Elanor stood naked before the full length mirror in her bedroom. Eight months ago her hair had fallen out and her skin was like paper from the radiation treatment and chemotherapy. Six months ago her hair was growing back grey, and her skin was developing a loose ill-fitting look as the cancer ravaged her body, literally eating it alive from the inside. She had looked far older than her forty nine years. Now the change was amazing. Her hair was luscious black, her body filling out, and her skin had a youthful lustre. The oncologist had pronounced it complete remission, and was puzzled.

Elanor wasn’t puzzled by the miracle. Luke had walked into her life and performed some sort of energy work. She had felt different immediately after, and had slowly grown healthy. “I still find it hard to believe that six months ago I was dying, and now I’m young and healthy.”

Luke, friend, companion, lover, healer, walked naked from the ensuite. He was thin and wiry, one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, and looked about thirty five. He had a way of walking that reminded her of a jungle cat. “We healed you, and now you have grown back to what you were when you were twenty five.”

“I don’t think I look twenty five, more like mid thirties.”

Luke padded over, put his arms around her, and rested his chin on her left shoulder. She was eight centimeters taller than him, which made her shoulder just the right height. “Your body is twenty five, just as mine is. But we both act older, so we don’t look in our twenties. You act like a mother with grown up children. If you want people to think you are twenty five you will have to act like your youngest daughter.”

There was a tingle of energy where his hands touched her, and she smiled at him in the mirror. His hands were pale against her brown skin. “My children think I have had plastic surgery. I don’t think I want people to think my daughter is my sister.”

Luke grinned back. “If you continue the energy work, you will stay as youthful as you are now. If you stop you will age normally. Some day you will have to come to terms with not aging, or decide instead to grow old and die.”

She sniffed with amusement. “I don’t fear death these days. But why would anyone choose to grow old and die?”

“When you outlive everyone you know, and your culture changes so much you no longer understand it, you might decide to die and be reborn.”

“Easy for you to say. How old are you?”

“Older than the pyramids, so I know what I am talking about.” He kissed her cheek, gave her a squeeze that sent thrills and chills through her body. “Now, we may have all the time in the world, but we should get dressed. We have that reception to go to, and it has already started.”

“Well you’re lucky I’m a plain girl who doesn’t wear makeup. I can be ready in ten minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later they were at the front door, ready to leave. Luke was dressed in a tux that made him look regal, complete with diamond studs in his shirt that must have been two carats each. Elanor was in a diaphanous red dress that was subtly woven with gold thread in a subliminal design. Around her neck was a necklace of rubies that must have been worth a king’s ransom, with matching solitaires in her earlobes. Luke had produced them from a pocket inside his jacket.

She opened the hall cupboard where she kept her shoes. “I’m not sure I have anything to go with this dress.”

“Would you wear high heels?”

“I’d tower over you.”

“Since when had that ever worried me? If you wear them, I want you to strut.”

Elanor grinned. “I always strut! What do you have in mind?”

Luke waved his hand, and a pair of red leather high heel shoes appeared in the cupboard. They were garnished with gold work and rubies, very elegant, with fifteen centimeter heels. “I’ll be over two meters tall! If guys aren’t careful they’ll get their eyes poked out!”

Luke chuckled. “I hope they are suitable?”

Elanor gave him an appraising look. “We’re off to some parallel world right? Because these are a little too high for here.”

Luke nodded. “Yes, you know me well now. We’re off to another shadow London, very similar to here, perhaps a little more advanced than here. Some wealthy old industrialist has made advances in rejuvenation technology, and will demonstrate it tonight. My sources tell me he has made some kind of Faustian bargain, which is why I am interested. Shall we go?”

The shoes fitted perfectly. Luke seemed to know her exact clothing size. She linked her arm through his and they turned toward the door. It shimmered and dissolved into a rainbow swirl. That swirl faded and they stepped onto the floor of the reception, just near a wall curtain. There was a crowd of expensively dressed people mingling near by. Luke led her into the throng.

Several of them seemed to know Luke, who introduced her as Lady Elanor. She smiled inwardly as they tried to work out who she was. She listened intently, smiled, spoke politely, and helped herself to the canapés when ever a plate came past.

As she mingled, Elanor came to realise that these people represented some very wealthy industrialists and movers and shakers on the world stage. From comments passed she guessed that many of them had received cosmetic surgery to retain their looks as they grew older.

Elanor had finished her second drink and was hoping for a third when the curtain near them was drawn back to reveal a stage with some fancy electronic equipment and what looked like a large ornate coffin with a number of strange devices attached. An elderly couple walked purposefully onto the stage. She had the haughty look of a society lady and was expensively dressed, her hair dyed brown with just a streak of grey here and there. He looked like an older version of someone she recognized as a self made software billionaire, wearing a slightly worn suit, a shock of grey hair that was long but neatly combed and steely grey eyes.

