“Vampires are a sick travesty of immortals.” Lukeios told Elanor. He was an Egyptian looking man about thirty, five feet ten inches or one hundred and seventy eight centimeters tall, wiry build, with piercing yellow eyes. He was wearing pale yellow slacks, tan shoes and a lavender shirt, open to show a heavy gold chain.

Elanor, his companion, was an African looking woman of similar age, six feet three inches or one hundred and ninety centimeters tall, of a solid build that was mostly muscle rather than fat. Her hair was piled into a topknot that then cascaded to her shoulders, with bright red streaks of hair extensions interwoven, and a pair of ornate chopsticks stuck into the bun. She was wearing white slacks with matching sandals, bright blue top, several rings, heavy gold pendent earrings set with coloured stones, and a heavy gold necklace set with assorted coloured stones each the size of the top segment of her little finger.

“What makes you say that?” They were walking through the French quarter of the town, the old part down by the river. The sun was setting, the air cooling with breezes from the river providing some relief from the 30C temperature, and the converted warehouses were starting to open up as boutique restaurants, nightclubs and brothels. “I thought vampires were the undead?”

Luke snorted, shaking his head. “Undead would be something like a resurrected corpse, animated by a powerful spirit. If they are powerful enough to do that, they don’t need a dead body. No vampires are as alive as you or I, with their souls mortgaged to the immortal who created them.”

“Created them? How? And how do they mortgage their souls?”

Luke smiled at her. “Elanor, you know the Hollywood idea of a Vampire has little truth. Any immortal, or an extremely powerful sorcerer, can give some of their power to a mortal, and that mortal will be nearly immortal.”

“Isn’t that what you did with me?” Elanor had grown young, and was developing powers under Luke’s tutelage, and a few of his associates.

“Not quite. I lend you my power, but you are free; I did not bind you to me with some blood stained ritual. You do not suck the life force out of other mortals. One day you will become a powerful sorcerer. Vampires on the other hand consume life energies, that’s often how their victims die. They drink blood in a ritual that reinforces their ties to their master or mistress - their owner. Cut their hearts out and burn them and they die. Immortals don’t. Palomedes has studied Vampires in detail, he can tell you a lot more.”

“We’re meeting him tonight, but how do vampires fit in?”

“We are entering the vampire area; the clubs are run by vampires, mostly for vampires, but some cater for ordinary people. They always need new victims. It was Palomedes’ idea you should meet real vampires.”

Elanor sighed. “He could just be trying to shock me. Vampires running clubs. This isn’t my shadow, is it?”

“No, this city is called New Orleans, but it isn’t your world. Vampires are citizens here.” They turned left, following the river. The throng of people lessened as they proceeded, while the warehouses seemed more dilapidated.

They stopped near a doorway being guarded by two muscular men in t-shirts and jeans, with people queuing up behind a rope barrier. They seemed to consist of couples and groups of women. The sign above the door proclaimed “Dracula’s Lair”

“We’ll wait here, they’re on their way. There’s less eyes here, and I can prevent them from seeing without that being noticed.” He was referring to the manner of Palomedes intended arrival.

“Legal Vampires? What happens if they eat someone? I mean kill.”

“I believe if the police can prove it the courts set a vampire hunter on the killer, and the killer or killers are executed.”

“That sounds a bit barbaric.”

“So are vampires.”

Elanor felt a tingling in her solar plexus, a signal that someone was shadow-walking, shifting into this world from another parallel world, from one so called ‘shadow’ to another. There was a rainbow shimmer off to her left, and four people walked out of it.

The first was Palomedes, or Philip as he liked to call himself; Luke’s son. He was a slender young man with dusky skin, round face, curly dark brown hair, tawny yellow eyes and bulbous nose and fleshy lips, a mixture of Greek and Middle East. He was dressed in black baggy trousers tucked into black boots, a black belt with a silver buckle, a plain shirt of dark crimson, and a jacket in silvery gray. He looked about twenty five and was about the same height as Luke.

The second was Liz, his girlfriend. She was a Murri aboriginal about five feet six inches tall, say about one hundred sixty seven centimeters, with brown skin and eyes, somewhat solidly built. She had a prominent brow and broad nose, and round face. Her shoulder length black hair had a vivid red streak through it. Each of her ears sported four or five small earrings, and she was also wearing dark red lipstick, and dark blue eye-shadow. She was wearing black slacks and a red silk blouse with a large eagle’s head emblazoned on the front. She looked about twenty, but Elanor knew she was over thirty.

The third was Danny, a muscular man about thirty with pale skin, tousled brown hair and blue eyes with a slightly Asiatic cast, a gold hoop in his left ear. He was about six feet or one hundred and eighty three centimeters tall, with callused knuckles of someone who worked at martial arts. He was wearing dark blue slacks, pale blue shirt. He looked about thirty, but Elanor knew he was at least ten years older than Liz.

The fourth was Nalini, Danny’s wife. She was a dark skinned Indian, about five feet seven inches or one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, with a gymnast’s body that moved with a dancer’s lithe grace. Her glossy hair was braided and pinned to her head with jewelled combs. Her eyes were piercingly yellow, her features a mixture of Indian and Chinese. She was wearing loose black slacks, an ornate gold belt, and an emerald green silk blouse with what looked like a leopard emblazoned on it. She looked about twenty, but Elanor knew she was twelve years older than Danny, making her about the same age as Elanor.

Like Danny and Liz, about her neck she wore an ornate gold torc incised with silver and red gold scrollwork that could be cursive runes. Each end of the torc ended in bird’s claws cradling a large gem, the left one smoky green, the right one smoky red. They channelled power in a similar manner to the necklace that Elanor wore.

