There was no warning. One minute Elanor was walking along a busy London street under grey skies threatening rain. There was a cold damp breeze in her face. The next she was walking in warm red sand under a green sky and hot blue sun.

She stopped, and a look of annoyance crossed her face. “Luke? You’re not playing tricks on me are you?”

She dismissed that idea, turned around. While Luke could do things like this, he wasn’t a practical joker, and this wasn’t his style. He was always very considerate of her wants and feelings. But there were others like Luke.

Her tracks began three paces from where she stood. Elanor walked back over them, just in case there was some invisible doorway that would take her back. Then she sighed angrily and looked around, taking stock.

Red sand dunes stretched off into the distance. It was warm, and here she was wearing an overcoat. She stripped off coat and jumper. She had no water or food, she wouldn’t be walking very far.

Her experiences with Luke had taught her that parallel worlds, or shadows as he called them, existed, and Luke could cross between them at will. He maintained that she could learn to do the same, but since she had not, she would not be walking home. This looked real, she believed it was real. The fact that she was here implied that someone with Luke’s abilities had put her here. Luke would find her, of that she was sure, but if she were here because of some act of one of his enemies that could mean she was in for some unpleasant times in the near future. Her task was to survive until he could rescue her. A moment of panic hit her, but she took three deep breaths and calmed herself.

That blue sun was hot, and quite possibly putting out a lot of ultraviolet. Even her dark skin would not protect her. The overcoat could act as a sun shade. To her left was a much higher dune, one that might allow her to get her bearings. There was no point walking anywhere unless there was somewhere to walk to.

Elanor climbed the dune in slow easy strides, synchronizing her breathing to her steps. She felt the tingle of energy and that lifted her mood. I wish I’d learned more, but I can work with the energy. She reached the top of the dune and looked around.

Red sand stretched out all around, but in the distance there were low hills in one direction, a cliff face in a second, a snaking line of purple in a third, and a glint of open water in the fourth. There appeared to be several towns in each direction. Possible safety plus unknown dangers in each direction.

“Holy mother, which way should I go?” Her hair was gathered in a loose bun at the back of her head, held in place by two clips and with two ornate wooden chopsticks and a narrow black wooden cylinder with mushroom shaped ends thrust into the bun.

Elanor removed one of the chopsticks, tapped the pointed end against the palm of her left hand, and then tossed it into the air. “Show me the best direction.” It fell to the ground and she sighted along it. It pointed towards the sea, between two towns.

“Thank you.” She fixed her destination in her mind before wiping the chopstick and replacing it in her bun. Then she set off in her long legged stride, an easy pace she knew she could keep up for hours.

Elanor’s watch told her an hour and fifteen minutes had passed. She was thirsty, hot and sweaty. She was passing clumps of purple leafed grass, interspersed with low bushes with fleshy red stems and fleshy finger shaped purple leaves. They were full of juice, but was it safe for her to drink? She decided to wait.

She was approaching the beach now. There were taller bushes with dark purple needle like leaves, and taller trees reminiscent of palms but with huge umbrella like fronds. A yellow awning caught her eye. Movement drew attention to figures beneath it.

She felt her mind growing quiescent, entering the state Japanese martial arts called muga, wherein any movement stood out and every attack responded to appropriately. As a third dan black belt in karate she felt cautiously confident. She slowed as she approached the group, and slipped the strap of her handbag around her neck so the strap ran diagonally across her body. She tightened the strap so the bag was snug, and pushed it behind her back.

There were five figures. The nearest was dressed like a Viking, possessed of a long braided beard, braided hair, leather jerkin and chain mail shirt, iron helmet, and long sword, its point resting on the ground and his chin on the pommel. A second was similarly dressed, but had a short scruffy beard and naked broad sword in his hand. The third had a steel breastplate and leg greaves, and was drawing his sword. Number four wore chain mail plus leg greaves and a cutlass or saber in a scabbard. Number five was similar to number four, except his curved sword seemed longer and heavier with a basket hilt. They appeared to have been sitting in wicker-work chairs near a large wooden table.

“Hola!” number four hailed her. “Want to buy some weapons?” Elanor heard Spanish, but understood him. A trick Luke could do, but if she understood them, they would understand her.

“Hello yourself. My money may not be good here. But a drink would be good.”

“Water is free, but anything else will cost you. Where are you from? Where are you going?”

Elanor decided not to tell the truth. She walked closer. “I am going from Carcasonne to Navarre, but I seem to have taken a wrong turn. What are these towns?”

“Then this is your first time. Erlik, fetch some water.” The Viking shouldered his long sword and walked into the trees. Elanor stopped when she reached the shade, keeping a careful eye on the men. She was now close enough to notice that armed man number five had fangs and small horns on his forehead.

“I have not been here before, that is true. I would appreciate any information you can give me.” Armed men number two and three walked together to the edge of the shade, looking out across the desert. Elanor turned slightly to keep them both in sight.

“I’ve not heard of Navarre or Carcasonne, but if you are good with weapons you will find a ready welcome in any town around the desert. They are all at war with each other.” the Spaniard replied.

“And what do you do here?”

“We welcome travelers such as yourself, and sell them weapons, since travelers lack them. What sort of money do you have? We take most kinds.” Elanor fished carefully in her handbag, keeping her eyes on the armed men. The two at the edge of the shade moved closer, and Elanor moved a pace to the left and closed her handbag. She pushed it behind her back, ready for action.

Her hand held some British coins, imitation gold and silver, which she held out. The four of them moved closer. Elanor found she was being herded away from the desert and towards the trees and scrub. She transferred her coat to her right hand, closer to the armed men, and held out her left hand to the Spaniard. “Take a look.”

He looked at her and smiled. Then carefully he reached out his right hand and took one gold and one silver coin from her hand. Elanor stuffed the balance into her jeans pocket. The two men with swords moved closer by a pace. The Viking returned with a bucket which he placed on the table, and dipped a wooden cup into it. He held it out to her. If she moved to where he was standing she would be surrounded.

Instead she stayed where she was and beckoned him to approach. “If you don’t mind, could you bring it to me?”

The man shrugged, shouldered his long sword again, and picked up the cup with his left hand. As she moved to take it he swung the sheathed sword at her like a club.

Elanor reacted immediately, using her forearm to block the blow as close to where the man was holding as she could reach. Then she kicked him hard in the solar plexus, and saw him wince in pain as he doubled over. She had no time for more, the nearest swordsman was swinging at her with his naked blade.

She tangled the heavy overcoat about the blade, kicked the man’s closest knee, and then punched him hard in the jaw with all her weight and fury behind it. He dropped to the ground. The other swordsman swung at her head. She spun and lunged deep with her right foot, using both forearms in a block against his sword arm.

Then she did several things at once. She spun into him, pivoting on her right leg, sweeping her left foot to kick his right ankle, causing him to lose balance. At the same time she grasped his sword arm and pulled and twisted so it straightened and rotated to have the elbow underneath. As she stepped she bent at the knees, lowering her centre of gravity, giving her stability for the movement. As soon as her foot struck the ground she stood up while forcing his sword arm down against her shoulder, with all the force against his elbow. She heard and felt something snap, and as the sword fell from his grasp she elbowed him in the nose.

She spun to take stock and leaped away from the group. The Spaniard was still standing beside the table. The man with the fangs had drawn his sword, but sheathed it again under her gaze. The Viking was crawling away from a pool of vomit. One swordsman was unconscious, the other groaning and holding his bleeding nose.

A dozen responses sprang to mind, but she settled on “You’ve ruined my coat! What was all that for?”

The Spaniard considered for a moment. “They probably thought three to one was good odds when you are unarmed.”

“So you would rob me, rape me and murder me?” Don’t let this run away from you, you must remain in control. “You will make amends, and you will tell me what you know about this place.”

The Viking rolled into a sitting position. “By the gods! You hit hard!” He was still gasping for breath. “You can have my oath of fealty!”

“So you can stab me in the back one night?” Elanor replied more quietly.

“No!” He spluttered. “I am Viking! My oath is my honor.”

“I’ll think about it. Now, I am still waiting for my drink, and an explanation. And I want all of you where I can see you.”

The Spaniard beckoned to the fanged man, and they walked over to where the Viking was, away from the table and its bucket of water. The Spaniard picked up the cup and put it on the table. Elanor stood her ground “You drink some water first. Prove it’s safe.”

He seemed surprised, but poured a cup and drank it. “It is good water. You are strong and fast. You will do well here.” He put the cup back on the table and walked back to the others.

Elanor took the cup, inspected it. “Didn’t your mama teach you to wash dishes?” She sloshed some water from the bucket, swilled it around, then brought a clean handkerchief from her handbag and wiped the cup. Then she poured more water and drank.

“Now, where are we, what’s going on, and what do you know? And you’d better see to the others.”

The Viking used his long sword as a staff to help him to his feet. “This is Valhalla. Everybody spends all day fighting, and all night feasting, drinking and fucking. And the next day we do it all again! Marko, give me some water.”

“What do you remember before you found yourself walking on the sand?” the Spaniard asked, pouring water into the cup Elanor used and handing it to the Viking.

“I was somewhere else, walking along a road.”

“And then you were here. It happened to all of us. Each of us walked out of the desert, became involved in battles, were killed. Whenever we are killed we find ourselves on the sand again, and walk out again. When you come out you have no weapons. You should have some gold on you, though, and you can buy weapons. The cities are at war with each other, like Erlik said, most people fight each day. If they survive they feast, drink and fuck the night away. Women fight too. And within each city there are factions, and they war with each other.”

Erlik was poking the unconscious man. “I think you broke his neck. After a few years the fighting becomes boring.” There was a knife in his belt shaped like a large ghurka kukri, heavy curved blade as long as his arm, suitable for chopping bones. He drew the knife, and with one stroke severed the unconscious man’s head. Elanor winced. Blood sprayed and pooled on the sand, the body spasmed and became still. “Watch.” Erlik remarked. Elanor watched warily.

After a few minutes passed the corpse shimmered, and vanished, leaving behind weapons. The pool of blood and severed head also vanished. “He will wake up in the desert, and walk out. Maybe he will return here, maybe not.”

“And tonight we will feast.” That was the man with the fangs. His mean look was countered by a bad lisp.

“What do you mean?”

“One of the rules of this place.” Marko explained. “If you make a kill your group feasts that night. If you don’t then you go hungry.”

“Is that why you killed him? Nobody fishes, nobody raises cattle, or grows grain?”

“Fish are poison, plants are poison, anything that can eat them is poisonous.” The fanged man said.

“Like Marko said, we kill someone and our group eats.” Erlik the Viking confirmed. “But nobody really dies. This is Valhalla, you come back to life in the desert. And injuries take time to heal.” He knelt beside the man with the broken arm, who was whimpering in pain. “You big baby. Scratch like that wouldn’t stop a Viking, you have to kill us!” He grasped the injured man’s hair, pulled to stretch his neck, then cut his head off with one stroke. Then he quickly cleaned the blade on the dying man’s clothes before he vanished.

“Is that why you stopped fighting? I don’t think you are dead.” the fanged man rejoined.

“She knocked me out - that’s about the same.” he stood up, faced Elanor. “Lady, you should stay with us tonight, else you’ll go hungry. Few will sell you food.”

“Her money is good.” Marko commented. “But Erlik is right, we will have plenty to spare tonight. You can eat with us, we’ll not harm you.”

Slow realisation dawned. “You tried to kill me because I have gold and you’d be fed?”

“We haven’t eaten for two days.” the fanged man replied.

“And now you want to be friends?”

“It happens all around the perimeter of the desert.” Erlik added. “Returnees are killed all the time. When I first arrived here I think I was killed eight or nine times just at the edge.”

“It’s nothing personal.” Marko added.

“It doesn’t sound very honorable to me!” Elanor countered. “You guys just hang around the edge of the desert, and kill people who walk out.”