“Good evening, and thank you for coming to my little show.” His voice was firm, with just a hint of controlled excitement. “All of us here can buy just about anything we want, when we want.” He raised a finger. “But until now, there is one thing none of us could buy.” He paused for effect, surveying the crowd. “That is youth.” He paused again for effect. “Tonight I will show you that money can now buy youth, for I have perfected a device that rewrites the DNA and brings it back to what is was when we were twenty. Those of us here can become practically immortal.” He paused again, surveying the crowd. He held up a finger again. “And now I will demonstrate using myself.” He turned to his wife. “Vera, if you would assist.”

Together they walked to the coffin and he climbed inside. Vera closed the lid. She walked over to a computer, tapped a few keys, then nodded to an assistant who was standing amongst the machinery. He flicked several switches. The machine came alive, and electronic discharge flashed amongst the attachments to the coffin.

Luke shook his head, muttering “Empty show.” Then he turned and tapped Elanor gently on the forehead, as he had done many times before, and she felt her perception change. She could now see auras about everyone in the room, along with glowing lines that ran through the air and surrounded living things and electronic circuits. The coffin was alive with swirls of color, and something that looked almost like a double helix, or a pair of coiled snakes made of energy.

“The discharges are designed to impress the marks.” Luke explained. “That strange snake like pattern is doing the work, and I find it very troubling.”

“Why?”

“It is a sentient power, it will have its own agenda, and will help humans only as long as it suits that agenda.”

Humans talked about gods and demons, Luke referred to ‘Sentient Powers with which one can traffic’ but it amounted to the same.

Luke nodded in the direction of the stage. “I need to go there. Follow me please.”

He made his way through the throng to the stage and vaulted lightly onto it. He turned and offered his hand to Elanor. The stage was almost a meter and a half high. Elanor looked at Luke thinking does he seriously expect me to climb up there in a dress and high heels?

“No” Luke shook his head. “Just give me your hand.”

As soon as their hands touched she felt herself floating off the ground. Luke pulled gently and guided her onto the stage. “Everyone else please stay where they are.”

They walked over to Vera who gave them a dirty look. “You shouldn’t be up here.”

“Vera, what if Ingmar needs help to get out of the machine?”

“Well don’t get in the way.” she sniffed, and returned to her duties.

Luke walked carefully around the machine taking note of things. He pointed out “There’s a lot of modulated electromagnetic energies surrounding the box, but they are not actually doing anything.” Elanor could see the curves, lines and swirls he was talking about. But there was something else.

“Yes, those lines with a snakeskin pattern are performing the work.”

“They seem to extend off into the cosmos.” Elanor remarked.

Luke smiled grimly. “Yes, to those sentient powers I mentioned. And there’s some magical object in the box that acts as a link.”

“What does that all mean?”

“Something wants to come through.” The humming energies died, and Luke motioned silence.

Vera walked over to the coffin, excitement and fear chasing each other across her face. With her hands on the lid she paused for a moment, then drew a breath and lifted the lid. The three of them clustered round and peered in.

A young blond haired man lay there, his eyes closed. He was quite handsome, but Elanor wondered if he were dead. Vera gasped. “Is he dead?”

“His heart is beating.” Luke responded. “Ingmar, can you hear us?”

The eyes flew open staring at something Elanor couldn’t see. “How did he get that young so fast?”

“You should ask him in a few minutes.” Luke replied.

“What’s wrong with him?” Vera asked.

“I think he might be a bit dazed.” Luke replied. “Do you have a mirror?”

“Oh, yes.” Vera went to the computer bench to fetch one from her handbag.

While she was gone Luke passed his hand into Ingmar’s aura, and Elanor noticed a brief flow of silver energy from Luke. “He’s in danger of lapsing into shock. Now he is stabilized. Ingmar wake up.”

The eyes tracked to Luke’s face. “I’m alive then. Did it work? How do I look?”

“You look beautiful darling!” Vera announced as she bent over him. “Take a look.”

His right hand fluttered up, and he held it before his face, turning it this way and that. “I feel as if I have come from a far place, like waking from a long dream. How long was I in here?”

“Five minutes and fourteen seconds.” Vera replied. “Was it too long, or not long enough.”

“It was sufficient.” Ingmar took the mirror and inspected his face. “I approve. Now I should get up, my audience awaits.” He sat up slowly then looked at the side of the coffin. “Hmm, this should be made to fold down so it is easier to get out.”

“I can lift you.” Luke offered.