For years after meeting Luke Elanor had tried to avoid learning anything that smacked of sorcery, until she had met Danny, Nalini, Liz and Danny’s sister Paula. They were more or less ordinary humans like herself who had become caught up in the world of sorcerers, immortals and others, and they’d proved to her that what ever they referred to as sorcery didn’t involve demons. After that she’d allowed herself to learn what they could teach.

After they greeted one another, Luke remarked to Palomedes “Before we go in, I told Elanor you might explain about vampires being travesties of immortals.”

“Mmm.” Palomedes said. “Immortals bestow their power on ordinary mortals. In the case of vampires, an immortal performs a ritual involving their power, blood, and sex to make the vampire into a pseudo immortal. Blood has traditionally been held to convey a being’s life force, so if you are going to the power out of someone, the belief is you must also drink their blood. There’s no real truth in it, but traditions die hard. Sex, as I think we all know, is a good way for humans to raise up what little power they have. It’s also a lot harder to think straight in the middle of an orgasm, and people don’t notice that their partner is draining their power. Lust is also part of how a vampire attracts victims - they come willingly like lambs to the slaughter, believing they are going to have mind blowing sex. They get drained of their life force, and many will die, or sicken and die soon after. A vampire bite cannot turn you into a vampire, but it can, with the application of their power, make an ordinary human their slave. You four should be immune.

“Now, an immortal that is going to give sufficient power to a mortal to make them almost immortal is going to want more than friendship in return. In the case of vampires, they are enslaved to the immortal. Vampires start out pretty powerless, but they grow in power over the centuries. Some have gained sufficient power to break free of their owner, some have even killed their owner. Vampires can do things that sorcerers can do, like controlling people’s minds, casting a few spells - though that drains their power, and healing wounds and surviving attacks that should be fatal.

“Because they are pseudo immortal, they can survive without eating. They can eat normal food, but most seem to prefer raw meat, probably for the blood, while a few subsist on a diet entirely of blood.” Palomedes grimaced. “Talismans and magical objects can harm them, so a religious item can work if it has been converted into a talisman or similar. But a blessed cross is mostly useless unless you plan on beating the vampire to death with it. They can detect magic, so if you start using your powers they will sense that, and be aware of your abilities. Any questions?”

“Lots.” Elanor laughed softly. “I’ll save them till later, once I think about it. Are we going in? It’s hot out here, and I’m hungry.”

“They open the door at sunset, it’s nearly that. But before we go in, keep your senses on low, not enough to alert them, but enough to notice what they are doing. We’ll play a game of spot the vampire. I want you all to learn to recognise them.”

“Does sunlight affect them?” Elanor asked. “The stories say sunlight kills them.”

“No, it’s just a story. Most vampires hunt by night, so they tend to sleep during the day. The rest, the coffins, the fangs and so on, is just theatre. Are the two gatekeepers vampires?”

“Well, I would have said ‘No’ because they are out in the light, but now I don’t know.” Elanor offered.

“Their auras look human.” Nalini suggested. “But since I’ve never seen a vampire, at least not that I’m aware of, I’m not sure what to look for.”

Elanor gave a snort, pulled one of the chopsticks from her bun, and tapped the tip against her left palm. “I always forget to use the second sight.”

“Elanor, what’s with the chopstick?” Nalini asked.

“Oh, my children used to play a game called Dungeons and Dragons. As an adult I was often the dungeon master, but when a group of us got together I’d often play as an elf.” Elanor found herself smiling at the memories.

Danny was nodding. “I used to play with a group of friends from uni. Paula used to join in if the game wasn’t going to run too late. Elves are good characters, night vision, magic and weapons.”

“I’ve never played,” Nalini commented, “but Danny’s explained it to me.”

“The chopstick was my sword and my magic wand when I played.” Elanor looked off into the distance. “I played an elf because I’ve met some of them personally, years ago. Back when I found out my friend Mifunwi was the Raven Queen. That was before I met Lukeios”

“This sounds interesting.” Nalini smiled. “Tell me more.”

“Well, there’s not really a lot to say. One of my friends told us her daughter talked to fairies at the bottom of their garden. Mifunwi took me with her to see the girl and the fairies, but when we got there the girl had disappeared on her way to school. Mifunwi gave me her medallion, then vanished in a rainbow shimmer, which scared the life out of me. Gwen and I went for a walk into the woods, she saw tiny fairies, I saw large elf like people. They tried to frighten us off, but when they realised I could see through their glamour they were more polite. They recognised Mifunwi’s medallion and took us with them into their world. We all waited in a clearing for an official to appear, and then Mifunwi and the fairy queen and her entourage appeared in the clearing. They brought Mary with them, and Mifunwi took us home. She told me later she’d spent a lot of time with the faery folk and that they respected her as the Raven Queen. She and I went back several times. I even have an elvan sword hidden away at home.”

Luke laughed. “There’s a lot you’ve left out, but we can tell it more fully over dinner. Mifunwi was the person who introduced Elanor to real sorcery. We call each other brother and sister, and as you know she’s married to Red Raven, who is also known as the Raven King. I met Elanor through Mifunwi. But returning to the present my sweet, are the two by the door mortal or vampire?”

Elanor turned her attention to the swirling colours around the two men. They changed constantly, but she couldn’t see anything abnormal. “They look human, but I don’t know what to look for.”

Danny was staring at the crowd. He nodded and turned to Elanor. “They’re human, but Nalini’s spotted a werewolf in the crowd. Can you see which person?”

