It was a warm spring afternoon in a picturesque French village, spring flowers in bloom in pots on window sills. At first glance the village seemed peaceful, calm and quiet. On second glance, the café, where the old men hang out, drinking espresso coffee strong and sweet, or absinthe, and playing cards and boules, was empty. In the village square there was a 1936 black Mercedes flying a swastika flag, two motorcycles, and a military truck. Several soldiers in grey-green uniforms stood guard, trying not to look bored, rifles held so they pointed toward the ground. Only one other person was visible - a large figure in overalls, worn overcoat and straw hat, a misshapen figure with short bowed legs and long arms, ambling toward the café with a rolling gait.

A scream rang out, the raw sound of someone pushed beyond the limits of pain and terror. The soldiers ignored it.

The figure stopped, its head swung from side to side, then it turned and walked swiftly in the direction of the sound with an odd rolling gait.

The soldiers stiffened, watching the figure. “Should we follow, corporal?”

“No, they have weapons. It’s only one old man who is fat and cannot walk properly.” They spoke German.

There were more screams, one a deeper voice, and the figure broke into an ungainly run. Around the square curtains and blinds inched back as unseen occupants tried to discover what was happening without being seen.

The figure entered the front gate of the house and headed towards the front door. A side window opened and a small girl about five wriggled through and ran for the front gate, looking behind her. A young man’s head poked through the window, but he was too big to get out that way. “The girl’s getting away!” he yelled in German.

The figure moved to intercept the girl, who collided with him and fell over, wailing. The figure stooped to pick her up and she squawked in fear, trying to get away.

Seen up close, the figure was grotesque, frightening. He was stooped, but built like a gorilla with short bandy legs and arms that reached his knees. He possessed a huge barrel chest, and a face that would have looked good on a gargoyle. His skin looked like granite too. “Collette, it’s me, Pierre. You’re safe now.” His voice was a deep rumble. He made soothing noises that sounded like the purr of a jungle cat. Pierre was a gardener at the chateau, everyone knew he was harmless, a bit slow of wits, and ugly as sin. The village children considered him a fairytale ogre and occasionally threw stones at him, but he never seemed to mind. Even his name Pierre was a joke, because it meant both Peter and rock.

The girl stopped struggling and allowed herself to be settled in the crook of Pierre’s left arm. He smelled like leaves and loam.

At that moment two soldiers burst from the front door. “Don’t let them get me!” she shrieked.

Both soldiers stopped dead when they saw Pierre. One unslung his rifle. “You caught her. Now give her to us.” he ordered in badly accented French.

“She doesn’t belong to you. Why do you want her? What are you doing in there?” Pierre rumbled, walking towards them.

“They hurt mama and papa!” Collette yelling. “They want to hurt me!”

“I am going inside.” Pierre growled. “Get on my back Collette, this may be dangerous.”

The soldier cocked his rifle, pointing it directly at Pierre. “Stand still or I fire! Give us the girl.”

Pierre stepped forward. A shot rang out, then Pierre’s long right arm struck, tearing the rifle from the soldier’s grasp and knocking him to the ground where he lay still, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. The other tried frantically to back away, but Pierre picked him up with one hand and slammed him into the ground headfirst, where he lay unmoving.

Pierre shook his head and walked carefully through the front door. The house was small, a corridor with a few small rooms, and stairs leading to bedrooms. There were sounds from the kitchen, moans, sobbing and other noises of pain. “Did you catch the girl?” a voice called out in German.

“Ja.” Pierre replied, pushing his way into the kitchen. Collette peered over his shoulder, eyes wide in shock.

A naked man and women were tied to chairs, both covered in cuts. The woman was unconscious, her entrails spilling bloodily into her lap. The man had been similarly injured, but appeared conscious. A blond man dressed in black was holding two bloody eyes in his left hand and a knife in his right, a second man was watching.

The second turned as Pierre entered, drawing a pistol. “Who are you? Stop or I will shoot.” He spoke perfect French.

