Elanor sat in the partial shade of the grape arbor, sipping chilled white wine. It was a sunny spring day, still a little cool. The grapes were developing leaves, but had not yet flowered. Near by was a flower garden filled with tulips and daffodils. Beside that was the kitchen herb garden, and the vegetable patch. The chateau was a working farm, so the vegetable patch covered two hectares, beyond that was the orchard, with assorted fruit trees - apples and pears, peaches and plums. Stretching up the hill from the orchard and vegetable garden was the vineyard, with several varieties of grapes - pinot blanc, pinot gris, pinot noir, merlot and sauvignan blanc.

This wasn’t her estate, it belonged to Luke, someone she hesitated to call boyfriend, preferring instead to think of his as friend, companion and lover. He was seated beside her drinking beer, and seated around the large wooden table was an odd collection of people. Luke himself was a wiry man in his early thirties, about one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, his facial features a mixture of Greek and Egyptian heritage. He was wearing tan slacks and loafers, and a yellow shirt with broad multi hued vertical stripes of lilac in different shades. There was a heavy gold chain about his neck.

Elanor herself appeared to be in her mid twenties, one hundred and eighty seven centimeters tall with a slightly solid look that her red singlet top showed to be muscle rather than fat. She was born in Kenya, grew up in England, and had spent some years in America. Like Luke, she was much older than she looked.

Beside Luke was his son Palomedes, a slim man in his mid twenties with a round face and slightly bulbous nose. He was wearing jeans and black t-shirt printed with a record cover from some band. Palomedes was drinking wine, produce of the chateau.

Beside Palomedes was a small man with short blond hair and droopy moustache and Vandyke beard. He was the chateau’s brew master, responsible for the beer most of the others were drinking. He called himself Rene, but the locals often referred to him as Monsieur Asterix because he reminded them of a famous French Comic book character.

Beside Rene, seated on a specially reinforced chair, was Lars Copperhead. If you pictured a statue of a gorilla carved from granite, larger than life size, you had a rough idea of Lars’ appearance. He wore a leather jerkin, but his prehensile feet were bare. His legs were short and bowed, and his arms long enough that his knuckles would drag on the ground. His skin was the color and texture of granite, and almost as hard. He was immensely strong, and could easily carry a horse under each arm, a feat he was happy to demonstrate at the local fair. He was the chateau’s head gardener, a gentle soul who loved the soil and everything that grew from it or lived in it. The locals often referred to him as Monsieur Obelix because he reminded them of another comic book character.

Beside Lars was uncle Red, a man in his mid thirties with a shock of shoulder length hair the color of fresh blood, and reddish tinged skin There were three red feathers stuck in his hair. He was Luke’s brother in law. Beside him was his wife, Mifunwi, Luke’s sister. She had milky skin, green eyes and long dark hair braided into nine braids, each one twined with silver thread. Each braid sported a black feather at the end. She wore black jeans and t-shirt.

Beside her was Erlik, a wiry man with pale skin, light brown hair in two braids, a beard also in two braids. In his jeans and leather jerkin he looked like some renegade biker. Beside him was Siska, an Asiatic woman with blonde hair and eyebrows, and beside her was Layla, European with shoulder length dark hair. Both girls appeared to be in their mid twenties, and were dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Layla was sitting next to Elanor.

Appearances were not quite what they seemed. Only a week ago Elanor had helped rescue Layla, Siska and Erlik from a private universe run by five gods for their amusement. The main theme had been fighting and killing, with those that died brought back to life the next day in adult bodies. All three of them had fought and died many times in that world, and they had continuous memories running all the way back to when they had first been snatched from their own universes. If you counted back to then, that was a long time ago.

Layla was over four hundred years old, remembering life in some European village. Raiders had come to the village, she had fought to protect her children, and thought she had been killed, waking up in the private universe. Siska was a privileged female from a warrior culture who had become a warrior in her own right. She had been married off to a husband she did not particularly like, and run away. Her own family had turned against her, and she had become an outlaw. She had several children by different fathers, and wasn’t even sure who the fathers were. One day the soldiers had come, and she had been injured during the fighting. She presumed she had died, and the private universe was the afterlife. She thought she was somewhere around six hundred years old. Erlik was a bona fide Viking, who had one had a homestead, wife and children, and a long ship. He had been killed while on a raiding party, and woken up in what he thought of as Valhalla. They calculated he was about nine hundred years old. Rene and Lars had been with Luke since before the first world war. Elanor chuckled - that meant she was the youngest here, having been born in nineteen forty two.

The three were still coming to terms with technology like running water, electric light, motor cars. Rene had invented a term ‘Technomancy’ to cover any electronic device more complicated than a switch, and the others were now adopting that. But they had all learned French in one night thanks to the powers of Luke and Red Raven, and now the entire group was speaking French. The three newcomers could not read or write yet, that would come next week, and after that Luke planned on teaching them English.

“You are welcome to stay as long as you like.” Luke was saying. “All that we ask in return is that you find something to do around the estate. The chateau is a working farm, there’s plenty to do. Lars is head gardener, you can ask him about tasks to do outside.”

