

The Old Hero

Book 3: The Battle of Mt. Diablo

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Chapter One: George at the Door

The porch light caught a pair of green eyes waiting for them at Clara's Mill Valley house. A striped brown tabby sat squarely on the mat, as though she had been guarding the door all along.

Clara slowed. The cat didn't budge--only cocked an ear and gave a flick of her tail, as if to say: Well? I've been waiting.

Roy raised his hands to his head, pantomiming cat ears and mimicking her posture. He tilted one ear dramatically, a foolish grin tugging at his mouth. "Mrraio?" he asked, attempting fluent Catspeak.

"Mrao," the tabby replied, low and steady, eyes locking on his. The sound went through him like a tuning fork struck on bone.

Roy's chest tightened. "She says her name is George," he translated softly, suddenly serious. "She's ours. And unless she's fed immediately, she'll perish on the spot."

Clara burst out laughing, her hair catching fire in the last light as she scooped the cat into her arms. "George? That's ridiculous. And perfect."

George pressed her head beneath Clara's chin and purred so hard Clara felt it in her collarbone. Clara closed her eyes, surprised at the rush of tenderness. It felt like being claimed.

Roy blinked at them, dazed. "She also insists she'll be an excellent guard cat and--uh--nanny for the twins. Wait. What twins!?"

Clara hugged the purring cat tighter, ignoring him.

Roy looked from the woman he loved to the cat who had chosen them, and his grin softened into something deeper. "She's more than she seems," he murmured, and for once he wasn't joking.

In a nearby tree, a crow spoke, "Caw caw caw, caw!" (This is my tree, and everything that can be seen is mine.)

It flew off.

Chapter Two: The Nap Interrupted

They tromped into the big, homey kitchen--redwood paneling glowing warmly, tiles cool underfoot, a broad oak table waiting like an old friend.

Clara set the cat on the table and pointed at the flap in the back door. "This is the doggy door," she said with mock sternness. "For going outside. Not for mischief." She flicked the flap with her wrist.

George flicked her tail--we'll see--then leapt down just in time for Clara to crack open a can of albacore. She devoured it with gusto, each bite punctuated by throaty little grunts of satisfaction.

"I'll make brunch, then we can have a Sunday nap," Clara said, winking. "Daddy, maybe set three places?"

Brunch unfolded in glorious excess: scrambled eggs with cheddar, thick buttered sourdough, strawberries drowning in cream. George, astonishingly polite now, sat upright in her chair, nibbling daintily while Roy and Clara devoured theirs like castaways ashore.

Afterward, Clara tugged Roy toward the bedroom with mock solemnity. "Adult nap. Come along." She tossed a glance over her shoulder. "Behave, cat."

The door clicked. Muffled laughter, rustle of sheets.

Then--crash!

Clara, bare as sunlight, strode into the living room. George crouched beside a toppled glass vial--the elixir Tamalpais had entrusted to Roy. The stopper rolled loose, contents gone but for a single shining drop. George's tongue flicked. Gone.

The change was instant. Fur rippled, body stretching like storm-tossed water. In heartbeats she stood bobcat-sized--still tabby, still white-bellied, but her eyes blazed emerald.

Roy stumbled in, awestruck. "Oh, you are a bad kitty," he whispered.

Clara only smiled wider. She leaned into him, laughter low, voice a purr. "So... you like cats?"

Her lips brushed his cheek, then her tongue flicked playfully. He sputtered laughter. They tumbled back to bed, wrestling with wild joy.

This time the door stayed open. George gave them one disdainful look, sat primly, and began to wash with the air of a queen whose subjects had gone feral. "Apes," she muttered, though her rumbling purr betrayed contentment.

At last she padded over, curled into Clara's arm, and drifted into dreams with them.

Chapter Three: Dr. Amos Fox

Clara woke with a start. “Ruh roh.” In her dream she had seen an evil red orb, distant yet focused on her house. Evil was near--closing fast.

“Roy! Grab your things and the cat. Ten seconds. Meet me at the car--we’ll dress on the way!”

Roy didn’t argue. He swept George under one arm, snatched clothes, cloak, sword, feather from Tamalpais, and bolted.

