was a job at Arcane Wisdom Magicke Shoppe, then best known as sponsor of the internationally-televised Tarot Twister Tournament.

My interview for the position hadn't been with Arthur, who seemed a bit remote, but with the store's anchor janitor, Johanna.

Although she was a year or two older, we'd competed in all-state janitorial tourneys, where she once edged me by a single point in Horizontals to take the Golden Dustpan.

I thought she might feel kinship due to our shared specialty – the maintenance of horizontal surfaces such as floors, hallways, driveways, and shelves.

But she had seemed competitive. "I hope you can do verticals," she said as she

tapped her pencil on a legal pad. "That's really the help we need."

"Sure," I said. "I'm pretty handy with a squeegee."

"Squeegee," she said as she wrote on her pad. "One more question – any moral or religious scruples about working in a new-age store?"

* * *

I gulped – in fact, I did have a few concerns about whether my ground-breaking magical materialist paradigm might prove off-putting at a store which spelled the word "magic" with an extra "ke."

Materialists are minimalists. If you can spell "magic" without the extra letters, save them for another word, I always said.

Still, I wanted to be considerate of others' feelings. During my undergraduate years I became aware that devout spiritualists often took offense at my resolute materialism, particularly when I cited specific passages from my magnum opus to refute their views.

For all my fine theories, though, materialism ultimately boiled down to one thing. I looked Johanna in the eye and posed the question.

"What time would my shifts start?"

"We open at noon, so you need to unlock a little before that."

I groaned inwardly at having to wake before noon, but I needed the internship to complete my degree. "I believe I can handle that."

"Okay, then," she had said in a businesslike voice. "Start tomorrow."

I had kept up my end, arriving by 11:59 almost every morning. Once Johanna saw that I'd show up and do the work, she relaxed and was almost friendly. She seemed fine with me covering most of the shifts, and I enjoyed being facilities manager for the quirky little shop.

Of course, that was the olden days. Now that Neo-Paganism was the West's dominant religion, what had been a quaint tourist excursion had become an obligatory destination for thousands of newly-coined Neo-Pagans.

Yet even if Arcane Wisdom and Oracle Street were world-famous, the neighborhood still brimmed with a small-town vibe, a veritable junior high cafeteria of interlocking relations, circles, passions, and feuds.

No one attracted more gossip than Arthur A. Arthur. Although he was publicly hailed as the sage – no, the magus – of Oracle Street, I knew that other locals had a few private bones to pick with him.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

With his Trismegistus Meister deck rumored to challenge the theories, moral fiber, and income streams of other denizens of our neighborhood, relations weren't likely to improve.

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As I waited for Arthur to arrive for the morning's errand, the antique clock behind the counter tolled quarter till ten.

With a chill I realized that my employer might have come and gone before I arrived. Maybe he had already delivered the deck, and I had been aced out of my chance at vicarious glory.

There was one way to tell. I'd seen Persephone put the master paintings away the night before. I strode over to the cabinet and dramatically pulled the doors open.

Empty. I stuck my head inside. Nothing.

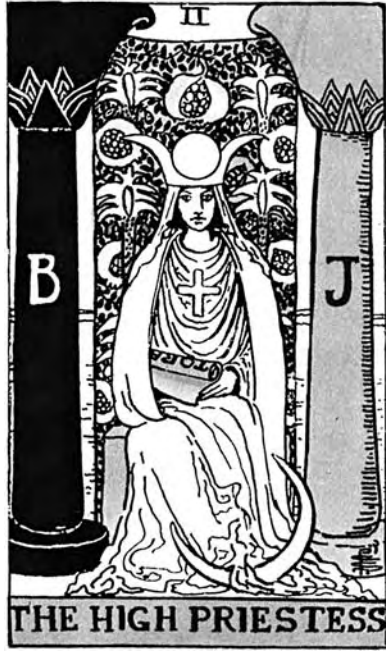
My stomach lurched. Had Arthur really arrived early and departed without me? Wouldn't he have left a note?

Had he or Persephone come back the previous night and moved the deck? I yanked open one cabinet after another, then rummaged through drawers, scattering papers and merchandise all over the place.

Suddenly a key turned in the front door. With dismay I saw the mess I'd made.

If Arthur walked in now, he'd never trust me as substitute custodian, let alone helping deliver the precious paintings.

My eyes darted around, searching for an escape or at least an alibi. Deftly I grabbed a broom and swept it across the floor just as a scrawny body on a pair of spindly legs duck-walked into the store.



CHAPTER II: High Priestess

Perkins, one of Arthur's initiates who sometimes tended the store in the owner's absence, stood in the doorway with hands on hips.

"I want to make sure everything is okay," he said as he gazed past me.

Perkins was a lanky and ill-humored fellow who seemed to imagine himself some sort of senior assistant to Arthur A. Arthur.

I recalled the sting of humiliation when, as a raw intern working my first day at the shop, I referred to a pack of "tah-roo" cards.

Perkins had laughed so hard he spewed bits of his lunch all over the countertop.

Despite my obvious desire to get on with sweeping the floor, Perkins hadn't

been able to resist showing off his superior knowledge, forcing me to repeat the word until I got the proper aspiration on the middle syllable:

"Dtah-hro'-uh."

Chastened, I had rehearsed the pronunciation for several weeks before I dared utter it again in public – at which time Arthur himself revealed one of the great secrets of Tarot – no two cultures have ever pronounced the word the same way.

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Right now I had more on my mind than how to pronounce the *nomina sacra*. I needed to find Arthur and his deck and secure my personal place in Tarot history.

First, though, I had to rid myself of Perkins. In spite of my visibly fidgeting with the broom, he was apparently incapable of grasping a social cue.

"Why wouldn't things be okay?" I finally asked. "I'm just waiting to meet Arthur."

He squinted and stared at me. "Huh? Don't you know what happened?"

My stomach tightened. "No, what?"

"Arthur," he said as if that explained everything. After a moment he began again. "Arthur – he's dead!"

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I slumped back against the counter. "Arthur? Dead?"

A dozen scenarios flashed through my brain. Had my employer delivered the priceless deck to the print shop with his dying breath? Or had he collapsed and died en route? Had he died in his sleep and never even gotten started?

What if he'd been robbed and killed on his way to the printer? Were the irreplaceable master paintings in the hands of a small-time crook who had no idea of their inestimable value?

Or might they be tucked in Arthur's coat pocket at this very moment?

"What happened?" I stammered.

"He fell and hit his head," Perkins said without making eye contact. "It happened last night, just up the block near Happy Endings."

"Last night?" I repeated, realizing that Arthur hadn't lived to deliver the cards to the printer. Surely he hadn't been carrying them around on the street in the middle of the night. He must have come back to Arcane Wisdom before his accident and tucked them away somewhere.

HIGH PRIESTESS

Perkins seemed to have the same surmise. He ambled around opening cabinets, eyeing shelves, looking in drawers.

"Anything I can help you with?" I asked, hoping he'd take a hint and leave.

"I doubt it," he said blandly.

"Well, then," I said, "I probably should be getting on with my work." I lifted the broom to underscore my point.

"Good, you get on with your work," Perkins replied. "I'll just have a look around."

He meandered some more, poking and prodding under stacks of paper, craning his neck to see on top of cabinets.

It made sense he'd try to get his hands on the deck. Already he presumed himself a leading advocate of Arthur's theories – and perhaps the natural successor as manager of Arcane Wisdom should anything happen to Arthur...

If he were the one to deliver the post-mortem deck to the printer, Perkins could do a few select media interviews and his place in Arthurian lore would be secure.

Well, I thought, maybe I should let him have his moment of glory. In any case, letting him search the store was the fastest way to be rid of him.

But wait – what if Perkins, hearing of Arthur's death, had already come to the store and stolen the deck and now returned in order to pin the blame on me for its disappearance?

It was a heartless plot, but I wouldn't put it past him if he thought it would advance his career.

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A couple of nights earlier, back when Arthur was still alive and well, I stopped into the Hungry Hedonist, Oracle Street's most popular divination saloon.

Who should I run into but Perkins, a couple of Bloody Medeas past his prime.

He spotted me and insisted on pouring a scant two fingers of the bright red drink before monologuing about how talented he was and how extraordinary his ideas were.

I did my best to look interested, not wanting to antagonize even the lowliest of Arthur's staff. As I sat staring at his long, bony nose, he meandered off the topic of how amazing he was and started kvetching about how he had been denied advancement and generally abused by those in positions of power wherever he had gone.

He made a point of saying that Arthur was no worse than any other master. But he followed it with a rambling discourse about how some of Arthur's key insights were actually gleaned from none other than Perkins.

"I'm not saying anyone exactly 'stole' my ideas, if you know what I mean," he said with a thick tongue. "But think about it – how'd you feel if you're reading some hot-shot expert's manual on Tarot, and what do you see? Your own ideas. Right there in print. It makes you think twice, know what I mean? It makes you wonder who you can really trust."

He sat staring at me through drooping eyelids, his head bobbing up and down in time to an inner drummer. I could tell he wanted me to say something supportive.

"Wow, that must be hard," I said, careful not to validate his delusion that he had contributed so much as a jot or a tittle to the new deck.

"Damn straight," he said. "It makes me really careful who I talk to and what I say. You never know who is trying to stab you in the back."

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In the cold light of day he'd probably forgotten his drunken diatribe. But as he cast his beady eyes around Arcane Wisdom, I wanted more than ever to be rid of him.

"I really do need to be getting back to my work," I said, sweeping toward the door to subliminally suggest his destination.

His eyes surveyed the shop once more, then came to rest on me. "You're right – you really should get the place cleaned up." He started for the door. "By the way, we're out of paper towels in the restroom."

I started to make a scorching yet ever-so-slightly ambiguous response, the sort that would leave him a blubbing mass of speechless frustration yet could never quite be proven slanderous were he to press the issue in a court of law.

But I needed to be rid of Perkins and get back to my search for what now seemed to be a missing Tarot deck. "So, then, I guess we should be getting on with it," I said, making another sweeping motion toward the door.

"Yes, I guess 'we' should," he said. "I'll need to make myself available to the media. As the person who shared Arthur's most intimate counsel I will doubtless be expected to offer insights into the scope and meaning of his life's work."

I clenched my lips to avoid suggesting that Persephone might have shared a good deal more of Arthur's counsel than Perkins could ever have hoped.

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He started toward the door, though, and I left well-enough alone. He climbed the three steps to street level and disappeared.

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A moment later the door swung open again. Figuring Perkins was coming back, I got the broom moving.

Instead, a heavy-set guy in a tie-dyed cape and pointed beard stepped into the shop.

"I'm from across the street," he said gruffly. "I work at the faire."

Of course – he was a mountebank who peddled patent herbal remedies from a stage at the edge of the faire. I'd seen him around the shop a few times back during my prior time in Key City.

"Sad to hear about Arthur, eh?" I said.

"Yeah, real sad," he said flatly. He looked around the store as if sizing it up. I wondered if he wanted a handout. I reached in my pocket and jingled a few coins.

Suddenly he looked right at me. "Where are the cards?"

"The cards?"

"Don't play dumb. Where's Arthur's deck? I was the one who inspired him. Now that he's gone, they're rightfully mine."

The mountebank glared at me expectantly. I gauged it best not to divulge my lack of precise knowledge as to the exact whereabouts of the deck.

"I, uh, that is – don't you think you should talk to Persephone? She might have an opinion about whose deck it rightfully is!"

"I'll deal with her when the time comes. Now give me the deck!"

I shuffled my feet, unsure what to tell him. I was in no position to satisfy his crazed demand. But should I admit it?

Just then the door rattled open again. I cast a desperate glance, hoping it might be the police or the media.

Instead, a large woman in a flowing taffeta gown swept through the doorway, followed close at heel by a sleek white Russian wolfhound.

Madame Bluebloodsky! She seemed startled to see me and the mountebank, and hesitated a moment before walking grandly across the room toward her customary reading booth. The white dog took up its usual post at the foot of the little table and gave a sad look.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

The mountebank looked nervously at the big dog, then at me. His eyes narrowed. "I'll be back!" he hissed.

Ignoring Madame Bluebloodsky, he spun on his heels and stormed out the door.

* * *

I turned gratefully to Madame B. Her face was impassive. Was she unaware of Arthur's fate? What was she doing here at this hour when she never arrived before noon?

"Uh, hi, Ma'am," I said. "Can I help you?"

She appraised me with a haughty yet oddly detached air, as if she were looking down her nose but didn't mean for me to take it personally. "Yes," she finally said. "Would you step outside for a moment so I may be alone with the spirit of my late friend?"

So she did know. And what could be more reasonable than this matron of mysticism asking for a moment of solitude in the abode of one of her closest associates?

On the other hand, it seemed obvious to me, having read a few detective novels in my day, that nothing was more suspicious than someone you might never suspect asking for a "moment alone."

If Madame Bluebloodsky had a hand in the disappearance of the Tarot deck, might she intend to destroy crucial evidence of her possible complicity?

If I refused to leave the store, it might foil her scheme. "Uh, I need to finish sweeping up first," I improvised. She shot a shriveling glance and turned her back.

She dropped her heavy purse on the reading table and paused for a moment as if gathering her energy. The lanky white dog sat perfectly still, gazing up at Madame B. I kept sweeping until at last she turned to face me.

* * *

As so often in my encounters with Madame Bluebloodsky, I felt reduced to the status of an earthworm, and a particularly small and miserable one at that.

She'd had that effect since our first meeting several years earlier, during my undergrad internship.

The day she arrived, Arthur and I were going over the inventory of Tarot decks, carefully opening each package, counting the cards, and resealing it.

I know it sounds a little compulsive, but the thought that he would sell a

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defective deck to an unsuspecting customer raked Arthur's heart.

At least that's what he would have the public believe.

Those of us who knew Arthur suspected that his true motive in unwrapping every Tarot deck was the search for the Legendary Lost Arcana of the Bohemian Rosicrucians.

* * *

The Legendary Lost Arcana were Major Arcana cards that had reputedly been part of the earliest Tarot decks, but were removed during the 1700s. Every subsequent deck, from the Marseilles Tarot forward, lacked them.

No one could prove that they ever existed, although an examination of the earliest Renaissance decks showed various alternate Majors – zodiac signs, virtues, muses, celebrity witches from the Late Middle Ages, and in one lost deck from about 1522 the entire trance-dueling squad from San Gimignano in the Tuscan hills.

In the early 1700s, realizing that Tarot was about to be rediscovered by mainstream culture, renegade Rosicrucians from Southeastern Bohemia decided to remove one or more Majors which provided the final key to the mysteries of the universe.

No one knew how many cards were removed, or what they depicted.

In its most powerful and popular form the legend states that to this day individual Bohemian Rosicrucians enter Tarot warehouses on the night of the New Moon, open packages from different decks, and slip in hand-crafted copies of the Legendary Lost Arcana.

Whoever finds these cards and can decipher their proper placement among the still-extant Majors will unlock the secrets of time and space, comprehend all that has ever or will ever exist, and nearly always find a parking place within a reasonable distance of their destination.

If their rarity didn't make matters difficult enough, there was the underlying hermeneutical problem – how would you recognize one of the Lost Arcana if you did see one? How would you know you weren't being pranked, or getting all excited over a random packing error?

In order to even begin searching for the Lost Arcana, wouldn't the searcher need to have some idea what they were looking for? Were the missing cards muses? Virtues? Astrological signs? Elemental guardians? Celebrity witches?

Or were they utterly anomalous subjects like the Hanged Man?

I mean really – if the Bohemian Rosicrucians had removed the Hanged Man,

would everybody today be going around saying, "Wow, there seems to be a card missing from the sequence of Majors! I bet it's a picture of a man hanging upside down with one leg tucked into a triangular position and a placid smile on his face!"

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In a lifetime of study, Arthur admitted that he had never spoken to anyone who could convince him that they had actually seen one of the Legendary Lost Arcana, and the cards offered for sale on PaganBay invariably proved to be clever forgeries.

Still, the value of an authentic card would be immense. Who could blame Arthur for devoting his labor – and that of his minions – to the quest?

It was while we were performing this humble inventory task that Madame Bluebloodsky first entered our shop.

She had recently fled Russia, where Secular Humanists were conducting ruthless purges of mediums and soothsayers. Eastern Transylvania proved no more hospitable, and at last – bitter fate for an old-world matron such as herself – she immigrated to America.

That first afternoon she regaled us in heavily-accented English with tales of fleeing the Transylvanian Metaphysical Police, well-known for their crude but effective methods with silver stakes. After a brief sojourn in suburban Cincinnati she landed broke and friendless in Key City.

Arthur, always a soft touch for a hard luck story (not to mention a colorful character), offered her a reading table for twenty percent commission. The two shook hands, and a local legend was born.

Back in those days, Arthur and I shared many a subtle smile at the sight of this hefty aristocrat squeezed into one of the little side-booths, knees wedged under the wooden table, antique gown trailing across the floor.

Her dog, Animus Vas (Latin for "Spiritual Vessel"), joined her soon after. Madame Bluebloodsky injured her knee, and doctors told her she needed an expensive and risky operation. Rather than rush into surgery, she adopted the white dog, which slept on her leg at night and leaned against her when she was seated.

Ani Vee, as we shortened the name, never left her side, and in the end Madame Bluebloodsky's leg healed without surgery. Ani Vee was so silent and melancholy, though, that you had to wonder what sort of energy the dog was taking on.

Together they made a well-known local spectacle, a source of entertainment

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as well as enlightenment. Of course, most people were discreet enough to disguise their laughter, as Madame Bluebloodsky seemed the sort to respond by hurling a curse that would blister your nose hairs.

Not to mention she was Arcane Wisdom's most popular (and lucrative) attraction. Even Arthur kept his laughter private.

Only lately had long-simmering differences come to the surface, as the impending publication of Arthur's new intuitive deck threatened Madame Bluebloodsky's position as one of the foremost Tarot readers in town.

* * *

My musings were interrupted by Madame Bluebloodsky clearing her throat somewhat more volubly than one might expect in a woman of her class and breeding.

Being the sensitive sort, I recognized a hint. I couldn't deny her a moment of privacy in the Tarot shop of the deceased.

Besides, if she was involved in the disappearance of the deck, perhaps she had suffered a pang of conscience. If I left the premises for a discreet interval she might take the opportunity to restore the purloined cards.

With the deck currently missing and its fate entirely unknown, I didn't see what I had to lose by giving her a few minutes.

It actually seemed a bit overboard to suspect Madame B of complicity in the disappearance of Arthur's Tarot deck when he had been her chief benefactor in Key City. But I determined that no one would be above suspicion until I could locate the deck and get it to the printer.

I got a dustpan and pretended to sweep some debris into it. "I'll be finishing up now," I said.

"Thank you for the courtesy," she said with a disdainful look.

I nodded and turned toward the rear exit. As I stepped through the curtain into the back room, the weird multi-deck Tarot spread grabbed my attention.

* * *

Six cards formed an oval like the upper half of the Cabalistic Tree of Life.

The cards at the top and bottom were from Arthur's usual Bergamo Renaissance deck. The bottom card was certainly striking: Death. A companion from the same deck lay at the top: Justice.

Four side cards from a mind-boggling assortment of decks completed the oval. Each was a divinatory marvel in its own right, yet warped by proximity

to the others.

On the upper left lay the Moon from the Thoth deck. Below sat the Three of Swords from an 18th century Marseilles deck.

Lower right was the Queen of Wands from the Gnostic Gnomers Tarot. Above lay a circular card – the Four of Pentacles from Motherpeace.

In the center of the mandala rested the empty box from the illicit Fast Food Tarot, a corporate-sponsored deck which was red lined after the beta version caused severe psychic damage to several impressionable young users.

I eyed the cover, which depicted a famous chain restaurant's mascot – a grinning mole noshing on a juicy burger.

Why would Arthur place such a travesty in the very center of his spread? Was it part of some secret mystical divination technique?

Had he developed perverse practices during my years away?

Or was it all a macabre joke?

I looked again at the Renaissance cards, the deck I most associated with the late lamented Arthur.

Justice and Death.

In the wake of his demise, they seemed almost too perfect, like drawing the Ten of Cups on your wedding day or the Seven of Wands on your first day at a new high school.

A thought struck me – what if Arthur didn't "draw" the cards at all, but carefully chose them to send a message about himself?

What more obvious self-signifier than cards from his customary pack?

My eyes roved over the rest of the lozenge-shaped layout. Assuming that Arthur deliberately chose the various cards, why would he wantonly violate divinatory decency by mixing cards from a half-dozen decks?

Was he referencing different magical perspectives or practices? Perhaps he intended a chronological sequence of Tarot decks, calling attention to the history of the noble arte?

Or was mixing decks a desperate attempt to gain our attention? Was the weird layout Arthur's way of telegraphing the premonition that he was about to die?

A scenario took shape in my mind. What if the preceding night after we parted company, Arthur returned to Arcane Wisdom for a secret rendezvous

with someone else?

Perhaps they engaged in high-stakes negotiations about the publication of the forthcoming deck and the discussions turned sour.

Seized by an intuition of impending danger, Arthur secretly configured the bizarre multi-deck layout so that it conveyed tell-tale indications of his adversary, rising to a culminating cry for justice.

Obviously I was staring at a key clue. But what did it signify?

My eyes circled the spread, then fixed on the empty Fast Food box in the center. The toothy mole grinned back, mocking my efforts.

At least remembering it would be easy. Such a boorish image would definitely stick in my mind.

This is not some morbid obsessive-compulsive disorder of the sort my dear old mother feared I would one day develop in the event I did not first develop the sense of discipline she strove so diligently to instill in her putative offspring.

No, it's actually the way the art of memory works. The more grotesque or disturbing an image is, the harder it is to forget.

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From the front of the store I heard a chair move. Did Madame Bluebloodsky realize I was still here?

Placing my right hand on my forehead so my thumb and middle finger touched my temples, I quickly engraved the cards in my memory.

Then I headed out the back door wondering what in the world the weird layout could mean. Was it indeed a final missive from my erstwhile mentor?

One person might know, the only person typically allowed to be present for Arthur's daily reading – Persephone Coalschmidt, his artistic amanuensis.

She alone might tell whether the multi-card spread was some sort of uncouth joke, or represented Arthur's last, desperate communication with our world.

* * *

As I reached the street, the *Hermetic Enquirer's* headline screamed from a news stand.

"Famed Magus Found Dead on Oracle Street!"

With a tight breath I dropped a coin in the slot and took a paper. Beneath a grisly photo of the sprawled corpse ran a stark caption: "Questions abound as

famed magical proprietor found dead on Oracle Street!"

I gave a sad laugh. Leave it to the *Hermetic Enquirer* to sensationalize a tragedy.

As I looked at the photo, something struck me. You didn't have to be a Tarot expert to see that Arthur A. Arthur had died in a most unusual pose.

He was sprawled on his back facing the sky, one arm pointing down toward his feet, the other stretching overhead – an inescapable replica of the Magician card from the classic Rider-Waite-Smith deck!

I shook my head. Was I imagining things? If he'd fallen, his arms could easily have wound up in this position.

But it was too perfect. People don't just happen to die in the Magician pose.

Perhaps as he fell he had just enough time to consider his post-mortem legend, and in one final effort twisted his limbs into a Tarot pose that would forever be etched in our minds.

Or maybe Arthur struggled into that position precisely to convey a final, desperate message to humanity! Was his death-pose a heroic call to shine the light of magic into our occluded world?

But wait – could it refer to the weird multi-deck spread I had just committed to memory? Was his final pose an additional clue, like a crossing card in a reading?

I blinked and shook my head again. What was I doing? I was worse than the *Hermetic Enquirer*, sensationalizing a tragedy.

Still – what if the dying Arthur had embodied the Magician as a way of crying out that someone must get his new deck to the printer?

His final message might well be intended precisely for me – my late employer was summoning me to action!

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I skimmed the accompanying story and found no mention of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot paintings. Surely the *Enquirer* would have reported if the widely-anticipated miniature masterworks had been found on Arthur's body.

Perhaps the police had found the paintings and decided to keep it hushed up, although I couldn't see why. Maybe they were waiting for the evening news to make the dramatic announcement?

It wasn't unthinkable that robbers had made off with the goods. But the story said nothing of robbery, and the *Hermetic Enquirer* seldom scanted those

sorts of details.

The likeliest event was that Arthur, who apparently returned to the shop late the previous night and did the bizarre layout, had moved the deck prior to his tragedy. It might well be tucked away at Arcane Wisdom, and I simply needed to locate it and walk it over to the printer.

Unless, I couldn't help thinking, someone had done away with Arthur precisely to lay their hands on the acclaimed deck.

* * *

Unable to search the shop, I did my best to avoid puzzling over such possibilities. Leave that sort of speculation to the tabloids.

Still, I couldn't avoid it altogether. Just about everyone on Oracle Street had something to lose – or gain – from Arthur's Tarot deck and his legacy. Too many simmering rivalries and festering feuds hovered over our neighborhood to completely rule out foul play.

So long as the priceless paintings were missing, I needed to be vigilant with everyone.

Exiled from the shop and my immediate search for the deck, I could still make use of my time.

I needed to talk with two people. Either might have answers and prove an invaluable ally – or might be wrapped up in the disappearance of the most anticipated new divinatory deck of our times.

One was Arthur's co-creator, Persephone Coalschmidt. She'd been with me and Arthur the previous evening, and I saw her place the deck in the cabinet.

Persephone had a key to the shop. Was it possible she heard about Arthur's death and removed the cards? If so, was her motive safekeeping, or was she seizing what she felt was rightly hers before someone else did?

The second was Alabaster Crockley, Arthur's arch-nemesis. If anyone was at loggerheads with Arthur over the origins and interpretation of Tarot, it was Crockley. More than once he had ridiculed Arthur and Persephone's efforts, claiming that his own Urgrundian-based deck – years in development and nowhere near completion – would be vastly superior.

Before I could decide which to seek first, I saw another familiar figure approaching – one of the toughest nuts on the entire block – Wendy Womansdaughter, sole proprietor of the Wiccan Wonderland.



Chapter III: Empress

Spotting Wendy, I turned up the collar of my flannel shirt and ducked my face, hoping not to be recognized. It was nothing personal – I was on a mission to interrogate Alabaster Crockley and Persephone and didn't want to get distracted.

But she waved, and I couldn't very well avoid her.

What to say? This was the first time I'd seen Wendy since my return to Oracle Street, and considering the friction between her and the dearly departed Arthur A. Arthur, it felt awkward renewing our acquaintance on the very day of my employer's death.

Here she stood in front of me, though, the most esteemed of contemporary feminist Wiccans.

Wendy Womansdaughter, of medium height with broad shoulders and wavy grey-brown hair, came from a distant time when feminist spirituality meant strictly Dianic, women-only rituals, festivals, and music labels.

Although this was fairly straightforward in the 1980s and 90s, post-millennial developments presented a challenge as trans women such as my custodial comrade Johanna insisted on their right to participate in Dianic circles.

At first Wendy took a hard line, demanding that participants recite obscure lyrics from Feminista Records artists before they were allowed entrance.

But eventually she learned to accept trans women at her rituals, with the caveat that they sign a non-disclosure agreement, swear out an affidavit that they would cause no disruption, and post a security bond.

In recent years Wendy had even come to acknowledge the right of men to perform key priestessing roles such as carrying tables and mopping floors, so long as due respect was shown for the fact that these roles were traditionally performed by women.

She had asked my assistance on several past occasions with minor repairs, and allowed that as a sacred custodian, even in the employ of one of her chief competitors, I might make valuable contributions to the Craft.

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Wendy Womansdaughter's tradition, the Neo-Postmodern Latter Day Wiccans, were devout in observance of the ancient Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Gaelic, and Norse holy days. It was Wendy's astrologically-corrected calendar of sacred dates, times, seasons, and moments that ruled most Neo-Pagan wheels of the year.

Her most famous book, *The Giant Neo-Wiccan Booke of Propitious Moments*, had in recent years become something of a bible for people seeking the perfect horoscope.

Astrological charts, once confined to the funnies section of the daily paper, had since the Great Return become a vital component of one's worldly standing.

Dating websites were ruled by astrological factors. Universities selected students based on planetary aspects. Job applications routinely demanded horoscopia data.

Recognizing the market value of a Capricorn Sun or a Virgo Moon, people naturally began to lie about their signs.

When HR departments responded by running natal charts on applicants, a

thriving underground market developed in forged birth certificates as people vied for the most promising and lucrative moments of birth.

While Wendy had never been implicated in illegal horoscope trafficking, her book became the standard reference in the field.

It got to where people wanting the most propitious horoscope for their offspring began following regimens of abstinence based on Wendy's prognostications, having sex or revving up the old turkey baster only on nights exactly nine months prior to the most auspicious moments.*

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As interest in the most auspicious birth times grew, corporate capital moved in. Pharmaceuticals designed to secure advantageous astrological signs by speeding or delaying birth soaked up venture capital and sent their parent companies soaring up the Pagan Stock Exchange.

They could crash just as quickly. BioScope's stock plummeted when it turned out their labor-inducing drugs were leading to an abnormal number of Scorpio Moons.

Wendy seemed embarrassed by the publicity, and when she agreed to meet with angry parents whose kids had the perfect chart but still talked back and wouldn't clean their rooms she even garnered a certain amount of sympathy from the usually-cynical tabloid press, which cast her as a modern-day Granny Goodwitch, a throwback to hippie days of yore.

Of course, for those who knew her, Wendy Womansdaughter was different – a shrewd, calculating businesswoman who drove the hard bargain.

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Back in my undergraduate days Wendy took me to the cleaners when I

* - The notion of the auspicious moment derives from the practice of interpreting the flights of birds. The taking of "auspices," or augury, is documented as far back as ancient Egypt.

The site of Great Rome was determined by the taking of auspices. Quarreling brothers Romulus and Remus sat facing one another. Remus saw six birds while Romulus spotted twelve, spiritually empowering the latter to choose Palatine Hill for the first settlement. (Plutarch, *Life of Romulus*)**

** - The taking of auspices is not to be confused with the art of haruspicy, which involves examination of bird entrails by a trained and licensed haruspex.***

*** - See Appendix Q-18 to Volume One of my magnum opus, "On the Dignity of Entrail Reading," for a materialist appreciation of this time-honored divinatory art.

experienced a cash-flow crisis, giving me a mere pittance for my collection of Mesopotamian Goddess figurines from Land o' Milk & Honey cereal boxes.

What really upset me was that Wendy probably turned around and sold the Mesopotamian figurines one at a time for an obscene profit, destroying the nearly-complete set and driving the price of the few remaining sets even higher.

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Knowing the risks involved in consorting with wiccans, my first impulse was to avoid Wendy that morning when she stepped into my path.

But she wheeled on me with her hawk-like eyes. "Sad news about old Arthur, eh?"

"Uh, yeah," I muttered without quite stopping. "It's really too bad."

"I guess it's quite a shock to those of you at his shop."

She looked at me expectantly. I couldn't very well ignore her.

"Well, yes," I admitted. "I guess it hasn't quite sunk in yet, but yes, you could say that it's quite a shock to arrive at work and find out your boss is dead."

I clenched my teeth, wishing I had phrased the matter more gracefully.

Wendy just nodded. "I'm sure it is."

I started to bid her adieu, but she blocked my path.

"Say," she said, refusing to step aside despite my throwing glances beyond her. "Would you give me a hand lifting something?"

* * *

Trapped!

But wait – wasn't this an opportunity to put a few subtle questions to one of Arthur's chief competitors on Oracle Street?

Wendy, as much as anyone, had a lot to lose from Arthur's new deck. Like Madame Bluebloodsky, she made a sizeable chunk of her income from interpreting Tarot cards for lay people. With Arthur's intuitive deck, people would doubtless do more of their own readings.

On top of that, Wendy sold more Tarot decks than anyone in Key City except Arthur. Feminist-inspired decks like Motherpeace, Daughters of the Moon, and Heroines of Brasilian Field Hockey formed a cornerstone of her income. If Arthur's deck reduced sales of older ones, it would surely hurt her business.

Might she know something about the missing Trismegistus Meister Tarot?

True, she'd never said a negative word about Arthur's project, but I could imagine she was none too happy about the new deck, and might go to some lengths to prevent its publication.

Worse still, if Wendy was complicit, might she guess that I, the substitute custodian at Arcane Wisdom, would make the investigation my most ardent priority?

I didn't doubt that this tough-as-nails witch would cast whatever spells were necessary to silence me.

But I couldn't shy away. The more I feared this steely Neo-Postmodern Latter Day Wiccan priestess, the more I needed to question her.

I followed her into the Wiccan Wonderland.

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The store didn't open till noon, so we had the place to ourselves. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the gentle track lighting which picked out various products and displays for special attention.

All manner of wiccan paraphernalia ornamented the tastefully-accoutred display cases. You had your cauldrons and your pentacles, your wands and crystals.

Swords, labyrises, and sacred athames lined the wall behind the counter. Racks along the side featured capes, wristlets, headdresses, vestments, cingulum, bustiers, and thermal goddess onesies from diverse pantheons.

A colorful display of Waters of the World caught my eye. The vials, which contained small amounts of H₂O from sources on every continent, were said to possess magical powers that would purify and restore Earth's waters while dramatically improving the social life of the purchaser. A small vial cost \$12.95, but a liter bottle was just \$59.95, the best price in town.

Next to the bottles was a new item for folks who had to carry their magical supplies long distances to remote witchcamps, retreat centers, and anti-nuclear protests: Dehydrated Waters of the World.

The little envelope looked like a flower-seed packet. I turned it over and read the fine print: "Each packet contains tiny samples of mud, sludge, micro-organisms, and toxic waste from all over the planet. Just add hot water, shake, and let stand for five minutes. Caution: Do not drink reconstituted Waters of the World!"

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Wendy called to me from the rear of her shop, behind a row of mannequins

in trendy ritual poses attired in the latest wiccan fashions and accessories. I found her standing in front of a large box.

"It's a new shipment of runes," she said.

"Wow, runes have gotten bigger while I was gone."

"It's a hundred sets. Can you help me lift it onto the counter?"

I bent over and grabbed a corner. We yanked, but the box wouldn't budge.

"By Freya's falcon feathers," she said, "I don't think we're going to move it. I'll get the forklift." Wendy turned a knob. The entire back wall rolled up like a garage door, revealing a tractor, cement mixer, and several large Caterpillar machines.

She grabbed a pair of work gloves, climbed onto a forklift, and turned the key. An unmuffled engine roared to life. She drove the big four-wheeler into the store, hooked the forklift under the runes, and hoisted them into the air.

Knocking a few mannequins out of the way, she carried the load to the front counter and dropped it. The cabinet shook from the impact.

Wendy switched off the forklift and jumped down. "Might as well leave it here in case I need it again," she said. She pulled the gloves off, grabbed a double-edged athame, and slashed the box from one end to the other.

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I must have had Arthur's death on my mind, because at the sight of her wielding the knife so expertly I lurched backwards and tripped over one of the fallen mannequins.

"Watch your step," she said, reaching down to give me a hand. She still held the athame in the other, its blade glistening in the track lighting. I declined her offer and pulled myself to my feet. She shrugged and returned to unpacking the case of runes.

Wendy had carved out a niche as something of an expert on the runes, offering classes, meditations, and bone-engraving seminars.

Other local diviners mostly deferred to Wendy when it came to runic interpretation, but Arthur – whether out of conviction or simply as a way of asserting his esoteric seniority – never tired of twitting her about the chief quandary of the field.

Runes are a mystery. Few writings survive from pre-Christian times giving any clue to what the stark symbols may have meant, or how they might have functioned within Norse and Germanic society.

Some of the finest minds in occult scholarship have applied themselves to

deciphering the crude symbols, with no more than intuitive hunches to show for their efforts.

Were runes simply an ancient alphabetic script? Or did the stark symbols – often found etched onto bone or engraved on metal – carry occult messages revealed only to initiates?

Is it possible they were used to transmit the deepest and most powerful secrets of Northern Pagan culture?

Unfortunately, with no runic Rosetta Stone that might grant insight, the key to the ancient ciphers may have died with *Ye Olden Wayes*.

Despite modern revivals of the Northern mythological cycles (as well as the occasional Neo-Viking pillaging of a Neo-Celtic ritual, resulting in no end of bad blood and litigation), the original meanings of the runes seemed lost in the murky mists of time.

That hadn't stopped speculation from having a field day. Some, like Wendy Womansdaughter, claimed the mysterious symbols were keys to a virtual philosopher's cabinet of esoteric knowledge which in days of yore allowed Norse priests and priestesses to pass between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Others suggested that secret meanings were hidden in lost pronunciations of the runes. One researcher went insane attempting to reconstruct ancient patterns of speech by playing 78 rpm phonograph records of Icelandic folk songs backwards on a 33 rpm turntable.

Myself, I subscribed to a maverick theory propounded by none other than Arthur A. Arthur himself.

Arthur's theory held that the ancient Nordic runes, far from concealing the mysteries of the universe in cryptic form, were actually parking permits for horses, carts, and carriages.

The rune known as "Yr," for instance, entitled the bearer to unlimited parking in ritual sacrifice zones, while vehicles bearing the lowly "Feo" rune had to be moved every two hours.

Norse aficionados like Wendy were dismayed at the theory, undermining as it did the very foundations of their magical practice.

Arthur didn't help matters by suggesting that they might make more money selling runes as parking permits than as divination tools.

But maybe Wendy got the last laugh – in spite or perhaps because of their mystery, runes sold better every year.

EMPRESS

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As Wendy neatly placed the freshly-minted boxes of ancient runes inside her display case, I cast a glance at the bookshelves, which were lined with cheerfully-colored new-age tomes.

When I prepared to self-publish my magnum opus back before my wanderjahre, I hadn't even bothered asking Wendy to stock it.

It wasn't just my advocacy of Arthur's controversial runic musings. Volume One of *Magical Materialism* also included a prospectus for a bold new spiritual organization, the Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance, which I intended to inaugurate as soon as I completed work on Volumes Two and Three.

Were Wendy to browse even a few hundred pages of my magnum opus, she was astute enough to recognize the likelihood that current Neo-Pagan circles, covens, communities, and welding collectives were about to become tragically outmoded.

Given the anticipated impact of my visionary plans, I reckoned there wasn't much chance the Wiccan Wonderland would carry my book regardless of what I had to say about runes.

Wendy stacked the last boxes in the display case. "I'm going to make some tea," she said. "Care for a cup?"

In point of fact, I am not a big fan of tea, particularly of the Neo-Wiccan persuasion.

More than that, my disconcerting encounters with Perkins, the mountebank, and Madame Bluebloodsky made me slow to let my guard down.

This was doubly true with Wendy, given not just her testy relations with my late employer, but also the long and scandalous history of witches using their potion-brewing skills to poison people.

From Canidia in Classical Rome to La Voisin at the time of the French Revolution, witches figured in the most lurid tales of poisoning.

In our day, what more perfect means for a witch to administer a fatal dose than a tangy cup of herbal tea?

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I gave an embarrassed laugh. My ancestors stopped putting witches on trial in the 1700s. Was my aberrant imagination rekindling the inquisitorial flames at Wendy's expense?

Perhaps. But intuition told me that for the time being I should be alert with her as much as anyone.

The Trismegistus Meister Tarot was missing. Its designer had died on the very eve of publication.

Given that half of Oracle Street had reason to fear Arthur's deck, you didn't have to be Sam Spade to deduce that foul play might be involved.

And if Arthur's death was no accident, would the perpetrator hesitate to dispatch me or anyone else connected with him?

Yet if I declined a cup of tea on my first visit in three years to the Wiccan Wonderland, I was as good as telegraphing my suspicions of Wendy.

"Sure," I said. "I'll have whatever you're having. No honey."

I had a plan. When she returned with two steaming mugs of kale-rutabaga tea, I waited until she turned her head and switched the cups around.

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She picked up her cup, or rather my cup, and lifted it to her lips.

Instantly her face contorted. "I've been poisoned!" she cried, staggering to her feet and spewing the steaming liquid at me. I leapt from my chair, ready to bolt for the door.

She doubled over, hacking violently, then spat into a wastebasket in a most unwiccanly manner. When she straightened up, her face was twisted in a horrid expression.

"By Diana's girdle," she said in a disgusted tone. "Did I make this tea? Obviously I didn't put enough honey in it."

She walked to the back room and returned with a little plastic honey-dragon. She shot a big dallop into her cup and sipped again. "That's much better."

I shook my head. So much for the poisoning theory. Still, I couldn't let one false alarm lower my guard.

I weighed my opening query. "So," I said gingerly, "I guess it's quite a shock for everyone on Oracle Street to lose Arthur."

"It's always a shock when someone crosses over," she said, holding her cup in both hands and gazing straight ahead. "No matter how many Samhain rituals we do, death never fails to catch us unprepared."

I supposed that was true. But how exactly were you supposed to prepare?

Pray louder? Do longer rituals? Volunteer for the clean-up crew? Call my dear

old mother more often?

And what happens when we cross over?

Should we expect exquisitely fine-tuned torture? A hedonist utopia? An eternity of Hadean drudgery? An El Dorado of the spirit?

Cessation of all self-consciousness whatsoever?

No word has ever come back from those who have sallied forth.

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Wendy's eyes focused on her tea cup. I studied her for a moment. "You must have known Arthur well," I probed.

She paused and took a sip of tea. "Yes, I suppose so, if anyone did. I knew *about* Arthur, anyway."

"You know," I said, "I always wondered how folks on Oracle Street really felt about Arthur. I mean, I know everyone admired him. But what did people really think about him?"

She looked at me for a long moment. "I can't answer that," she finally said. "I'd just be repeating gossip."

I probed carefully. "I guess I'm new and all. But sometimes I got the feeling that Arthur felt sort of persecuted, if you know what I mean. Like other people had it in for him."

She nodded slowly. "More than a few people are upset about his Tarot deck."

"I gathered that," I said, veiling my excitement. "I guess his cards might hurt sales of other decks?"

She frowned. "That's not why people are upset. Arthur's images – I should say Persephone's images! – are extraordinary. But they don't close the door to other decks. Every deck is unique. There can never be a single deck that captures all of Tarot's nuances."

"No, I didn't mean that," I said. "But Arthur and Persephone's deck might become the new standard."

"I don't see how there can be a 'standard' Tarot deck," she said, although I detected a hint of worry in her voice. "Different decks serve different people – we don't all respond to the same images."

"Tarot isn't about the 'perfect' deck. It's not something you carve in stone and lock up in a museum. Part of what makes Tarot such a powerful tool is its ability to evolve, to inspire and welcome new possibilities, new themes, new

imagery.”

“Yeah, the images are cool,” I said.

Wendy nodded. “Tarot works primarily through images. It’s not about verbal ‘meanings’ so much as the way the images speak to our subconscious – they reach us at a deeper level than the rational, grasping ego.”

“Right,” I said. “That makes sense.”

“Well,” she said, “there’s not one set of images that works the same for everyone, is there? Persephone’s paintings may be the epitome of how the traditional arcana can be depicted in our generation. Yet other artists will depict them in different ways and create new sets of Majors to suit other places and purposes.”

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I pictured the non-traditional decks the Wiccan Wonderland carried – Faerie cards, Egyptian imagery, animal oracles, herbals, Norse motifs, Goddess cards, on and on.

Meanwhile, Arthur and Persephone’s deck, however much it developed and reworked the imagery, hewed scrupulously to the Major Arcana of the 18th century Tarot de Marseilles.

“If you change the Majors,” I said, “is it still a Tarot deck? Don’t you think there’s something about the traditional Major Arcana that sort of ‘defines’ Tarot?”

She shook her head emphatically. “There’s nothing sacrosanct about the Major Arcana. Tradition doesn’t mean things never change – evolution is inherent in a living tradition.

“Tarot’s capacity for inspiring us, its incredible suppleness and universality, is due to the way images in general fire our imagination, not the specific cards.”

“But wouldn’t you say the Majors form a set? That they fit together?”

“We might say as much for any set of provocative, archetypal images,” she said. “They spark our imaginations. That’s why animal oracles work so well. You pull a raven and a salmon and a coyote and right away you see a story.”

“One time I drew a wolf and a grasshopper and a starfish,” I said.

“Okay, that’s a little harder.”

“Not at all,” I said. “Right away I saw them going on a life-changing journey and learning to appreciate those who have a different number of appendages than us.”

"Well, there you go," she said. "That's the nature of imagery. It sparks our intuition. But Tarot is not about specific images. Do you really think that figures like the Emperor or the Chariot are the only ones that can inspire modern imaginations?"

"No, I suppose not," I said.

"Precisely. If we honor the *spirit* of Tarot, and not just the dead letter, isn't it our duty to bring a fresh perspective to the arcana and their imagery in each generation?"

"Well, uh, yes," I said, grasping for the first time how Wendy's ideas about Tarot were consonant with the materialist axioms of my magnum opus.

But I was letting myself get distracted by theorizing.

Wendy had stated that people were upset about Arthur's deck. That was the key.

"Some people seem to think that Arthur stole their ideas for his deck," I said. Immediately I wished I hadn't – Wendy herself might harbor such a grudge.

"Not just that," she said curtly. "I've seen enough of the cards to know that Arthur's deck reveals initiatory secrets that he swore never to disclose."

My ears perked up. "Initiatory secrets? What sort?"

"Who knows? Arthur claimed dozens of initiations – everything from Wiccan to Feri, from Enochian to Freemasonic. He even lied about his age to get into Boy Scouts so he could be initiated into Order of the Arrow."

She gave a humorless laugh. "His deck borrows imagery and symbols from so many traditions that it's anyone's guess who might feel betrayed."

Wendy's suggestion intrigued me. As I knew from Bristling Broom ceremonies, initiations often included vows of secrecy that invoked a multitude of excruciating curses upon a violator's head.

If Arthur was suspected of flouting his magical pledge, had someone decided to enforce the initiatory silence that he had sworn?

For the first time, I didn't feel like a conspiracy nut when the word "murder" crossed my mind.

I'd seen all along that some of his closest associates had reason to fear publication of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot.

Now it seemed that someone on Oracle Street might have hastened Arthur's journey to the netherworld.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

I looked at Wendy. "So – were you part of any initiatory traditions with Arthur?"

Her eyes turned hard. "I'm not at liberty to discuss that."



CHAPTER IV: EMPEROR

As Wendy swirled the remaining tea in her cup, the phone rang.

Should I stick around and try to pump her for more information? She'd just given me a possible motive for *someone* killing Arthur. Now she refused to clarify her own relation to the deceased. Clearly she knew things she didn't want to share.

Wendy lowered her voice and turned away. I stepped across the room but kept my ears peeled. Wendy listened for a minute, spoke a few words, then abruptly hung up.

"I need to go," she said without looking at me. "I'll be opening late today."

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Coming out of the Wiccan Wonderland into the sunlight, my eyes adjusted to a whole different spectrum. My head was still swimming from Wendy's bombshell – Arthur may have been killed by a fellow magician because the Trismegistus Meister Tarot was about to reveal sworn initiatory secrets.

Of course, that didn't narrow the search much. Everyone on the block except the mail carrier was probably part of some initiatory group that Arthur belonged to. He might even be a post office initiate, for all I knew.

How could I winnow it down? Maybe I could compile a list of every group that every person on Oracle Street belonged to, then cross-index each one with Arthur. That might get me somewhere – but I could never be sure I hadn't overlooked a group – and it might be the most important one!

After all, if a secret society is good at its job, shouldn't it be able to keep outsiders from knowing it exists?

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During my wanderjahre I heard about a society so secret that no one knew what it was called. The name was so carefully guarded that even members weren't allowed to know it. In fact, it was so clandestine that no one knew for certain that they belonged.

This made membership meetings difficult to arrange. But it mattered little, as, according to the most common conjecture, the society had one and only one mission – to keep its existence an absolute secret, even from its members.

What a roster! Many of the most illustrious figures through the storied centuries of Western history – Christine of Pisa, Roger Bacon, Jacob Boehme, Babe Ruth — have reputedly belonged, unbeknownst to themselves. Albert Einstein was believed to have been a member, as was Virginia Woolf. Jean-Paul Sartre was said to have declined membership, but to no avail – once you are tapped, such trifles as your opinion count for naught.

Myself? In all humility, I recognized that I did not yet merit inclusion in this august society. Despite the disappointing initial reception of my magnum opus – a reception that linked me with such luminaries as Friedrich Nietzsche, Emily Dickinson, and Arthur Rimbaud – I could not presume to such hallowed company.

And yet – what if I were the one to unravel the mystery of Arthur A. Arthur's death? Arthur, who probably set some sort of record for belonging to secret societies, surely belonged to this most secret of all societies, if anyone did.

Supposing his death was a murder – might this not be perceived as an assault on the entire society and all that it held sacred and secret?

If I could nail the killer, might I not merit nomination to the society?

Like the others, I would never know for sure. But the beguiling prospect of admission to the exalted ranks of the secret society, added to the intellectual and cultural debt I owed Arthur A. Arthur, spurred me to action.

Could I count on the authorities – who called Arthur’s death an accident, made no mention of the missing deck, and probably preferred to sweep the whole matter under the rug – to conduct a thorough and unbiased investigation?

No – as so often in the annals of crime-fighting, it would fall to a concerned citizen to fill the void left by complacent officials. Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Encyclopedia Brown... I was about to add my name to this illustrious roster.

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Oracle Street teemed with tourists, and no one paid any notice as I slipped down the alley alongside Arcane Wisdom.

Had Madame Bluebloodsky, in a fit of shoplifter’s remorse, decided to return the precious Tarot cards?

Suddenly I realized – if she *had* pilfered the deck, didn’t that implicate her in Arthur’s mysterious demise? It wasn’t likely that she’d just happened along and swiped his deck at the very moment he happened to die.

I reminded myself not to get melodramatic. Madame B probably heard about Arthur’s death on the news and came to the store at once – for whatever reason. Even if she had a hand in the deck’s disappearance, that didn’t implicate her in his death.

Yet I realized with a shudder that it wasn’t out of the question. Until the authorities confirmed that Arthur had indeed accidentally fallen and not been murdered, everyone on Oracle Street should be treated with a certain degree of professional discretion.

The back door was still unlocked. As I eased it open I could hear someone in the front of the store.

Figuring Madame Bluebloodsky was still there, I entered the back room noisily, not wanting to startle her *in flagrant devotis*.

To stumble onto her in mid-devocation was as good as inviting a curse. And I had enough troubles and travails without my hair falling out or my toenails rotting away.

Suddenly I jerked to a stop. On the worktable where Arthur had laid out the

bizarre multi-deck Tarot spread, all that remained was a jumble of cards!

I sucked in a breath. If the mixed-deck spread was a transgression of Tarot ethics, to scatter another person's divinatory layout trampled underfoot every metaphysical code of conduct in the history of the West.

Could Madame Bluebloodsky have done such a thing? Were her finely-wrought sensibilities so disordered by the spectacle that she couldn't stop herself from defacing Arthur's final Tarot spread?

Or had she realized that it implicated her?

As I gaped at the messed up cards I heard the sound of a cabinet closing in the front.

Stay focused, I reminded myself. Recovering Arthur's new deck was my number one priority. I could address ethical infringements later on.

Figuring Madame Bluebloodsky was finishing up her mourning rites, I cleared my throat loudly, then stepped into the main room just in time to see a skinny leg disappear through the front door.

Attached to the leg was a black shoe, which was little help in identifying the leg.

But above the black shoe, tattooed high on a sockless ankle, I spied a series of concentric circles.

Was it a labyrinth? A sacred omphalos? An advertisement for a famous department store?

All I could tell for sure was that the tattoo was round.

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I bounded up the three stairs to sidewalk level. My eyes darted up and down the street hoping to catch a glimpse of the stranger in the black shoes. But they must have disappeared into the crowd around the street faire.

I went back into Arcane Wisdom and shut the door. One thing for sure, those weren't Madame Bluebloodsky's legs, unless she'd performed a shrinking spell in the hour since I'd last seen her.

Was it a confederate of Madame B? What about Johanna, the regular custodian – had she come back for a visit? I'd assumed she was already on her way to Rome. Perhaps not. Her angular frame might fit the fugitive's physique.

It could really be anyone, assuming Madame Bluebloodsky left the door unlocked when she left.

But two people jumped to mind, either of whom could have been the rightful owner of the scrawny leg I saw: Alabaster Crockley or Perkins.

I went into the back room and looked again at the jumbled cards. Whoever I'd seen fleeing the store must have scrambled the reading.

Actually, I had no proof it was the tattooed fugitive. It was entirely possible that Madame Bluebloodsky did it before she left.

In fact, there could have been still more people in the store besides her and the tattooed intruder. With the door unlocked, the whole neighborhood might have traipsed through.

I stared down at the scattered cards, glad I'd committed the spread to my vise-like memory, even though at the moment I couldn't recall the specifics.

Memory – that reminded me – the deck! I hurried to the front, hoping that Madame Bluebloodsky – or anyone – had returned the deck in the interim.

The cabinet was still empty.

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I slumped against the counter, then exhaled loudly, exasperated that Arthur and Persephone had refused to allow the master paintings to be scanned or photographed. A bunch of hi-res scans would solve the most pressing of my worries.

But I understood their refusal. Tarot pirates had become a serious problem for the magical economy. Counterfeit and forged decks circulated widely, siphoning off the thin profit margin that kept artists and publishers afloat.

Worse still, bogus cards typically bore inferior artwork. Colors were faded, lettering off-center, borders miscropped. The Hanged Man's beatific smile became a grimace, Temperance resembled a barmaid mixing a cocktail, and the Hermit morphed into a zombie.

One infamous counterfeit misprinted the little booklet that explained all the meanings, mixing up Swords and Cups and sending a number of impressionable users to the metaphysical ward.

Knock-offs of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot were unavoidable. To prevent them appearing even before the real deck hit the stands, Arthur and Persephone had kept a tight rein on the miniature masterpieces. I was one of the fortunate few even to have seen them.

Were the originals really missing? Surely the authorities would have made the dramatic announcement if they had found the cards on Arthur, or at least informed those of us at his shop that the deck was safe.

Unless a mugger had stolen the cards when they assaulted Arthur, they must be here at the store.

A systematic search of Arcane Wisdom was the first order of business. Wouldn't it be embarrassing to go crying to the world that the most-anticipated Tarot deck of our generation had disappeared – that its inceptor was dead and incapable of replicating it – and then find the cards underneath an old newspaper or phone bill?

That would do little to enhance my professional standing.

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I set to work methodically, looking over, under, around, and through drawers, cabinets, and closets. Over the next thirty minutes I turned up 174 Tarot decks, 19 packs of playing cards, five Witches Oracles, seven Werewolf packs, four Uno sets, two Lenormand decks, a stack of crudely-defaced Angel Cards, and even a box of Mystical Crazy Eights – but none was the one deck that mattered.