“German barbarians!” Pierre spat, walking towards the man. The officer emptied his pistol at Pierre then stared bug eyed as he realised it had no effect. “I’m bullet proof.” Pierre picked the man up, casually broke his arms and legs, put him down again.

The torturer made a dash for the back door while this was happening, but Pierre lunged, grabbing his leg. The torturer kicked viciously at Pierre’s head, only to scream with pain as he injured his foot. Pierre broke his arms and legs before setting him down. “He won’t get away now.”

He turned to the two victims in chairs. The man was now bleeding profusely from a wound in his throat. “That looks bad. I need help.”

He walked out the back door into an area with a vegetable garden, hen house, barn, depleted haystack, assorted farming odds and ends. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he drew a deep breath and bellowed, a sound between fog horn and whale song, deep and painfully loud. Later the locals would claim it rattled windows and caused china plates to fall from shelves. It lasted nearly thirty seconds.

Collette finally found her voice. “What was that?” she asked in consternation.

“Mountain Troll yodelling. It’s how we communicate over distances. Help will come soon, from the chateau.”

Her voice became smaller. “What about mama and papa? Can you help them?”

“I’m a gardener, I’m not good at healing people. I told them it was urgent.” He began walking toward the barn.

“Oh. Can they understand Troll speech? Do Trolls really exist?”

“Several people at the chateau will understand. Trolls live in the high mountains, but it’s terribly cold there, I don’t like it.”

He looked at Collette with a sad expression. “I think I’m the last one. So I live at the chateau and work as a gardener and I have friends there and here in the village. You should hide in the barn, the soldiers are coming and they want to kill us.” Pierre set the girl on the ground. “You hide, I will stop them.”

“What if they hurt you?”

“I’m bullet proof and fire proof and very strong. Quick! They are coming down the side path! Stay low.” Collette disappeared into the barn, Pierre went swiftly to the pile of old bricks nearby, scooping up around thirty in a pouch formed by his coat. He turned to watch as eleven soldiers spread out around him, guns pointed.

“Put your hands up or we will shoot you.” The officer spoke fluent French.

“Go back to Germany if you want to live, barbarians!” Pierre growled in German, hefting a brick.

“You are a traitor then. Stop!” He didn’t duck fast enough,the brick hit him in the head and he dropped like a rag doll.

Eleven soldiers opened fire, six were still standing when they ceased, five turned to run, four ran for the road, but none reached the front fence.

Pierre vaulted the fence and made for the rest of the soldiers. Two had set up a machine gun and hit him with a hail of hot lead, which had about as much effect as hailstones might. A few seconds later they each took a brick to the head, and the gun fell silent. The rest made a scramble for the truck.

The Mercedes burst into life as the panicked driver tried to flee, and one of the soldiers was trying frantically to kick a motorcycle into life. He jumped and ran when Pierre approached. Pierre picked up the motorcycle and hurled it at the Mercedes, shattering the windshield. The car veered into the ditch at the side of the road.

By now the truck was moving, and Pierre leaped onto the bonnet, smashing a hand through the windshield and trying to pull the driver from his seat. That proved to be a mistake as the driver’s legs caught beneath the dashboard and pressed the accelerator. The truck lurched forwards.

Pierre dropped from the bonnet and grasped the tail of the truck as it went past. He was pulled off his feet and dragged, but he hung on. He got his feet under him and braced, then heaved the rear wheels off the ground. The truck stopped rapidly. Pierre took a deep breath, heaved the back higher and then tilted the truck sideways. It overbalanced and the Troll leaped clear as the truck slammed onto its side, engine racing.

“Hey, Pierre! Have you left any for me?”

Pierre turned to see his friend René, a thin, blond, elfin looking man dressed in green, and Lord Lukeios, a tall, slim Egyptian looking man dressed in a yellow suit and lavender shirt. René had a droopy moustache, Lukeios was shaven headed with a pointy beard on his chin. “Well René, maybe you should have come sooner.” Pierre brushed himself off, noting his overalls were torn where the truck had dragged him.