“Thank you Lucius, but it would not be seemly. I’m just a little dizzy, it will pass.”

To Elanor his form flickered momentarily out of focus and his head was overlaid with something that looked like a crocodile head. It was gone a moment later, and he was back in focus as the young man. Elanor glanced at Luke, who nodded slightly.

Ingmar twisted his head from side to side, shrugged his shoulders and then rose smoothly to his feet. He stepped carefully over the rim of the coffin and onto the steps. He turned to the audience and waved his arms in the air like a victorious boxer.

There was polite applause. Ingmar walked swiftly to the microphone. “I am Ingmar Christiansen, I am seventy six years old, and I feel magnificent!” There was more applause, enthusiastic this time. “With my technology no one in this room need grow old. Think of what that means!”

“Will you make available to everyone?” someone in the audience asked.

“Ahh. For a small fee, priced so that only the wealthy can afford it. There’s no point letting the hoi polloi have it, or politicians. We will start taking bookings tomorrow.”

Several times while he spoke he worked his shoulders and back as if getting the kinks out. Twice his form shimmered, but without any visible change. Luke was watching him like a hawk.

“Now it is my turn.” Vera spoke commandingly.

“Do you think that wise so soon?” Luke countered. “There may still be side effects.”

“Nothing we cannot handle.” Vera turned and strode towards the machine. “I have waited decades for this. Ingmar, calibrate the machine!” Ingmar moved to the computer console.

“I have to wait until she is inside.”

“Ingmar, how did you get so young so quickly?” Elanor asked.

“The process reprograms the DNA, and the cells change in response to that.”

“But if you change only the DNA it will take your body months to grow young.” Elanor countered.

“Elanor is right, Ingmar.” Ingmar began pressing keys on the computer keyboard. The crocodile head made a brief appearance. Luke continued “Whatever you have done is unstable.”

Ingmar finished the sequence and the machine started working. “It should not be unstable, it worked fine with monkeys.” The hand that pressed the keys was scaly, green skinned, and clawed.

“You are the first human guinea pig?” Luke questioned. “Take a look at your hand.” Ingmar’s mouth worked but no sound came out. Luke continued “You’ve done what shape shifters do, applied energy to deform your morphic field, and when the energy shuts off, you revert to a stable form. You’re still channeling energy, that’s why it’s unstable. Humans don’t possess that energy, it’s alien.”

Ingmar stared for a long moment. “It’ll happen to Vera too?”

“Yes.”

“She’ll kill me.”

“That may be the least of your worries. You could continue to change.”

“Lucius, you seem to know something about this. Can you help?”

“I’m sure we can do something. If we shut off your energy channel while you’re human you should be stable in that form.”

“And if I’m not human?”

Luke chuckled “you’ll still be stable but no longer human. Tell me how you got the ideas for this.”

“I had a number of dreams and Vera did as well. The ... er ... breakthroughs were from our dreams.”

“Hmm, most of the visible electronics don’t really do much, do they? The real stuff is inside the cabinet, isn’t it? I mean you have something with some kind of geometric design on it, perhaps some sort of crystal.”

“There’s two metal disks inside the cabinet. They are a combination of metals, the crystalline structure is a combination of five geometric shapes. It bends electromagnetic radiation into a pattern ...” His voice trailed off.

“Something like a mandala - it channels energy from a particular source. They will be the key. Ingmar, you have tapped into a sentient power, you are trafficking with this power. We must find a way to break this connection before it is too late.”

Ingmar looked at his clawed hand again. “I’m worried, Lucius. Can we fix it?”

“I think so, Ingmar.” Luke reassured. “The machine is stopping. Vera might need our assistance.”

All three walked to the coffin and opened the lid. Vera was a twenty something girl with brown hair. Luke passed his hand over her torso, and Elanor noticed the flash of silver fire. Vera gasped and her eyes flew open.

Luke asked “Can you hear me Vera?”

“Yes.” The woman spoke slowly, as if dragging language from a vast distance. “Did it work? Am I young again?”

“Yes Vera. Would you like your mirror?”

“Yes.”

Luke passed it to her; she stared into it for a long time. Finally Luke remarked “Can you get up? Would you like me to lift you out?”

“It takes a lot of effort to move, I just want to lie here. How is Ingmar?”

“I’m fine Vera.”

“Lucius, maybe you should help me up. Ingmar may be too weak still.”

Luke reached in, gently raised Vera to a sitting position. Then he placed one arm beneath her back and the other beneath her legs and lifted her out of the coffin and set her feet onto the floor. Elanor steadied the woman while Luke straightened her into a standing position. “You might feel a little dizzy for a few moments, Ingmar did.”