“Not everybody, only the first one for the day.” Erlik countered. “If you had lived here for a while you’d understand. If you don’t kill someone you don’t eat that day. And if another one walks out we sell them a weapon and bid them farewell.”

“Besides, we only kill one person a day.” The fanged man explained. “We don’t go around slaughtering as many as we can. The towns are bad like that. And some of them go in for torture, not letting you die for days and days. That way they can make sure their group eats every day.”

“And if you’d been here for a while,” Erlik added “you’d have taken Cohen’s sword and killed him yourself, saving me the trouble.”

“And a lone woman is likely to be grabbed by a large group of men and raped repeatedly for days or even weeks and months.” Marko added.

“Hmmf!” Elanor snorted. She was extremely reluctant to sit and eat with these thugs, but if half of what they said was true, no one else would be likely to offer food, and many would try to kill her. The alternative seemed to be going back into the desert and going hungry. “Any man tries that I’ll rip his balls off and stuff them down his throat!”

Erlik laughed. The other two looked at each other.

“Well boys, maybe I will stay for dinner. And if we are being friendly, I’m called Elanor.” Erlik introduced himself as Erlik Sigurdson Longsword, Marko was Marko Rodriguez Hernando Cortes, and the fanged man Gwydir Skull Splitter.

There was a while till sunset, and Elanor was eager to find a change of clothes or at least underwear. Her new companions were bemused by the idea, so she explained about cleanliness, adding that one benefit of being clean and smelling fresh would be a much greater chance of success with the ladies. She found herself slipping back into the role of Big Mama, but in her experience if you treated men like children they responded.

Erlik even volunteered to accompany her saying there was safety in numbers. He also insisted she wear a visible weapon. “If people see you with a sword they will know you can use it and leave you alone. If they think you’re unarmed you’ll be a target.”

“Won’t they want to see how good I am with it?”

“Maybe a few.” Erlik shrugged. “Women in my culture would fight alongside men, perhaps they weren’t as strong, but they were just as good. Why do you think the Valkyries are women? And here women fight, or they are raped and killed.”

The others agreed she would be safer with a sword. Elanor reviewed their selection of weapons and chose a Roman style gladius, short and straight. With Luke’s help she had laid to rest the shade of the Roman Centurion from a previous life but this sword felt right. If anything it was similar in size and weight to a martial arts sai - a long knife like weapon with a steel bar instead of a blade.

She had practiced with those during the years between obtaining her first dan and her third. She picked up the second gladius in her left hand, made a few practice strokes as if trying to select the best. Then she stepped away from the small group of onlookers, gesturing them all to move back. She could use these, but she needed to prove that to the men watching.

Elanor stood for a few moments with the swords crossed over her chest. Then she blurred into a series of three katas, each a choreographed sequence of martial arts moves. They were fast, furious and powerful.

By the time she finished there were about twelve onlookers, all with various expressions surprise. Erlik’s mouth was open. “Freya! The goddess of battle returns!”

“I thought you said you couldn’t use a sword?” Marko complained.

“Bloody marvelous!” one of the onlookers shouted.

“I’ll take both.”

“You haven’t got two hundred gold pieces.” Marko countered.

“My leather coat was worth more than that. You ruined it, maybe this should be compensation? But I’ll bring them back when I’ve finished with them.”

Marko looked sour, but Erlik guffawed. “Spoken like a true Viking! Let’s be off before he changes his mind.”

Erlik was interested in her idea that females preferred their menfolk clean and smelling fresh.

“I washed myself this morning and all my clothes were clean. I’m a bit sweaty now, but I don’t smell. Can’t you smell yourself? People can smell you before they see you, guys will have their swords ready, girls will run away.”

It was probably quite a while since he’d had an actual conversation with a female. He seemed to like her and chatted about life in Norway, where he’d had a wife and children, and raiding parties. He’d been killed on one raid, skewered with a spear, and found himself here. He believed in Valhalla, and for a while he fell into the pattern of fighting by day, feasting and fucking by night. Each time he was killed he had journeyed to a different city, but eventually he grew very tired of the lifestyle.

“How long have you been here?”

“I do not know. I have visited all seventeen cities, plus a number of small settlements. I have walked the desert forty nine times now. I really wish I could build a boat and sail away from here.”

“Over open ocean? Can you build a boat?”

“Open ocean? What do you think we Norse do when we go raiding in long ships? Any Viking could build or repair a boat with just his ax and knife! I cannot get suitable wood - these trees are all fibrous. I have cloth for sail, rope for rigging, but I need good wood for keel, planks and mast. All the wood is fastened with wooden pegs and then caulked with fiber and pitch.”

“Does it have to be a long ship with wood? I am thinking of something I have seen, made of willow withes. You weave a large basket shaped like a boat from willow withes, and then you cover it with skins to waterproof it.”

Erlik’s eyes lit up. “I am not sure where I could get willow, but anything like that will give strength and flexibility. Waterproofing it could be a problem, but I have nothing to lose. If I drown I’ll just be back in the desert again.” He sighed. “There are times when I wish I could end it. Please do not tell the others that.”

“I no longer fear death.” Elanor explained. “I was an old woman dying of cancer. I met ... “ she paused. “I met someone you would probably call a god, he healed me, made me young again. He will soon notice I am missing; he will come for me. When he does, if you want, I will ask him to rescue you as well.”

“Thank you. I just hope that is wise.”

There were a number of stalls arrayed along the track between cities. Some sold weapons, some clothing, others utensils and odds and ends, some locally made, others obviously discarded by passers by.

Elanor tried on a few items of clothing. There was no real privacy for this; she turned her back, stripped to her underwear, and tried new clothes on. People looked. As a brown skinned female she was an oddity. As someone who was one hundred and eighty eight centimeters tall and well built as well, she was bigger than most men, and stronger. And Erlik was spreading her reputation. But he was also staring openly and hungrily. He’d better not act on any ideas.

Elanor settled for some baggy male attire that was cooler than her jeans and jacket, but offered freedom of movement and practicality. They hid the shape of her body so that people would think her male. There was very little in the way of underwear, most people didn’t seem to wear it, and anything close to her size was designed for men. She’d just have to wash what she had each evening and hope it dried by morning.

On the way back to where she was staying, a red bird flew up from the foliage and tried to land on her shoulder. She shooed it away several times. It landed in the bushes and looked at them with beady eyes. The bird was the size and shape of a raven, but the color of fresh blood.

“I’ve been here a long time, but I have never seen a bird like that.” Erlik commented. “It looks like a raven, maybe it’s a messenger from the gods. Let it sit on your shoulder if it wants.”

Something went click inside her mind. She nodded. “All right raven, if you want to sit on my shoulder, I will not shoo you away.”

The bird looked at her, then Erlik, then her again. It cawed twice, then flew to her shoulder, settled itself, and then tapped her on the forehead with its beak. Elanor felt her perceptions shift, as they did when Luke did something similar. She could see the auras of the people around her, and glowing lines writhing everywhere. The lines of the world, Luke called them. “Is that you Luke?” she asked softly.

The bird cawed again, but a voice in her mind said “No, I’m a relative. Luke asked me to come, he is too well known here.”

“What should I do?”

“Go on as you were for now, I need to suss this out.”

“Erlik, you were right.”

“What did it say?”

“It needs to find out the situation here first. But it will help rescue me. And you if you want.”

“Oh ho! There are exciting days ahead!”

“You don’t get on all that well with the others, do you?” Elanor realized suddenly that the presence of the bird lightened her spirits. Luke knew where she was, had sent someone to take care of her.

“Not really. I walked out of the desert one day as you did, and they tried to kill me. I killed one of their group, and they told me I could stay for dinner.” He shrugged. “It’s the custom here. Once someone has been killed we can stop fighting. There is always safety in numbers. If you leave a group, any other group may kill you on sight, or invite you to stay.” He scratched his crotch absent-mindedly. “I have been thinking of moving on for a while now. If you decide to move on, we could go together.”

“Well thank you Erlik. I will wait until I have a message telling me what to do, if that is to move on then I will let you know. Of course if you come with me it might mean your death.”

Erlik chuckled sourly. “I didn’t fear death when I was alive, why should I fear it now I’m dead? You will likely have some kind of adventure, it will be a relief from the sameness of my life. Or should I say death? I can’t go sailing, I can’t go farming or hunting or even fishing. Nothing I could catch or grow would be edible. Apart from fighting and a bit of fucking, there is very little else to do. The gods only give you so much beer at night, I can’t even get drunk during the day!” He hawked and spat on the ground.

“You are in a bad way. Conversation, story telling, music, games, isn’t that what humans have done since the beginning? Oh, and raising families.”

“No children here, never seen any, don’t know anyone who has seen any. This is Valhalla remember? Most people I’ve met aren’t Norse, they don’t know the sagas, they aren’t interested in knowing. They don’t have any stories from their own culture to tell. I haven’t seen many musical instruments, mostly a few in the cities. There’s no decent wood to make any from. And most of the people I’ve met are too stupid to build a boat or compose a saga. And here we are, I’m having a better conversation with you, a woman, that almost any of the men I’ve met here.”

“That’s because in my culture women have the same education as men, and do the same work.”

When they returned to Marko and Gwydir, they found four others there as well, including three women. Two were armed, dressed more like men, the third wasn’t, and looked more feminine, and younger. None were very clean, Elanor could smell the body odour of each before she got close.

It wasn’t until the girl approached her and informed her “Hey big fellow! Three gold pieces buys you half an hour with me. And I know tricks!” She was a pretty little thing, elfin face framed by light brown hair, and pale blue eyes.

Elanor decided not to enlighten the girl. “I’ve spent my money. Some other time.” Then she saw Erlik grinning. “Erlik, if you have money, go ahead, enjoy yourself.”

“It was two last time.” Erlik responded.

“You’re a regular. You get a discount.”

“Okay. I have two gold pieces somewhere.” He turned to Elanor “I’ll be back soon.”

“If you’re back in ten minutes you should only pay one gold piece!” Elanor laughed. “Insist on your half hour.” Erlik and the girl left for somewhere in the bushes. Elanor went to talk to the newcomers.

The two women weren’t that welcoming at first. Elanor was forthright, asking “You two are lovers, aren’t you?”

“That’s right big fellow, so we aren’t interested in you.”

Elanor laughed. “Didn’t Marko or Gwydir tell you I’m a woman?”

“You!” Both looked up at her incredulously. Neither of them came above her shoulders.

“I’m used to that, but I can prove it.”

At this point one of the women put her hand on Elanor’s chest, feeling for her breasts. She cupped one, gave it a good squeeze. She nodded to her companion, who did the same. “Well, you must be the tallest woman I’ve ever seen. I’m Siska, this is Layla. You are a new arrival?” Layla was European looking, with pale skin, longish black hair and green eyes. Siska was Asiatic looking, except her short cropped hair was blonde.

“Yes, I arrived this morning. Erlik and his friends tried to kill me. Instead two of them died, and now Erlik is trying to be my friend. There is a lot I don’t know about this place.”

“It’s very strange here. We don’t see many people with dark skin like yours. People here are mostly European origin, plus a sprinkling of others, like Gwydir and me. I’ve never seen anyone else with teeth like that, he says everyone has those teeth where he comes from. I’ve seen lots of people with eyes and face like mine, but they all have black hair. The consensus is that we’ve died and this is the afterlife.”

“Have you killed anyone today? I keep being told that you have to kill someone every day if you want to eat.”

“Not for a week or so. Mostly you have to - you killed Cohen, so you get to eat, but because you fought with other members of Cohen’s group, they get to eat. We discovered that if you had sex with someone whose group had made a kill, you seem to count as part of the group. We protect Abi whom you met, and Angel. And we’ve been told that if she has sex with a group who haven’t made a kill, but she had previously had sex with someone else who did make a kill the same day, then that group gets to eat as well. The first two groups we went to hadn’t made a kill, so we moved on.”