If Madame B had taken the deck, she wasn't giving it back. But wait – maybe she returned it, and the tattooed intruder discovered the cards and fled with them when they heard me enter from the back room.

I pictured the tattooed ankle again – Perkins and Crockley were definitely the suspects. Either, upon hearing of Arthur's death, might have come searching for the deck for all sorts of personal and professional reasons.

Or were they seeking something else? Arthur's store housed several decades of magical archives and paraphernalia which might include all sorts of metaphysical dirt on other residents of Oracle Street.

At a more mundane level, someone might have owed Arthur money and wished to destroy the records. Even if Arcane Wisdom kept the stakes low, plenty of small-time gamblers squandered their paychecks at the store.

Arcane Wisdom made significant income each month from metaphysical gambling, and Tarot was front and center. Games like 78-Card Hold 'Em, Hermits Wild, and Turinese Tarocchi Smackdown brought the house a cool 15% of winnings.

Tourists who'd never been in a new-age shop couldn't resist the million-dollar pot offered to anyone who could draw an esoteric straight – the last five Majors in ascending order – from the entire 78-card deck.

Never mind that the odds were 2,533,330,800-to-1 against you. They always had to try. At a dollar a pop, it added up.

Has it ever been done? According to the Gwydion Book of Cosmic Records,

yes. The Paracelsus II Divination Computer – the world’s most powerful computing device dedicated exclusively to Tarot – was able to draw the esoteric straight (Star to World) on its 2,112,752,341st attempt during a five-day stretch.

In short – it’s been done. But don’t bet grandma’s grimoire on it.

Could gambling debts be the secret behind Arthur’s demise? Was I getting so focused on the missing deck that I was overlooking a bigger clue?

In any case, I needed to find Crockley and Perkins and hold their potentially-tattooed ankles to the harsh light of day.

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But wait – first I needed to call Persephone Coalschmidt. Did she have a hand in the disappearance of the master paintings? Maybe she took them for safekeeping – or for personal reasons?

I picked up the store phone and speed-dialed her number. She answered on the second ring. “May I speak with Ms. Persephone Coalschmidt or a designated representative of the same, if you please,” I said, using my best Midwestern manners.

“This is she,” came a sharp voice. “What do you want?”

I hadn’t planned my speech. “Yes, well, this is Jeff Harrison at Arcane Wisdom, and although it is the furthest thing from my mind to disturb your slumbers, or whatever it is that you were doing at this time of day, not that it’s any of my business, but yes – I was checking to see if you were coming by the shop?”

“Yes, around two. Why?”

How much should I say? “There are just a few loose ends. It will be easier to explain when I see you.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Harrison. Jeff Harrison. The substitute custodian at Arthur’s shop.”

She seemed to weigh the matter. “Well, Harrison, I’ll be there about two.”

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At that moment, a knock sounded at the entrance. I’d left the door unlocked when I chased the intruder, and I wondered why the knocker didn’t just come in. I walked over and opened the door.

A silver badge glinted up at me. “Special Agent,” said a short, uniformed man.

The diminutive agent wore reflecting sunglasses and a navy blue baseball

cap with raised gold letters reading "UPPIC." A shiny leather belt held a dozen electronic devices, a stun gun, and a billy club with the paint worn off around the hand grip.

"I was sent by the Security Division of the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council," he said. "It's my job to get to the bottom of matters."

I recognized the UPPIC insignia with its gold pentacle. The Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council acted as a mediating body among the countless sub-faiths, striving to quell conflicts and present a unified and positive image of religions that had, after all, been viewed rather negatively for the past couple of millennia.

Via UPPIC, Neo-Pagan groups cooperated to suppress heretical tendencies, dissident formations, and any hint of scandal.

We were still getting accustomed to the fact that since the Great Return the various Pagan tendencies not only had justice departments – UPPIC had more power than local police forces in matters of magic, divination, and ritual.

The man from UPPIC stared up at me through his mirrored glasses, then stepped past as I stood immobile in the doorway.

He paused in the center of Arcane Wisdom and looked haughtily around as if passing judgment on its recently-deceased proprietor.

I have always had the highest regard for the law and those noble individuals who dedicate their lives to ensuring our strict compliance. Still, I wondered whether I ought to let a UPPIC agent go poking around Arthur's shop.

Summoning my courage I put a question to him: "What did you say you were looking for?"

He turned his head slowly, fixing me in the glare of his reflecting lenses. "I didn't." He slapped the club against his bare hand a few times. "My task is to see that matters are resolved without unseemly publicity."

I nodded to myself. I could understand his concern for Pagan propriety. Only the previous year, High Priest Lucifer "Larry" Hieronymous of the Peoples Pagan Party was raked through the tabloid press for sexual improprieties when it was revealed that he had never actually performed the Great Rite on Beltane.

After that debacle, the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council was quick to intercede at the first hint of scandal.

But would UPPIC actually investigate Arthur's death? Or was the agent's sole responsibility to quash all questioning?

EMPEROR

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I started to enquire as to his *modus operandi*. But if his assignment was to hush things up, he might not take a shine to a concerned citizen conducting his own investigation. Best to stay quiet and observe.

The agent wandered around the space slapping his club rhythmically against his palm. After a minute or two he started humming an old Samhain chant whose name escaped me – one of those catchy minor-key ones about journeying across the Sunless Sea to the Isle of Apples, communing with the beloved if somewhat meddlesome ancestors, and coming back to tell.

I hummed along hoping the title would come to me, when suddenly he whirled and glared up at me.

“Where were you on the night of November 17th, 1968?” he demanded.

“Uh, I was, uh – I wasn’t born yet!”

“Aha! So you can’t account for your whereabouts.” He adjusted his reflecting sunglasses, put his club away, then got out a notepad and pencil and began writing, mumbling to himself the whole time.

After a moment he looked up again, pencil poised. “And who were you with? Anyone who can vouch for your alibi?”

“I told you, I wasn’t born yet,” I said, holding out my open palms to show that I was holding nothing back.

“Suspect has no alibi,” he said as he wrote on his pad.

I started to feel angry. “What does November 17th have to do with anything?”

“That’s for us to know and you to find out,” he said cagily. He tilted his head back and studied me through the mirrored shades. “Now, tell me everything you know.”

“About what?” I said.

He peered at me for a moment, then scribbled on his pad. “So you deny all knowledge?”

“I didn’t deny anything,” I said.

“Doesn’t deny anything,” he said aloud.

“No, no, I didn’t deny anything because I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Plays stupid,” he said as he wrote another sentence.

"I'm not playing stupid!"

"Claims he really is stupid," the agent muttered.

"Aaaagh!" I cried in exasperation.

"Makes threatening sounds when confronted with the facts," he noted. The agent put the pad in his pocket and pulled the club out of his belt. "Stand back," he ordered.

I wasn't sure which way "back" was, so I took cover in one of the little reading booths. He made a quick circuit of the store, using his club to shove things off of shelves, knock capes from the rack, and finally scatter the contents of the front counter all over the floor.

At last he seemed satisfied with his handiwork and came to a halt by the front door. He pointed the club directly at me. "That's all for now. But we'd like to have you visit our office for some routine questions."

"Questions?" I said shakily. "What for?"

"Simply a formality," the agent said, nodding to himself. "Civilian authorities are calling Mr. Arthur's death an accident, saying that he fell and hit his head on the curb. I'm sure they're correct, but as a formal procedure, UPPIC is questioning everyone who worked with Mr. Arthur."

"I see," I said, breathing a little easier. Apparently I wasn't a suspect. In fact, maybe I could turn the tables and pump him for some information.

He gave me a quick up and down. "You look like a morning person. Let's schedule you at eight tomorrow morning."

I gasped at the thought of losing my all-important restorative slumber. Should I tell him I wasn't a morning person? Did I dare admit that I was in fact a dyed-in-the-woolen-pajamas night owl?

Not the best plan. Given that Arthur apparently died late at night, it wasn't wise to go telling a UPPIC agent that I was always awake at that time. Just let him have his assumptions. "Sure," I said, drawing the word out to convey my lack of enthusiasm.

He didn't look up. "In fact," he said, "let's get an early start. Let's make it seven."

I bit my tongue to keep from crying out. Carry it much further and I'd have to wake up before I fell asleep.

"Fine, seven o'clock," I said quickly before he decided to make it six. "Where do I go?"

"Report to the offices of the Security Division of the Universal Pan-Pagan

EMPEROR

Interfaith Council, on the lowest level of the City Center complex. Seven o'clock sharp. Don't be late. Don't be early. Wear clean clothes and a tasteful necktie. Don't forget to floss. And call your mother more often!"

With that, the special agent from UPPIC spun on the heels of his polished boots and stormed out of the shop.



CHAPTER V: Hierophant

Once my anger abated, my first impulse, welling up from deep within my janitorial soul, was to clean up the mess the agent had left behind.

But I had urgent business – hunt down Crockley and Perkins and see if either was wearing black shoes. If so, I needed to get a gander at their ankles.

If I waited too long, they might change shoes, put on socks, or have the tattoo removed – and I'd be left clueless.

First in line was Alabaster Crockley. We'd passed on the street one time since I returned from my wanderjahre, and although I was flattered that he recalled my name, we hadn't had time to get re-acquainted.

Now, in the wake of tragedy, we were about to renew our connection at an

awkward moment.

I quickened my step as I jaywalked over to the Twisted Talisman.

Unsurprisingly, the shop had not closed in Arthur A. Arthur's honor. The front door stood open.

The Twisted Talisman operated different hours every day. As an undergrad, I used to think it was just one more way that Alabaster Crockley asserted his will against a recalcitrant world.

But when I had asked about it, he claimed he carefully calculated the astrologically most propitious times to be open each day.

Being a bit dubious about the capability of planets and stars to determine the optimal operating hours for a local business establishment, I enquired about his methodology.

"That's initiatory knowledge," he had answered. "It's part of my advanced curriculum."

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To heighten the impact of the main space, the foyer – a small lobby about twelve by eight feet – was lit by bare fluorescent lights. The hum of the lights echoed off the speckled tile floor and shiny white walls.

A bulletin board stretched along the wall facing the door, the only place in the Twisted Talisman where anyone besides Crockley and his personally-initiated assistants could advertise magical events, classes, and yard sales.

Stopping to catch my breath, I glanced at the flyers.

The Revolutionary Pagan Workers' Vanguard was offering Rites of Dialectical Materialist Passage, a six-week class recreating the historical epochs leading up to the present conjuncture: primitive accumulation, feudalism, mercantilism, industrial capitalism, and the disco era. The closing session, a student-planned ritual, would attempt to overthrow post-industrial finance capitalism.

I jotted down the contact number. Then I took a deep breath, pulled the curtain aside, and stepped into the dark, narrow vestibule.

The air was warm and stale. My eyes slowly adjusted to flickering candlelight that did little to illuminate the ebony walls.

Sprinkled across the dark ceiling were a host of glow-in-the-dark stars. I paused and paid silent homage to Stelladoma, ancient Urgrundian goddess of the heavenly vault and resident deity of the Twisted Talisman.

Legend held that many years earlier Stelladoma had revealed Herself to

Alabaster Crockley while he was in the throes of an auto-erotic episode which some whispered involved performance of the Great Rite from the mythical *Urgrundian Book of the Dead, the Dying, and Those Who Are Likely to Die Someday*.

Most people think you need at least two people to perform the Great Rite. Some old-timers even think it's supposed to be people of different genders.

Alabaster Crockley held that what mattered most was intent and will.

If one had a sufficiently strong will, it was possible to play all roles and perform the Great Rite alone.

According to what I'd heard, Stelladoma appeared in a celestial apparition during one such erotic ritual and commanded Crockley to write down Her precise words, which conveniently were spoken in English.

Amid all of the hullabaloo about ancient deities and spiritual communiques, I sensed a deeper purpose: Alabaster Crockley was scheming to start a new religion based on the worship of Stelladoma with himself as first prophet and high priest.

He'd hinted in the past that he'd already channeled an entire curriculum and calendar of sacred rites along with a generous tithing schedule.

I could see why such a role might appeal to him, but it made me a little sad to think of him getting all excited about it – and then he'd have to watch it steamrolled by my own innovative participatory religion, the aforementioned Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance.

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Drawing one more breath in homage to Stelladoma I stepped from the narrow vestibule into the Twisted Talisman proper.

Three years had passed since my last visit, but the tenebrous little shop hadn't changed. In each corner stood an altar draped in black velvet. Framed prints of Major Arcana from the Thoth deck were interspersed with tastefully displayed scourges, whips, handcuffs, and other magical implements. Metallic studs glimmered in the purplish glow of the display cases.

Alabaster Crockley, tall and thin, long dark hair draped across his pale face, hunched over the front counter. Without a word he lifted his eyes and met mine.

In the dim light I couldn't read his expression. Surely he knew that Arthur had passed. Was he speechless at the death of one who, whatever their conflicts and struggles, surely numbered among his closest associates?

Or did his silence mask complicity in the disappearance of Arthur's ultimate achievement?

Was he counting on me to cut him slack and raise no questions based on our past familiarity?

In spite of his forbidding appearance, Al Crockley and I were on a first-name basis. That was ironic, given that during my undergrad years I had registered for and then dropped his seminar, *Prolegomena Symbolica ad Systemam Sceptico-Mysticae Viae Explicandae Fundamentum Hieroglyphicum Sanctissimorum Scientiae Summae*.

The seminar, called *Intro to Magic* for short, was no doubt first-rate, but it interfered with the final formulation of my magnum opus.

Not unexpectedly, Crockley had been upset at my withdrawal, and I hadn't even bothered asking him to stock my book. In any event, the *Twisted Talisman* only carried Crockley's personally-channeled works.

What got us back on good terms was my repairing a light switch in the *Twisted Talisman's* restroom shortly before I left on my wanderjahre.

Crockley got shocked trying to fix it, so he had been delighted when I not only replaced it, but showed him how, by a simple re-routing of the wiring from the restroom into the main room, through the display cases, back to the coffee grinder, and finally out to the security lights, we could make the display lights blink on and off every time the newly-installed electric toilet was flushed, while anyone triggering the security lights would set off a round of toilet flushing and coffee-grinding that would make an intruder think people were in the shop.

It had been brilliant work for an undergrad, and I figured he'd let me take a class or two for free.

I wasn't prepared for the supreme honor: "Call me Al," he had said. "Come by any time. You never know what else might need 'rewiring!'"

He had winked lewdly as if suggesting some arcane ritual practice which doubtless involved considerable disrobing – one could only speculate as to the sordid details. Still I knew that underneath the ribaldry lay cold pragmatism – he was making a hedge against the day when he might need some more electrical work.

But now, first-name or no, I determined to be vigilant. I might be facing a desperate Tarot thief – one known to stop at nothing to impose his will.

Aside from his known antipathy for the deceased, Crockley had professional reasons to be worried about the impending publication of Arthur's deck and

accompanying book.

Alabaster Crockley had spent the last ten years preparing his own deck, the Universal Urgrundian Petroglyphic Tarot, based on the theory that Tarot descended from archetypal symbols of now-lost Urgrundian rock carvings.

Crockley's deck was still years from completion, though, and the booklet accompanying Arthur's new deck was known to debunk theories of Tarot's ancient origin: Egyptian, Sumerian, Neo-Platonic, Gnostic, Cabalistic, Arabic, Indian, Chinese, and above all Urgrundian.

With Arthur's research laying waste to Neo-Urgrundian mysticism, the publication of his deck threatened to render Crockley's a mere cross-cultural oddity.

Was it so hard to imagine that Crockley, desperate to preserve his Urgrundian fiefdom, might have seen personal advantage in the disappearance of Arthur's cards?

Certainly his derisive demeanor did nothing to assure me of his innocence.

As I pondered my opening gambit, he preempted me. "Been visiting the Wiccan Wonderland?" he said sardonically. "How's Wendy the Wacky Witch?"

Crockley and I had shared more than a few laughs at Wendy's expense in the past, but it made me uncomfortable to have him monitoring my whereabouts. "How did you know I was there?"

His eyelids closed half way, and his voice grew dreamy. "There is naught hidden from one whose sight is undefiled."

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Undefiled? Of course, Alabaster Crockley claimed that spiritually superior beings (such as himself, to take his favorite example) created their own ethical norms. Most people come out undefiled when they get to make the rules.

Might making his own laws extend to doing whatever was necessary to thwart Arthur's final magical creation?

I pictured the tattooed ankle I saw fleeing Arcane Wisdom that morning. Had Crockley been spying on Arcane Wisdom, watching for an opportune moment to rush in and steal the precious deck?

Seeing me go into the Wiccan Wonderland, all he had to do was watch from the Twisted Talisman's doorstep until Madame Bluebloodsky departed.

That interlude, however brief, could have given him enough time to dash into

Arcane Wisdom and search for the deck. Seeing Arthur's bizarre spread in the back room, paranoia no doubt led to the despoliation of the multi-deck layout.

Had Crockley found the Trismegistus Meister paintings? Was he fleeing with the goods when I spotted the tattoo?

There was one way to double-check my theory – get a good look at Crockley's ankles. That they were bony was beyond doubt. That they were pasty white was just as certain. Even the tip of his nose was white.

His shirt and slacks were black, and of course his shoes matched. Nothing out of the ordinary there. With the exception of tasteful scarlet trim, Crockley never wore any color except black. It wasn't his clothes I needed to see. It was his ankle.

Quickly I concocted a plan to get him to reach for something on a top shelf, thus exposing his ankle to my purview. "Wow," I said as if seized with an ardent desire for occult knowledge, "I never noticed that velvet day-glow painting of Stelladoma up there. That must be really rare. Do you mind if I have a closer look?"

He gave his head a slight shake. "Sure, go ahead."

"I can't stretch that far," I said. "I, uh, I threw my shoulder out last week doing an Air invocation. Could you get it down?"

He looked up at the shimmering painting of the Urgrundian goddess of the night sky. "Actually, I have several more under the counter," he said. He reached down and pulled out an identical work.

Foiled! I pretended to study the cheesy lounge painting. "Yeah, wow, amazing, huh?" I said as convincingly as I could muster, all the while racking my brain for a new plan.

Maybe I could get low enough to see from the underside. Knocking a pen off the counter I knelt to retrieve it, dipping down till my head scraped the carpet. I succeeded in catching a glimpse up his cuff, but boots covered his ankles.

I stood. If the tattooed culprit fleeing Arcane Wisdom was Crockley, he'd changed shoes in the interim. Lacking access to that tell-tale clue, I had to resort to interrogating him.

Perhaps the shock of hearing his victim's name would rattle his façade. I took a breath. "How sad to hear about Arthur." I drew out the name for emphasis.

"Yes, I suppose," he said without looking up. "One can scarcely get excited

over the spilled blood of a faded adversary. It's the weakest sort, hardly worth the trouble of draining."

I took an involuntary step back. How could anyone on Oracle Street speak so blithely of blood on the very day of Arthur's death?

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I stared at him. He didn't meet my eyes, but the flicker of a wicked smile played across his tight lips. I reminded myself that blood-images were one of his favorite ways of outraging the public.

Crockley's iconoclastic stunts had long captured the fancy of the tabloid press. The *Pagan World Observer & Magickal Querent* once labeled Crockley "The Incarnation of Evil," alleging that the Twisted Talisman's proprietor engaged in satanic/demonic practices such as sacrificing infants, drinking the blood of virgins of several genders, and wearing ritual robes with shockingly short hemlines.

Were the extravagant stories true? They certainly didn't hurt business at his shop. Apparently everyone wanted to believe there was something behind all the talk of blood and death.

Until now. With Arthur at the morgue, death wasn't such a laughing matter.

I searched for an angle. The blunt approach hadn't worked so well. Maybe I needed to soften him up a bit.

"So, Al," I began casually, "how is your Tarot deck coming along since I left town?"

He abruptly looked up. "I've been making progress at the conceptual level," he said sharply, as if I had issued a challenge to his integrity as a magician. "These things can't be tossed off half-baked, despite what some people do."

Ignoring the poke at Arthur, I stayed focused on Crockley's favorite topic – himself. "Your deck is still based on Urgrundian rock art?"

"Why begin anywhere but the source?" He gazed beyond me. "Western history didn't spring fully formed at the Italian Renaissance, like some so-called Tarot experts believe. It didn't start with the Romans or Greeks, nor the Egyptians or Assyrians.

"To understand the essence of Tarot, indeed of all magic, we must return to the roots – beyond the oldest languages, beyond the most ancient artifacts, and reclaim as our own the primordial past – the source of all sources, the foundation of all foundations – the Urgrundians."

Although he wasn't looking at me as he spoke, I nodded noncommittally.

HIEROPHANT

Unlike Crockley, I was no devotee of the Urgrundian Imputation, although I had to admit its logical rigor was impressive.

Basically, whatever historical evidence told us about the birth of Western culture, the Imputation postulated that the Urgrundians were behind it.

To trace one's lineage to the Urgrundians was as good as claiming ancestry back to the first glistening rays at the dawn of civilization.*

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"The Urgrundians," Crockley continued, "were in contact with nascent life, with the eternal and immutable order which united Heaven and Earth, body and spirit. Their knowledge came not from texts and teachings, but direct experience of the sacredness of nature and all being.

"To celebrate this immediate encounter with life and the divine, the Urgrundians created magic, language, science, and myth. They passed these arts down to their descendents, but inevitably the process of transmission and interpretation diluted the primal experience, and the original inspiration was lost.

"Down through the ages, in every generation, some strive to recover this raw, unmediated experience of the divine – a direct encounter with pure spirit. Most are distracted by the empty forms of religion and scholarship. They learn endless rites and facts, but lack the animating spirit. The wisdom of the ancients is forever closed to them.

"Only those rare virtuosi who by dint of disciplined practice achieve the pinnacle of purity shall prove capable of unlocking the secrets of the Urgrundians!"

I nodded slowly to indicate that I grasped his points. "So I get the purity and rigor and all that," I said. "What I don't get is, if magic and Tarot descend from pre-history, how did they get down to us? It's not like we all have keepsakes from our Urgrundian ancestors tucked away in our attics."

"Of course not," he said bluntly. "The inheritance depends not on artifacts but on an unbroken transmission through the millennia by magical adepts.

* - The origin of Western civilization used to be credited to the Egyptians and Sumerians, the first cultures to leave written records. Archaeological studies by Marija Gimbutas and others have pushed the dawn of history back into the pre-literate Neolithic era.

Advocates of the Urgrundian Imputation note that these earliest documented civilizations didn't burst forth fully formed. They must have had antecedents. By extrapolatory logic the beginning of the chain must have been the Urgrundians, who thus form the postulative foundation of all Western culture.

You would know that if you had completed my course of study." He eyed me archly.

"I was, uh, that is, I was editing my book," I mumbled, then hastily added, "I assure you that I am most sincerely interested in your views on the transmission of the sacred Urgrundian inheritance."

He tilted his head back and gave a satisfied smile. "To begin with, then, it is essential to acknowledge that the oldest literate civilizations in the West – Mesopotamia and Egypt – already possessed sophisticated cultural techniques, including myth, divination, and magic.

"These societies must have had pre-literate antecedents, which themselves had forebears, and so on. Logically the lineage can be traced to the first of all sources – the Urgrundians."

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I let the name linger for a moment, then asked: "So you're saying Tarot is older than written language?"

"Precisely! In the earliest generations, the wisdom of the ancestors was transmitted not in words but by means of archetypal images. Artists shared sacred knowledge through drawings, rock paintings, or the decoration of pottery. Patterns and figures that seem mere ornament to the untutored eye conveyed timeless truths to those with discernment.

"Through these primaeval images, ancient wisdom was passed down through the ages until in Mesopotamia it was inscribed in the heavens in the form of the zodiac – twelve sacred images that guide our lives.

"Ancient Egypt refined the images into hieroglyphics, which sought to encapsulate the mysteries of the universe in the guise of an alphabetic script."

I pictured the antique script with its mixture of curves and squiggles and birds and unblinking eyeballs. Hieroglyphics certainly conveyed a sense of mystery, and must have presented a real challenge during spelling bees.

"There's a problem, though," I said. "The understanding of hieroglyphics was lost for centuries. How could they transmit secret knowledge?"

"They didn't! The deepest truths can never be captured in writing. It has always been the function of secret societies to preserve and pass along archetypal knowledge as an unchanging tradition."

I was intrigued at the mention of secret societies. But I didn't get the point. "Why keep it secret?" I asked. "Why not publish the knowledge widely so everyone could share it? Wouldn't that be the best way to ensure continuity?"

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Crockley laughed coldly. "And watch the wisdom of the ages degraded into dry and dusty creeds? Look at the history of religions – the spiritual insights of one generation ossify as the empty platitudes of the next. Yesterday's liberation becomes today's chains.

"The only way to preserve primaevial revelations as living epiphanies is through secret initiatory societies, where a carefully selected membership swears to keep the knowledge alive and place it in responsible hands of the next generation."

"There's been quite a few generations from the Urgrundians to today," I pointed out in a skeptical tone.

"Yes," he said as though I had grasped his key point. "And the essence of Urgrundian culture has been transmitted in an unbroken chain, from Sumerian poets to Egyptian priests to Greek mystery cults to Gnostic visionaries. Gnostic sects bequeathed these truths to the Arabic world, where the secrets flourished in mystic movements such as the Sufis."

"Okay," I said. "But how do you get from this 'secret knowledge' to your Tarot deck?"

He recoiled. "What do you think Tarot is? Tarot is the repository of this knowledge!"

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I took a slow breath. I was starting to see what Crockley was driving at. He wasn't claiming that Tarot itself was an Urgrundian creation, but that it grew out of a lineage of images and divinatory wisdom stemming back to prehistoric times.

Obviously divination didn't begin with cartomancy – paper was rare before modern times, and playing cards date only from the late Middle Ages. It didn't start with the study of planetary aspects or bird entrails, important as these would become.

Divination probably began with people consulting an oracle – someone older, craggier, uncannier, more marginal – in a word, someone weirder than you.

Someone whose very strangeness might give them special insight into the mysterious ways of the gods and goddesses, the occult workings of nature, and perhaps the hidden book of the future.

For commoners, you had your local and regional fortune-tellers – the cunning old man down the lane, the foreign-born woman in the next village.

For the more upscale, celebrity oracles held court at sacred shrines around

A FOOL SUCH AS I

the ancient Mediterranean – Delphi, Cumae, Erythrae, or Trophonius.

Sometimes the sacred voice responded in song or cryptic poetry. Other times they were prosaically blunt.

The story is told that Trojan refugee Aeneas, on his way to spawn Rome's founding dynasty, sought guidance from the spirit of his dead father, Anchises.

He traveled to the sanctuary of the Cumaean Sybil near a volcanic crater in Southern Italy, supposed entrance to the underworld. After various offerings and invocations and propitiations and the like, Aeneas asked with averted eyes:

"Oh great Sybil – I seek my father's spirit! How do I approach the underworld? How does one journey to the abode of the dead?"

The Sybil gazed at the rustling leaves outside her cave, then sang her answer: "Foolish mortal, 'tis all too easy to travel to the land of the dead. But to return to this world, that is labor indeed!"

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Ancient oracles were known for their snappy one-liners. But it was still a long leap from Sibyls to the Major Arcana. I shook my head. "Do you think Gnostics and Sufis knew Tarot?"

Crockley looked exasperated. "Or something like it! The point is, these images have been passed covertly through the ages, carrying with them the ancient wisdom of the Ugrundians. The form of the images has varied – rock art, altar paintings, tattoos, playing cards. But in each generation a saving remnant, organized as a sworn society, understood the true meanings of the images and entrusted those secrets to their descendants.

"The Templars brought the secrets, or 'gnosis' as it was called, from Arabic lands to Europe, where it took hold among dissident Christian sects such as Cathars, Waldensians, and the Family of Love.

"Inquisitions forced the knowledge underground, but we find it again at Italian Renaissance courts and among Christian Cabalists, Rosicrucians, and certain Freemasonic traditions.

"Finally in the later 1800s these traditions converged in the great Eliphas Levi, who in his writings shared as much as the honor of his magical and spiritual vows allowed."

"So Levi made the knowledge more or less public?"

Crockley scoffed. "Not in its deepest aspects. Certainly most magical traditions since his time have built on the foundation he laid in his books. But

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writings can only take you so far. Only those who are heir to the teachings of the secret societies – knowledge that is passed from teacher to student and never in writing – only such adepts can unlock the ancient gnosis and transmit this wisdom to our day.”

He gazed beyond me as if feeling the weight of his words. “This,” he concluded, “is the true and veracious origin and lineage of the Tarot – the unalloyed transmission and embodiment of the sacred Urgrundian heritage, which my deck will bring to fruition for modern times!”

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I gave him a moment to savor his speech. Regardless of how far back Tarot actually went, legends of famous spreads stretched into the past.

Jewish tradition avers that a Jacob’s Ladder layout with the Ace of Cups in the future position convinced Noah to start construction on the ark.

Julius Caesar is said to have scoffed when his wife’s reading on the eve of the Ides of March highlighted the Ten of Swords.

Joan of Arc reportedly drew the Knight of Swords as her Signifier and got so excited she took off for the front lines, never turning up the Ten of Wands that lay in the Outcome position.

The most famous tales, of course, surround Jesus of Nazareth, who that last night in Gethsemane drew the desultory Five of Chalices as his Outcome card and cried, “Father, if it be Thy will, let this Cup pass from me!”

God, in his infinite mercy, granted a crossing card. Jesus took a deep breath, let his left hand hover over the deck for a moment, and turned up the Hanged Man.

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I spoke carefully. “I’ve heard that some scholars believe, well, you know, that Tarot was created at Italian Renaissance courts in the mid 1400s, and that there are no known historical antecedents, let alone any prehistoric ones.”

Alabaster Crockley’s head snapped back. “Yes – and those same so-called ‘scholars’ will try to convince you that Tarot began as a courtiers’ game.”

“Well,” I said with a suppressed smile, “that *is* what recent research suggests.”

“You call that research? Your ‘scholars’ can’t see beyond the cloud of dust they stir up. For them, all of Western culture begins with the Renaissance. Tarot – a game? As if the most ancient and sacred iconography of our culture was naught but a trifle!”

He began pacing back and forth in front of the counter as if oblivious to my presence. "Arthur! How could someone with so little understanding of esoteric history – of the origins of sacred images and their deepest meanings – completely incapable of illuminating the multivalent richness – you would think someone who was initiated into the mysteries –"

He ranted on, but my attention was riveted by the allusion to Arthur's initiation into unspecified "mysteries."

Did these initiations involve the ancient Urgrundian traditions that obsessed Crockley?

Had Arthur paid with his life for threatening to betray the secrets of the Urgrundians?

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Maybe this was the lever I needed to pry the truth from Alabaster Crockley. I leveled my gaze at him. "I believe that Arthur was 'initiated' into the deepest 'secrets' of Tarot."

He snorted. "Many attain the highest level of initiation without ever grasping its essence in their hearts. Arthur received the degrees, but in his academic arrogance he missed the ultimate key. Without tracing the art to its most ancient Urgrundian roots, without acknowledging the unbroken lineage of the secret societies, he forever betrayed Tarot's origins and heaped ashes onto the memory of its true meaning."

"You think Arthur didn't understand Tarot?"

"No more than Wendy Womansdaughter and her ever-evolving new-age imagery, or old Papyrus and his arid numerosophy. Not one of them grasps the true source and power of Tarot!"

My ears perked up at the mention of the mysterious Dr. Papyrus.

Back during my undergrad days in Key City, I'd heard the name whispered in a tone midway between reverence and contempt by Crockley, Arthur, Wendy, and others. Although never a shop owner, he was apparently once the dean of magicians in the Greater Oracle Street Region.

Both Arthur and Alabaster Crockley, while acknowledging their debt to Dr. Papyrus, tinged their comments with a creepy quality. I'd always had the sense I wouldn't want to meet him – maybe because the antipodean Crockley and Arthur were in rare agreement regarding the shadiness of Dr. Papyrus.

Now I began to sense that this Papyrus character, whatever his personal shortcomings, might shed some light on the present mystery.

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For although Arthur A. Arthur was the original esoteric entrepreneur of Oracle Street, legend held that the hermitlike Dr. Papyrus had once been his teacher.

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I'd learned back during my undergrad years that Dr. Papyrus had already been renting a flat in a single-room occupancy hotel near Oracle Street when, 25 years earlier, Arthur first alighted in Key City.

By signs he never disclosed, Arthur recognized Dr. Papyrus as his magical preceptor and began visiting the older man's room to receive initiation into the mystery school known as COTA: Colorers of the Arcana.

Arthur wasn't Dr. Papyrus's only student in those days. Alabaster Crockley was also seeking initiation at the time of his falling out with Arthur. In fact, their clash reportedly stemmed from disagreements over the doctor's mystery school.

One of COTA's primary teaching guides was a color-by-number deck of Tarot Majors.

The final step in the COTA initiatory process was to color the cards by hand, exactly according to Dr. Papyrus's original instructions, while meditating on the correct colors in the correct spaces in the correct order. Only thus could their deepest wisdom and power be unlocked.

Apparently Alabaster Crockley had trouble coloring within the lines.

Arthur, acting as a sort of graduate assistant to Dr. Papyrus, insisted that he start over and do it correctly.

In response, Crockley drafted his own set of instructions allowing third-degree initiates in other traditions to choose their own colors, and those with thirty-third degree honors to draw outside the lines with impunity.

Since Crockley claimed thirty-third degree initiations in several secret societies, he proceeded to scribble all over the COTA cards and turn them in as his final homework.

Arthur appealed to Dr. Papyrus, but the latter promised only to take the matter under advisement. Whether by assent or neglect, he eventually initiated Crockley, who thumbed his nose at Arthur. The two had been arch-enemies ever since.

How much did the good doctor know about their conflict? Might the disappearance of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot have something to do with sworn secrets from their COTA initiations?

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I spoke casually, as if asking the time of day. "You now, I've always wondered where one might find this Dr. Papyrus character."

Crockley squinted at me. "Why would you want to know?"

"Just curious, that's all," I said. "Is he still around these parts?"

"Oh, yeah." Crockley nodded knowingly. "He's around alright. He never leaves his room."

That'll make him easy to find, I thought. "And where might that room be?"

He paused for a moment, as if weighing my question. Was he trying to protect me from a teacher whose reputation was none too savory?

Or could it be that he was steering me away from someone who might reveal his own youthful foibles – and who might unravel the tangled web that linked Crockley to the now-deceased Arthur?

Crockley's voice broke into my ruminations. "Dr. Papyrus, eh? You want to visit old Papyrus?"

"Well, you never know," I said. "I mean, if he was one of your teachers..."

"I wouldn't go that far," he said with a scowl. "I took a class or two that he allegedly taught, that's about the extent of it. But he's still in the same place he's been all along: the Visconti-Sforza Hotel, just around the corner on Campanella Way. Room 13. He never leaves. If he's not there, it probably means he's dead."

He paused, then added with a dry laugh: "Give him my regards if you see him."

"Great," I said. I knew I wasn't going to get much more out of Crockley. But I could take a quick look around the back room for a pair of low-cut black shoes. If they were still warm, they might be the loafers I'd seen beneath the tattooed ankle.

"Do you mind if I use the toilet?" I asked.

He gave me a cool look. "Do as thou wilt is the whole of the Law."

"Wait," I said, "I thought you wrote that 'Love is the law.' Or at least part of it."

"'Love under will,' is what I wrote. So you've been reading my latest book?"

I smiled, hoping the compliment might lower his guard. "Actually, yes, and after a few times I think I'm starting to understand it."

"You understand nothing if you continue to read it," he snapped. "Didn't you

read the Preface? I distinctly said, 'The study of this book is forbidden.'"

I blushed. "I guess I skipped the Preface. I wanted to get right to the important part."

"The Preface *is* the important part! If you'd read it, you'd know that my strict injunction was to burn the book after one reading."

"Geez," I said, inwardly resolving to studiously ignore his next book. "Sorry – I won't do it again."

His lips curled into a crooked smile as if he'd bested me in a psychic duel.

Well, let him have his moment. It wasn't going to dissuade me from the dogged pursuit of my investigation.

I made my way to the restroom in the back. I didn't really have to use the toilet, but I figured Crockley might be watching, so I went into the little cubicle and shut the door.

Once inside, I realized my own handiwork was about to betray me. He'd know when I finished because the lights in the display cases would blink when I flushed the electric toilet. If I didn't come straight back to the front, he'd be suspicious.

Cracking the door slightly, I made sure he wasn't in the back room waiting for me. The coast was clear. I slipped out.

What was I looking for? Shoes. Black shoes.

My eyes raced around the room. Instantly I spied a pair of telltale low-cut black loafers!

And another pair next to them. And several more behind them. A veritable boatload of clues! Unfortunately, too many to check them all for residual warmth.

As I studied the shoes I heard Crockley heading toward the back room. I jumped into the restroom before he came through the doorway, pressing the button of the toilet to indicate I was just finishing up.

When I came out, I saw that it was nearly time to meet Persephone. I certainly didn't want to keep her waiting. She of all people was likely to know the whereabouts of the missing Tarot deck.

Maybe she had the cards, and there was nothing to worry about.

Or maybe she had the cards, and there was plenty to worry about.



CHAPTER VI: LOVERS

I hurried back to Arcane Wisdom and set about cleaning the shop before meeting Persephone.

Our two o'clock rendezvous was my last hope for recovering the Trismegistus Meister Tarot without having to solve an entire mystery.

Not that I suspected Persephone Coalschmidt of foul play. Not in the least. But she certainly had an interest in the future of the Tarot deck.

Maybe she heard about Arthur's death on the morning news and came to the store before I arrived and retrieved the deck.

Had she taken it for safekeeping? Or for personal benefaction? Was it any of my business?

LOVERS

Persephone had spent several of her best years helping Arthur realize his dream of a fully intuitive Tarot deck.

Even if Arthur had collated the symbolism, Persephone's genius crafted the supple, evocative paintings that spellbound even a novice like myself.

Persephone was widely regarded as the most promising of Arthur's advanced students, and I'd been in awe since we met.

Nor was I alone. With her goddess-like bearing crowned by Arthur's evident regard, I knew any number of men, not a few women, and several gender-queer folks who pined for her.

While I wasn't entirely certain she knew my name, I had this vision that once she finished up her work for Arthur, and as I gained her deeper confidence and profound respect, she would be inspired to do a few dozen illustrations for the later volumes of my magnum opus.

But regardless of my esteem and my sincere desire to establish a professional collaborative partnership, I needed to be as coldly calculating with her as with anyone else.

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As I tidied up the store, I reviewed what I knew of her. Persephone was a member in good standing of the New Archaic Re-Established Order of the Rosy Red Sunset, one of the many offshoots of the Ancient Hermetic Order of the Rosy Red Sunset, a secret society founded in London in the late 1800s.

The original organization disbanded in 1900, but successors immediately cropped up. Persephone's group was a direct offshoot of the Rather Old and Accepted Order of the Rosy Red Sunset, itself springing from the Even Older Yet Oft Re-Invigorated Order, which claimed lineal descent from one of the original splinter groups.

While I wasn't drawn to the formulaic practices of the Rosy Red Sunset groups (preferring the more free-form rituals of my soon-to-be-inaugurated Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance), I had to admit a certain envy of the antiquity of the Rosy Red tradition.

While my plans for NROSSWOR would answer every practical and emotional demand of a contemporary spiritual tradition, it lacked that certain "legitimacy" granted by a more mystical calling.

I didn't want to fabricate a blatant untruth. I needed something mystical yet plausible – something like the original Rosy Red Sunset group itself.

According to legend, the order's three founders (upper-middle-class

professional men who shared a cloistered fascination with the occult) were rummaging among the barrows and bookstalls of Victorian London one Summer afternoon in 1884 when they chanced upon a previously unknown volume of esoteric lore.

Tucked into the book were several pages of cryptic notes, along with the address of one Fraulein Gespünken in Germany.

Intrigued, the three wrote to Fraulein Gespünken telling her of their discovery and asking permission to found a secret society dedicated to deciphering the notes. The good Fraulein responded with an utterly obscure letter which the men took to be a sure sign of their calling.

Amid much ritual and pomp the Ancient Hermetic Order of the Rosy Red Sunset (AHORRS) was formed.

Basic to the understanding of their task was the faith that buried within the first batch of notes were instructions for contacting the Secret Masters of the Craft, believed to be living in a dilapidated chateau in the South of France. If contact could be established with the Secret Masters, further pages of cryptic notes might be forthcoming, implicitly validating AHORRS's mission.

Several dozen people of various genders were persuaded to become dues-paying members, and AHORRS got down to the task at hand – deciphering the initial pages of cryptic notes.

The work proceeded apace, with rituals, ceremonies, and spells to ensure its efficacy. The translators had just prepared the first draft of what promised to be a magical bombshell when Fraulein Gespünken suddenly died.

Aghast, AHORRS's founders tried desperately to contact the Secret Masters of the Craft. When registered letters were returned, they went so far as to take out a subscription to *Psychic Readers' Digest* in the Secret Masters' name. But all was in vain – everything came back stamped "Unknown At This Site," "No Forwarding Address," or "Get Lost and Quit Bugging Us."

Finally one of AHORRS's founders had an inspiration – he ordered a pizza for the Secret Masters and had it delivered to their address. When they accepted delivery, he had the proof he needed.

He flew to the South of France, located the chateau, and confronted the Secret Masters, who confessed to eating the pizza and sending back the letters and magazines, but refused any further cooperation.

The founder begged them to reconsider, but when he returned the next day the Secret Masters of the Craft were gone.

LOVERS

On the front porch of the dilapidated chateau was a note, crudely hand-lettered on the back of the pizza box: "Give up your quest for our secrets or suffer the curse of the ancient ones! Go find your own secrets and leave us alone!"

Faced with the collapse of their project, AHORRS's founders fell to infighting. Soon the Ancient Hermetic Order was torn into a dozen pieces, each wearing a different shade of red and racing to re-establish contact with the Secret Masters.

Finally one of AHORRS's youngest members, Frater Perambulus, received a visitation from a spirit claiming to speak for the Secret Masters.

Buried within this esoteric communique was a message so obscure and convoluted that no one could doubt its authenticity.

No one could decipher it, either. Which made it the perfect validating document for a Western religion. Frater Perambulus had it framed, started a new tradition, and lived on Easy Street the rest of his life.

So I knew it could be done. It all depended on having a good foundational legend on which to build.

The problem is, I am the sort of journalistically-imbued young scrivener who cannot help but record the unvarnished truth – an inveterate social realist. Sometimes I wonder whether I am temperamentally suited for writing a mythical origins document for a major world religion.

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The front door opened. In strode Persephone Coalschmidt, auburn hair trailing down her back. I caught my breath as her graceful steps carried her across the floor.

"Hey there," she said.

"Fine, thanks, and you?" I answered, hoping to get some conversational flow going.

She let it drop like a lead bowling ball.

I cut straight to the missing deck. "I have some terrible news, or maybe not so bad if you happen to know anything about it, which in fact would greatly facilitate my own task at hand, but I figured I better warn you so you don't faint. Do you want me to get some water, just in case?"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded in a tone that reassured me that she didn't desire a glass of water.

With a wave of embarrassment I realized that I should have begun by offering condolences to one whose life and well-being had been so intimately entwined with the recently deceased Arthur A. Arthur.

How socially maladept could I possibly be?

I decided not to contemplate that question, but without further ado to address the potential emotional concerns of my co-worker.

"I'm, uh, that is, I want to say, in so many words, not that I am particularly adroit at this sort of thing, although I did quite well in Custodial Report Writing courses..."

She stared at me.

I flushed. "Let me get right to the point," I said hurriedly. "I am sincerely bereaved to hear about your loss, which must be causing you incalculable distress in this your moment of trial and tribulation, assuming of course that you already know that Arthur is dead, which I certainly hope I am not the first to –"

"Of course I know," she said flatly. She turned toward the front counter.

"Wait," I called. "Now that we have dispensed with that formality, I have something very important to ask – might I request just one more moment of your time, which I of course know to be quite valuable?"

"Yes?" she said impatiently.

"The new deck," I said breathlessly. "Remember the cards you and Arthur were working on? And you left them in the cabinet last night?"

"Oh," she said, not nearly as upset as I would have expected the painter of a missing Tarot deck to be. "I have them."

My breath hissed through my teeth. "You have them?"

"I couldn't sleep last night, knowing that it was my last chance to make changes. So I came back and got the cards."

"Blessed be the Great Mother Goddess," I nearly shouted. "Here I thought someone had broken in and stolen them!"

I told her about seeing someone flee, although I didn't let on that I had a prime suspect, or maybe even two. "I thought we had a mystery on our hands."

"Well, the mystery is solved," Persephone said. "I took the cards. And I have all six of them right here."



Chapter VII: Chariot

Persephone reached into her purse and produced a blue silk bag. Gingerly she removed a handful of painted cards separated by tissue paper. "Here are all six."

"Six?"

"Yes," she said, "I have all of them."

"The whole deck?"

"No, these six."

I leaned against the counter for support. "But the deck – where is the rest of the deck?"

She looked at me oddly. "In the cabinet."

"I looked there, and everywhere. It's gone."

"Impossible. It goes to the printer today."

"I know," I assured her. "We owe it to Arthur to get it there on time."

"Not just that," she said coldly. "We owe it to Cornelius De Roquefort."

I recognized the name of the retired CEO of the Headstone Metaphysical Outlet chain, for whom Arthur did private readings. "Why does Roquefort care if it gets to the printer on time? He's just paying the bill."

"Exactly," she said. "His contract specifies today for delivery. There's a one-week grace period. After that, he has the right to void the contract."

"He wouldn't do that. He's one of Arthur's oldest clients, isn't he?"

She peered at me for a long moment and I started to feel uncomfortably like I was disappointing her.

"Arthur is dead," she said flatly. "Cornelius De Roquefort is an incredibly private man. He always avoided any kind of publicity until Arthur convinced him to be named 'Presenter' of the deck."

"Surely he wouldn't undermine Arthur's final legacy," I said, but it felt more like a question than a statement, given that I'd never met the man.

"Now that Arthur isn't in a position to do anything for him," Persephone said in a tight voice, "I don't know what to expect. De Roquefort dreads the prospect of being cursed by Alabaster Crockley and others whose business might be hurt. With Arthur dead, De Roquefort is probably looking for a pretext to get out of the contract. If we miss the deadline, he'll have his excuse."

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Silence hung in the air. "Maybe Arthur came back last night and got the cards," I said hopefully.

She looked at me with irritation. "Why would he have done that?"

"I don't know – but if he did, well, maybe someone robbed him, or the police found them on his body and just haven't announced it...." My voice trailed off.

She shook her head sharply. "Not likely. The deck was here when I came back after midnight and got the six cards. Arthur died not long after that. And I heard he was at Happy Endings for a while before he died."

That seemed to rule out my theory that Arthur had been held captive at the store – but in that case, when had he done the weird multi-deck layout? Was it from the previous day? Something didn't add up.

"We have to find the deck," she said. "It was here last night. You must not have looked hard enough."

"I searched the whole store."

Persephone glared at me like I was playing a particularly harsh trick on her. Did she really think I'd taken the cards?

Or was it all a ruse? What if Persephone had taken the entire deck, and now was proffering a half-dozen cards which she was confident she could replicate? Maybe she was using these cards to divert suspicion from herself for the theft of the whole deck.

Was she planning to publish the deck herself – perhaps with her name in larger type? For all I knew, her secret agreement with Arthur may have made her heir to his estate. Had she decided to speed up the process?

With the project completed, she no longer needed Arthur's assistance. In fact, if he happened to die just as the deck went to market, it might be seen as free publicity.

Who stood to profit more than Persephone?

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I couldn't bring myself to believe it. Intuition, deduction, and admiration mingled to make Persephone the least likely candidate for suspicion.

Her phone rang. She stepped away and turned her back. "Yes?" she said nervously. "Tomorrow afternoon? RitualLand? Fine. The Chakra tents, tomorrow at two."

She snapped her phone off. "I need to go – I have an appointment."

"An appointment?" I couldn't help repeating.

She glared at me. "Yes – do you have a problem with that?"

"Uh, no," I muttered. But in fact, I did have a problem. The seemingly innocent Persephone's suspect status had suddenly taken a dramatic jump.

She'd obviously set up a secret rendezvous at RitualLand the next day. And now she was off to another meeting. Was she already fencing the stolen deck, dispensing with the evidence even before she became an official suspect?

I studied her face as she started for the door, but I knew I had to remain silent. If Persephone was involved with the disappearance of the deck and saw me as a threat, I doubted that her uncertainty regarding my name was going to prove much of a safeguard.

She departed without another word. I gave her twenty seconds, then followed out to the street where I spotted her flagging a taxi.

As I turned back toward Arcane Wisdom a white stretch limousine pulled up alongside me. The rear window lowered and I beheld the rouged face of Madame Bluebloodsky.

“Good day, Mr. Harrison,” she said in her resonant voice. “I am going to the coroner’s office to identify Mr. Arthur’s remains. Would you be so kind as to accompany me?”

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Perhaps it was the dazzling glint of the sun off the shiny surface of the limousine. Or maybe it was the hypnotic quality of hearing my name in Madame Bluebloodsky’s lilting alto.

Either way, I felt little choice but to acquiesce. I needed a breather, anyway. I went around to the other side. The driver stepped out and opened the door.

I nodded, then stooped and climbed into the spacious limo, which was lined with white leather couches. A bucket of ice on the center table chilled bottles of sparkling water. A video monitor streamed the Pagan Stock Exchange.

A small man in an immaculate suit sat next to Madame Bluebloodsky. I felt like I’d seen his pointy, greying beard before, but I couldn’t place the context. His head bobbed in a series of short nods which I took for a greeting. I acknowledged him with an uplift of my chin.

As I took a seat on the couch facing the two of them, Madame Bluebloodsky’s gangly dog Ani Vee, resting against her leg, gave me a sad look.

I smiled and tilted my head at the same angle to show solidarity.

I don’t really understand dogs, but you didn’t have to be a parapsychic to see they had a hard life. A dog’s life.

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Back before the Great Return, Christian theologians used to speculate that the miserable plight of dogs reflected an ancient, unpardonable transgression by some primordial tail-wagger, a sort of Canine Original Sin.

One academic claimed to have deciphered a Coptic papyrus fragment that told of the disobedience of Adam’s first dog, Skippy, who failed to come when God called.

The Lord was of an impatient temperament in those days, and the Curse of Skippy has bedeviled dogs down through the ages, yea, even unto the

present generation.

The whole thing seems a bit unfair – Adam had only recently given names to the various creatures, and no one ever accused dogs of being the fastest learners in the garden.

Skippy had few opportunities to learn his name prior to the God incident, and to accuse him of dereliction – nay, to saddle his progeny with never-ending servitude because he failed to respond promptly – bespeaks an arbitrary and vindictive God who lacks compassion for His own creation.

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As Madame B directed the driver to proceed to the coroner's office, I surveyed the limo, fascinated by everything from the stained glass windows to the little jukebox control mounted on my seat-belt buckle.

"Nice set of wheels," I said when Madame Bluebloodsky got off the intercom.

"It belongs to my friend, Mr. De Roquefort."

The elfish man's head bobbed again. So this was the celebrated Cornelius De Roquefort. Co-founder of the Headstone discount metaphysical chain. Private client of the great teachers of Oracle Street. Patron of the most important new Tarot deck of our times.

Provided, of course, that he didn't catch a case of the cold feet flu.

I wanted to challenge him on withdrawing support from Arthur's deck. But that would require admitting that there was a problem delivering it to the printer. Not the best thing to inform your benefactor on deadline day.

Of course, maybe he already knew the deck was missing – and possibly its current location. If he wanted out of his contract with Arthur, was it inconceivable that he had decided to invoke the ultimate escape clause?

I couldn't picture this nervous gnome having the stomach for the task. But he was a shrewd businessman. What if he'd inked his signature on a second contract – with a professional thief and killer?

I caught my breath and reminded myself not to get carried away. Just because someone rode around in a limousine and threatened to withdraw funding from my late mentor's Tarot deck didn't prove he was a cold-blooded murderer. It just made him my favorite suspect.

"Hello, Mr. Roquefort," I said with deliberate politeness.

"It's 'De' Roquefort," Madame Bluebloodsky corrected me.

"De Roquefort, excuse me," I said, doing my best not to laugh. The way people

could be so proud of their family name – as if we chose our ancestors!

Well, what if we did?

It certainly helped explain why Roquefort cruised around in a limousine while I trod the sidewalks of our fair city.

When selecting a lineage for this lifetime, Roquefort took careful inventory of the available families and opted for title and wealth.

I, impetuous fool, must have chosen for looks.

It made me think of my hoity-toity fellow undergrads – legacy janitors, they were called – who got all puffed up about their grandiose lineages. Half of them claimed their ancestors swabbed the decks on the Mayflower.

In the Old World it was even worse. During my wanderjahre I met someone who said her ancestors cleaned up the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve got evicted.

“You’d never believe how trashed they left the place,” she said. “No wonder they got kicked out. Sometimes you almost feel sorry for God.”

I shrugged. “Did your ancestors get to stay behind in the Garden?”

“Of course not,” she said in a bitter voice. “Everyone had to leave. If Adam and Eve hadn’t screwed up, that job might still be in my family today!”

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Seated on the limo’s white couch, Roquefort leaned slightly toward Madame Bluebloodsky. Was he a suitor for her hand, or did the bulge of his wallet tilt him that direction?

I studied his ageing yet surprisingly soft features. It was hard to imagine the nebbish as a threat to anyone’s well-being, let alone that he would target his magical tutor, Arthur.

But I could see what Persephone meant about him being publicity-shy. For all his business acumen, the founder of the Headstone chain seemed a reluctant celebrity.

Now that his idol was dead, would fear of the spotlight – and perhaps of being cursed by Arthur’s magical rivals – lead him to withdraw funding from the priceless deck?

I needed to loosen him up a bit. “Great limo,” I said casually. “You don’t see many this nice.”

“Thank you,” he said crisply. “I’ve been trying to persuade Madame that she

should lease one for herself. She could write it off as a business expense. After all, appearing successful is half of being successful." He winked at her, and she gave a slight smile.

I turned his words over in my head. Was this my mistake? I had personally published (thanks to a high-speed copier at a night job) what was quite possibly the most stunningly illuminating compendium of materialist esoterica since Spinoza – yet I was having a distinctly difficult time marketing my magnum opus.

Maybe my error was not having a limousine.

I was amazed that the thought had never occurred to me. With its built-in stereo and refrigerator, I could live in the big car and save on rent. My room at the Bristling Broom lodge, the Forester's Cottage, was actually a converted gardening shed. How much more cramped would the back of a limo be?

