

## CHAPTER 1: UNWITTING BETRAYAL

“Stanford, can you hurry it up?” I said with mild irritation. Yeah, his name really was Stanford, though I didn’t usually call him that unless I was annoyed with him. Guess where his parents wanted him to go to school.

“I’m doing this as fast as I can, *Taliesin!*” he snapped back, his fingers clicking extra hard on the keys. I knew I had pushed too hard. He never called me Taliesin unless he was genuinely mad at me. “And it’s Stan.”

“I know. Sorry. I’m just anxious...”

“You’re always anxious! Maybe if you would learn how to use a computer better yourself, you wouldn’t have to rely on someone as slow as I am.”

“You’re not slow,” I replied, giving him a pat on the shoulder. “Hell, you could probably work faster than the people who designed the computer in the first place.” That wasn’t just empty flattery. Stan knew technology like a time traveler from the future. I, on the other hand, couldn’t quite figure out how to update my Facebook status.

“Okay,” said Stan in a tone that suggested I was not yet quite forgiven, “the virus scan finished, and I made sure all your security software is up-to-date. Your computer is clean for now, but stop clicking on links in email from people you don’t know.”

“Thanks, Stan. My computer would have gotten the digital equivalent of leprosy long ago if you hadn’t been around.” I got a little smile out of Stan then. I made a mental note to be more careful not to call him Stanford. It wasn’t that he was really that temperamental. Well, actually I guessed he was pretty temperamental, but he had good reason. His parents put as much pressure on him as if they believed he was coal and were trying to make a diamond out of him. Whatever he achieved—4.5 grade point average, getting into AP Physics (normally a senior class) as a high school freshman, creating a successful website design business with several corporate clients—nothing, and I mean nothing, was ever enough. They gave him some praise, yes, but then they started right on pushing him toward the next big achievement.

Add to the parental pressure the fact that Stan and I had known each other practically since birth, but that recently, I had been a constant reminder of what puberty hadn’t yet done for him. We were both sixteen, but I had, as the adults were fond of saying, “shot up” and “filled out,” so that, though I didn’t exactly have the build of a basketball player or a bodybuilder, I could draw the occasional female glance and was sometimes mistaken for eighteen. Stan, by contrast, was a sixteen-year-old who looked thirteen or fourteen. It’s okay to look like a cute little kid when you are a little kid, but not really all that great when you’re sixteen. The fact that I could fend off the bullies that would otherwise have circled Stan like sharks should have been some consolation, but, though we never talked about it, I felt sure Stan didn’t want to be dependent on me—or anyone else—for that kind of protection. He had tried martial arts, where his size wouldn’t have been as much of an obstacle, but he apparently didn’t have the coordination for it, so he ended up dependent on me, whether he wanted to be or not.

“Tal?” asked Stan. I glanced over, and Stan was looking back with an odd expression on his face. He looked like guys our age look when they first realize their parents have left some details out of the sex talk, and they want to ask a buddy but don’t quite know how to bring the subject up without sounding completely clueless. Since I was pretty sure Stan’s parents viewed him as more machine than guy anyway, I could almost see the gaping holes his dad’s talk would have contained—if they had even had the talk at all.

“Yeah?” I replied curtly, mentally bracing myself.

“Can I ask you something?” Oh God, here it comes!

“Sure!” I said with very, very fake cheeriness. “Ask away.”

“You remember a few weeks ago, when you stayed over at my house?” Okay, so I hadn’t seen that one coming.

“Yeah,” I answered, trying to figure out where he was going with this.

“Do you know you talk in your sleep?”

The question hit me like a brick right between the eyes. Hell, more like a whole brick wall. I realized that I had started breathing faster and tried to appear calm.

“I don’t know,” I quipped lamely. “After all, I’m asleep when it happens.”

“Well, you do.” Stan opened his mouth as if to continue, but he didn’t.

“Okay, enough with the suspense.” This time the fake cheer sounded fake even to me. “So what did I say?”

“I didn’t know at first. I couldn’t understand. It wasn’t until later I realized I had left my computer on that night. I have a very sophisticated language recognition program on it, something my uncle, you remember, the Berkeley linguistics professor uncle, sent me as a Bar Mitzvah gift. I also have a really powerful microphone on that computer, and it picked up what you were saying. The language program identified it and tried to translate it.”