“Angel had three customers, Abi two.” Layla added.

“And then the next group, five more customers, one of them had made a kill. Angel had sex with him. The last group was only two customers, they both wanted Angel, they hadn’t made a kill, but they invited Angel to stay with the group. They are regulars, so we let her. I’m not sure about the first two groups, but the last should eat because of Angel. We thought we’d come along here, the guys here are another group of regular customers. Abi thought she could handle all of them. That’s enough, Angel will join us tomorrow, we’ll move on down the road.”

“How long before you come back this way?”

“Maybe two or three months, it’s hard to say. We do a complete circuit around the desert. There are other groups ahead of us and behind us that do the same. We bypass the cities and towns though, they are bad places.”

“I’ve heard that from a few people now. Why are they bad?”

“Well, out here, people know each other.” Layla explained. “We go past groups of people, they don’t normally attack us, even if they need to eat, because we’ll be back, often the girls have already had sex with someone who has made a kill, so they’ll get to eat as well.”

“Returnees are fair game, unless they are personal friends, but most returnees are from the cities anyway.” Siska added. “If you try to kill a returnee and they manage to kill one of your group, like you did, then the fight’s over, and the returnee is invited to share the meal. In the cities and towns, there are so many people, they form large gangs. If you are in a different gang you are captured, tortured for days or weeks, they will eventually kill you when they decide they need a kill. Both Layla and I were raped by a whole gang of over a hundred guys every day for months. And they mutilated and maimed us each day. In the end we managed to get hold of a knife and killed ourselves to escape.”

“We swore never to go back to a city after that.”

“That’s terrible. Mind you, I know of places where I came from where that sort of thing happened. How did you meet up again?”

“Oh, there is a land mark we both know, so we walked there. Layla was waiting when I reached there.”

“If returnees are fair game, and don’t have weapons, how do they survive?”

“Many head back to the cities, where their gang will welcome them. Out here, some are good with their bare hands. We said we were traveling prostitutes, so the first group welcomed us. We bought some weapons, and we kept going till we found a group that made a kill. Then we just kept going, and after a while we met up with other girls who wanted to travel, so we could give up being prostitutes, and guard them.”

“What would you do if they all leave you?”

Layla and Siska looked at each other. “It’s not so hard to have sex with a man who’s paying you. We’d go back to that until we found some more girls.”

“You do what you have to. If this is the afterlife, it’s shit!”

“I don’t think this is the afterlife, it’s some mad god’s idea of a game”

The three of them continued chatting. Erlik returned with Abi, but found he was excluded from their conversation. As the sun slowly sank toward the horizon a sense of expectation gathered over the assembly.

“When does the food arrive? And how?” Elanor didn’t expect waiters to jump off a cart, but she wasn’t sure what to expect.

“When the sun touches the horizon, the food will appear on the table. This is why we are all standing around it.”

Conversation hushed as the sun neared the horizon. Elanor found herself glancing at the table, then sideways to the sun, and back to the table again. And finally the sun touched the horizon. There was a shimmer over the table, and it was laden with food. On one side there appeared a large keg and a smaller keg. Next to that were eleven lit oil lamps, one for each person present. As to the food, there were plates covered with pieces of meat, schnitzel, salad, potatoes (roast, mashed, and fried), a big bowl of rice, several tureens of stew, several more of vegetables, one that looked and smelled like an Indian curry, several loaves of bread, a large bowl of fruit, a pile of plates, a set of tankards, another set of goblets, short knives with sharp points, two pronged forks, spoons and chopsticks.

Some of the men made a grab for the meat with their hands, and Elanor found herself yelling “Hey! Everybody sit down! There’s enough food for everyone. Just take it slowly!” Everyone was looking at her. “Sit down, and pass the plates around. Now watch me!” She took a plate, picked up a fork, stabbed a piece of meat and transferred it to her plate. Then she followed with vegetables, potatoes. She began directing others to pass plates and those in front of dishes to use a fork or spoon to put some of that dish onto the plates. Erlik was pouring himself a beer from the larger keg. Elanor yelled “Right! Who wants beer? Pass the tankards to Erlik, he will fill them.” Erlik looked surprised, but did as he was told. The smaller keg contained wine, Elanor poured that for those who wanted it. “Hey! You’re like a bunch of children! You should wait until everyone has food and beer or wine.” Those who were stuffing their faces stopped and stared at her. She waited until Erlik regained his seat before commanding “Now you can start eating.” She was being Big Mama again.

There was a plaintive cry, a swoosh of wings, and the raven landed on top of the smaller keg. “Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot about you. What would you like?”

The answer popped into her mind. “A piece of roast.”

“Marko, could you pass a piece of roast up here for the raven please. It’s hungry.” Marko glared, picked up a piece with his fingers. “That piece is yours because you touched it. Use a clean fork. Now pass the fork down!” His mouth and eyes opened in shock, but he did as he was told. The fork and its burden reached Elanor, she dropped the meat onto the top of the small keg where the raven sat. It began tearing into it hungrily, one foot holding the meat in place.

The food was nothing special - home cooking for the relatives Elanor thought.

Conversation was muted. Most people were stuffing their faces hungrily but Elanor wondered if she had put a damper on things. “There’s more people here than I thought. Are you all part of the same group?” she asked.

Siska answered “Sort of. They’re neighbors, and because we brought Abi they are assured of eating as well. Out here neighbors help each other when they can.”

“And there’s safety in numbers.” Erlik added from across the table, his mouth full. “There’s roaming bands that would kill us for our food, maybe capture a couple of females as sex slaves.”

“Some of those roaming bands will roam by day, and capture smaller groups to kill them one by one.” Layla added. “It’s always safer to travel in groups.”

“That doesn’t sound very good. Since I’m new here, can you people fill me in on what you know about this place?”

Most people at the table subscribed to Erlik’s idea that this was Valhalla. Marko was the lone dissenter, claiming that this was either purgatory or hell, and they were all being punished for their sins. Elanor disagreed, saying “I know this isn’t the afterlife. It is too physical for a start. People still die here, and can be injured here. We need to eat.” At their looks, she added “I’ve seen the afterlife. I’ve visited my dead husband there. The souls of the dead stay for a while, then they are reborn. We are not souls. In the afterlife you all can work energies, you all can influence your surroundings.” Everyone was looking at her. Disbelief on some faces, but others saw hope. She pointer her right index finger at a piece of bread, and ordered “Black coffee in a cup!” Nothing happened. “In the afterlife I can do that. This is physical! This is some mad god’s game, and we are all prisoners playing parts for the amusement of the gods.”

“You have visited your dead husband?” Marco asked.

“Yes, he died over twenty three years ago. Last time I spoke to him he was telling me he will be reborn as one of my great grand children.”

“How did you get there?”

“Nothing fancy. When I was asleep. Anyone can if they want to. Trust me, this isn’t the afterlife.”

People looked at each other, went back to eating. Elanor continued her questions as she ate.

Opinions were divided on whether there were three, four or even five gods (or demons) who ran the place. There were at least seventeen cities divided into three or four factions that warred with each other. One city was the capital, the home of the gods, or at least one of them.

“I’ve seen two of them.” Erlik volunteered. “One looks like a small girl with wings, but made of white stone. The other looks like a man in armor, with a Greek style helmet that covers most of his face. He’s made of bronze.”

“There’s a third one, black iron, like a horse with a human torso instead of horse head, and human head and arms.”

“I’m sure there is a forth one that is red. Like a man, but with horns of a bull or maybe a ram.” Marko volunteered. “And maybe a fifth one to rule the other four.”

Most manufacturing seemed to revolve around weapons and armor, followed by clothes. No one new where the raw materials came from, no one knew of farms or mines.

“It’s probably like the food.” Erlik observed. “Weapons and armor and clothes and other utensils appear somewhere and the finders trade them claiming they made them or bought them from the manufacturer.”

Eventually they grew tired of her questions. “Why do you want to know so much?” snapped a man at the other end of the table - Patricius or something like that.

“The raven wants to know.” Elanor snapped back.

“Maybe we should make raven pie out of it.” He grumbled.

The raven flew off its perch to land on the table. It walked directly in front of Patricius, looked directly at him and gave an angry cry. The man picked up a knife.

“Don’t!” Erlik yelled. “That’s no ordinary raven!”

Patricius swung the knife at the raven. It stopped in mid air as if it had hit a brick wall. The raven snickered. He tried again and this time screamed in pain and dropped the knife. The raven snickered again. The man glared at the raven, which stared back steadily. Eventually he dropped his gaze and mumbled something. The raven gave a cry. The man replied “I said I’m sorry. All right?”

The raven made a noise and bobbed its head. Then it strutted across the table, snagged a scrap of meat with one foot, and then flew back to its perch.

“No, it’s not an ordinary raven.” Elanor said into the silence. The raven croaked agreement. People began to talk again about whatever they knew. Patricius sat silent, an angry scowl on his face. Eventually the conversation ran off at tangents, Elanor and the Raven ran out of questions. People finished eating, but they continued drinking.

Elanor was tired, but she had no intention of being the first to bed. She had already settled that there was a nearby structure with a thatched roof, supported by poles made from the palm trees that would act as a sleeping shelter. Thirty meters beyond that was the toilet - a hole in the ground with a very makeshift seat, and fifty meters diagonally to the left was the well - a hole in the ground surrounded by a simple brick fence and a thatched roof, a coil of rope and a wooden bucket attached to the rope.

Basic necessities only. She could have her choice of two bedrolls since she had been responsible for the deaths of two people, but the smelly blankets made her shake her head. If she was staying here tomorrow she would purchase clean blankets, for now she would make do with her coat and jacket.

Eventually the party broke up, one group staying to attempt to drink both kegs dry, the other to the sleeping shelter. Abi was having noisy sex with one of the men, Elanor looked around for somewhere away from the pair. Siska and Layla invited her to stay near them, for which she was grateful. Elanor mentioned wanting to wash, the two girls went with her to the well to bring back three bucket of water. They grabbed two of the bowls from the table, sloshed water to rinse off the food scraps, then poured water into each. Siska offered Elanor one of the bowls, saying “Layla and I will share the other.”

The two women stripped off their clothes and proceeded to wash using a small cloth and the bowl of water. Both women were hairy, with armpits and groins covered in hair. Elanor copied them, aware that the men were gathering to watch. She waxed, so she had little body hair apart from a landing strip. The women asked about that and she explained as best she could. She wasn’t happy to be washing so publicly, but she would rather be clean. There was no soap, so she wasn’t really clean, but it would do. She dried using her discarded shirt, then dressed in essentially a caftan for sleeping. She washed her underwear and draped it over her discarded clothes to dry. Both women wore underwear that was little more than a strip if cloth wrapped about their loins.

Elanor spread her overcoat out on the woven grass matting that covered the dirt floor, bundled her jacket to use as a pillow, lay down on the hard bed and tried to get comfortable. The two women snuggled together nearby. Elanor bid them goodnight and closed her eyes. The raven found a perch somewhere up near tne roof.

This place reminded Elanor of some parts of some third world countries she had visited as an aid worker. There was the same one room communal living, the same lack of privacy, the same public washing. She made a mental note to ask the women how they dealt with menstruation. She had some ideas and wasn’t looking forward to that.

Humans were adaptable, what was strange now would soon become the norm. Elanor could understand why many people believed this was the afterlife, and thinking like that probably helped them adapt. The small community around her acted something like a family group, and helped protect and look after its members. There was a lack of women in this group which concerned her. The prospect of staying here for eternity, or even a few thousand years, apalled her. The presence of the red raven was a comfort, and a promise that Luke would rescue her soon. Her chances of survival seemed much greater now.

Elanor slept fitfully. The hard bed and the snores of those around saw to that. She awoke from dark confused dreams where she was surrounded by figures with heads of birds feeling she had travelled from a long distance.