Clara grabbed her go-bag, shoes, keys, phone. She hesitated over panties. “Commando it is,” she muttered, and sprinted.

By the time Roy and George tumbled into the car, Clara had the engine snarling. Tires squealed as they tore uphill.

“Buckle up,” Clara said calmly. “We’re going to see Dr. Amos Fox. My godfather.”

George pressed her nose to the glass, tail swishing to the beat of “Badass Woman Driving.” Roy just held on, dazzled and alarmed.

Minutes later they coasted to a halt at wrought-iron gates. They opened silently, as if recognizing her. Gravel crackled beneath the tires as redwoods closed in.

At the end of the path stood a tall, lean man--silver hair, ageless face, eyes clear as spring water. His smile was unhurried, already forgiving them for being late to a destiny none had asked for.

Beside him sat a poised Border Collie, tail sweeping, gaze sharp. She studied Roy, Clara, George... then locked eyes with the giant tabby. George stared back, unblinking, calculating odds.

“Clara,” the man said warmly, like kin returned. “And this must be Roy.” He bowed, Buddhist-style.

Before they could answer, thunder rolled. Smoke rose from the direction of Clara’s house.

Chapter Four: This Means War

“Why don’t you kids get dressed and wait in my Land Cruiser,” Fox suggested. “Leave your car keys and phones under the seat. Wipe off Roy’s prints. We may come back. Or not.”

He strode inside with Ruby padding at his heels. A few minutes later, an encrypted Telegram message flew to his old Hell’s Angel friend, Bear. Fox slung his medical bag over his shoulder, whistled Ruby close, and strolled into the garage humming “Black Magic Woman”.

The Land Cruiser rolled out--leaving yesterday’s trouble, heading straight into tomorrow’s.

Fox cut Roy a sidelong glance. “So. A little bird says you need to see Tamalpais again. What’s she stirred up this time?”

Clara smirked. "Trouble? Try fun. In two days I've married a warrior-king, adopted a giant smart-aleck cat, gotten pregnant with twins, and become wanted by every agency from ICE to the FBI--including Animal Control. Oh, and I'm not wearing underpants."

Fox stroked his beard, eyes twinkling. "Well. Sounds like you've got it under control."

Ruby thrust her nose between the seats, sharp bark. (It's the cat's fault.)

George swatted her muzzle, claws sheathed. "Mrao." (Nonsense, doggo.)

"Cut it out!" Clara snapped. Then, "Godfather--you've met Tamalpais?"

Fox chuckled. "Since the '60s. Dead concert. She takes holidays, you know. Incognito. She loves Santana. He wrote her a song. Knows every crow in the Bay, they keep her briefed. She's bitter about how it all turned out--Kesey, Garcia, Viet Nam, RFK, LBJ. Flower Power fizzled, country went to hell."

He fell quiet. Oddly sheepish. Clara caught it--was he blushing? That sly old fox...

Fox cleared his throat. "So, Roy--how do you plan to support my god-daughter and the twins?"

Roy muttered, "Why does everyone--human, animal, divine--know she's pregnant before I do?"

Clara kissed him. "My love, I meant to tell you. We've been busy. And yes--George is psychic, and the crows gossip."

The Cruiser climbed toward the summit. And waiting in the lot was Tamalpais in her tall-woman form--raven-black hair bound with a headband, buckskin dress clashing with green combat boots and streaked warpaint. Bow on her back, tomahawk at her hip, Colt .45 on her belt. She was packing heat--and a whole lot of attitude.

Chapter Five: Tamalpais

Tamalpais looked every inch the terrifying ancient ghost-goddess-princess--but in the flesh, tangible, solid. And surprisingly hot, considering her age.

She slipped into the back beside Clara, George, and Ruby. "Hello, Amos. You look well."

"Thank you, Your Highness. And you look... fantastically terrifying today." Fox studied her in the rear-view.

Clara listened, half-horrified, half-delighted. Imagine! Her eighty-year-old, ex-hippie godfather making a move on a million-year-old witch goddess. Brave man.

"George," she commanded. "Go sit on Roy's lap. Give Tamalpais some room."