And here I was, worrying about what I might have said, when the biggest problem was apparently how I said it.

“The translation part didn’t work,” continued Stan, sounding more and more puzzled. “The software didn’t have a complete dictionary and grammar for the language you were speaking built in. But the program could at least identify the language. It was Welsh.”

“You know, my family is from Wales. My parents don’t speak Welsh, but I do have a few relatives who do. I must have picked up—”

“No!” shot back Stan, so vehemently that I reflexively pulled away from him. “There has to be more to it than that!” Now it was my turn to be puzzled.

“Why? Usually you are all about the logic, and that is a perfectly logical explanation.”

“Except that the language wasn’t modern Welsh. The software could have translated that. It was *medieval* Welsh, apparently an early form that is actually closer to the original Celtic. Unless someone in your family has been around for fifteen hundred years, you couldn’t have picked it up from them. There aren’t more than a handful of specialists in the world that can read it, and no one who can speak it fluently. My uncle confirmed that!”

*Well, damn your uncle to hell.* “Okay, Stan, there must be a glitch in your software.”

“I have double-checked...”

“So, what are you suggesting?” The cheerful tone was really wearing thin, but I didn’t know what else to do at this point. “Demonic possession? I think then I’d be doing Latin backwards, not medieval Welsh. No, maybe I’m a vampire who lived in medieval Wales. Though I’d like to think my abs are really more like a werewolves...”

“Don’t make fun of me!” Stan’s retort wasn’t exactly a shout, but it was certainly higher volume than he needed to make his point to someone who was sitting practically right next to him. It was also high pitched enough to be funny, but I suppressed even the faintest hint of a smile. “I’m asking a serious question,” Stan continued, slightly more calmly. You’re my best friend. If you don’t take me seriously, who else is going to?”

Choose your words carefully. “Stan, I’m not making fun of you. You have to admit, though, that the question isn’t exactly scientific, and you are always scientific in the way you analyze situations. Maybe the problem is that I have no idea where you’re going with this.”

Stan leaned closer and almost whispered, a sharp contrast to his previous shout. “The ancient Celts believed in reincarnation.”

The implicit question hung in the air for a while. I’m ashamed to admit that for a split second my old

battle training almost took over. Yes, for one bloody, irrational moment I thought about how many times I had killed before, how easy it would be to kill Stan and dispose of the body, all before my parents got home. Then I got a grip on myself. All of that killing was so long ago. I hadn't killed in this life, and I didn't want to. Besides, I was an only child, and Stan was the closest thing I had to a brother, as well as my truest friend. He was almost the last person I would ever want hurt, let alone kill. However, the fact that I was shocked enough to think such a dark thought for even a fraction of a second gives you some idea of how I dreaded what I knew was about to happen.

Stan, little human supercomputer Stan, had figured out my situation, as unscientific as it was.

Yeah, I know, unbelievable—but true, nonetheless. And now my best friend was going to hound me about it like the *Gwyllgi*, the black hound of destiny from the tales of my people.

Why the idea of my best friend knowing my secret horrified me so much I couldn't quite say, but ever since I had known the truth myself, I had also known that if anyone else shared that knowledge, the consequences could be unimaginably horrible. It was as if I had forgotten some *tynged* (“binding spell” is the closest I can come in English) that required me to keep the secret, on pain of death or worse. My heart grew colder than the fog sweeping in from the sea on a dismal night. I could almost feel the sharp fangs of the *Gwyllgi* biting through my chest.

The question was, what could I do about the situation now? Was it already too late? Was the cliché cat out of its bag already, and was it ready to claw out my eyes?

“Reincarnation?” I finally managed. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Think about it. I didn't notice it when we were kids, but recently you have done a lot of things that can't really be explained any other way.”

“Such as?” I asked, trying to sound contemptuous about the whole idea but sounding shaky instead.

“Well, there's that,” said Stan smugly, indicating my harp with a sweeping gesture. “You played the guitar for years, but you never touched a harp, and out of nowhere you con your parents into getting you one, you take a few lessons, and suddenly you're a concert quality harpist? I don't buy that for a minute. But if you had played the harp in a previous life, your sudden ability makes sense. You know literature better than I do, but didn't Arthur Conan Doyle write a line for Sherlock Holmes something like, ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?’”