As Luke released Vera her form flickered and shimmered, her head was briefly replaced by that of a large cobra. Luke stood back, pulling Elanor with him. “This is very serious. Now I have touched her I know what they have done. Oh!”

Elanor felt a prickling across her chest and arms, a slight tightening that indicated Luke had activated a shield spell around her. That meant she faced mortal danger. Luke cried out commandingly “Everybody down!”

The audience obeyed unthinkingly, everyone dropping to the floor at the same instant. Drinks spilled and canapés went everywhere. A moment later there was a burst of machine gun fire, and eleven black clad figures, their faces obscured by balaclavas, came out from behind the wall curtains. Everyone carried a sub machine gun. Five strolled toward the stage, two hurried to the stage, the rest stayed around the perimeter.

“Nobody move!” one of them shouted. “You up on the stage. Get your hands up!” Slowly the four of them raised their hands.

“Who are you?” Vera spat as two gunmen walked up the stairs and onto the stage. “What do you want?”

“Shut it bitch! We’re here for your jewels and the machine.”

“How dare you!” Vera began.

“Don’t you talk to my wife like that!” Ingmar spat. “Do you know who you’re dealing with? You’ll beg for death, and so will all your families!”

One of them laughed and slapped Vera across the face. The was no transition, a large snake head darted forward and bit the man, who fell to the ground screaming and writhing. Vera now looked like a stocky cobra with arms and legs. Ingmar had transformed into something resembling a scaly human with a crocodile head and tail, and claws.

The remaining gunman fired at Vera, causing her to stagger. Ingmar lunged forward and bit his head off. The gunman continued firing as he staggered and then fell. The five gunmen close to the stage retaliated by raking the four on stage with machine gun fire.

Elanor reacted mostly on instinct. She kicked off her shoes and launched herself at the nearest gunman, momentarily cursing wearing a dress as it flew up around her. She delivered a solid karate kick to the man’s head and he crashed to the ground unmoving.

The next nearest gunman turned and shot her at point blank range. Her heart leaped to her mouth, his eyes widened with fear as the bullets fell at her feet. She couldn’t say afterwards whether she paused out of shock or knowledge that if she attacked the gun would spray bullets everywhere. After what seemed like an eternity the gun clicked empty and she moved like a panther. Stepping forward she grasped his left arm, pulling it forward and down while she rammed her knee just behind his straightened elbow. There was an audible snap followed by a scream that was cut short when the edge of her palm struck his throat.

No one else seemed to be moving. The guests were all lying on the floor, the rest of the gunmen standing like zombies. Luke has them under control, she thought. She glanced at the stage. Luke was over by the cabinet, looking inside, as if the shootings and gunfire had nothing to do with him. Ingmar and Vera had completely changed form. One looked like a green skinned crocodile walking on its hind legs, except the legs were longer, the arms longer, the snout smaller and the brain case larger. It also looked as if it were made from green gems, or green cut crystal. It was alive with light, and almost transparent. That had to be Ingmar. Vera was similar, except that she had a head like a hooded cobra, and she was yellow and red. Both figures leaped from the stage to land near her. Each creature selected one of the remaining gunmen and placed their left hands against the gunman’s body. Both humans scintillated with light, and as each point of light faded, so did the human. Within seconds both were gone.

“Approach us.” Vera made beckoning motions with her hands. The gunmen at the back began walking toward her, and the guests began to get up from the floor.

“Everyone stay put.” Luke countermanded. The guests dropped back to the floor, but the gunmen kept approaching. Elanor backed away from the two figures. She looked at Luke again.

Luke strolled across the stage with two metal disks in his hand. He surveyed the scene, then leapt to the floor, landing beside Elanor. “These disks are the key.” He said quietly. “Walk away from the two gunmen you have felled.” They backed about two meters away, and waited quietly. Elanor could still hear her heart thumping, and was dying to ask Luke questions, but she knew him well enough to know that he would explain when the time was right. Luke held his right hand palm up and showed her what looked like two ball bearings residing there. He clenched his fist again and held it to his lips, studying the two figures carefully.

Ingmar and Vera each dragged one of the two fallen gunmen from the ground. Luke made a flicking motion with the fingers of his right hand. The small silver spheres flew towards Vera and Ingmar, expanding enormously as they did. Within moments each figure was trapped inside a silver bubble. Vera hissed like a steam engine, Ingmar roared like a jungle cat. The insides of both spheres exploded into thunder and lightning, but nothing escaped.

“That was good work felling those two. It gave me the chance to spring the trap.”

“What are they? Are they truly trapped? Can you help them?” Elanor wished her legs would stop shaking.