“I can see you’ve been having fun, but what was the urgency?” Lukeios asked, his perfect French having a Parisian accent.

“Some of them were torturing villagers. There’s badly injured people in that house, and little Collette is hiding in the barn.”

“Hmm.” Lukeios turned to the soldiers crawling from the overturned truck and spoke in German. “Right, soldiers. Sort out your wounded - walking wounded in one group, badly injured in a second. Then those of you who are uninjured can collect the dead.” His yellow eyes glittered. “And don’t even think about disobeying me.” He switched to French. “Citizens, you can come out now. These barbarians will be docile.” He drew a breath, pitched his voice to carry. “Doctor! Please bring your first aid bag - you have wounded to attend to. And someone fetch the priest.” He turned back to Pierre. “You did very well. Let us see to those in the house, and find Collette.”

“I’ll bring her. Her parents are in the kitchen. They look bad.”

Pierre walked down the side of the house. When he rounded the corner into the back yard he spied two German soldiers with Collette, one holding her arm tightly. “Hey big man, stop where you are. You try to hurt us and the girl gets it.”

“Luc!” he called, then turned his attention to the two soldiers. “If you hurt her I will personally skin both of you alive and then roll you in salt. You let her go now.” He growled.

“Do you think we are stupid?” the first one replied. “The moment we let her go you will kill us.”

“After he rolls you in salt, I would suggest roasting over a very slow fire.” Lukeios descended the back steps. The second soldier pointed his rifle at him.

“Everybody stay back. We are going to the car. We will let her go when we are out of range of your weapons.” The first soldier ordered. “You do as I say and she won’t be harmed.”

“Do as they say Pierre.” Lukeios walked towards the soldiers. “Now, about the car, there is a slight problem with it.”

“What do you mean?” the soldiers appeared nervous. “We will kill her!”

“What? And lose your bargaining chip? You do not want to hurt her, because then we will feel obliged to hurt you both very badly before you die. And I will make certain you take a very long and painful time to die.” His voice was soft, almost happy, adding a sense of bizarre menace. “There is nowhere to run, because now I have seen you I can follow you anywhere – to the ends of the earth and beyond, or to hell and back. Although if you choose that route you won’t be returning.” Luke pointed out reasonably, smiling. “But you do want to know about the car.”

“What’s wrong with the car?” He seemed disconcerted by Lukeios’ threats. His companion’s leg was shaking.

“Ah, you see, during the fracas the driver panicked, and drove it into a ditch. One of the front wheels has been broken off. And Pierre here tipped the truck on its side, so it isn’t driveable either. I suggest you put your weapons down and go and join the rest of your comrades. You will both be safe with them.” Lukeios was speaking softly as if to naughty children. “Put the weapons down.” The two soldiers looked at one another. “Put The Weapons Down Now.” That last was an order given in German, but there was a quality about his voice that caused the two soldiers to obey without thinking. “Let Her Go Now.” The soldier released his grip on Collette, looking slightly puzzled as if he didn’t quite know why he was obeying, but was unable to stop himself.

Collette looked at him as if she couldn’t quite believe it either, then she kicked him in the shins and ran to Pierre, who scooped her up into the crook of his arm. “Did they hurt you?” he rumbled.

“No, but they frightened me. Why did they do what the man said? Are you going to punish them?”

“That man is Lord Lukeios, he owns the chateau. He said not to hurt them if they let you go and didn’t hurt you, so we should keep our promise. I think.”

“I can be very persuasive when I want to be.” Lukeios replied. “Soldiers! Join your comrades in the street.” The two soldiers took of at a run. “Collette, soldiers have to obey orders. We do not punish them if they obey. The officers give orders, we punish the officers if they give bad orders.” The girl nodded.

“Now can you be brave?” Again the girl nodded. “Collette, your mama and papa were too badly hurt. I am afraid they are both dead.” The girl made a face, but said nothing. She nodded slightly. “I think you should see them and say goodbye. Can you be brave and do that? You will make them happy.” The girl was big eyed, close to tears. She nodded gently, slowly.