I wondered whether the sound system was any good. Before I could pursue this line of questioning, the limo pulled to a stop in front of a large, gated manor.

Roquefort shifted in his seat. "Be well then, Madame. I'm sorry I am unable to accompany you, but my nerves would never allow it. Please use the car as long as you need. I have instructed Jeeves to be at your disposal for the remainder of the day."

"Thank you, Cornelius," she said. She held out her hand for him to kiss. He dipped his neatly-groomed face and touched his lips to it, looked up and held her gaze for a moment, then turned and slid out of the limo.

I stared at Roquefort's backside. Why hadn't I questioned him when I had the chance? Had Cornelius De Roquefort just telegraphed his complicity in Arthur's death?

Through the tinted glass I watched him gazing after us as we pulled away.

What secrets might lurk in his tight little heart?

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Madame B was staring out the opposite window, absently stroking Ani Vee's head. The dog looked at me with a melancholy expression.

I still wanted to try out the stereo, but I realized that I should seize the opportunity to ask Madame Bluebloodsky a few questions.

After all, her behavior since Arthur's death – her early appearance at the store, her demand for privacy, her riding in the limo with Cornelius De Roquefort, and now her trip to the coroner's office – all suggested a more-than-average interest in the matter.

Was she simply honoring her friendship with Arthur, or were she and Roquefort conspiring to quash Arthur's deck?

I puzzled over how to strike up a conversation with a proud – some might say haughty – Russian psychic medium whose original supporter in this country had just died.

"A little odd to ride in a car like this, isn't it?" I finally said.

"Odd?" she said in a distracted tone. "In what way?"

"Well, I mean, usually we see each other at the shop, with its rickety chairs and worn-out rugs."

"We must learn to be at home in all worlds," she said.

"I'd never get used to this," I said, gesturing around the richly-appointed interior. "Even if the sound system is good, it would never feel like my space."

"I fear that says more about you than it does about this limousine. All of science and experience teach us that the world is a unity, that nature and spirit form one seamless whole.

"Why must humans insist on being so fragmented and alienated? Our highest goal must be to bring people together regardless of race, creed, class, or gender – to form a true brotherhood of man."

It was strange to hear this aristocratic matron speaking of a "brotherhood of man," but I figured it was a touch of Old World rhetoric. In any case, I could hardly disagree with her sentiment. "Sounds great," I said. "It's about time."

"Indeed it is," she said, seeming pleased that I comprehended her message. "The Secret Guardians have decided that now is the moment – humans are ready to hear and act on their great message of love and unity."

My ears perked up. I'd heard Arthur mention the Guardians, although it didn't look they'd guarded him very well in the end. "Who are the Secret Guardians?"

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She looked at me for a long moment, as if weighing how much to say. When she spoke, her voice was low and level. "The Guardians are spiritual beings who mediate between us and the divine. This mundane world is a distant emanation from the Godhead, from the Source. We are but an emanation of an emanation, countless degrees from the divine creator."

Kind of like when you used to make copies of a cassette tape, I thought. Nothing sounded worse than a John Coltrane solo on a fifth-generation cassette tape.

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On the other hand, I had a warbly tape of renowned priestess Sunshine MoonBeam leading a guided visualization called *The Ocean is the Beginning of the Earth* that was particularly effective because it sounded like she was talking underwater.

Madame B gazed past me as she continued. "Our world is so distant from the Godhead that left to our own devices, the best we can do is religion – dead practices smothering what began as a heartfelt yearning for the divine.

"Yet there remains hope. The truth of our being – the secret knowledge of the meaning of life and death, of our origin and our destiny – is held in trust by the Guardians, who exist on a plane much closer to the Divine Source."

I found myself nodding. Didn't we all want to believe that a higher intelligence guided our lives? Anything that helped make up the terrestrial shortfall would be much appreciated.

No matter how ardently I wished it, though, I couldn't reconcile the idea of an intelligent creator with the pain, suffering, and small-mindedness I saw around me.

And if the Guardians were closer to the Source, weren't they culpable as well? Little consolation to hear that they were meddling in our affairs.

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I knew better than to say any of this to Madame Bluebloodsky if I wanted her to continue to unburden her conscience to me. I nodded silently.

Ani Vee leaned over and tried to sniff my face. Fearing a lick was next, I leaned back and deflected its snout.

"Mr. Harrison," said Madame Bluebloodsky, placing her hand gently on the mutt's head, "do you really find so little charity in your heart for one of your fellow creatures?"

"It's not that," I said. "It's just that, well, I consider my face kind of private, if you know what I mean."

She sighed reprovingly. "Where our hearts are closed, there is our greatest work. Through many lives we toil, until our heart is completely unburdened."

"I've been working pretty hard in this life," I said, subtly alluding to my dedicated service at Arcane Wisdom.

"Perhaps," she said, leveling her surprisingly cold eyes at me. "Yet this is only one lifetime. I sense you are a young spirit, Mr. Harrison, early on its journey."

I frowned. I had the feeling this "young spirit" thing was a bit of a dig. Like I

lacked seasoning and might be prone to rookie mistakes.

Which admittedly did have the metallic ring of iron truth.

But who was Madame Bluebloodsky to cast aspersions on the age of my spirit? Maybe my spirit was plenty old, and I was just a slow learner!

She stroked Ani Vee's head. The dog gazed up at her. "The world is offering you a lesson in compassion from one of the Goddess's most beautiful creatures," she said, "and you turn away. Apparently you'll have to learn these lessons by more direct experience."

"Are you suggesting that I'm destined to be reincarnated as a dog?"

"Are you surprised? This angelic being is radiating love and affection – yet you are incapable of opening your heart and receiving. How else will you learn these lessons except by experiencing its reality in an immediate manner?"

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Great, I thought. I had to be reincarnated as whatever I didn't totally love?

If her theory was correct, I was staring at a sequence of lives as a dog, a rat, a banana slug, and a police officer.

Maybe I could do them all at once by being a sluggish police dog who rats out its master. Although that might have its own karmic consequences.

Stay in the present, I reminded myself. "So there's these Secret Guardians, and they send messages to us?"

"Precisely," she said. She was gazing out the window, still stroking the dog.

"The Higher Ones call us to remember who we are and from whence we have come – to know that our origin is spirit, and to spirit we must return.

"The ultimate point of human existence is to become aware of ourselves as part of the divine. However mired we are in this earthly realm, there remains within each of us a spark of pure spirit which can hear the call from the divine source."

Her eyes took on a still harder aspect. "This must be the first aim of every esoteric practice – to rekindle an awareness of our true home and to rouse our desire to return.

"What greater purpose can divination or alchemy or magic serve than to nurture this yearning for reunion with the divine? Is this not the deepest meaning of the Major Arcana of the Tarot – to guide us on this journey from base matter to pure spirit?"

"Well, I guess..."

CHARIOT

Madame Bluebloodsky looked offended that I didn't wholeheartedly endorse her views. "Tarot is the key to the symbolic realm! What is reality but a multi-layered tableau of signs, symbols, and meanings? Tarot is a guide to these symbols, and ultimately to our relation with the divine source."

I pondered her point. If she was correct, Tarot could practically be seen as a new-age bible, a holy writ in pictorial form.

But hadn't we heard that line before? Was Tarot just the spiritual fashion du jour? Maybe it wouldn't turn out to be quite so mystical as it presently seemed.

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Sacred icons had suffered such demotions before. Consider the fate of Christian symbols in recent years – they had fallen so low that when cities laid out new streets, Pagan officials insisted that they not "cross" at ninety degrees.

And what about the ouroboros – the serpent swallowing its tail?

When Renaissance scholars delved into the world of ancient symbology, they delighted in "discovering" arcane meanings for the popular figure from Graeco-Egyptian times.

Alchemists took it to be a symbol of the most splendid of magical wonders, the Great Work.

Neo-Platonic philosophers saw it representing the soul's endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Hermeticists understood it as the eternal return of the cosmos.

All of these theories bit the archival dust when modern research revealed that the ouroboros was really a graffiti indicating that your opponent had their head up their tail.

So I wanted to be careful about reading too much profundity into Tarot.

Madame Bluebloodsky seemed to have no such reservations. "Consciousness," she was saying, "links us to the entire cosmos, and ultimately to the magic inherent in nature.

"All creation carries 'signatures' and 'correspondences' that alert us to the occult properties and divine significances around us – signs and symbols of the 'gnosis' inherent in the universe, guiding us back toward our true source.

"Yet faced with this abundance we are likely to be overwhelmed, wandering confused and helpless amid a chaos of images and signs. We would be lost forever in this fallen material world unless we find a map showing us our way home – our way back to spirit.

"Tarot is that map – Tarot is an indestructible star of divine fire, shining down to guide our ascent through the cosmos as we return to our true source!"

She stared straight at me as if awaiting a response. I started to frame a few theoretical questions concerning the precise relationship of spirit to matter, and particularly her appropriation of Tarot to unadulterated gnosticism.*

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Before I could formulate my rejoinder to her gnostic vision, Madame Bluebloodsky pressed on. "The Guardians have decided that the time is right for humanity to learn this small piece of the truth that they have been holding in trust for us."

"A small piece?" I said. "I don't mean to sound rude, but if their 'truth' is so important, why do the Guardians dole it out a little at a time?"

"Ah! Were truth to be unveiled all at once, no human could withstand its radiance! We must have teachers and masters who know exactly how much we are ready to learn and can place the appropriate challenge before us."

I nodded, and she continued. "This is the purpose of working through the degrees and grades of the mystery traditions – the deepest truths can only be revealed one step at a time, through initiations."

Again that word, "initiation." I started to ask if she and Arthur shared any magical inductions when the limousine pulled to the curb in front of the coroner's office, a two-story brick building with an astroturf lawn. I unfastened my seat belt.

Across from me, Madame Bluebloodsky blanched. Her hand went to her brow.

"Oh, I feel faint," she moaned. She groped for the intercom. "Jeeves, please stop at once!"

* - Following the numerical sequence of Majors does suggest a gnostic ascent from matter to pure spirit. Yet working the arcana in reverse would seem to map a path from spirit to pure matter.**

** - Barlet (*Tarot of the Bohemians*, 1889) suggested a journey where Majors I (Magician) through X (Wheel) are a downward movement into the world, XI (Strength in the traditional ordering) to XIII (Death) form a transition, and XIV (Temperance) to XXI (World) a return to spirit. Materialist critics note that while this schema honors the material realm, it still prioritizes a gnostic "return to spirit."***

*** - See Appendix G-23 of my magnum opus for a parahistorical critique of gnosticism's tendency to denigrate matter as dirty, burdensome, oppressive, or just plain annoying. Which admittedly it can be. But spirit can be pretty annoying too, especially when you call and call and get no answer.

CHARIOT

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"We are presently stopped, Madame," came a voice through the loudspeakers.

Madame Bluebloodsky rolled her window down and inhaled the crisp Fall air. "Oh, it's too much," she said. "I need to see Wendy. Jeeves, take me at once to Wendy Womansdaughter's establishment!"

"Yes, Madame." The big limo pulled out. Madame Bluebloodsky rolled her window up and fanned herself. Then she shivered.

I started to tell her that Wendy's shop might be closed, but she looked so upset that I hesitated to remove her solace.

"Can I get you something, ma'am?" I asked, leaning across the little table. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Wendy," she said, resting her head in one hand. "I need to see Wendy."

I nodded and said nothing. What was going on? A delayed emotional reaction to the death of her dear friend Arthur?

Or had my subtle yet incisive questions sent a wave of debilitating guilt crashing over her just as she was about to view the corpse on the coroner's table?

And what was this about seeing Wendy? Was Wendy some kind of miracle healer that Madame Bluebloodsky visited in her shakier moments?

Or were they confederates in a malignant plot to suppress Arthur's Tarot deck? For all her witchy flightiness, Wendy could be tough as freshly filed nails, as I knew from bitter experience. Was she the puppet master who manipulated Madame Bluebloodsky to do her dirty work?

Madame B didn't speak again until we reached the store. As we pulled up outside the Wiccan Wonderland the front door stood ajar.

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Was Wendy back? Or was someone else in the store? My mind jumped to the tattooed intruder at Arcane Wisdom – were they on a spree?

I offered to go and look for Wendy.

Madame Bluebloodsky nodded. Then her voice choked. "No, no, I don't want her to see me like this." She daubed at her eyes with a monogrammed handkerchief. "Not this way."

Madame B pressed a button. A lighted mirror dropped from the ceiling. She opened a make-up cabinet in the side door and applied a few strategic

brushstrokes. "There, that's better. Don't tell her I had a spell. Just ask her to accompany us to the coroner's office."

Understanding my orders, I hopped out of the limo and trotted up to the Wonderland, wondering who or what I would find inside.

Once my eyes adjusted, I spotted Wendy seated at the counter. She stared at her computer monitor, her right hand poised over the mouse. Her eyes were glazed, her breathing soft and shallow.

I couldn't tell whether she was deep in trance or checking her email. Either way I didn't want to disturb her concentration.

Suddenly she looked up. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, yes," I said. "I just came from Madame Bluebloodsky, and she wants to know if you will go with us to the coroner's office to identify Arthur's body."

She looked at her computer again and gave a sharp sigh. "You know," she said in a tight voice, "it's not something I can do right now. I'm sure you two can handle it. Please tell Helena I'll call her this evening."

She turned back to her computer. I didn't move. After a moment, she looked up. "Yes?"

"Well, you see, Madame B was pretty upset, I guess about seeing Arthur's body, and she had a spell and started asking for you, so I'm supposed to get you to go with us but not tell you that she had a spell."

"Helena had a spell?" Wendy stood up from her computer. "Okay, just a moment." She returned with a handbag and sweater. As she passed the counter she picked up a little purple bottle.

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Jeeves held the limo door. Wendy climbed in and took a seat next to Madame Bluebloodsky, whom she greeted by first name.

As the limo pulled away, Wendy reached in her bag and produced the purple bottle. "It's a lavender essence I'm developing," she told Madame Bluebloodsky, "for peace and serenity. Do you want to try it?"

The older woman closed her eyes and held out her wrist. Wendy pulled a hypodermic needle out of her purse and filled it with lavender essence. She tied a ribbon around Madame Bluebloodsky's arm, found a vein, and expertly plunged the needle in.

Madame Bluebloodsky gasped, then relaxed. A soft smile played across her face. I considered asking if I could try some. But I needed to keep my mind

unclouded by flower essences.

The two of them chatted about herbal remedies and the varying benefits of time-release capsules versus mainlining. I attempted to interject a few questions concerning their whereabouts the night before. But they formed a cocoon that I was unable to penetrate.

I leaned back and listened carefully for covert references to Arthur or the missing Tarot cards. Each time they spoke the word “deck,” I jumped – clear the decks, deck the halls, all hands on deck, all decked out, and a passing reference to re-arranging the deck furniture on the Titanic.

None seemed to refer directly to the missing deck. Yet cumulatively I had to wonder – were they drawn to use the word like moths to a flame?

It was as if the deck itself was eliciting their confession.

And what could what could be more fitting if they were enmeshed in the disappearance of Arthur’s deck? After all, the images were intended to lay bare the deepest truths buried in one’s soul.

Granted, this could be a bit daunting if one’s question was, “What should I have for dinner?” But I understood the point – let go of the mundane and focus on the big issues.

* * *

On the previous evening, as Arthur and Persephone finalized the box design, I had taken the opportunity to do a personal reading using the new cards.

I didn’t really know how to use the Trismegistus Meister Tarot, but it wasn’t the first intuitive deck, so I had some idea what to expect.

Over the years I’d seen Jungian, Corbinian, Animasian, Zen Buddhist, and other archetypal decks, each evocative of intuition to varying degrees.

Lucifer “Larry” Hieronymous supposedly crafted a “Shadows” deck where whatever image was on the card somehow triggered the opposite feelings – mirthless Death made you feel all warm and fuzzy, while the joyous Ten of Cups left you with nightmares for the next week.

During my wanderjahr I ran across a deck so powerful that it virtually read itself. If you didn’t have all of your psychic shields in place when you turned up the cards, they pretty much imposed their interpretation and left you floundering in the wake of the divinatory fates.

Luckily it came with a little booklet that explained the whole thing, so at least you had some idea what was coming down the pike.

Arthur and Persephone's creation seemed like a good compromise – the cards sparked a wide range of feelings and intuitions, but left it up to you to figure out what it all meant.

As the two of them talked the previous evening, I laid the Trismegistus Meister cards face down. With a slow breath I framed my question, the one on which my future hinged – when would my magnum opus and my ground-quaking new magical materialist paradigm be acknowledged and embraced by the broader academico-Pagan community?

I turned over three of the freshly-painted cards and almost staggered backward. Colors and shapes leapt at my eyes. I didn't even notice the numbers or suits, just the profusion of figures, landscapes, symbols, and objects swirling in a synesthetic cacophony.

Then, right when I was on the verge of psychic overwhelm, the reading had snapped into place, crystallizing as if by magic to tell a simple, distinctively personal story.

According to the cards, my quest for recognition would involve a long and arduous journey during which I would struggle against many obstacles. Daunting would be my path, and few my allies or those who understood my vision.

Yet in the end, just as all seemed ultimately hopeless, I would suddenly and to my utter astonishment be rewarded by the honor and esteem of my peers, along with various financial remunerations and professional emoluments.

I even thought I could glimpse a testimonial dinner in the background of one of the cards, but perhaps that was my imagination.

I could scarcely conceal my excitement. What a striking demonstration of the prowess of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot!

Impressed that even a novice like myself could do such a potent reading, I could also see how the deck diminished the role of the professional reader.

Since the cards were intended not to illustrate a fixed set of meanings but to evoke situational and intuitive responses, interpretations were dependent on one's unique encounter with the imagery.

Instead of a professional reader expounding traditional keywords and connotations, the "guide," to use Arthur's term, was simply to ask questions that assisted the querent in discovering their own sense of the reading.

Such a role hardly required the years of experience that some readers boasted. It was sobering to consider again how professionals such as Madame Bluebloodsky and Wendy Womansdaughter might see a drop in

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their most lucrative trade.

Now, seated in the back of the limousine, I studied the two of them. In spite of all Madame B's fine airs, I doubted she had much of a financial cushion. Sure, she had some wealthy clients. But I didn't get the sense it was a steady paycheck. Why else would she let a gremlin like Roquefort flirt with her?

As for Wendy, she was perpetually in danger of losing the lease on her store. Only the support of the local women's music community, which cribbed half of their lyrics from her liturgies, kept the Wiccan Wonderland afloat.

Whatever show of mourning the two women made at Arthur's passing, it was evident that each had ample reason to fear the publication of his new deck – publication that would proceed apace as soon as I recovered the missing cards.

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The body was Arthur's, without a doubt.

Nor was the cause of death a mystery, as we could see the wound where he had struck his head.

Or had been struck. I was increasingly convinced that Arthur's all-too-convenient death was the result of foul play.

Did my companions think the same? For a moment I was tempted to raise the issue, but I reminded myself to keep my own counsel for the time being.

Were they being equally cautious with me? I cast a quick glance, but their faces were masks of grief as we viewed the body.

Even though Arthur had been dead less than a day, the remains already gave off a bit of an odor.

Old Christian legends aver that when a saint died and forever afterward their corpse would smell like roses, or at worst pine-scented air freshener.

Arthur's odor was not that of sanctity.

Aside from affirming the identification, none of us spoke until we had signed the paperwork and were outside. Realizing I was unlikely to elicit anything further while the two were together, I bid them adieu and took a slow walk back to Oracle Street.

* * *

My route took me past a new speed-spirituality franchise that was all the rage, Cronos Junior's, which featured drive-thru rituals.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

The tabloids talked like Cronos Junior's was the cutting edge of new-age spirituality, and car-based Pagans lined up around the block to order from a menu of groundings, castings, blessings, and invocations.

Ritualists then drove through the Tunnel of Trances to commune with the beloved ancestors while their car was washed and waxed.

An all-in-one devocation sped celebrants to their post-ritual destinations.

I stopped and asked whether you could attend sabbats without a vehicle. The manager said yes, but the waxing process could be rather painful.

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As I continued on toward Oracle Street, my head felt light. Was it a delayed reaction to seeing Arthur laid out at the morgue?

Or a wave of dismay that I had no idea whatsoever as to the whereabouts of his final creation, the Trismegistus Meister Tarot?

Nearing Oracle Street, my pace slowed. From the street faire drifted the pungent aroma of fresh-grilled tofu.

No wonder I was light-headed – I hadn't eaten all day.

I'd come to the right place. The street faire was in full bloom as the evening crowd arrived.

Craft pavilions bustled with customers. Side booths featured aeromancers, auramancers, aquamancers, geomancers, pyromancers, bibliomancers, cryptomancers, narcomancers, necromancers, fructomancers, fractomancers, lychnomancers, dactylomancers, and even a good old-fashioned phrenologist.

A body-modification booth offered two-for-one discounts on Tarot tattoos – buy a Major and they tossed in a Minor of equal or lesser numerical value.

It reminded me of a college friend who had all of the Majors tattooed across his arms and back. People would hang out while he was doing yoga and get free readings.

Herbalists pranced and shouted from their little stages, calling for passersby to sample their potions and tinctures. I kept an eye out for the tie-dyed mountebank who had accosted me at the shop.

As I moved through the faire, a young person with the top of their head shaved and their remaining hair in a long braid held out a glossy leaflet for a FundaWiccan sect known as Pledge-Keepers of the New Moon.

Devoted to the service of the maiden goddess Artemis the Huntress, initiates were said to take perpetual vows of chastity, abstinence, and daily flossing –

CHARIOT

except during their High Holy Fortnight, when for two weeks all acts of love and pleasure (as well as commerce and calculation) were Artemis's rites.

Members wore their hair half-shaved and half braided, referred to one another as "Beloved of the Huntress," and refused to eat at any fast food chain that did not coordinate its menu with the phases of the Moon.

It sounded like some sort of weird cult, but it wasn't. Not yet, anyway. Apparently they had petitioned for weird cult status, but their application was on hold pending further documentation.

Cults abounded since the Great Return, as if to fill every evolutionary niche. As an undergrad I joined a group known as the Thrice Awakened whose most sacred ritual involved hitting the snooze button twice.

A vegan-free grill caught my eye. I elbowed my way politely to the front of the line and called out my order for a Jupiter burger with some Saturn rings.

I stepped over to a newsstand while I waited. The vendor held up a paper.

"*The Paranormal Times!*" he cried. "Tomorrow's news today!"

* * *

I remembered the rag from the old days – a rival to *The Hermetic Enquirer*. I handed him a coin and opened the paper expecting an eye-popping report on Arthur, along with accounts of lost pyramids, alchemical transmutations, and apocalyptic earthquakes.

To my surprise, *The Paranormal Times* had become quite respectable since the Great Return. Sedate typefaces announced stolid predictions such as "Snow Likely This Winter," "Odds Are You're Ageing," and "Team with Most Points Expected to Win Big Match."

Fair enough. Why ruin your credibility on aliens and buried gold? Here was a prognosticator you could take to the bank.

The main story reported Arthur's death in somber tones. Alongside a photo, the article cited local luminaries lamenting his untimely passing.

I studied the picture. As I'd noticed earlier with the *Enquirer*, Arthur's arms were splayed in the Magician's pose. This photo was taken from above the head, so it looked like a reversed reading.

Was this a further clue? Had the magus himself been "reversed"? What was the reversed meaning of the Magician card? I made a mental note to bone up on the traditional divinatory meanings of the 78 Tarot cards, including reversals and crossing cards.

The accompanying news story, I noted, made no mention of the missing deck nor suggested that any announcement was pending.

Authorities were unanimous in describing the death as an accident. The mayor ordered that prayer flags be flown at half-mast for a week-and-a-day of mourning, while the city council called for an investigation into Key City's curbs, citing the likelihood that Arthur had tripped over one. The overwhelming sentiment was grief.

I took a breath and nodded to myself. Aside from worrying about job security, I hadn't allowed myself a moment for feelings about the loss.

Was I conjuring an entire murder mystery as a way of avoiding my emotions over Arthur's death?

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I caught myself – I was in imminent danger of allowing myself to be drawn into the emotional morass of feeling one's feelings right when I might be on the cusp of a breakthrough in my doggedly determined investigation!

As I regrouped with my Jupiter burger, I spotted a former custodial classmate selling a popular brand of aura-cleansing lotions. I bought a concoction of passion flower, valerian, chamomile, and lavender to sooth my inner tremors and help focus my detectival quest.

As I spritzed my aura, I told my old classmate about my fortune in landing a job at Arcane Wisdom, now somewhat attenuated by the death of my employer. We commiserated about how inconvenient death can often be.

Maybe it was the effect of the herbs, but soon I found myself ruminating on life and meaning and mortality.

Usually I don't like to obsess about death or anything, but it comes up from time to time – especially when I finish off a tube of toothpaste and I think about the weeks that have passed since I opened it and all the time that has flowed like yesterday's mouthwash down the metaphorical drain of life.

It's like how Renaissance humanists used to keep a skull on their desk as a reminder of their mortality. Toothpaste is my *memento mori*.

My old classmate retailed the latest janitorial gossip, including which of our comrades had gotten the best jobs after the Great Return as well as the bacchanalic details of the revels my custodial comrade Johanna hosted before her journey to Rome.

I shared a few stories from my wanderjahre, notably a near-disastrous episode in San Francisco where I used the wrong gender pronoun at a ceremony of

the Sibylline Sisters of the Strict Observance. Mortified, I atoned for the gaffe only by submitting to a ritual flogging.

Appreciating the chance to confide in an old comrade, I considered admitting that I felt responsible for Arthur's currently-missing and entirely irreplaceable Tarot deck, but reminded myself that I needed to hold my tongue with anyone connected with Arthur, however remotely.

"Say," I asked, "do you know the mountebank who used to stop by Arthur's shop? Sort of a heavyset guy who wears tie-dye?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm not sure of his name. What's the brand he promotes, Loki Lotion? He's kind of an odd duck – not real sociably adept, if you catch my drift? I think he travels the faire circuit. He's just here on Oracle Street a few days a month."

"Do you know if he had any sort of special agreement or deals with Arthur?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "You never know what sorts of deals Arthur might have made."

* * *

After a somewhat taxing day, and facing a dawn appointment with the inquisitive UPPIC agent, I was relieved to get back to my digs at the lodge hall of the Bristling Broom.

When I returned from my wanderjarhe the previous week and applied for accommodations, I was delighted to hear that the available space was called the Forester's Cottage.

Visions of romantic three-ways with Lady Chatterley and her lover danced through my head, nestled around a rustic fire doing drum-trance journeys to each other's Places of Power.

I was a tad disappointed to discover that the space had historically been used as a storage shed and lacked amenities such as carpet, overhead lighting, or windows.

It was no surprise to get a less-than-desirable room. As the most recent arrival at the local lodge, and a journeyer rather than a master janitor, I was rather low in the proverbial mopping order.

Even when I'd been around awhile, I was unlikely to penetrate the informal hierarchy of the custodial elite – the legacy janitors.

Legacy janitors, thanks to behind-the-scenes family connections, received the poshest appointments and benefices, often becoming supervisors-in-absentia for several posts at once. Those at the top of the hierarchy – eight

quarters or more of custodial ancestry in the past four generations – seldom wielded a broom outside of guild ceremonies.

Naturally they were assigned the best rooms in the lodge even if they were seldom around to enjoy them.

While there was no written rule about what constituted a “legacy” family, anything less than four quarterings disqualified all but the most affluent from consideration. For those of us with neither finances nor ancestral credentials, the ranks were forever closed.

So I might be living in a storage shed for a while. But fresh air flowed under the door, and once I got my goldfish settled and set up my North altar on some bags of peat moss, I found it quite cozy.

* * *

Popping open a bottle of Wickerman Pale, I flipped on Pagan Entertainment Network and caught the end of *Gwydion's Island*, a classic comedy where seven castaway Pagans are shipwrecked on the Isle of Apples and have to ritually propitiate cantankerous ancestor spirits.

Next was the break-out hit of the previous season, the critically-acclaimed X-Trances, where Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council agents investigated mysterious absences of paranormal phenomena at Earth-based rituals.

Unfortunately, it was a re-run. Even though I hadn't seen it, I knew others had, and there's nothing I hated more than playing cultural catch-up.

I switched off the tube and headed for bed. My mind ranged over the next day, when I planned to track down the shadowy Dr. Papyrus and trail Persephone to her rendezvous at RitualLand.

At some point I needed to stop by Arcane Wisdom and clean up.

First, though, I had more pressing concerns. At seven o'clock in the morning I had to be downtown for my interrogation.



Chapter VIII: Strength

Although I had no idea what questions might be asked, I lay awake most of the night rehearsing my answers.

I'd heard they always try to trip you up and put words in your mouth, so I figured it was best to stick to a prepared text. The structure and introductory remarks were my own, but beyond that I based my answers on famous quotations from beloved ancestors of craft and spirit, figuring their well-documented statements would be harder for a malevolent prosecutor to twist around.

By six the next morning I had the various speeches outlined and affixed in my memory.

I grabbed a quick breakfast of Tarotios, a new multi-grain vegan-free cereal

that promised a complete divinatory reading with every bowl. It wasn't as reliable as Lucky Charms, but I figured I'd get better with a few more boxes.

* * *

As I flossed my teeth I chipped a fingernail. I reached in my pocket and pulled out my WiseWoman Swiss Navy Utility Tool, a combination nail file, knife, screwdriver, wire clipper, hacksaw, hand drill, fountain pen, volt meter, jumper cable, fire starter, water purifier, pitch pipe, chromatic oscillator, metric slide rule, magnifying glass, can opener, smoke bender, universal toothpick, athame, mini-cauldron, collapsible chalice, finger labyrinth, compass, sextant, armillary sphere, turntable, bicycle pump, Pez dispenser, and emergency bong which I kept with me at all times.

Toward the end of my wanderjahre I had the tool magically charged as part of a ceremony at a sacred naval maintenance facility in Central Switzerland and now carried it as a protective amulet.

It also came in handy when I chipped a nail.

I trimmed my stubble back to a fashionable three-day growth, then slipped into jeans and T-shirt. Recalling the UPPIC Agent's strict warning about the dress code, I fished around in my costume bag and found a bright blue tie with little cartoon lions dancing across it. The bottom was coming unstitched, but a bit of duct tape could get me through the ordeal.

I looked in the mirror and grimaced. Years ago I took a solemn oath never again to wear one of these things after I nearly choked to death when my tie got caught in a pencil sharpener. Fortunately it was one of the manual kind and I was able to wind it backward, or I might have been killed.

Slipping it around my neck, I looped the long end over the smaller. Immediately my heartbeat went up. Cold sweat broke out on my forehead. Could I even recall how to fasten it?

I took a breath and began lacing – up, through, down, end-around, over, double-reverse, three times around, up, down, and finally through again.

I looked in the mirror. The knot was the size of my fist, leaving a tail about three inches long. But the cartoon lions were more or less centered under my Adam's apple. I figured I better leave well-enough alone.

The dawn appointment with the Security Division of UPPIC was first on the day's agenda, but I refused to let it dominate my thoughts. Just as significant was being present at RitualLand at two o'clock to see whom Persephone was meeting and whether it had anything to do with the missing Tarot cards.

In between, I had ambitions of visiting Dr. Papyrus. As one-time mentor to

STRENGTH

Crockley and Arthur, he more than any other might elucidate their tangled history. In particular, he might know which esoteric initiations the two shared – and which Arthur might have betrayed.

* * *

Seven o'clock was rapidly approaching. I set out at a crisp pace.

City Center was a multi-function complex that did service as government offices, courtrooms, the city jail, a dance hall, and a bomb shelter.

The last function largely determined the design, which located the entire office suite deep underground and covered it with layers of steel and concrete.

The entrance was marked by a security periscope flanked by a roaring marble lion. Holding open the lion's mouth was a Greek goddess, her wavy hair crowned with a laurel wreath. In keeping with the government building's security functions, her mirrored sunglasses seemed to be tracking you wherever you moved.

As the locus of institutional power in our fair town, City Center wasn't a favorite place of mine, and I was glad when I reached the lowest floor where the local branch of UPPIC had its headquarters.

* * *

I made my way down a brightly-lit hallway, passing the enforcement wings of the various Neo-Pagan religions: the Vatican's inquisitorial SPQR; the Covenant of Presbyterian Pagans (COPP); and the dreaded Ultimas Quietus, the sinister body which enforced silence at Quaker meetings.

Further down the long passageway a stark orange and black poster reminded me that my magical name renewal was overdue.

Anyone wishing to use a magical, initiatory, or adopted name was required to register annually with the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Magical Name Repository or risk losing the name to the highest bidder.

I wasn't opposed to registering, as it saved a vast number of misdirected text messages. My problem was the renewal fee.

The lower end of the sliding scale was quite reasonable, especially if you adopted the name of an insect, weed, or small shrubbery. Names involving birds, trees, and most mammals weren't prohibitive.

But for multiple names involving deities the costs rose sharply. And I made the mistake during my initiation of spelling the name Lugh BroomSweeper with an internal capital. At the time it was something like \$10 extra, but while

other fees had doubled since the Great Return, internal capitalization had skyrocketed.

I considered changing the spelling, but that meant going through the de-initiatory process, which I heard was not particularly pleasant.

UPPIC had fumbled a major fundraising opportunity when it “grandchilded” in kids who were given Pagan names at birth. The lost windfall was turning out to be huge.

Since the onset of the Great Return the most popular baby names had changed from Joshua, Elizabeth, Noah, Matthew, and Emma – all sanctioned by the Bible or Jane Austen – to Isis, Loki, Parnassia, Orpheus, and of course Gilgamesh, which topped the list for babies of all genders the past two years.

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At the end of the hall stood a steel door marked “UPPIC – Security.” I pressed the buzzer. As I took hold of the knob an electric jolt zapped my arm.

“Stand away from the door,” came a mechanical voice as I staggered backward in compliance. “State your purpose.”

Shaking my stinging hand, I looked around for the speaker. Above the door a small camera pointed directly at me. Staring back, I stated my mission. “I’m here to see Special Agent – uh, Special Agent...” I realized I hadn’t gotten the agent’s name. Now what?

To my surprise the door-release buzzed. I reached out gingerly and touched the handle. No shock. I pushed it open and walked through.

A long white corridor stretched ahead of me. On either side were translucent glass doors, none labelled. I was about to choose one at random and knock when a door at the end of the hall opened.

“You’re late,” said the short UPPIC agent I’d met at Arcane Wisdom.

“I’d be on time if you had better signs,” I said.

“It’s an evil generation that demands signs,” he said as he glanced down at a notepad. “Blessed are they who believe without a sign.”

“No, I mean signs on the wall,” I said.

“They’re evil, too. Now, where were we?”

“You ordered me to appear for questioning in the matter of Arthur’s death,” I said, then reminded myself of my firm resolution to stick to my scripted responses.

STRENGTH

He pointed to a beat-up folding chair. The chair tipped back, and I kept my weight forward in case it collapsed.

“Very well,” he said. He took a seat behind a large art nouveau desk on which stood a framed photograph of the agent serving in the honor guard at the National Labyrinth in Washington DC.

I visited the National Labyrinth one time. What a disappointment. You had to stand in line forever, several circuits were closed for repairs, and the center was a souvenir shop selling overpriced trinkets.

The UPPIC agent clasped his hands on his desk and stared at me. “Let’s take care of some preliminaries. Then we’ll get down to business. What is your full name?”

My name? I hadn’t realized he might ask that question. Should I give my legal name, my magical name – or make up another name altogether?

Best not to start telling stories I’d have to remember later. “Jeffrey Harrison,” I stated.

“Thank you, Mr. Harrison, that confirms what we already know. And will you confirm that you were a student of Arthur’s?”

It sounded like a trick question. Next he’d want to know if I had any cause to be dissatisfied with Arthur’s mentorship.

Once it came out that Arthur had practically conspired to suppress my magnum opus, a motive would be established and I’d be charged with hatching a plot to murder my teacher and take over his store as way to get my book distributed.

I wished I could deny that the idea had crossed my mind. In truth, I’d gone so far as to devise several excruciating ways for him to die whereby he would be forced with his last breath to acknowledge my brilliance and sign over his store by means of a notarized and recorded quitclaim deed.

Obviously that was a can of refried worms I didn’t want to pry open. Who knew what a Special Agent from the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council might make of such an admission?

The agent came out from behind the desk and repeated the question: “Were you or were you not, during the period in question and at all other relevant periods up to and including the present, a student of the aforesaid Arthur?”

His legalese was obviously a ploy to intimidate me. Well, two could play that game. Summoning my best television-lawyer accent, I stated: “At this point in time, it would seem to me that an unbiased observer would find the

preponderance of evidence on the affirmative side.”

“Affirmative side,” he echoed. He seemed to be mulling over my response, then suddenly whirled and glared at me. “And what do you know about magic?”

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Another trick question!

With Arthur’s body discovered in the Magician pose and the Trismegistus Meister deck missing – obviously the agent was trying to drag me into a morass.

Yet if I denied all knowledge of magic it certainly was not going to help sales of my magnum opus.

Where to begin?

Perhaps I could offer some pithy remarks on the material history of Western magic and its development both in tandem with and in opposition to science and religion.

Or might it be better to begin with a discourse on the social role that magic and divination have played in empowering individual and collective action?

I recalled my carefully-outlined speeches quoting beloved ancestors of arte and crafte. But now that I thought about it, more than a few had come to gruesome ends, and it was hard to guess who was in or out of fashion at a given moment.

What of my own writing? Should I cite specific chapters and appendices for his immediate reference, or simply summarize the appropriate passages and submit the footnotes later?

Playing for time, I looked him in the eye and spoke slowly and dramatically. “Magic? I know a lot.” I almost hurled the final word at him.

“A lot,” he repeated, jotting my response in his notebook. He tapped his pencil on his thigh, staring at his notes.

Given a moment to collect myself, I realized I hadn’t grounded. Quickly I breathed to my center, cast a protective elemental circle, invoked various deities and magical allies who seemed potentially to be of some assistance in my present predicament – then remembered I’d forgotten to honor Spirits of the Land at the beginning.

Hurriedly I backed up and started over, ending by dashing off a single invocation that I hoped would cover several of my most trusted allies.

STRENGTH

I braced for whatever might follow.

The agent looked at me. "Thank you, that will be all for now."

"We're done?"

"Yes, I believe we have what we need."

Needed for what? Was I about to be charged with murder? Or had I just proven my innocence beyond a reasonably substantial shadow of a doubt?

I pointed toward the door. "Can I go?"

"Yes," he said, holding out his hand.

Instinctively I shook it, then pulled back, feeling soiled by my auto-response. If he rang a bell would I drool?

"You're free to go," he said. "But please notify our office of your whereabouts at all times. We may find the need to interrogate you further."

He walked to the door, opened it, and waited like a valet for me to exit. I started to ask him when a further interrogation might take place. But the door closed in my face.

So that's how they do it around here, I thought, feeling a bit unnerved. Getting involved with the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council was no picnic.

But at a deeper level, my spirit rebelled. The interrogation was probably intended precisely to throw a wet blanket on my smouldering curiosity so authorities could sweep the whole thing under the rug.

They knew I had nothing to do with Arthur's death. They just wanted to quash my innate desire to ask questions.

Well, I had some questions to ask, alright. And the first to feel the stern lash of my resolve was the reclusive Dr. Papyrus.

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The bus dropped me on Oracle Street. I headed toward Campanella Way, where Dr. Papyrus's hotel was located.

As I strolled past the Mini-Max Magic Mart, a familiar face caught my eye.

Perkins! I ducked behind a phone pole and peeked out. He was standing in line at the Ritual Supplies counter.

Dr. Papyrus could wait a few minutes. Here was a chance to investigate Perkins. There was, after all, a possibility that the tattooed ankle I saw fleeing

Arcane Wisdom was attached to his leg.

Waiting until he turned his head, I dashed into the Mini-Max and took cover behind a rack of mixed nuts. A woman in the aisle gave me a strange look, but I put a finger to my lips to silence her.

Staying low to the ground, I crept around the edge of the rack to where I had a clear view of Perkins' ankle. The problem was, it was covered in a pair of corduroy slacks.

As I puzzled over how to get a view of his ankle, he stepped up to the counter. Seeing him occupied with the clerk, I quietly lifted a pan of Jiffy Pop off the shelf, then dropped to my belly and inched forward like a commando on dawn patrol.

The others in line politely moved aside as I crept along the floor. Coming to a stop just behind Perkins, I reached out and used the handle of the aluminum popcorn pan to hook the cuff of his corduroys. Slowly I lifted.

Perkins slipped his wallet back in his pocket. I had to act fast. Pushing up on the Jiffy Pop, I exposed several inches of his ankle.

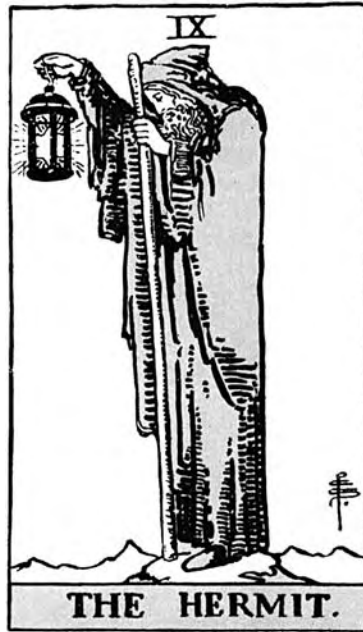
He jerked around. "What's going on?" At first he looked over me, and I thought I might make it back behind the nut rack. But as I scampered across the floor, he spied me.

"Hey," he warbled. "What are you doing down there?"

"I dropped something, sorry," I improvised.

Stay calm. Don't admit what I'd just seen.

Tattooed on Perkins' ankle was an exact replica of the eleven-circuit labyrinth at Chartres cathedral!



CHAPTER IX: Hermit

"Oh, it's you, Harrison," Perkins said. "I might have guessed I'd find you crawling along the floor."

I clenched my fists as I clambered to my feet. Don't blow it now. I had my evidence – Perkins had been the tattooed intruder at the shop. That meant he might well be the thief of the missing deck. And if my math was correct, I could be staring right at Arthur's murderer.

"Yeah, well, just trying to stay in touch with the Earth." I turned to leave.

The hulking Mini-Max clerk called me back. "Hey – you gonna pay for that Jiffy Pop?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. I mean no, uh, here, I'll put it back."

A FOOL SUCH AS I

She grabbed a baseball bat and started from behind the counter. “Hey, punk! Nobody wants your used Jiffy Pop. You touch it, you buy it!”

I handed her too much cash and fled the store.

I had what I needed – proof that it was Perkins I’d seen fleeing Arcane Wisdom the day before.

* * *

I considered sticking around and tailing him home.

But the clock was ticking. I needed to locate Dr. Papyrus, persuade him to spill all he knew, and then get out to RitualLand by two o’clock to check on Persephone.

As I reached the end of the block, I realized why I was feeling so tense – I hadn’t removed my tie. I stopped and took hold of the loose end, fed it back through the loop, around, through again, twice under, then through and around again.

Something was wrong – the tail was getting shorter instead of longer. Sweat broke out on my forehead. My breath came in short gasps. Was I choking, or just having a panic attack?

I dug in my pocket and clutched at my WiseWoman utility amulet. Yanking open the hacksaw blade I ripped at the fabric until it yielded. With a sharp jerk I tore it from my neck.

Sucking in air, I hurled the shredded tie to the pavement, firmly resolving to place a higher value on my life in the future.

Knowing I was rattled, I re-grounded myself, did a purification, cast a circle using the Quotidian Celtic Wheel of the City method, then performed an elaborate invocation of Kneph, Egyptian God of the breath of life.

I’d never worked with Kneph before, but He was the celebrity spokesdeity for my favorite brand of bottled air, so I felt a certain affinity.

Feeling more or less re-grounded, I turned the corner onto Campanella Way and faced the task at hand – the interrogation of the infamous Dr. Papyrus.

* * *

The Visconti-Sforza Hotel was a nondescript building flanked by a bathtub repair shop and an insect taxidermist. Both had elaborate window displays that veiled the little three-story hotel.

An old brick propped open the battered front door, but aeration didn’t dispel the lingering aroma of stale incense. As I stepped inside, a couple of scrappy

men came down the stairs, one counting a sheaf of cash. They gave me a sharp look, then hurried down the sidewalk toward the divination saloons on Oracle Street.

Unit 13 of the Visconti-Sforza was on the top floor. I made my way up the narrow, graffiti-covered stairwell. The walls were tagged by two artists who staged a running competition.

One styled himself the Ace of Wands, topping off the signature with a flaming scepter thrusting out of a cloud. The challenger offered a bony hand holding aloft a lantern that illuminated wild-style letters: Da Hermit.

As I ascended further, the air thinned and the stale incense thickened. By the time I located room 13, I was re-invoking Kneph and gasping for fresh air.

It hadn't occurred to me to prepare a greeting or bring any kind of peace offering. But Dr. Papyrus must have been expecting someone, because he immediately opened the door and gestured me inside.

* * *

As he shut and triple-locked the door, I studied the shrunken man. His hunched shoulders and wispy white hair made him look 75, but he might be a broken-down sixty. A snowy stubble peppered his cheeks and neck. His blue jacket was frayed at the elbows and missing a couple of buttons.

He made a vague sweeping motion that I took as an invitation into the one-room studio. The place smelled like dirty laundry and was a veritable rat's nest of books and papers. A cluttered table loomed over an unmade bed piled with tattered manila folders. The trash can overflowed with fast-food boxes.

Everywhere, spilling out of drawers and off shelves, were pages of yellow legal paper covered with scrawls and complicated drawings. Some were neatly stacked, others half-wadded and tossed on the floor.

Dr. Papyrus took a bunch of notebooks from an old wooden chair and tossed them onto the table. He waved me toward the chair and seated himself on a barstool a foot higher.

So this was the enigmatic Dr. Papyrus. Judging from the seedy hotel, one might suspect that he trafficked in illegal substances. But a more colorful legend suggested that esoteric gambling provided his wealth.

He wobbled on the barstool and placed a hand on the counter to steady himself. His puffy eyes made him look like a caffeine junkie who'd quit cold turkey.

I cleared my throat. Even though his watery eyes seemed to be looking at me,

he flinched. His hand knocked some papers off the counter and they fluttered to the floor.

Handwritten numbers in neat columns filled the pages. I wondered if they were magical calculations or part of an elaborate gambling scheme. I picked them up and set them on the table.

"Well, then?" he said, looking down from his barstool.

Was it an invitation to conversation, or did he think I'd come to place a bet? Should I begin with condolences regarding Arthur's passing? He didn't exactly look the sentimental sort.

I figured I should get straight to the point. "You see, sir, having heard of your great expertise, and as a matter of fact being in some manner a student of two of those who have been in some manner students of yours, if I am not stretching the term too far, well, if you don't mind – I've come to ask you a few Tarot-related questions, and in particular to enquire about a very strange layout left by Arthur."

Dr. Papyrus sighed deeply, then stood and shuffled across the floor, kicking an empty vodka bottle out of his path. He reached down and swatted a scroungy grey cat off an armchair, then dropped onto the broken-down cushions.

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"Arthur," he said, breathing heavily, as if speaking caused him great effort. The name was spoken with no affection, as dispassionately as one would name a street on a map.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Arthur left behind a Tarot reading that has proven quite perplexing, and I thought perhaps you might be able to shed some light on it. Since you were his teacher, the key might be clear to you."

"Arthur's teacher," he repeated. He looked me directly in the eye. "Yes, I was. All of his expertise, everything in his Tarot deck – where do you think he learned it? Right here."

He swept an arm around the hovel as if the spectacle might seal his argument. Then he slumped deeper into his armchair.

I wasn't sure if his claim had any merit. But it couldn't hurt to flatter him. "Then surely you can make sense of this reading."

I pulled out a sheet on which I had sketched Arthur's final spread and handed it to him, pointing out the different cards from the various decks.

"What's most mysterious, sir," I said, "is why Arthur used a half-dozen decks. That isn't the usual way to do a reading, is it?"

He seemed to be staring right through the paper, scratching at his stubble. His head bobbed slowly up and down, although it wasn't clear whether it had any relation to what I was saying.

At last he held up a hand. "Let me be clear," he said, waving the paper on which I had drawn the layout. "You are endeavoring to understand these cards, in particular as they pertain to the relations exhibited in this Tarot spread?"

"Exactly," I said. "If you could shed some light on the meanings of the individual cards as well as the reading as a whole, I have high hopes that we will discover an important final message from Arthur."

"Arthur," he muttered, absently crumpling my drawing and dropping it on the floor. "Always Arthur."

He stood, and I thought he was going to order me to leave. But he merely excused himself to use the toilet.

The scroungy cat jumped back onto the chair and glared as if daring me to do anything about it.

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Usually I'm game for staredowns with cats, and I often win. But I needed to take the opportunity to gather clues about this curious magical elder.

Breaking off eye-contact, I turned to survey the cluttered bookcases that lined the longest wall. Every shelf was lined with tattered volumes and piles of yellow legal paper.

Most of the books pertained to magic or cosmology. Infamous grimoires such as the *Sworn Book of Honorius* and the *Key of Solomon*, looking like they'd been passed down for generations, shared space with once-renowned titles such as Roger Bacon's *Secretum Secretorum*, John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*, and Agrippa's *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy*.

Antique texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *Sepher Yetzirah*, and *Chaldean Oracles* leaned against volumes of Early Moderns like Kirchner, Trithemius, Reuchlin, and Rosencreutz.

Albertus Magnus's *Book of Secrets*, a slender modern reprint with a shiny silver cover, sat atop a jumbled stack of papers. Various versions of the *Petit Albert* and the *Dragon Rouge*, fabled French texts from the 1700s, were held upright by a leather-bound copy of Barrett's *Magus*.

Youth got its due. A well-thumbed paperback of *Teen Witch* perched atop a

stack of *Buffy* and *Sabrina* videos.

Several rows overflowed with herbals, home remedies, and new-age self-help books. Sacred geometry texts stood interspersed with guides to Kabbalah, Cabala, and Qabala. Cheap paperbacks of mazes and crosswords were heaped on top.

An entire shelf bulged with works attributed to Moses – shoddy chapbooks filled with child-like drawings and obscure script promising the ability to command demons and spirits.

The *Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and even Tenth Book of Moses* purported to be the secret teachings revealed by God after He finished carving the Ten Commandments on stone and having the first five Books of Moses (*Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*) inscribed on fine vellum.

Apparently the Lord felt that pulp was adequate for the secret teachings. In any case, that's how *Book Six* and its sequels have come down to us.

Why so many magical texts were linked to Moses and not other esteemed biblical elders such as Abraham, Lilith, or Joshua is anyone's guess.

And what about King Saul, who before his final battle reportedly consulted the famous Witch of Endor, who was probably not a witch at all in the modern sense of the term but I'm guessing more like a freelance guidance counsellor?

It's curious that Jesus of Nazareth, miracle healer and water-to-wine prestidigitator, seems to have no books of magic posthumously foisted upon him.

Why does Moses get credit for a half-dozen magical tomes, while Jesus doesn't get a single mention?

The deciding factor was probably Moses wandering in the desert for 40 years (giving a different spin to the term "wanderjahre"), while Jesus, we're told, lasted a scant 40 days before throwing in the towel.

When later generations of magicians went looking for a fictitious author with staying power upon whom to saddle their controversial works, little surprise they turned to the redoubtable Moses.

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Knowing time was short, I quickly scanned the rest of the shelves. Lined up just below the *Books of Moses* were a bunch of *Mad* paperbacks. Intrigued, I pulled *The Voodoo Mad* off the shelf.

The cover, already dangling, fell off. Quickly I stuffed cover and text back onto the shelf as I heard Dr. Papyrus flush the toilet.

As he came into the room, I bent down and picked up my crumpled sketch of Arthur's final reading and smoothed it out.

Dr. Papyrus swatted the cat off the chair and dropped heavily onto the tattered cushions. He exhaled loudly and leaned his head back.

"What is the Tarot?" he asked with a grand gesture. His voice was suddenly crisp, his eyes alert. "Tarot is the Bible of Bibles, the key to all truth, the Rota, the royal road to wisdom. It is the codex of Thoth Hermes Trismegistus, the lost Book of Enoch, the bearer of the sacred traditions of forgotten civilizations.

"It is the primitive book of Egyptian initiation, in which is found the loftiest philosophy of the ancient world."

He looked at me for a moment, but didn't wait for my assent before continuing. "Lost for centuries, the true meaning and interpretation of the Tarot has at last been revealed to a select few, enabling us to open the sepulchres of our forebears and behold the wisdom of the ancients in all its splendor!"

He paused and crossed one leg over the other, gazing at the far wall as if lecturing to a packed auditorium. His voice took on a deeper resonance.

"The most profound knowledge stems not from human invention, but from the universe revealing itself. The unfolding of life, of the cosmos, is our greatest teacher. The deepest truths are 'occult' only because we fail to see what is right before our eyes.

"The Major Arcana are the purest expression of this revelation, embodying ancient archetypal images as a living series.

"My aim has always been to discover the key to the construction of the Tarot arcana. Where others have seen only contingent meanings and adventitious attributions, I have endeavored to lay bare the architectonic underlying the apparently chance arrangement of images and disclose the truths that lay hidden within."

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He reached over to a cluttered table and picked up a filthy, dog-eared deck of Marseilles Tarot cards, performing a deft one-handed cut. He fanned the deck and held them toward me, face up. "Pick a card, any card. Fifty cents says I can name it."

"You're looking at them," I said, none too enthusiastic about touching the soiled cards.

"So I am," he said, collapsing the fan and tossing the tattered deck back on the

table. "No wonder that trick always works. Now, where was I?"

I reminded him of his paeon to Tarot.

"Ah, yes." Dr. Papyrus picked up a shot glass with a half-inch of murky liquid in the bottom and held it aloft. "All honor to the unsung heroes who have preserved this marvelous instrument, the summation of the mysteries of the universe!" He downed the last few drops in the glass.

I could see that I was going to have to take a guiding role if our conversation was to yield any results. "Sir," I said, "while I have found this account of the origins and transmission of Tarot quite fascinating, I am still hopeful that you will help me understand the meaning of Arthur's final layout and the strange cards I showed you."

I held out the crumpled paper, which he ignored.

"Yes, yes," he said, turning away from me. "As for the meanings of the cards, it's quite straightforward. The arcana form a hieroglyphic and numeric alphabet, expressing in their imagery a series of universal and absolute truths."

He shifted around in the ratty armchair. "It's Pythagorean, you see. The sacred numbers convey a whole body of doctrine to those trained to recognize them. Let us begin with the Minor Arcana, whose essence is found in the relation of their numbers to the sacred name, the tetragrammaton."