“They are truly trapped, and when I destroy these disks I will banish the power that has possessed them. But first I must settle one or two things.” He stretched out his hand and a wooden staff appeared, dark ebony banded in silver, with a silver head of a bird of prey at its top. He rapped it once on the floor, and there was the sound like the tolling of a distant church bell, except that the floor shook, the air shook, and she felt something that echoed through her soul. She was forcibly reminded that Luke was not human, but something ancient and powerful.

The two beings stopped what they were doing and stood close to the front of their bubbles, staring directly at Luke.

“How did you trap us human?”

“You will let us free, or we will flay your souls.”

Luke smiled at them. “May I present their Imperial Majesties Emerald Serpent and Jewelled Cobra, gods of the serpent folk, and ancient mortal enemies of humankind.”

Elanor felt a cold wind blow through her at that phrase. “What are they doing here?”

“We claim this planet for the serpent folk. We will lay waste to all that humans have built, and wipe the planet clean of the stain of humankind. We will reclaim the heritage of our people.”

“The serpent folk predate dinosaurs. On some parallel earths they have wiped out humans, on many they were wiped out, usually by humans.” Luke commented.

“Are they really that powerful?”

“Oh yes, they could lay waste to everything on earth. It would take them a few years to kill every last human, but they are immortal. Their weakness is that every god needs an artifact with which to focus their attention into a physical shadow. In their case these disks are the artifacts.”

Elanor looked at the disks. Each was about the size of a saucer, about half a centimeter thick, and silver in color. The surface of each was covered in an intricate pattern of very fine lines, very close together. “How do they work?”

“These channel power from their realm into this shadow, and allow them to directly manifest as gods. If they weren’t contained in those bubbles they would be a real problem. Hundreds of people would be dead already. Don’t touch the disks, they will infect you.”

He banged the disks together. The two gods watched him carefully. “Who are you? You are not human. What do you want?”

“Oh, look what I have found. Now what should I do with them?” Luke was smiling a predatory smile.

“Throw them in the ocean.” Jewelled Cobra suggested.

“Bury them down a deep mine.” Emerald Serpent suggested.

“Where you can continue to channel power and no one can find them.”

They hissed and spluttered. “He must be one of the human gods.”

“But none could pen us. Perhaps he is one of the elder gods.”

Luke stared off into the distance for long moments. Then he drew a deep breath. “There are powers even the serpent gods must obey. They have decided.” He banged the staff into the ground, producing a bell tolling effect again. “There is nowhere in shadow where these would be safe, and nowhere in shadow where they can be destroyed. These will be consigned to the pit of chaos.” Luke banged the staff again then handed it back into thin air where it vanished. He produced a sphere of silver fire about the size of a basket ball and touched each of the plates to it. They were absorbed inside. Then he flicked the sphere into the air where it vanished.

Elanor wanted to ask questions, but he shook his head. “I must concentrate.”

Nothing else happened for maybe thirty seconds, and then the world rang like a gong, only this time a higher note. The world around her rippled like a flag in the wind. Luke’s own form flickered, and for several moments she a tall man in a white kilt, jewelled harness about his naked chest, and the head of an eagle or perhaps a hawk - they looked the same to her.

“Do not adjust your mind, there is a fault in reality.” Luke joked.

The tone died away and everything returned to normal. The two silver bubbles had gone, leaving behind two still, forlorn looking figures. Luke moved so fast he blurred across the distance to the figures. Silver lines flew from his hands, and the two reptilian forms on the ground flickered in and out of focus, shifting between reptilian and human. By the time Elanor reached them they were almost human save for a snakeskin pattern coiling around their bodies. Ingmar’s was green, Vera’s red and yellow. It wasn’t like a tattoo but actual snakeskin.

Luke tossed a ball of silver fire at the machine on the stage; it exploded into flames and was quickly consumed, along with most of the support equipment.

He turned back to Ingmar and Vera. He passed his hand though their auras and they awoke. Then he plucked towelling robes from thin air.

“How do you feel?”

Ingmar wiggled fingers and toes stretched a little. Vera did something similar. “I’ve felt better, but everything seems to work. How is Vera?”

“I’m fine, shaky but fine. What happened?”

“The machine exploded. The two of you are very lucky to be alive. Put these robes on and we will get you out of here.”

Luke stood, leaving Elanor to help the two to their feet. He took a deep breath. “Everybody, the machine exploded, but no one was injured. Please go home all of you. There is nothing to see here.”

The audience got to their feet and began leaving the auditorium. Some were talking in low voices. Luke spoke again. “Ingmar and Vera’s assistants. Come here.”

One crawled from behind the stage, two more left the guests and returned.