The massive cat sprawled across Roy with a grunt. She grinned. "Godfather, why don't I drive? You and Her Excellency can... strategize." Smirk.

They switched seats. Clara rolled the Cruiser forward.

Tamalpais leaned close to Fox. "We may be killed tonight. Or maimed, disfigured, cast into the abyss."

"Don't tease," he said dryly.

She arched one eyebrow, pure Morticia Addams. "We've a long night ahead, Amos--perhaps our last. Time for a sip of my elixir?"

She produced a vial, half full of glowing liquid. One wave of her hand, and it brimmed over. Chuckling, she passed it to him. "Buckle up."

Fox drank. It was like spring water spiked with honey and lightning. Fire raced through his body. His heart pounded, his skin flushed, and years melted away. He looked forty, felt sixteen. He turned to Tamalpais like a starving man eyeing fresh cherry pie.

She smiled sweetly. "First, we slay the ancient evil."

"I'll explain the battle plan when we join Fox's ally, Bear," Tamalpais said.

Clara, steering with one hand, closed her jaw with the other. "Unbelievable."

Roy struggled under George's thirty pounds, then surrendered with a sigh. He caught Clara's eye. "To battle."

A shadow swept across the sun. George bristled, fur on end. "Mrroaow!" (Step on it, Blondie!)

Chapter Six: Bear

As they descended the mountain, Roy sat in silence, wrestling with the strangeness of it all. He'd only been in this world a handful of days, yet already he'd found love, clan, and purpose. And now--called again to slay beasts.

So be it. Every land needs strong men with sharp blades. He had a family now. If his job was to clear the monsters from their path--then that was his lot, and he'd not shrink from it.

He glanced at Clara behind the wheel. She radiated delight, as if she'd been waiting her whole life for this wild ride. Roy felt blood hammer in his temples and a reckless grin tug at his mouth. A man could do worse than fight for such a woman.

Fox directed her past the public library. On the curb, a hulking man in a worn leather vest swung up into his Ford F-250 Super Duty--six seats, lift kit, enough torque to haul a tank. He fell in behind them without a word.

At a quiet lot the two vehicles nosed together. Clara killed the Land Cruiser's engine, tossed the keys under the seat, and stepped out. "Too hot to keep," Fox muttered. "It's tied to me."

Bear climbed down from the truck, massive and solid, with the rolling walk of a man who'd fought both fists and wars--and usually won.

"Evenin'," he rumbled. "How 'bout we swing by the Depot--coffee, cake, and a bathroom break? Long night ahead."

Fox nodded. "We'll need fuel."

It was nearly six, with hours yet before their midnight rendezvous at Diablo. Enough time to regroup, and not much more.

In the parking lot behind the café, Tamalpais took command. She didn't raise her voice; she didn't need to. "Set up your conference, Bear. Call in your chiefs."

Bear tapped his phone. Within minutes the speakers in his truck crackled alive, a dozen rough voices patched in from across the Bay Area.

The goddess stood like a general before her army, backlit by the orange glow of sunset. When she spoke, it was flint and thunder: the ancient evil rising, the vessel it had chosen, the battle to come.

When she finished, silence. Even bikers know when there's nothing left to say.

"Bear," she said, turning to him at last. "Drink."

She pressed a vial into his hand. He sniffed it, shrugged, and knocked it back like a shot of bourbon.

The effect was immediate. Before their eyes, the sagging belly shrank, the bald crown sprouted dark hair, the stooped shoulders straightened. He flexed a hand, astonished, then grinned like a man who'd been given back his twenties.

"Whoo-eee!" Bear bellowed. "That's the good stuff!"

Tamalpais allowed herself the faintest smile. "Understatement."

She clapped once, sharply. "Enough chatter. We move. Obey the laws. No sudden speeds, no heroics. The police must not learn that World War Three begins tonight."

And just like that, the clan rolled out--one roaring Super Duty, two animals, a goddess, and the handful of mortals mad enough to ride with her.

Chapter Seven: Second Thoughts

The Ford's big diesel hummed steadily as it rolled east across the darkening Bay. No one spoke. Gravel-throated silence, thick as smoke, filled the cab.