Dr. Papyrus leaned back, his eyes half-closed, and expounded at length on the sacred name from the Hebrew tradition. His discourse was obviously redolent with profound insights and incredible intuitive leaps. But since he spoke in Rabbinical Hebrew, all I could understand were the four letters of the sacred name: Yod-He-Vau-He.

"Yahweh," I used to pronounce it, before I learned that occult adepts consider it extremely dangerous to so much as whisper the sacred name, instead referring to it as the "tetragrammaton," or "four-lettered word."

I wanted to respect tradition, but I had to wonder: if pronouncing the sacred name was such an almighty sin, what happened if I *mispronounced* it – which was likely, being a 21st century American trying to speak ancient Hebrew.

Was mispronouncing the tetragrammaton more or less of a sin?

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On the one hand, I not only violated the most solemn strictures against uttering the sacred name – I couldn't even get it right. I could see where your average deity might get a bit tweaked.

On the other hand, if they use a voice-recognition system my pronunciation

of “Yahweh” might come across as “Oy vey,” which didn’t seem likely to land me in the penitential slammer.

It led me to conclude that when dealing with deities, particularly those known by their own assertions to be of a jealous and tyrannical temperament, a bit of mumbling might not be bad policy.

As he spoke, Dr. Papyrus flipped over an old flyer and drew a diagram on the back showing the four Hebrew letters arrayed in the four corners. From the center he drew diagonal lines connecting the different letters, all the while emphatically pronouncing them: “Yod! He! Vau! He!”

I stared at the drawing in silence, having no idea where to begin explicating my confusion. Just keep him talking, I figured. Maybe he would eventually get to the meaning.

Still speaking Hebrew, he drew a bunch more lines until the whole thing looked like a massive doodle. I looked around the room at the scribbled papers littering every surface and wondered what esoteric brilliance might lay buried in those lines.

Suddenly Dr. Papyrus shifted to English. He drew a square. “Now, if I place the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 around this diagram, we begin to see the secret meanings of the cards.”

* * *

He was off again, this time in my language, but just as incomprehensibly.

He pointed to the numbers. “Term one is positive and generative. Term two is negative or generant. Term three is neuter and emanates from the preceding two. Four is a term of transition.”

He drew another square. But instead of starting with five, he began at the top with four again. “Four, which formed the transition from the prior sequence, now individualizes and actualizes itself by commencing a new sequence. Is this clear?”

He waited for me to respond. It seemed to make sense in a quasi-Hegelian way that I hoped I wouldn’t be tested on. I nodded.

Dr. Papyrus pointed again to the square surrounded by Hebrew letters. “Starting from this fixed principle – the tetragrammaton – Tarot develops the most diverse combinations. Here we see how it flows into the Minor Arcana, which contain the real key to the system.”

He drew a simple grid and labeled the quadrants Swords, Batons, Cups, and Pentacles.

"If we correlate these with the numbers, we understand the Minor Arcana. The series 1-2-3-4 represents the suits in the divine world. The sequence 4-5-6-7 is their presence in the human world. The numbers 7-8-9-10 are their evolution in the material world."

"That's for all of the suits?" I said.

He stopped and peered at me, his eyes sunken yet alert. "Interesting you should ask. In some operations we reverse two of the suits. This follows the oldest and most correct practices. However, for the purposes of illustration we will take all four suits as identical."

He sketched a series of diagrams so rapidly that I couldn't keep track of the explanations. Triangles within squares, circles within circles within circles, showing how the suits radiated out through the Minor Arcana.

"Each suit of the Minors has its own emanations," he said. "And each suit is also connected to one of the letters of the sacred name." He ran out of space on the back of the flyer, flipped it over, and drew a series of interlocking triangles in the margins of the advertisement.

He grabbed a pair of rusty scissors and started cutting the drawings apart. I leaned back in my chair, not wanting to get gouged. Soon the floor was covered with little scraps of paper. Dr. Papyrus got down on all fours and sifted through the pile, quickly selecting 20 or 30 scraps.

Coming to his knees, he shoved a stack of books off an endtable and with amazing dexterity assembled the little fragments into one large diagram, a series of concentric circles divided into four sections.

Each quadrant was assigned a suit: Swords, Batons, Cups, and Pentacles. In the center a square was labeled with the four letters of the sacred Hebrew name.

"Voila," he said triumphantly. "Once you grasp the inner dynamic, it's simple."

* * *

"That's amazing," I said, doing my best to sound sincere. "But I'm concerned with this particular reading that Arthur left. How do you go from your chart to actually understanding what the cards mean?"

"Meaning?" He shook his head slowly. "Those who fail to appreciate the sacred numbers always want further meanings. Why can we not be content with this magnificent Pythagorean vision? Why do we have to find something 'deeper'?"

I didn't want to seem ungrateful, either to my host or to the sacred numbers. But I was starting to get concerned that I was wasting my valuable time trying

to extract some semblance of meaning from Arthur's multi-deck mélange. Dr. Papyrus certainly showed no inclination to help.

I wondered whether I should raise the topic again. But after taking a pinch of snuff he resumed the discussion himself. "For those pursuing the lower arts of cartomancy or fortune telling, we may illustrate by explicating a specific card."

I seized the opening. "How about the Three of Swords," I said, recalling the Marseilles Tarot card from Arthur's final layout. "Can you explain that?"

"Ah, three," he said with a satisfied sigh. "The most mystical number in Western culture."

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I nodded, thinking about how the number echoed through history – Plato's body-mind-spirit, Christianity's holy trinity, Joachim of Fiore's three historical ages, Fichte's dialectical triads, Freud's id-ego-superego...

And can you picture the Three Stooges as a pair or quartet?

Dr. Papyrus took a deep breath, as if preparing for arduous labor. "Let us consider," he said, "how the symbolic meanings of the cards follow from the very nature of the numbers themselves. We see at once that each suit begins with the Ace, with the number one. It is indivisible. It is unity. Do I make myself clear?"

Again I nodded, although I wasn't entirely clear what defining "one" as "unity" accomplished.

"The second Minor," he continued, "is the reflex of the first, and is formed by taking the first negatively. Thus two, plurality, is the negation of one, or unity. From one and two result three, or difference. You see how simple it is? It suffices to understand the first card to mathematically determine the meaning of the entire sequence."

On a sheet of scrap paper he drew another square. Along each edge he placed a Hebrew letter from the tetragrammaton plus the name of a Tarot suit. Then he began to fill in the square with the numbers one through ten.

"Endeavoring to avoid all empiricism," he said, "I will now demonstrate deductively the symbolic value of any of the Minor Arcana by determining which letter of the sacred name is its analog, and which side – positive or negative – it is on."

He looked at me sharply. "We will take your Three of Swords as an example."

* * *

My ears perked up at the mention of the card from Arthur's final reading. Maybe we were finally getting somewhere.

He pointed rapidly to his diagrams. "As you can see, the third card of the suit of Swords is represented by the letter Vau considered positively, which indicates our connection to the macrocosm. This is determined by the fact that the third arcanum is the reflex of the second taken in dialectical relation to the first. Is this clear?"

"Yes, but honestly, sir, I still don't get what it means."

He looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. "So you're searching for the *divinatory* meaning?"

I clenched my teeth to hold back my annoyance. "Yes, if you don't mind."

"Well, then, let's look it up," he said.

He rooted around on the floor, picked up one of the little booklets that come with Tarot decks, and opened it to the appropriate page. "The Three of Swords," he read aloud, "means that negative thoughts are getting the best of you."

He turned the page and squinted. "It also says here, 'Avoid holding secrets in your heart.' If the card is upside down, you might see a light at the end of the tunnel. I can't recall, was it reversed?"

"No, sir, it wasn't." I sucked in a slow breath. "I asked if you could provide a key to an exceedingly strange layout that Arthur left. And what do you do? You read me an interpretation out of a little booklet."

He shrugged. "You asked about Tarot, I told you about Tarot. I shared everything I know. Yet you aren't satisfied. You want divination. Is there no hope for the youth of today?"

"There's a lot of hope." I replied tersely, "if we got some straight talk from our elders." I emphasized the final word to make my point perfectly clear.

I expected him to lash back, but instead he gave a crooked smile. "Straight talk you want? Well, look for yourself," he said, gesturing at the crumpled diagram of Arthur's layout. "What do you see?"

"A bunch of cards," I said angrily, "from a bunch of different decks."

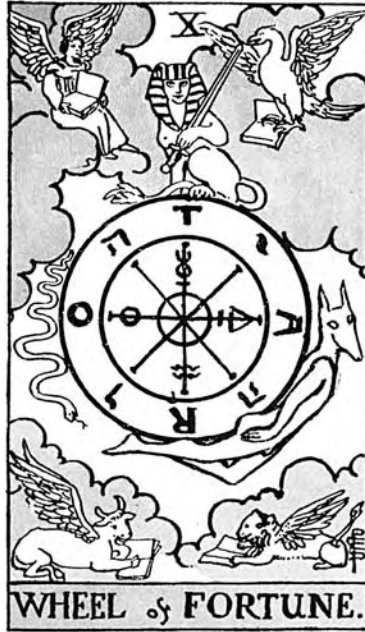
"Well," he said, "I can't tell you what the individual cards mean. You'll have to figure that out for yourself. But obviously the different decks must symbolize something."

I caught my breath. "Like what?" I asked tentatively.

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“Who knows? Different possibilities, different ideas, different people – who can say?”

He shrugged, but I could barely contain myself. Of course! Why hadn't I seen it before? The different decks were a code in which Arthur had sent a message about the others on Oracle Street!



CHAPTER X: Wheel of Fortune

In my excitement over the meaning of the bizarre Tarot spread, I nearly forgot that I'd wanted to ask Dr. Papyrus about Arthur and Crockley.

Even if it wasn't Crockley whose tattooed ankle I'd seen, I didn't consider him off the hook for Arthur's fate.

Had the two of them shared initiatory secrets that Arthur's new deck threatened to betray? Was this the key to the disappearance of the Trismegistus Meister Tarot?

But as I started to raise the question, Dr. Papyrus abruptly sat up and looked at a clock on the mantle. "Is it so late? I have an appointment in five minutes. I'll need to conclude our interview."

He got to his feet and walked toward the door. I stood and followed. "Thank you for your time, sir. I do have one remaining question, if I might –"

"Yes, yes, another time," he said. "Here's my card. Call first. I see people only by appointment. Goodbye now."

He handed me a well-fingered card and shepherded me out the door. I heard the locks click behind me. Partway down the stairs I passed two people coming up. Both were thin as rails. They were talking hurriedly, but fell silent when they saw me. I assumed they were Dr. Papyrus's next appointment. But they entered a second floor pad.

I made my way down the dank stairway and out the door onto Campanella Way, my head spinning from the stale incense and the interpretive possibilities of Arthur's spread. I jaywalked across the street, then turned and looked back at the little fleabag hotel sandwiched between the bathtub repair shop and the insect taxidermist.

To my surprise, I spied a familiar figure dressed all in black coming up the block – Alabaster Crockley. Startled to see him outside during daylight hours, I raised my arm to hail him.

Suddenly I realized where he was heading – the Visconti-Sforza Hotel!

I ducked into a doorway and peeked out. He seemed to be hiding something under his black coat. After casting a quick glance up and down the block, he entered the hotel.

So after all his bad-mouthing, here was Crockley going to see his old master! Of course, maybe it wasn't a social visit at all. Maybe Crockley had a gambling problem and Dr. Papyrus was his bookie. Everyone had their habits. At least his addiction gave sustenance to an aged teacher.

But wait. If Dr. Papyrus was a recluse, had he colluded with his former student Crockley to suppress Arthur's new deck? Maybe the doctor was the brains of the operation, with Crockley his eyes and ears on the street.

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As I walked back toward Oracle Street I weighed Dr. Papyrus's interpretation of the bizarre Tarot reading – that each card represented an individual. Maybe the clue was right in front of me?

But what could it all mean? Tarot could be completely baffling.

Sometimes I wished I'd taken at least one divination class during my formative years. I've heard that if you don't start young it's much harder later on. But for the longest time I wouldn't go near a deck of cards.

It started back in third grade, when I got all excited about trying out for the Tarot team.

My dear old mother urged me to pursue more realistic goals such as the accounting team or the proofreading squad.

But my heart was set on Tarot.

Having no experience, I never expected to make it as Sun or Moon, let alone Star. I figured I had a shot at Chariot or Temperance, though.

I was even willing to ride the divinatory bench if I occasionally got into a layout.

But Coach had it in for me. An older woman with a greying mullet, she had us running Celtic Cross sprints with the Tarot de Marseilles on the very first day. When I mixed up conscious and unconscious influences, she hit me with fifty one-handed shuffles.

Despite my offer to play backup Hanged Man if I were promised a promotion to Hermit the following season, I was cut before the first match.

The heartbreak soured me not only on Tarot, but on Poker, Blackjack, Pinochle, Piquet, Bridge, Gin Rummy, Bezique, Euchre, Hearts, Spades, Whist, Canasta, and even Go Fish. For a while the mere sight of playing cards sent me reeling into the slough of despond.

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Even with no background in Tarot, though, I could heed Dr. Papyrus's suggestion that each card might indicate a person.

Thoth seemed easy – Alabaster Crockley's deck of choice. The Moon card, replete with Egyptian imagery, was stiff and regimented. Not unlike its apparent target.

If Crockley was Thoth, it was but a short step to identifying Dr. Papyrus with the Three of Swords from the Marseilles Tarot, the 1700s deck I'd seen him handle during my visit.

I'd noticed that Swords tended to be more negative than the other suits. Was Arthur accusing Dr. Papyrus of channeling bad energy toward him? Or was it just his way of saying the doctor was mired in negativity?

I sighed. The clues weren't quite as unambiguous as I'd hoped.

At least Death and Justice from Arthur's usual Bergamo Renaissance deck seemed straightforward. Arthur was dead, and he wanted justice. Even I could figure that out.

The Queen of Wands from the Gnostic Gnowers Tarot must be Madame Bluebloodsky. But aside from the Russian savant's regal bearing, what did the card tell me about her role in the mystery?

Motherpeace called to mind Wendy, but Persephone was another possibility. The Four of Pentacles. A woman clad in a white robe closed the door of a rustic temple in which burned a sacred fire.

Somber, yes. But it hardly suggested a cold-hearted killer or Tarot thief.

That left the empty box from the Fast Food Tarot. Once I grasped that Arthur might be telegraphing a message about the people on our block, the beady-eyed mole on the cover of the outlawed deck took on a sick logic.

Perkins. The intuition soared like a bottle rocket and burst in my mind. If ever there was a rodential character on Oracle Street, it was Perkins.

If I added this all-too-obvious interpretation to the tattoo I'd seen earlier, the clues pointed directly at him.

I gasped. Suppose Perkins *was* the Tarot thief. Did that make him Arthur's killer? And now Persephone was on her way to RitualLand to meet with – Perkins?

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Glancing at a clock, I saw that I had a couple of hours until Persephone's appointment. If I was riding out to RitualLand anyway, why not go early and do a little recreating? Surely I'd earned a break.

For the surveillance work I was about to undertake, I needed a good disguise. I stopped at Headstone Eclectic Metaphysical Outlet, the tri-state's largest occult hobbyist emporium.

Whatever I thought of their gnomish co-founder, Cornelius De Roquefort, no one denied that Headstone's esoteric inventory was first rate.

The store, which occupied a prime lot on quaint little Oracle Street, was a big box warehouse. The architecture was minimalist – steel beams and bare fluorescent bulbs. But who looked up?

Everywhere the latest and gaudiest magical merchandise enticed the eyes. Just inside the door a discount table offered Witchcamp Barbies attired in last year's costumery, flanked by a cabinet of Goddess bobbleheads from diverse pantheons.

The main aisle featured Pan GoodHumor's latest coffee-table book, *1013 Practical Jokes for Neo-Wiccans and Other Pagans*, accompanied by a display of favorite ritual pranks.

Front and center in Headstone's display stood Brigid's Electric Well, which delivered a mild jolt to celebrants just as they stepped up to speak their commitments to the Goddess. "Perfect for long-winded celebrants!"

The Miracle of Life Tadpole Farm showed an impish, spike-haired kid sneaking up on a sacred cauldron. "Pour a vial into Waters of the World and watch the fun begin!"

Wodin's Whoopee Throne was always a big seller before large community rituals like the Spiral Dance, where jokesters loved to slip the flatulence bags under the deep anchor's seat cushion.

Across the aisle was my favorite ritual prank of all time, the Exploding Dumbek. "Guaranteed to get your chants started with a bang!"

Moving on to the costume department, I selected a shamrock green "Earth Huggers for Orpheus" T-shirt that I figured would throw a bloodhound off my track.

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The 782-J Express bus headed for the edge of town. As I stared out the window at the endless malls, my mind roved back over the past two days. Arthur dead. His Tarot deck missing.

And his last testament encapsulated in a bizarre Tarot spread that implicated everyone in the neighborhood.

Which made sense in a way. Everyone on Oracle Street must be part of some clandestine society or another, each with its own confidences to guard.

Word must have spread through the esoteric underground that the Trismegistus Meister Tarot was about to unveil the deepest mysteries of their fellowships. Alarmed, the denizens of Oracle Street gathered in a midnight tribunal and collectively sentenced Arthur to death for betraying their secrets.

The empty Fast Food box pointed to Perkins as the hatchetman. But the proximity of the other cards suggested a whole panoply of accomplices, each with their own personal motives for preventing publication of the new deck.

Crockley and Dr. Papyrus saw their ancient-origins theories debunked and were liable to become laughingstocks once Arthur's more prosaic theories about Tarot's Renaissance origins reached the public.

Madame Bluebloodsky and Wendy Womansdaughter were threatened by the new deck's transparent symbolism, which would eliminate the need for specialized interpreters.

Cornelius De Roquefort, for financial or personal reasons, might wish to

wriggle out of his obligation to finance the deck.

Even Persephone Coalschmidt, despite her disclaimers of humility and service, must resent the almost total lack of credit she received for a deck she painted single-handedly.

And might she stand to inherit Arthur's store?

Then there was the mountebank from the street faire with his high-handed claims to rightful ownership of Arthur's deck. Had he assaulted Arthur on the street, then come back and rifled the store trying to find the cards?

And what about the clerk at the Mini-Max Magic Mart with her baseball bat? Seeing as how Arthur died from a blow to the head, that seemed a coincidence worth noting.

Perkins – always I circled back to that slippery eel, who might well delude himself that killing Arthur was the best way to advance his own fortunes. With Arthur dead, Perkins could dream of a lucrative career as the foremost authority on the master's teaching – and with Persephone's collusion he might even aspire to be named manager of Arcane Wisdom.

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made that Perkins was the killer. But was he the one calling the shots? Or had his proximity to Arthur simply made him a useful pawn for someone else's malevolent intent?

Now it seemed likely that Perkins was meeting Persephone at RitualLand. Was the conspiracy about to unfold before my eyes?

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Out beyond the furthest reaches of suburbia, among disused farm fields and abandoned strip-mining operations, sat the sprawling complex known as RitualLand. The 782-J Express reached the end of the line and disgorged its consignment of revelers. I debarked and stepped aside from the throng.

I hadn't been to RitualLand for several years. In the wake of the Great Return the already popular park had turned into one of the most spectacular Pagan entertainment centers this side of the Vatican.

Behind the glistening gates rose a cascade of every conceivable architectural style, from Roman temples to Arabic minarets to Chinese pagodas to space-age heliports. Even in the middle of the day thousands of fairy lights dazzled the eyes.

New-age music blared from giant speakers. Purifying mist wafted through the air, and a potpourri of exotic fragrances tickled the nostrils.

Just outside the entrance stood the new Cosmoplex, where you could watch

up to sixteen movies at the same time while riding an exercycle and getting your nails done.

Cosmoplex had exclusive rights to the season's blockbuster hit: *The Goddessfather*.

In the Neo-Pagan sequel to the unrivaled mafioso series, Michael Corleone's grandson Sequoia attends California Witchcamp. He aspects Aphrodite, changes his name to StregaDove, and dedicates his life to healing the bloody rifts among the feuding Sicilian families.

At the camp's culminating ancestor ritual, however, the young heir to the bitter Corleone legacy invokes the spirit of his great-grandfather, the legendary Don Corleone, who issues an initiatory challenge that StregaDove take over the entire Witchcamp operation.

When camp organizers balk, StregaDove channels a spell the others can't refuse, and the first part of the trilogy ends with the Corleone circle going to the hypoallergenic foam mattresses in a hex-duel showdown with an affinity group from Vermont Witchcamp.

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As I approached the portal my stomach tightened. A trip to RitualLand always seemed like a great idea right up to the moment I had to cross the threshold...

Taking a deep breath, I grounded myself into the native soil of my adopted hometown, apologizing for my complicity in paying rent for land that was stolen in the first place.

Casting three protective spheres around my aura, I invoked the sacred elements along with a miscellaneous grab-bag of deities and allies who seemed like they might potentially be of service amid the chaos of RitualLand.

Then I plunged ahead.

RitualLand's portal was modeled on the sacred shrine of the Delphic Oracle. Chiseled in faux-marble above the gate was a simple phrase repeated in 178 languages: Know Thyself.

It was more than a slogan – just inside the portal you could choose from a smorgasbord of psychiatric, personal growth, and counseling services available a la carte, sequentially, or synchronically.

I selected a quick round of depth-charge parapsychological co-modeling mindfulness-based cognitive therapy followed by a brisk auric rubdown set

WHEEL OF FORTUNE

to chimes in the celestial key of F#maj7b9.

Instantly refreshed, I opted to do the rest of my personal growth by facing my primal fear of gravity.

RitualLand was a vast agglomeration of amusement zones and recreation areas. The original core of the park was the Isle of Ancestors, where visitors could hobnob with spirits of the beloved dead in a culturally-sensitive milieu while sonically immersed in antique 1980s Samhain chants.

Crowds queued up for the Sunless Sea underwater roller coaster, the first of its kind in the tri-state area, as well as the Temple of Reincarnation, or as it was better known: "You Bet Your Past Life!"

Contestants faced three identical doors, chose one, and were thrust into a fully immersive experience as an Egyptian Pharaoh, the High Priestess of Inanna, or a minor-league Canadian hockey player.

Soon Labyrinth Village opened, followed by the Zodiac Zone, the Tarot-themed Fool's Journey, the women-only Dianic Gardens, the male-identified Golden Wand Club, and the trans-exclusive Changelings.

The latest addition to the complex was the Chakra Experience, aimed at bedraggled parents who got roped into events at RitualLand.

While kids queued up for thrill rides, adults could get their auras cleaned and fluffed, have their egos inflated or deflated, and give each chakra that sort of individualized attention that is so rare in today's world of spiritual bustle and commerce.

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Persephone was meeting her mystery date at the Chakra Experience at two. But it was barely one. I had an hour to sample RitualLand's other features.

I warmed up by riding the Flight of Icarus roller coaster, then moved on to the Spiral Tilt-a-Whirl, where a thirteen-person pod spiraled toward the center and back out again as the sound system blared *The Wheel of the Year Goes Round and Round*.

Still reeling, I stopped by the Mansion of Spirits, the original haunted house that started the whole park. Nostalgia aside, it was about as scary as watching *The Arkansas Scrying Bowl Massacre* with the lights on.

Of course I had to visit my favorite venue – Le Musée Magique, a warehouse filled with early-1900s arcade games. The mechanical contrivances included skill contests, challenges of strength and endurance, and a Beltane tableau with dozens of moving figures simultaneously invoking, grounding, casting circles,

dancing the Maypole, and cavorting in the bushes.

But my primary purpose in visiting Le Musée was practical: to consult the antique divination machines.

The machines – thirteen altogether – dispensed sage advice to all comers. For a few ducats you could consult a fortune teller, discover your ideal career, determine your chances of financial success, and learn how good a kisser you were.

During my undergrad years in Key City I found that by taking readings from all thirteen mechanical diviners I obtained an unerring oracle for determining the esoteric median – hence the odds of success – for any proposed plan of action.

I drew a breath and stepped up to the whirring and flashing machines, asking about the odds of success in my investigation of Arthur's death and the missing Tarot deck.

Working my way down the row, I got a printout of my biorhythms, obtained an astrological reading, tested my grip, and gauged my professional prospects.

Last on the circuit was the Kiss-O-Meter, where you proffered a coin, pressed your hand to a metal surface – and incredibly, the century-old machine could calculate your precise degree of passion.

I'd had a few bad experiences with the machine in the past, and I was wary of laying my heart on the line. But for a scientific survey I needed the results of all thirteen machines. I dropped a coin in the slot and placed my hand on the sensor.

Trepidation swept over me as the lights flashed on and off: Smoocher, Wolf, Granny, Tongue Twister, and Dead Fish. The Granny light flickered for a terrifying moment, then dimmed as Sizzling lit up and stayed aglow.

My heart swelled with delight. I'd always secretly suspected that I was a devastating kisser, but with so little feedback over the years I could never be certain. How reassuring to receive objective validation of my talent!

Wrapping up the divinatory circuit and using my fingers to do the requisite math, I arrived at my composite score: 88.752%. It wasn't the 90% affirmation I'd desired, but it let me know I was following a promising path in my investigation of Arthur's death.

It was nearly time to search for Persephone, but I had a few minutes for a quick spin on the park's newest attraction: The Descent of Inanna.

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The ride was built around a giant tower in the center of the park. Entering through a smoke-belching cave, we filed down a clammy corridor past seven gates where we were stripped of everything we held dear – phone, hash pipe, house keys, credit cards, Ricola drops. At the last gate even my WiseWoman utility amulet was taken away.

Finally we beheld the monstrous Ereshkigal, scraggly-haired elder sister of Inanna. As we huddled in the dark, Ereshkigal barraged us with gravel-voiced insults, the gist of which was: life up on Earth sucks, and the real action was underground.

The harangue ended. After an eerie silence, minimum-wage teenagers dressed as infernal demons leapt from the shadows. Jabbing with low-voltage cattle prods they forced the entire group into a dirty freight elevator. With a jolt we began a creaky ascent more terrifying than any roller coaster.

At the top, teenage demons strapped me into a plastic safety seat and fastened a meat-hook behind my collar. Suddenly the wall and floor fell away, and I dangled 200 feet in the air. I eked out a prayer to Inanna that I didn't turn to jelly and ooze right through the safety belt.

A staticky loop of *We All Come from the Goddess* played through a tinny sound system, punctuated by Ereshkigal's death-metal growl: "Prepare to die!"

At last Ereshkigal began a countdown. "5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 – die!"

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As the plastic seat plunged, my life flashed before my eyes: my loving if somewhat preoccupied mother; my years of getting picked on by the school bully, Evangelina Townsley; all the dysfunctional people I had known and how I wished I had spoken up the time someone was wearing patchouli deodorant at the *Fragrance Freefest*; my impending emergency medical and burial expenses that would accrue compound interest and deplete the resources of my estate; my unrequited love for Evangelina Townsley; the songs I never sang and the novels I never wrote and the time it snowed on Easter and the big rugby match got cancelled and I knew in my heart there was no God...

Whoosh! The shock absorbers bounced us to a stop. My stomach caught up as I unbuckled. I lurched out of the safety seat, barely able to stand erect.

Should I do it again? Maybe later. Right now, I needed to collect my valuables, get over to the *Chakra Experience*, and find *Persephone*.

* * *

Following the labyrinth-shaped signs I stumbled dizzily across the maze of

RitualLand, dodging over-stuffed Saturday morning cartoon characters like Divination Dawg and Mortimer the Metaphysical Moose who roved around trying to pose for photos with complete strangers.

The entrance to the Chakra Experience looked like a Burning Man chill-tent, with one flap pulled slightly open. Pulsating techno-trance subwoofers massaged my chest as I joined the crowd streaming through.

Two multi-gendered usherettes in white gowns wafted fragrance-free incense toward us. "You are now entering sacred space," one intoned. "You are now entering sacred time."

The other rang a Tibetan bowl. The tensions of RitualLand – and the past 24 hours – began to drop away.

Conversations that had been shouted over the carnival cacophony fell to a whisper and then faded altogether as we approached the glowing red portal of the root chakra.

The Chakra Experience comprised seven color-coded tabernacles. The Red pavilion featured a grounding exercise that I considered a tad redundant, having just dropped 200 feet in 5.6 seconds. Hard to get much more grounded than that unless the brakes failed.

I took a quick look for my quarry and moved on.

I hoped to spot Persephone right away, but seeing how vast the Chakra Experience was, I started worrying. Her assignation could be in any tent. Was she working her way through in order, or had she hurried to the end for her rendezvous?

Did she believe what I now strongly suspected – that Arthur might have been murdered, and that she might be headed for a liaison with a killer and Tarot thief? Did she realize that her own life might be in danger?

Persephone needed my help, and fast. I owed it to the memory of our mutual mentor Arthur – indeed to the very future of Tarot – to warn her.

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Complicating my task, Perkins or whoever she was meeting might recognize me and realize that I was bent on foiling their fiendish scheme. So in addition to searching for Persephone I needed to be on the lookout for I knew not whom.

The second tent, bathed in orange light, was a virtual orgy. People with electrodes taped to their skin writhed on the ground emitting low moans of pleasure. It looked like a valuable self-growth exercise, but I was glad to see

that Persephone and her “date” weren’t meeting here.

Yellow was a chocolate buffet. Many visitors apparently never made it past the third chakra – a true test of Will.

Green was an ecstasy trip of the senses. Blue, the throat chakra, featured a rousing sing-along of one of my favorite Pagan chants, My Goddess is Your Goddess and Your Goddess is My Goddess, complete with all the hand-motions. But still no sign of Persephone.

The sixth chamber glowed with the indigo hues of dusk. Specially trained physical therapists working for substandard wages massaged temples and third eyes. It was hard to keep my other two eyes focused, but eventually I determined that Persephone was not in the Indigo tent.

Violet was a hall of mirrors softly illumined by purple floor strips. The mirrors articulated mysterious passageways that seemed to stretch to infinity. Soft gusts of air suggested ease and expansion as we prepared to emerge from the crown chakra.

The lighting was quite flattering, and I was admiring my left profile in an angled mirror when a familiar figure passed behind me – Perkins!

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I whirled, expecting to be greeted by his customary ill-founded hauteur. All I saw was another mirror. When I looked back at the first mirror, I caught a glimpse of a vanishing figure.

I dashed over to the spot just in time to see the leg disappear again. Turning to follow, I ran into myself from a dozen angles.

Was I hallucinating? Was I was so appalled at the idea of Persephone collaborating with Perkins that I imagined my nemesis at every turn?

Suddenly I had an inspiration. Why chase after Persephone and Perkins, or whoever she was meeting? Why not wait at the exit? Sooner or later one or both had to emerge.

Catching my breath and doing a brief but thorough regrouping using the Cryogenian Snowball Earth method, I made my way toward the exit sign.

The mirrored crown chakra opened into a long, broad hallway bathed in white. The floor rose slightly, leading to a radiant, mist-shrouded altar.

Forgetting all else, I hastened toward the apparition and fell on my knees before the glory of the Goddess.

As I landed I realized that the altar was actually a snack bar with a fog

machine. I climbed back to my feet and ordered a Selena Sludgee, then went out into the sacred grove to await my prey.

Full-spectrum fluorescent light streamed through artificial oak branches, casting a serene ambiance over the dining area.

I hadn't taken three slurps of my Sludgee when my attention was wrenched back to the mystery at hand by the appearance of a tall, lithe figure emanating from the final chakra.

Persephone!

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My plan had worked! I could warn Persephone of the danger, enlist her aid in entrapping Perkins, and be done with the whole matter by dinnertime.

Dazzled by my deductions, Persephone might spontaneously offer to create several hundred high-resolution grayscale artworks for the forthcoming volumes of *Magical Materialism*.

But first I needed to warn her of the danger! I leapt from the stool as discreetly as I could, aware that Perkins – if it was indeed Perkins whom she was meeting – might be surreptitiously observing.

"Hey, Persephone," I called, waving my arms to get her attention. "How great to see you!"

She shot an alarmed look. "What are you doing here?"

The moment demanded the steely nerves of a professional. "Oh, I just happened to be here at the park. RitualLand is pretty cool, huh?"

"I need to go," she said, her eyes darting around.

I realized I had to dispense with formalities. "No, wait – that's the point – you're in terrible danger! This Perkins fellow, or whoever you're meeting – I have special inside information that he may possibly be involved –"

"Of course he's involved, you fool! That's why I'm here. Will you leave me alone?"

It pained me not to honor what must have seemed an eminently reasonable request.

But given my first-hand knowledge of the circular tattoo emblazoned on Perkins' ankle as well as my past experience with this execrable character, I would be remiss in my duty if I failed to forewarn her.

I adopted my most dramatic tone, augmenting it with appropriate gestures to heighten the impact. "Far from me to malign someone whom you apparently

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hold worthy of your time and considerable consideration, yet it is incumbent upon me not to neglect this opportunity to warn you of –”

“What’s this?” A loud voice broke into my oration. I turned to find myself facing a human toothpick.

Hands on hips, Perkins demanded: “Do you have business here?”

* * *

Caught off guard, I tried to explain that our conversation was private and that the two of us would appreciate the courtesy of a few moments alone. I shot Persephone oblique glances signaling my desperate need to speak confidentially with her.

Perkins must have exerted a mesmeric influence over her, though, because she waved her hand dismissively.

“It’s nothing,” she said to Perkins. “We chanced to meet and were just saying hello.”

“Good,” he said with a satisfied smirk. “Let’s be on our way, then, and leave the ‘amusement park’ to our young friend.”

He took hold of Persephone’s elbow. I glared after them, mutely clenching my fists.

Just as Perkins steered her through the turnstile, Persephone arched her graceful neck and cast an inscrutable glance over her shoulder.

Was she trying to send a message? Was she warning me away from imminent danger in order that I be free to assist her afterward?

* * *

Yet I could feel my ardor dim. There were RitualLand attractions that I hadn’t sampled, but I’d lost the spark. I started for the gate.

If I couldn’t offer even a modicum of protection in her utmost hour of trial to Persephone Coalschmidt, co-creator of the most important new Tarot deck of our time – a deck which was presently missing and quite possibly in the nefarious hands of none other than Perkins – what was the point of my efforts?

Oblivious to the revelry around me, I pushed through the crowd toward the exit.

Above the gate a huge video monitor advertised upcoming concerts and musicals on RitualLand’s stages. As I neared the portal, a memorial to Arthur A. Arthur flashed on the screen.

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I paused and paid silent homage to my erstwhile employer. Next to me a woman stopped eating cotton candy and sighed as Arthur's picture flashed on the giant monitor.

The little segment wrapped up with a touching ten-second meditation on his life and wide-ranging influence. Then a stark word flashed across the screen.

"Alert!"

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A hush fell over the park. Even people on the roller coasters stopped shrieking, and the only sound was the whine of metal wheels against the rails as the trains raced overhead.

A middle-aged man in a business suit appeared on the screen. "This just in – Key City authorities have released a composite sketch of a person of interest in the death of famed Tarot expert Arthur A. Arthur."

A black and white drawing flashed on the screen, a young man about my age whose face was consumed in spite and anger.

His hair, of an indeterminate color, was about the same length as mine. He seemed to be wearing a T-shirt, and I was reminded of my own sartorial preferences.

A murmuring rose around me, and I suddenly became aware of the incredible coincidence that the description so closely matched my own.

Although no one was fingering me, I felt it wise to hunch my shoulders and fake a rheumatic cough as an excuse to keep one hand over my face.

As I elbowed my way toward the exit, a sickening thought occurred to me. What if the description actually *was* intended to be me?

Slowly it sunk in. Someone had ratted me out.

What a bitter turn of the wheel – I was wanted by city authorities for questioning in the death of Arthur A. Arthur!



Chapter XI: Justice

I cast a furtive glance at the screen just as the black and white sketch faded. It was me, no doubt about it. I was a “person of interest” in Arthur’s untimely death.

How had local authorities tabbed me? Sure, I was substitute custodian at Arthur’s magic shop. But why me, among all the other possible suspects?

I’d never been in trouble with Key City police before, other than routine arrests for jaywalking, skateboarding, spraypainting, vandalism, creating a public nuisance, resisting arrest, and inciting to riot (all of which stemmed from simple misunderstandings).

Being linked to Arthur’s death was different. I better get out of RitualLand before a vigilante mob spotted me and exercised frontier justice. Anyone who

could lasso me with a binding spell before I got my metaphysical shields in place might take me down.

As I boarded the 782-M back to Oracle Street I took a moment and renewed my shielding.

During my wanderjahre I experimented with parabolic psychic mirrors which turned energy back on the sender 33-fold by concentrating all of the vibes at a specific point.

If I could maneuver my persecutors into standing at an exact distance as they slung their invectives, the backlash would fry them to an esoteric crisp.

But the best shielding in the world couldn't stop the police from arresting me.

Where could I hide? The authorities might be watching the Bristling Broom lodge hall. And they knew I worked at Arcane Wisdom. Would it be safe to go to the shop?

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How had I gotten into this mess? Someone must have traduced me. Probably they told the authorities about my feud with Arthur concerning my magnum opus, a feud that would never have taken place had Arthur but taken the time to judiciously weigh my work in light of the overarching trajectory of Western magic

I hate to sound like I'm kvetching about Arthur all the time, like it's some petty personal vendetta. His inability to grasp my materialist theories was hardly the only symptom of the once-redoubtable Arthur A. Arthur's decline.

Back during my undergrad internship he scorned the Ritual-In-a-Box craze until it was too late, allowing Headstone and the Wiccan Wonderland to reap windfall profits while Arthur got stuck with unsold inventory when the bubble burst.

More telling was his unwillingness to engage with Quantum Tarot.

Years earlier Arthur had made his name as the inventor of the Periodic Table of the Tarot, which revolutionized interpretation by highlighting recurring relationships among the Arcana.

The Periodic Table, however, was based entirely on empirical data collected from readings. Although Arthur could offer experimental evidence that his categories worked, he was unable to explain theoretically why the meanings recurred as they did.

It was a younger devotee of Quantum Metaphysics who unraveled the

mystery of the Periodic Table of the Tarot and in the process threatened to overturn the most hallowed of all divinatory traditions – namely, the ones printed in the little booklets that accompany Tarot decks.*

* * *

I first encountered Quantum Tarot when I audited a Metaphysics class taught by none other than Dylan Oceanbreeze Heisenberg, great grand-nephew of German physicist Werner Heisenberg, discoverer of the Quantum Mechanical Uncertainty Principle.

Following in his famous forebear's footsteps, Dylan propounded a theory he called the Quantum Tarot Uncertainty Principle – namely, the more precisely you interpreted the suit of a card, the less accurately you could interpret the number, and vice-versa.

This controversial theory undermined the all-too-precise readings offered in Tarot books, which operated on the classical metaphysical assumption that suit and number could be interpreted independently of one another.

Ironically, Quantum Tarot presented no challenge to Arthur's intuitive deck – Arthur never claimed that the Trismegistus Meister cards carried precise meanings in the first place. It was decks like Thoth which spelled out interpretations right on the card that stood to suffer from quantum developments.

But as with my striking new materialist paradigm, Arthur seemed to have closed his psyche to the latest advances in the field, and he never carried Quantum Tarot texts in his shop.

So I tried not to take my own rejection personally. Was it my fault that Arthur was incapable of embracing the new aeon, the age of quantum metaphysics and materialist magic?

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* - Quantum Tarot begins from the deceptively simple fact that Tarot energy is contained only in discrete "quanta," or quantities – ie, cards carry only simple, successive whole numbers. In standard, unadulterated decks, one never finds card number 9.75, or two and a third, or pi.

Exploring this seemingly obvious fact led to realm-shaking discoveries that challenged the interpretations contained in every Tarot book ever published.**

** - Pre-millennial Tarot books invariably featured a section which listed all 78 cards with copious meanings and interpretations. This fashion arose because older authors were paid by the word. Contemporary authors pay to publish, and pay by the page at that, so the practice is rapidly declining.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

I hadn't hesitated to call out Arthur's shortcomings in my magnum opus, challenging his anti-materialist tendencies.

Although I'd been careful not to mention him personally – not wanting to hold his name up to never-ending obloquy – the vehemence of my critique might well lead perceptive readers to wonder about my feelings toward Arthur.

Still, I doubted that Key City police could decipher the arcane references and elliptical critiques I directed against my mentor's outmoded paradigm.

No, someone had ratted me out. Someone who knew of my frustration with Arthur and could explain it in terms that even the police could understand.

I'd already established that any or all of the Oracle Street regulars might be involved in Arthur's death, particularly if the motive was to prevent betrayal of initiatory secrets.

But who would go the extra step and frame me?

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Madame Bluebloodsky or Wendy? Even if they didn't frame me, they might have called the police in a misguided belief that I was a menace to society.

What about Al Crockley? He knew of my frustrations with Arthur. If he were embroiled in Arthur's death and wanted a fall-guy, I was an easy target.

Persephone? The mountebank? The Mini-Max clerk?

Each seemed capable of the foul deed. But none struck me as the culprit. As soon as the expression "ratted me out" popped into my head, I intuitively knew my betrayer.

Perkins. If he murdered Arthur and stole the Trismegistus Meister deck, he would need a fall guy. He'd tell police that he was my manager at Arcane Wisdom and they'd swallow his story.

I reminded myself to keep an open mind and not blame Perkins just because he was so, well, Perkinsesque.

Whatever the case, the police were on the lookout. I was a wanted man.

* * *

Jail and court didn't worry me that much. The local jail housed mainly drunk drivers and con artists, so it wasn't exactly a seething den of violence. Boredom and lack of personal space could wear the spirit down, but no more than most of the undergrad classes I took.

The only problem was, in jail you can't drop out and take an incomplete.

As for court, I hadn't been there since my return, so I had no direct experience of what the tabloids called Tarot Court.

Taking their lead from the magical tourist trade, Key City's courts had adopted a Tarot motif for their official finery. Exactly where I would fit into the decorative schema wasn't clear, but I figured the costume department would clue me in.

I could handle the ordeal of court and jail. What burdened me was what my Oracle Street neighbors would think when they saw my mugshot on the cover of *The Daily Querent*.

The 782-M dropped me off several blocks from the magic shops. I paused for a moment outside the Temple of Isis, one of the many retrofitted churches around town.

Until the Great Return, the building had been a Catholic cathedral called Most Holy Redeemer. We all knew who that meant.

But you had to wonder – if this Jesus fellow was the *most* Holy Redeemer, who came in second? How close was the vote?

* * *

My first impulse was to go to Arcane Wisdom and straighten up. I recalled the UPPIC agent's "investigation," and it grated on my custodial bones to think of the shop being disordered in the wake of Arthur's death.

Did I dare get close? Surely the authorities were watching the shop.

Yet how could I not go there? The store was a shambles – I had a sacred janitorial duty, regardless of the risk.

Hunching my shoulders and ducking my face, I hoped to make it to the alley without attracting attention. As luck would have it, though, two beat cops came ambling up Oracle Street. Their heads were bent together as they peered at a flyer.

Was it a Wanted poster? Were they searching for me? I craned my neck – the artist's rendition certainly bore a resemblance, at least in its general scruffiness.

Quickly I ducked into the nearest store – the Mini-Max Magic Mart.

Should I slip out the back door and vacate the neighborhood? Stay and shop till the cops moved on? Buy paper plates and crayons and make a mask?

As I moved through the aisles, I spied the display of Jiffy Pop that cost me so

dearly on my prior visit. I reached out and tilted one of the metal pans to see the actual price.

"Hey!" The clerk's voice rang out. "You again, fondling the Jiffy Pop!" She grabbed her baseball bat.

"No, no," I cried, "I'll pay you for it!"

The brick-bodied woman started from behind the counter. "You got some weird thing about popcorn? All the stores in town, and you have to mess with my Jiffy Pop?"

I retreated toward the door. The bat-wielding clerk closed in. Outside, the cops studied the flyer.

Trapped between Scylla and Charybdis! If I fled, I risked being picked up for questioning as a "person of interest" in Key City's most sensational crime in years.

Staying risked getting killed over an unpopped pan of Jiffy Pop. That would look just awful in my obituary, and could make a laughingstock of my entire magical materialist system.

I owed it to the future of magic, indeed of all esoteric studies, to preserve myself for a grander fate.

"Keep your Jiffy Pop," I called as I broke for the door. "I'm outa here!"

As I laughed over my shoulder, I ran smack into one of the officers. Her hat tumbled to the ground. Dodging to avoid crushing it, I stepped on the other's toe.

"Assault!" he yowled as he hopped up and down in pain. "Assault on a police officer! Arrest this man!"



Chapter XII: Hanged Man

I bolted back into the Mini-Max Magic Mart with the cops on my heels. My first thought was to dump a bottle of corn oil on the floor, a trick I'd seen Buster Keaton employ to good effect.

But the clerk brandished her baseball bat. If I opened a bottle of oil, she'd think I was trying to pop the corn right there in the store.

The hulking woman pointed the bat like she was sizing me up for a devocation. Realizing that the police were my only ticket past the clerk, I abjectly surrendered, thankful to escape in the custody of Key City's protective services.

All of Oracle Street turned out to see what the commotion was about. The anonymity and privacy I previously enjoyed abruptly vanished. People

pointed and whispered as if speaking aloud might implicate them in my crimes.

The worst moment came in front of the Wiccan Wonderland. Madame Bluebloodsky and Wendy watched silently as the police paraded me past.

What a way for people to remember me.

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The Key City jail was part of the underground City Center complex, located on the floor just above the security offices.

I was booked, fingerprinted, eyeball-scanned, voice-recognized, and given a hasty haircut so I looked more like my driver's license photo. A guard confiscated everything in my pockets, from my WiseWoman multi-tool to my last Ricola drop.

At first I thought I might slip through on a simple assault charge. But pretty quickly the smarter ones figured out who I was.

"Are you the 'person of interest' we've been looking for?" asked the booking officer.

I saw no point in prevaricating. "Yes ma'am, that's me. Jeffrey Harrison."

"I didn't ask your name," she said. "Just answer the questions."

Chastened, I remained silent. She pulled out a form and prepared to write. "Now – what is your name?"

She worked her way down a list that included my mother's favorite mailing address, my last known pet's first car, and the elementary school of my childhood hero's matrilineal grandmother.

Then I was led to a holding tank. Naturally the television was blaring. TV is as much a part of jail as bolted-down furniture.

The current show wasn't as bad as most. The Pagan Olympics, held triennially at an amusement complex in suburban Glastonbury, were about to get under way. Pagan Entertainment Network was airing a series called Quest for the Crystal.

The segment covered the time trials for the Triple Spiral Relay, with an up-close-and-personal segment showing the ritual Blessing of the Batons.

I wondered how Key City's team would do this time around. Recognized as an international power in Synchronized Aspecting, Veiled Labyrinth Walking, and Speed Trancing, the locals had found it harder to crack the upper echelons of such Old World specialties as the Spell Casting Marathon, Tag Team Hex

Dueling, and Three-Legged Maypole Dancing.

The local squad's main hopes for a Crystal Medal centered around the Magickal Decathlon. This grueling competition – requiring contestants to ground, cast a circle, invoke elements and deities, lead a drum trance, and devoke in reverse order, as well as anchoring the clean-up crew and selling newsletter subscriptions – had long been dominated by older Neo-Wiccan groups from England.

But the locals captured the event at the Between-the-Worlds Cup in Toronto, which is often a harbinger of the Olympic field, and hopes were running high on Oracle Street.

Just when the top-ranked trancer was about to be interviewed, the station cut to commercials. Everybody and their sibling had to have a piece of the Pagan Olympic pie. It's part of the broader commercialization of our faith.

Call me old school, but I just can't get used to the idea that the sacred elements have corporate sponsors. The first time I heard a spot for mineral water in the middle of a West invocation, I just about gagged.

Pretty soon the entire Summer Solstice ritual was underwritten by Stonehenge Stout, with the wickerman chugging a can of the beverage.

* * *

Ritual novelty was getting out of hand. A few years back, researchers succeeded in getting a number of popular deities to invoke themselves, speeding rituals by nearly thirty percent in one well-publicized set of experiments.

However, the auto-invoking gods and goddesses had a habit of manifesting at inopportune moments, such as Sekhmet (Egyptian goddess of war and mistress of dread) appearing at a witchcamp healing ritual, chaste Artemis disrupting a Men's Mysteries kegger, and Hecate, the somewhat ill-tempered Mediterranean goddess of the crossroads, popping right into the middle of a handfasting at British Columbia witchcamp.

Recall efforts were largely successful, but occasional sightings of Aphrodite and Cerridwen continued to garner headlines in the tabloid press.

After the Olympics special, it was back to the usual fare: hospital dramas and cop shows. Pagan Entertainment Network was airing a weekly series called *The Man from UPPIC*, featuring a duo of wisecracking special agents using their psychic abilities, intuitive skills, and a dazzling array of electronic devices to unravel criminal threats to the Goddess.

* * *

You'd think with all my past experience of jail, I'd have been able to relax. But my prior arrests were all for misdemeanors.

Even the inciting to riot charge (stemming from a misunderstanding at a ZazaZeus's restaurant over a simple request for more secret sauce on my Eleusinian Mystery Burger) was dropped to a misdemeanor after I agreed to pay for the Mystery Meals I destroyed and stay at least 200 feet from all ZazaZeus's.

Now I was locked up as a "person of interest" in what was shaping up as a suspicious death, perhaps even a murder.

Was I about to be hit with a felony charge? Would they break out the hot oil and thumb screws in search of a confession?

The metal door down the hallway opened and slammed shut. Bracing myself for a hard-boiled homicide detective, I was caught off guard when the officer who showed up at my cell door was an older man with tired, sad eyes – one of the specialists from the Metaphysical Squad.

All Key City authorities above a certain rank were expected to be Pagan, at least in name. But whereas most police were trained not in a spiritual field but as enforcement agents, the Metaphysical Squad was expected to be familiar with the entire range of esoteric practices, from meditation to divination to raising energy.

Most of the Metaphysical Squad's workload involved charges of fraudulent horoscopes, bogus rituals, or loaded runes. Investigating the suspicious death of an esotericist was a bit out of their usual league.

The authorities must have figured that if Tarot had something to do with it, the Metaphysical Squad would be the ones to unravel the clues.

The officer pulled out a plastic-coated cheat sheet. "You have the right to hold sacred silence," he droned. "Anything you say may be invoked against you. You have the right to one metaphysical consultation. If you do not have a Tarot deck or other divinatory device, one will be provided for you at the court's expense. Do you have any questions?"

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This being my first arrest since the Great Return, I'd never been read my esoteric rights, and I wasn't sure about my legal or social obligations. "Am I going to be tested on this?"

The Metaphysical Squad detective assured me that although I would be tested, the course was pass-fail.

HANGED MAN

"Basically," he said, "you're either guilty or you're not. The guilty, naturally, are punished to the utmost extremity of the law and human endurance."

"And if I'm not guilty?"

"In that case, you will be given ample opportunity to prove your innocence at trial."

"I see," I said, feeling relieved. "So I'll get a court hearing where I get to present my side of the matter?"

"Yes and no. You get a trial. The method is up to the judge, although you can always ask your attorney to recommend a particular method, which will perhaps increase your odds of success."

"And if I don't have an attorney?"

"Oh, that is a shame," the Metaphysical Squad officer said. "I always tell people they should have an attorney for exactly this contingency. But it's a little late now."

"What happens in the trials?"

"For simple felony charges, it's the dunking chair. If you survive ten dunks, you're deemed innocent. For additional offenses, they move on to the hot iron. You clasp it in your hand. If it burns you, you're guilty. If not, you're innocent."

I cringed. "That's horrible!"

He looked at me quizzically. "Few trials produce more clear-cut results, where the accused party cries out their own guilt."

* * *

I took a deep breath. At least the trial sounded fast. I hated the idea of one of those interminable TV affairs where they subpoena astrology experts to draw up your birth chart and invoke your least favorite ancestors as character witnesses.

Sure, it made great entertainment. But I had no desire to be a media star.

Being famous wasn't what it used to be. One time I heard about this guy, I forget his name, but he got famous because he "discovered" the South Pole!

What, like we didn't already know where it was? Once they found the North Pole, anybody with a bit of tenth grade geometry could pretty well work out where the South one was going to be.

So this guy sticks a flag in a chunk of ice, and everybody's supposed to go, "Oh, look, that must be the South Pole – there's the flag!"

On the other hand, being infamous might give valuable publicity to my magnum opus. Assuming I lived to see the momentous task through to completion.

* * *

Even if I survived my ordeals, I was feeling nervous about the daunting challenges of completing *Magical Materialism*.

Volumes Two and Three must definitely explicate the theory of material magic while continuing to offer succinct yet thorough critiques of all rival theories.

As if that wasn't enough, I was haunted by every writer's worst nightmare – that my sequels would not live up to the promise of Volume One.

Nothing mars a brilliant original like a bad sequel – remember *Ragnarok II*, *Escape from the Isle of Apples*, or *Revenge of the Faerie Queene*?

Follow-up flops have dogged history's greatest writers – none more than the immortal Dante Alighieri.

The celebrated Florentine had a best-seller with *The Inferno*, where he takes all of the horrible, atrocious, miserably morbid people from history, tosses in a bunch of contemporaries that he doesn't care for, and submits them to a finely-articulated sequence of (porno)graphically sadistic punishments.

So what do you do for an encore?

Purgatory? Great – you go from lashing the souls of the eternally damned with whips of metallic fire to giving a bunch of somewhat naughty people a bad case of sunburn. And in the end they all get into heaven anyway.

The third volume is even worse. The only redeeming grace of the *Paradiso* is that the further along you get, the faster it puts you to sleep.*

* * *

* - Glorifying in his High Medieval wisdom, Dante condemned diviners to the netherworld, and even devised a special punishment. In Canto XX of *The Inferno* he shows fortune-tellers with their heads twisted backward, since only the Christian God is allowed to see the future.

Honestly, this doesn't sound so bad when you consider all of the burns and scrapes and gouges and strangulations meted out to other sinners. Dante must have figured that anyone dabbling in the divinatory arts would already be burning in Hell for blasphemy, fraud, pride, and/or engaging in illicit pleasures. The whole backwards-head thing was just icing on the cake.

HANGED MAN

The Metaphysical Squad detective shuffled his feet as if to leave.

I saw that he was carrying a deck of Tarot cards in his shirt pocket. "You said I get one reading? Can I use your deck?"

He looked offended. "I never let anyone touch my cards. I don't want your energy mixed in with them. I'll get you a deck from the inmates' library."

With a chill I saw myself as he saw me – a caged felon, destined for the dunking chair.

As the agent departed, I railed against the cruel trick that Fate had played on me. Was this to be my lasting legacy?