Pierre placed her gently on her feet and then the two of them followed Lukeios up the steps. Lukeios paused at the top, and tapped Collette’s forehead with his fingertips. “There, you will be able to see them now. Come in, what do you see?”

René was inside, scrubbing blood stains off the floor. They appeared to vanish as the scrubbing brush passed over them. Toward the back of the kitchens were two lumps wrapped in blankets. But what caught her eye were two diaphanous, luminous figures. “Mama, papa, is that you?”

“Yes, poppet, we are dead. Monsieur Luc explained it to us. We have a little time to say good-bye. You’ll have to be brave.”

Collette started talking animatedly, still holding Pierre’s hand. Lukeios watched, a smile playing around his lips.

Father Marcel walked in, taking in the scene with surprise. “To whom is she talking?” He was a middle aged man, balding, developing a potbelly, and dressed in sober black with a white dog collar. His eyes were kind, and he had a high, intelligent forehead.

“Hush.” Lukeios quieted him. Then he rapped him on the forehead with his knuckles. “What do you see now?”

The priest’s eyes went round. “Oh! That looks like her parents, but how?”

“You know about souls, father. Now you can see them.” Lukeios replied. “They are saying goodbye before they go on. I explained things to them, so they are aware that they are dead. Most people do not realise until the funeral, and some take years to realise.”

“Yes, you and I have talked about that several times. I have never been able to see souls before, what did you do? What are you?”

“Father! You know me, I attend mass every Sunday, I play the church organ sometimes, and you have dinner with me at the chateau twice a month. We have known each other for years.”

“Yes, we have known one another for many years, but until today I never had cause to think you were anything other than a normal man, albeit with a chateau and a few strange retainers. Today I have seen things I would not believe had I not seen them with my own eyes.”

“Really father? Please tell me what you find incredible.”

The priest sighed, smiled in a thoughtful manner. “Today I was watching when the Boche entered our village, and I continued watching them. I saw Pierre run down a machine gun that was firing at him, I saw him throw a motorcycle a good ten meters into the Mercedes, and I saw him pick up a truck and tip it on its side.”

“Pierre is very strong, we know that, and perhaps the saints were protecting him. Do you know why the Nazis came into this house?”

The priest snorted. “Maybe they were with the résistance? They moved here from Lyons about eighteen months ago.” The priest wagged his finger at Lukeios. “Stop distracting me. I saw you and René appear out of thin air in the middle of the road. The air shimmered, and there you two were, in time to watch Pierre. How do you explain that? You gave orders to the soldiers, and they obeyed without question. How do you explain that? And now I am seeing the souls of the dead. How do you explain that?”

“Small children and animals can see spirits. Collette needed only a slight nudge to see her parents. You on the other hand needed a good solid thump. It will wear off soon, and what you see now will vanish. Look around, what else do you see?”

The priest looked about. There were half seen things that were visible from the corners of the eyes, but vanished if you looked at them directly. He couldn’t quite make out details - they were like smoke on the breeze. “Spirits.” Lukeios explained. “There are many different types - some mischievous, some harmless. Ask me some other time.”

There were ghostly forms of Emile and Michelle, Collette’s parents. Behind them were two other figures the priest did not recognise. They had to be in the kitchen, but his brain kept telling him they were outside. “Michelle’s grandparents.” Lukeios explained. “They are here to collect them and convey them to the afterlife. They are further than the wall, but you can see them anyway.”

Charlotte, René and Pierre were wreathed in swirling colours. “Auras.” Lukeios explained. “Every living being has one. The colours can be interpreted to determine health, state of mind. We’ll talk some other time.”

Lukeios himself was wreathed in a silvery glow something like pictures of saints, and there seemed to be a silvery sun behind his head. “My aura.” That was all he would say.

Behind him were two objects that looked like Grecian columns, one white and one black. “Guides.” Lukeios explained. “They don’t always have to resemble humans. Now look at Collette’s parents.”