Finally Tamalpais shifted in her seat. Her voice cut the quiet like a scalpel.

"Friends, there is still time to turn back. This may be a suicide run, and I won't lie--I feel guilty for dragging you along. If any of you want out, just say so. Step from this truck, thumb a ride, start a new life. Forget me--or remember me with a toast someday. Either way, you live. I can do this alone."

Roy straightened, but she raised a hand, forestalling him.

“And don’t make me into something I’m not. I am no goddess. No witch, black or white. No ghost. Yes, I have a princess’s sense of entitlement--but I’m not royalty. I don’t cast spells. I con rubes. I bluff. That’s all.”

Silence deepened. You could hear the engine ticking over, the tires swishing on asphalt.

Tamalpais went on, fierce and relentless now:

“Look hard at yourselves. Are you sane? Or did someone spike your orange juice with LSD? Roy and Bear are the only ones who know fighting from the inside. The rest of you--are you even sure which end of a blade is which? We’re not on our way to a Sunday school picnic. People are going to die tonight. Maybe you. Maybe me. Maybe all of us. Or maybe we rot in prison.

“And who the hell appointed you World-Savers? Who anointed you martyrs?”

Bear grunted low, but didn’t interrupt.

“I’ll tell you what I really am,” she said. “Just a very old woman. A Highlander without the lightning show--older than dirt, maybe older than the idea of dirt. I can’t remember being a child. My best trick? Persuasion. I talk, people do what I want. My second best? Illusion. I convince you not to believe your own eyes. Those are my ‘powers.’ Call it psychology with a knife in its boot. I could run for President tomorrow and win by a landslide.”

She took a breath, her eyes far away. “Yes, I can Vanquish. Yes, I can Shapeshift, and put mortals to sleep. That much is real. But those are skills, sharpened across millennia, not fairy dust. Roy’s portal, the elixir? Science that you don’t understand, not magic. But when you get killed, I can’t un-kill you. When you cry, I can’t un-cry your tears.”

She leaned toward the window latch. “Stop this truck. I’ll go the rest of the way as a crow. I’ll face the Evil One myself. That way your blood isn’t on my hands.”

Everyone spoke at once, a jumble of voices--denial, anger, loyalty, even laughter, all tangled together.

Then Fox, quiet until now, said flatly:

“We love you. Whither thou goest, we go.”

Chapter Eight: Rendezvous

The F-250 Super Duty carried Tamalpais and her improbable war-band--warriors, pranksters, mummies, and talkative animals--up to the North Gate of Mt. Diablo. It was 2330. A flick of her hand put the gatekeepers to sleep, another gesture Vanquished the lock. The truck rumbled through, climbing deeper into the mountain’s dark folds.

They stopped at a turnout to wait. The main army--the thousand Angels already scattered across the Bay--was busy keeping the cops and Feds chasing shadows: bonfires on bridges,

fistfights in bars, traffic accidents staged with theatrical precision. Only thirty-six had been chosen for the mountain itself.

Right on the stroke of midnight, they arrived. Not roaring but whispering, throttles low, bikes rolling like ghosts.

Bear climbed down from the cab and opened a wooden crate glowing faintly from within. His voice carried:

“Her Excellency, Tamalpais, requests that you drink of her elixir before battle. It’ll put fire in your blood and steel in your bones.”

The vials passed from hand to hand. One by one the Angels drank, eyes widening as youth and strength surged back through worn bodies.

“After victory,” Bear promised, “you’ll come to her mountain in three days to collect your rewards. For now--half of you lead our truck to the summit lot. The rest, hold back as reserve. Stay mounted; we may need a fast extraction.”

Engines murmured assent. The column moved out, winding upward through switchbacks toward the peak.

Tamalpais unfolded wings of shadow and was gone into the night--snuffing cameras, blanking witnesses, recruiting her bird-folk. Crows would cover her like a living stormcloud; Hawks and Eagles held in reserve. The Bluejays, incorrigible blabbermouths, were told there was a kegger waiting at the top.

Dawn touched the sky when Bear braked the truck in the summit lot. He fixed his phone to the dash, camera pointed at the open ground.