“Summon the car to the back entrance. Contact the fire brigade and the police. The machine exploded. We should keep it quiet, but they will need to be notified. No one has been injured. The PR person should prepare a statement for the media. Arrange for any mess to be cleared up.”

“Certainly.” One of them said. A moment later he was making calls on his mobile phone. Luke gathered Elanor and the two of them helped Vera and Ingmar toward the back entrance. The car was waiting, Luke got in the back with Vera and Ingmar, Elanor got in the front beside the driver. Luke spent some of the journey describing the explosion for the benefit of the driver, and part of the journey describing how Vera and Ingmar had become younger.

Eventually the four of them were ensconced in a warm sitting room with hot tea, single malt whisky, and chocolate biscuits. The servants had finally ceased fussing, and they had some privacy.

“Lucius, what actually happened after Vera came out of the cabinet?” Ingmar asked. “It’s like a dream. You saying the transformation was unstable, bits of me changing, and it feels like I was possessed by something. I seem to remember gunfire, some sort of silver cage, and then I was lying on my back on the floor.”

“Yes.” Vera commented. “Something happened to us, and I’m sure you did something to save us. I thought I was young again, and clear skinned, but now I am disfigured by scaly skin across my face and body.” The two of them were snuggled up together on a large couch. Luke and Elanor were seated together on another.

Elanor was sipping alternately from hot tea and a large malt whisky. She’d not tasted malt whisky before, but now she felt she needed it. She also wanted questions answered, but knew she had to wait for explanation number two when they were in private. She settled in to listen to explanation number one.

Luke swilled some whisky, then spoke. “Something contacted both of you in your dreams. What ever it was, it had its own agenda and was extremely powerful. Part of that agenda required the use of human bodies, yours in particular.”

“Was it a demon?” Vera interrupted.

“I think it was something like that. Did you make those disks, or did you discover them?”

“We dreamed of them. Then one day there appeared in my office.” Vera explained.

“Vera was always more skeptical that I was, but once she found the disks she was convinced we were doing the right thing.”

“Mmm.” Luke confirmed. “Once you touched those disks you were infected. The being has little power in the physical world, and could only contact you in dreams. Those disks were its receivers, they channeled its power into the physical. When you touched them it could put you under its control. It persuaded you to build that cabinet on the basis that it would transform you into a younger version of yourselves. Once you were both transformed it moved to possess both of you. And then it transformed you into shapes more to its liking.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, you transformed into snake like beings with legs. I’d already said to Ingmar that the transformation was unstable, and that something was supplying energy to keep it unstable. While you were transforming into serpent people, I found those disks. I removed them from the cabinet, and then I destroyed them. When I did that the machine exploded, and the two of you collapsed. You transformed back into what you are now. I should be grateful that you seem to be young and healthy. It could have been a lot worse.”

The two of them looked at each other, then Vera spoke. “Can you be sure we are healthy? Are we really young, or is it just smoke and mirrors?”

Luke smiled. “You seem healthy, you look healthy. You could possibly go to hospital for a full body scan to see if you are still human underneath. Maybe you could pay for a full DNA sequencing.” He shrugged. “Who knows? If you have snake skin on your bodies, you may have other things inside. However, I don’t believe it has harmed you. It may try again. If it does, please contact me, and don’t touch anything you find that you have dreamed about.”

“I don’t like the idea that it may try again.” Ingmar said.

“It may not. I destroyed those disks, it has to obtain more from somewhere. I doubt it will try until then.” He paused, looked at both of them. “I believe that both of you will live a long time. That would suit it. Any dreams of it, please contact me.”

“Lucius, what exactly can you do?” Vera asked. “You’re not human either, are you? And neither is Elanor. I remember gunmen, they sprayed bullets at the four of us. None of us were wounded.”

Luke closed his eyes as if in thought. “You two were in the process of transforming. You would heal instantly.”

“What about you and Elanor? I saw her leap off the stage straight at a gunman who was firing at her. And you were standing between us, I know you were hit, I saw bullets coming out of your back.”

Elanor glanced at Luke, and spied a twinkle in his eye. “Any gunmen must be part of your dreams, because no one was killed or injured, no one else saw any gunmen, or heard gunfire, and there is no trace of any bullets being fired.”

“So everything that happened once I got out of the machine, until I awoke naked on the floor was a dream?” Vera asked.

“Yes. No one else has any memory of it, and the police will not find any evidence of it.”

Vera chuckled. “Which only shows you are very good at cleaning up and covering up. So, humour me. In my dream, where you and Elanor are bullet proof, and trap us in some kind of silver cage, what are you? Neither of you are human, are you?”

“Possibly more human than you are now. Very well. Please keep this to yourselves. How old do you think I am?”