“Hah!” exclaimed Uncle Red. “There’s always plenty to do on a farm. But if you work well he’ll pay you too!”

“If you do more than small chores then we’ll pay you for your effort.” Luke replied. “Besides, if you want to leave you will need money in this world.”

“Hah! Don’t leave too soon, you should learn how to make your way in this world first.”

They thanked him, then Erlik asked a question after glancing at Siska and Layla. “If you don’t mind my saying, you seem very human, and not much like powerful gods. I mean, here you are drinking beer with us.”

“Hah! We’re not gods, we are the old sorcerers!” Red Raven exclaimed. “We’re on your side against the gods.”

“We keep the gods honest.” Mifunwi added. “That’s why they fear me and call me Mor Riganu - The Queen of Terror.”

“What you see before you is mostly human.” Luke began.

“And Palomedes is entirely human! He just doesn’t like anyone to know that.” Red Raven interjected with a chuckle.

Luke smiled, continued “We wear human form, we tend to think like humans. And we have lived amongst humans for thousands of years.”

Mifunwi nodded sagely “Because we appear so similar to humans, it fools the gods into thinking we are humans. They don’t notice us unless they are actively looking. I think all of you realize that we are much more than human, because you have seen something of what we can do.”

“One thing puzzles me.” Erlik commented. “If Palomedes is Lord Lukeios’ son, then isn’t he more than human?”

Luke smiled. “There is no need to call me that. Luke, or Lukeios will do. I wear a human body, Palomedes’ mother wears a human body, therefore he is human. In terms of his powers, he could be said to be a powerful sorcerer. But any of you are capable of learning and developing the powers he has. Uncle Red refers to us as the Old Sorcerers, to emphasize we are powerful, but human.”

Mifunwi added “And our powers are limited by our human bodies. We are more powerful than Palomedes, but we have limits. When we rescued Elanor and the three of you from that private universe, we left you in the protection of Red Raven, and then Luke and I went into the temple, and the vortex that sustained that universe. We discarded our human forms, only then could we destroy the vortex. To return to our human forms, we had to focus on Red Raven to appear where we should. Otherwise we encompass an infinity of shadows, and your physical selves are very small and hard to see. While I am human I cannot truly remember what I really am.”

Red Raven held up one finger. “This finger is like my human form. This is what you see before you. You do not notice the rest of my body. And while my attention is here.” He tapped the tip of his finger with his other hand, “I am not really aware that I am much more than this single finger.”

Erlik shook his head. “This gets too much for me. But I think I can understand a little.”

Red Raven chuckled “It’s as clear as mud, but it covers the ground! Just work with the basic idea, it breaks down if you try to see too much.”

Elanor had heard this before from Luke. “You can be in more than one place at once? More than one body? Like fingers on a hand?”

Red Raven waggled the fingers on his hand, and chuckled. “Anything is possible. But very confusing.” He held up one finger. “One is less confusing. We three are old sorcerers. Think of us as humans like yourselves, only older and wiser.” He broke into laughter. “We are more scary that way!”

Somewhat later, the others left for various reasons, and Elanor was left with Erlik. He’d downed several beers, and now he was sitting looking across the estate. His eyes seemed moist. Elanor wanted to go, but something made her ask “Erlik, what are you thinking?”

He looked at her for several moments “Oh, it will pass. I’ve been dead a thousand years, I resigned myself to living in a pointless Valhalla, never seeing my wife and children ever again. Now I am alive, and you all tell me that everyone is reborn countless times. Do you think I might meet up with them again?”

“Yes.” She responded straight away. “Maybe not in this life, but in the afterlife you’ll get to catch up with them, and then plan your next life.”

Erlik shrugged “Sometimes I think Luke was correct, and we should all have died. Then I’d be in the afterlife, planning to be reborn. But don’t tell the others.”

Elanor laughed softly “You’ve had too much to drink. Luke or Uncle Red will help you locate your relatives in this life. Besides, you waited a thousand years; you can learn things here that will fit you better for your next life. Your family will have grown, and lived many lives. You have to catch them up before you will be ready for them. And all those things you wanted to do while you were in Valhalla, but couldn’t, this life is your chance to do them.”

Erlik nodded. “I still miss them though.”

“And I still miss Abe.” Elanor shrugged. “You have carried them with you for too long. I carried my dead husband for too long and I became very sick. You can miss them, but now you are back on the road, and you can catch them up. Abe told me he’d be back as one of my grandchildren. And that’s the thing, Erlik. Your wife might be your daughter next time, or your mother, or your sister. Every time it will be different.”

Erlik drank the last of his beer. “Elanor, do you think that you and I are family?”

Elanor smiled, gave him an honest answer. “You and I met this time for a purpose. I’ve wondered about whether we knew each other in a previous life. The thought that comes to mind is that once you were my little brother.”

Erlik’s eyes opened with surprise. “When I was little, she showed me how to use a sword. But she married and moved away when I was still a child.”

Elanor smiled indulgently. “I can be your big sister this time around too.”

Erlik smiled happily. “You boss me around just like she did. And you feel like family. I am still becoming used to the idea of reincarnation though.”