“Clara--driver’s seat. Keep her idling. And whatever happens, keep George, Ruby, and Fox safe inside. Like babes in cribs, hear me?”

He swung out, Roy at his side, Angels fanning into formation.

Chapter Nine: Showdown

At the far end of the asphalt stood the Vessel of the Evil One, grinning with manic delight. His voice was acid sugar:

“Welcome, travelers. Are you here for the keg party? Or to Worship Me, and kneel forever?”

Crows circled overhead, a tightening gyre of black wings.

Roy drew his sword, voice ringing like steel.

“Neither, Putrid Pustulence of Satan’s buttocks! We invite you to return to your foul kennel in the bowels of earth.”

The Vessel sneered. “And if I refuse?”

The crows dipped lower, shadows dragging across asphalt.

"Then we'll cut you, stomp you, slice you," Roy promised. "And we'll recite Vagon poetry until your ears bleed."

The Evil One spread his arms. "Then die."

He raised his power--only to feel a whisper at his back. Tamalpais had landed silently.

"Not today, bro," she said flat.

Her bow thrummed. The broadhead took him through the mouth, arrow jutting from his neck. The Vessel gurgled, clawing at the shaft. Tamalpais raised her hands for a Vanquishing--

--but his fury lashed out first. A psychic blow, gorilla-swing with a bat, hurled her down. She hit the tarmac like a sack of potatoes and lay still.

The lot detonated. Roy and Bear roared and charged, their madness contagious; the thirty-six Angels with them dropped all pretense of humanity, howling like berserkers. The crows fell upon the Vessel, wings and beaks a storm. Hawks and Eagles stooped from the clouds like spears. Even George and Ruby tumbled from the truck window, fur and fangs flashing.

The Vessel turned in circles, flailing, every swing another psychic hammer. Men staggered. Birds dropped, broken. Angels bled but kept clawing forward. And still the Evil One stood, coughing, choking, and yet--unbowed.

When silence finally fell, he alone remained on his feet. Bloody, but upright. Victorious.

He turned toward Tamalpais's unconscious body, lips shaping promises of torment unspeakable--

--and heard the last thing he expected: a diesel engine at full bore.

The F-250 came out of nowhere, four tons of steel fury. It hit him square. Flesh and bone went airborne. He landed broken, one eye rolling toward Tamalpais.

She stirred. With the calm of inevitability, she raised a hand, extended a single finger, and spoke the word.

The Vanquishing was absolute. Vessel and Master both winked out like a candle flame.

"Bye now," she whispered--before collapsing into darkness herself.

Chapter Ten: Aftermath

The battlefield was strewn with groaning Angels, bloodied birds, and smoking asphalt. But all who had drunk the elixir stirred and healed--flesh knitting, bones realigning.

All but three. Tamalpais lay white as marble. George and Ruby, still breathing, but dim.

Fox knelt by her. Quick exam, quick conclusion: concussion at least, maybe worse. He looked at Bear, desperation raw.

“Load her. We’ve got to move.”

He scooped her up like a child and sprinted to the truck. Bear swung behind the wheel. George and Ruby were lifted to the cab, while Roy and Clara clung to choppers' "bitch seats" as the strike team rolled downhill in ragged formation.

Fox cradled Tamalpais in the back, her head on his lap. Her breath shallow, her face too still.

“We need her conscious,” he muttered. “We need her to Jedi-wave us past the cops.”

“Any more elixir?” he demanded.

“Not a drop,” Bear said grimly.

Fox thought fast, then reckless. “Maybe there’s a trace in me.” He bent and kissed her--slow, lingering, a gambler’s last bet.

For a heartbeat, nothing. Then her eyes opened, green fire flaring.

“You frightened me,” she accused softly. “Do it again.”

“Okay, Morticia,” he grinned, relief cracking into laughter.

The truck barreled down the mountain, bikers flanking, the crows above forming a ragged escort. Behind them, a thousand Angels still lit the Bay on fire, keeping the road clear.

The war wasn’t over. But the Evil One was gone, at least for now.

The End
(continued in Book 4)