“I’ve know you since I was thirty.” Ingmar said. “I’ve never noticed, but you look the same as you did then, and that was forty six years ago. You have to be at least as old as I am. Why did I never notice?”

“Because I did not want you to notice.”

“Then how old are you? And what are you?” Vera asked.

Luke steepled his fingers together. “I predate the pyramids. The Egyptians knew me as Horus, the Greeks as Apollo Leukeios. I am like a shepherd, humans are the sheep, and beings like the ones that possessed you are the wolves.”

“You said something like ‘These are mankind’s ancient mortal enemies’. So you are two of our defenders?”

“Shepherd is a better term.” Then he grinned. “More like goat herd, because humans are recalcitrant, inquisitive, and stubborn, just like goats.”

Ingmar surprised Elanor. “Apollo was a god of shepherds originally, I seem to recall. And Leukeios has something to do with protecting from wolves.” He grinned. “I am old enough that I studied ancient Greek and Latin at school.”

“It also means bright and shining, depending on which word root you use.” Luke supplied helpfully. “Apollo Leukeios was originally associated with the morning star, before someone decided the sun was better.”

“And Horus was the hawk of the dawn, and associated with the morning star. Ah, of course!” Ingmar continued.

“What dearest?” Vera interrupted.

“Our friend calls himself Lucius Morgenstern, and he predates the pyramids. Should we be afraid of you?”

“No, if I was dangerous to you, you would not be sitting here now.”

“You’re not making sense dear.”

“Morgenstern is German for morning star. And if we use the Latin for morning star, we can deduce that our friend is Lucifer Morningstar.”

Luke executed a little bow while sitting down. “In the flesh.”

Vera made a little ‘O’ of surprise. “You’re not quite the way I pictured you.”

“Horns and a tail are a bit conspicuous.” Luke replied with a grin. “This way, no one would believe you if you told them. Anyway, not all the stories told about me are true.”

They chatted for another half an hour before Luke stood up. “It is time we were going. You both need sleep, you will have to issue a statement tomorrow. And get used to living, you are both young again. And snakeskin may set a fashion.” Both had a band of snakeskin running up their necks on the right and across their faces to disappear into the hairline at the left temple. Ingmar’s was emerald green, Vera’s red and yellow.

“Will we see you again?”

“Of course! I’ll drop by from time to time. But if the dreams come back, call me at the chateau. Leave a message if I’m not there, it will find me.”

Luke linked his arm with Elanor. “Now this may surprise you.” He led Elanor forward, and they walked into a rainbow swirl and arrived in the entrance hall of her home.

“Was that wise to do that in front of them?”

“They know enough about us from being possessed. But who will they tell? When they see us again we will be model citizens.”

Elanor kicked off her shoes and led Luke into her own sitting room. “There are so many things I want to ask, I don’t know where to start. You told a lot of half truths, you left out many things, and how did you clean up all evidence of the gunmen? I mean, I know you changed the memories of all the guests. And what is the pit of chaos?”

Luke laughed. “Would you like some more malt whisky?” Elanor assented, and fetched glasses from the drink cabinet. Luke plucked a bottle from thin air. “This one is better than the one they had.” He poured a generous measure into each. Elanor sipped and decided it was better.

“Now where do I start? Those disks were the key to giving those two entities access to the physical realm. Destroying them broke the link. I did not realize they had arranged with the gunmen to secrete themselves in the auditorium, and to attack. Shooting Ingmar and Vera forced them to transform into bodies the serpent gods deemed more suitable. I was able to trap them because they were pre-occupied with feeding on the gunmen. I altered everyone’s memories, I certainly did not want too many witnesses to something miraculous. I want Ingmar and Vera to remember being possessed so they are not tempted to try that again. Their memories are like dreams, but they remember the gunmen. I placed a shield around you as soon as I became aware of danger threatening, and I think you realized that.”

“Yes, I felt it. I knew I was bullet proof, but that didn’t make it any less frightening when they were shooting.”

“I understand. You handled yourself very well.”

“Thanks. How did you clean everything up? They must have been spraying bullets everywhere. Erm, why didn’t you put them under control?”

“The gunmen were all under control of the two gods. If I took over they would notice. The gods could have done a lot of damage if they’d realised I was there. I mean things like morphing all of London into a copy of some Mayan city full of stone ziggurats and half the population into serpent folk and the other half messily dead as they tried to destroy me. Ordinary damage like bullet holes and a few physical wounds is easy by comparison. But I do have helpers, they find whatever needs to be cleaned up, I lend them the power.”

Something occurred to Elanor. “They needed artifacts to bring their power through. What about you?”