The priest obediently looked at them. They seemed to be saying farewell. Then they moved towards the grandparents, who accompanied them as they receded into the distance. White light shone around them, becoming brighter and brighter until the figures were washed out. The light shone for a few seconds before it faded.

“Mon Dieu!” father Marcel exclaimed, crossing himself.

In the ensuing silence Collette’s voice announced “Mama and papa said they were going to heaven.”

“Yes little one, you watched them go.” Lukeios said.

“And they told me they would visit me when I’m sleeping.”

“Maybe they might not be able ...” The priest stopped when he caught Lukeios’ look.

“They can visit you in dreaming.” Lukeios explained. “And you can visit with them. Dead people still exist, their souls are just living somewhere else.”

“I should give them the last rites.”

“I am sure they won’t mind if you do. But their souls have already moved on. I administered to them. They asked me to take care of Collette, she has no relatives in the village.”

“No, she doesn’t. I will attend to the dead, and arrange funerals. Perhaps you should attend to the living. What will you do with the German soldiers?”

Lukeios smiled. “What will we do, father. I think you should help. After all, some have died and some may be dying. Perhaps you should give them the last rites. I think the floor is clean enough René. You and Pierre and Collette should come with us.”

“The floor is spotless! All it takes is a little magic.” He stopped and looked at the priest as if he expected to be rebuked.

“I didn’t hear that. My parishioners are my first priority, but I think Emile and Michelle have no further need of me. What will you do with the soldiers? They’ll bring the entire Boche army here tomorrow if you let them go, and if you don’t they’ll come here looking for their comrades.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Let’s see the situation first.”

Seven dead soldiers had been laid out neatly near the black Mercedes. Five more were unconscious and likely to die from head injuries. The two torturers were lying in the shade with them, though they were conscious and in pain. Seven more were injured but mobile, ‘walking wounded’, the remainder uninjured. One of the soldiers was helping the doctor set a broken arm on one of the torturers.

Lukeios walked to the unconscious men, spreading his hands palms downward as if bestowing a blessing. “You will all heal and return to full health.” He turned to the walking wounded and said the same. The two torturers, writhing in agony from their broken bones, caught his eye. He considered them for a little while before speaking.

“You tortured and killed people. What should I do with you? Will you learn the error of your ways?” he sighed, shook his head. “You will both heal, but when it is cold or wet your injuries will trouble you, to remind you that if you inflict pain it will return to you, by your own doing. Perhaps you will learn something in this life.”

The priest was watching him. “Luc, are the dead Boche even Catholic? Perhaps you could ask the others? I don’t speak German.”

“Perhaps you should give them the last rites anyway. Best to be on the safe side. But before you do, father, do you see something hovering over the bodies of the dead?”

“No.” said the priest, screwing up his eyes.

“Do not stare, let your eyes go slightly out of focus. Perhaps I should tap you again?”

The priest did as he was bid. “There is something that is faint, like cigarette smoke. Is that what you mean? What is it?”

“Their souls, still separating from their bodies. Your last rites should include helping the soul separate from the body. Watch me.”

Lukeios spread his hands, and the priest saw a faint silver shimmer that seemed to spread from his hands to the dead bodies. “Souls, your bodies are dead, come forth.” As an aside he added “You will see spirit helpers waiting for them, but they can do little until the soul separates. As a priest you can help one dead person at a time. You should lay you hands here, beneath the head. Do it. Then you speak to it, and draw it forth. You must be able to see it.”

The priest knelt, placed his hands, and spoke “Soul, your body is dead, it is time for you to leave.” Nothing happened.

“Say it three times. And you must mean it. You are persuading it to leave.”

The priest repeated the command twice more, but still nothing happened. Then he drew a deep breath. “By the name and power of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ, soul I command you to leave this dead body.” There was a surge and a shimmering smoky shape freed itself from its fetters and rose into the air, where it formed itself into a semblance of the dead soldier. There was a feeling of lightness and happiness. The priest looked at Lukeios with a satisfied smile. “So that’s how it’s done. They taught us in the seminary to command the spirits in Jesus’ name.”