“Mastering the harp took more work than you think.”

“No, it didn't. We hang out all the time, Tal. How much time did you spend practicing the harp? Enough for appearance's sake, I guess, but not enough to really learn it from scratch—and you know that as well as I do.”

“Okay, so I'm a prodigy. Mozart was composing music when he was a toddler.”

“Exactly, he didn't start when he was twelve or so. Statistically, if you are a prodigy, you are an awfully late-blooming one.” Well, he had me there.

“I still play guitar, though.”

Stan raised an eyebrow at that. “Yeah, in a garage band that should never have gotten out of the garage.”

“Hey!”

“Don't pretend to be offended. Even you used to say you guys sucked. Then, all of a sudden, you become the Bards, and you are actually good, pretty much overnight.”

“We aren't that good.”

“Horse manure.” That was Stan's idea of cursing. “You played at the Troubadour last summer. I was there, remember.” Yeah, I'd had to do some heavy lobbying with Stan's parents to let him go to LA for a weekend with a *band*. Now I wished I hadn't.

“And then there is that.” Stan pointed to my fencing foils, leaning again the wall in their carrying

bag. “You were in AYSO soccer for years, all set to be starting varsity in high school—and then you just dropped it, and started fencing instead. And you were good at fencing right away, just like the harp. I’ve been to some of your competitions. I’ve seen you beat people who have been fencing for years. I heard my parents talking about it. They don’t understand why you aren’t trying to do what it takes to get on the Olympic team. Tal, the Olympic team! Four years ago, you didn’t even know what a fencing foil was. Then there is your sudden interest in medieval reenactments.” That last I used as a way to camouflage my possession of some real weapons, but I had to admit I had kind of become the star of the show—I should have been more careful.

“And just look around the room, Tal.” I did, and again, he had a point. How could I have been so sloppy? I should have kept up the typical teenage boy decor: sports poster; maybe a band poster or two; images of strikingly beautiful, if unattainable, models and celebrities; something that would have made me seem more normal. Instead I had Celtic crosses, Welsh flags, mythologically themed art reproductions. The room was altogether too medieval, not to mention too green, to seem anything like the typical teenager’s lair. In retrospect, I was surprised Stan hadn’t started asking questions much sooner.

Stan fell silent, clearly waiting for a response. I couldn’t even begin to think of a suitable one. How could I possibly explain all the changes in my life, without letting him know who—and what—I really was?

So instead I walked over and started to play the harp and sing—in Welsh. Nothing much to lose at this point.

Stan was dumbfounded...during the brief time he remained awake. One trick I had mastered long ago, at least 1500 years ago, give or take a century, was using my music to charm someone to sleep. Needed that one for my parents more than once, I can tell you. Anyway, Stan looked as if he were trying to fight the effect, but if so he only lasted a few seconds; then he slouched over in his chair, nearly falling off. My reflexes were good enough for me to catch him in time and lay him gently on my bed. Whenever I used that kind of magic on someone, they never seemed to remember it afterward, so at least I hadn’t made the situation any worse.

“Yes, Stan, I should have known I couldn’t fool you,” I whispered to him. “I can’t just tell you the truth, or I would have, believe me. What can I say? My parents don’t know it, but they named me Taliesin for a reason.” Stan twitched almost as if he had heard me, but I knew he was under too deeply for that.

Not knowing what to do with Stan, or even if anything I did with him would help at this point, I listened to the slow, steady sound of his breathing and let my mind wander back over the last few years.

I remembered vividly how much I had resented my parents for naming me Taliesin, not exactly the most masculine sounding choice any way you look at it. Maybe in Wales such a name could have worked, but in the United States? Ridiculous! Despite the name, though, I had been a fairly normal kid, good at soccer, so-so at school, someone who played my rock music louder than my parents thought necessary, and then...

And then puberty had hit, and when I say “hit,” I mean “HIT”—like a sledge hammer to the skull, smashing my mind into hundreds, maybe even thousands, of little, bloody, screaming fragments. The worst part was not being able to tell anyone, not even my parents. I kept imagining spending the rest of my life in a mental institution, and the Hollywood images stirred around by my pre-teen imagination could conjure up a fairly lurid picture of what mental institutions were like. Whatever was happening inside me made me physically ill, like the sharp edges of my shattered mind were twisting around and ripping up my innards. I was even in the hospital for a few weeks. It wasn’t a mental hospital, but I figured it was only a matter of time until I ended up in one.