“You have. And today we must travel to the city of the gods, the city of jade.” She looked left to see the raven standing by her head. It shook itself and ruffled its feathers. “Anyone who wants to accompany us will be allowed to. Breakfast will be here soon.” The blue sun was about to rise.

Elanor went to perform her ablutions. When she returned the others were stirring. She dressed quickly, rolled what was left of her belongings in her overcoat and then went out to the table. There was a platter of meats, a platter of fruit, a platter of bread plus three containers of different porridges - oats, rice, and polenta. Gwydir was asleep on the ground, Erlik was at the table looking the worse for wear.

“Greetings, queen of night.” Erlik sounded drunk. “Your raven told me to sober up and prepare for a journey.” He waved his hand at the table. “See, it is stuffing itself already.”

“Have you slept?”

“I was asleep when your raven woke me.” Erlik complained.

“Then go and wash your face, drink lots of water, and eat breakfast. And the more water you drink, the less ill you’ll feel later.” Elanor ordered.

Erlik staggered to his feet. “Yes mother, as you say mother.” Elanor experienced a strange sense of deja vu. The raven squawked, Erlik shook himself and visibly sobered up. “I’ll be back.” He began to sing “Sigurd was a sailor, from the land of ice and snow, the land where the hot springs flow. His longship was sleek and strong, built of northern oak, with the raven at its prow. He sailed the icy seas…”

“What’s he looking so cheerful about?” Siska asked as she and Layla approached.

“Are you traveling with us?” Layla asked.

“Apparently the raven told him we are leaving for the city of jade today. He has gone to get ready. You are welcome to come with us if you wish.” Elanor started helping herself to porridge, and poured some honey over the top.

“That’s a dangerous place.” Siska sat beside her, gave her a quick peck on the cheek. Elanor gave her a quick hug in return.

“The gods are supposed to gather there in three days time.” Layla sat on the other side of Elanor, and kissed her on the cheek as well. Elanor reciprocated with another hug.

“Yes, we have to be there for that. There is some plan to free us, but don’t ask me details.”

Layla looked at Siska. “We’ll have to ask Abi and Angel what they want to do.”

Siska added “We’re responsible for them, we can’t go off and leave them, and I can’t imagine they will want to come with us.”

“You said you had a husband? Erlik isn’t your lover?”

Elanor looked around bemused. “I can talk to Erlik, but if he were my lover we would have slept together last night. My husband died twenty four years ago. I was pregnant with our third child. I had to become strong and bring up the children. Now I have grand children.”

“You told us you’d seen him in the afterlife. What was it like?”

“It was a very clear strong dream. I spoke with him. He had a little house, with fields and a small farm around him. It was all very nice, peaceful, not like here. He was preparing to be reborn as my grandson. My eldest daughter is now three months pregnant, that will be Abe.”

“Oh, I believe in reincarnation.” Siska commented. “You are a grand mother? That must be why you act like everyone’s mother here.”

“It could be. I just think the world would be a lot better place if we all acted like family, and treated each other with respect. I don’t like to see other people abusing or misusing people, and I’m big enough to do something about it. Besides, men are just big children, if you treat them like that they will do what you tell them to.”

“Hey, that’s so true!” Layla exclaimed.

Others were turning up for breakfast, some of them hawking and spitting to clear sleep clogged throats. Erlik returned, his hair and beard wet. He ladled oat porridge into a bowl, sprinkled salt over it, tore chunks off a barley loaf, and began slurping up the porridge using pieces of bread as a spoon. With his other hand he grabbed a chunk of meat from the platter, and alternately tore pieces from the meat with his teeth.

Elanor waited until most people had finished eating before explaining she was planning to leave. The consensus was that she was mad, and so was Erlik if he wanted to go with her. Abi told everyone “I’m quite happy to stay here. I don’t need to go traveling around. I can easily walk four or five settlements in either direction if I want variety. Sissy, I’m getting tired of traveling every day. Do you mind if I stay here?”

“We need to check with Angel. Maybe we should walk back and ask her if she wants to stay.”

“I’ll go with you.” Elanor stated. “The raven is going to fly around for an hour or so to check out the lie of the land.”

“An hour will be plenty of time.”

When the three of them had finished eating, they strapped on weapons and walked back to the settlement where Angel had sent the night. Angel proved to be a pretty little Chinese looking girl, who was very happy to stay right where she was. She had a boy friend there, and if Abi was staying nearby, so much the better. Siska and Layla both hugged and kissed the girl, and then they set off back when they came from.

“I’m a little disappointed they are so happy to leave us.”

“Well, you have each other, they prefer men.” Elanor explained. “I’d say they are sick of having ten or twenty different men each day. They’d be much happier with one special person, or just a few good friends.”

Layla chuckled. “When you put it like that it sounds reasonable. Then why are we going to go off with you?”

“The same reason Erlik is. He’s bored, he knows there is more to life than he has here. You both know that. I know that. This is your chance to get off the ride, to make a difference to the lives of everyone here. If you die, you’ll go onto the real afterlife, and then be reborn in the world you came from after a few years.” Elanor was certain of this, though she could not way why.

“Does that mean Siska and I won’t see each other again?”

“No, you have a bond, you’ll be born in the same town so you can find each other again. You’ll both know and agree before you are reborn.”

“So what’s it like there?”

“It’s peaceful, colorful, full of life, you can go anywhere in the blink of an eye by thinking about it.” That discussion continued until they arrived back at their camp.

Once there, Elanor insisted they go to the well and each drink a cup of water. When they arrived back at the breakfast table, a surprise awaited them. Erlik had gone to a nearby settlement and bought straw hats for each of them. And on the table was a small pile of gourds that Erlik was filling with water.

“Where did they come from?” Elanor asked.

“Ask the Raven. He told me to buy these hats, and when I returned these were here. I’m filling them with water. I still have five empties, so of you want to help, bring them to the well. Bring the stoppers too.”

Erlik had devised a sling like satchel from a blanket, it could be slung across the back from one shoulder to the alternate waist, and hold a small amount of luggage. One gourd could be tied to the waist, the others could be carried in the sling pack.

And so began the saga of Red Raven, Erlik Longsword, Elanor Two Swords, Layla Silverblade and Siska Goldenblade.

The raven flew ahead, circled to indicate the direction they should walk, then flew back to settle on Erlik’s shoulder, sheltering under the broad brim of his hat. Elanor was just a little miffed at this, she had begun to think of it as her raven.

Erlik led the way across the red sands, longsword across his shoulder, the three women followed in his wake. There was no shade, but at Elanor’s insistance they stopped regularly for water. The heat bothered Erlik more than anyone, it wasn’t long before he was sweating profusely. Elanor felt the responsibility to ensure everyone remained hydrated, including the raven.

After several hours they stopped for a rest, spreading one of their blankets on the sand and a second above them supported by swords wedged into the sand to form a crude shelter. Elanor was prompted to look in her handbag to discover eight snackbars, each a mixture of fruit and nuts. She passed them around saying “Lunch , courtesy of the raven.”

Rested, they continued on for several hours in the direction of some small hills. By mid afternoon they topped a dune to spy three palm trees and a stone structure below them. “The raven says we will stay here tonight. There’s shelter, water, and food will be provided at sunset.” That statement gave them all renewed energy.

The structure proved to be the entrance to a larger underground building, perhaps an abandoned military outpost. Elanor found a torch in her handbag, enabling them to see their way around. There were four large delightfully cool rooms, one with a well and a stone trough, another with several long wooden tables and benches.

After all of them had drunk, Elanor told everyone to bathe in the stone trough and wash all their clothes. That meant that Erlik, who hadn’t brought a change of clothes, had to drape himself in a blanket toga style. Elanor found a tube of moisturizer and another of anti chafe cream in her handbag that she gave to Erlik. “The raven has been busy.” she commented.

Food arrived at the appropriate time, similar to the night before, though less because there were fewer of them. This time there was no wine, but the beer seemed to go down well. They were four famished people, and between them they polished of almost all the food.

At the end of the meal the raven strolled across the table. This time all four could hear it speak in their minds. “Tomorrow we will leave here about three hours after noon. It will take you about an hour to walk to the city. We will enter the jade city about an hour before sundown. Then we will make our way to the central temple. Your task is to get us that far. There will be fighting. I will do my best to protect you and keep you alive. If you die, you will find yourself out in the desert. You will be beyond my protection. When we reach the temple my colleagues will join us. We will do battle with the gods of this place. Do not try to participate. This battle is beyond you. If we succeed, you will be freed. You will live. If you are out on the sands you will die. If we fail, you must fight your way out. And one day someone else will come to try again.”

“Hah!” Erlik slapped his knee. “We go up against the gods for freedom or glory, and probably die trying. Sounds like fun!”

“Fun!” Elanor was incensed. “You want us to fight our way into a city? You’ll get us all killed! I thought you were here to rescue me.”

“Hah! Yourself!” was the raven’s response. “Erlik, you fight for both freedom and death. This is not the afterlife. You are trapped in a prison! You are neither dead nor alive. You are entertainment for a set of bored gods. Elanor, do you fear death? We believe you will win through. It is vital that you bring me to the temple.”

“What if we don’t want to?” Siska asked.

“Then leave us tomorrow. You know the perimeter. The nearest settlements are less than an hour’s walking.”

“Don’t look at me like that!” Erlik flung as Siska. “You can all go, the raven and I will go to the city. I’ll fight till they kill me, or we get to the temple.”

“Who are you anyway?” Elanor asked the raven. “Are you really one of Luke’s friends? Did he really send you? And who is we?”

“And how can you go up against gods?” Erlik added.

“Elanor, Luke sent me. You have trained in martial arts. You stood up to the kidnappers when you were an aid worker in Africa. You have seen the afterlife and Abe several times. Luke said to tell you that you helped the centurion, and now the centurion will help you.” The raven walked along the table to stare directly at Elanor. “I am Red Raven. My wife is The Raven, Mor-Riganu, the Queen of Terror, sister to Apollo Wolfsbane, Lucifer Morningstar, the Herald of the Eagle. We will kill these rogue gods, we will destroy this world, we will free the prisoners. That is all I wish to tell you tonight.” With that it hopped onto the top of the beer keg.

Erlik drained his beer. “I have heard of The Raven, the Queen of Terror. She is someone even the gods fear. It will be good to have her on our side. But I’ve not heard of the others. Wolfsbane? Is he someone who can kill the god Loki and the Fenris wolf?”

Elanor turned to the others. Siska and Layla were looking at her. “Luke is the one who healed me and made me young again. He has a sister Mifunwi, known as the Mor-Riganu and she is also known as the Raven Queen. And Luke told me he was called Apollo Lukeios, or Lucifer Morningstar.” Then she shrugged. “I don’t fear death. I just don’t like the idea of fighting and killing other people. And I don’t like dying.”

“They don’t really die anyway.” Erlik observed. “But once you remember dying a few times, you realize that most times it’s over fairly quickly.”

“If the raven says we have a good chance of surviving, then I’m in.” Siska said.

“Yeah, well, at the end of it all, what have we got to lose? We’re all going to die anyway.” Layla added.

That night they talked about a lot of things, as people do when they know they have a battle to look forward to. Elanor found herself liking these three rather odd people more and more. She slept well, waking from dreams of three figures with heads of birds, but this time her three companions also recounted similar dreams.

With the arrival of breakfast came rather strange bundles of clothes. There was a bib and brace and long jacket that reminded Elanor off high fashion spandex ski wear, except the exterior of the fabric was webbed and corded. The jacket was studded with overlapping scales the size of coins that looked like they were mode from red glass. The entire outfit was various shades of red, and made Elanor think of Spiderman costumes she had seen in her children’s comic books. There was a helmet done in Greek style with the Y shaped opening. It was made of the same red glass, with crash helmet style webbing and small gill like slits over the ears. Surprisingly, when warn, the entire helmet appeared transparent from inside. There were comfortable red boots as well. Along with all this were four large red paper parasols.