Luke smiled. “Gods, angels, demons are all spirits, sentient powers that can be trafficked with, they all need an artifact of power to link them to the physical. Their other option is to be born of woman, but then their powers are limited. I am different, I need no artifact. I am here in the capacity of shepherd. I will always be more powerful than any god that manifests through a power object.”

Elanor sighed inwardly. It didn’t look like Luke was going to explain anything about himself, especially that puzzling reference to elder gods.

Luke picked up on her thoughts - that could be annoying sometimes. “It’s not that simple. Suppose I said to you that strangeness and charm were conserved in quark interactions, would that mean much to you?”

“No. It sounds like gibberish.”

“And if I said that color, strangeness and charm are the names of properties of quarks, you may feel you have a handle on something, but you still have no idea what I am talking about.”

“I know you are leading somewhere, I just don’t know where yet. That happens a lot, you know. Are they some kind of spirit?”

Luke chuckled. “Quarks are small sub atomic particles. You still don’t understand what I am talking about, but you have some context now. Trying to explain gods and elder gods and all that is like explaining quantum mechanics to you. The best I can do for now is put things into some context. You will understand more later.”

Elanor settled in for an explanation.

“Jews, Christians and Moslems all have a similar world view - there is only one god, who created the universe, and beneath him are a hierarchy of angels and demons. They correspond loosely to gods in pantheistic world views. In most world views, there is a multiplicity of gods, like the ancient Greeks or Romans or Egyptians. In those world views demons are lesser beings again. So what is an elder god?”

“Erm, something that came before the gods?”

“Something that created the gods, and so predates them and is more powerful. In many mythologies they are more remote from humanity than gods, who are at least in human form. But what is the difference between the elder gods, the old gods, the ancient gods, the high gods and all that?” He paused to sip his whisky.

“There are differences?” She could imagine the concept of a hierarchy within the ranks of gods, and high gods being like lords in the human world.

“What they mean depends on your viewpoint. I’m not even sure some of the time how best to explain things to humans, because there are no words. If I said I was one of the luminous beings from the realm of the summer stars, would that make any sense? You have no context. In many shadows, we are known as the Old Sorcerers, because we do not behave as gods, yet we keep the gods in check. We teach and guide humanity. We are their shepherds down through the eons, but we are not their lords. The gods want to be their lords, if humans let them.”

He seemed so earnest. “Are there others like you that I would know of?”

“Hmm. Buddha, Krishna, Jesus - who really did resurrect you know. There are others as well. The term ‘shepherd’ at least gives you some context. And leads me to the pit of chaos.”

He paused, looking into the distance. “Yes, my friend Durathror would explain it like this - everything you can ever conceive of is the mind of god. God dreams, and some of those dreams are the archetypes. One of those archetypes is our archetype of order and chaos, and it in turn dreams the realm that comprises our physical worlds and spiritual worlds. That archetype includes the realm of the summer stars. What it dreams includes the crystal of order, the pit of chaos, and the template from which the shadows or parallel worlds come. So, I am from realm of the summer stars, while the gods are from the template, which is part of the dream of the archetype. The template casts shadows, which is why all the parallel worlds are called shadows - they are shadows of something more real. All of this is probably quite foreign to you.”

“I know you refer to parallel worlds as shadows, and you have mentioned the archetype of order and chaos. The rest is a lot to get my head around.”

“But wait, there’s more!” he remarked in his best TV sales tones. “The Pit of Chaos is where anything can be broken down and destroyed. Anything the archetype has dreamed. So gods and their imperishable artifacts can be destroyed in the Pit of Chaos. Something of the concept of the Pit has leaked into cultures as the lowest levels of hell, where demons themselves are destroyed. I sent the disks into the pit, and they were destroyed. That destruction echoed around creation.”

“So that ripple was felt through the universe?”

“Not to that extent. The gods were in the same room with us, it was strongest there. Once the disks were destroyed they had no anchor to the world of shadow. They left their human hosts with bodies as they had transformed them. When the energy is shut off, the body reverts to a stable form. I had to transform them back to human myself.”

“So they are human? Why did you leave that snake skin pattern on them?”

“They are human, young and healthy, but with a slight mutation of DNA that gives them a band of snakeskin that goes from their left leg, across their backs, up the right side of their chests, and then in a small strip diagonally across their faces from right neck to left temple. It will always remind them of the folly of trafficking with powers they know nothing about.”

“And are they young?”

“They might easily live another eighty years, and by that time modern medicine may enable that to be doubled.”

“And the powers the gods had to obey?”

“Me, others like me, the archetype itself.” Luke shrugged. “Slowly you will come to understand what I am talking about. It takes time, you must continue your energy work.”

“Speaking of which, all that excitement has made me horny.” She looked at him saucily. He grinned back at her.