Elanor scanned the crowd. “I’m not sure what to look for, but there’s one man whose aura looks a bit like a sorcerer. Is he the werewolf?”

“I see him too.” Liz responded. He’s dressed in black, with three women. I think the blonde is his girlfriend, she looks normal, but the other two look weird. The woman in black and white looks like a sorcerer and a killer, and the redhead in the green dress looks drugged. What do you call a werewolf, Nalini?”

“Well, Korum had some odd friends, including wares. I can recognise their auras. He said they were shadows of true immortals, more like powerful sorcerers, except they breed true. They are shapeshifters who only have a few shapes. The untrained ones shapeshift involuntarily. They started by adopting totem animals, their power animals, but to the ones I knew it was a gift of the spirit world, part of the workings of power. I can’t speak for someone who has grown up in a modern technological society.”

Elanor knew that Korum was the immortal who had trained Nalini. She was about to ask another question when Luke spoke. “Korum was correct in what he told you. I don’t believe this one has any sorcery training except to control his shapeshifting. The blonde appears to be a normal human female, the red head is in the thrall of a vampire, while the dark haired girl has some sorcery training and some power. She is also armed. This could become interesting. Now I think we should join the line.”

Luke stepped forward, the line parted to make room for him to push in, along with the others. There were no dirty looks, everyone behaved as if that were his right. They were about ten people behind the werewolf. To Elanor’s questioning look he remarked with a smile “Jedi mind tricks.”

“This is a theater restaurant, right? Is the food any good?” Danny asked, echoing Elanor’s thought.

“What do vampires know about good food?” Palomedes laughed. “Probably specialises in blood pudding and blood sausage!”

There was laughter from several people in the line. One woman offered “I’ve been before. They do steaks and seafood with salad and chips, or burgers or pizza. It’s good.”

“Last theater restaurant we went to was Elizabethan themed.” Danny countered. “They did overdone roasts with roast or boiled vegetables. This place sounds better. What’s the floorshow like?”

“It’s really good, but I think the ladies will enjoy it more.”

“Is that why there’s so many ladies in the line?” Elanor asked.

The woman laughed. “There’ll be some hunks getting their gear off on stage. They’re good!”

“Maybe us blokes should go for a beer instead.” Danny suggested.

The small talk continued as the line made its way up the steps and into a softly lit vestibule. The air-conditioning made it seem icy. The werewolf party were just in front, the dark haired lady checking in weapons at the coat check counter. “I told you to leave all that in the car.” the werewolf was saying.

“No, when I leave here I want to be armed.” the woman countered.

A tall man dressed in black stood very still beside her. “And the cross, please.” The woman sighed theatrically, then removed her cross and handed it to the girl at the coat check counter.

There was something odd about the man’s aura. “Is he ... ?” Elanor began.

“Vampire.” Palomedes supplied. “About three hundred years old. Reasonably powerful. The cross has powers by the way, it’s a magical item.”

“Then he’s a vampire too.” Elanor nodded at a black clad young man standing still as a statue nearby.

The mouth smiled, revealing long eye teeth. The eyes didn’t smile. “Please remove your weapons and holy items and check them in at the counter. You’ll be given a receipt.”

“Around two hundred and fifty.” Palomedes remarked. Then he answered the vampire “We don’t have any.”

“What about those torcs? They’re magical.”

“They are not your concern. They are nothing. Let us pass.” Palomedes said softly.

“Please go through the curtain.” the vampire gestured, then became still again, gazing at the group behind them.

As they proceeded through the curtain Danny remarked quietly “More Jedi mind tricks.”

“Why do they stand so still?” Elanor asked.

“It’s a vampire thing.” Palomedes replied. “Stand still in the shadows and you become invisible. Those two have enough power to forcibly remove magical items from anyone who isn’t an experienced sorcerer. Make no mistake, they are dangerous. And be careful about looking them in the eyes, their power will strike you.”

Luke spread his hands briefly. “I have hidden our powers from them. I want each of you to shut off your sorcerous sight for a little while, so you see them as other humans see them. They wear a glamour.”

Elanor dropped her vision of people’s auras. There were two young vampires clad in black leather guiding patrons to their tables. They weren’t particularly noteworthy until she dropped her second sight, whereupon they became two pretty boys. The one showing them to their table had a Latino look, and couldn’t possibly have been more than twenty five. “I see what you mean.”

They refrained from commenting while their waiter, Marco, handed out menus and took their drink orders. The werewolf party was seated only two tables away. The menu was simple, as the woman in the line had described. “Helps them get the food out to all the tables at roughly the same time.” Danny commented. “They want to clear the tables before starting the show.”

“They’re all men waiting on tables, no women.” Nalini commented.

“That reflects their traditional world view.” Palomedes commented. “Think seventeen hundreds. Ladies don’t work, their job is to look good.”

“Hasn’t changed much!” Nalini laughed.

Once everyone was seated, jugglers, acrobats, mime artist clowns and two vaudeville magicians appeared, all dressed as characters from commedia dell’arte from seventeenth century Italy, such as Harlequin, Scaramouche, Punchinello. They walked between tables performing tricks.

The food was ordinary, but plentiful, which suited Elanor - she hated leaving the table hungry. Elanor swapped back and forth between second sight and normal human perceptions. The waiters and performers were all vampires, but seen with normal human perception they were far more appealing. For example, Marco had crooked teeth and sallow skin seen with second sight, but seen normally his teeth were white and gleaming, his skin suitably pallid, and he possessed fangs.

Eventually the waiters came round clearing tables and taking drinks orders. A buzz of excitement was building around the room, with an undercurrent of fear. Elanor realised there was a soft sound track underlying the atmosphere, music suitable for a horror movie.