“What’s all this?” Elanor asked the raven.

“Parasols to protect you from the sun. You will arrived fresh. And magic armor. It cannot be cut or pierced. It stiffens when hit. I will add more protection when we enter the city.”

“It looks flimsy.” Erlik commented, drawing a knife and sawing at one of the costumes. “Hmm, it seems as strong as steel.”

“It is far stronger.” the raven replied.

Among the clothes was clean underwear, including sports bras. Elanor explained them to the other two women, to Erlik’s amusement. She swung towards him “It’s all right for you! You don’t risk getting a black eye every time you jump around! You’d think different if your balls were on your chest.”

“Heh!” Layla chuckled. “They’re too small. It wouldn’t worry him.”

“Yeah, I guess he’d need to be hung like a bull!”

This day lunch appeared, to the surprise and delight of everyone. “I don’t think that’s ever happened before.” Erlik commented.

“You need to be full of energy when you leave here.” the raven responded.

Eventually it was time. They dressed in their new clothes, packed what they needed, and left the shelter. The new suits were comfortable and cool. The parasols fitted into a socket between their shoulder blades, saving them the trouble of carrying them. After about an hour’s walking the raven led them to the right and onto a well warn path.

“You will meet security guards. You will tell them you are gladiators from the garnet city. They will let you pass.” It flew off.

The city was evident by the green stone wall in the middle distance, and the spires and roof tops that poked above that. They drank some water, put on their helms, and set off, Erlik in the lead. A couple of hundred meters they encountered the guard post. There was a small building built of green stone - presumably jade, and five bored guards lounging in the shade. They wore armor that appeared to be carved from blocks of jade. Behind the guard post a paved road led to the city, a road paved with slabs of jade.

“Right! Who are you and what do you want?”

“Oh, we are gladiators from the City of Garnet.” Erlik told them.

“Gladiators? Nancy boys more like. Our boys will cream you guys. Where’s Garnet City, haven’t heard of that one.”

“Well, you should get out more, travel broadens the mind. Take a trip to see the winged lions of Babylon, or the Sphinx of Aegypt, or the jeweled forest of Narsil. Garnet City is on the far side of the desert, a long walk.”

“All right, pass.”

They walked onto the jade paved road and made their way toward the city. “Did you make all that up?” Layla asked. “I’ve never heard of any of them.”

“I’ve heard of them, never been to see them. Anyway, they are from back home, not around here.” They walked on toward the city gates. The raven joined them, landing on Elanor’s shoulder this time. It tapped her on the forehead with its beak, and she felt her perceptions change. There were lines and whorls of light everywhere, and she could see the auras of her three companions. A moment later she felt a tingling and tightening across her chest, belly and arms - the raven had activated a shield spell like Luke did.

“That’s right Elanor, Luke will be very angry if you are killed and I did not do this.” That was a long sentence for the raven. She wondered if he would activate a shield spell for the others.

“I am thinking more like myself, and less like this bird. One of the dangers of taking on a form is that it influences how you think. Luke would give all of them shields, I will do so.” With that it flitted off to Layla, then Siska, and finally Erlik.

Then the raven made its thoughts known to all four of them. “I will leave you in a moment. These new shields will keep you safe, but not immortal. If you let yourself be surrounded you can still be killed. You should be reasonably safe until I fly in through the gates, because once I do so the gods will know I am there. I will fly near you, but not with you, I don’t want to draw too much attention to you. If you go through the gates and straight along the main street, you will come to the temple. It is on the high ground at the city center.”

“Why don’t you just fly straight there? Surely you don’t really need us?” Erlik asked.

The raven chuckled. “Hah! You are decoys! You are correct.” There was a pause. “I cannot fly over the wall, there is a shielding dome to stop beings like me from entering the city. The only way in is through the gates. You will draw their fire, but since I am not with you, they will see you as normal humans. Do not enter the temple building, stay in the forecourt, where you will be reasonably safe. Good luck.” The raven flew off.

There were butterflies in Elanor’s stomach. She drew a few deep breaths, calming herself. “Is anyone nervous? Just take a few deep breaths. We will win through. We can handle this.”

“You girls might be nervous,” Erlik responded “but I’m excited about this. One last glorious battle against the gods!”

“You’re strange!” Elanor shot back.

“We can do it because we have to do it.” Siska commented. “The alternative is being stuck here for ever. We have the best armor around, and we are good with swords. Let’s go.” She pushed her sword forward in its sheath and snicked off the catch that helped it stay in the scabbard.

They walked up to the gates. The guards waved them through. The street was probably wide enough for two cars to pass, and led in a reasonably straight fashion toward a distant hill. The pavement was jade, the bricks and tiles of the houses and buildings around them were jade. There were single story houses, multi story tenements, shop fronts, multi story buildings with balconies all jumbled together. There were a few people here and there, and faces peering from behind curtains. Anyone on the street was armed. The four of them sauntered along the street as if they owned it. To Elanor, towering over the others, it was as if they were her honour guard. Elanor walked with one hand on each sword, ready to draw it if needed. Erlik still had his long sword over his shoulder, but his right hand was on the pommel. He had arranged a belt to hold the scabbard in place. Their parasols projected from the back of their armor like some small umbrella tree growing above their heads.

They hadn’t gone far when there was a flash of something swift, and an arrow fell to the ground. “Arrows don’t normally fall like that.” Layla commented.

“No,” Elanor commented “I think it hit one of us, and was stopped by our armor. Anyone feel it?”

The next hit Erlik squarely in the chest, and bounced off. He swore an oath. “Normally I’d run for cover, but it looks like the raven was correct. Let’s go on.”

Strangely, Elanor found she was relaxing. It was like stepping into the ring for a competition in karate, when it was time for the fighting to begin she slipped into martial arts mode. She now realized what the raven had meant about the centurion. Some months back Luke had helped her to lay the ghost of a previous incarnation, a retired Roman Centurion who had died when barbarians had attacked his farm. Now his pragmatic fighting skills with the Roman gladius would help her here.

A moment later a volley of arrows hit the ground around them, or stuck into the parasols. “I think they’ve ruined the parasols.” Elanor commented. “Should we jettison them?”

“They’ll only get in the way when the hand to hand starts.” Erlik observed. He reached up with his left hand, plucked the parasol and dropped it on the ground. The others did the same, walking forward at a steady pace. The street widened here into a broader thoroughfare, the buildings looking more stately.

They proceeded perhaps another fifty meters when a group of about twenty people dressed in greenish armor ran out of one of the buildings and charged at them, swords drawn. Erlik, in front, swung his longsword in two handed horizontal arc, taking the head from one and then another, smashing the point into a third at the end of the swing and booting a fourth before turning and swinging back the other way. Elanor had both swords drawn, and was in the thick of it, thrusting, blocking and slicing. A few moments later she was clear, and as she spun to take stock realized that only two of their opponents were standing. Erlik was sparring with both, she stabbed the nearer in the back and watched as he fell. A moment later Layla pulled the man’s head back and, dislodging his helmet, slit his throat.

“Anyone hurt?” Elanor asked.

There was a chorus of No’s. Erlik added “This armor is amazing. I didn’t even feel any blows, but I know some must have landed. Well, let’s keep going.”

“How did we dispose of them so quickly?” Elanor was puzzled, because she knew she hadn’t dealt many killing blows.

Layla laughed. “You two knocked them down, Siska and I killed them.”

Elanor had a sudden flash back. “That’s like the Roman Legions.”

“I’ve heard of them.” Erlik put in as they walked. “Weren’t they the most feared army in the world?”

“Something like that. They would form into lines across the battlefield, with swords like mine, and large shields. The front rank would engage the enemy, and stab from behind their shields. They didn’t worry about killing, just dropping them, then they moved forward. The ranks behind killed the fallen. And if someone in the front rank was injured he fell back, and the soldier behind him took his place. They would massacre enemy armies.”

“You talk like you’ve been there.” Erlik commented.

“In a previous life I was a centurion in one of those armies. Sometimes I can remember bits.”

A hail of arrows woke them to the fact that there was another group of warriors ahead. Erlik and Elanor walked evenly spaced across the road, Layla behind Elanor, Siska behind Erlik. They walked steadily towards the group. This new group was more numerous, and better armed. Most wore mail shirts and leggings, while the rest wore scale jerkins - overlapping plates of metal like the scales of a fish. Many of the mail wearers also had metal breastplates, leg greaves and arm guards. Some even had neck guards, some had mail hoods and metal helmets, while most wore full helms with chain or plates to protect their necks. Elanor had a moment of doubt and uncertainty. “Holy Mother! Help us to come through this safe and sound.”

“Look for weak points.” She told the others. “Chain mail will give when you strike it, you can still cause pain. And knees, ankles, elbow and wrists are all weak points.”

“Heh!” Erlik chuckled. “Hit them hard enough and they’ll go down. You ladies make sure you kill any we drop.”

“Or any that get past us.” Elanor added, calm again. “Don’t let them surround you. Their own numbers will get in the way.” Then she bellowed at the nearing warriors “Stand Aside! We have business at the temple!”

There were chuckles and cat calls. “Make us move aside.” “You’ll have to go through us first.”

Elanor’s eyes were gazing calmly at the warriors, able to detect the slightest movement. She brought her two swords up across her chest, and then back to the ready position, exhaling forcefully like a steam engine.

Erlik replied “Oh, we can arrange that! My sword is thirsty boys, can you hear it calling for blood?” With the longer sword, he had the reach on Elanor, and struck first. A swift double handed movement and he sliced the blade into the chain links protecting the neck of the nearest attacker. The man ducked and Erlik moved the blade tip just enough for it to slide into the man’s cheek. He lifted the blade almost vertical, spinning as he did, and took the hand of another and the nose of a third.

Elanor saw most of that out of the corner of her eye. She feinted with her left hand, parried a slash with her right, stabbed at her opponent’s face and as he ducked back kicked his feet from under him. His fall opened a gap in the ranks of attackers, and she moved right, away from Erlik.

As a third dan black belt in Karate, most of Elanor’s training was with hands, feet, elbows and knees rather than weapons, and in the thick of the melee she found herself reverting to this instinctively. With her long legs her feet were very effective weapons. Several went down to a kick in the solar plexus, many to a kick to the knee, and a few to a head kick. She reversed her swords so that the blades ran down the length of her forearms. Not only did this allow her to punch with the pommels, slash with her forearms and use the points with her elbows, but it also seemed to disconcert her opponents. When she blocked her blades would split chain mail, and a punch left a dent in any helm or breastplate, all with detrimental effects to the flesh and bone beneath.

Most were left to the tender mercies of Siska and Layla, but one unlucky attacker came at her with two swords of his own. She blocked with forearm blocks and kicked him hard in the solar plexus. She stepped back as he doubled over, allowing her to settle her weight on the other foot and ram her knee into his chin and her elbow into his spine, breaking his neck regardless of how good his armor might be.

Twice she spun and kicked backwards, sending an attacker flying into his colleagues, and opening up breathing space. Erlik, relying more on his sword, was finding the going harder. The second time she kicked backwards she leaped through the opening to come in behind Erlik’s opponents, sending them scattering in panic. Erlik seemed to be grinning, but he was breathing heavier. She sensed someone behind her and rammed her left elbow backward, embedding the sword through the chain mail and into the would-be attacker. Unfortunately there it stuck, forcing her to relinquish the sword. It dawned on her that she was growing tired.

Five attackers left, who seemed to be realizing that. One turned to run from Erlik, and Elanor tripped him, kicking him in head as he struggled to his feet. This time he stayed down. She hit another attacker a hammer blow to the helmet with the pommel of her remaining sword and he staggered, falling to his knees. This time she copied Siska, pulling the man’s head to expose his throat and slashing the sword across it. She would agonize about that later.