Mordant Fate, as is Her wont, held up a mirror.

Had my malignant musings over Arthur, however well-grounded following his lamentable failure to comprehend my magnum opus, actually called down justice on my own head?

Were present circumstances a karmic payback for my festering bitterness toward Arthur?

Was I feeling the blowback of the Law of Three-Fold Return?

Ordinarily, it was easy enough to tell. I can multiply by three as well as the next fellow.

But turbulence on the Pagan Stock Exchange had lowered dividends on the Law of Three-Fold Return to approximately 2.81-fold (a much harder proportion to gauge, no matter how well-developed your faculty of intuition).

While this was still a deterrent to hostile magic and anti-personnel spells, spiritual economists debated how far the figure had to fall before daring witches begin to test the law.

If you knew that your malicious spell would return on you only 1.75-fold and you had good psychic mirrors in place, might it be worth the risk?

* * *

Spiritual economics notwithstanding, my anger at Arthur A. Arthur threatened to envelope me in a miasma of guilt and self-loathing.

But even as I sank to lowest ebb my magical materialist theories rose to convince me of my innocence:

(1) It is a basic tenet of materialist philosophy that intention without subsequent action counts for naught.

(2) This accords with folk wisdom which paves the road to Hell with good but empty intentions.

(3) Conversely we may conclude that an evil intention such as a desire to publicly disembowel one's mentor will lead to Heaven if it is not acted upon.

Practically speaking, my theories assured that no matter how often I meditated on strangling Arthur with one of his own Celtic knot pendant chains, I was innocent as the new-shoveled snow so long as my murderous intent did not issue forth in action.

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Still, here I was, stuck in jail. Someone wanted me out of the way. Someone had slandered me.

Perkins. What could be more obvious?

But was this too facile? Was the hapless dweeb just a convenient scapegoat?

Maybe Al Crockley or Madame Bluebloodsky killed Arthur and then, seeing me tightening the noose, traduced me to the authorities.

No, it must have been Perkins. How he must be laughing! Knowing that I was holed up in a dank jail cell without so much as my amuletic WiseWoman utility tool for solace.

I was bewailing my various misfortunes, not the least of which was the mess my pet goldfish were probably making of the Forester's Cottage, when the Metaphysical Squad officer came back.

"Here's a Tarot deck from the library," he said, tossing a rubber-banded pack through the bars. "Most of the Majors and aces are missing, but it's still a deck."

"Thanks," I said glumly. "I'll try reading Minors."

Unfortunately it was one of those old-fangled decks where the Minor Arcana simply show the basic symbols. The Eight of Cups features – you guessed it – eight cups!

Maybe that worked for the immortal Mlle Lenormand, who read cards for Empress Josephine of France. But for me it didn't exactly inspire frenzied leaps of imagination.

Still, it was the deck I had available. As Arthur used to say when a customer grouched about the cards they drew: "Read the hand you're dealt."

Before beginning, I grounded myself using the Euclidian spheroid method, then cast nine concentric circles and their correlate conic sections, called

HANGED MAN

in allies and ancestors of the craft, and finally purified the cards by dancing counter-clockwise and chanting, "If my soul says so, I do as my soul says."

Just as I started to lay out a simple Emerald Crystal Wheel of Last Resort & Prognostication layout that I learned during my wanderjahre, the hallway door slammed. Footsteps came my way, echoing off the concrete walls.

The Metaphysical Squad detective stopped in front of my cell.

"Harrison? A visitor to see you."



Chapter XIII: Death

Yes, I admit it, I was hoping that Persephone would walk through the cell door. Wouldn't it be great if she heard of my predicament, knew in her heart that I must be innocent, and had come to secure my release and clear my besmirched name?

I was a tad disappointed when my visitor turned out to be the Special Agent from UPPIC. The short man strode in carrying a shiny black briefcase. He set the case crisply on the holding tank bench and snapped it open.

Pulling out a folder, he brusquely flipped through the papers. "Well, Harrison. Sorry to find you in these straits."

"Yeah, me too," I muttered. I wasn't sure if I should ask his purpose in visiting. Did he have a hand in my incarceration? Anything I said could be invoked

against me, I reminded myself. Just stay quiet.

"At least the tabloids haven't connected you to the store yet," he said in a flat tone. "They're saying you're an isolated lunatic."

"That's a relief," I said. "I'd hate to see Arcane Wisdom dragged into it."

"Or any of the shops," he said sharply. "I'm going to have to request that for the time being you keep a low profile when you are on Oracle Street."

I couldn't help laughing. "I don't see a lot of choice."

"Oh, jail," he said, looking distastefully at my environs. "You didn't have any reason to kill Arthur, did you?" He looked me directly in the eye, his expression more demanding than penetrating.

"No, sir, I did not," I stated firmly, deciding at the last second not to mention that I had been a bit upset at my esteemed teacher for his utter inability to comprehend my new magical system, and had in fact contemplated various and sundry ways in which I might dispose of this obstacle to my professional advancement in a particularly poignant manner.

Keep your own counsel, I reminded myself.

"If you didn't kill Arthur, I don't see why they're holding you," he said. "I have no jurisdiction over Key City affairs, but I'll have a word with the judge and see if we can arrange your release until your next hearing."

"Wow," I said, "that would be great."

"Of course, there would be a couple of conditions. One, as I mentioned, is that you stay out of the limelight until we clear this matter up. No escapades that could land you in the media's purview. Understood?"

Although his demand threatened to cramp my native exuberance, I figured it was better than rotting in jail where I wasn't doing anybody any good. "Sure, okay. What else?"

"The second is a pledge to appear at your next hearing. Even if you're innocent, we can't have you jumping bail. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. One more thing. We'll count on you for occasional updates on the situation on Oracle Street."

"You mean I have to tell you what people are doing?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Let's say at two o'clock each afternoon?"

It was an onerous condition – turn stool pigeon on Oracle Street. But

if I wanted to clear up this mystery, I might have to make some ethical compromises.

In any case, I could match wits with the UPPIC agent and be selective about what I revealed.

"When might I get out?" I asked, trying not to betray my eagerness.

"I'll talk to the judge. If you're lucky, you'll be released at the next court session."

My spirits fell. The next session wouldn't be until morning, at best.

I picked up the library deck of Tarot cards and sifted idly through them. "Well, thanks for coming by. I appreciate your help."

"Think nothing of it. We all do favors for one another. It's what makes the world go round." He looked at my sorry deck of cards. "Is that what they gave you for your reading?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's missing a few cards."

He shook his head. "You'd think they never heard of an esoteric right." He reached in his briefcase and pulled out a sealed pack. "I got this as an advance sample. Try it and tell me what you think. Remember – two o'clock each day."

He closed his briefcase and departed. I slumped on the bench, feeling relieved and anxious at the same time. When would I get to go home?

When would I get back to Oracle Street to confront Perkins?

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I picked up the deck the UPPIC agent had given me, an experimental Tarot called the Mystical Accountant. I hadn't heard of it, but that wasn't surprising, given the number of new titles appearing every month.

New decks, once the province of a handful of artistic adepts, had since the 1960s proliferated at an ever-accelerating pace. Cards had been created with every conceivable motif and concept, from high ceremonial to radical faerie to anarcho-wiccan, from Babylonian astrology to Arabic alchemy to Acheronian necromancy, from magical animals to organic vegetables to intergalactic minerals.

Around the millennium decks appeared so quickly that architectural designs for the Tarot Museum in Bologna were twice rendered obsolete even before foundations could be laid.

That changed following the Great Return, when the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council mandated strict regulation of private divination, including

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decks, tools, and especially the diviners themselves.

New decks required an imprimatur and only a limited number were allowed each year.

Established magi such as Sunshine MoonBeam and Esmeralda RagingWitch received licenses with only a slight increase in taxation, but a number of other post-Return decks were forced underground when UPPIC denied their applications.

Arthur, who had announced the Trismegistus Meister deck before the Great Return, obtained a license without too many restrictions, although he and Persephone were “advised” to portray the Hierophant in a favorable light.

* * *

I broke the seal on the Mystical Accountant Tarot and looked over the cards. The Minor suits were coins, securities, trusts, and leveraged investments. The Majors were represented by Great Heroes of Bookkeeping.

I read somewhere that the best way to get to know a new deck is the traditional Omnium Cartium spread – you ask a question, lay all 78 cards face up, and try to make sense of them.

Of course, at my rate of reading, that might take a week or two. Even a three-card spread took a while. Maybe I should take a class in Tarot Speed Reading.

During my wanderjahre I met this guy who could speed-read palms. He'd shake hands with people and know half their life story.

For me, that sort of divination was a mystery. How could anyone make sense of the lines on someone's palm – or a cup of tea leaves or the movement of the planets or the discoloration of animal entrails?

At least Tarot had pictures.

After my first flush of excitement to have a new deck, I sobered up. Why was the UPPIC agent so eager to help me do a reading? What if the point was to capture the spread on hidden cameras and gain insight into my intentions?

Worse yet, what if the Mystical Accountant was a loaded deck? Maybe it was skewed so every reading came out negative, depressing, hopeless. No matter what question you asked, it advised you to give up and cooperate with the authorities.

It wasn't so far-fetched. There were plenty of loaded decks. Most, like the Tarot of the Magical Unicorns, were rigged so they gave entirely positive readings. Egyptophile decks, on the other hand, were often fixed to seem profound

A FOOL SUCH AS I

no matter which card you drew. And the Lenny Bruce Tarot always made you laugh in that queasy, self-flagellating way of his.

So why not a deck whose sole purpose was to take the wind out of the querent's sails?

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I couldn't resist flipping through the cards, and in the end, the advantages of playing with a full deck carried the day.

Doing a visible layout seemed risky, given the likelihood of surveillance. But after all, the cameras could only see the cards – they couldn't read my soul.

I decided on a Past-Present-Future spread. Seeking a dramatic reading, I set aside the Minors and shuffled the Majors. Then I laid three cards face down.

Taking a breath, I turned up the card for the Past – the Hermit, portrayed as a taxpayer carrying a lantern, apparently in search of an honest accountant.

My customary financial situation didn't require the services of an accountant, honest or otherwise. But I could relate to the "search." Whether it was a search for a home town, a mystical calling, or the faintest glimmer of appreciation for magnum opus – had not my past been one long, faintly illumined quest?

And what about my quest for justice for Arthur – and for myself as an apparent suspect in his death?

Did the Hermit ever find what he sought? I made a mental note to look up the card the next time I ran across one of those little Tarot booklets.

Maybe the second card would be clearer. You'd expect things to balance out with an Accountant's Tarot.

I turned up the Present position, revealing the Hanged One.

Most decks portray this arcana as a person actually hanging upside down. The Mystical Accountant, by contrast, showed a bleary-eyed woman stuck on "hold" on an old-fashioned hard-wired telephone. The knotted cord that connected the phone to the wall echoed her tangled hair.

I gave a sharp laugh. What more perfect metaphor for my present situation? All tangled up and stuck on hold. The only thing I lacked was the phone.

I turned up the Future: the Moon.

My favorite card! The Mystical Accountant portrayed a Sumerian scribe gazing wistfully at a crescent moon rising beyond twin ziggurats. Dogs yowled while a lobster pointed a claw at the lunar orb.

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Someone once told me that when you read a card you might ask: What object or being am I in this picture?

I think it's some sort of crypto-post-analytico-Jungian thing where the first archetype that pops into your mind was probably planted there by the beloved ancestors precisely so you would think of it at this pivotal moment.

The scribe is too obvious. Choosing the Moon Herself bespeaks a bit of self-aggrandizement, while being one of the dogs or towers dilutes your energy by half, like being born on Winter Solstice and having to share your birthday with the Sun King.

No, any well-adjusted devotee of the esoteric artes would naturally identify with the humble yet determined lobster about to set out on a pilgrimage to the Moon.

It called to mind my own dreams of a pilgrimage to Rome, from whence (following publication of Volumes Two and Three of *Magical Materialism*) I planned to launch my bold new spiritual tradition, the Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance.

* * *

During my wanderjahre I hadn't set foot in Rome.

Technically I qualified for housing, but I guess I was a bit in awe. I'd heard that the Bristling Broom lodge in the Eternal City was controlled by old-world legacy types who lorded it over itinerant journeypersons.

Rome laid claim to being the original Bristling Broom chapter, tracing its ancestry to the Rare and Reified Order of Knights Janitorial of the crusading era.

Like the Knights Templar (who protected pilgrims in the Holy Land) and the Knights Hospitaller (who cared for the sick and wounded), the Knights Janitorial had a special mission.

Basically, whenever the Christian forces sacked a city, the Knights Janitorial followed close behind and tidied up.

Because they got first pickings of the loot, the Order gradually accrued wealth so vast that it came to be known as the Cornucopian Cauldron of the Knights Janitorial.

The Cornucopian Cauldron, said to be made of pure gold and overflowing with the secret treasures of the ages, was last seen in Rome itself before mysteriously vanishing when the Knights Janitorial were suppressed in the fourteenth century, and legend held that it lay buried in a storage locker under one of the seven hills.

Although I wasn't planning to do any treasure hunting, I wanted to visit the Eternal City before it changed forever.

Since the Great Return, archaeological digs had rendered huge swaths of the city a crazy-quilt landscape of marble edifices tottering over gaping pits.

While the official purpose was historical research, rumors abounded that the real goal was to locate the Cornucopian Cauldron of the Knights Janitorial – even if it meant digging up the entire city.

Rome wasn't the only endangered site. The previous year the sacred cave complex at Delphi was excavated and shipped to Arizona to become the crown jewel of a regional entertainment center.

Thankfully Oracle Street had been spared the wrecker's ball – so far.

Rumors circulated that the entire block of metaphysical shops might be relocated to RitualLand, but so long as even one of the stores refused to break its lease, Oracle Street was safe.

* * *

I didn't feel like I slept, but the Metaphysical Squad detective stirred me back to alertness. "It's morning, Harrison – you're heading to court. I heard you made bail."

"Made bail?" I answered, regaining some of my customary jocularly. "All I've been doing is sitting here. I didn't realize it paid so well."

"Well, someone sprung you."

The UPPIC agent must have kept his word. Even if Key City's courts weren't under his jurisdiction, he clearly had some sway.

Of course, he had ulterior motives for wanting me back on the street. Pumping amateur sleuths like myself must be a prime source of information for the ever-vigilant forces of law and order. But I'd pay that bridge toll when I came to it.

First I was headed for a showdown with my nemesis, Perkins. Even though it was obvious his accusation had landed me in the hoosegow, I wanted the satisfaction of wringing the confession from his scrawny neck.

But now – freedom! Feeling a flush of benevolence, I stood and drew myself to my full, proud height.

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I'm ready to go to court."

"Very well, then." He handed me back my confiscated belongings. I gripped my WiseWoman utility tool, breathing in the sense of grounding and magical

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protection it always gave me.

I left jail in good spirits. Of course, my court appearance would be a circus. Not because of me or Arthur's case, but because it was Tarot Court.

* * *

As civic boosters hoped, the local judicial system had become one of Key City's major tourist attractions. Although I hadn't yet attended Tarot Court – the waiting list for the studio audience was months long – I'd seen news accounts.

By law, every defendant who appeared before the bench was costumed as one of the sixteen Court cards. The judge, bailiff, and other officials attired themselves as various Major Arcana. The audience – limited to 40 people each session – divvied up the Minors.

The clips I'd seen made it look like a grand pageant, and as I was led through City Center to the courtroom I built up great expectations that I was about to be immersed in a veritable Triumph of Tarot.

Imagine my disappointment when almost everyone was in civvies! It got even worse when the bailiff loudly ordered the one guy in a Fool outfit to remove his bulbous red nose and jingly-bell hat. The bailiff pointed sternly to a stenciled sign beside the Earth flag: Outside Costumes Absolutely Forbidden!

A moment later the attendants wheeled in a clothes rack. The courtroom erupted, and I was swept along with the mob that descended on the costumes.

I've got a bit of the street scrapper in me, and I figured I had a shot at one of the more dashing Court cards such as the Knight of Wands, or at least Swords.

But amid the melee, the others (who obviously watched Tarot Court telecasts) exhibited a remarkable degree of teamwork in fencing me entirely away from the rack until each of them had chosen a costume.

I got stuck being the Page of Cups, wearing a floppy blue hat and carrying a big plastic goblet with a mechanical fish that kept squirting water in my face, much to the entertainment of the rest of the court.

"Hear ye, hear ye! Tarot Court is now in session! All rise and pay homage to Justice!"

A hush fell over the room as a robed, blindfolded woman made her entrance carrying a set of scales. Although an usher led her by the elbow, she kept bumping into things. At first I thought she was the judge, but the usher led her to a lower seat, where she removed her blindfold, hiked up her robe, and

started popping bon-bons into her mouth.

With similar fanfare, the judge came in dressed as the Hierophant. His crimson robe was a bit tattered, but the triple-tiered Pope hat with psychedelic reflecting panels more than atoned.

“All rise,” the bailiff called again. Everyone was already standing, craning their necks for a better view.

With all attention on him, the judge seemed to take pains not to look at anyone in return. Did he have self-esteem issues?

Or was he afraid of the evil eye?

* * *

Malignant spells were an occupational hazard for the new magical courts.

On the very day of my arrival back in Key City, the evening news reported that several curse tablets had been found buried outside the staff entrance to City Center, where every official coming or going from the complex would pass directly over them.

No one knew how long they had been there, and the crude symbols scratched onto the thin lead sheets were in no known language, which made them even more terrifying.

Cunning folk and de-witchers were immediately summoned, unleashing an entire panoply of counter-magic – warding, banishing, shielding, isolating, de-spelling, un-spelling, and ex-spelling spells.

Officials were cautiously optimistic, but since the purpose of the curse tablets was completely unknown it was difficult to assess the effectiveness of the remedies.

* * *

Adjusting my floppy blue hat, I prepared for my day in court.

The order of our arraignments was determined by a quick round of Trionfi, with the Major Arcana counting as trick-taking trumps. The bailiff shuffled and dealt the Tarocchi cards. I got all Minors except the Chariot.

Being a bit unclear on the rules – which besides incorporating 21 trumps also included two of the suits being counted in reverse and the Fool representing some sort of wild card – I came in last and had to watch the others get called to the bench ahead of me.

Most of the defendants were up on misdemeanors like lying about their sun sign, divining without a license, or failing to devote deities after rituals. Some

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laughed it off and paid their fines, while others evinced shame and remorse at the revelation of their esoteric duplicity or negligence.

One guy got tagged with a felony rap for cultural appropriation. It sounded kind of harsh until they read out the charges, which included forgetting to speak the name of the local First People, wearing feathers in his hair, burning sage in a neo-wiccan ritual, blowing sage in the face of a scent-sensitive Indigenous elder, and beating on a drum and chanting like the whole shebang was some sort of Hollywood war dance.

The entire courtroom erupted in boos and hisses, and the judge handed down the most severe sentence possible – seven Samhains on clean-up crew at the Spiral Dance.

At last my turn came. The judge called the prosecutor to the bench. They bent their heads together and spoke in agitated whispers, gesticulating in my direction.

Were they reconsidering my release? Dickering over additional bail? Given that the employer who signed my paycheck had just died and I hadn't bought enough big-ticket items since my return to Key City to establish my credit, I might be headed right back behind bars.

Should I step forward and plead my innocence? Should I demand immediate justice?

Or would that just earn me a one-way ticket to the dunking chair?

* * *

The judge banged his gavel. Leveling his steely gaze directly at the back wall, he declared my case put over till the following week. I was free until that hearing.

Phew! Apparently I wasn't considered too great a threat to public safety or sanity. Had the UPPIC agent put in a good word along with the bail money?

I wanted to ask the judge the details of my charges, but I figured I better not slow down the process lest they change their minds. I'd see the UPPIC Agent the next afternoon and put the question to him.

Hopping a bus back to Oracle Street, I started toward the Bristling Broom lodge hall, then stopped short. My place was surely under surveillance.

Wait a minute. I was reporting to UPPIC every day. Who cared if I was under surveillance if I was a surveillant, too?

What if their surveillance was intended to determine whether my surveillance was up to standard surveillance standards? Was someone spying on me to

see what I was spying on?

I stopped at the main desk of the Bristling Broom and filled out my guild report, confirming that I was gainfully employed in the custodial trade and was maintaining the professional dignity which the Siblinghood demanded of all members.

Best not to mention getting arrested on suspicion of involvement in the death of my employer. Without a fair bit of contextualization, that was bound to look bad.

It was a relief to get back to the Forester's Cottage and have a late brunch. My goldfish weren't happy, though. They didn't like living in a room with no windows. Water was splattered everywhere and fish-scat was smeared on the sides of the bowl.

I pulled out my notepad and jotted a memo to spend more time with them as soon as I solved the mystery of who killed Arthur A. Arthur, who was in possession of his priceless and irreplaceable Tarot deck, and who was trying to frame me for their execrable misdeeds.

Then I headed back out.

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My first priority, even before unraveling the mystery, was to clean Arcane Wisdom. It weighed on my conscience almost more than the missing Tarot deck.

Over my years of training I'd learned to pay heed to that inner voice: "Now is the time to sweep the lobby," or "Today is the day to wash the windows."

It's not a timetable or an objective criterion – it's an intuitive feeling that a true custodian has for the work.

Besides, you never knew when the media might pop by with cameras rolling. Keeping the shop spiffed up was the best way to honor Arthur's memory.

Making sure no one was watching, I scooted down the side alley, gave the door a swift kick, and slipped through the back room into the store.

The place was as I'd last seen it, a shambles from the UPPIC agent's visit. I gathered scattered merchandise, hung up capes and robes, then got a broom.

As the bristles skimmed the floor I felt my psychic energy swept back from all of the places I'd been in the past couple of days – City Center, RitualLand, the other magic shops, the Mini-Max, Dr. Papyrus's room...

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I swung the broom in a wide arc, each stroke strengthening my relation to Mama Gaia.

* * *

A key turned in the front door. Instinctively I ducked into the back room.

I had no idea who was arriving or what their connection to my being labeled a “person of interest” might be. Best to lay low. If necessary, I could flee out the rear exit.

Two voices identified Madame Bluebloodsky and Wendy. It sounded like there were three or four more, but I didn’t recognize them. I decided to stay hidden.

“Everyone find a chair,” came Wendy’s crisp, efficient voice. “Will Mr. De Roquefort be joining us?”

“Cornelius called to say he was unavoidably delayed,” Madame Bluebloodsky said.

I could hear chairs and maybe a table being moved around. Gradually the shuffling died down, and Madame Bluebloodsky spoke in a low, steady voice.

“Dear friends, we are gathered today to speak with our dear departed friend, beloved of the spirit, Arthur A. Arthur.”

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A séance! Madame Bluebloodsky, with the help of Wendy and the others, was trying to call up Arthur’s spirit.

What a great idea! I wished I’d thought of it myself. If she could make contact with the ghost of the late Arthur, he might reveal the solution to the whole mystery right then and there.

That would sure make things a lot easier.

I wondered whether the dead did reverse séances as a way to consult with the living.

What if Arthur was doing a séance to reach the store at the same time this circle was trying to contact him? Would it result in an especially potent connection?

Or would it fry the metaphysical circuits?

“Before we begin,” Madame Bluebloodsky intoned, “Let us take a moment to observe the passing of another spirit so recently departed. Let us pause in memory of Mr. Perkins.”



CHAPTER XIV: TEMPERANCE

Perkins? Dead?

I could hardly believe my ears. Perkins was Arthur's murderer, wasn't he? How could he be dead?

Although the murder happened in the past, when Perkins was still alive. So theoretically he *could* have done it, then dropped dead in a fit of self-inflicted remorse.

Once I read one of those trendy new-fangled post-novellas where right at the climax the main character misread the script and killed himself.

But this was real life. Perkins was dead?

How dare he! Now I'd never get to tell the dweeb off, not just for betraying

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me to the authorities, but for generally being an all-round unpleasant character who blighted my time at Arcane Wisdom.

And what about the Trismegistus Meister deck? Based on the concentric tattoo, I'd pegged Perkins as the thief.

In fact, I'd assumed that his rendezvous with Persephone at RitualLand involved some sort of negotiation for the deck. Had Perkins been killed in a double-cross?

Where was the deck now? Had Perkins' killer absconded with it? Did they have the six cards Persephone removed?

And what was their role in the larger mystery? Had Perkins' killer also killed Arthur? Was Persephone their next target?

Was I blind to the threat to my own well-being?

* * *

I hoped that Madame Bluebloodsky's séantific endeavors might yield some answers. Honestly, I felt reassured that she and Wendy were taking such efforts. It suggested that they were innocent of Arthur's blood.

Or did it? Maybe Wendy was the killer, but had to pretend to support Madame Bluebloodsky's efforts. She'd find it easy enough to disrupt the energetic channels and keep Arthur's spirit from making a solid connection.

What if Madame Bluebloodsky herself was faking? She could hold a sham séance, pretend to talk with Arthur, and use the "evidence" to pin the killing on someone else.

From my lair in the back room I listened closely, hoping to detect Madame B's intention from her tone. But she settled into trance voice, her rich alto taking on a breathy resonance.

I needed to get closer. Staying low to the ground, I slipped into the main room. The séancers were seated around a table over near the divination booths. I ducked behind the main counter.

As I knelt, my key-belt jingled. I froze, praying no one had heard.

This of course is one of the occupational hazards of being a janitor – keys.

Not only do they threaten to betray you when you're doing undercover work, they are a constant menace to your sense of balance, placing an asymmetrical strain on back and hips. The more keys you carry, the greater the risk.

And I carried a full belt, as the saying goes. As part of my magico-custodial practice, I made a point of never discarding a key.

"You never know what door it might open," my venerable teachers used to say.

But now they had nearly blown my cover. Silencing my perfidious keys, I nestled in behind the counter as Madame Bluebloodsky spoke again: "I will first ask Wendy to create sacred space."

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Wendy stood and with minimal ceremony performed the standard Neo-Postmodern Latter Day Wiccan invocations of the guardians of the elements, the sacred and the profane, the above and the below, the within and the without, the past and the future, the deosil and the widdershins, the tops and the bottoms, a generous sampling of underworld deities, and the spirits of magicians, psychics, and necromancers of the past.

Wendy sat again, and Madame Bluebloodsky resumed.

"Arthur A. Arthur," she called in a pleading voice. "Arthur A. Arthur!"

The others took up the cry, and the room resounded with calls for Arthur to appear. I almost joined in, but I felt a cough welling up. I cleared my throat before the voices died down.

"Arthur," Madame Bluebloodsky intoned. "Can you hear us? We, your Earthly friends, call to you from this side of the veil. We call not to disturb your spirit or bind you to this realm, but to ask your aid in resolving the matter of your untimely death!"

The others murmured in what I took to be assent. "Arthur," said Madame Bluebloodsky. "Arthur, are you present? Can you give us a sign?"

Just at that moment my throat tickled and I let out a low cough. Figuring I was busted, I prepared to stand and reveal myself. But Madame Bluebloodsky seized upon the cough as a signal. "You are here! Arthur! We hear you!"

"Arthur! Arthur!" moaned the others.

I held as still as I could. The last thing I needed was for them to think they heard Arthur behind the counter and come rushing over to find me hiding there. My leg cramped, but I resisted the urge to stretch.

"Arthur," intoned Madame Bluebloodsky, "we beseech your aid in clarifying the circumstances of your death! We, your friends and allies who remain in this Earthly realm, ask you to come to us and answer our questions. If you are willing, give us a sign."

The room was deathly quiet. My body tensed. I had to stretch my leg or I was going to get a charley horse. I moved as carefully as possible, but I couldn't

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help bumping the glass cabinet.

"He has spoken!" Wendy cried. The others echoed her.

I started to feel bad. In all likelihood they were sincere in their quest. And here I was getting them all worked up thinking they had contacted a spirit.

It was too late to back out. I had to improvise.

* * *

"Arthur," Madame Bluebloodsky said, "If you know you are dead, give us a sign."

That one was easy. Surely Arthur's spirit had figured out that much in the past day and a half. I knocked gently on the glass.

"Arthur," said Madame Bluebloodsky, "we hear you! Tell us – is your spirit unquiet over your death?"

Another easy one. I gave it two knocks for good measure, and heard a rustling from the table.

"It must have been foul play," lamented Madame Bluebloodsky. "Oh, this is terrible."

Voices of dismay rose. Wendy calmed them. "I feared as much," she said in an almost reassuring voice.

Madame Bluebloodsky took a deep breath. "Arthur, are you willing to help us solve the mystery of your untimely death?"

Knock knock knock.

"Arthur," said Madame Bluebloodsky, then paused dramatically. "Arthur – do you know the identity of those involved in your death?"

Uh-oh – a trick question! Should I rap? I might wind up framing someone, and that would feel terrible, especially if they were executed in some excruciatingly painful and humiliating manner that left even their dear old mother ashamed to speak their name.

But if I didn't rap, they might get discouraged and give up. Once again I'd be the only one trying to solve the mystery. How could I encourage without misleading them?

* * *

As I pondered my options, the silence in the shop was suddenly broken by a sharp, metallic rapping. Everyone at the table gasped simultaneously, which was fortunate, since I gasped loudest of all.

Not only was the metallic tone distinctly different from my own efforts. The rhythm was unmistakable: "Shave and a haircut, two bits."

There must be another spirit in the room with us! And a comedian, at that.

Was it possible that Madame Bluebloodsky really could communicate with the dead?

And was it really Arthur? It made sense that his spirit might dawdle around the shop. Getting him to rap on pipes probably wasn't all that difficult once contact was established.

Still, it surprised me that the signal was a silly children's rhythm – not exactly inclined to inspire a sense of the sublime.

The other séancers seemed duly impressed, though, convinced that they were witnessing an authentic audio apparition.

"Honored guest," said Madame Bluebloodsky in a grand voice, "we hear you! Please make yourself known to us!"

The metallic rapping repeated shave-and-a-haircut.

"Arthur – is that you?"

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Silence. I contemplated providing a knock or two to remind them who got the whole thing started. But I was intrigued how the other might respond.

"Arthur – is that you?" repeated Madame Bluebloodsky.

Silence. Her tone altered. "Spirit – can you make yourself known to us?"

Shave-and-a-haircut.

A murmuring rose at the table, but Madame Bluebloodsky quickly silenced it. "Spirit – were you known to us in your lifetime?"

Shave-and-a-haircut.

"Did you know Arthur A. Arthur?"

Shave-and-a-haircut twice.

"Were you esteemed by us?"

Shave-and-a-haircut, emphatically.

The murmuring rose again, but Wendy spoke over the others. "We shouldn't waste a guess. Let's use our questions wisely."

A half-dozen further questions ascertained that the spirit was larger than

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a breadbox, was of the animal as opposed to the vegetable or mineral persuasion, was a male, had been under age 40, and had died recently of violent causes.

* * *

While they pursued their enquiry, I reviewed my theories concerning the necessary embodiment of spirit – a corollary of the pantheism inherent in a rigorous magical materialism.

Whatever spirit had rapped on the pipes must have the use of something analogous to a human body. That much was evident.

Before I could work through all of the implications of my theory, Wendy's voice rent the air.

"It's Mr. Perkins!"

The pipe-knocker went crazy, taking shave-and-a-haircut into a series of syncopated bebop rhythms.

The séancers erupted in applause as the percussive display ended. Even I was impressed at the hapless Perkins' virtuosity. Was it a skill every newly-deceased soul acquired?

"So it's the spirit of Mr. Perkins," someone said.

"I'm not surprised," said Madame Bluebloodsky. "Those for whom no one is grieving often linger in the places with which they are most familiar. Perhaps we can offer a libation."

"I have some fruit juice," another person said.

"That will do fine," said Madame Bluebloodsky. I heard the liquid poured onto the floor. "Let this be an offering for the peace of his spirit," she concluded.

An offering, fine. But pouring juice on the floor? I wondered how soon it was acceptable to mop up ancestor libations. I couldn't recall covering that in my Custodial Ethics classes.

"Mr. Perkins," intoned Madame Bluebloodsky, "have you come to us with information on your death and that of Arthur?"

Shave-and-a-haircut, this time slow and ominous.

"Did you and Arthur die by foul play?"

* * *

The pipe-drummer paused for a long moment, then rapped out a stately funeral march. The people around the table shifted nervously.

Madame Bluebloodsky, seemingly unperturbed, ascertained that Perkins' killer was known to those present, that it was a male and a former student of Arthur's, and that the person considered himself to be making vital contributions to the esoteric sciences.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. I tried interposing a few raps of my own, but the séancers interpreted it as static. When one of them stood up to see if the reception was better near the counter, I knew I better be still.

"Spirit," Madame Bluebloodsky said slowly. "Do you mean Mr. Harrison?"

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I held my breath, praying for silence. But after a pause, the spirit rapped its affirmation.

"Oh, dear," Wendy said. "I really hoped it wasn't true. Poor Arthur."

Poor Arthur? What about poor Mr. Harrison? Not only was I on the lam – now Perkins' ghost had turned state's evidence.

"So it was Mr. Harrison," Madame Bluebloodsky said in a cold tone. "It's better that we know the truth."

It was all I could do not to spring up and protest being sentenced in absentia, based on testimony obtained at a séance.

But as so often in my career, just when the odds looked bleakest, I drew upon my innermost reserves and consulted my magical materialist theory.

I had already deduced that in order to play complex drum patterns, the spirit communicating with us must be embodied. If my inferences were correct, this implied that the knocker was in some manner of speaking a living person.

Once theory clarified the issue, it didn't take a genius to see through the scam.

A confederate of Madame Bluebloodsky runs ahead of the group and hides where they can tap on a pipe. Madame Bluebloodsky feeds pre-arranged questions, the accomplice raps out responses, and the others are duped. What could be easier?

Even better, the metal pipes carried the sound the length of the shop, making it impossible to determine the source of the rapping. Clearly the schemers had given the matter some thought.

The "spirit" was probably in the maintenance closet across the store from me. Unfortunately, the presence of a table of people who were convinced that I was a double murderer posed a slight impediment to my investigation.

But I could do the math. Assuming that the knocker was a confederate

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of Madame Bluebloodsky, the stooge must be the “unavoidably delayed” Cornelius De Roquefort.

And that pointed to Madame Bluebloodsky as the Svengali of the affair.

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Gradually the séance drew to a close. Wendy devoked the circle and they prepared to depart. Would everyone leave together? I was dying to know whether Wendy was in on the scam. I wondered when Mr. Shave-and-a-Haircut would reveal himself.

Madame Bluebloodsky switched off the lights. The space was plunged into shadow. As the little group congregated at the front saying their goodbyes, I heard a door creak. I poked my head around the edge of the counter and saw an indistinct figure slip out of the closet and tip-toe toward the back room.

Should I shout? It was my only chance to publicly unmask the imposter.

But with Madame Bluebloodsky conspiring to frame me, and Wendy her possible accomplice, they would call the police and turn me in. All my fine stories about fake séances would be for nought against their denunciations.

The figure scuttled into the back room. Moving quickly along the floor, I ducked into the back as the person ran out the door.

Leaping to my feet, I dashed into the alley just as the fleeing pipe-knocker turned the corner. I raced after, but didn’t catch sight before they disappeared into the street faire crowd.

Was it Roquefort? Suppose I did catch him – was I going to have him arrested for impersonating the dead?

Sure, it was a serious offense, and considering the many crimes he’d no doubt committed on his way to the top, I wouldn’t feel bad if the old codger did hard time.

But I needed to stay focused on the shop. I ducked back inside and peered into the dimly-lit front room. As far as I could tell, only Madame Bluebloodsky remained. She was standing near the door, phone pressed to her ear.

“Our signal is bad. What did you say?” She paused for a moment, and I could feel her anxiety all the way across the room.

“What? Persephone is missing?”



CHAPTER XV: Devil

"Persephone is missing?" Madame Bluebloodsky's tone was urgent. "Perhaps she went into seclusion after Mr. Perkins was killed."

She was silent for a moment, listening to the other party. "Impossible," she finally said. "Yes, she detested Mr. Perkins. But murder? Why?"

I gulped. I could imagine a reason Persephone might have murdered Perkins. What I'd seen at RitualLand must have been a blackmail meeting.

A scenario took shape in my mind. The jealous and incompetent Perkins, believing his own career would be advanced by Arthur's demise, assaulted his master and stole the deck (minus the cards Persephone had). Then he pressured Persephone to collaborate with him in publishing the deck and book, for which Perkins himself would write a Foreword that would launch his

career as Arthur's expert commentator.

When Persephone refused, the situation turned ugly. Surely she never intended to kill, and was only defending herself from a madman. But after doing away with Perkins she must have been so terrified that she fled.

Instinctively I trusted Perkins was Persephone's only victim. It made sense why she would kill him. But that in no way implicated her in Arthur's death.

Sure, she had her motives, just like the rest. But she was also Arthur's closest magical confidante. If she put up with his demands and eccentricities for the past several years, would she murder him on the very eve of the release of their epoch-making Tarot deck?

* * *

From the front of the store Madame Bluebloodsky's voice broke into my thoughts. "No, I just can't believe Persephone had a hand in any of this. I just can't believe it."

Well, no wonder – Madame B and our chicken-hearted magical Maecenas, Cornelius De Roquefort, had just convinced everyone of my own complicity.

She wrapped up her phone call and departed. Unless there were more concealed spirits, I had the store to myself.

I let out a loud sigh. What a crazy few days! Two people dead, Persephone missing – and myself accused of involvement in Arthur's demise.

I went to the back room and found a can of Molten Core. It was a bit past its expiration date, so I gulped it quickly, feeling the tensions of the day seep back to the transformative center of Mother Earth.

Now what? Given a moment to reflect, the puzzle pieces weren't adding up. Suppose Persephone killed Perkins. Then why were Madame Bluebloodsky and Roquefort trying to frame me? Were they all in it together?

* * *

I drew a slow breath, feeling nauseous at the thought of my closest neighbors being embroiled in Arthur's death and the disappearance of his Tarot deck. Not to mention framing me.

Yet obviously they had the most at stake.

The idea that the culprit was among the inner crowd reminded me of a mystery novel I planned to write as soon as I wrapped up work on the remaining volumes of my magnum opus. I already had the back cover blurb.

"Lazarus is dead. Jesus has an alibi. But what about the disciples?"

You figure with a blurb like that, one of the Twelve just about has to be the killer, and it can't be Judas because that's too obvious.

One by one the suspects are eliminated, until right at the end, just as the Beloved Disciple is about to be fingered by Mary and Martha for the heinous misdeed, Jesus steps up and resurrects Lazarus, who smells a little musty but is none the worse for wear.

With no victim, there's no crime. The Beloved Disciple goes free.

That's all I had so far. But as they say, a good blurb is half the book.

* * *

That Persephone killed Perkins seemed likely. But that left a lot of unanswered questions.

Had Perkins really murdered Arthur and stolen the Trismegistus deck? If so, was the dweeb taking orders from someone else?

Given my uncertainty, it didn't seem wise to wander around blurting out my suspicions. I needed to pick my spots.

Crockley. I never had cleared up his reasons for visiting Dr. Papyrus. It was hard to believe he wasn't somehow wrapped up in this affair.

Was it possible that *he* killed Arthur, framed Perkins for that murder, then killed Perkins and told the police that I had done it?

Could he have been the pipe-rapper at the séance?

I wouldn't put it past Crockley's conniving brain. And his secretive visit to the Visconti-Sforza Hotel suggested that Dr. Papyrus might be part of the scheme.

No wonder Persephone had chosen to disappear. Seeing death unfolding around her, she must have drawn the conclusion that anyone connected with Arthur was in imminent danger. And who could gainsay her?

* * *

Recognizing that I, too, was known to have worked with Arthur, I jotted a quick memo to keep a somewhat lower public profile. But first I needed to clear up a few questions.

I stepped out the back door of Arcane Wisdom and made my way down the alley to Oracle Street. There were enough tourists to mask me as I jaywalked over and ducked into the portico of the Twisted Talisman.

I had to squint under the bright fluorescent lights of the lobby. A colorful poster for a round-robin aspecting tournament grabbed my attention, but I was on a

mission. Catching my breath, I entered the main room.

My eyes took a minute to adjust. Behind the counter I was surprised to see, instead of Alabaster Crockley, a tall woman with cropped red hair. She was reading a book on magical merchandising and masticating a wad of what I hoped was gum.

"Hi, I'm looking for Al," I said, deciding not to mention that I suspected him of involvement in Arthur A. Arthur's death and missing Tarot deck.

"He's out," she answered, squinting at her book as her jaw worked the gum.

"Yeah, I see. Any idea where I might find him?"

She looked up slowly. "He said something about a family emergency," she said. "That's all I know."

"Are you his new assistant?"

"Me? No. The temp agency sent me over. I wish someone had told me it was going to be so dark. I'd have brought a reading lamp."

"So you have no idea where I could find him?"

"No more than the last time you asked," she said, popping her gum.

I spun on my heels and strode out of the store.

* * *

Crockley's "family emergency" excuse was flimsy. He didn't exactly seem the "family" type, and for him to disappear in the wake of Arthur and Perkins' deaths was a mite bit suspicious.

I flashed on Dr. Papyrus. Was he mixed up in this latest twist? Was he the "family" that Crockley was meeting?

Keeping an eye out for familiar faces, I rounded the corner onto Campanella Way. The Visconti-Sforza sat humbly between its more colorful neighbors. Did I dare knock again on Dr. Papyrus's door?

No – call first, he'd said. I fished out the card and dialed the hotel number.

"Visconti Hotel," came a bland voice. "Extension please."

"Room 13," I said.

"Sorry – room 13 is out."

* * *

I groped for a response. "Out? What do you mean?"

"Well," came the operator's colorless voice, "you know, like out of their room. That kind of out."

"But I thought —"

I caught myself. I didn't need to go spilling Dr. Papyrus's lifestyle proclivities to every telephone operator in town. What mattered was that the reclusive doctor, who Crockley had told me never left his room, was absent at the same time that Crockley was dealing with a "family emergency."

I thanked the operator and hung up. Without finding Crockley or Papyrus, I had just made big strides in clarifying the mystery.

Of course, all I'd accomplished was confirming that Crockley and Dr. Papyrus were still suspects, and likely in cahoots.

If I was that successful with everyone, I'd be right back where I started. I needed to start eliminating suspects, not confirming them in their suspectual status.

My spirits sagged. My childhood idols Frank and Joe Hardy had an unblemished crime-stopping record. They never got stumped. I hated to fail on my very first try.

Then again, the Hardy Boys never had to solve a mystery involving a missing Tarot deck. That certainly complicated matters.

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I pictured again the strange Tarot spread that Arthur left on the day of his death. A symbolic message whose diverse and dissonant decks seemed to implicate everyone on Oracle Street. No wonder it was so convoluted!

I headed back to the shop to plan my next move. Gently busting open the back door, I stepped inside and was greeted by a symbolic message of the clearest sort.

Arcane Wisdom had been ransacked again.



Chapter XVI: Tower

I gaped around – the shop had been trashed even more thoroughly than when the UPPIC agent practiced his craft. The place looked like a giant game of Fifty-Two Pickup, with cards, books, clothing, and even a broken Ouija board strewn about.

I checked the front door, which was unlocked. Anyone could have come and gone in the time I was out.

How foolish to leave the store unattended while I chased the chimera of Crockley and Dr. Papyrus. Who cared about them? They were already suspects. I didn't need any more dirt on them.

But leaving Arcane Wisdom unguarded had invited disaster.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

I wandered around picking things up and setting them down again. After a few minutes I paused and took a breath. Maybe I should stop and ground myself.

Usually I'm pretty matter-of-fact about starting my working day. No fancy custodial rituals for me. But with all the chaos of the past few days, maybe I needed to deepen my practice.

During my wanderjahre I met sacred janitors who began their shift with elaborate ceremony. Some purified themselves as a prelude to cleaning their building. Others did guided meditations where they visualized the place immaculate before they even unlocked the broom closet.

A caretaker in Norwich began with a ritual blessing of her dustpan. A woman in Mainz worked a Medieval banishing spell. The staff of a monastery outside Heraklion clipped a strand off a dirty mop as an offering to Custodia, Cretan goddess of tidiness.

My favorite was an old janitor in Lyons who drew a Tarot card as an oracle of which task to do first.

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I looked at the mess that surrounded me. Drawing a card seemed a tad redundant, given that dozens of decks lay scattered about the store.

Was the ransacker seeking the Trismegistus Meister Tarot? Or were they searching for something else? Hiding something? Delivering a message?

Suddenly I noticed that the cash-tray stood open and empty. So it was a petty thief!

Right away I thought of the mountebank and his urgent insistence that he was entitled to Arthur's deck. Had he been frustrated in his search and settled for rifling the register?

But wait – couldn't it have been Alabaster Crockley? What if at the very moment I was visiting the Twisted Talisman, Crockley slipped into Arcane Wisdom and tore the shop apart?

Was he seeking Arthur's deck? Or perhaps some piece of incriminating evidence from their tangled past?

I doubted that Crockley needed the cash. He probably intended to use it for some deliberately decadent purpose just to get the last laugh on Arthur.

Or could the theft have been a ruse to distract attention from the culprit's true motive?

TOWER

I flashed on Cornelius De Roquefort. Had he circled back after the séance to ransack the store? If so, pilfering a handful of cash would be the perfect cover.

What would Roquefort really be seeking? Was he trying to get his hands on the missing deck?

Or was he digging for dirt that Arthur had used to coerce the reclusive millionaire into “presenting” (and funding) the Trismegistus Meister Tarot?

* * *

I sighed. It wasn't fair to single out Roquefort or Crockley or the mountebank. With the door unlocked, it could have been anyone. I was right back where I'd started.

I glanced at the clock. My two o'clock meeting with UPPIC was coming up soon. I had to concoct some story so the special agent would think I was cooperating.

Maybe I could divert attention toward the Mini-Max clerk. That would ring with poetic justice. I pictured myself munching Jiffy Pop in the front row at Tarot Court as her sentence was read.

Yet even if I could distract the UPPIC agent and buy a little more time, I had to wonder where I was getting with my investigation.

Obviously someone wanted Arthur and now Perkins out of the way. Had that someone told authorities that I was involved in Arthur's death in order to hide their tracks? That was the simplest explanation.

Who? I had plenty of clues – but collectively they pointed to every still-living person on Oracle Street. I doubted that the entire block was conspiring, but I'd already had reason to suspect some combination. Was I overlooking a covert confederacy?

What if Crockley and Madame Bluebloodsky were secret lovers? Maybe Wendy and Dr. Papyrus were clandestine confidantes?

Was it possible that Persephone and the mountebank were in league? Or that Dr. Papyrus and Madame B might be in cahoots?

Any of them could be involved in a conspiracy with any of the others. Each had reason to wish Arthur out of the way and the Trismegistus Meister deck suppressed.

No one, though, more than Alabaster Crockley.

* * *

Crockley's antipathy toward the deceased was well-documented. And the

booklet accompanying Arthur's deck was expected to debunk Crockley's grandiose theories of primaevael Urgrundian origins.

Of course, Arthur's work was also rumored to demolish just about everyone else's favorite ideas about Tarot as well. If his death was a result of debunking someone's pet theories, the problem still remained – which theories?

Obviously Arthur's final multi-deck layout offered tantalizing hints as to whom Arthur himself suspected.

Was the Fast Food box in the center the key? Might it betoken a dysfunctional present which Arthur's deck would transcend, or an obstacle which must be overcome before the true meaning of Tarot could be actualized?

Did the clue lie in the history of the various decks? Was the Fast Food Tarot – or Motherpeace for that matter – intended to contrast with the Renaissance cards that Arthur typically favored?

Perhaps a better sense of the history of Tarot would enable me to decipher the significance of the different decks – and by extension solve the mystery.

But understanding the history and lineage of Tarot was hardly a straight-forward task, as my conversation with Alabaster Crockley had shown. And he was hardly alone in his speculations.

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As every budding esotericist knows, Tarot has long been the playground of the wildest fantasies, particularly as regards its origins. Phoenicians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Urgrundians – each theory pushed the foundations further into the past without providing more than a smattering of evidence.

The plethora of myths, far from discrediting Tarot, proved a source of delight and fascination to the general public, who devoured one book after another on the topic.

But it made a nightmare of untangling Tarot's actual origins.

What is the genesis of this strange oracle which has inspired and baffled scholars and adepts for centuries?

Whence Tarot?

In the past couple of days I'd imbibed a sampling of theories, none convincing. Dr. Papyrus's arid numerosophy didn't hold much water. Madame Bluebloodsky's gnostic path of ascent seemed an anachronistic stretch. And Alabaster Crockley's Urgrundian suppositions were by definition without evidence.

TOWER

This was only the beginning. During my wanderjahre I met an apprentice shaman who insisted that the Majors depicted a Medieval Dance of Death, where people from every station of life – from Fool to Pope, from Lovers to Hermit – ride the Wheel of Fortune, meet the Grim Reaper, ascend through the celestial spheres, face judgment, and (hopefully) enter the highest aeon.

I'd heard other people describe Tarot as an alchemical allegory, a Neo-Platonic odyssey, a morality play like the battle of Carnival and Lent, a metaphor for the Grail Legend, and a pictorial representation of the Paths of the Cabalistic Tree of Life.

One scholar of Esoteric Economics even suggested that the earliest Majors were handbills for Renaissance brands such as Devil's Own Dried Fruits, Inner Priestess beauty products, and Emperor natural ram's bladder condoms.

All of these ideas were about to fall before the axe of Arthur's painstaking research.

Yet the sheer range of theories showed how Tarot inspired in the human imagination the wildest and most varied speculations.

And no wonder. A favored deck sets the mind awahl, inviting you on a mystical journey. Does it contain the secrets of the future? Are the cards a key to the meaning of the universe?

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What if Tarot as we have it is but a fraction of a larger esoteric apparatus? What if the colorful cards were actually part of a vastly more complex and long-forgotten magical system?

Imagine a set of Monopoly cards – both kinds, Chance and Community Chest – but that's all. No board, no dice, no playing pawns, no rules – only the cards.

One rainy November afternoon, a lapsed Quaker in suburban Minneapolis happens upon the deck and finds herself strangely compelled by the obscure messages: Take a Ride on the Reading, You Have Won Second Prize in a Beauty Contest, and the mysterious injunction, Advance to Go.

Two cards particularly grip her: The oppressive Go Directly To Jail, and its companion, Get Out of Jail Free, with a cherubic tycoon flying out of a little cage.

For a while LQ, as the lapsed Quaker is known in commentaries and dissertations, shared the cards as a party trick, telling people's futures and predicting their love lives.

The turning point came when a reading based on the Parcheesi Cross method

predicted that LQ herself would discover a system of arcane truths embedded in the little Monopoly cards.

LQ intuitively grasped the implication – the Monopoly cards were part of a larger system of metaphysical knowledge in which the human soul is bandied about by forces beyond its control, so that the richest man in the world could find himself trapped in a miserable prison, or worse yet, compelled to pay taxes.

Correlating the drawings with the signs of the zodiac, the Cabalistic Tree of Life, the steps of several alchemical processes, and the verses of London Bridge is Falling Down, LQ reconstructed the original order of the cards, which represent the soul's journey from the tyranny of worldly life to spiritual liberation.

Beginning with Advance to Go, the soul (represented by the little tycoon, emblematic of both the potential richness of the spirit and its entrapment in the material world) travels the nettle-ridden path of Pay Doctor's Fees and School Tax, while finding solace in Life Insurance Matures and Advance to Nearest Railroad.

The pilgrim pauses for succor at Free Parking, then passes through the dark night of the soul with the Pay Poor Tax and Assessed for Street Repairs cards.

Finally, having traversed these various levels of initiation, the journeyer crosses over into the ethereal realm of Grand Opera Opening and Income Tax Refund, ascending to the ultimate release of Get Out of Jail Free.

LQ's reconstruction was so popular that other Monopoly decks soon appeared, including the Marseilles Monopoly and the Ancient Hermetic Order of the Rosy Red Sunset's famous cards.

More recently, the Neo-Wiccan Monopoly (based on the Miria creation myth) revised the images. The tycoon was replaced by a little peak-hatted crone, while Community Chest was transformed into a Bubbling Cauldron. Chance was renamed Fatum, and the deck immediately became de rigueur for witches everywhere.

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These and other decks lay strewn around Arcane Wisdom. Boxes had been torn open and their contents thrown about as if the ransacker were searching for a particular card or cards.

Was it another seeker of the Legendary Lost Arcana of the Bohemian Rosicrucians?

Or simply a very thorough vandal?

I tried to reshelve pentacles and triskelions, capes and vestments, and get the shop back in order. But I'd been away too long, and had little idea where things belonged.

After a half hour I wasn't sure I'd improved matters much. I settled for piling stuff on the counter and sweeping the scattered divination cards out of the main walkways.

I was plugging in the crystal detenebrator when I noticed it was past one. My appointment with the inquisitive UPPIC agent was in less than an hour.

Leaving the cleaning half finished – or half unfinished, if you're the pessimistic sort – I double-locked the front door.

Not that I was worried about thieves. I was just tired of sweeping up after the entire neighborhood.

As I boarded the bus, I reviewed my plan – blame the Mini-Max clerk. Even if she were cleared of the charges, it might distract the UPPIC agent long enough for me to complete my own investigation.

Was I thinking too small? Maybe I should be pumping the agent for information. If I handled it skillfully, I might learn a great deal while sharing very little.

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Reaching City Center, I rode to the basement and made my way down the sterile hallway.

The UPPIC agent, wearing his reflecting shades even in a windowless office, greeted me brusquely. "Have a seat, Mr. Harrison. It is most fortunate that you have arrived on time. I don't know how much longer I could have guaranteed your safety."

"My safety?" I said, on guard for trickery.

"Yes, your safety. There's a bounty on your head." He handed me a stark black and white page with the word "Bulletin" stamped across the top.

"Reward!" I read. "Jeffrey Harrison." The artist's rendition bore little resemblance beyond the stubble.

"This is nothing new," I said. "I was already a 'person of interest' in Arthur's death."

"This isn't about Mr. Arthur," he said. "This concerns Mr. Perkins."

"Perkins?" I recalled the séance and shuddered. "What does Perkins have to do with me?"

He pointed to the bottom of the flyer. "Read the fine print. You have been accused of killing Mr. Perkins as well as being involved in Arthur A. Arthur's death. Key City authorities say that you are an insane serial killer."

"That's absurd," I said. "I didn't kill anyone, least of all Arthur."

"I know you didn't kill Mr. Arthur, but I'm not so sure you didn't murder Mr. Perkins." He laughed drily. "In any case, if you leave this room you'll be arrested for both killings. And you know what trials around here are like."

I flinched at the image of dunking chairs and thumb screws. "What's my option?"