“You don’t actually need to command the soul, but if it works for you.” Lukeios replied. “I will release the others.”

That took Lukeios only a few moments and he turned again to the priest. “Now you may anoint the bodies and seal them with the sign of the cross so no wandering spirit gets into them.”

Father Marcel went about his business. “Luc, we must talk about this soon.”

“Certainly father, next time you come for dinner.” Lukeios turned from him, organising the villagers to fetch tractors and chains to right the truck and pull the car from the ditch.

The truck presented a problem - the bed of the truck was a steel frame covered with wood, but the enclosure was covered with canvas supported by flimsy steel hoops. The steel was bent and the canvas torn where the side of the truck had hit the ground. “Where do we attach chains?” the villagers asked.

Lukeios made a moue of discontent, sighed, then chuckled. “So be it. This won’t disturb the harmony much. Please stand clear.”

The villagers moved back. “On your wheels - gently.” Lukeios ordered. The truck shuddered, then rose into the air, tipped upright and settled gently onto its wheels.

As people gaped, Lukeios ordered “Car, back on the road. No scraping.” It floated into the air, righted itself, and gently settled on the road on three wheels.

“Luc, you and I must talk very soon.”

Seeing the priest’s look, Lukeios remarked “Father, you know full well the clergy have a love affair with white magic. It goes hand in glove with commanding spirits. Did not the bishop of Nimes fill his house with hail trying to summon rain only last century? What about pope Honorius III?”

“We repudiated his grimoire, it was regarded as diverging from white magic.” The priest nodded, frowning slightly. This wasn’t the time or place for a debate on the subject. “Very well, we will talk later. Carry on.”

Lukeios nodded, turning away. “Soldiers, load the wounded and dead into the truck. Pierre, please put the damaged motorcycle and pieces from the car onto the trailer here. And Etienne, could you please chain the car to your tractor so the front wheel is off the ground? We will tow it with us.”

The truck, car, motorcycles and soldiers were driven several kilometres out of the village, past a cross-road. Lukeios, Pierre, René, Collette, the priest, the doctor and several villagers went with them. They reached a deserted area where there was a deep ditch on the side of the road. Everyone disembarked, and the dead were unloaded.

Lukeios set the broken wheel of the car upright on the road and gave it a push with his foot, sending it flying into the ditch. Pierre gave the car a shove, pushing the car into the ditch where it ended on its nose. He then picked up the broken motorcycle and threw it with such force that it flew over the ditch and skidded some distance on the other side.

Then Lukeios started the truck and set it moving, and with Pierre’s help they toppled it onto its side. Lukeios turned to the assembled soldiers. “The car lost its wheel and the accident ensued. The nearby villagers were prevailed upon to assist, but they cannot fix the car nor right the truck. That is all. You never reached the village and nothing else happened. This you remember, anything else you forget. You have not seen any of us. This other motorcycle is still working, one of you should ride it back the way you came and fetch help from your unit.”

With that Lukeios and the others climbed aboard the trailer, and the tractor took them back towards the village. Meanwhile one of the German soldiers started the motorcycle and drove it the other way.

When the French party reached the cross road, Lukeios took an unlit cigarette from the doctor, lit it and drew in a mouth full of smoke. He puffed it out again, fanning it with his hands across the intersection. It spread out like a fog, shimmering with silver light, and then seemed to sink into the ground.

“The German soldiers will never find this village now.” Lukeios announced. “You will be safe from now on.”

“Monsieur Luc, how does that work?” Collette asked.

Lukeios smiled warmly. “Ah, it’s magic. I have created a fog that will confuse the German soldiers when they reach the crossroad. They will decide there is no reason to continue and return home.”

“Are you a magician?” the girl asked.

“I am a mage, like the three kings who visited baby Jesus. I can do things other people cannot.”

“Oh. Are you a king also?”

“No, but I am lord of a chateau, so that is like a king, just smaller.”

The priest was thoughtful. “Mage comes from the Latin ‘magus’, a learned man. Thus we have the three magi, which is plural, the three learned men. But it also gives us magician and magic.”