And then there were no attackers standing. Erlik was breathing huge gulps of air, Elanor realized her heart was pounding and she was panting. “I think some water and food might be in order.” Everyone had a stash of fruit and nut bars and some water.

They paused a few minutes to refresh themselves. All of them were splattered with blood, Erlik completely drenched. It was probably a good thing their armor was dark red because the blood wasn’t all that visible.

Elanor looked back the way they had come. “Is that a crowd of people following us?” About one hundred meters behind them was a crowd of perhaps thirty people.

“They’re not here to admire us.” Layla commented.

“They might be here to watch us fight.” Erlik commented. “They are armed, but then everyone here is.”

“Probably sandwich us against the temple guards.” Siska indicated up ahead. There was a green block wall around the temple, with a wide open gateway. A number of armored men were gathering to block it.

“Can we go over the wall?” Elanor asked.

“If it’s like the city wall you can’t” Erlik replied. Let’s go take a look at them before the crowd arrives.”

Elanor retrieved the second sword and was about to clean both swords when she realized the blood had vanished from them, presumably linked to the disappearance of the people who died.

Up close every one of the temple guards wore heavy plate armor, full helms, with chain mail visible where the armor had to bend.

“I think they will be slow with all that.” Elanor commented. “The joints will be the weak points.”

“Hah! I’ve seen armor like this before. They are like beetles, knock them on their backs and they are helpless.” Erlik responded. “And there are leather straps and metal catches to hold everything together. Cut the straps and the helm will come off.”

Elanor sheathed her swords. “Swords won’t be a lot of use.” What we need is a heavy machine gun, with armor piercing bullets - she thought to herself.

“No, an ax would be better.” Erlik replied. “Elanor, since you are so tall, could you sheath widowmaker and fetch bonesmasher for me?”

Elanor took the notched longsword and stood behind Erlik. The sheath hung down his back, stretching from his shoulders nearly to his knees. She slid the sword in, but the long pommel jutted above his head. He had his other blade, the one that looked like an enlarged Ghurka Kukri, strapped beside the longsword. She drew it out, feeling the heavy curved blade. “This is bonesmasher? I’ve seen a smaller knife used to behead an ox.”

“Oh yes! We call it a seax, because it is between a sword and an ax. Well girls, Elanor and I will try to knock them down, you will have to remove their helms and kill them.”

There were sixteen guards standing across the gate, and another eight standing behind. The front row had maces, clubs, and one a spiked iron ball on a chain, known as a morningstar. The eight behind had spears that poked between the front row.

Elanor approached one of the spears, and as the wielder jabbed it at her face, deftly caught it and pulled hard. The wielder and the man in front of him staggered and fell forwards, far enough for the four of them to grab their arms and drag them out from under the spears. Erlik pinned one, Elanor the other. Siska and Layla sat on their chests, slashed the straps holding the helms on, and swiftly stabbed the guards in the throats.

Elanor looked away, not wanting to see the gory detail. She kept hold of the spear, and watched the remaining guards as they screamed abuse and threats. Evidently they had been told not to go beyond the gateway. At this point she realised that a gun made it easier to kill someone by avoiding getting up close and personal the way swords and knives did, but it was the same thing. The crowd behind were closer, but not close enough to be a threat. Maybe they really did want to watch the fighting.

Elanor approached the gate again, grabbing another spear and sending two more sprawling. Someone tried to stab her with another spear while she was dragging the fallen man, so she grabbed that spear and heaved backwards. Three more fell over, but they could only grab one of them. The guards helped the other two to their feet. They tried again with the others spears, but each time the wielder let go.

“Five down, and they have no more spears.” Erlik commented. “We could try using their spears against them.”

“Wait a bit.” Elanor advised. “Once we start that we will be in the thick of them. The longest reach now is the one with the morning star. I wonder if I can catch that?”

“Ordinarily I would say it was madness, you’d get your bones broken.” Erlik replied. “But I think this armor might protect against even that.”

Elanor darted forward, spear in hand, and poked it at the man with the morning star. She didn’t actually intend getting hit. He had to swing it in a circle over his head, so there was plenty of warning. She stepped forward and to the side as it came down, and hit the long chain with the butt of her spear. The chain wrapped about it and she tugged back as hard as she could, pulling the man off balance. She released the spear and pulled on the chain, dragging the man from the line and onto his face. Erlik pounced, dragging him away from the gateway.

Erlik swore an oath of praise. “If I hadn’t seen that I would not have believed it. You could have done that without armor! I thought the spear would have broken.”

“It’s all in how you do it.” Elanor told him. “You can even use your arm. The trick is to move the same way the chain is moving so your arm doesn’t break, but you move slower so the chain wraps. Once it does that you have control of the weapon. And of course if anyone manages to grab the chain when you are using it, release it immediately, or pull back and kick. Now, I wonder what I can do with this?”

Quite a lot it turned out. The principles of using a chain weapon were something she had learned when she was second dan - the Chinese and Japanese had iron weapons similar to nunchukus but with much longer chains. She darted forward, the morning star spinning furiously on a shortened chain, smashing it into the head of another guard. This one dropped and stayed unmoving. She caught two more similarly until one guard with a mace used it to catch the chain. She pulled back sharply and kicked to the man’s knee, dropping him. Now she had both a morningstar and a mace. However, as Erlik dragged the fallen man from the gateway the remaining guards decided that with half their number already disposed of they should use their superior numbers while they still had them. They charged at Elanor and Erlik.

Elanor discarded the morningstar as too dangerous to friends in close conflict, and used the mace to block one guard’s attack and kick his knee at the same time. A second guard caromed into her and she fell backwards, but not before grabbing the guard, putting her foot into his stomach, and sending him flying behind her. As she rolled to her feet she saw one guard smash his mace into Layla’s face, but while it knocked her back, she seemed otherwise uninjured. Elanor booted him in the head, smashed the mace into a second, then dropped down to deliver a back kick to the advanced knee of a third. His knee gave was with an audible snap.

All of a sudden there were only three guards remaining. Erlik parried a mace with his seax to the man’s wrist, cutting through the gauntlet and removing the man’s hand. The second hit Erlik with the mace, causing him stagger slightly before returning a similar smash to the man’s head with his seax. Elanor tackled the remaining guard, catching his arm as he swung his mace and then breaking it across her shoulder. She threw him on the ground, and then realising that both Siska and Layla were busy, sat on the man’s chest, slit the straps on his helm with her sword, and then had second thoughts about killing him. They looked into each other’s eyes for a few moments before she said, “This will make it better. She placed the sword point against the man’s throat and then rammed the sword through his spine. A gun would be quicker, but she would make it as quick as she could for him. She dragged the sword out and sliced through the carotid arteries, spraying herself with blood. She got to her feet with a heavy heart.

Erlik was jubilant, as were Siska and Layla. “We really should be dead. The number of times I’ve been hit with no effect I can’t believe it!”

“If they’d rushed us all at once in the beginning things might have been different.” Elanor replied. She was well aware from what Luke had told her previously that the shield spell was mostly impervious, but an opponent could do what Elanor did to break bones using leverage, and a slow blade could enter the shield and cut flesh. “There were enough of them to knock all of us down and sit on us, and then it would only be a matter of minutes before they worked out how to kill us.”

“I wondered what you were playing at pulling on the spears.” Erlik replied. “I thought you had something planned, but I couldn’t see beyond the obvious. We got five that way, which was five less to jump us. It wasn’t until you got the morning star that I thought we had a chance to get through the gateway.”

They all took advantage of the moment to swig some water. Siska commented “I didn’t think we’d get this far, but I was hoping for a swift death.”

“This armor must be something!” Layla commented. “When that guy hit me in the face with his mace, I should have been dead or knocked out. All it did was rock me back a bit.”

“We have to get into the forecourt.” Elanor remarked. “is that just beyond the gate, or further?” She bent and picked up a discarded mace. “I think I’ll take one of these.”

“I’ll keep Bone smasher.” Erlik responded. “Is everyone ready? Let’s go.” Together they walked through the gate and into the temple grounds.

The temple looked like something from ancient Greece, with columns all done in green stone. The forecourt was paved with the same green stone, sprinkled here and there with a reddish shrub trimmed into a conical shape. Six figures in green robes descended the stone steps of the temple and walked towards them. Nearby was a group of statues - an alabaster angel with a pretty feminine face and breasts, a bronze man in ancient Greek style armor and helm with Y shaped opening, a black iron minotaur, a centaur of red stone mottled with black, and a satyr carved from wood.

There were voices. “Well there they are. One of you must have helped them.”

“They’re not mine.”

“Nor mine!”

“I’ve never seen them before.”

“The statues are talking!” Elanor hissed to her companions.

“They might just be the gods we’ve come to see.” Erlik whispered back.

“They’ve noticed us at last. Humans, can you hear me?”

Erlik looked around at his companions. “Should we answer?” He got into a whispered discussion with Layla and Siska.

“They are probably scared witless!” chuckled another god.

Elanor decided to take charge. Drawing a breath she bellowed “We can hear you, can you hear and understand us?”

“Don’t shout!” one of them commanded.

“Remove your helms.” the angel commanded.

Elanor removed hers and shook her hair. She wanted a mirror - she was sweating and there were rivulets running down her back, and she must have a bad case of helmet hair. She removed one gauntlet and ran her fingers through her hair. “Why have you brought us here? One of you snatched me and brought me to this world. Who was it and why?”

“Is that wise?” Erlik asked.

“It is not wise!” the angel thundered. “Scream in pain!” It pointed its finger at Elanor, there was a flash of light and a bang followed by a peal of thunder. Elanor perceived a golden glow around her.

“She’s not screaming.” the Minotaur observed.

“Why? Who is protecting her?” There was a chorus of No’s and Not Me’s. The angel turned back to Elanor. “Human, who gave you your armor? Who is protecting you? Answer truthfully, for I will know if you lie.”

I’m sure she will, Elanor thought. “I’m not sure, but the one who gave us the armor was red.”

That set the cat among the pigeons. The other four rounded on the centaur accusing him of arming and aiding the four humans. It was several minutes before the gods turned their attention back to the humans. Where was the raven?

Elanor fished out one of her chopsticks from the pocket she had secreted it in. “I still want to know which one of you brought me to this place and why?”

“How should we know?” the Minotaur complained. “All you humans look the same to us.”

“You are here to fight in campaigns we devise.” said the bronze warrior. “We need more fighting women. You are obviously a fighting woman.”

“What’s that you’re holding?” the angel asked.

“So this entire world is just a toy for your amusement?” Elanor asked.

“Yes, and you are impertinent!” the red centaur screamed.

“Me? Impertinent?” Elanor blustered. “You have the hide to kidnap me, drag me away from my children, maroon me here, and you call me impertinent? Oh No, you miserable excuses for gods, you are impertinent!” She jabbed the chopstick in their general direction. “You have kidnapped everyone here, you are holding everyone trapped in this stupid excuse of a game because you are all too stupid to amuse yourselves. And we can’t even escape by dying because we end up back in the sands, instead of moving on to the after life! Don’t you think that is impertinent? And another thing, we only get to eat if we kill someone else, don’t you think that is downright bloody minded? All you want is for us to fight each other ...” She let them have full broadside of her pent up frustration and anger.

She was about thirty seconds into a tirade that would have lasted minutes when the gods decided they had heard enough, and blasted her. The world around her went white, there was a crescendo of noise that seemed to go on and on for ages. After the first few seconds she realized that it wasn’t getting through her shield and she relaxed. She must have made them really riled. Well, it was about time the raven and Luke put in an appearance.

The sound and fury proved ineffective, and died away. Elanor glanced over at three very frightened humans, cowering unharmed inside their shields. “Is that all you can do? And you call yourself gods? I don’t think you’re gods, you’re a bunch of wimpy half baked excuses for human sorcerers!” The world disappeared in another white out.