Luke commented, “It’s not just music, there’s sorcery helping with the sense of dread.” He often picked up on her thoughts.

With second sight there were floating tendrils of mist blown by unseen breezes toward the audience. Some passed by their table without stopping, while they paused at other tables. Many seemed to cluster around the table with the werewolf.

Luke nodded. “The vampires are setting a trap for the werewolf and his party.”

“Maybe you should do something to help?” Elanor asked. A limitation on Lukeios’ powers was that he needed to be asked to interfere in purely human affairs, or he was limited to acting with the powers and abilities of a normal human. The supernatural was a different matter, but she wasn’t sure about vampires or werewolves.

“They all qualify as humans, but Palomedes will look after them, and he will ask for help if needed.”

The music struck a discordant chord, and the lights went out. People screamed.

“Welcome to Dracula’s lair.” The voice was soft and silky, whispering in her ear. “We are here to pleasure you, to make your most wicked thought come true.” It was the sexy voice of a lover, drunk with desire. Elanor was surprised to find her nipples becoming hard.

“He’s not using a microphone.” Palomedes commented. “He’s good. But listen with your second ear.”

The difference was marked. The voice was still mellifluous, but now it sounded more like Vincent Price with a French accent.

“He is sending waves of lust to every person in the room. A normal human could not resist. Listen.”

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to feel my breath upon your neck? My lips along your skin. My tongue teasing, with just a hint of hard sharp fangs. Your body arches in pleasure while you beg me to bite you. The sharp pain of my fangs excites you, your heart throbbing against my chest, as I delicately suck your blood, nourishing me, pleasuring you.” The laugh that followed was lascivious, wicked, obscene.

A drum began bearing like a heart, slow, steady. A second started faster, frenetic, excited, perhaps terrified. It softened as the spot came on, showing a solitary figure on the stage. Black slacks, black boots, black leather jacket over a figure hugging white t-shirt, pale face, dark eyes, long dark hair swept back. He was athletic rather than muscular. And standing as still as a statue.

Music began drifting in, soft, working with the drums. The man on stage swayed in slow motion in time with the music. Slowly he peeled off the jacket, then strutted elegantly across the stage, showing off his body. There were scars from bites at the bend of each elbow, and a line running along the inside of each arm.

Elanor asked about the scars. Palomedes replied “The veins in the crook of the elbow are the easiest to obtain blood from, just ask any nurse who collects blood. The inside of the arms are easy, ask any junkie who injects. Blood is a fetish with these people.”

The man strutted back to center stage, pirouetted, then grabbed the t-shirt at the neck, slowly ripping it from top to bottom. Scattered screams came from the audience, while a few of them called his name. His smile was a million dollars sexy, and his hairless, sculptured chest divine.

Except that wasn’t the case when Elanor looked with her second sight. The body wasn’t so toned and perfect, there were scars on chest, back and neck, forming patterns, while his skin was darker. The smile was ordinary.

The pulse of the drums grew wilder, the music increased in volume and became driving. The man of stage began gyrating and swaying to the music, but to Elanor he was no longer sexy, and with all those scars he was almost grotesque. He paused in his gyrations, and with a clash of cymbals ripped his pants off in one smooth, practiced movement and leaped from the stage onto the dance floor.

Women in the audience were cat calling and waving money, including the red head from the werewolf’s table. The dark haired woman seemed to be trying to stop her.

The dancer strutted over to their table. The red head stuffed money into his g-string, he gyrated his hips in front of her. She put her hand on his chest, stopping him, and began running her fingers over his scars. Then she learned forward and began running her lips and tongue over them. He stood still and let her. The blonde stared open mouthed, the brunette was looking away. The werewolf looked like he wished he were elsewhere. Most of the women in the audience were going wild.

The drums rose to a crescendo, and the dancer whirled away, strutting over to another table. Elanor looked back at the red head, sitting languidly, mouth open in that unmistakeable shape of orgasmic afterglow. She commented on that to Luke.

He nodded slowly. “The rush of energy is similar to orgasm, except more potent. She probably experienced one. Now look to the left, there are two more about to walk unseen to the stage.”

Most of the audience were staring raptly at the dancer as he moved from table to table. To the left were two men dressed as classic vampires, complete with gloves and opera capes, making their was slowly through the crowd. No one seemed to notice them. “Another glamour, but one that makes them invisible.” Palomedes commented. “They will notice us if I don’t block them.”

They stopped at the edge of the tables, looking toward Luke’s table. Elanor felt a slight mental pressure, that vanished as swiftly as it began. “They’ve spelled the werewolf.” Luke commented. “You all see them?” There was a soft chorus of assent from everyone else at the table.

The two men strutted into the middle of the dance floor and there was a collective gasp from the audience as they noticed them at last. The music changed tune, and they began to sway and dance sensuously. They didn’t simply strip, but rather slowly removed each other’s clothing. It was almost homoerotic. Danny made the comment “Without using sorcerous sight, they even manage to excite me. That’s insidious sorcery they are using.”

Eventually the two stripped to top hats and g-strings. Someone off stage tossed three ebony and gold canes to them, and a third top hat. They placed the top hat on one cane on the dance floor. Elanor watched the other dancer slink back and stand behind the top hat. She switched off her second sight and realised he was invisible. The top hat began to lift, and his feet and legs were revealed; the hat moved slowly up his body until he placed the hat on his head. To the audience he would have seemed to appear from out of his top hat. The three dancers picked up their canes and danced around them in unison.