“Then you are a magician!” Collette exclaimed.

“Perhaps, but magician suggests someone who does legerdemain, such as pulling rabbits from hats. A man of knowledge does other feats, such as helping a truck find its wheels, or convincing people to do as they are told.”

“Do these feats involve commanding demons, Luc?” The priest couldn’t resist asking.

“No father, though as you know, demons can be commanded. Solomon commanded demons to build his temple, it is said, while several popes have a reputation for similar deeds. Every catholic priest is supposed to be able to command spirits and perform exorcism. Let us leave that topic, there are more pressing matters such as seeing Collette settled into the chateau.”

The doctor went off to make his rounds, but the others helped Collette pack and move. The girl was sad, but not distraught - she had spoken to her parents and said farewell. She knew Pierre well, and Rene too, while a number of villagers worked at the chateau.

Among them was a middle aged woman who worked as a maid. “Collette! What are you doing here?”

“The Germans killed my mama and papa, and Pierre chased them away, and Monsieur Luc and father Marcel decided I should stay here.”

“Oh you poor little thing!” the woman enveloped Collette in a hug. “What happened?” she asked of the others. Father Marcel explained in more detail, leaving out the miraculous parts, and assuring her that every one else was all right.

“Thérèse, you can help Collette to clean and tidy her room,” Lukeios said, “but like any other child she should learn to do most of that herself.”

“I’ll look after her as if she were my own.” Thérèse replied. “Collette, if you need anything, you just ask auntie Thérèse.”

Collette chose a room that was light and airy, with a view of the gardens. The room was quite luxurious - it was actually a suite with bedroom, a living room with table and chairs, writing desk, several comfortable armchairs and a coffee table, and an ensuite bathroom with a wash basin and a bath.

Collette stared out at the gardens that seemed to stretch forever, and the forest beyond and the distant mountains. “Where is my village?”

Heads swivelled to look at Lukeios. “You have to go to the front to see that.” He replied. “From here you can see faery land and the mountains where the Trolls live, and you can walk to anywhere you can think of.”

“Oh! Can I visit faery land?”

“If you are a good girl, we will visit many different places. But you should be a little bigger, because it can be a long way for little legs.”

“My legs are not little! And I walk a kilometer to school!”

“It is a little further from here, through the woods...” Lukeios began.

“I will walk with her to and from school.” Pierre offered. “There’s things in the forest that could hurt you, Collette. I’ll see that they don’t.”

Two days later they held the funerals and almost everybody in the village attended. Lukeios himself played the organ.

Collette settled into the chateau and gained a number of adoptive uncles and aunts. There was Lukeios’ sister Mifunwi, with milk pale skin, tresses dark and shining like ravens’ wings, and penetrating green eyes. There was her husband uncle Red, or Red Raven as others called him, a youngish man with coppery skin, dark eyes, and shoulder length hair the colour of fresh blood. There was also Palomedes, son to Lukeios, but a grown man, with a round face, curly brown hair and infectious laughter.

Every school day Pierre would walk with her through the forest to the school, and when school was over he would be waiting for her. Sometimes one of the others would travel with them.

René and Palomedes were very good at spotting animals or their signs such as tracks, loose hair, bent twigs and other spoor.

René remarked to Collette “I am a forest elf, I am quieter than the breeze. I can track any living thing.”

Palomedes claimed “I am The Hunter, whom they named the constellation after! I can be quieter than the stones. I can track anything, alive or dead.”

To which Pierre countered “Stones are not that quiet - they sing to me.”

“Then hearing me hunt you would think me a stone.”

“Well, you might convince the forest creatures, but never a mountain born Troll.”

Uncle Luc, Aunt Mifunwi and Uncle Red would accompany her from time to time, and take her to see strange places, some of which could be glimpsed from her room.

And so Collette came to call the chateau home, and came to know some rather odd people. She learned things most humans only hear about in tall tales, and had several adventures. All of this, however, is another story.