“They are still unharmed!” one of the gods complained. “How can this be? Who is shielding them?”

“Our combined powers could not penetrate her shield. Look at it.” The angel screamed. “Look at it! Who is her patron?”

“Aiya!” Wailed the centaur. “That silver webbing! Her patron is one of the elder gods!”

At this point three birds flew over the top of the gods. One was a hawk, one a red raven, which defecated onto the head of the angel, and the third a black raven. Elanor walked over to her companions. “You guys all right? The cavalry has arrived.”

“You are unharmed?” Erlik and Siska asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what is scarier, what the gods were trying to do to you, or the fact that you are unharmed.” Erlik said.

The three birds banked and braked for landing, except an odd thing happened. Their heads stayed at the same height, while their bodies stretched down to the floor. The red raven became a man, the black one a woman, and the hawk became her beloved Luke.

As a man, the red raven’s skin was coppery red, he wore a simple loin cloth that consisted of two flaps of red leather, one front, the other back. His hair was long and straight, the color of fresh blood, and hung to his shoulders. His eyes were dark. Around each calf a thong of red leather had been tied, with seven red feathers attached. Similar thongs were tied to his wrists. A complicated device hung on his chest: a hoop with netting spread over it, red feathers and colored stones tied here and there. His arms were spread like the wings of a bird, and in his left hand he held a small drum made from the skull of an animal over which red skin had been stretched tautly, while in his right he held a small bleached bone into which red markings had been incised. He waggled his left hand and the drum made a noise like a rattle snake, then he brought both arms together in a sweeping movement to play a rapid tympani on the drum with the bone. He stopped suddenly and stared, his eyes the piercing stare of a raven.

Elanor felt compelled to announce the new arrivals. “The Raven King whose dream catcher is said to hold the dream of shadow.”

The female had green eyes, milky skin and long dark hair in nine braids, each twined with silver. She wore a tunic and skirt of black leather, belted about with a silver cord. In her hand was spear with a leaf shaped silver blade, and three black raven feathers tied to the shaft. Between her breasts hung a complicated pendant of silver and obsidian. She swung the spear into the air, circling it around her head so fast that it made a roaring sound and the blade blurred into a circle of silvery light. She stopped it suddenly and swung it forward to point at the gaggle of gods, holding it in two hands like a sword. It made a sound like a whip crack. The circle of silvery light remained, shrinking and descending until it became a silver band about her head. At this point she lowered the butt of the spear to the ground.

Elanor spoke again “The Raven Queen, with her skull pendant, and spear with three back feathers, one for terror, one for death, and one for war. She is known as Mor-Riganu, the Queen of Terror, one whom even the gods fear.”

The third was a haughty Egyptian looking man in white linen kilt, sandals, and a complicated jeweled harness across his bare chest. In his hand he held an ebony staff with an eagle’s head. “And Horus the Hawk of dawn who is also Apollo Lukeios and Lucifer Morningstar, the Herald of the Eagle.” Elanor was suddenly feeling very proud.

Elanor lowered her voice for her companions. “That’s Luke, he’s my er lover, Mor-Riganu is his sister Mifunwi, and Uncle Red is her husband.”

“I’d say she’s scarier.” Layla put in. “But if he’s her lover, that explains why she’s still alive.”

Erlik grinned and shook his head. “We went up against the gods! And we met someone who is friends with some gods.”

“We’re still alive,” Elanor commented “so there is a good chance of getting out alive. It isn’t over yet, but our part is.” The four of them stood together, Erlik on her left, Siska and Layla on her right.

The five gods made a concerted attack on the newcomers. Horus tossed what looked like a handful of ball bearings at them. Each silvery sphere swelled in size as it travelled towards the gods, one sphere targeting each. When a sphere struck a god in the chest it enveloped him like a silvery bubble, and that god’s lightning bolts, fire and fury were cut off.

“That’s better.” Luke said. His voice was soft, polite. He raised his staff and slammed its butt into the ground. Everything around them rang like a heavy brass bell.

The gods were still, staring at the three like mice staring at a cat. One of them, possibly the Minotaur, exclaimed “That’s the Herald!”

“I’m so happy you managed to work that out. Red Raven, what have you discovered?”

“As Elanor said, these five have been kidnapping people from various shadows, and imprisoned them here for their amusement. The gods organize military campaigns by some cities against others. Very little is produced here, any industry revolves around war, weapons and armor. The gods provide food, but only for those who kill someone. And when anyone dies their soul does not travel to the afterlife, but is reclothed with an adult body and returned here.”

“Thank you. I have been here twice before and it has been the same. I told you then that there would not be any third warning. What have you to say for yourselves?” Lucifer was still being polite.

There was a chorus of yells, but one from the angel stood out. “We fixed things!”

“Such as? Women are no longer naked rape victims, and the group eats if one member makes a kill. What about death? Those who die must progress to the afterlife. What about sustainability? Inhabitants of this world must be able to make a living from the soil, and they must be capable of reproduction. Those are requirements of any private universe.”

“If they won’t play by the rules then they don’t play.” added the Mor-Riganu. “They have been warned, they are still guilty. I say punish them.”

The Herald looked at Red Raven, who spoke “I agree. They are guilty, they must be punished.”

“I concur. The punishment is banishment from the shadow realm for five cycles of order and chaos. You are exiled to the frozen wastes behind the shadows. Mor-Riganu, will you carry out the punishment?”

“Willingly.”

“That’s too harsh!” someone, possibly the Minotaur, complained.

“Really? You are immortal. The next transgression will earn you twenty cycles as something mortal, perhaps an insect. That might give you a better appreciation of how you affect the lives of mortals.”

The Mor-Riganu lifted her spear and walked over to the gods. “Who wants to be first? No one? Are you afraid of me?”

“Will it hurt?” asked the angel, tears in her eyes.

“Ah, you are gods. You have never died, have you?”

“Make it swift.” said the warrior.

“You have become too earth bound, forgetting the world of the spirit. And yes, you should fear me. I am the Raven Queen, I am she who collects the souls of the dead. And I am she who kills the gods.”

With that she thrust her spear through the silver bubble and into the chest of the satyr. His entire being became enveloped in silver flames and then crumbled to nothing. The silver bubble collapsed and vanished.

The Minotaur complained. “Five cycles of exile will be very boring.”

“Then learn to amuse yourself. Or we can make you into a mortal if you prefer.”

“A human? No.” It sighed theatrically. “Strike true then.” The raven queen thrust her spear into the Minotaur, and he was swiftly consumed.

“To become mortal we lose our godhood. Do we regain it afterwards?” the Centaur asked.

“Yes, you will reawaken to your godhood at the end of your mortal period.” Horus answered. “In between you will die many times, and evolve as mortals do. I am sure you will benefit from it.”

“Mmm. I do not wish to be human.”

“We can find you shadows where centaurs live if you prefer.”

“I would prefer.”

“Very well.” the Herald stretched his staff through the silver bubble. Silver fire engulfed the centaur, and something like smoke came off. After a while the centaur’s body was consumed like the others, but this time the silver bubble shrank to the size of a pearl. The raven king picked it up and dropped it in his pouch.

The warrior preferred exile. The angel cursed the Raven Queen, who countered “Let you curse be upon yourself.” and as the angel shrieked Mor-Riganu stabbed her.

“Now we can breathe a little easier.” the Raven Queen said.

“Gods are like naughty children.” Red Raven said.

The Herald lost his haughty look, and grabbed Elanor into a hug. I’m sweaty and dirty, and he wants to kiss me? she thought.

He laughed. “You are my beloved. I am your Luke. Sweat and dirt is a natural part of life.” He kissed her on the lips and her heart sang. “I am very proud of you.”

Elanor hugged him back. “I knew you would rescue me eventually, but why did it take so long?”

“This shadow is almost completely closed, they have been closing it off since my last visit. If we’d rescued you I doubt any of us would have been able to get back in. They had a powerful patron who is every bit as powerful as us. That may even be why you were snatched, your relationship with me is known. Then again, they were hunting for fighting women, and with that third dan black belt you are well qualified. As you proved.”

Erlik asked “Please excuse my ignorance, but what are you if you kill gods?”

Luke smiled. “We predate the gods,

and are more powerful than they. You may have some reference to us in your mythology.”

“We are the spirit beings from the dream time, now we have many names such as the Lords of Light.” said the Raven Queen.

“We are also known as the old sorcerers.” said Red Raven. “We are on the side of mortals, we keep the gods honest!”

“They are here.” said Mor-Riganu.

“Who, Mifunwi?” Elanor called Luke’s sister by the name she was familiar with.

“My ravens, come to collect the souls of the dead.”

“Dead?” Erlik interrupted. “There must be thousands of them!”

What Elanor had mistaken for a dark storm cloud approaching was resolving itself into a very large number of black birds - ravens by the noise of their calls. “Millions!” she exclaimed. “Why so many?”

“About five million two hundred and seventy thousand, one for each person here.” Mifunwi replied. “Everyone save you four will die, and their souls will be conducted to the afterlife, where they can recover and then be reborn among family and friends.”

“That hardly seems fair!” Elanor protested. “Can’t you find them somewhere else to live out their lives? Luke, you talk about informed choices. Shouldn’t they have a choice?”

“The question is where to put so many people.” Luke replied.

“Yes.” Red Raven added. “Most people have been here for hundreds of years, the society they came from is gone, and their family and friends moved on. We can’t put them back where they came from. Should we put them all in a refugee camp? Or dump them into some uninhabited shadow to eke out a miserable existence until they die young of disease or hunger?”

“They are from many different shadows and many different times.” Luke said. “There are at least one thousand different languages spoken. Even you four speak four different languages. But I suppose there be some like Elanor, selected recently, who can go back where they came from. But if we let them all live, where do we put them?”

“Somewhere with a similar technological level to here, I suppose.” Mifunwi suggested.

“We should make an announcement if we are going to keep them alive.” Luke seemed to be thinking out loud. “Your ravens could convey one person each to a new home instead of into the afterlife.” He turned away, lifted his staff into the air. There was a sound like a crystal gong that rang out. Two Grecian style columns appeared nearby, about three meters tall, one white and the other black. Each one hovered about half a meter from the ground.

“What are they?” Siska whispered to Elanor.

“Something called guides. They seem to follow Luke everywhere. They are spirit beings of some kind, very wise.”

Luke turned and said to the four humans “These are the pillars of creation. They can help with this.” He turned back.

“We need a suitable shadow for the five million people from here. Warm climate, food, shelter, suitable for humans.” Luke said. “What we have here are mostly fighters, not necessarily a lot of other skills. It would be better if there are others in that shadow who can look after them. Somewhere that five million people suddenly arriving will not strain the resources, nor cause wars. Somewhere they will be safe, and can live out their lives, and have children.”

“There are many places.” One of the guides replied in mellifluous English. “Let us show you.”

“What are they doing?” Siska asked.

“He’s going to save everyone here. I think they are selecting a suitable world.” Elanor replied.

Suddenly there was agreement between Luke, Red Raven and Mifunwi. Mifunwi turned to Elanor “Each person will be given a choice: death or life in a shadow we have chosen. Each will be asked where they came from. If that shadow exists, and their family is still alive, then they can choose to return home. As you know, that may cause problems - a wife remarries, farm or business goes broke, family home sold.”

“What about us?” Erlik asked.

“None of you three have homes to return to. You may choose to go to the new home with the others, or you may choose to go with Elanor.”

“Siska and I will stay together. We would prefer to go with Elanor, but can we see the other place?”

Luke returned. “You three should come with Elanor. You will spend time in her world, and you will spend time with me, Red and Mifunwi. We will take you to visit the other shadow, you can always choose to stay there.”

The three looked at each other. Siska replied “That suits us. And we are happy for Erlik to join us, he’s a friend.”