Then the first dancer strutted over to the tables, almost prancing. A number of women in the audience seemed to know what was about to happen, for there were calls of “Pick me!”

He sauntered over to one table, pointed to a woman and beckoned. The woman jumped out of her chair and ran to him, grasping the head of his cane. She looked about forty, bottle blonded hair, too much make up, red and gold dress, matching high heels, and a wanton smile on her face.

The dancer led her to the group, where they placed her in the center and danced around her, taking turns to touch her, stroke her, kiss her. The first dancer began to bite her on the arm - she squealed and writhed with pleasure.

“What are they trying to do to her?” Danny asked. “They can’t be pleasuring her for the crowd’s entertainment.”

“No.” Palomedes replied, the corners of his mouth turning down. “The one who is biting her is enthralling her, in the old sense of the word. She is being made into a servant to do the vampire’s bidding. There is some truth in the story of three bites - three times and he will own her, she will be his slave. She may think she is receiving immortality, but she isn’t. She’ll do his bidding, and participate in blood rituals to feed him her life force. Most will be dead within ten years.”

“Why do the victims do it?”

“They have no choice, once a vampire sets out to capture a victim, they control the victim’s mind. In the old days most victims didn’t live more than a few weeks, but that’s what caused humans to hunt vampires. Now it’s subtle - they weaken, then sicken and die, of natutal causes as far as most doctors can see.”

“And this is supposed to be entertainment?” Elanor was incredulous.

“I think it’s called decadence.” Luke offered. “The audience are enjoying it.”

“Except for us, the werewolf, and the dark haired girl at his table.”

Eventually the woman sagged exhausted, and the dancer carried her back to her chair. The second dancer selected a woman from the crowd, and the process repeated.

Then the third vampire strutted to the werewolf’s table, and selected the dark haired woman, who shook her head mutely even as she stood.

The werewolf protested and jumped to his feet, but halfway up he slowed so much it was as if he were moving through treacle. “There’s at least two vampires controlling him, maybe more.” Palomedes commented.

“He’s not trained in sorcery,” Luke added. “but neither are the vampires. They tried to paralyse him, but they’re not strong enough.” Then he smiled an angelic smile. “I’ve blocked the others.”

“She’s fighting every step of the way.” Nalini commented sharply.

Elanor watched as the woman bit her lips, dug fingernails into her palms, shook her head, but still her feet bore her inexorably toward the vampire. “We should do something!”

“That’s like rape!” Nalini exploded. “If you won’t do something then Danny and I will!” Her anger flickered like lightning around her.

“I’ll stop them when she gets to him.” Palomedes replied. Was that a touch of embarrassment? “We don’t want a fight with people getting injured.”

Nalini spread her hands, and a gold ring with a large amethyst appeared on her right hand, lines of power swirling about her. Danny placed his right hand on the table, and a large dagger appeared, gold pommel set with a large emerald, horn hilt and a leaf shaped blade of reddish metal. Lines of power swirled about him as well.

“There is no need for this.” Luke protested softly. “You will alert them too soon.”

Danny and Nalini looked at each other briefly, and the two power objects vanished. Nalini looked over at Luke. “Apollo Lukeios, you may keep the gods honest, but we’ll remind you of what being human means. I’ll kill him the moment he tries to hurt her.”

Luke smiled, nodded acknowledgement. “It will be easier if Palomedes rescues her, he’s had many more years doing this. But I will do nothing to stop you.”

The woman was nearing the vampire. Palomedes got to his feet. “Nalini, don’t get in my way; watch my back instead.”

The woman reached the vampire, he reached for her. Nalini rose to her feet, followed by Danny. The woman made a striking motion with her hand at his chest. There was a flash of silver and a spurt of blood, followed by a roar of rage. Luke commented “Silver blade. Bide Nalini.” Palomedes flexed his shoulders and neck like an athlete limbering up. Lines of power swirled about Nalini and Danny.

The vampire staggered back, a silver dagger piercing his heart. “I will send you to hell! I will teach you what obedience and eternal suffering means!” He readied himself to strike and Nalini moved, plucking a sword from thin air and starting towards him at a run.

Palomedes was swifter, literally blurring into motion. Nalini had travelled two strides when the blur collided with the vampire, sending him flying over the entire stage to careen into the wall behind. He sagged to the floor motionless. “Pick on someone your own size.” Palomedes jibed, catching the woman as she collapsed. He swung her into his arms, and in another blur was standing by their table, depositing the woman into his seat. Nalini stopped, blade paused.

“What? How?” The woman looked around wildly. “Where is he?”

“He’s dead, but they’ll likely bring him back to life. Let me free your werewolf friend. You’re safe now.” He walked over to the werewolf table, where the werewolf was two steps away from his chair.

Palomedes stopped in front of him. “Calm down, I’m about to free you.” He tapped the man, who staggered forward and nearly fell, regaining his balance with surprising agility. Palomedes touched him again. “Calm yourself sir, you don’t want to shapeshift here!”

The man shuddered and shook himself with the effort. Finally he remarked. ‘I’m fine now. Let me see Ana. Is she okay?”

Elanor went to join Danny and Nalini, who were menacing three vampire body guards dressed in black plus one who was obviously part of the show by his eighteenth century costume. “Which one do we thump first?” Noticing that both Danny and Nalini had activated their shield spells, she activated hers, as Danny had taught her.

The three guards looked disconcerted. “You are immune! All of you! What are you?”

Danny chuckled. “We keep the gods honest. Beware.” That should have been Luke’s line.

“Gods? What are you talking about?”