"I recommend protective custody for a few days until things settle down and they drop the charges concerning Mr. Arthur. Then you can take your chances on a trial for killing Mr. Perkins."

It was the sort of plea bargain I recognized from the aftermath of my ZazaZeus's secret sauce incident. But I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. Essentially he was recommending that I accede to trial by ordeal for a crime I had nothing to do with.

"I didn't kill Perkins," I reiterated with special emphasis.

"No problem, then," the UPPIC agent said. "Just ask for the hot iron. If you're innocent, you'll be exonerated."

I studied his impassive face. Was he playing me for some kind of fool?

"So tell me," I finally said. "Why are you so confident I didn't kill Arthur?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "Because Mr. Perkins committed that crime."



CHAPTER XVII: STAR

"Perkins killed Arthur?" I caught my breath. "Do you have proof?"

"We have his confession," the UPPIC agent said. "He signed it on his death bed."

So Perkins had a last-second twinge of conscience. Maybe he wasn't quite as soulless as I had always with ample reason deduced.

"Have you tracked down Arthur's Tarot deck?"

"Yes, Mr. Perkins had most of them," the agent confirmed. "Six are missing."

I choked back a gasp. So Persephone still had the six missing cards! Was she safely in hiding, or the prisoner of some metaphysical maniac bent on extorting the deck from her?

I looked at the agent, whose reflecting sunglasses stared up at me. Assuming that Perkins' confession was genuine and not simply a final, twisted grasp at undying infamy – and that Persephone had the six missing cards – then the only loose end was who killed Perkins.

Although I was the authorities' scapegoat du jour, I was pretty sure I hadn't murdered him, even in a fit of insane and completely justified rage.

"Why am I being blamed for Perkins' death?" I asked, still suspecting that someone was setting me up.

"I can't imagine," the agent said, "aside from video footage of you and Mr. Perkins arguing at RitualLand an hour before he was found dying from a blow to the back of the head."

Me and my big mouth! Of course they had security cameras at RitualLand.

Why hadn't I just ignored Perkins when I saw him meeting Persephone? Now the jerk had gone and gotten murdered – and left me to face the inquisitors.

* * *

I weighed the UPPIC agent's suggestion to remain in protective custody. Were I to appear in public and get arrested by city police, the story would splatter all over the tabloids. I'd be drawn and quartered in a court of public opinion lusting after a sacrificial victim to avenge the blood of Arthur A. Arthur.

"Where would I stay?" I asked.

"We have some private rooms," he said. "You'll get three square meals and cable TV."

Compared with getting tarred, feathered, and ridden out of town on a rail, a private room with cable TV sounded downright civil. Maybe I could catch up on Pagan Entertainment Network, or watch some old Goddess flicks on the Mystery Cult Classics station.

He ushered me down the hall and opened an unmarked door. As I stepped inside and reached for the light switch, the door slammed behind me.

"Hey!" I cried. I pounded my fist on the door, but I knew it was futile.

I'd been played for a rube.

I flicked on the light and looked around. It wasn't a cell, but a large office. A black desk sat to one side, its top covered with dust. To the left stood rows of vacant shelves, along with some folding chairs and an empty wastebasket. A second door with a large dead bolt and no handle was set into the back wall.

The ceiling was lined with white acoustic tiles, the kind with little holes in

diagonal patterns that you always have to count to see if each one has exactly the same number, which in this case they did. Two banks of fluorescent lights lent the room a lifeless glow.

I stepped up on a chair and pushed on a few tiles. They didn't budge. Even if I could knock them loose, there was a layer of steel and concrete between me and the next floor. It was, after all, the basement of a fallout shelter.

Pulling out my WiseWoman utility tool I scanned for an implement to pry the door open, but saw nothing big enough. I poked at the lock with the universal toothpick but nothing moved. I was stuck.

I walked over to the video monitor and pushed the switch. It flickered on.

At least the agent wasn't lying about the TV. I scanned the dial. Pagan Box Office offered a vampire-slasher film called *Never Lose Your Way to the Well* that looked a little bleak for my current spirits.

Luckily the Cult Classics channel was playing the 1950s musical, *My Faerie Lady*. I turned up the volume, dusted off the guest chair, and took a seat.

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My Faerie Lady involved a wiccan teacher who wagers that she can take a first-year novitiate and transform her into a High Priestess in time for Winter Solstice.

The plot thickens as the lowly novitiate struggles to develop a proper Gardnerian New Forest accent.

Naturally the two fall in love, and in a tragic twist are thrown out of their coven for having an illicit teacher/student affair.

Just then the Faerie Queen appears in Ren Faire splendor to reveal that the lowly novitiate is in fact the reincarnated spirit of the wiccan teacher's former mentor. Their ethical violations cancel out, and they live happily ever after.

If the tale was a bit hackneyed, the musical numbers were perennial favorites, especially *I Could Have Tranced All Night* and *Get Me to the Grove on Time*.

The problem with watching movies on TV was commercials. Just as the lovers were about to kiss, the network cut to an ad for Acme Inflatable Labyrinths showing a bunch of garden gnomes cavorting in a seven-circuit model.

I wasn't so keen on Acme labyrinths. One time I rented an eleven-circuit for a Beltane Blowout and it deflated halfway through the ritual, trapping several celebrants in the Center and causing serious damage to the lawn.

The next ad was for a new-age ecological company called VisionQuest, which collected old visions, meditations, spells, and other magical workings, spiffed

them up, and donated them to needy witches around the world.

Celebrity spokeswitch Sunshine MoonBeam stood in front of a cluttered altar as the toll-free number flashed on the screen. "Cleaning off your altar, but hesitant to burn those wonderful old spells and incantations? Imagine the thrill of knowing that your workings will continue their magic in new hands!"

As the screen portrayed happy witches receiving their recycled spells, a robotic voice stated the terms: "No binding or losing spells accepted. Extra charges may apply for love spells gone awry. VisionQuest also recycles used ancestors for a small handling fee. Call today to arrange pickup!"

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The screen went back to *My Faerie Lady*, but I was having trouble concentrating. I'd never been particularly adept at sitting around. The capital charges hanging over my head made it even harder.

I longed to be back at Arcane Wisdom doing what I loved most – sweeping the floor while my mind roamed over the outlines of my magnum opus.

Of course, I was in mortal danger if I showed my face on Oracle Street.

But if I didn't go back, how would I ever clear my name?

Surely no one believed I killed Perkins. Even Madame Bluebloodsky and Wendy, once they had time to meditate on the flimsy séantific evidence, must have been persuaded of my innocence.

Unless I was being framed. If not by Perkins, it must be someone else on Oracle Street. And if their scheme to have me arrested and strapped into the dunking chair failed, who knew what measure they might take next?

Was I about to be snuffed for daring to investigate Arthur's death?

I switched off the TV. The fluorescent lights emitted a distinct hum. No wonder I felt edgy.

I flipped the lights off to get a little relief from the humming. For an instant all was black. Then I noticed a sliver of light under the back door, the one with no handle. I walked over and thumped on the door to see if it rattled in the frame.

From the other side came a gasp of alarm.

"Sorry," I called out. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Who's there?"

The voice ignited my spirit. "Persephone!"



Chapter XVIII: Moon

"Persephone! It's me – it's Jeff Harrison!"

She was silent for a moment. "Who? Do I know you?"

"Jeff, the substitute custodian at Arthur's shop, remember?"

Succinctly I explained my plight, commencing with learning that Perkins had confessed to killing Arthur, getting locked in the office against my will, discovering that the television worked, and concluding with being accused of Perkins' murder.

"They think I killed Perkins. I mean, I think I understand why they think they understand that I didn't think particularly highly of this Perkins fellow. But really, to kill him?"

"Did you say Perkins killed Arthur?"

"That's what the agent told me."

She was silent for a moment. "Someone may have killed Arthur," she said. "But I wouldn't have guessed it was Perkins. When I talked to him at RitualLand yesterday he kept prattling about 'untold fame and wealth.' But I wouldn't have guessed I was talking to a murderer."

"He could be slippery," I reminded her. "Why would you trust him?"

"He told me he had the missing paintings. He promised to give them back if he got to write a tribute to Arthur to accompany the deck. I said okay just to get the cards back. But now he's dead, and it's anybody's guess where the paintings are."

"The UPPIC guy told me that he has them," I told her. "He got them from Perkins."

"Did you actually see them in his hands?" she asked skeptically.

"Well, no. But he knew that six cards were missing, so I assumed he had the others."

"Maybe," she said. "I'm not sure who to trust. Yesterday I thought I had a deal with Perkins to return the paintings. Now he's dead and I'm in custody."

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Right, I thought. How rude of me not to notice that she was in jail, too. "So they're holding you?"

"They say it's for my own safety, until they apprehend Perkins' killer. Actually, now that they have you, I guess I might be getting out. But I'm not sure I'm going anywhere until they have all of the cards."

Was it just the cards the authorities wanted from Persephone, or did they suspect more? How could they be so sure she hadn't killed Perkins?

I didn't see how to raise the issue directly. I tried a different angle. "So you still have the six cards?"

"Let's not go into that. The less you know, the better."

"Right," I said. "But if the UPPIC agent has most of the deck, he must want the other cards as well."

"Of course. He says he wants them all in one place while the courts sort out the legal issues. But who would keep a more careful eye on the cards than me?"

She was silent, and I wondered if I was being tactless to pester her with more questions. Given our current predicament I didn't see a more convenient moment arising.

"So you think Perkins is innocent?"

"Of what?" she said bitterly. "Of being a money-grubbing klutz who got himself killed and maybe me in the bargain? Innocent?"

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I waited a polite moment to show I'd grasped the gravity of her point. "No, I mean innocent of killing Arthur."

"What proof do you have besides the agent's word that Perkins killed Arthur?"

I felt torn. Should I confide one of my primary clues to someone who had been making deals with Perkins? Yet if I didn't share what I knew, how could I expect candor from Persephone?

"You see," I began slowly, "before Arthur died, he apparently left behind a Tarot spread which I believe may hold the key to this whole mystery. If my interpretation is correct, it points to Perkins as the culprit."

I waited for a response. Finally she said, "Yes?"

"Well, the reading to which I refer is, or rather was, or in some important way still is, very strange. I hope you might shed some light on it, so to speak, if I'm not intruding into private matters which are of course none of my business."

When she didn't speak, I continued. "It would be of immense help to me to know precisely when Arthur did this reading."

"He did a reading almost every morning." She sounded impatient.

"Right. Did you happen to see the one he did with all the different decks and cards and the Fast Food box in the middle?"

"Fast food? Arthur never ate fast food."

"No, the illegal deck. I'm talking about the layout that used the Fast Food Tarot and several other decks."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

* * *

My lips tightened. Either she hadn't seen the weird spread, or she was being evasive.

I took a slow breath. "You see, in the back room of Arcane Wisdom I found,

that is, I presume that Arthur left, a most unusual reading which quite likely contains the clues to unravel the mystery of who killed him."

"Really?" she scoffed. "And when do you think he did it?"

"If you didn't see him do it the last morning, then my theory is that on that final night, after you two ran the divination tests, Arthur did this reading to spell out his final testament."

"When? He left the same time we did," she said.

"He could have returned."

"I don't see when. I heard he was at Happy Endings before he died. The layout must have been from the previous day."

"Maybe. Whenever he did it, it's his final reading. You didn't see it?"

"Not the reading you described, with the different decks. I've never seen anything like that."

"Well," I said dramatically, "I've given it a great deal of careful thought, and I have reason to believe the layout establishes Arthur's final state of mind concerning each person on Oracle Street."

I paused for effect, then pressed ahead. "Not only does intuition suggest that the reading has a connection to Arthur's fate and that of the new deck – someone else on Oracle Street was so concerned that they snuck in during my absence and scrambled the spread!"

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"What's your point?"

"The point is," I said, dropping my voice, "that I have begun to determine appropriate references and interpretations for each of the cards in the reading."

With a minimum of rhetoric, and not omitting a generous credit to Dr. Papyrus for his insight that the disparate decks might in fact indicate specific individuals, I conveyed the essence of my interpretation to Persephone.

"It seems obvious," I concluded, "that the rodent on the cover of the Fast Food Tarot means Perkins. The problem is the rest of the cards, which I believe indicate others involved in Arthur's demise – and might tell us who killed Perkins."

Her silence encouraged me quickly to continue. "Even if I have an idea who each deck points to," I said, "I don't get what it all means. I see all of the signs

and symbols and suits and numbers, but I'm missing the key. I was hoping you might help with the meanings."

Her sharp sigh carried through the door. "It's not that simple," she said. "I can't just give you a list of meanings. That's the point of intuitive reading – you respond to the imagery in the moment."

"Sure," I said. "But when you do a layout, don't the positions of the cards have certain meanings? So one position is Past Influences, and another is Hopes or Fears or things like that?"

"Well, yes," she said. "That's the point of doing a particular spread."

"Okay, then," I said. "I know the cards and the decks and who they might indicate. So it seems like what I need for the overall interpretation is the meanings of the positions in the spread."

"I'm not sure how much that would help," she said. "You could know all the cards and their positions. But you have no idea what *question* Arthur asked. The meanings of Tarot cards aren't fixed – it's not something you can look up in a book and say, 'Oh, that card is in the Future Influences slot – so here's what it must mean!' Unless you know what the querent was asking, you're stabbing in the dark."

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"Fine," I replied tersely. "So the question is the key? I happen to have a pretty good idea what Arthur was asking about. I think the reading conveys his fears for himself and the future of the new deck!"

She was silent, and I thought my logic had stunned her. "Possibly," she finally said. "It's the kind of thing he might have asked."

"Right," I said. "So if that's the 'question,' or at least the point of the spread, and we know who some of the cards point to –"

"You keep looking for a simple solution to a complicated issue," she interrupted. "Yes, the question is important – but in the end, the key is the questioner and their process. The querent has to bring the reading to life."

Her voice gained urgency. "Tarot cards don't contain ancient secrets or magical powers. They're just pictures on little pieces of cardboard. I should know! *You* have to supply the magic. Divination is about *your* intuition, your questioning, your personal experience of magic – the most that the cards can do is awaken what's within you."

She paused for the length of a breath, then continued more slowly. "A Tarot reading isn't about a set of meanings. It's a journey. The querent goes on a

psychic and emotional journey.

"In fact, you don't just 'go' on a journey – you *become* the journey. Some people call it the 'Fool's Journey.' The journey makes the Fool who they are.

"When I painted the Major Arcana for the new deck, I had to go on that journey myself. I had to inhabit every card, to shape and be shaped by each one. I had to embody and enact each arcana in order to discover what the archetypes wanted to convey through me."

* * *

"You had to be every card?"

"Each and every one," she said with more than a touch of pride. "A lot of my early sketches were self-portraits – that was my way of entering into an intimate relationship with the arcana. The images of Tarot are living beings, allies that can reshape our consciousness and direct our growth and spiritual attunement. Anyone who truly wants to engage with Tarot needs to enter into a living, embodied relationship with the cards. You have to live them, act them out, *be* them – in sequence and all at once."

I pictured a contorted Morris Dancer embodying 78 cards simultaneously. "All at once?"

"That's part of the magic," she said. "The arcana don't exist in isolation from one another. Every card illuminates every other, depending not only on their positions in the spread but on the querent's personal experience of the connections.

"I see." I paused. "So there's no way that anyone else can understand Arthur's final reading?"

"Not unless someone else was with him," she said. "Knowing the question gives you a clue. But what the cards might have meant to Arthur in this particular reading, only someone who was present could say."

I was silent for a moment, and thought I could hear her speak to another person. Her voice seemed muted. I spoke her name a couple of times and knocked on the door, then realized she might be under observation and unable to respond.

I waited a minute, but heard nothing. Was she alright?

Had Persephone been taken for interrogation?

Was I next?

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I spoke Persephone's name again and knocked lightly on the door. Nothing. Had the authorities moved her? Or was she being released now that I – the number one menace to all decent society – was securely in custody?

I stepped away from the door and in the silence heard a slight jingle. My key belt, of course. The keys reminded me of Arcane Wisdom, which I had left in a condition that my guild siblings would regard as substandard if not downright deplorable.

I sighed heavily, feeling the weight of the past few days. I had been no help to Persephone, and even worse was derelict in my duty to Arthur's legacy and the Trismegistus Meister Tarot. Handed a role on the grand stage of magical history, I was trapped in the dressing room.

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I jingled my keys again. Much as I appreciated the aesthetic possibilities of carrying so many keys, I wondered if I ought to consider an upper limit.

During my wanderjahre I learned that many sacred custodians in the Old World base the number of keys they carry on their favorite divination deck. The most common number of custodial keys throughout Europe is thus 32, 52 or 78, although French custodians lean toward the 97 of Minchiate decks.

Being a resolute New Worlder, I hesitated to restrict myself to a particular number of keys. I focused instead on achieving isometric as well as harmonic balance. At last count I carried 142, carefully arranged on my belt so as to minimize muscle strain while maintaining tonal symmetry.

Keys. Interesting coincidence – Tarot authors sometimes used the term “key” to speak of the Major Arcana. Not just in passing, but as a synonym. The Emperor is Key Four, the Tower is Key Sixteen, and so on.

Did it hint at a deeper connection between the magical arts and sacred custodics?

I speak (in a whisper) of that most occult of all custodial secrets – the Cloit.

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During my wanderjahre I occasionally heard talk of a mysterious substance known as the Custodians' Cloit – a near-miraculous janitorial aid alleged to clean the grimmest surfaces with a single stroke, lift wine stains from linen tablecloths, and even remove dog droppings from shag carpeting.

No one I spoke with during my travels claimed ever to have seen or used the Custodian's Cloit. But given proper lubricant a few old-timers recounted stories they'd heard.

One said the Cloit was an elixir, a Paracelsian concoction infused with supramundane qualities that eased the most onerous maintenance tasks.

Another assured me that it was a powder, and yet another a fine white crystal.

An old woman in Antioch, speaking on condition of strict anonymity, averred that it was a syrup similar to (although vastly more potent than) GreenClean, a modern commercial concentrate powerful enough to unclog your drains, yet safe enough to use as a dessert topping.

While I'd never come across a formula for concocting or distilling the Cloit, I considered the search for such arcane knowledge a key part of my post-graduate education.

Keys again. I mused on the use of the word "key" to signify the essential element which unlocks a complex matter: The key to my education, to the meaning of the universe. The key to your heart.

The key to the mystery. The key to Tarot.

The master key.

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That's what I was missing – if all of the Majors together were "keys," was one of them the "master key?" Did one of the cards unlock the secret of all the others?

Quickly I pictured the Majors. The Magician held the powers of the four sacred elements. The Wheel of Fortune was the pivot around which the others turned. The World was a summation and completion.

Yet each of these cards seemed to imply the others for its full meaning. Their meaning inhered in their being a set, not how one ruled all the others.

A true "master key" opens all locks with no other key needed.

One possibility remained – perhaps the missing master card was one of the Legendary Lost Arcana of the Bohemian Rosicrucians!

No wonder modern scholars and aesthetes could reach no agreement on the meaning of the Majors. The surviving cards each carry rich and profound meanings. But only by completing the sequence with one or more Lost Arcana could the ultimate significance of the series be revealed.

But if that was the solution, I wasn't likely to come across the Lost Arcana down here.

I sagged. I wasn't going to come across much of anything in this sterile dungeon. Least of all the key to the meaning of Tarot.

MOON

Keys. Was I overlooking something? I reached down and felt the clusters of keys arrayed on my belt. I'd been so focused on isometrics and tonality that I almost forgot why I carried them in the first place.

Even if I couldn't solve the mysteries of Tarot, might I have the answer to my captivity at my fingertips?

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I scuttled across the darkened room to the hallway door. Flicking on the fluorescent lights, I bent down and read the lock.

Vulcan – the most common Pagan lock brand! Surely I had a few on my belt.

Quickly I flipped through the keys, speaking the brand names stamped onto the metal as if they were invocations: Hephaestus, Goibniu, Svarog, Wayland, Creidhne, Luchtaine, Gofannon...

At last I found a Vulcan. And a master at that. Would it work?

Rubbing my thumb against the embossed lettering for good luck, I slipped the silver key into the lock.



Chapter XIX: Sun

The master key turned with a gratifying click.

I clutched the handle and opened the door. The coast was clear.

But I was several stories underground with no authorization to wander around City Center. If the wrong person spotted me, I'd be right back in custody.

I was going to have to attempt some serious magic.

During my wanderjahre I was made privy to one of most powerful of all sacred janitorial workings – the Custodians' Invisibility Spell.

I don't do a lot of spells. They take time and concentration. But I find a few useful. I know a spell called "Breathe to the Future" – if you don't like where you are, hold your breath until you reach the future. Repeat as necessary.

The Custodians' Invisibility Spell was a far more demanding working. Did I dare it attempt it here, in the very intestines of Key City's repressive power?

To work the spell properly, you needed a single magical tool. In a pinch, you can use just about anything – even an old plastic bag will do.

But I recalled spotting the perfect implement in the office where I'd been locked. I ducked back inside and grabbed the wastebasket.

Heading down the corridor, I spied a stack of Know Your Esoteric Rights brochures. I stuck one in my pocket and crumpled the rest.

Each time I passed anyone, even a secretary or tech worker, I went through an elaborate routine of dropping the wadded papers, picking them up, and ceremoniously placing them into the wastebasket. I spoke to no one and made no eye contact, just as I'd learned from my janitorial mentors, and it worked like a charm – nobody paid me any notice.

I even got past an official City Center custodian. The squat old woman slowed down and squinted like she sort of saw me, but couldn't quite trust her eyes. Finally she shook her head and padded on.

As I waited for the elevator a couple of security guards suddenly appeared. I stifled a wave of panic, then realized they were oblivious to me. One of them polished off a donut and dropped his napkin on the floor.

Waiting a polite moment, I bent over and picked it up. Feeling my veil of invisibility grow stronger, I joined them for the ride up to surface level.

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Soon I approached the exit portal. Now came the tricky part.

When I put the trash basket down I would abruptly become visible to the guards at the exit, who might recognize me from my Wanted poster. But if I passed through the portal holding the wastebasket it could set off an alarm and I'd be re-arrested for pilfering city property.

It was no joke. Just a year earlier someone used the Invisibility Spell to steal Tintoretto's First Communion of the Last Dionysians from the Louvre.

The thief sliced the Cinquecento Venetian masterpiece from its frame and would have gotten clean away except that security sensors detected him trying to leave the museum with a government wastebasket.*

* - It was several days before a maintenance worker discovered the famous painting in the trash can, gave it a quick but thorough cleansing and disinfecting, and duct-taped the canvas back into its frame.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

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My movements needed to be timed perfectly. I sidled up to the exit, gauged the distance, and lobbed the trashcan across the room to create a distraction.

Then I dashed through the portal.

Emerging above ground, I grabbed a copy of the *Post-Divinator* and obscured my face as I waited for the 562-N back to Oracle Street. I was relieved to see no mention of my name in the story about Arthur, whose death was still described as an accident.

But this was the morning paper. What would the late edition say?

Regardless, I didn't have much time. UPPIC would sound the alarm as soon as they discovered my absence. The hellhounds might already be on my trail.

I had to act fast if I wanted to thwart whoever was framing me, clear my name, unmask Arthur's killer, and get the Trismegistus Meister Tarot to the printer in a timely fashion.

Plus clean up Arcane Wisdom. That was first on my list. It grated on my custodial nerves to know that the store looked like a disaster area.

At some point the media was going to show up with cameras rolling. If the shop got on the news looking like a shambles and my comrades at the Bristling Broom saw it, the shame would haunt me the rest of my life.

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The bus neared Oracle Street. I wondered what sort of welcome I would face when I reappeared on my home turf. Would people be relieved to see me?

Or had I been trumpeted around the neighborhood as a serial killer?

Most people would probably just be confused. But someone knew exactly what was going on and had sold me down the turnpike.

My head spun with the possibilities. I hated feeling all paranoid and everything, but I guess seeing your face on a Wanted poster will do that.

As I hopped off the bus I caught sight of Happy Endings, the notorious house of divination where Arthur had spent his final hours.

Of course! Why hadn't it occurred to me to stop by and ask a few questions about who might have been drinking with Arthur that evening, whether he got a reading, and whether he left with anyone?

It was early in the day, but Happy Endings was open 24 hours. I cast a furtive glance up and down Oracle Street, not particularly wanting to be spotted by

acquaintances as I entered.

Really, though, there was no reason to be ashamed about visiting a house of divination. Even if it was a bit shady, nothing was more natural than wanting a good outcome to your reading.

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A neon sign promised: Scintillating Sessions with Stimulating Partners! A greeter pulled aside a heavy black curtain covering the entrance.

Soft red lighting illumined the lobby. Stale frankincense tickled my nose. A jukebox in the background played the disco classic, Trancing Queen.

I had hoped to speak with the manager and get right down to business. Now I realized that I would need to build some trust. After all, Happy Endings regularly got busted by undercover cops for rigged readings. I couldn't expect them to vest confidence in a newcomer.

Taking a seat on an overstuffed couch, I waited my turn. I have to admit I felt a bit tawdry watching the diviners parade their talents in front of me.

I almost went for a good old-fashioned Byzantine Cross Tarot reading, but at the last second I switched my selection to a fire-scryer from the Temple of All Universes who seductively caught my eye.

The scryer led me to a windowless room, closed the door, and lit a single votive candle on a small central altar.

"Have a seat," he said, offering me a choice of floor mats. "What are you hoping to explore this morning?"

How much to say? Should I confide that I had come in search of clues to Arthur's final hours? That another customer might well be complicit in his death? Probably not the best opening gambit on my first visit to a house of divination.

"I, uh, I guess I hadn't exactly thought about that," I said.

"Well, then," my host said politely, "we'll just do a general scrying."

He re-arranged the altar and added the Sun, Star, and Knight of Wands from an antique Tarocchi deck featuring Arabic motifs.

"That's unusual, isn't it?" I asked, pointing to the decorations.

"Not really," he said. "A lot of older cards have 'arabesque' patterns on the Minors. And why not? Tarot comes from Italy, from the same courts where Renaissance philosophers studied Arabic theories about an astral fluid that pervades the universe. This cosmic fluid links the magical and mundane

worlds, the above and below. It's what makes divination possible."

I nodded, taking in his words. As he idly shuffled the remaining Tarocchi cards, he directed my attention to the candle.

"Gaze at the flame.... Watch it glow in anticipation.... Let your eyes grow soft and your mind free from thoughts.... Gaze at the flame...."

In the distance the jukebox played *Trance With Me*. My head grew light in the closed, incense-filled space.

The scryer's mellifluous voice coaxed me on. Gradually I beheld a cavalcade of apparitions dancing in the flame. Witches, werewolves, sprites, faeries – and vaguely human forms.

"Look closely," came the scryer's now-remote voice. "Perhaps one of the spirits has a message for you...."

Gauzy figures floated before my eyes. Then, slowly, imperceptibly, I began to make out a face – a face I knew oh, so well – Arthur! I almost called out, but he seemed to inhabit an inaccessible plane, as if projected onto the aether by a magic lantern.

Arthur's specter floated toward the door. My eyes followed through the walls, and I saw him leaving *Happy Endings* and stepping into the dark night. Now he was out on Oracle Street – arguing with someone! He shook his head in sharp refusal. An arm grabbed for him. Arthur staggered backward....

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Just then the song in the background changed, and my attention snapped back to the stuffy room. I tried to will myself back into the vision, but all I could see was a lonely flame dripping wax onto the altar.

"Our time is just about up," came the scryer's gentle voice. "Unless you would like an additional half hour?"

"Oh, uh, no," I said, shaking off the torpor. "Thank you so much. This has been very helpful."

I hadn't been able to establish the identity of Arthur's assailant.

But I had irrefutable divinatory proof that his death had been no mere accident.

I left with new respect for *Happy Endings'* place in the Oracle Street ecosystem. But now I needed to get to Arcane Wisdom.

Ducking into the alley, I used my foot to unlock the door. The backroom light was on, and Arthur's Tarot spread still lay scattered on the workbench.

My concern was the main room. I grabbed a broom and dustpan and set to it. I had barely begun my labors when I heard the back door open again.

Who could it be? Was someone trying to get the drop on me?

Keeping the broom moving, I readied myself for the visitor.

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A thin, wiry person came through the rear doorway.

"Johanna?"

She gave a crisp wave. "I guess you know about Arthur," she said grimly.

I flushed with embarrassment at the store's disarray. She seemed not to notice. "Thanks for cleaning up," she said. She pulled a rag from her belt and wiped off the counter.

Did she know about my scrape with the law, and that I had been deemed a threat to civilization? Best to be up front.

"I'm not an insane serial murderer, you know," I said.

She shrugged. "I heard you were in some kind of trouble, but really, a serial killer? You just got back in town!" She laughed and went back to dusting.

I appreciated her perspective. But maybe there was another reason she knew I hadn't killed Arthur and/or Perkins. Was she was involved herself? Had I been overlooking a suspect because I thought Johanna had already left on her travels?

If someone wanted to take Arthur out, who knew his most intimate habits better than the senior custodian at his shop?

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A few well-placed interrogatories might clarify Johanna's reasons for still being in Key City, or at least give me a better idea where her loyalties lay.

As I turned to question her, Johanna stood gazing sadly around the room.

Embarrassed again at the sorry state of the shop, I wanted to assure her that the mess she saw was not to be typical of my performance, and that she could depart for the Eternal City with peace of mind, knowing that Arcane Wisdom would in the future be well-tended.

Assuming there was a future for the store, I realized with a chill. Maybe that's why Johanna was here. Her future was on the line as much as anyone's.

My own future wasn't looking so bright, for that matter. With Arthur gone, I

might need to find another way to butter the proverbial bread.

Jobs were harder to come by these days, what with everything getting computerized or robotized.

When I was an undergrad you could make a few extra ducats working overnight in the psychology labs, watching the Skinner cages and counting how many times the pigeons pecked the bar.

I used to enjoy spending time with the winged varmints, challenging them to break their own pecking records by ramping up their reinforcement schedules when the supervisors weren't looking.

But now the University had brought in computers. Apparently with a bit of pre-operant conditioning your average pigeon can learn to execute a simple series of keyboard commands, eliminating the need for observers.

Pigeons had come a long way since the era when they wandered around boxes pecking on bars. Nowadays the descendants of B. F. Skinner's acclaimed avians could do it all – run through a maze while pecking on a keyboard, all the while drooling every time a bell rang.

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I could worry about job opportunities later. Right now I needed to focus on my examination of Johanna.

"So you haven't left for Rome?" I began slowly, watching her reaction.

"I was leaving today. But that's off."

"Did the police order you to remain?"

"No, the police haven't contacted me, at least not yet," she said vaguely. "But I figured I was needed here. Anyway, it would have looked weird to disappear immediately after Arthur died."

"Right." Then I asked as casually as I could: "Did you happen to notice the strange Tarot reading that Arthur left in the back room before he died? The one with cards from a bunch of different decks?"

Johanna's brow furrowed, as if she were deciding how much to share. "It sounds like the reading he did the day before he died. I came over to give the shop a quick tune-up before I left for Rome, and happened to be sweeping the back room when he did the layout."

I couldn't veil my excitement. "You saw him do the reading?"

"Yeah. I was honored that he let me watch. Usually Persephone was the only one who got to be present."

I shook my head slowly. "If it was done the day before he died, that's even weirder – like he had a premonition of his death, and used the cards to point to likely culprits."

Johanna smiled sadly. "I don't think so. It had nothing to do with his death. It was more like, 'After me, whither Oracle Street?' Sure, it was a bit grandiose. But that was Arthur, wasn't it?"

I scowled. "How did he just happen to draw Death and Justice the day before he died?"

"Oh, those – he chose those cards face-up. I think he usually did that for the Situation and Outcome cards. He consulted some inner muse to determine the beginning and end of the layout – Death and Justice in this case – and then drew the rest of the cards face down as the 'journey.'"

"But Death as the Situation? How could he know that?"

She paused as if framing a careful answer. "He didn't mean his own death. The Death archetype has all kinds of nuances. It can mean change, transition, loss... Arthur had in mind the changes that were coming to Oracle Street when his deck appeared. He was thinking of retiring, traveling, maybe becoming a Paracelsian monk. He didn't mean physical death – more like one phase of his life ending, another being born."

I nodded, although the irony of his being "born" into his physical death didn't escape me. "Okay. And Justice as the top card?"

"He wanted a fair outcome for everyone. He considered other cards for that position – Temperance, the World, the Sun, even the Ten of Cups. He wanted a card that suggested what was best for all. He knew his new deck was going to shake things up on Oracle Street. He wanted it to settle out well."

"Okay," I said, not convinced that Johanna was telling me all she knew. Was she contriving an interpretation to deflect attention from herself? Guarding initiatory secrets?

My eyes narrowed. "Isn't it strange that he drew the rest of the cards from different decks? Did he do that much in recent years?"

"Not that I noticed," she said. "He mostly just used his old Bergamo deck. But he said he wanted this reading to include other decks he admired."

"I see. Do you think the different decks might stand for different individuals?" I asked, deciding not to reveal that I had been in contact with the disreputable Dr. Papyrus.

"Not exactly. More like 'tendencies,' you could say. Sure, it's hard not to think

of Wendy when you see Motherpeace, or Alabaster when you see Thoth. But Arthur had in mind the tendencies each deck epitomized, not specific people."

"You said those cards were chosen face-down?"

"Yeah, I saw him pick them – one card from each pack."

"Interesting," I said. "They seem so perfect. Even if it's 'tendencies' and not people, look at them – the Queen sure points to Madame B. It's uncanny."

"Tarot can be like that," Johanna said with a slight smile. "It hardly matters which card you pick – they all seem to suggest something. The images help us project our own thoughts and beliefs. And sometimes our illusions."

She paused for a moment as if lost in thought, then continued. "Especially illusions. Did you ever notice how when people get the Wheel of Fortune, they always think it means their luck is about to improve?"

I laughed sharply in recognition. "So you'd say the meanings are just projections of our imagination?"

"Not 'just.' Imagination is the core of our most powerful magic. Our ability to visualize, to hold images before our minds like talismans, as models to be followed or avoided – that's the source of some of our deepest workings. And what more perfect talisman than Tarot?"

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"What about the side cards?" I asked. "What 'tendencies' did they represent? Did Arthur say anything about them?"

Johanna looked away for a moment, as if weighing how much she could reveal about Arthur's reading. Then she spoke slowly. "It was a simple past-to-future spread, left to right. The Marseilles Tarot at lower left spoke about the history of magic and divination, the countless threads of transmission. Thoth in the upper left signified the tradition-bound past that is being superseded."

"The parts we're leaving behind?"

"No," Johanna said, "the past is never left behind – what's superseded is always woven into the present and future."

"Okay. And the two on the right?"

"The Gnostic Gnowers at the lower right suggests intuition and personal engagement as the foundation of present-day divination."

"That makes sense," I said. "And Motherpeace?"

"Motherpeace points to open-minded eclecticism as the future of magic. What was the card, the Four of Discs? Think about it. It promises nothing specific – it simply portrays the priestess at the portal, opening toward the future."

I recalled the card, which I had interpreted as *closing* the door. Funny how the same card can be read both ways.

"Opening?" I repeated.

"Yes, opening to the future."

I laughed involuntarily. "Arthur saw Motherpeace as the future of Tarot?"

"Not *the* future – he saw it as an experimental approach that opens new possibilities. I think it's the way he felt about Wendy's work in general."

"That's surprising," I said. "I never heard him say much of anything positive about Motherpeace, or any other deck for that matter. It was like he saw them all as the past, and himself as the only future."

Johanna smiled sadly. "Arthur had an inflated aura sometimes," she said. "A lot of the time, actually. But he knew that others were also opening new pathways. He didn't think the Trismegistus deck was the final word in Tarot."

"No," I said pointedly. "Just the most important deck ever created."

"Well, yes. He definitely thought that."

Arthur's final spread was making sense, but so far it didn't shed any light on the mystery at hand. Was Johanna revealing all she knew? Or was she covering up the most important clue?

One possibility remained. "What about the Fast Food deck? That's the weirdest part of all. What was an empty box doing in the center of the layout?"

"Oh, that," she said. "You know, I saw him place it there, but he didn't say anything about it."

"Maybe it was a joke," I said.

"No, I doubt it. He wouldn't have placed it right in the center of the spread unless it had some meaning to him."

"So what does the center position mean?"

"It could be a lot of things," she said reflectively. "Anything from ally to obstacle, from inner resources to inner demons. Perhaps it's what is central – but it could just as well mean something that is contained, that is held. Or something that needs to be released."

Great, I thought. A perfect dialectical paradox, where everything can mean either itself or its opposite. Or both.

I had the feeling that was part of Tarot's mystique.

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My interrogation wasn't turning up any smoking guns in Johanna's hands. What was I expecting, anyway? Unless she was Arthur's heir, she seemed to have nothing to gain from his death.

Maybe she had dirt on another character I'd been wondering about.

"By the way," I said. "Do you know the guy from the street faire who claims that he inspired Arthur's deck?"

Johanna grimaced. "Yeah. I don't know his name. We just call him 'the mountebank.' He's kind of odd, but very creative. He invented this Tarot-based therapy where you work out your childhood traumas using the Minor Arcana. First you act out a tableau of a card you find challenging. Then you transform your pose so it becomes an embodied image of your liberation. Kind of like *commedia dell'arte* for the psyche."

I imagined embodying my most challenging card, the Ten of Swords – ten scimitars thrust through a corpse-like figure. Would I be the lifeless body? Or one of the swords?

How would I modify the image? Give the victim a band aid? Thrust in another blade? Yank one out and let it bleed?

"I can see where that exercise could be quite transformative," I said. "But why does he claim he inspired the Trismegistus Meister deck?"

"Oh, the deck," she said, nodding her head. "Way back when Arthur first started working on his deck, the mountebank happened to mention an idea called the Tarot di Tutti Taroti. He actually mocked up one card, the Magician.

"The card was over a foot tall and divided into sixteen sections, each the size of a small Tarot card. In the outer sections he pasted miniature versions of the Magician from famous decks – Visconti, Marseilles, Etteilla, Tarock, Rider-Waite-Smith, Thoth, Golden Dawn, Gatos Paganos, and so on – a dozen in all. Those made up the frame.

"In the center he collected all sorts of symbols – astrological, geometric, alchemical, hermetic, and so on. It was just a jumble, really. Nothing like the pictures Persephone painted. But the Tutti Taroti might have inspired Arthur when he started gathering ideas for his deck."

"Wow," I said. "Did the Tutti Taroti deck ever get produced?"

"Oh, no – I don't think the guy ever made any other cards. It was just a vision."

"Too bad," I said. "I'd buy a copy."

Johanna suddenly looked at her watch. "I have to go," she said with no explanation. "I'll probably see you tomorrow."

She headed out the back door. Johanna had clarified a lot of questions. But the biggest ones remained unanswered.

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A moment after Johanna left, the front door swung open. In paraded Wendy Womansdaughter, Madame Bluebloodsky, and Ani Vee.

The big white dog gave me its usual sad look, but the two woman seemed taken aback. Guessing their fears, I quickly explained.

"Hi, it's great to see you! You probably heard that I'm an insane serial killer, but no need to worry, I'm not insane."

They stared at me. Even Ani Vee looked concerned. "No, no," I continued, "I'm not a serial killer either, or a killer of any sort, so far as I can recall, unless of course I actually am insane and have repressed the memory of committing the murders, but honestly, I'm pretty sure I would make a point of remembering something like that!"

I had almost convinced them not to consider me an immediate social menace when who should run in but the rainbow-caped mountebank. Ignoring me and Madame B, he addressed Wendy in an urgent voice.

"Where is Persephone? I need to talk to her right now!"

Wendy took a step back. "She isn't coming here. She told me she's going to RitualLand."

I gave a sharp laugh. "RitualLand? Why is she going there?"

"She said she was meeting Cornelius at Tarot Mountain," interjected Madame Bluebloodsky.

"De Roquefort?" snarled the mountebank. "What's that old codger got to do with anything?"

Madame Bluebloodsky shot a shriveling glare. "I believe he may have more to do with this matter than you think!"

Roquefort! Of course he was involved – maybe more than even Madame Bluebloodsky suspected. Was he meeting Persephone to try to buy the six missing cards?

Or perhaps to draw her into a plot to fence the deck to an anonymous bidder? If he could parlay the cards to a private collector, Roquefort might achieve his aim of suppressing the deck while turning a tidy profit.

What was Persephone's motive? Was she, in spite of her miniscule credit on the box, trying to re-assemble the Trismegistus Meister Tarot in order to get it published?

Would she plead with Roquefort not to withdraw his financial support at this crucial moment?

Or, her artistic task complete, was she looking to enrich herself now that Arthur was gone? Would she take Roquefort's bait?

Suddenly the mountebank uttered a strangled groan. His eyes darted from Wendy to Madame Bluebloodsky to me. Then he dashed out the door.



Chapter XX: Judgment

The mountebank sprinted out the front door of Arcane Wisdom. Sensing that he knew what was coming down at RitualLand, I took off in hot pursuit.

The 782-A pulled up to the stop. Casting a quick look back, the mountebank hopped onto the bus. I was about to follow when I realized I didn't have the correct change.

As I fumbled in my pockets the bus door slammed in my face. The mountebank thumbed his nose through the glass as the 782-A roared away, leaving me gnawing on eco-friendly zero-emission fumes.

As luck would have it, a 782-F rolled up. The driver hopped out and headed for the coffee shop to get a refill before finishing his route.

I couldn't wait. Dashing past, I grabbed his broad-billed driver's hat, leapt up the stairs, and jammed the big vehicle into gear. With a screeching of tires the bus peeled away from the curb, leaving the dumbfounded driver staring.

I don't drive much, but I'll say this for a full-sized bus – it taps into your sense of presence and power. Once the old 782-F got rolling, even SUVs gave me plenty of berth.

I didn't quite have the feel for the big beast yet, so I flipped on the intercom to apologize for what must seem a jerky ride. I was wasting my breath – the passengers were all up in arms about something or other.

My quarry swung left. As I careened around the corner in hot pursuit, the rambunctious riders screamed especially loudly.

They were getting on my nerves. But realizing what a tremendous favor I owed them for their cooperation, I decided to give them the ride of a lifetime. They were on their way to a thrill park, and they had paid their fare. They deserved something more than simply arriving at the end of the line.

Life after all is a journey, not a destination.

As we cleared the megamalls, the 782-A roared away. I gunned the engine and swung into the fast lane, leaning on the horn to let smaller vehicles know that Key City Transit was coming through.

Just when I was getting up a head of steam, someone pulled the cord for a stop. Chagrined, I dropped behind my prey and steered toward the curb.

The 782-A was getting away. Fearing I might lose them as we approached RitualLand, I made a split-second decision to execute a rolling stop. Angling toward the bus kiosk I opened the rear door and jerked the steering wheel to the left to create more angular momentum.

Half dozen people went flying. I wasn't entirely sure that it was precisely the ones who wanted to exit, but the others were shrieking so loudly I couldn't make out what the ejectees were yelling.

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A bit rattled by the commotion, I took a breath and exhaled sharply, regrouping and summoning my elemental security wardens.

Only one stop remained on our route, out beyond the tract homes, out beyond the shopping malls, out beyond the last stoplight – RitualLand.

I taxied onto the access road, looking for a place to stash the big coach, when the 782-A stopped in a handicapped zone right in front of the main gate. As its passengers debarked I roared up behind and jammed on the brakes.

JUDGMENT

Tossing the broad-rimmed hat aside, I jumped down the steps and took off in pursuit of my quarry, whose tie-dyed cape made him easy to spot.

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It was getting near dinner, and RitualLand was a teeming cauldron of frantic activity. Visitors rushed to and fro trying to maximize their remaining entertainment time.

Up ahead, the mountebank cut in line for the Fool's Journey, or as it was popularly known, Tarot Mountain. Tourists grumbled, but with his gaudy attire people seemed to figure he was part of the entertainment staff and grudgingly made way.

My more modest attire consigned me to the end of the queue. As I waited, I sized up Tarot Mountain. The ageing attraction, one of the oldest at RitualLand, was an inverse of Dante's pit of hell – a craggy mountain where visitors ascended an obstacle-strewn path of the Major Arcana, meeting a suitable challenge at each.

Some of the stations were obvious even from ground level. Strength was a carnival hammer-and-bell game, while the Hanged Man featured a trapeze. The Tower loomed over the lower stations like an indomitable sentinel.

At the peak of the mountain rose a diaphanously-clad goddess dancing through a green mandala.

The path zigzagged up the hill like a goat track. To prevent cutting ahead or skipping cards, multi-gendered teenage usherettes armed with tasers and pepper spray patrolled the arcana.

As I reached the turnstile I spied the rainbow-hued mountebank a few levels above. I hadn't spotted Roquefort or Persephone, but given the sequential nature of the Tarot stations I figured it would be hard *not* to stay on their trail.

The Fool portal was a rusticated arch decorated with bas-reliefs of the Major Arcana. A carnival barker called through a megaphone: "Step right up, Fools!"

As I slowed to admire the carvings, a mechanical dog popped out of a fake shrubbery and snapped at my heels. I scooted through the portal and nearly stumbled off a rocky step.

The early stations were easy – invoking Elements and paying homage to spiritual and temporal powers.

The Magician station invited you to approach a small table on which were arrayed a variety of magical tools and implements. "Invoke the Elements," said one of the multi-gendered usherettes.

Some people donned robe and headband and performed elaborate rituals, elevating chalices, wands, pentacles, and blades to call in the sacred elements.

I had no time for such pleasantries. Picking up a wooden match, I named Earth. I waved it and pronounced Air. Striking it and calling Fire, I doused it in a paper cup and acknowledged Water.

“Welcome, Elements,” I concluded.

I hurried through the next several stations, invoking the High Priestess with a two-line chant, the Empress and Emperor by paying a poll tax, and the Hierophant by executing a proper genuflect.

The Chariot took a bit longer, as I had to change a flat before I could get the darn thing rolling. Making my way up the path toward the Lovers I spied a familiar face – Persephone, several levels above at the Temperance station.

I started to call out. But I remembered her less-than-delighted reaction to my attempted intervention at the Chakra Experience a couple of days earlier. Given that she was headed for a clandestine rendezvous with the enigmatic Cornelius Roquefort – pardonez moi, *De Roquefort* – it seemed best not to tip off my presence.

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I hadn’t spotted Roquefort, and had lost sight of the mountebank. I figured my best bet was to keep track of Persephone. Whatever deal was coming down with the Trismegistus Meister deck, she must be part of it.

By the time I finished Strength and turned toward the Hermit, Persephone was completing Temperance. As I scanned the crowd above my station, I caught sight of the gnomish Cornelius De Roquefort, way up at the Tower.

Had he and Persephone seen one another? Did they plan to rendezvous further ahead?

Either way, I needed to close the gap. The Hermit line was barely moving.

The distance between the Hermit and Tower was a half-dozen cards and many twists and turns – but only about twenty feet as the crowd climbed.

The mountainous terrain was mainly for show. It didn’t seem difficult to slip under the fence and bushwhack my way up to a higher level, provided I could elude the omnipresent taser-armed usherettes.

That was a big “if.” Besides the risk of getting zapped, if I got busted for jumping lanes the authorities might ID me as an escaped madman and throw me into a jail so deep that I’d never see daylight again.

JUDGMENT

Worse still would be the stain on my reputation.

I recalled the scandal a few years earlier when High Priest Lucifer “Larry” Hieronymous of the Peoples’ Pagan Party got caught jumping lanes at a labyrinth ritual. Hieronymous compounded his misstep by denying the charges, and when *CosmoPagan* printed photos showing him straddling the fourth and fifth circuits the furor nearly led to his resignation.

So lane-jumping was out.

Maybe there was a shortcut through the Majors? A lot of occult practice seemed like a search for a shortcut – a magical way to make gold, to cure baldness, to know the future. Was I overlooking something about Tarot?

My mind ran through Major Arcana – cards that have been interpreted as a Triumph of Death, a gnostic or alchemical code, a summa of human life, a shamanic quest, the mystic marriage of the Sun and Moon, a didactic game, a mnemonic scaffolding – one writer even proposed using the Majors as a plot-organizing device for a daring and innovative mystery novel.*

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And what about the Fool, which sat outside the set as if it were a particularly privileged – or scorned – character? The one to whom all of the other cards referred. The one who journeyed through the rest of the Majors.

Surely that journey was part of the secret?

It hardly mattered. At my present rate of progress, I was going to be left in the divinatory dust.

I searched my memory for a spell that might be of assistance. With so many low-paid employees, the invisibility spell was out – the minimum wage usherettes would see right through that one.

What about time magic? I knew a spell where you could stretch time so it lasted practically forever – it’s called Visiting the Dentist. But without an appointment I had no chance of working that one on short notice.

I ran through several more that might help me bypass a few stations – the Tyrolean Transport spell, the Syracusan Substitution, even Beaumarchais’ Bluff.

But none seemed likely to work amid the crowds at RitualLand.

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* - The originator of this idea died of Writer’s Block in the late 1890s, and several subsequent writers went mad trying to implement the structure.

Clearly I wasn't going to solve this alone. I needed to call on my magical allies. Maybe I should invoke my namesake, the one who gained admittance to the Celtic pantheon by dint of talent and wit – the one and only Lugh.

Ordinarily I didn't like to go asking special favors from deities, even ones that I paid an annual fee to be named after. It wasn't like I offered all that much in return aside from occasionally keeping alive the memory of their sacred names, which I wasn't even sure I was pronouncing correctly.

But this was one of those moments when I had to look beyond my own personal feelings. If Arthur's final legacy, the Trismegistus Meister Tarot, was to be preserved in anything like its pristine form, urgent measures were needed. Surely the judges at Tarot Court – and at the steely-eyed bar of history – would uphold my defense of necessity.

Invoking Lugh wasn't all that different from calling on any other deity. You honor the First People of the land, ground your energy, cast a sacred circle, invoke the four sacred elements (or five, if you're working post-Starhawkian magic), acknowledge the beloved ancestors and descendants, run the Iron, Pearl, Gold, Chromium, and Platinum Pentacles, chant the sacred names of Mother Earth, pause for a moment to catch your breath, and then launch into one of the standard Lugh invocations.

To save time, I chose the shortest one, where you repeat Lugh's name a few times while twisting your hand clockwise like you're tightening a bolt.

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There was no puff of smoke, no clap of thunder or flash of light.

But the instant I spoke his name I saw the secret – I must become one with Tarot Mountain. Not with this or that card, but as Persephone said, with all the arcana at once.

And Lugh was the key. This wasn't about high magic – it was a down and dirty working of the sort they teach in undergrad custodial courses.

Slipping behind the queue for the Hermit, I snagged a baseball cap from someone's head. Melting into the crowd, I jammed it backward on my head, then grabbed an empty cardboard box and some paper towels from next to a trash can.

I spoke Lugh's name once more. Then I launched into the fray.

"Divination Maintenance," I cried. "Emergency at Station Sixteen!"

The taser-armed usherettes herded the crowd out of my way, and one called out, "Tarot repairperson coming through!"

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Ignoring the excited murmurs around me, I raced through the Hermit, the Wheel, and Justice, closing the gap on my quarry. As I approached Station Twelve, one of the usherettes came running toward me.

“Thank Goddess you’re here! The gears are stuck, and someone is hanging by one foot!”

I pleaded a greater emergency up at Station Sixteen, but the usherette was adamant.

She urged me toward a T-shaped contraption where park visitors took turns dangling as a living arcana. The victim was flailing wildly, and their face was so red and contorted that I couldn’t begin to guess which gender pronoun to use.

“Looks like ‘they’ need a hand,” I said.

Ordering the crowd to stand back, I instructed several of the multi-gendered usherettes to lie down beneath the Hanged Man. I clambered up the pole and tugged at the rigging. It wouldn’t budge.

* * *

Although the problem was simple – a chain had slipped from a large gear wheel – the person’s weight prevented my lifting it back onto the sprocket. Clinging to the crossbeam by one arm, I reached in my pocket and pulled out my trusty WiseWoman utility tool.

Using the WiseWoman’s screwdriver to get some leverage, I slid the hacksaw blade under the chain, filed down a metal tooth, sounded the pitch-pipe to ascertain the precise frequency of the apparatus, then pressed the chromatic oscillator button to send a slightly-flatted F# coursing through the gears.

It worked like a charm. The chain engaged, gears turned, ropes loosened, and the suspended victim crashed headfirst onto the prone usherettes.

A cheer rose from the crowd. The staffers tried to get me to look at couple of other problems while I was there, but I pleaded urgent business ahead.

Racing through Death, Temperance, and the Devil, I arrived breathless at the Tower just as Roquefort moved on toward the Star. Quickly ditching my props, I jumped the line and scaled the medieval turret of the sixteenth station.

* * *

Reaching the top of the faux-stone structure, I paused and drew a breath.

The essence of the Tower challenge was to survive a lightning strike without

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tumbling into a safety net. The lightning was unpredictable, and from the top of the Tower I momentarily enjoyed a sweeping vista of the amusement complex.

In the center, the Descent of Inanna rose as high as Tarot Mountain, while the color-coded tents of the Chakra Experience stretched like gumdrops in the distance. Roller coasters wove through the zones like garlands of steel.

Way down at ground level people flowed around one another like an anarchistic maypole dance.

Suddenly I spotted a familiar figure emerging from the crowd.

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Persephone! From atop the Tower station on Tarot Mountain I spied her far below, hastening toward RitualLand's exit.

What was going on? Had something scared her off? Why was Roquefort still headed uphill?

Had they already transacted their business and parted company? Why not? How long did it take to barter six cards for cash?

Should I follow Persephone? I started down from the Tower.

Kabaam! The lightning bolt crashed into the turret. I clutched at air and did a belly flop into the net.

As I shook myself, I knew my mission. Whatever bargain she had just made, Persephone had written herself out of the drama. Roquefort must now have her cards.

And Roquefort was still climbing Tarot Mountain. Did he have a further rendezvous?

Of course – the mountebank! I'd completely lost track of my tie-dyed friend. He must have wormed his way ahead – maybe by skipping a few lanes – and be waiting to strike a deal with Roquefort.

I searched the paths above for his hippiesque attire. Was it possible he had changed clothes?

Taking care not to be spotted by Roquefort, I shadowed the millionaire through the cosmological challenges of the Star, Moon, and Sun.

As I climbed onto the scales of Ma'at at the Judgment station I spied Roquefort up near the dancing goddess of the World card.

He wasn't alone. As I suspected, he was meeting someone. But it wasn't the

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mountebank.

Instead, Roquefort was engaged in an intense argument with a small person in a blue suit. I craned my neck for a better look and realized who it was – the Man from UPPIC.