“I don’t have many friends.” Erlik replied. “I am curious about the new world, and I am curious about Elanor’s world. But to be honest, you three are my friends.”

Mor-Riganu turned away. “You have your instructions. Fly my ravens, find every last person on this world, and convey them out of here.”

Red Raven had his arms outstretched like wings. Suddenly he dropped them to his sides. “I have made the announcement. Now we wait.”

Mifunwi explained, “We cannot leave yet because we cannot get back in if we do. We must stay here until we dismantle this world, and that must wait until everyone else has left. In the mean time, freshen up all of you, and then we shall eat.” She gestured, and a series of silken pavilions appeared nearby, along with a stone bathhouse. “There is hot and cold water, soap, towels, and clean clothes for each of you.”

It was a roman style bath house, with pools of hot, tepid and cold water, a steam room, and an area for washing with buckets of tepid water before plunging into the pools. Elanor insisted her three companions wash properly, and scrub the ingrained dirt out of their skins. That took a little while before she was satisfied they looked and smelled clean. They complained that since she was brown they couldn’t tell if she had ingrained dirt, she countered she had been clean when she arrived there.

They were luxuriating in the tepid pool with Erlik proving he still knew how to swim when Luke, Red Raven and Mifunwi joined them in the pool. “We spend a lot of time as humans, we enjoy typical human pleasures.”

Dinner was a sumptuous banquet served buffet style under candlelight. Elanor and her three companions were famished, Luke and the Raven king and queen ate sparingly. They encouraged Elanor’s companions to talk about themselves.

Towards the end the Raven Queen announced “The living have been removed. Elanor, only eighteen have been repatriated, one hundred and seventy six chose to die, the rest chose life. Several thousand had injuries that required healing. And one thing you men overlooked - about two hundred and twenty thousand souls were in a holding area waiting to be reclothed with physical bodies. They have been conveyed to the afterlife. We should go soon. Eat up.”

“Now would also be a good time for visiting the toilet.” Luke suggested. “When you finish eating.”

“I’m curious about this new home you’ve found them.” Elanor prompted.

Luke chuckled “You would be proud of me, Elanor. The shadow itself is a mediteranean climate, fertile ground, sweet rivers and wells, and seas full of fish. I’ve taken a leaf out of your old testament, Moses and the land of Canaan. We’ve constructed abandoned towns and villages, there is stored food, farms stocked with animals, fields growing grains, fruit trees, vinyards, the works. The refugees need only walk in and work their farms.”

“That sounds good, but will many of them know what to do?”

“Hah!” Red Raven responded. “Many warriors won’t, but several of our group have volunteered to co-ordinate and teach, and we the guides who can educate them while they sleep. The refugees will need an adjustment period but most would have grown up with farming or fishing. And we are making them leave their weapons behind.”

“Are there any more women?” Erlik asked.

“No,” said Mifunwi, “The ratio is about ten to one. That’s workable.”

“It is?” Erlik replied, making it obvious he didn’t think so.

“You saw how people adjusted.” Mifunwi countered. “Most groups had only one or two women, and many women decided prostitution gave them benefits. However, the balance will be about equal in the next generation. The biggest problem is the number of languages. There’s over a thousand, and none is large. Maintaining translation spells for everyone is not practical. We will need to instill a common language soon.”

“Heh! If there were more women I’d be tempted to go there, but it might not be a lot better than before.”

“It will be different at first,” Luke commented “but when everyone starts farming and fishing it will be more like home. And when children are born I think most will be content. They should develop into a thriving community.”

Elanor had been thinking “They will have creation myths about how the gods brought them there, but they’ll forget, won’t they?”

Luke laughed. “Yes, and like the humans in your shadow they’ll invent new histories to explain how they evolved there.”

“Well, thank you all for not killing them. I think you made the right decision.” Elanor finished.

“Well, we will monitor them over the next thousand years or so.” Red Raven commented. “Now, if you’d care to finish eating, visit the toilet and so on, we need to get moving.”

When Elanor returned, Luke had persuaded a throw rug to levitate off the ground by about half a meter. “I want you four up here. You can take your luggage and weapons if you like, Erlik.” They didn’t have much baggage apart from weapons and discarded clothes. Elanor still had her handbag that had been wrapped into an impromptu pack, and she decided to take the swords and mace, strapping on the swords as she had before. The others did the same.

Red Raven sat at the front of the rug, and spread his hands. “We are shielded now, so you are protected from what will happen next.”

Luke and Mifunwi walked away, up the hill.

“Where are they going?” Elanor asked.

“The temple is the connection to the power needed to keep this world going.” Red Raven looked around. Seeing puzzled expressions he continued “Let me explain in simple terms. All of you have your creation stories, where the gods create the world. You may not realise that there is a very large number of worlds. Most of them are connected, and if you know what you are doing you can walk between them.

“Think of islands in a sea. They are close together, and you can swim from one to another, but you need to know how to swim.

“This world, on the other hand, is closed off as best they could. It is too far to swim, you need a ship, the seas are treacherous, there are dangerous rips and rocks. It is very difficult to get here, and from here to anywhere else.

“You should also know that the creator gods come first, they create the world, and then they create the other gods that you end up worshipping. These new gods do not have the power to create worlds. The ones we destroyed earlier are some of those gods. Beings like me can create worlds.

“So those gods had a patron, someone as powerful as me or Luke, and that being created this world. There will remain a link between the creator and the world, and Luke and Mifunwi are about to destroy that link. When that happens this world will unravel, but the creator will be aware that this has happened. That being may react, and that would be very dangerous even to us. Luke has given me instructions to get the four of you to safety if that happens.”

At that moment there was a series of gong like sounds from within the temple, followed by a concussion that rocked the world. A sphere of fire, roiling, multi-hued, expanded out from the temple, swiftly engulfing them. Their rug was buffeted, but settled down once the edge of the sphere passed.

It wasn’t dark, but it was as if the five of them were in a bubble surrounded by multicolored fog, roiling swirling colors, with sounds, shrieks, voices, faces and staring eyes. Red Raven clenched his fist then opened it to reveal a small sphere of silver fire, which grew to the size of a basketball and floated over their heads.

“This is something no mortals and few gods have ever seen.” Red Raven explained. “This universe is dissolving back into the primordial chaos from which it was made. Without my protection, you would dissolve so thoroughly your souls would cease to exist.”

Elanor could see looks of superstitious fear in the eyes of her companions. “So that is why you were going to kill everyone and migrate their souls to the afterlife first? What about the gods.”

“If anyone, including gods, were left here, their souls have dissolved, they have ceased to exist. We moved the souls of everything we cold find before we destroyed this universe And I mean everything - plants, fishes, bugs, the lot.”

“What about you, Luke and Mifunwi?”

“Hah! We are exempt! We are the makers of worlds! Remember?”

A raven and a hawk appeared out of the maelstrom, on the other side of the bubble. Red Raven spoke “Luke and Mifunwi are here. We are leaving now.” Nothing seemed to happen.

After about a minute the hawk and the raven entered through the bubble that separated everyone else from the chaos outside, and transformed back into Luke and Mifunwi.

“‘The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, even the great globe itself, all has dissolved into primeval chaos, leaving not a trace behind.’“ Luke misquoted.

“Shakespeare’s Tempest?” Elanor guessed.

“Yes, though I changed the wording slightly.”

Finally Erlik asked “When do we start moving?”

“We are, but you have no point of reference. Our shield bubble separates everything in here from primeval chaos. You won’t feel you are moving until you are free from this universe.”

“How long will that take?” Erlik asked.

Elanor asked, “We were inside a universe, you destroyed it, so where are we now and how big is this chaos thing?”

Luke sat cross legged on the rug. “Elanor, you know about planets and solar systems and things. This was a solar system, and it was a bubble inside a larger bubble of primeval chaos. I don’t know how to measure it in human terms, except to say that it might be half a light year in diameter, but that is only an educated guess mind you. We will reach the edge soon.”

“Then we are traveling faster than light.” Elanor found that astonishing. She was getting a handle on the sheer scale of things. She and Luke had begun studying physics, though she suspected he understood far more than she did. There were puzzled looks on everyone except Luke.

“Ah, yes, that is only a problem when you are in a physical universe. Once you step outside that universe then the rules of that universe no longer apply. Out here is primeval chaos, the rules of physics are what ever we want them to be. Now brace yourselves, the edge is coming up.”

It was as if a light shone out from their rug, lighting up a swirling tunnel, a vortex through the chaos. A veritable maelstrom of swirling colors, smoke rings and the like, except that everything was made of small moving images of three dimensional worlds. There were small images of mountains, of trees, of worlds under various colored skies. Luke was grinning. “How fast? We are crossing whole universes in the blink of an eye!”

And then the tunnel ended, and they exited into a world. There was green sky above, a red sun setting, water beneath them, forest before them, and in the distance snow capped mountains. “This is the world where we sent all the survivors. We’ll take a very quick tour.” Red Raven commented.

The smell of the sea came flooding in, and Elanor realized the shield had been dropped. They were floating about ten meters above the sea. The rug moved higher, and onto the land. Everywhere she looked she could see small villages, cultivated land, interspersed with small woodlands. Further from the shore the villages became fewer, and the woodland more complete. About fifteen kilometers inland the woodlands became forest. “How far does it stretch?”

Luke replied “From the shore inland about fifteen kilometers is farmland, with small villages. Further inland is the primeval forest, and the mountains behind. The farmland runs the entire length of the sea.” He waved his hand to the right and in a large circle. “It is like the Mediterranean, it stretches thousands of kilometers to the east, and round and then back again. Tomorrow morning when they wake they will all speak the same language, and they will have some idea about farming and fishing.”

“A whole new world!” Erlik commented. “Can we visit it sometime?”

“You can choose to stay tonight, or visit in a few months. All of us” he indicated Red Raven and Mifunwi, “will be visiting to monitor how things are going. If you wish to visit, then there are things you must learn so you can teach when you visit.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Siska and I don’t have much liking for where we were, we don’t know if we want to visit.”

“It will depend on how much we like were you are taking us.” Layla added. “We’ve had enough of being wanders and warriors. We’d like to settle down, and maybe have a family.”

Elanor forbore to comment on the facts of starting a family. Instead she said “I’m sure you’ll like it where we’re going. Luke, are you planning on setting up a police force and government?”

“No, they are small groups, they can organise their own government and policing. We have always left that up to humans, but we do offer guidance. Don’t forget, the swiftest communications here will be by sea, they really need a lot of local government.”

Elanor wasn’t convinced, but decided that Luke was probably right. To set up government you needed a lot of infrastructure, and governments worked best when they grew from within instead of being imposed from the outside. “Yeah, when the U.N. goes into a region for peacekeeping, or for refugees, they always set up police and local security, but you aren’t the U.N.”

“No, we have a different philosophy. No government is perfect, and people need to learn what works best for them. That’s why most moves to impose democracy always fail. As you know.”

She had discussed this at length with Luke, and in detail with both Red Raven and Mifunwi. “Yes. What’s behind the mountains?”

“Snow and ice, and glaciers extending toward the pole. Across the sea there is more forest running down to the warm equatorial regions, and then sea beyond that. To the east there is some land, a central mountain range, and the ocean on the other side. To the west there are archipelagos extending for some distance into the western ocean. The land area is nowhere near as big as on earth, but it is uninhabited”

They cruised slowly along the shoreline for about fifteen minutes. Elanor was beginning to feel tired, Siska was yawning. “We can take a better look next time. I mainly wanted to show you that everyone is taken care of. Let’s go home.”

And so ended the saga of Erlik, Elanor, Siska and Layla. They were conveyed to Luke’s chateau in the south of France. Erlik composed his saga, and eventually learned to read and write, and wrote it down. With help from Luke, the three of them learned French and English, and learned how to fit into modern life. There were other adventures they participated in, but that is another story.