At that point Nalini’s shield brightened briefly, and a single gunshot rang out, followed by a strangled cry, and a bullet dropped near Nalini. The gunman was staring at his hand, and the poisonous snake he was holding. Palomedes joined the group, and several weapons appeared at his feet. “Now I’ve disarmed you, maybe you’ll calm down.” Behind him the would be gunman collapsed. Palomedes waved his hand, and all the weapons vanished, except for those Danny and Nalini were holding.

The older man, the one dressed in eighteenth century costume, said “Let’s talk out the back, away from the audience. You’re not common vampire slayers.”

“Fine. I’ll, shout, we’ll pretend to stab you, you’ll all fall down dead. I’ll deliver a quick soliloquy, cut the lights, and we all exit, stage left, or is that stage right?” Palomedes grinned.

“Left. Then we’ll go up on stage and to take a bow.”

“Everyone ready?” Palomedes leaped back, plucking a spear with a short haft and a long leaf shaped blade from mid air. “Death to all vampires!” he yelled. Then more softly “All of us pretend to stab one of them.” He suited actions to his words, appearing to impale the older vampire on his spear.

Elanor placed her hand on the nearest guard’s shoulder, and as he turned toward her she pretended to stab him in the chest with a chopstick. “Now fall to the floor like you’re dead.” she told him.

All four vampires appeared to be dead on the floor. Palomedes brandished his spear. “I am Korum, vampire hunter! All you would be vampires in the audience, beware! If you turn vampire, I will hunt you down, and you will die for real! We will rid humanity of this scourge!” Then, sotto voco, “Kill the lights.”

The lights died, but Elanor could still see moderately well using her sorcerous sight. The older vampire ordered “Everyone follow me! Quickly!”

They followed him across the dance floor and up the steps of the stage. “Form a line. Godric, join the line!” That last was to the vampire who’d been slammed into the wall. The lights came on, dazzling Elanor, and everyone bowed to audience applause.

“I hope you all enjoyed our little play.” the older vampire announced to the audience. “Vampire slayers are out there, and some will stop at nothing to destroy us. Now we will see Simon.” He lowered his voice. “Paul, lead off.” The vampire on the right of the line led everyone through the wing and back stage.

Simon, dressed in leather and lace, with a hat and scarf, watched them pass. “You expect me to follow that?”

The older vampire responded “You will manage to charm them, my friend.” He detailed the guards to go back to their posts, then said “The rest of you come with me, there is a sitting room we can use. Then we will talk.”

“Luke should be here too.” Elanor remarked.

“He’s on his way. Vampire, you will need another four chairs.”

“I have a name you know.”

“So do I, but we haven’t been introduced. That can wait until everyone is here.”

The room was comfortably furnished, if a little old fashioned. There were sofas and single arm chairs scattered around, with coffee tables. It reminded Elanor of a comfortable club, and could probably seat twenty to thirty people. The older vampire sat in an armchair, two dancers sat one on either side, though they were still pulling on clothes. Several more vampires, younger, stood arranged behind his chair. Elanor sat in a comfortable armchair facing them. Palomedes picked another.

“Where’s Godric?” Palomedes asked.

“He’s not feeling well after you killed him. He will be in soon. Now may I offer you tea, coffee, wine or spirits?”

“Straight whisky if it’s good.” Palomedes responded. “Otherwise red wine. Ah, here are the others.” The door opened, and Luke, Liz, the werewolf and the dark haired girl walked in. The vampire glared at them.

“I believe the whisky is good. I’ll have one too.” Luke prompted. “Good to see you have everything under control.” Then he turned to the others. “It’s safe to drink, they won’t poison it.”

The vampire threw him a look and commented “What makes you believe that?”

Luke shrugged and spread his hands. “If I say you won’t, then you won’t. Besides, you want to find out what we want. Drinks, introductions, then we’ll talk.”

One of the younger vampires acted as barman and waiter, pouring and delivering drinks.

Luke sipped his straight whisky. “Ah, single malt from the isle of Skye, there’s no mistaking that slightly smoky, peaty taste. At least sixteen years old, no more than twenty. For a vampire you have good taste in whisky, or more correctly, scotch.”

The vampire permitted himself a small smile. This was one cultured nobleman facing another, and each recognised the other as dangerous. “But then ‘whisky’ comes from the Gaelic ‘uisgebaugh’ which means water of life, so perhaps it is fitting. Now sir, you are?”

“But of course, Lord de Poitiers, I am forgetting myself. You do not recognise me.” He’d switched to French, which Elanor spoke fluently, but this was slightly archaic, not modern. The vampire’s face registered very mild surprise. “I am Lord Lukeios, though you might remember me as Apollo Lukeios. We met briefly at the court of Queen Elizabeth the first, you were one of the nobles in the entourage of the French ambassador.”

The vampire smiled briefly, then returned to poker face. “Jean-Luc will suffice, those days are long gone. You were an associate of Dr. Dee and sir Matthias Loxton. It is good to see you again.” He switched to English. “These are all your entourage?”

“It is good to see you also. I don’t believe you were a vampire then. Not everyone is my entourage, permit me to introduce them.” Luke introduced his party, then continued, “The others are Dave, a werewolf, and his friend Anna. I’m afraid your act upset the ladies in my party, they complained that it was like rape, so we intervened.”

“I became a vampire shortly after returning to France. The years have obviously been kind to you. This is Guillome, and this is Francois. We only choose willing participants. Godric erred in his choice.”

“If you confuse their minds with lust,” Palomedes chimed in, “doesn’t that make it difficult to see who is willing?”

“And an invasion of the mind is still rape.” Nalini added. “If you drug your rape victim first it’s still rape.”