Then, just as abruptly as my mind had come apart, it had snapped back together like someone assembling a psychic jigsaw puzzle. Sure, everything wasn’t in exactly the same place, and there were days when I felt like pieces were missing, but at least I could function. You see, nothing was actually broken in the first place; it just took my adolescent mind a while to process what was happening to it.

And what was happening? People associate a belief in reincarnation mostly with eastern religions, but, just as Stan had said, the ancient Celts had a similar belief—and, if my experience was any indication, they were right. Sometimes people have fleeting memories of previous lives, but for the most part they live in blissful ignorance of who they might have been and what they might have done. I didn't know why, but suddenly the dam that separated my past lives from my current one had dissolved, drowning me in a tidal wave, thousands of years of memories and of radically varying personalities all pouring over me, giving me no room to breathe. I might have lost myself; I might have washed up on shore, broken and rotting, and ended up in the mental institution I so dreaded. Somehow I had hung on. Eventually my current life personality reasserted its dominance, though flavored by my newly remembered past, as my changing interests indicated.

My parents told me afterward that Stan had been at the hospital almost as much as they had, that he often held my hand and talked to me, that almost as often he cried when he thought nobody was looking. I often wondered if his friendship had somehow anchored me, saved me.

And yet here I was, standing by him as he slept, with some of my ancient and medieval past personas wanting to throw him out the window, smother him with a pillow, run him through with a sword—anything to mend the *tynged* and save me from that uncertain something waiting to swallow me up. I didn't really blame them in a way—some of them came from much more savage times in which moral dilemmas did not interfere with survival. Fortunately, they were just echoes of the past; I was the one who was in control, and if I had to face death or worse so Stan could live, then I would. Easy to say, I know, but at the time I really believed it. My past lives gave me a wild side I sometimes had to restrain, but they also gave me wisdom “beyond my years,” you might say.

That did, however, leave the question of what to do with Stan. I could do more than charm him to sleep. I could, for example, make him forget, but that process posed more risks. I would have trouble wiping just the memories that threatened me, and, looking down at him and thinking about his brilliant mind, I just couldn't make myself take the chance. Besides, unless I erased much more, and took an even bigger risk, he would just come to the same conclusion again at some point in the near future. Instead of erasing his memories, I settled for a temporary fix and made him think he had dreamed the conversation with me. When he awoke, he would be a little groggy, not prone to act out the discussion he thought he had dreamed. I would walk him home—he lived just down the block—and I would buy myself a few days perhaps, to figure out what to do.

“Yes, Stan,” I whispered to him again. “You were right. I am Taliesin Weaver right now, but I was also the Taliesin who journeyed with Arthur to Annwn and then wrote about the journey later. And I was the more ‘historical’ Taliesin who was the court poet to King Urien of Rheged. I am betting you looked him up in *Wikipedia* and would have asked me about him had I given you half a chance. I have been other Taliesins as well, and many, many other people. The best part of all that, though it almost crushed me, is I can access any memory, use any skill from any of them; at least I can if I concentrate hard enough. Why that is true, what the purpose of all of it is, I really, really, wish we could find out together, but that, my friend, is a journey I am going to have to take alone.”

With that I brought him back to semi-wakefulness, just as I had planned, walked him home to make sure he got there in one piece, went back to my place, had the usual tense dinner with my parents, played the harp a little, and then crawled into bed, though naturally I couldn't sleep.

Around midnight I heard howling that would be enough to freeze anyone's blood, let alone someone like me who knew what it meant. The howl was followed soon enough by harsh scratching at the windows and by a moaning lament in, you guessed it, Welsh.

Over breakfast, my parents speculated about what could have caused all the racket last night, but I already knew.

We had heard the *Gwrach y Rhibyn*, the Welsh Banshee. When it spoke, it spoke to the relatives of

the one who was going to die, wording its lament from their point of view.

Last night it spoke to my parents. It repeated, "Oh, my son!" to them over and over.

Now what Stan did or didn't know became the least of my worries.

The *tynged* had been broken, and the price for its breaking was death. Mine.