* * *

A sting! The UPPIC agent had drawn Roquefort into a trap. Had the millionaire been caught red-handed trying to fence the Trismegistus Meister cards? What about accomplices? Was the mountebank already in custody?

And Persephone – was she fleeing arrest when I spotted her?

I drew an impatient breath as Ma'at's scales bobbed up and down. I was a bit surprised that an ostrich feather outweighed me, but the usherette aspecting the Egyptian goddess of divine balance signaled with winged arms that I was good to go.

Hopping down from the scales, I ducked behind a bunch of tourists approaching the World.

The ultimate station of the Fool's Journey was a sprawling observation plaza looking out over RitualLand. Beyond the security fence, miniature Alpine peaks soared still higher.

In the center stood a magnificent art nouveau statue of the Goddess prancing through a laurel wreath. Arrayed around her were icons of a bull, a lion, an eagle, and a human. Clustered beneath were a snack stand, gift shop, convenience store, and cocktail lounge.

Across from the lounge, painted directly onto the ersatz Alps, shone a big carnival clown face. The gaping grin framed a portal through which a few people were passing.

What was a clown face doing on Tarot Mountain? Was it the Joker from a playing card deck? The entrance to a new-age shopping mall? Surely it wasn't one of the Legendary Lost Arcana of the Bohemian Rosicrucians?

I made a mental memo to ask later when I visited the cocktail lounge. For now I had my hands full. Taking up a position under the laurel wreath I peeked around to see if the UPPIC agent was arresting Roquefort.

Sure enough, the agent reached out toward the tycoon. Craning my neck, I saw what he was holding – not handcuffs, but a small pouch exactly the size of a Tarot deck!

* * *

Of course – how naïve I'd been! Roquefort was bargaining with the UPPIC agent! Was I witnessing a bribe? A negotiation? A pre-arranged transaction?

Roquefort pointed to the pouch. The UPPIC agent pulled it back. The two men exchanged agitated words.

So Roquefort was acquiring the Trismegistus Meister Tarot! He must already have the six cards from Persephone. Once he reassembled the entire deck, did he plan to publish it as promised? Sell it to a collector for an obscene profit? Place it in a private vault and savor being the only person ever to read from it?

And the UPPIC agent – what was he doing? Was he actually selling the deck to a scoundrel like Roquefort? Was it all about cold cash?

I slipped through a throng of tourists to get a closer look. As Roquefort reached for the pouch, he nervously glanced around.

Our eyes met. With a shock of recognition Roquefort jerked his hand back, blurted something to the UPPIC agent, and took off running.

I jumped from behind the touristic pack and started after the millionaire, who was making a beeline toward the clown portal.

The agent whirled and saw me. "You fool!" he shouted. "You've ruined everything!"

I jerked to a stop. Was it really a sting?

Had I just spoiled the agent's chance to apprehend the mastermind behind the suppression of Arthur's deck?

Without another word, the UPPIC agent, still clutching the pouch, took off in the opposite direction.

My eyes shot back and forth. Forget Roquefort. Forget the money.

Follow that pouch!

* * *

The multi-gendered usherettes, ubiquitous at lower stations, were nowhere to be seen. Apparently management was vigilant about lane-jumping, but never suspected that anyone would try to go beyond the World.

Taking a quick look around, the UPPIC agent vaulted over a security fence and began his ascent of the highest peak of Tarot Mountain. A cluster of people smoking weed jumped up and scampered away.

Did the agent know a back exit? I couldn't let him out of sight. Checking for

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taser-armed usherettes, I hopped the fence and scurried after him.

Off the marked paths the artificial summit had a low-budget Seussian quality that didn't inspire confidence. Chipped paper maché revealed bare chicken-wire. I struggled to keep my footing. The agent was doing no better.

"Get away from me!" he cried as he stretched across a precipice. "What are you doing out of jail? You've done nothing but get in the way!"

"Forget it! I'm not letting you abscond with Arthur's deck. Those cards are contraband – Perkins stole them when he killed Arthur!"

"What?" The agent stopped atop a snow capped pinnacle and gave a haughty laugh. "Mr. Perkins didn't kill Arthur!"

I paused in my pursuit. "Huh? Then who did?"

"No one." His voice was almost disdainful. "Arthur fell and hit his head."

"He fell? How do you know?"

"I was there."

* * *

"You were there? You killed Arthur?"

"It was an accident!"

"Why were you even there?"

The UPPIC agent sucked in a breath. "I followed him when he left his shop that last night and waited outside Happy Endings until he finished his business there."

"You accosted him outside Happy Endings at two in the morning?"

He snorted. "When else? It was my last chance to prevent publication of his Tarot deck. I don't know how many times I tried to persuade him that he should wait and publish it near the end of what should have been a much longer life. But would he listen?"

"You asked Arthur not to publish his deck?" I laughed rudely. "I bet that went down well!"

"Arthur could be a real mule," he said with a dry laugh. "He just wouldn't listen to reason. He tried to walk away. That's when I grabbed his arm. That's all – I swear it!"

"Why were you making such a big deal? Really, it's just a Tarot deck."

The agent's lips tightened. "It's counter to the interests of the Universal

Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council to allow publication of a divination deck which would so severely disrupt the harmony of Oracle Street.”

“By revealing initiatory secrets?”

“Initiatory secrets? Who cares about initiations? We’re talking disruption of the metaphysical economy! Surely you heard others talking – the new deck would cut down on professional readings, hurt sales of other cards, reduce the income of competing shops – it would interrupt the flow of metaphysical commerce in an entirely unacceptable way.”

“Unacceptable?”

He scowled and shook his head like a disappointed teacher. “Oracle Street is far too important to the well-being of international Pagandom for UPPIC to stand by and watch one of our most lucrative bases of operation undermined by the petty ambitions of one person. Honestly, how can you expect society to function?”

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I sized up the agent. “You colluded in the death of one of modern magic’s greatest minds in the name of economic efficiency?”

He mulled the idea from his perch atop a precarious peak. “I suppose you could see it that way. I would file it under the ‘general good of humanity’ clause.”

“I can’t believe what you’re saying. You killed a man – excuse me, you grabbed the coat of a man outside a bar at two in the morning – because his divination deck might disrupt the local economy?”

He looked at me as if I had finally grasped his key point. “Yes, that’s correct. I tried to prevail upon him, but he refused to discuss the topic any further. I grabbed his coat to stop him. He jerked away, fell, and hit his head.”

“And he died right there?”

The agent was silent for a long moment. “So it seems. Of course I couldn’t risk being seen, so I got as far away as possible.”

“What? You might have saved his life! He didn’t die immediately,” I said, recalling the earliest news photos. “He had at least enough time to twist his body into the Magician pose.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Arthur’s pose when he died – it was the Magician.”

“The Magician?” He laughed incredulously. “Honestly, the things people

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imagine they see in Tarot! He didn't contort his body into any poses. He was unconscious!"

I weighed his alibi. "He was unconscious and you deserted him?"

"I didn't know he would die! I called an ambulance from a pay phone and they said it had already been reported. Next thing I heard, Arthur was dead."

"You killed Arthur," I said slowly.

"I didn't 'kill' him," he snapped. "I grabbed his coat and he slipped."

"Then why did you try to blame me?"

"I didn't plan on that. I assumed the civil authorities would call it an accident. I even planned to 'investigate' the situation myself and issue a report. But the media jumped all over it. We had to give them something, so Mr. Perkins gave a vague description of you."

"Perkins? I knew he was ratting me out!"

"It wasn't personal," the agent said dismissively. "You were just convenient. Then when Mr. Perkins had to be eliminated you made a perfect double murder suspect."

I shook my head. "Wait – you 'eliminated' Perkins?"

"Yes," the agent said sadly, as one might speak of losing a favorite umbrella. "I hated to see him go. He owed us a few 'favors' after we caught him smuggling counterfeit talismans."

"Favors?"

"Yes. It was Mr. Perkins who retrieved the master cards – most of them, anyway – from Arcane Wisdom that night after Arthur died. Naturally I couldn't go near the store. So I told him to get down there and find the paintings."

"You've had them all along?"

"No, Mr. Perkins delayed turning them over until our final encounter. I have reason to suspect he was scheming to publish the deck and anoint himself heir to Arthur's crown."

I felt a twinge of appreciation that the UPPIC agent had thwarted Perkins' devious ambitions. "Why didn't you just tell him to stop? Did you have to kill him?"

"He was getting grandiose visions. He was setting up media interviews, which is the last thing we need right now. Besides, Mr. Perkins was the only person

who knew that I was aware of Arthur's death before the next morning. He had to be eliminated, so to speak."

"And you framed me," I said angrily.

"Yes," he said with a wry laugh. "Thanks to the séance."

* * *

"You were at the séance?"

"I was the one knocking on the pipes!"

I shivered like I was seeing a ghost. "That was you? You were in cahoots with Madame Bluebloodsky?"

"Oh, no – she had nothing to do with it." He beamed with pride. "I fooled the whole bunch of them."

"What were you doing at Arcane Wisdom?"

"After Mr. Perkins surrendered most of the paintings, I guessed that the six missing cards were still somewhere at the store. I had just started to search when you and the others showed up, so I hid in the maintenance closet."

"And drummed on the pipes," I said, recalling his percussive displays. "Not bad chops."

The agent nodded. "Thanks, I used to play a bit. By the time I finished, Madame Bluebloodsky and half of Oracle Street were convinced you're a dangerous madman."

"They still think that," I muttered.

"And they will continue to do so," he said as if finalizing an administrative report. "This is all working out quite well!"

"You think so?" I replied as coolly as I could. "Don't you think anyone will ever investigate these deaths?"

"Of course they will. In fact, I intend to head up the investigation myself. I want it done right!"

I nodded grimly. "I see. So I'm taking the fall?"

"Two people are dead. We have to blame someone. You will make a most suitable sacrifice."

"Not when I reveal what I know!"

He laughed coldly. "Right – they're going to believe an insane serial killer when he tries to fix the blame on a special agent of the Universal Pan-Pagan

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Interfaith Council? And your escape from jail proves you must be guilty.”

I drew a breath, realizing the full weight of my predicament. I pictured my dear old mother, distraught at my plight even as she secretly congratulated herself for prophesying that this was exactly the sort of end I would come to in the all-too-likely event that I failed to heed her parental admonitions.

“Thanks a lot,” I muttered to the agent.

“No problem,” he said. “And don’t worry, we’ll take a better mugshot. That drawing on the Wanted poster made you look awful!”

* * *

Suddenly, as if our business was complete, the agent began scaling down the faux mountain toward the World plaza.

My first impulse was to follow. But was I being a fool?

Maybe I should escape while I had the chance. If I could elude the taser-armed usherettes, I might slip down to the docks under cover of fog and book passage for Santiago, where I could live out my life in utter obscurity.

But I was obscure enough already. I owed it to my cutting-edge materialist paradigm to clear my name and prepare for the spotlight of esoteric eminence that would one day become my birthright.

Destiny demanded that I stay and fight for justice.

The UPPIC agent had the Trismegistus Meister paintings. And possession of those artworks looked like my best chance to clear up the affair without undergoing dunking chairs or thumb screws.

* * *

If I could get the right angle, I might be able to take the guy out with a crosscut tackle. After how he’d treated me, I wouldn’t mind “accidentally” knocking him for a loop.

But really, I wasn’t aiming to get tough. That wasn’t my way.

In fact, my devotional practice dictated that I never unnecessarily inflict actual serious physical damage on another human being unless the situation strictly called for it.

The tradition of spiritual nonviolence always fascinated me. Back before the Great Return, I took a Comparative Religions laboratory section called Experimental Christianity where we tried to put Jesus’s teachings into practice.

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One week we walked around campus inviting people to slap us on the cheek. When they did, we'd turn the other cheek and offer it.

I did okay up to a point, but I cost myself an A when I knocked down this fraternity guy after he slapped me the second time.

I disputed the grade – after all, Jesus never specifically said what you were supposed to do when someone struck your second cheek.

But my professor insisted that a pacifist response was implicit in the narrative, and marked me down for faulty moral reasoning.

* * *

Huffing for air, the agent and I clambered across peaks and valleys. As I crested a summit and gazed downward, my stomach lurched.

Twenty feet below, folks who had completed the Fool's Journey milled around the World statue, sipping drinks and buying Major Arcana souvenirs. Far down at ground level, park visitors scurried from one attraction to another.

The UPPIC agent clawed his way around a snow cap. I had to slow him down. Letting go of a pinnacle, I skidded down a chute and landed just behind him.

"You're trapped," I gasped as I staggered to my feet. "Give up!"

His eyes darted around. "I'm warning you – get out of my way!"

"Not until I get those cards." I took a step forward, ready to tackle him if he tried to get past. "You were trying to sell Arthur's deck to Roquefort!"

He sneered. "Are you serious? No way was I giving the cards to De Roquefort. All I wanted from him was to lure Persephone to RitualLand so I could bargain for the cards she had."

"You were holding her in jail – why didn't you do it then?"

"I tried. She wouldn't even admit that she had the missing cards. I let her go hoping she might turn them over to De Roquefort. And it almost worked, until she got cold feet."

I remembered seeing Persephone fleeing RitualLand. "She probably got cold feet when she saw you," I said pointedly. "Don't blame that one on me."

"Maybe," he said sharply. "But it was *you* who scared off De Roquefort. He might still have gotten the cards from Persephone if you hadn't butted in."

I laughed as I recalled the millionaire's frightened eyes when he spotted me. "I guess old Roquefort got cold feet, too," I said. "And yours are going to get

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mighty hot if you don't give up those cards! If I yell that you jumped lanes, usherettes with tasers and pepper spray will converge to apprehend you."

He glared at me. His hand shot into his jacket. I jumped back, fearing the worst.

Instead of a gun he produced the little pouch. Quickly he unlaced the drawstring.

"Arthur's deck!" I cried.

"Get back," he hissed as he drew the cards from the pouch. "Get back or you'll never see these together again!"

I froze. "Hold on, hold on. I was just kidding. We can work something out."

"So now you want to bargain?" He dangled from the craggy plaster rocks, waving the precious miniature paintings in the air. "This deck represents nothing but trouble. I could be rid of it in an instant!"

I gauged the distance. If I aimed just right I might knock him, cards and all, into a gutter-like valley. But if I missed he'd go flying and the cards might be lost forever.

Before I could decide, he released his grip and skidded down toward the World plaza.

I dove after. We landed in a tumble outside the plaza fence. I grabbed for the UPPIC agent. He dodged my grasp and staggered across the uneven terrain.

Suddenly he lost his balance. His arms windmilled. As he grabbed for a plaster peak he let loose the cards. The Trismegistus Meister Tarot flew into the air.

"No!"



Chapter XXI: World

"No!" The UPPIC agent and I yelled in perfect unison.

Sadly, the cards did not heed our invocation. The pack tumbled through the air. Then the wind gusted and the deck virtually exploded. Glinting in the sunlight, the irreplaceable paintings sailed past the World platform and fluttered Earthward.

A wave of vertigo swept me as the precious artworks drifted toward the revelers far below. I clutched a paper maché peak, sick at heart over my ineptitude.

If I had I left well enough alone, the deck would still be intact, even if in the UPPIC agent's duplicitous hands. Now it was scattered to the four directions. Or five, counting below.

Down at ground level, people began to notice the cards. Pandemonium broke out.

Trampling the rules and etiquette of RitualLand, people cut lines and leapt over barricades in pursuit of the cards. Shrieks of pain filled the air as they kicked, scratched, and gouged to gain the slightest advantage. Grown men swatted children aside and grabbed the colored cards, thrusting their prizes triumphantly in the air.

I was incredulous. How could everyone realize the value of the cards? Had the media reported that the missing deck was at RitualLand? Was everyone hoping to cash in?

Once people had a card, though, they stood dumbly as if awaiting further instructions. I realized that no one had any idea what the cards might be good for. It was enough that they fallen from the pinnacle of the Fool's Journey, that they manifested from on high.

In the finest Tarot tradition, everyone seemed to trust that the cards' ultimate meaning remained to be revealed.

* * *

How I was going to engineer this ultimate revelation, I wasn't sure. I just knew I needed to get off Tarot Mountain and down to where the cards were.

Another wave of vertigo swept over me as I searched for the quickest route to ground level. Lacking a parachute, jumping was out. Running backward through the 21 stations would take too long.

Was there a quicker way? I'd seen dozens, even hundreds of people ascend the Fool's Journey. Yet I hadn't noticed anyone coming down. They couldn't all be at the cocktail lounge.

Suddenly I realized why there was a clown portal at the World station. What more perfect icon for an amusement park?

And what more perfect climax to Tarot Mountain – the end of the Fool's Journey wasn't the World – it was the Fool!

The Fool – the ouroboros, the snake swallowing its tail – the beginning and end, the alpha and omega.

Was this the key to the meaning of Tarot?

In any event it looked like the solution to my immediate challenge.

Scrambling across the World platform toward the big clown face, I called apologies as I elbowed people aside. Over my shoulder I saw a squad of taser-

armed usherettes closing in on the UPPIC agent, who sat dazed outside the fence.

I dashed through the Fool portal. If I was looking for a shortcut, I wasn't disappointed. Two steps in, the floor took a sharp dive. I landed on my backside and plummeted down a super slide.

Enveloped in the darkness of Tarot Mountain, accompanied only by the terrified screams of my fellow celebrants, I murmured a prayer to a host of underworld potentates: Hades, Hecate, Osiris, Cerridwen, Batman...

A blast of fresh air greeted me as I plunged from the bottom of the slide and landed in a pit of bouncy balls. Horns blasted, bells chimed, and lights flashed like a Las Vegas convention: "Welcome Fools!"

While others laughed hysterically and flung bouncy balls, I pushed through the melee and sprinted out to the plaza where the master paintings had just fluttered down like divinatory confetti.

Frantically I pleaded with people to return the cards. They looked at me like I was insane and clutched their booty tighter.

A guy in a Hawaiian shirt held the Nine of Cups in one hand while he sipped a soda from the other. I almost snatched the card from him. But I'd never get them all back that way.

Yet he gave me an inspiration. Leaping over a barrier, I raced to a security kiosk, shoved past the startled guard, and grabbed the microphone.

"Attention RitualLand revelers! Announcing an Inner Light Special! For the next ten minutes only, redeem your special Tarot coupons for a free soft drink!"

The crowd surged toward the refreshment booth. The guard recovered, shoved me away from the microphone, and cleared his throat sharply: "Offer valid only with purchase of Deluxe Odinburger or Freya Fries," he said in a strict voice. "RitualLand employees and their families not eligible. Some restrictions may apply."

The soda jerks worked at breakneck speed trying to keep up with demand. I slipped in and collected people's cards. "Get your free soft drink, right here!"

Ten minutes later I had collected 71 of the precious paintings. Assuming Persephone still had six, only a single card was missing.

Of course, I was on the hook for 71 soft drinks, but it was a small price to pay for being part of occult history. Considering Giordano Bruno got burned at the stake for championing the esoteric artes, I was getting off pretty easy.

WORLD

Guards in riot gear surrounded the security kiosk, ruling out another announcement. I held a soft drink aloft for another several minutes to indicate the special offer was still in effect. But no one stepped up. One card was lost.

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Back on Oracle Street, I tried to phone Persephone, but it just rang. I hid the master paintings in a cabinet at Arcane Wisdom, then headed for my digs at the Forester's Cottage.

Despite my exhaustion I stayed up most of the night regaling my goldfish with my escapades as I made them dinner and scrubbed their bowl.

The next morning I woke determined to leave for Rome.

My dreams of a quiet return to Key City lay shattered. Even if the charges were dropped, the tragedy had rendered me a local curiosity. Everyone would want my autograph, the media would pester me for interviews – never again would I enjoy the peaceful anonymity I so treasured.

I could resume my wanderjahre, but I had no desire to travel. I wanted a place to call home.

Why not the Eternal City? I could wire ahead and request housing at the Rome lodge of the Bristling Broom. Legacies or no, the ancient traditions of the custodians' guild virtually required that they accommodate me.

I pictured myself strolling the seven hills, offering up burnt sacrifices in Olympian temples, and immersing myself in the world of the Great Return even as I began to lay the groundwork for launching my own bold and innovative spiritual organization, the Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance.

* * *

I was a bit bedraggled when I arrived at Arcane Wisdom just before noon. Again I tried Persephone, but the phone just rang.

As I hung up, Johanna came through the back door.

"Got to go through the bills," she said. "And some of the others are coming by to talk about Arthur's memorial. You should stick around."

"Thanks," I said noncommittally. Should I tell her that I had the cards? I was dying to tell someone. Maybe she knew where Persephone was.

No – I still wasn't sure of Johanna's – or anyone's – loyalties. Best not to confide in anyone until I spoke first to Persephone.

I walked to the front, where decks and vestments and magical merchandise were still scattered around the shop. Picking up a wicker basket I began tossing in cards, figuring I could sort and repackage them later. I'd probably get a few in the wrong boxes, but that would just add to the mystery.

Johanna came into the front and picked up some robes. "I have a favor to ask," she said. "I still want to go to Rome, at least for a few weeks. If we try to keep the store going, it may be a while before I get another vacation. Will you hold things down for a month?"

"You mean run the shop?"

"Right – make sure the door is unlocked, and if people want to buy something, take their money. Helena and the other readers will do the rest."

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined myself the manager of an esoteric shop! My dear old mother would be so proud.

A happy thought crossed my mind. Of course it would never occur to me to take advantage of Arthur's demise to foist my creative endeavors on his store. Yet as manager pro tem I would be in a prime position to recommend that Arcane Wisdom carry my magnum opus.

Maybe Johanna would even dedicate the front window if I xeroxed the covers onto different colors!

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"Sure," I said. "I'd be happy to help."

"Great!" As she turned to the bills, I wondered again about confiding in her. If not my fellow Bristling Broom initiate, whom could I trust?

"Say," I said, "do you know if Persephone is coming by?"

"I'm not sure," Johanna said. "Wendy left her a message. Why?"

"I need to talk with her about the Trismegistus Meister deck – or at least the cards I have."

Johanna looked at me incredulously. "You have the cards?"

"Most of them," I said, pointing toward the cabinet where I'd hidden them. "I think Persephone has six. And one is missing."

I started to tell her about pursuing the cards up Tarot Mountain. But before I could delineate my trip through the Major Arcana, let alone explain how it came to pass that the priceless master paintings had tumbled from atop the Fool's Journey and were nearly lost to posterity, Wendy Womansdaughter, Alabaster Crockley, Madame Bluebloodsky, and Ani Vee came through the

front door.

"Did you hear?" Wendy announced. "They arrested an agent from the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council and charged him with killing Mr. Perkins and being involved in Arthur's death! It was on the news this morning. Apparently he was arrested for jumping lanes at RitualLand, and before they finished interrogating him he confessed to everything!"

* * *

Now that I was no longer officially a criminal lunatic, Wendy seemed downright happy to see me, giving me a warm hug.

Alabaster Crockley's eyes twinkled as he nodded in my direction. Was it the faery lights, or had my recent notoriety gained his respect?

Madame B greeted me by name, and even Ani Vee gave a less melancholy look than usual.

"Are we expecting Dr. Papyrus?" asked Wendy.

"No," said Crockley. "He's resting."

Wendy nodded. "So he's home from the hospital?"

"Yes," Crockley said. "They held him overnight for observation, but there was no sign of a heart attack. I'll stop by and check on him later."

So that was the great conspiracy! The infamous Alabaster Crockley had apparently been guilty of accompanying his ageing mentor to the hospital. When I'd spied him at the Visconti hotel a couple of days earlier, he was probably delivering a care package to the honored recluse. Some conspirator!

Wendy turned to Madame Bluebloodsky. "I've created a new lavender extract – would you like to try it?"

Madame B nodded silently. She closed her eyes and held out her wrist.

"No, you don't have to mainline it," Wendy said, then added in a lower voice. "You really should give those veins a bit of a rest!"

Wendy reached in her purse and produced a small, unmarked envelope and a makeup mirror. Tearing open the envelope, she poured a fine purplish powder onto the mirror and used a silver athame to shape it into two lines.

From a little leather pouch she extracted a thin glass tube. She handed it to Madame Bluebloodsky. "Start with one nostril. You can always do more."

Madame B nodded silently, her eyes fixed on the powder. She bent over the mirror and touched the tube to the lavender extract. With a most

unaristocratic snort she inhaled most of the powder into her left nostril.

She sat upright, eyes shut. Touching a finger to her nostril she held the pose as if receiving a divine communication. Then she exhaled slowly, her face melting into a blissful smile.

Wendy nodded knowingly. Alabaster Crockley leaned over and indicated that he, too, would like to sample the new extract. Wendy got out a bigger envelope and emptied it.

They offered me a line, but until my legal affairs were wrapped up I wanted to keep my mind unclouded by herbal concoctions.

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Now that the UPPIC agent had owned up to his misdeeds, I figured my charges would be dropped – ideally without dunking chairs or hot irons.

But I knew I might still face a round of plea bargaining. I imagined my encounter with the judge.

“Your honor,” I would say, “I didn’t kill anyone, wheretofore I hereby and thereafter move to have the charges quashed.”

“Very well,” the judge replies. “Let’s get rid of those. What do you say to pleading guilty to lesser charges of hijacking a bus, kidnapping the passengers, reckless endangerment of the public, and parking in a handicapped zone?”

My spirits sag. “Really?”

“In addition,” she continues, “we have video footage showing you jumping lanes at Tarot Mountain, impersonating a RitualLand repairperson, and obstructing a UPPIC agent in the performance of their duty.”

“Wait a minute,” I argue, “that agent killed at least one person, was complicit in a second death, and above all is guilty of attempting to suppress the most important new divination deck of our generation! And I’m in trouble for obstructing their performance?”

The judge’s eyelids droop. “I don’t make the laws, young man,” she sighs. “I just hand down the sentences. How do you plead?”

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I shook my head sharply. Stay in the moment, I thought. I walked over to the counter and spritzed my aura with a de-lavenderizing spray.

As I rejoined the others, Persephone stepped through the front door. “Hi, everybody,” she said in a dejected tone.

Wendy looked worried. "What's wrong?"

Persephone's lips curled into a scowl. "The deal fell through," she said. "I went to meet Cornelius, who told me that he had the deck. Then I spotted the UPPIC agent, and I knew something was wrong. I should have stayed and demanded to know what was going on. But I was afraid they'd arrest me and confiscate the six cards I had." She looked sadly around. "Now I have no idea where the paintings are."

Johanna's face was wide with excitement. "We have them!"

Johanna probably planned to defer to me to explain how, at great personal sacrifice of my valuable time and at the risk of being made scapegoat for the entire affair, I had managed to recover and reassemble almost all of the irreplaceable master paintings.

But before my role could be acknowledged, Persephone cried: "You have the cards?"

"Right here," Johanna said, pointing toward the cabinet.

As the others gaped, I went over and retrieved the cards. "It's almost all of them," I said, handing them to Persephone.

Her face lit up. "That's fantastic! So we have them all together again!"

"Most of them," I put in. "What about the six you had?"

"They're right here," she said. We looked at her expectantly.

"No, right here at the store," she said, starting toward the maintenance closet. "After I left RitualLand, I came back and hid them under the spare paper towels. I figured if something happened to me, Johanna would eventually run across them. And it's the last place a thief would look."

Clever, I thought. Unless the thief was a custodian who decided to restock the paper towels while they were robbing the store.

She returned with the six cards. "I can't believe we got them all back. Has anyone counted them?"

"Yes," I said. "Only one is missing."

Persephone picked up the paintings and began to go through them, pausing now and then to wipe off a smudge. As she counted, she handed each one to Johanna. Johanna studied the cards, then passed them around to the others, who bent close and admired the designs.

"The Fool is missing," Persephone finally announced. "I guess I'll have to repaint it."

She turned to Johanna. "Maybe I'll ask the mountebank to pose. That'll give him something to brag about. I think that's all he really wants. His Tutti Taroti probably did give Arthur a few ideas."

I remembered my suspicions that the tie-dyed herbal peddler had trashed the store and rifled the cash register a couple of days before.

"Did you see the mountebank at RitualLand?" I interjected. "He went there trying to find you."

Persephone gave a humorless laugh. "Yeah, he followed me when I left, pestering me all the way to my car. He's always after something."

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The front door opened and Cornelius De Roquefort sidled in. Spying Persephone, he seemed to shrink even smaller.

"I'm so sorry, young lady," he pleaded with apparent sincerity. "I never meant to deceive you. I thought I was doing the right thing in helping the agent get all of the cards back together."

"Yeah," Persephone said drily. "Next time, just tell me what's going on instead of trying to trick me, okay?"

Roquefort mumbled something that seemed to satisfy Persephone, who turned back to the cards. "I'll paint the new Fool card tomorrow, and we can have the deck to the printer by the weekend. Assuming," she said, turning to face Roquefort, "that we still have funding."

"Of course, of course." The millionaire shifted uncomfortably. "However, perhaps we could, well, perhaps we could discuss, you know," he stammered. "Perhaps we could hold off for just a short while before publishing. To let the dust settle, so to speak."

Persephone shook her head sharply. "Now is the moment. However sad, Arthur's name is in the news. What better time to release the deck?"

Roquefort's feet shuffled. "I just thought that, well, with respect to Arthur..."

"Arthur would want it on sale immediately," Johanna interjected. "Or sooner."

"I agree," Wendy said. "The Wiccan Wonderland would certainly like to have the Trismegistus Meister deck for Samhain season."

Alabaster Crockley cleared his throat. "The Twisted Talisman would like to carry it as well," he said. "At least until my Ugrundian Petroglyphic deck is complete."

"Very well," Roquefort said. "However, I request that my name be removed as 'Presenter' of the deck. Persephone's name belongs on the front of the box."

Now I'd heard everything. Was Roquefort really that modest? Or was he taking advantage of Arthur's passing to wriggle out of the spotlight?

Either way, the outcome seemed to please Persephone, who promised to redesign the box that evening. "We need to get it to the printer right away if we want it ready for Samhain," she said.

The others seconded her resolve.

I smiled, delighted to see the holiday spirit bringing Oracle Street together. Maybe the sad events of the past few days would sow the seeds of a new era of peace, love, and understanding. Old outrages and indignities would be forgotten, and by-gones would truly be by-gones.

* * *

Half of the art of memory is knowing which parts to forget. If every sense-experience, passing thought, and stray emotion became embedded in our already over-stuffed craniums, our brains would surely explode.

Imagine being the first people to have memories – what a thrill it must have been! But disorienting, too. Life would seem like one continual *déjà vu* until you got a handle on the new plaything.

When the Urgrundians, most ancient and revered of our hypothetical ancestors, first invented memory, they naturally tended to overdo it. They didn't need an art of memory, an *ars memorativa* – they clung to every fleeting sensation or thought. People would forever be recalling all the little details of their day and endlessly rehashing them just for the sheer exhilaration of remembering.

On the down side, insults festered endlessly, feuds might last forever, and life's petty vexations threatened to overwhelm the most stoic of souls.

Only by painful experience did the Urgrundians learn the necessity of forgetting most of what passed through their protohistoric noggins.

In short, they had to invent the *ars oblivata*.

* * *

The others circled to plan Arthur's memorial, but I was too restless. I told them I would get there early and set up chairs, then went in the back room to sweep up.

Near the doorway, the various cards from Arthur's final spread were still scrambled over the tabletop. At some point I would have to clean them up.

Maybe I could recreate the spread and lacquer it onto the tabletop as a

memento of Arthur's final vision for Oracle Street. Someday it might wind up in the Tarot Museum!

When the meeting ended, I returned to the main room. Persephone, Crockley, and Roquefort left, and Madame Bluebloodsky stepped into the back to use the powder room.

Wendy turned to Johanna. "What's next for the store?"

Johanna drew a deep breath. "I'm not sure. Cornelius De Roquefort is talking about buying the shop. Maybe I'll manage it for him."

"As part of Headstone?" I blurted.

"No, more like an independent boutique," Johanna said, then lowered her voice. "He's probably doing it so Helena has a place to do readings."

"She can read at my store," Wendy said. "She doesn't need to cater to Cornelius. But I can't imagine Oracle Street without Arcane Wisdom."

"Me, either," said Johanna. "I'd like to see the shop owned by the community and run by the people who work here. But I don't know where we'd get the capital."

Wendy nodded. "We can do some magic around it," she said. "You never know what new possibilities might turn up."

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Their words reminded me of Arthur's strange Tarot spread. "Remember your comment about Arthur's reading," I said to Johanna, "the part about opening to new possibilities?"

"Right," Johanna said thoughtfully, then looked at Wendy. "It was a card from Motherpeace. Arthur talked about how Motherpeace – and your work – are openings to the future."

Wendy's jaw dropped. "Well, I never!"

"He meant your experimental approach. Bringing Tarot into the present moment and not clinging to its past."

Wendy laughed and shook her head. But Madame Bluebloodsky, who had rejoined us, looked disconcerted. "Are you speaking of the strange layout in the back room?"

Johanna looked at her curiously. "Yes – the one from the various decks. Arthur left it on the workbench, but someone scrambled the cards."

"Oh, my," said Madame B with a pained look on her face. "I'm afraid that I was

so upset at seeing all of those decks that I did it without thinking. I couldn't bear the idea that Arthur might be remembered that way." She shook her head. "Not that way."

The others nodded. Although I was a bit shocked at such flagrant disregard for divinatory ethics, I appreciated her concern for Arthur A. Arthur's postmortem reputation.

As I pictured again the weird multi-deck *mélange*, I suddenly grasped the meaning of the fast food box with the demented mole. It was more than Perkins. It was more than the UPPIC agent and his ilk.

It represented, as Johanna put it, a "tendency" or a type – namely, those myopic social authorities whose concern for propriety and business-as-usual threatened to impede the evolution of Tarot and all of magic.

In Arthur's final reading, these retrograde forces were superseded by the twin spirits of intuition and experiment. The door was open to the future.

* * *

As they prepared to leave, Wendy invited me to stop by the Wiccan Wonderland if I had any questions or complications with getting the Trismegistus Meister Tarot printed. "In a moment of tragedy, we all need to pull together."

"Thanks," I said. "It's great to see Oracle Street rallying to get Arthur's deck produced. I'm glad people aren't holding back for fear it might cut into their business."

"I'm not worried," Wendy replied. "The new deck will stir up more interest in Tarot, and that helps all of us. Sure, people can do their own readings, but they also want a feeling of connection, of dialog. They want a sense that they are co-creating the meanings, that someone is listening and tuning in to their situation."

I reflected. "I guess that's what keeps Happy Endings in business," I said.

"That's what keeps us all in business," said Wendy.



Epilog: The Fool

We bid adiós. Johanna said she would check in before she left for Rome, and I assured her I would be on the job in the interim.

The door closed. For a moment I savored the silence, and could almost hear my heart beat.

With a deep breath I gave thanks for Arcane Wisdom and the land on which it stood, cast a circle using the Parametric Pentatonic method, acknowledged the sacred elements, welcomed several deities who frequented the shop, invoked the spirit of diviners past, present, and future – then realized I had forgotten to begin by doing a personal grounding.

Recognizing that I was a bit rattled from the commotion of the past few days,

THE FOOL

I decided to wait and do the magical stuff later.

For now, I popped open a can of Molten Core, picked up a broom, and got down to the task at hand.

The bristles skimmed over the old wooden floor, and my scattered energy began to gather in my center. Soon I found myself humming a chant to Custodia, ancient Mediterranean goddess of good housekeeping.

As the shop came back into a semblance of order, the outlines of Volumes Two and Three of my magnum opus took on a newfound clarity, as if my immersion in the Major Arcana had lent a fresh lucidity to my ever-evolving magical materialist theories.

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By dinnertime Arcane Wisdom was looking presentable for the first time in a week. I gathered up the last few trinkets and Tarot cards from the corners of the now-spiffy shop.

I was about to declare victory when a final card caught my eye.

Tucked behind a leg of Madame Bluebloodsky's usual table, I wasn't sure if it had been there a day or a year.

I reached for the face-down card, took a breath, and flipped it over – the Three of Discs from the classic Waite-Smith deck.

Perfect!

The card showed a Medieval mason putting the finishing touches on the arches of a temple. Sure, I'd probably never build a temple. But maybe in Rome I'd find a job tidying one up.

How fitting that the Three of Discs would be the final card I picked up.

Of course, as Johanna pointed out, most of the other 78 cards might have been equally perfect.

That seemed like a gift of Tarot – no matter what card you drew, it opened a window into the magic of your soul.

I could see why our ancestors decided, in their far-seeing wisdom, to call it "divination" – it's a way of seeing the divine within ourselves.

And life deals a never-ending divinatory spread. Or maybe it was a never-ending spiral of Fool's Journeys – from the cradle my dear old mother

distractedly rocked to the grave I would enter on the day I finished off the proverbial final tube of toothpaste....

Each step of my personal Fool's Journey had, for better and worse, made me what I was.

And soon I would set off on the grandest journey of all – to Rome, where I would bask in the glory of completing my magnum opus while turning my attention to the formidable task of preparing my Collected Works, which I had scarcely even begun to write.

Of course I'd have to find a job – surely the Bristling Broom would turn up something. In a place where half of the buildings are 2000 years old, things probably required a good bit of maintenance.

In my spare time I would undertake the inception of my bold new participatory Pagan tradition, the Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance, which would gain added luster by being launched from the Eternal City.

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I was daydreaming about the commencement ceremonies for NROSSWOR when the front door of Arcane Wisdom burst open. In rushed several well-groomed people, one carrying a video camera on her shoulder.

The camera swept around the just-cleaned shop, then landed on a man in a trench coat who spoke into a big Channel 13 microphone.

"This is Hermes Mercurius from Pagan News Network. We're here today in Key City, at the magic shop of tragically deceased Tarot expert Arthur A. Arthur. Tell us, sir," he said, thrusting the microphone in my face. "Did you know Mr. Arthur?"

Did I know Arthur?

I took a deep breath and gazed around, picturing Arthur puttering and muttering through the store, needling the others on Oracle Street, puncturing his adversaries' pet theories, dazzling people with his interpretations even as he challenged them to read for themselves.

I called to mind his strange multi-deck Tarot spread – particularly the Death card to honor changes, and Justice to indicate his wish for all to be well on Oracle Street.

Notwithstanding Arthur's now-eternally regrettable failure to grasp the

THE FOOL

essentials of my magical materialist paradigm, I felt a wave of gratitude to my erstwhile employer and mentor. Oracle Street was his enduring legacy, and I was among his heirs.

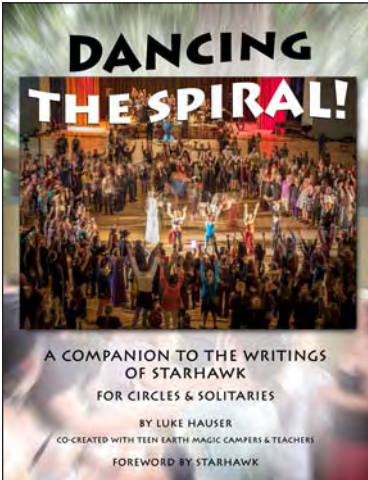
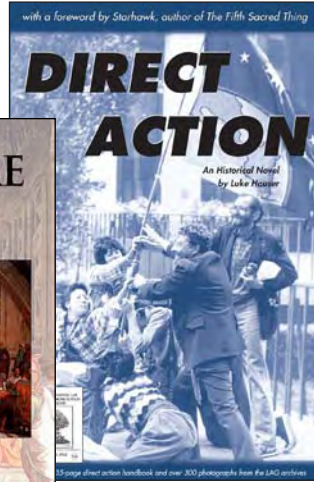
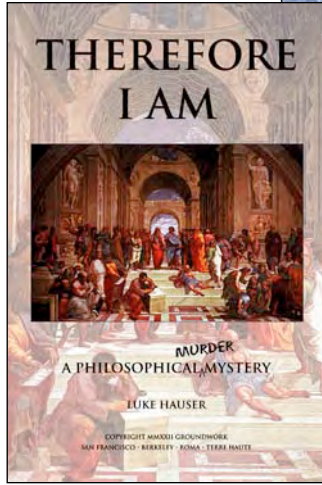
The newscaster looked at me expectantly. I nodded slowly.

“Did I know Arthur?” I finally said. “Yes, I’m beginning to think that I did...”

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Helpful Appendices & Various Assorted Miscellany

To Delight, Amuse & Elucidate

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Appendix A | Tarot: A Brief History
Tarot Bibliography |
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| Appendix C | Fact & Fiction: Tarot & Characters
Fact & Fiction: Scene-by-Scene |
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Journey of the Spirit |
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More Books by Luke Hauser |

TAROT: A BRIEF HISTORY

Excerpt from the book *Dancing the Spiral*, by Luke Hauser – see page 295

Print edition or free PDF: WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral

Complete Essay: Magical & Activist Ancestors – WeaveAndSpin.org/history

Tarot (French/Spanish/English – Italian Tarocchi, German Tarock) has long been the playground of the wildest fantasies, particularly as regards its origins. Babylonians, Chinese, Egyptians, Urgrundians – each theory pushed the foundations further into the past without providing more than a smattering of evidence.

The plethora of myths, far from discrediting Tarot, are a source of delight and fascination to the public, who devour one book after another on the topic.

But it makes a nightmare of untangling Tarot’s actual origins.

What is the genesis of this strange oracle which has inspired and baffled scholars and adepts for centuries? Whence Tarot?

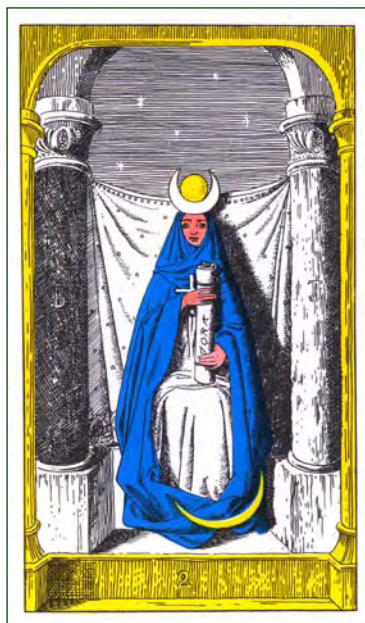
Here is one person’s sense of it.

Back to the Roots

Playing cards were introduced into Europe around 1350, probably from the Islamic Middle East. Their ultimate source may have been India or China, and they reflect the same sort of “number” magic as tossing coins or sticks and noting their patterns.

The earliest known European cards already included four suits of ten numbered cards as well as three or four court cards per suit. The suits may derive from late Medieval Egyptian designs.

Around 1440, Italian game-players and artists added a series of additional cards which



today we call the Major Arcana, and created the game of Trionfi, or Triumphs (google for information and rules).

The additional cards functioned as trumps in trick-taking games – as opposed to designating one of the four suits as trump, as many games do today.

Divination for the People!

Although professionals may study for years, anyone can intuitively read Tarot images – a magical tool for the people!

Tarot cards were used for esoteric purposes quite early. In one account from the later 1400s, a card was assigned to each person at a party, and others said how they thought it applied (or not).

Modern divinatory use of Tarot cards is first documented (so far) in the mid-1700s, probably inspired by popular fortune tellers. Romany people, renowned as seers and palm-readers, may have helped popularize cartomancy.

Suggestions that Romany people pioneered Tarot divination, while intriguing, are so far unsubstantiated – will evidence emerge as researchers examine police and court records?

A common type of deck at that time (still available today) was the so-called Tarot de Marseilles, actually based on Northern Italian models.

The Rediscovery of Tarot

Around 1780, a French writer on the occult named Court de Gébelin came across the cards and concluded that they were a pictorial form of the Egyptian Book of Thoth, passed secretly through the ages. The idea that the cards conceal ancient wisdom has been with us ever since.

Several writers expounded theories during the 1800s, notably Eliphas Levi, who integrated Tarot and the numerology of Hebrew letters to “discover” occult interpretations of the Major Arcana (most post-1900 scholars have found this artificial).

This ethereal theorizing culminated with the Golden Dawn, which wove Tarot into a unified fabric of Western magic that included astrology, alchemy, Cabala, and other arts.

Around 1910, amateur scholar Arthur Waite and graphic artist Pamela Colman Smith, both part of the Golden Dawn, created an intricate yet accessible deck. Since re-publication in 1971 by U.S. Games, it has become “the” iconic Tarot. Originally called the Rider-Waite deck (Rider was the first publisher), today it is often called the Waite-Smith deck.

Tarot bubbled underground in the early 1900s. Eccentric writer Aleister Crowley and artist Frieda Harris created the Thoth deck around 1940 (like the Waite-Smith deck it has been widely available since about 1970).

With the advent of the new age movement in the 1970s, Tarot exploded. Decks and books multiplied, readers emerged from the shadows, and scholars delved into the 500-year trajectory of this colorful magical tool.

Legacies

Tarot is widely used today among magical folk for discernment and insight – to help with a decision or to show various perspectives on an issue. Some rituals are built around Tarot readings.

Some reading is intuitive – interpreting images directly. Other times people read book-meanings – an evolving tradition that dates at least to the 1700s (see above).

The Journey of the Spirit uses Tarot to map a spiritual quest – see Appendix E.

Complete Essay: [Magical & Activist Ancestors – WeaveAndSpin.org/history](http://WeaveAndSpin.org/history)

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Fact & Fiction

Dedicated to Umberto Eco

How much of this book is true? All of it, depending on your perspective. Fiction does after all have a way of evolving into fact, or at least a reasonable simulacrum.

The material comes from three sources: fact, colorful legends, and the author's fevered imagination. This appendix will try to separate these strands.*

TAROT

For a short overview of the history of Tarot, see Appendix A.

The Trismegistus Meister Tarot (literally the Thrice Mighty Master Tarot) is fictional – it is the ideal Tarot deck each of us imagines. Using a few hints, you have to co-create the deck in your mind. So get to work!



The Fool, c. 1450 – possibly by Bonifacio Bembo, Cary-Yale deck (Visconti-Sforza design).

Arthur's Bergamo Renaissance deck is a composite of mid-1400s hand-painted Italian decks.

Thoth, Motherpeace, Rider-Waite-Smith, Gatos Paganos, Daughters of the Moon, and many others are real decks. Gnostic Gnowers is fictional, although there are gnostic-inspired decks. The Tarot di Tutti Taroti (Chapter XIX) should be produced! Other decks are mentioned in scenes below.

Marseilles refers to a design style, not a specific deck. The designs stem from Northern Italy, printed in Marseilles and other places by the 1700s.

Tarocchi is an Italian term that evolved into the French/English Tarot, German Tarock, etc. Tarocchi decks first appeared in Italy in the 1400s, apparently for a game called Trionfi, or Triumphs – the root of the English word "trump."

Arthur's demolition of fanciful theories about Tarot's origins echoes both Waite and post-1960s researchers (See Dummett, Decker, Farley, and others in Bibliography on previous page).

* - Occasional extraneous remarks may also be included at the sole discretion of the author.

CHARACTERS

Several major characters are very loosely based on past masters of the craft. These are *not* biographies in any sense of that word. They are imaginary constructions loosely inspired by those ancestors.

Arthur A. Arthur inspired by Arthur Waite, co-creator of the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot, the most influential deck of the past century. Waite was a competent amateur scholar who debunked far-fetched theories of Tarot's origins and meaning. See *A Pictorial Key to the Tarot*.

Persephone Coalschmidt is artist Pamela Colman Smith's shadow. Where Pamela was short and exuberant, Persephone is tall and haughty. Each is among the greatest Tarot artists of all time.

Alabaster Crockley inspired by Aleister Crowley, an influential if unattractive magician in real life. He co-created the striking Thoth deck, painted by Frieda Harris around 1940 but published only in the late 1960s. See *The Book of Thoth* for his thoughts on Tarot, and *The Book of the Law* for his channeled writings.

Madame Bluebloodsky is loosely inspired by Helena (aka Madame) Blavatsky, a much-traveled Russian émigré who helped launch the Theosophical Society and was instrumental in introducing Eastern spiritual practices to the West. Blavatsky practiced spiritism, but had little to say about Tarot. Her book *Isis Unveiled* is difficult sledding today. She did not mainline herbal extracts.

Wendy Womansdaughter is an imaginary composite of dozens of Neo-Pagans who have run magic shops, published books about wicca and paganism, taught classes, written emails, cleaned up after rituals, and generally nurtured the free-form mix of modern paganism. The Neo-Postmodern Latter Day Wiccans are entirely fictional (for the time being).

Dr. Papyrus's ideas (not his personality) are loosely inspired by nineteenth century authors Eliphas Levi and Gerard "Papus" Encausse. Neither was a recluse.

Jeff Harrison is a composite of the West's foremost theorists of magic, spirituality, and esotericism as well as history's most dedicated sacred custodians. His magnum opus, *Magical Materialism*, exists as a complete draft in his imagination.

Others: Perkins is the archetypal dweeb. The mountebank escaped from the 1600s. Johanna is mysterious. Cornelius De Roquefort is inspired by an expensive cheese.

Genders – remarks about multiple genders are jokes, except they're not. Gender has gotten a lot more complicated....

Pronunciations Poem (page 9). Nietzsche did not learn to read Tarock, and Paracelsus's parrot did not learn to read the cards of Tarot.

Prologue: Fool

Lugh story adapted from a legend, source unknown. The name Lugh refers to multiple persons (especially an Irish hero) and/or deities (an ancient Celtic god equated by the Romans with Mercury) who have been conflated by modern writers.

Narrator as custodian based on 25 years of experience. *Magical Materialism* exists as a complete but unedited manuscript in the author's overloaded brain.

Chapter I: Magician

Arthur A. Arthur loosely inspired by Arthur E. Waite, co-creator of the Waite-Smith Tarot deck. Persephone is the shadow of Tarot artist Pamela Colman Smith, whose monogram appears on their cards. The deck was long called Rider-Waite, ignoring Smith's role. Today it is called Waite-Smith or Rider-Waite-Smith.

Molten Core grounding beverage – alchemists are perfecting the formula!

Arcane Wisdom inspired by Bay Area magic shops such as Ancient Ways, Scarlet Sage, Curios & Candles, Raven's Wing, Two Sisters, Lavender Dragon...

The Trismegistus Meister Tarot (literally the Thrice Mighty Master Tarot) is fictional – it is the ideal Tarot deck each of us imagines.

Divinatory tests are imaginary, poker games are real. Fast Food Tarot is fictional.

Bristling Broom is fictional for the time being. Divination saloons and Happy Endings should exist. See Chapter XIX for more on Happy Endings.

Great Return puns on Joanna Macy's vision of an eco-socio-politico-cultural Great Turning – so mote they both be!

Periodic Table of Tarot – spoof, but others have created grids that highlight relations – four sets of five, three sets of seven, etc. None adequately explains all 21 Majors.

Lobster on the Moon card – your guess is as good as mine!

Pagan enforcement divisions such as UPPIC, COPP, SPQR, and Ultimas Quietus exist and are watching! COPP is a pun on CUUPs (Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans), which is the UUs enforcement division.

Chapter II: High Priestess

Perkins inspired by Perkinses everywhere! Mountebank inspired by mountebanks past and present. Madame Bluebloodsky loosely inspired by Madame Blavatsky, who also had a dog that helped heal a leg injury.

Legendary Lost Arcana of the Bohemian Rosicrucians fictional (but maybe I'm saying that to keep you from searching). Rosicrucian pamphlets first circulated in Bohemia and thereabouts in early 1600s. No evidence of an actual organization ever uncovered. There is no known connection to Tarot, but the pamphlets

were accompanied by vaguely similar artwork (see graphic below).

Madame B's story fictional, not based on Madame Blavatsky.

The multi-deck reading – no particular spread, and there is no reason not to use multiple decks if your sensibilities can stand it.

CHAPTER III: EMPRESS

Wiccan Wonderland inspired by better-lit Bay Area magic shops (see Chapter I).

Neo-Postmodern Latter Day Wiccans spoofs grassroots feminist-activist Neo-Pagan tendencies to which the present author is prone.

Astrology and job applications – the day is coming....

Daughters of Moon real. Heroines of Brazilian Field Hockey pending.

Waters of the World is an ongoing Reclaiming Tradition spell to heal the planet's waters. WoW have been carried to witchcamps, nuclear test sites, and elsewhere. More info in *Dancing the Spiral* (see page 295).

Runes – so far as I know, there are no ancient sources for occult meanings of the runes, leaving them wide open for intuitive and speculative interpretation.

Newly Realigned Order of the Silver Shining Wheel of Radiance spoofs the grandiose visions of some Neo-Pagans, perhaps including the present author. Silver Shining Wheel is a popular chant.

Wendy's spiel on Tarot introduces intuitive reading.

CHAPTER IV: EMPEROR

The secret society without a name exists. Do you belong? You'll never know.

Counterfeit Tarot is a joke – yet also real. No one paid royalties when they printed a



Modern author Frances Yates identifies this image from *Speculum Sophicum Rhodo-Stauroticum* (1618) as the *Invisible College of the Rosicrucians*. There is no known connection to Tarot – so feel free to invent one.

deck based on Marseilles models. And the present author owns an uncopyrighted knock-off of the Waite-Smith deck redrawn by a clumsier artist.

Tarot gambling probably dates to Tarot's creation in the mid-1400s. The two-billion-to-one odds on the esoteric straight are correct.

UPPIC, COPP, SPQR, and other Neo-Pagan enforcement groups – see Chapter I.

CHAPTER V: Hierophant

Twisted Talisman inspired by San Francisco's Sword & Rose and Tools of Magic.

Alabaster Crockley very loosely based on Aleister Crowley, who co-created the Thoth deck with artist Frieda Harris. "Incarnation of evil" – actual quote "the wickedest man in the world," from magazine *John Bull*.

The Revolutionary Pagan Workers' Vanguard was a satire page in *Reclaiming Quarterly* magazine from about 1997-2011 – see page 297.

Rites of Passage is actually a Reclaiming core class exploring the subconscious. The class often lasts six sessions, and the final session is a student-planned ritual.



The Pagat – the lowest trick-taking trump in a Tarock deck. Numerically it corresponds to the Magician. Vienna, c. 1800s. Can you interpret it?

Stelladoma, first invoked by the present author, is the hypothetical earliest avatar of the Great Goddess.

Crockley's discourse on Tarot history is fictional except when it accidentally resembles the facts, which it often does. This "history" is compiled from many sources beginning in the mid-1700s up to the present, and weaves as many old legends as I could shoehorn in. Aleister Crowley in fact debunked some of these far-fetched theories, but might have agreed that the archetypal images that manifested as Tarot are ancient.

The Ugrundians are both fictional and real. The present author claims to be the first to have hypothesized them as our primaeval ancestors. Logically, someone must have done things first. Why not call them the Ugrundians?