“Perhaps Godric will present himself soon with an explanation.” Luke added. “In the meantime, perhaps Anna should tell her story.” Jean-Luc nodded.

Anna was a wiry woman about thirty, Greek looking with short dark hair, dark eyes and sallow complexion. “I raise the dead for a living.” She paused to see the effect before adding, “Not literally, I summon their spirits to answer questions from the living. I also work with the police investigating crimes involving vampires or the so called supernatural.”

“Have you also told them you execute vampires?” Jean-Luc put in.

“Yes. And I explained that I must have a legal warrant. Anything else is self defence. Two days ago I was approached by a vampire, not one of Jean-Luc’s, to find someone who is killing vampires without a warrant. I refused, that’s a job for the police. Then yesterday Dave’s girlfriend Carol invited me to come with them here tonight. I shouldn’t have come.”

“Au contraire, you’d be in big trouble if you hadn’t.” Luke replied. “Do you think what happened here tonight was an accident? We should talk with Godric.”

“He is not one of mine.” Jean-Luc volunteered. “He’s visiting from another family.”

“And he’s older than you by about four hundred years.” Palomedes supplied. “You can’t control him, and his pater familias is even older. Whose side are you on?”

Anna’s indrawn breath showed her surprise at this statement. “Jean-Luc, who is Godric’s master?”

Jean-Luc looked from Luke to Palomedes. “Your right hand man is good. To the best of my ability I am on my side, with my family. But I am not at liberty to say anything about Godric’s master. It will cost me my life.”

“And your family will belong to Godric’s master.” Anna added.

Palomedes snorted. “You’ll be allowed to live only as long as you are useful. Godric’s master must be behind the request to Anna, and his attempt to enslave her. We should question Godric.”

Anna was suddenly agitated. “Dave, who suggested tonight?”

“Melanie said you wanted to come here. Carol doesn’t know much about vampires, I would normally avoid them. I thought you and Melanie wanted to show Carol this club, so I came along to protect her. Shit!”

“Jean-Luc, Carol and Melanie must be brought here immediately, for their protection. And Godric.”

“My people will find the girls, but I cannot command Godric.”

“He will come, if only to gloat.” Luke suggested.

“I’m not safe, anywhere.” Anna looked determined rather than anxious. Godric is very powerful, and his master will be even more powerful.”

“We can help protect you.” Nalini offered. “But you’ll have to stay with us.”

“I can protect myself, and I can’t involve ordinary people...” she stopped mid sentence, realising what she was saying.

“Anna, none of us are ordinary humans any more. If we didn’t want to be involved we wouldn’t have interfered in the first place. Who do you think freed your mind from the vampire’s grip just as you reached him?” Nalini replied. “We are already involved, we are already targets. Now we need to sort this out.”

“I felt something push the vampire out of my mind. He was too strong. It was ...” she stopped.

“Like rape.” Nalini finished. “He will try again, until he succeeds or dies.”

“A vampire that old is very hard to kill.” Anna protested. “A stake through the heart doesn’t work.”

“Danny and I can kill him.”

Palomedes laughed. “Most of us can kill him so he dies the final death, and stays dead. You just have to drain their life-force.”

The waiters brought in Melanie, but could not find Carol or Godric. “She said she was going to the toilet.” Melanie explained. “She never came back.”

“Didn’t you go with her?” Dave asked.

“And leave our table unattended? You never came back!”

“If anything’s happened to her I’ll kill you!”

“You’ll have to stand in line.” Anna cut in. “Melanie, if the vampires have harmed Carol, I will kill you myself.”

Melanie simpered. “My vampire friends will bring me back as a vampire.”

“A wooden stake will fix that.”

“Do you know how killing a vampire works?” Palomedes offered. “Vampires are easy enough to kill, but they resurrect. Each time takes some of their stolen life-force, until they are drained, and die their final death. A stake through the heart kills one, but five minutes later they’re alive again, but the stake is still there, and they die again. A powerful vampire can remove the stake, but not someone young, new, such as yourself. You might last four or five deaths, that’s all. Powerful ones you burn, then bury their ashes under tons of rock, or maybe wet concrete like a building foundation. They might spend years resurrecting and dying again every few minutes before they finally die.”

Melanie looked sullen. “It’s not my fault.”

“No?” Anna spat. “You told Dave I wanted to come here, and you told me that Carol wanted to come here. You arranged it, and your vampire friends told you to. That makes it your fault if anything happens to Carol.”

“And Melanie, if you die first, they can’t make you into a vampire. You have to be alive.” Palomedes put in good naturedly. “And only a master vampire has the power to make another.”

“Don’t be too hard on her.” Luke cut in. “She’s enthralled to a vampire, she does what she’s told without question.”

“Luke, you can find Carol? And Godric?” Elanor asked. Only then she realised that was the wrong thing to say. Luke rarely intervened in purely human matters, and usually only when there was no alternative, and she asked directly.

“Luke smiled angelically. “I believe Danny, Nalini and Palomedes have that ability. Let’s see how things play out.”

“I could locate him,” Palomedes mused, “but if he took Carol, she is likely in the possession of his master by now. We don’t know who that is. But Godric’s master will contact Anna soon, either tonight, or tomorrow. They will use Carol as a bargaining chip. I think we should take any further discussion outside. No offence Jean-Luc.”

“None taken. I prefer that my family is not involved, and given the situation, I cannot provide for your safety.”

Jean-Luc escorted everyone back to their tables where they collected the few belongings left there, then to the coat check counter where Anna retrieved her weapons. Finally he escorted them to the door. “I am truly sorry the evening turned out as it has. Please come again, and I will personally make amends.”