Egypt and Mesopotamia based on current research. For origins of divination and oracles see Bowden, *Mystery Cults*.

Many of the later groups cited by Crockley did (and sometimes still do) exist. Some people think they formed a network of transmission of secret teachings. Since the European scientific revolution of the 1600s the idea of “secret knowledge” has been superseded by the belief that publishing and freely sharing knowledge is the best way to advance human well-being. The jury is still out.

Aeneas and the oracle based on Virgil’s account. Legendary readings – I am launching these legends. Please repeat without attribution.

COTA (Colorers of the Arcana) is a loving spoof of BOTA (Builders of the Adytum), who worked with a color-the-Tarot curriculum.

Do as thou wilt is the whole of the law; Love is the law, love under will; the study of this book is forbidden – from Crowley’s *The Book of the Law*.

Electric toilet – written long ago as a joke. Now they exist. Be careful what you write!

CHAPTER VI: LOVERS

Persephone Coalschmidt resembles Pamela Colman Smith in one key way – they are among the premier Tarot artists of all time. Otherwise, the tall, lithe, remote Persephone is the polar opposite of the small, energetic, flapper-dressing Smith.

New Archaic Re-Established Order of the Rosy Red Sunset is a spoof of the origins stories told by the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn, formed in 1887, splintered by the early 1900s. Offshoots still exist today, often claiming in their names a connection to older groups. The original Golden Dawn’s magic was formulaic and ceremonial, and included a series of graded initiatory degrees where knowledge of the magical tradition was parceled out. Good account in Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*.

Secret Masters – see Chapter VII/Chariot.

CHAPTER VII: CHARIOT

Canine Original Sin – makes sense, doesn’t it?

Headstone Metaphysical Outlet – based on your favorite Halloween Superstore, only open all year.

Madame Bluebloodsky’s gnostic discourse is only partly based on Blavatsky, whose thought incorporated many diverse strands. She was an early proponent of Eastern mystical studies, and helped introduce Eastern thought and teachers to the West.

The Secret Guardians, like the Rosy Red Sunset’s Secret Masters of the Craft (based on, among others, Blavatsky’s Ancient Masters and the Golden Dawn’s Secret Chiefs), were among numerous higher intelligences invoked by alternative spiritualists around 1900. The genocidal 20th century seems to have put an end to the idea that a higher intelligence was somehow guiding human evolution.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

The Ocean Is the Beginning of the Earth is a Reclaiming chant.

Ourobouros theories – all may be true except possibly the head-up-tail.

Herbal extract mainlining – Madame Blavatsky didn't do it, and neither should you!

Intuitive decks – mostly real, although no deck can impose its interpretations on you unless you collaborate.

Cronos Jr's drive-thru ritual – a joke, I think!

Street faire: Types of divination – all real – look them up! Pledge-Keepers of the New Moon – spoof. Memento Mori – real. Sibylline Sisters – spoof of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

CHAPTER VIII: STRENGTH

Note – the order of arcana VIII and XI follow Waite-Smith/Golden Dawn.

Pagan enforcement agencies – see Chapter I.

Magical Name Registry – good idea, huh?

CHAPTER IX: HERMIT

Dr. Papyrus's name is similar to Tarot author Papus, but that is the only resemblance. Dr. P's library – all titles real, most available online. Moses versus Jesus as authors – fact.

Papyrus's speech based on ideas (and rhetoric) from Eliphaz Levi, Papus, and other late-1800s writers. Numerosophy and correlation with Hebrew letters are exaggerated yet typical of that era. Modern research disputes these correlations (See Decker, *The Esoteric Tarot*.)

CHAPTER X: WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Wiccan pranks – a marketing niche? We All Come from the Goddess and The Wheel of the Year are Reclaiming chants.

RitualLand – come on, somebody do it! Musée Magique based on San Francisco's Musée Mécanique. The Kiss-O-Meter really works! Descent of Inanna – good idea, huh? Chakra Village based on chill tents everywhere.

CHAPTER XI: JUSTICE

Legal charges – the author proudly claims a majority of these charges, although not skateboarding. All were dropped to infractions or misdemeanors. (See Luke Hauser, *Direct Action: An Historical Novel*.)

Periodic Table – see Chapter I. Quantum Tarot spoofs Quantum Mechanics.

CHAPTER XII: Hanged Man

Pagan Olympics and corporate sponsors of sacred elements – spoofs so far.

Auto-invoking deities – watch out, some deities still do this! Trial methods based on witch trials. Dante *Inferno* Canto XX diviners' punishment true (at least Dante says it is!).

Three-Fold Return – true (as theory and reality). My Soul is a Reclaiming chant.

CHAPTER XIII: Death

Mystical Accountant deck imaginary. Licensing of decks is on the way. Omnium Cartium = "All Cards." Tarot Speed Reading – see Tarot Handbook, page 275.

Loaded decks do exist. Lenny Bruce Tarot doesn't so far as I know.

Knights Janitorial spoofs the Templars and those who attribute the transmission of ancient magical secrets to them.

Relocation of sacred sites spoofs Hearst Castle and its ilk.

Tarot Museum in Bologna – for real!

Tarot Court – charge admission and it would be a civic fundraiser. Evil eye and curse tablets echo ancient magical paranoias. Trionfi rules follow original game for which Tarocchi/Tarot cards were probably created.

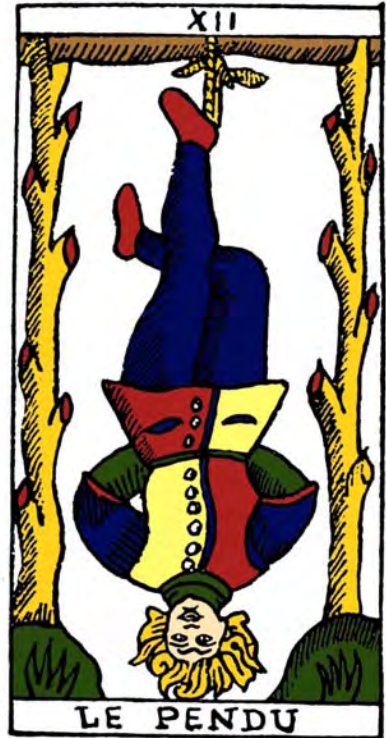
Cultural appropriation real, but slowly we're learning.

CHAPTER XIV: Temperance

The publisher confesses that this chapter appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with Temperance. If you discover any connection, please contact us at once!

Keys and balance – the author asserts that this is the "temperance" factor in this chapter. The publisher remains skeptical.

Séance – is it faked? Madame Bluebloodsky doesn't think so, and you don't want to make her mad!



Le Pendu/Hanged Man – circa 1700, Marseilles Tarot design (actually Northern Italian).

CHAPTER XV: Devil

Molten Core grounding beverage – alchemists are perfecting the formula!

Lazarus mystery – idea is up for grabs in exchange for 15% of royalties.

Hardy Boys solving all of their mysteries – is it possible they didn't talk about the ones where they failed? Just asking.

CHAPTER XVI: Tower

Custodians beginning their day – some also fire up a doob. Custodia as Cretan goddess of tidiness – documentation pending.

Review of various theories about Tarot – all have been propounded by past authors except the brand-names, which the present author intuited.

Monopoly divination – duh! Somebody tell one of the Parker Brothers to contact me! This spoofs theories about Tarot's origins by Court de Gébelin and others.



Death – possibly by Bonifacio Bembo, Cary-Yale deck (Visconti-Sforza design, c. 1450)

CHAPTER XVII: Star

Never Lose Your Way to the Well is a pun on a favorite Reclaiming chant. *My Faerie Lady* is also a pun, as are the songs. Sometimes I just can't help it!

VisionQuest spoofs our altars, spells, and lifestyles.

CHAPTER XVIII: Moon

Persephone's Tarot remarks synopsized intuitive reading – forget the book and read the images. Embodying the arcana is a way to intuitively engage.

Although Persephone's inspirator Pamela Colman Smith illustrated many books, wrote two collections of Jamaican folk stories, and helped publish other women authors, she is not known to have written on Tarot.

Custodian's Cloit spoofs the philosopher's stone and other chimerical quests – always rumored, never seen.

Lock brands based on Western gods of smithcraft. Vulcan locks real, others fictional.

CHAPTER XIX: Sun

Custodians' Invisibility Spell works! (For more on spellwork, see *Dancing the Spiral* – page 295.) Tintoretto's Dionysians painting is fictional.

Happy Endings is an entire scene generated by a single pun. Top that! The house of divination is based on your local neighborhood 24-hour massage parlor, where the company is at least as important as the services. Scrying as described.

Versatile pigeons based on an actual imaginary case study.

Johanna's discourse on Tarot is a materialist take on intuitive reading. In Arthur's multi-deck reading, the past influences recognize origins and traditions, while the cards pointing to the future show new foundations and fresh possibilities.

Tarot di Tutti Taroti (Tarot of All Tarots) – I'd buy a copy! All the decks named are real, including the wonderful Gatos Paganos (Tarot of the Pagan Cats).

CHAPTER XX: Judgment

Bus fare – been there. Hijacking a bus – never done it. The bus scene has not the slightest whiff of verisimilitude. In other words, it's all made up. Well, except I did once park in a handicapped zone – sorry!

Fool's Journey/Tarot Mountain – author repeatedly sketched this attraction. Blueprints available upon request. Ruminations on Fool's Journey and the meanings of Major Arcana echo various authors.

Writer's Block not usually fatal. Invoking deity – what *do* we offer in return? Spells probably fictional.

Pentacles – Iron and Pearl worked in the Feri and Reclaiming Traditions (see *Dancing the Spiral*, page 295). Gold, Platinum, and Chrome TBA.

Comments about multiple genders are jokes, except when they're not. We're slowly learning gender is not a simple binary...

Repairs – based on actual incidents not involving the Major Arcana. Ma'at's scales and the feather – google it for possible interpretations.

The Man from UPPIC echoes the Man from UNCLE, a pivotal influence in my artistic development. The agent's diatribe about social responsibility echoes well-meaning bureaucrats everywhere.

Experimental Christianity lab – someone offer it!

CHAPTER XXI: World

Fool as alpha and omega – suggested by many, and the heart of the Fool's Journey.

Giordano Bruno was executed by burning for views judged heretical in 1600. See

A FOOL SUCH AS I

Yates, *Giordano Bruno & the Hermetic Tradition*.

Crockley assisting Dr. Papyrus – in real life Aleister Crowley was not this sort of person, and probably would not want to be thought so.

Snorting herbal extracts – don't do this at home!

Motherpeace as opening to the future – this deck was an eye-opener around 1990, when it re-imagined many of the arcana for new times – multiple cultures, genders, ages.... If it wasn't the first to do this, it strongly influenced many later artists.

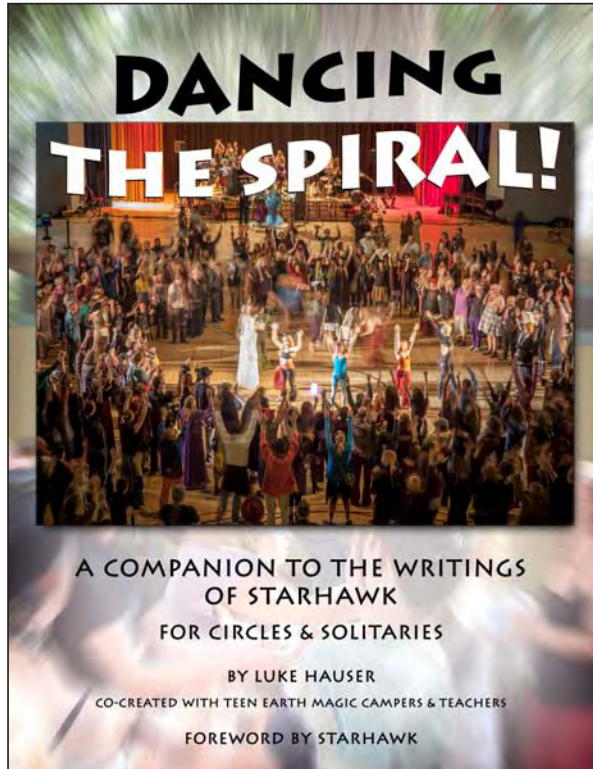
Epilog: The Fool

This entire chapter is both true and fictional. As is most of the book, when you think about it.



Six cards in the Marseille Tarot style, around 1700.

Intuitive Tarot Handbook on the following pages is excerpted
from Luke Hauser's forthcoming nonfiction book



Publication planned for 2023

Download the almost-completed draft now!

WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral

TAROT JARGON: A GLOSSARY

Cartomancy – divination using cards. “-mancy” is a Greek stem meaning divination – hence geomancy, lunamancy, pyromancy, etc.

Court Cards – these 16 cards, called King, Queen, Knight, Page, or different titles, are similar to the face cards in playing-card decks.

Crossing Card – an additional card which adds to the meaning of the card it crosses. The Celtic Cross layout builds in a crossing card – and you can add more!

Divination – using a tool such as Tarot, pendulums, fire scrying, rock reading, etc, to discover our own true meanings, attitudes, and intentions. Divination gives voice to the divine within each of us. See *Dancing the Spiral*, page 295.

Major Arcana – the “special” cards not found in playing card decks. In many decks they are given Roman numerals 0-XXI (0-21), with names like Magician, Star, or Tower. In the Renaissance game of Trionfi (google for info), these cards were trumps. For divination, they’re intriguing, but not inherently more powerful or meaningful than the Minors or Court cards. Sometimes it’s fun and/or enlightening to do an all-Majors reading.

Minor Arcana – the 40 cards numbered Ace through 10, as in playing-card decks. In most post-1900 decks, the Minors have pictures corresponding to divinatory meanings. These images tend to depict situations we find ourselves in.

Querent – the one asking a question and receiving a reading – or reading for themselves.

Reader – the one offering a reading, either professionally, as a gift, or for one’s self.

Spread – the pattern in which cards are laid out, with each card in the pattern having a particular focus, such as Past-Present-Future, Mind-Body-Spirit, or more elaborate spreads such as the 10-card Celtic Cross. Read about other spreads online.



Intuitive Tarot: an Introduction

Excerpt from *Dancing the Spiral*, by Luke Hauser – see page 295

Free PDF download: WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral

Note – this section makes no claim to originality. This brief introduction shows ways that various people use Tarot as an intuitive tool. The author works in the Reclaiming Tradition of magic and activism (visit Reclaiming.org).

Tarot is one of the most user-friendly of all magical tools. With roots dating back to the Italian Renaissance, Tarot can be used for many types of workings, from games to decision-making to a journey of the spirit.

The key is intuition – awakening our deep inspiration and awareness about our own lives, our community, and the planet.

Some people say that when we do divination, it's not cards we're reading – it's our own soul. Tarot cards are simply an aid.

The following pages share ideas about intuitive Tarot. But let's start with the cards!



Finding the Right Deck

The past 50 years have seen an explosion of Tarot and divination decks. Hundreds of decks have been created, drawn, photographed, painted, collaged....

Intuitive reading works best with a deck which spurs

Images reproduced as fair use with review of decks.

creative thinking in the broadest way. Some beautiful or striking decks catch a mood or outlook well – but every card triggers the same response. We’re looking for decks that stir a broad range of feelings, thoughts, and gut responses.

As with all magic – you are your own best authority. You’ll know when a deck inspires you.

Maybe you already have a deck you like. Maybe you have a deck or three, but none of them inspire you. Maybe you have no deck at all.

Not to worry! Tarot decks are available for \$20 or less at new age stores or online. Or see the next page for an online card selector.

Some Good Decks for Intuitive Readings

Rider-Waite-Smith – if there’s such a thing as “the” Tarot deck, this is it, and for good reason – Arthur Waite’s designs are rich but uncluttered, and Pamela Colman Smith’s calm, introspective artwork mirrors the widest range of moods and emotions. The c. 1910 artwork is Eurocentric.

Modern Witch – this recent reworking of Rider-Waite-Smith images reflects a broad range of genders, races, and ages.

Motherpeace – created by Vicki Noble and Karen Vogel around 1991, Motherpeace has been the author’s go-to deck for many years. Its simple, uncluttered artwork features people of many cultures, genders, ages, etc. Round cards allow nuanced readings (eg, what might it mean when a card is not quite straight up or rotated a little past upright?).

Marseilles Tarot – reproduction of circa 1750 cards by unknown artists, with simple, vivid images on the Majors. Some of the images go back to the original 1400s Tarot decks. Many modern decks reflect the Marseilles imagery.

Online Tarot Sites

Websites online let you pull single Tarot cards and/or multi-card spreads, including three-card (a favorite for intuitive work), Horseshoe, and Celtic Cross.



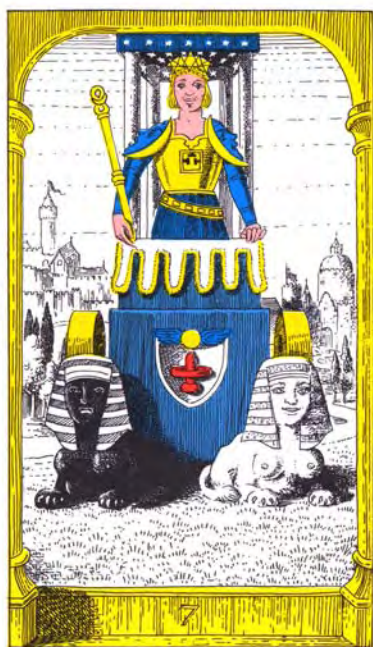
Here's a great site that's active as of 2022. The deck is Rider-Waite-Smith, one of our go-to decks (see above). The site displays the cards with no interpretations – perfect for intuitive divination!

Tarot Card Generator: serennu.com/tarot/pick.php

Reading – the Mind's Eye

Here are a few tips for reading intuitively – see the following pages for more:

- Put away booklets and “expertise” – look to your intuitive response to the cards.



- No one can read for you – all they can bring is questions and random insights.

- Look at the pictures and describe what you see – let the images awaken your imagination.

- Pay attention to first thoughts and responses – there is no wrong response.

Everything You Need to “Know” to Get Started

(1) A standard 78-card Tarot deck includes three types of cards: Court cards, Minor Arcana, and Major Arcana. See “Jargon” (Appendix D above) for details.

(2) No card has a fixed meaning, and no one else can tell you what the cards mean for you. The magic of Tarot is within you – let the images awaken

your intuition to meanings that are uniquely yours.

(3) Some people like to pull with their receptive - ie, their non-throwing – hand. Pull cards and lay them face down, according to the spread you are doing (see Jargon below). As you read, turn them up one at a time and contemplate them. At the end, look at all of them together. Write in your journal.

Tarot Workings in the Following Pages

- Tarot Reading: Quick Intro
- Intuitive Reading
- Tarot Workings & Games
- Shadows, Reversals, and Difficult Cards
- Tarot: Journey of the Spirit

Intuitive Tarot: Quick Overview

In *Reclaiming Tradition* we say: “Every person is their own spiritual authority” – and their own best Tarot reader as well!

There are no wrong answers. When you’re not sure – go with your first feeling or thought. Keep gazing at the images.

The following pages share lots of workings. Here’s an overview.



Prep

Frame a question: What question or issue do you want to explore with this reading? Or are you simply opening yourself to what comes through? Write it in your journal.

Spread: Decide on your spread (layout). This intro describes a three-card “Past-Present-Future” spread.

Draw cards face down: When ready – draw three cards and lay them *face down* as past, present, and future. (You can do this online too – see page 276-277.)

Intuitive Reading – Four Simple Steps

Take a breath and center yourself, then turn the “past” card up. Take about 15-30 seconds for each step below.

1. Look at the image on the card. Focus on the picture, rather than the number or suit. Name three things you see with your eyes. Let go of stories and interpretations. Describe what you see.

2. Find one object or being in the card that is “you.” No need to know or say why. Just feel it.

3. Tell a simple story about what is happening in the card, including the object that is you.

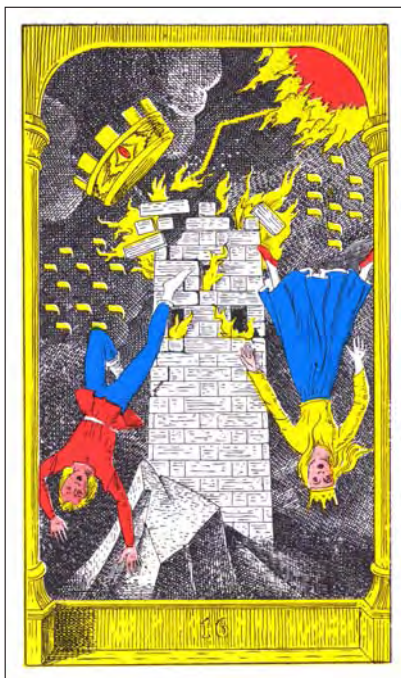
4. Now say briefly – given your question and the fact that this card represents “past influences” – what is its meaning for you?

Repeat for present and future cards.

When finished, recall your question, then look at all three cards together, face up. Soften your eyes and see what overall patterns emerge.

Write in your journal.

Ready for more? Turn the page!



Tarot images from Motherpeace, Marseilles Tarot, and an imitation of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck.

Reproduced as fair use with review of decks – page 276.

Intuitive Reading: Intention

Intuitive reading is a good introduction to Tarot for one person or a group – no prior experience needed.

With intuitive Tarot readings, we are not asking Tarot to predict our future – we’re asking it to reveal our own hidden secrets. We’re using the power of its magical images to unlock our inner wisdom.

So first, take whatever experience and knowledge you have about Tarot cards, breathe into it – then set it aside. All that information will just get in the way of your intuition.

Wisdom vs Knowledge

One of the advanced classes in Reclaiming is called Pearl Pentacle (details in *Dancing the Spiral* – see page 295). Two of the five Pearl points are called Wisdom and Knowledge. We always discuss: “What’s the difference?”

Tarot shows the difference – when we work with Tarot, we develop both knowledge *and* wisdom.

Knowledge helps us learn facts about the history of Tarot, about the occult (ie, secret or hidden) meanings of the images and numbers of the cards. Knowledge is what we can learn from teachers and books.

Wisdom is what Tarot awakens in each of us. Wisdom is our inner truth, unique to each of us. Wisdom is what we seek when we close the book and listen to our intuition.

You can gain Tarot knowledge online or in books. In this working we’re going to focus on awakening your deep wisdom by directly encountering the Tarot images.

What About Books?

Can you resist the temptation to look things up in the booklet that comes with your deck, or one of the many Tarot books you can buy? Trust your intuition – set aside the book until you have your own relation with the deck.

If you want to read about Tarot, try Mary Greer’s *21 Ways to Read a Tarot Card*. She’ll give you lots of ideas about divination without telling you “what the cards mean.” That part is for each of us to learn for ourselves.

What Exactly Is Intuitive Reading?

When we read intuitively, we are actually reading our souls! The cards (or other divination methods) are simply tools to help us gain access to our own deep wisdom, and to the wisdom of our species, our planet, and the cosmos.

Reading intuitively means opening ourselves to the images on the cards – images that echo back through history and through our own being.

There are no wrong answers or mistakes. Whatever pops into our minds could be a clue to the cards' unique meaning for us. Stay with the thread – tools like automatic writing and non-judgmental listening can help hold our focus as the magic slowly emerges (see Workings below).

We can help others read intuitively too – instead of showing off our knowledge, we ask questions that help our partner tap their own wisdom and intuition.

Note – in a class or ritual, these exercises can be used to frame a commitment that can be carried into a further working – use Tarot as a discernment tool to ask something like: “What is my next step regarding such-and-such issue?” Then do an empowerment working such as Overflowing Cup or Charging with Fire & Flour to charge and empower your commitment (these workings and many more in *Dancing the Spiral* – see page 295 for free download).

Prep

Need: Deck(s), journal, bell for timing in a group. Quiet space – for a group, space where people can sit in pairs and still hear the priestess. A bell helps mark changes. Allow half-hour or more.

In a group, decide who will priestess the working. Solo – you're your own priestess.

Choose a deck (or decks – if you share, one deck covers about 15-20 people). See preceding page for deck-ideas.

Decide on a type of spread – three-card Past-Present-Future (or Body-Mind-Spirit) work well – it's easy to keep all three cards in your mind at once. The 10-card Celtic Cross can be complicated for intuitive work – when you're ready, go for it!

You may want to print out steps 1-4 on next page, so you don't have to keep repeating it. Or write key words on an easel or erase-board.

Basic Intuitive Reading

Background: Explain that we are reading intuitively, not by book-learning. Invite people to set aside anything they already know about Tarot. With intuition, there are no right or wrong answers, only inspirations and insights.

Introduce the spread – here we'll use a three-card “Past-Present-Future” reading.

Invite readers to frame a question. You may do a short guided meditation to help people clear their minds and discover a question or issue, or simply open themselves to mystery.

When ready – each person draws three cards and lays them face down as past, present, and future.

A FOOL SUCH AS I

Decide who is reading for themselves first, and who is witness. Reader turns their “past” card over, and quickly answers these questions. Witness can remind the reader of the questions as needed, but otherwise simply listens and encourages.

1. Look at the image on the card. Focus on the picture, not the number or suit. Describe three things you see with your eyes. Let go of stories and interpretations, and just describe what you see.

2. Find one object or being in the card that is you. No need to know or say why. Just feel it.

3. Make up a simple story about what is happening in the card, including the object that is you.

4. Now say briefly – given your question and the fact that this card represents “past influences” – what does it mean for you?

Witness encourages reader to think out loud and “go with your first glimmer of thought.” There are no wrong answers.

Trade roles, and the second reader does the same steps for their past card. Repeat for present and future cards.

When finished, lay all three cards face up and each take a turn sharing the patterns you notice and any further thoughts.

Come back to the circle and do a go-round where each person shares one word about what they saw or learned.

Solo – Take some time to look at the entire spread. Soften your eyes and see what patterns emerge. Write in your journal.



*Reproduced as
fair use with
review of deck
– page 276.*

More Workings: Tools for Personal Work

Daily Card Altar

Create a Tarot altar – simple or elaborate. Each day, choose a card (randomly, or perhaps work your way through the Majors of a favorite deck?). Journal about the card – write for a few minutes first thing in the day and again last thing in the day. What changes? How did the card “play out” through the day?

Maybe you want to dedicate a page per card in your journal, so that you can add later thoughts – or even create a special Tarot Book of Shadows.

Invoking the Cards

After you cast your circle, try invoking the Tarot cards themselves. Invite the spirit of Tarot into your circle. Flip quickly through the images and welcome them to your circle. Ask them to speak to you – promise to be a good listener! Remember to devoke at the end of your working – you can devoke with a simple, “Thanks!”

Ten-Card First-Thought Challenge

Ground and cast a circle. Take a couple of moments and either come up with a divination question, or open yourself to mystery.

Choose 10 cards, face down. Turn over each card – say the first few feelings / ideas / thoughts that pop into your mind. If you are working in pairs, scribe for one another. Solitary, quickly jot down one or a few words for the card. Repeat for each card.

After 10 cards, go back and underline a half-dozen words – especially any words that you repeated. Write a short poem using all of these words. In a group, share your poems. Solo, take a breath and read it aloud.

✪ **Book of Shadows** – how did this seemingly random reading comment on your life and/or question?

Face Ups

Write a list of moods and emotions that you often feel – for instance, anger, laughter, frustration, boredom, excitement.

Lay the cards face up. Look through them, gradually finding a card that most closely matches each word on your list. Write its name, and a sentence or two about why this card is the best match.

When you finish your list – flip through the deck face-up and choose a couple more cards that you especially like. At the bottom of your list, write the names of these cards – next to each one, write a sentence saying what appeals to you. Ask:

“How would my life be different if I more often felt like this card? What is one step I can take toward that?”

Automatic Writing

Choose a card, speak its name aloud, and gaze at it for a moment. Then begin writing without lifting your pen from the page. Write about anything you want, but don't stop until you have filled at least half a page. Quick glances at the card are okay, but keep the pen moving. For more, see *Dancing the Spiral* – see page 295.

Create a Unique Card

Invent a new Tarot card. Name it, describe it – maybe you can draw or collage it. When it's complete, how will you charge it? Maybe a special ritual? A favorite song?

Some Reclaiming folks have created their own divination decks. You can google Dory Midnight's Dirty Tarot, Gaiamore's Earth Deck, Seneca's Creative Liberation Now Tarot cards, and Elka's Seeds of Wisdom deck.

Tarot Speed Reading

How fast can you read? In other words – how quickly can you have a “first reaction”? Sometimes that first reaction is what we really need to hear, but usually deny or ignore.

Tarot Sprints - turn up ten cards in a row, speaking 1-3 words after each and then moving along. Afterward, journal for a few minutes with all of the cards face-up.

What's the fastest you can “speed read” 10 cards, and still feel like it was a reading? Someday this will be a major event in the Pagan Olympics!

Tarot Games

- **Doom** – this is a quick, fun game. Everyone gives the worst possible reading of a card – especially the happy ones! What is the most horribly pessimistic interpretation you can give to the Star or the 10 of Cups?
- **Scrub-jay lines** – in pairs, each draw a card. Set timer for 90 seconds, and argue over whose is best.
- **Tell a story** – from a face-up deck, choose eight or ten cards and use them to illustrate the story of your life.
- **Group story** – each player draw five cards. Going clockwise, and as quickly as possible, each person plays a card that adds to the story. If you're stumped, you have to draw another card until you can continue the story.
- **Go Fish** – use Major Arcana as wild cards. If someone asks for your sixes and you have none, you can play a wild card (Major) instead, and give it whatever number you wish. Try this with a new deck – you'll get to know the cards quickly.

Crazy Majors Story Telling

Here's a short, fast-paced story-telling game. Try this when you have ten minutes of spare time at a camp. We used this to de-brief from the first Mysteries of Samhain camp, and wound up re-telling the whole story of camp, complete with all of the rituals, our favorite late-night snacks, and the giant bug discovered in someone's cabin.

The game is similar to Spades or Crazy Eights. Each player draws five or seven cards and holds them in their hand. The goal is to tell a fast-paced story about camp (or whatever) – and to be the first to run out of cards.

Player #1 lays down any card – for example, the Four of Pentacles – and begins a story that refers to the card (in this case, a person holding four pentacles). :

“We arrived at camp with all our stuff and got settled in.”

Player #2 can then play a Four, a Pentacle, or a Major – if they have none, they draw cards until they get one. Let's say they have the Four of Cups (a person leaving four cups behind and walking away):

“Then we put our stuff aside and began the journey.”

Player #3 might lack either Fours or Cups, so they play a Major – let's say the Chariot: “We hitched up our magical chariot and plunged ahead!”

After a Major, the next player must play a Court Card – let's say they don't have any, so they draw until they turn up the Queen of Wands:

“Right away we came to a magical priestess, who ordered us to stop!”

Next player can play a Queen, Wand, or Major – and so on, until people run out of cards and the story is complete.

Tarot Check-Ins

A fun, visual way to do group check-ins. Try this in dyads or triads, so people really have some time to share. It will help to have more than one deck.

Lay all cards face-up. Invite people to choose three cards that will help them share in a check-in. If two people want the same card, see if they can share and each use it in their turn.

Get into groups of two or three. Decide who is going first. Others lay their cards face down and give full attention. In one or two minutes, the person shows the cards and shares why they chose them.

Tarot Card Pantomimes

Priestess tapes a Tarot Major on each person's back - others look at it and try to help the person guess by pantomiming clues.

Tarot Salon – Readings for a Camp

What if we did a Tarot workshop, then later people practice their skills by offering readings to the wider camp – a Tarot salon!

One year we did Tarot workings in Ravens (Teens) Path at Witchlets in the Woods, and then teens offered readings to the rest of the camp. Teens who didn't want to offer readings helped decorate the space and acted as gate-keepers.

Tarot Altar

How about creating a Tarot altar where you can set out specific cards, such as all the Aces, or a particular card such as the Magician or Tower from several different decks, etc.

Maybe changing the cards can become a mini-ritual of its own?

Tarot Resources

- Mary Greer – *Tarot Mirrors*, *Tarot for Yourself*, and *21 Ways to Read a Tarot Card* – you'll gain knowledge *and* wisdom! And visit MaryKGreer.com
- See the Tarot History Bibliography at the end of Appendix A.
- Online Tarot card generator (for readings): serennu.com/tarot/pick.php

SOLO WORKING

Intuitive Tarot reading is a deeply personal practice. Even in groups, each person usually receives their own reading.

A Tarot altar is a way to become acquainted with a new deck, or to experience cards in new ways. See ideas above.

As a solitary, or with a few friends, close your door and cast a circle. When you read, speak your answers and interpretations aloud. Consider the possibility that one of your magical ancestors might be listening.

Resisting the Book – Solo Workers Too!

Can you resist the temptation to “look in the book” that comes with your deck? Trust your intuition – set the book aside until you have your own relation with the deck. Want to read about Tarot? See Tarot Resources just above.

Reversals, Shadows & Difficult Cards

Reversals and “negative” cards are different things – but they can work together.

No Tarot card is inherently negative – but some are harder to like than others! If we read just the surface meanings of Death or the Hanged One, the outlook won’t be very cheery. But what if we look past the obvious symbols and read other parts of the card intuitively?

Try the four-step reading above – look at the details of the image – what do you see? What if you deliberately made up a funny or happy story about the card?

We can stretch meanings – the Death card can mean the end of mortal life – but it can also suggest changes in general; the end of a situation (maybe you *want* it to end?); a time of rest and repose; and/or a prelude to rebirth. Does the caterpillar “die” so that the butterfly can be born? How is this a metaphor for your life?

Reversals

A reversal is when we draw a card and it’s upside down. We can ignore this and turn the card upright. Or we can read “reversed meanings” – we can ask what is the opposite of the obvious meaning? What blocks or obstructs the usual meaning?

If the Six of Pentacles shows someone being charitable, a reversed meaning might be greed or stinginess – or it might mean that I am the one who needs help.

Motherpeace Tarot, which uses round cards, carries this a step further – cards can be upside down, or rotated forward or backward – imagine the possibilities! No wonder this is such a popular deck.

Can you see how reversed meanings might be useful when drawing negative cards? And also for reminding us that those wonderfully positive cards like the Lovers or the Star have reversed meanings, too.

Shadows

Reversed meanings can be seen as the “shadows” of the usual meanings of cards, and they show us how complex our shadows can be. The shadow of Justice might be struggling against injustice. The shadow of the Devil card might be liberation – a positive shadow! Learn more about shadow work in *Dancing the Spiral* – see page 295.

Tarot Shadow Exercise

Frame a question, or decide that your reading is open-ended.

Lay your deck face down and randomly choose ten cards. Turn them face up and choose your favorite seven.

Set those aside, and read the remaining three as your Body / Mind / Spirit shadows.

Reading a Difficult Card – an Example

We did a Tarot working where everyone drew one card and did an intuitive reading. Afterward, someone said, "I got the Devil card, and I'm a little freaked out."

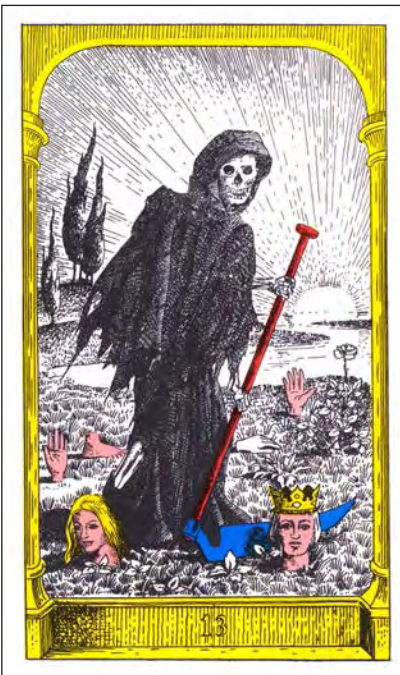
Our group stopped and looked at the card (from the Motherpeace deck), showing a pharaoh atop a pyramid holding smaller humans in chains. We talked about what was happening in the card, and what thoughts and feelings it called up.

Someone said the card suggested the ways we feel trapped or bound in chains – external chains, or those we put on ourselves.

Someone noticed the hierarchy of the pyramid, with the pharaoh at the top holding others beneath him.

We turned the card upside down – what might a "reversed" meaning be? If the card is about feeling trapped or chained, then the reversal might mean breaking out. Or maybe it's about the ways that we hold ourselves in chains of our own making. Each person will see different meanings – each unique to their situation.

★ **Book of Shadows** – if this were your card, can you see ways it might apply in your life? Can you see how even a "negative" card can carry very powerful and ultimately positive meanings?



Death – a Difficult Card?

The Death card – oh no! Our dreams are doomed forever! Abandon all hope!

Or maybe not. How else might we interpret the challenging image on this card?

Notice the scythe-wielding figure is "clearing the ground." As light bursts behind, even crowned monarchs get swept aside to make room for what may come next.

Are there parts of your life that you may need to change in order to "clear the ground" for new dreams to come to fruition? What might need to be pruned away?

Does making changes require chopping off heads? Maybe the card is suggesting that we could be a bit more gentle than the Grim Reaper? Or maybe not....

TAROT: Journey of the Spirit

Here's a personal working referred to in the novel. As Persephone says: Every Tarot reading is a journey where the reader becomes one with the cards.

This working is perfect for a solitary ritual. It explores personal goals and dreams, the obstacles that get in our way, and how we might address them.

You'll want an hour or more of quiet privacy, a Tarot deck (or online selector), your journal, and water. Create a magical circle within which to do the reading (for ideas, see *Dancing the Spiral* – page 295 – free PDF at WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral)

Intent

Sacred myths often include a journey where the heroine learns skills, faces obstacles, discovers allies, and finally passes a challenge that demands all of their talent and perseverance.

Journeys make great magical workings. Labyrinth workings are one form of journey, where we travel in and out of the magical circuits. And going to a Reclaiming Witchcamp is itself a magical journey!

Tarot is perfect for journey work (or the plot of a mystery novel). The Major Arcana from I to XXI are sometimes called the Journey of the Fool – the Fool (card zero) begins with the Magician (I) and progresses through the cards, meeting challenges, allies, and gifts to emerge into the World at card XXI (21).

We can use Tarot to craft a personal magical journey. We choose the beginning and end with our eyes open – we know where we are, and we see where we want to go. Then we draw cards that give us divinatory information about obstacles, allies, and challenges. (In the novel, Arthur's "weird spread" does this.)

Prep

Figure out how you'll create sacred space. Create a Tarot altar for the working – simple or elaborate. You might want to think about lighting – mysterious, but enough light to see the cards clearly.

Need – a Tarot deck for each person (or a few people can share cards), or an online card generator (see above). Use a favorite deck for this working – whatever calls to you.

Also need – journal and pen; water; anything needed for invocations, etc.

You may also want to do some prep for the Charging the Outcome step – see near end of this working.

Preparing Your Book of Shadows

On a fresh page of your journal or Book of Shadows, write the date and this title: Journey of the Spirit. Under it, write "Question" and leave an inch or so blank.

Below that, copy this list, leaving about an inch under each one (use two pages if needed):

- Self-Signifier
- Call or Challenge
- Obstacle
- Ally
- Testing / Initiation
- Climactic Struggle / Showdown
- Triumphant Conclusion / Return

Journey of the Spirit
A personal ritual of transformation

Question

Self-Signifier

Call or Challenge

Obstacle

Ally

Testing / Initiation

Climactic Struggle / Showdown

Triumphant Conclusion / Return

NOTES

INTUITIVE READINGS: A Quick Review

See beginning of this handbook for a full intro to this topic.

Here's a quick way to read a card for yourself. Try using it for your journey reading, taking a minute or two per card.

Intuitive readings are a way of encountering Tarot as a personal magical tool. The point is to discover your own unique relation with Tarot, rather than looking up other people's meanings in books.

In intuitive readings there are no wrong answers, only fresh inspirations – the point is to tune into what our inner voice is telling us. Our first thought is often the truest, least-censored response.

(0) state your question – write it down. Then turn over your card.

(1) name a few objects or beings in the card that catch your eye.

(2) name one object or being that is you.

(3) make up a simple story about what is happening in the card.

(4) say in one or two quick sentences what the card tells you about your question and your life.

🌀 **Book of Shadows** – write the name of the card and your thoughts. If you feel stuck, write the first thing that pops into your head. Follow your own muse wherever it takes you, and don't worry about what other people (or Tarot books) think or say.

WORKING – Journey of the Spirit

When your prep is ready, step out of the space. When you are ready to re-enter, take a breath and let go of any expectations about what is going to happen. Take a breath and dedicate yourself to the magical flow. Step into the space.

Create sacred space as you have planned – acknowledge First People, ground, cast the circle, invoke elements and allies.

As a final invocation, take a moment and say a few words of welcome to all the storytellers of history – from mothers at the crib to our favorite novelists. Welcome the magic of stories!

Tarot Reading: Your Question

Take a breath and close your eyes. Take as much time as you need to come up with a question about where your life is going. It might be specific (“Should I quit playing piccolo and take up the tuba?”), or it might be broad and general (“What can this reading show me about my art and creativity?”). When you have a question, speak it aloud. If it feels right, write it down in your book next to the word Question. Speak it again.

Drawing Your Cards

First, lay the entire deck *face up* (if online, find a way to view all the cards from a deck). Choose one card that signifies you – whatever card speaks to you.

Then choose a second card (face up) that signifies the “desired outcome” – a card that shows generally how you want your Question to work out. Lay these two face-up cards about a foot apart.

Shuffle the rest of the cards and lay them *face down* (or set Tarot-card generator for random). Soften your gaze and let your non-writing hand hover over the cards. Gradually choose five cards, placing them *face down* in a row between the two face-up cards. Set the rest of the deck aside.

Online, you may need to draw cards one at a time. If you get a repeated card, you can draw again.

First Card: Self-Signifier

In your Book of Shadows, under the word Self-Signifier, write the name of the first face-up card you chose. Write about why you chose this card to represent yourself, and what images attracted you.

Second Card: Call or Challenge

The next card, face down, will represent our Call or Challenge. If our journey was an ancient myth, this is the moment where the main character hears about a monster that threatens their village – and realizes they must fight it.

What will your personal challenge be? Tarot can't tell you – but it can help you discover it for yourself.

Turn the card over and do a quick intuitive reading. You can follow your own practice, or follow the four-step process above. Let the card inspire you, not limit you. End by saying what the card tells you about your Call or Challenge. Write down your first thoughts, along with the name of the card.

Third Card: Obstacle (External and/or Internal)

The next card will give you information about an Obstacle that gets in your way. Sometimes the Obstacle is external – a person or situation is thwarting us. More often, the true Obstacle is internal – it's not another person who blocks me, but my own doubts and fears of standing up to that person or finding a creative solution.

Turn the card over and do a quick intuitive reading, as above. Think about the Question you asked, about your Call or Challenge – then say what Obstacle is getting in your way. Write down your first thoughts, along with the name of the card.

Fourth Card: Ally

Our path may be blocked – but luckily we aren't alone on our journey. One or more Allies are ready to help. It may be another person that we need to seek. Or it might be a spirit helper or an animal ally who can bring energies that we need.

We may know some of our Allies. But there may be others we never suspect. Tarot can help discover those hidden Allies.

Turn over the next card and read it as above. For this step, think about your Challenge and the Obstacle you face. Then, along with the name of the card, spontaneously write what sort of Ally you want or need. Is it a companion? A teacher? A fierce guardian? A trickster? Don't worry about being realistic or following the card – ask for what you want and need.

Fifth Card: Testing / Initiation

A magical journey often includes some sort of instruction, followed by a Test or Initiation. If the heroine is going to face their challenge, they need to gain (and prove) some new skills.

What new skills or knowledge do you need to answer your challenge? Turn over the next card and do an intuitive reading, as above. Think again about your Call or Challenge, your Obstacle, and your Ally. Then, along with the name of the card, write about what new skills or knowledge you might need to gain. Write whatever comes to mind.

Sixth Card: Climactic Struggle / Showdown

Nearly every great myth, legend, or fairy tale winds up with a Climactic Struggle. Sometimes it's a battle with demons, such as Beowulf. Other times it's a showdown with an authority figure, such as the stepmother in Cinderella.

In real life, our struggles are usually less epic. Maybe our "Showdown" is a difficult talk with a parent, a friend, or a boss. Sometimes it's a change in our life, such as a commitment to study for a big exam in a class we hate, or a decision to eat healthier food.

You have framed a Question, answered a Call, and traced the steps of a magical journey. What Showdown or change is needed to bring the journey to completion?

Turn over the next card and do an intuitive reading, as above. Consider what action needs to be taken – and especially what difficult decisions need to be made. Along with the name of the card, write your thoughts – and consider writing at least one concrete step that you can take.

Seventh Card: Triumphant Conclusion

You've reached the final card, which you drew face-up – it's your ideal outcome, chosen before you had any idea of the path you would travel. How does the card

look now? Is it still your desired outcome? Would you choose a different outcome card now that you've experienced the journey?

Close your eyes and take a breath. Open your eyes and do a quick intuitive reading, as above. For the final step, say aloud what this card means as far as the outcome of your Question and your entire Journey.

Then, along with the name of the card, write your thoughts.

If you are satisfied, you're ready to empower the outcome. However, if your final card now seems less than ideal, flip through the deck face-up until you find a "desired outcome" card that you prefer. Write a bit about why you would prefer this conclusion to your journey, including possible problems and pitfalls.

Charging the Outcome

As part of your Journey, you may have written down a concrete step that you feel you need to take. If not, do that now. Read it again.

If it seems right, move ahead to charging the outcome. If not, write some more about what action, if any, you feel you can commit to.

To charge the outcome, you can do a working such as the Overflowing Cup (allow 10 extra minutes). If time is short, how about a song? Or sing an upbeat chant. For these and other charging ideas, see *Dancing the Spiral* on next page.

Opening Sacred Space & Journaling

When you have completed the working, open sacred space, remembering to devoke whatever you have invoked.

✪ **Book of Shadows** – afterward, take some time to write in your journal (or you may want to do it before opening your circle). If you're a group, agree on some journaling time before you move on to snacks and socializing.

This section is excerpted from

Dancing the Spiral: A Companion to the Writings of Starhawk

Ritual, spellwork, activism, and more – plus over 150 pages of workings and exercises for individuals and circles. See next page.

Visit WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral

DANCING THE SPIRAL!

A COMPANION TO THE WRITINGS OF STARHAWK FOR CIRCLES AND SOLITARIES

Next up from Luke Hauser – a handbook of practical magic!

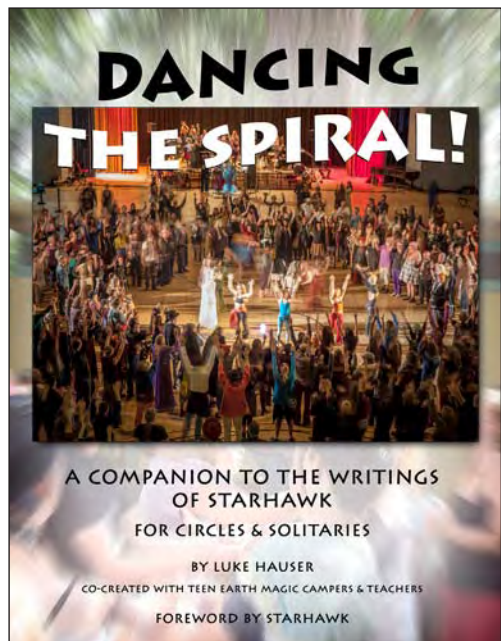
Ritual skills, magical workings, activist history and prep, Tarot, labyrinths, spellwork, and much, much more!

350 pages of witchcamp-tested magic for individuals, classes, and circles.

Links to resources and music playlists, plus in-person and online rituals, classes, workshops, and retreats with Starhawk and Reclaiming.

Publication planned for 2023 – but you can download the almost-completed draft now!

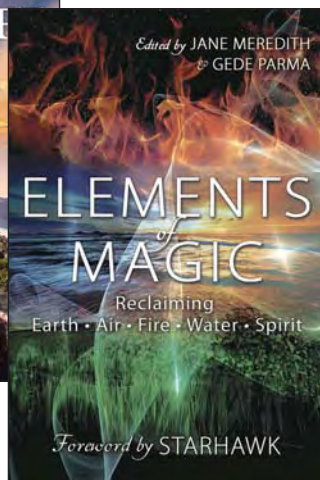
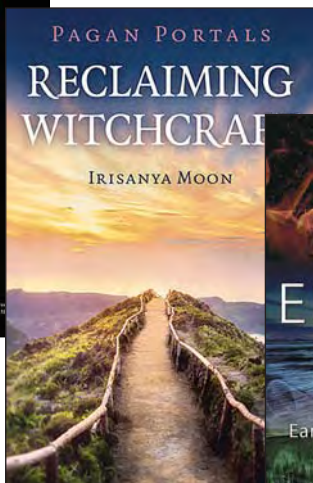
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MAGICAL RESOURCES & MUSIC



Writings, books, downloads,
manuals, back issues – a treasure
trove of resources!



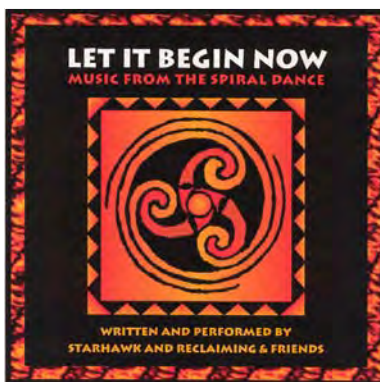
Reclaiming.org/reclaiming-books

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WeaveAndSpin.org/archives

Witchcamp.org



Chants & Music from Reclaiming!

WeaveAndSpin.org/playlists

Revolutionary Pagan Workers' Vanguard

Many of the sketches, satires and even a few minor characters in this book first appeared in the legendary pages of the Revolutionary Pagan Workers' Vanguard.

The RPWV was a long-running satire page that first appeared in Reclaiming Quarterly magazine around 1997 and still pops up from time to time. Luke Hauser co-edited these publications.

The complete Collected Works of the RPWV – nearly 40 issues plus other humor from the pages of Reclaiming Quarterly – are available as a free PDF on the RQ website:

ReclaimingQuarterly.org/web/rpwv

More Reclaiming Websites

Reclaiming.org | Witchcamp.org | WeaveAndSpin.org



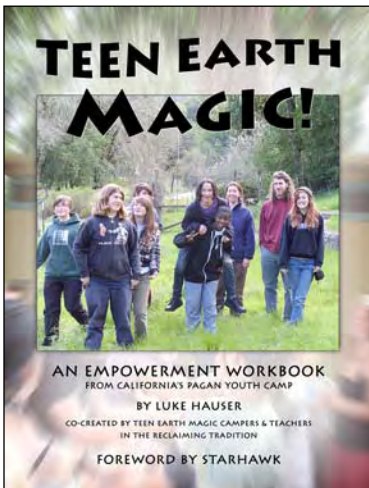
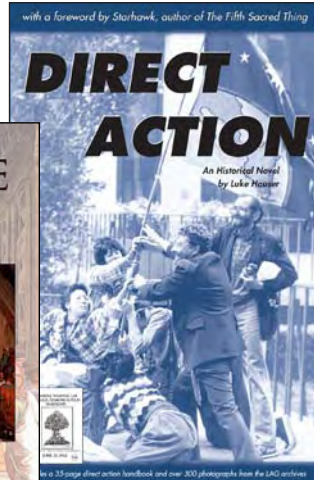
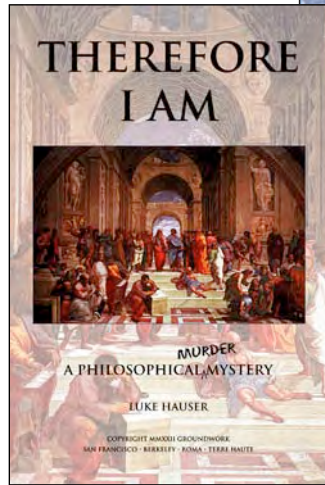
The Pagan Cluster (brooms and pointy hats optional) takes to the streets in their never-ending campaign for peace, progress, prosperity, and paganism. Photo from RPWV.

OTHER BOOKS BY LUKE HAUSER

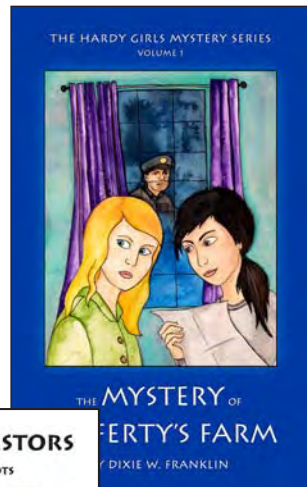
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Para-Fictional
Novels

Sort of true,
sort of fiction



Hardy Girls
Mysteries
For kids
& others



OUR MAGICAL ANCESTORS

RECLAIMING OUR TANGLED ROOTS

Read Luke Hauser's essay & more online - Wewetand@pgh.org/history



"Insightful, good-humored, generous, with that open-minded readiness to recognize merit in many different sources of inspiration that is one of the best features of the Reclaiming tradition."
-Ronald Hutton, Professor of History, University of Bristol

"Presents an enormous amount of material in a very attractive and readable way."
-Michael D. Bailey, Department of History, Iowa State University
Associate Editor: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft

Magical Nonfiction

And see page 295 for
Dancing the Spiral!

MURDER ON ORACLE STREET?!

The owner of Arcane Wisdom Magicke Shoppe is dead. His revolutionary new deck, the Trismegistus Meister Tarot, is missing. What happened that night outside Happy Endings, the notorious house of divination?

Could the culprit be one of the locals on Oracle Street? Perhaps gnostic sage Madame Bluebloodsky? Self-promoting raconteur Alabaster Crockley? Or maybe feminist maven Wendy Womansdaughter, owner of the Wiccan Wonderland?

Did the shifty mountebank from the esoteric street faire have a hand? And what about millionaire Cornelius De Roquefort, founder of the Headstone Eclectic Metaphysical Outlet chain?

Will the Universal Pan-Pagan Interfaith Council – UPPIC, the highest authority in the brave new Pagan world of the Great Return – succeed in hushing up the affair?

Worse yet, is UPPIC looking for a convenient scapegoat?

Join detective and resident custodian Jeff Harrison as he immerses himself in the minutiae of Tarot, taxing all of his intuitive and janitorial skills in a desperate attempt to clean up the messy affair – before he faces trial by ordeal!

No ancestors have been irremediably harmed in the writing of this book.

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"The most important work of theoretical esoterica since Karl Marx's classic Das Ritual." – E. Levi, Paris

"Deeply insightful – worthy of considerable disrobing!" – A. Crowley, London

"Affirms the value of magic in solving mysteries." – M. Adler, Isle of Apples