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It was like walking into a sauna. She’d lived in England for too long, Elanor thought, these days she didn’t like the combination of heat and humidity. She was wondering what the menfolk were planning to do about Carol, and what she could do to help.

Palomedes laughed “I wasn’t expecting to be thrown out until after midnight!”

“Well, we didn’t have to pay either.” Danny added.

“And I suppose you’ll say we fed first, so what is there to complain about!” Elanor joked. “What are we going to do about Carol?”

“And Anna.” Nalini added. “Here life’s in danger too.”

“Let’s all go somewhere we can talk.” Palomedes suggested. “Everyone follow me, and that includes you Melanie.”

They walked toward the street, and Elanor felt a familiar tingling in her solar plexus. Someone had shifted them to a different shadow. She looked around. The lights were different, there were subtle differences about the buildings, and the nightclub behind them was called “57” in flashing neon. The heat was still oppressive.

Palomedes led them two doors down to The Bavarian Beerhaus. Anna commented “I don’t remember this being here.”

“Places change all the time.” Palomedes replied. “It’s air-conditioned, we can get a table big enough for all of us, the beer’s good, and it isn’t run by vampires.”

“Then it has a lot to recommend it.” Dave commented.

Inside it looked like an old English pub, except there were Bavarian pictures and motifs. Waitresses were dressed in dirndl skirts, waiters wore Tyrolean hats. At the far end a costumed band was playing folk music. The place specialised in German beer and German food.

They settled onto wooden benches around a dark wood table; Palomedes ordered steins of beer for everyone. After some discussion with the waitress, Melanie ordered a cocktail, then settled back with a sour expression.

“Melanie is like a drug addict,” Palomedes commented, “except her addiction is sex with vampires.”

“Hey! Melanie is sitting here!” Melanie protested.

“Yes, and you will listen carefully to what I say. You’re addicted, you’ll have sex with any vampire, as long as they give you the rush you crave. You’re also enslaved - you’ll do anything they tell you to, dance naked in Times Square, betray your friends like you did tonight. But it’s not your fault, at least not anymore, you’re an addict.”

“I am not an addict!”

“No? You can stop anytime? Forego the orgasmic rush of the Kundalini energy the vampires raise in you? Look, you’re already getting cold sweats thinking about stopping.”

“I am not.” Melanie was shivering as she issued her denial. “What’s Kundali?”

“Kundalini. Life force energy, everything that’s alive channels it.” Palomedes explained. “If you open up the channel and don’t control it, you can become sick, psychotic, addicted to sex to the point of spending all your time in sexual congress. Control it and you can do wonders, perform sorcery. Vampires take it from other living beings for their own use. If you’re lucky, they’ll leave you a little; if you’re unlucky they’ll drain you so you die. How often do you have sex with vampires, how many at a time, and for how long?”

“I’m not answering that!” Melanie spat.

“Melanie, answer the questions.” Luke said quietly.

Melanie’s eyes went out of focus. “Every morning and evening, more often on weekends, anywhere from two to six vampires, usually one to two hours. All night Friday and Saturday.”

“What!” Anna exclaimed.

“She will feel as if she is having a prolonged orgasm.” Palomedes explained. “She is channelling enough for about thirty vampires. But they are taking everything, leaving just enough to keep her healthy. Maybe the Master Vampire will turn her into one, maybe he won’t. And now Godric and his master are making Carol like you.”

“You bastard!” Dave exclaimed. “I will erk!” He was going red faced, no longer able to speak.

“Enough Dave.” Luke said quietly. “We will rescue Carol before they harm her. Now calm down. You don’t want to become a wolf here.”

Dave shook himself. “Okay, but we should still punish Melanie for her part. She’s betrayed her friends, like Palomedes said.”

“She’s like any other junkie.” Palomedes replied. “She will do anything for her fix, she’s not fully responsible for her actions.”

“Crap!” Luke replied. “Every human has free will, and is responsible for his or her choices. I think a fit punishment is to block her energy channels so she cannot feed her vampire lovers. She will be of no use to them.”

Elanor switched to her sorcerous sight in time to see something like filmy gauze go from Luke to Melanie’s aura, where it sank in. The woman shivered momentarily.

“It’s done, Melanie.” Luke announced. “You are blocked until Palomedes or I see fit to unblock you. Now sit quietly while the rest of us decide what to do about Carol and Anna.” There was a look of anger on Melanie’s face.

“You will remember nothing of what we say until I command otherwise.” Luke added. Melanie sat sipping her drink, a little half smile playing about her lips.

“What are you, Luke?” Anna asked. “Jean-Luc knew you back in the sixteen hundreds, but you don’t feel like a vampire.”

“He doesn’t smell like one either.” Dave added. “None of them do.”

Everyone looked expectantly at Luke. He smiled angelically. “Collectively we are all sorcerers, though technically I am one of the Old Sorcerers. As Palomedes said earlier, we channel energy and use it to perform wonders. And as Nalini said earlier, we keep the gods honest.

“By your standards I am quite old. The ancient Greeks called me Apollo Leukeios, which means Apollo the Lightbearer, and Apollo Wolfsbane - I rid the region of a clan of werewolves who were preying on people. Dave, you have nothing to fear though.”

“I know in ancient history there were many clans of werewolves, but most of them disappeared. Did you kill them?”

Luke shook his head with a smile. “I didn’t kill any of them. I helped them to move somewhere else, a vacant world, with no humans. Their descendants are still there.”

“Where? How?”

“Let’s just say there are an infinite number of parallel worlds, not all of them have intelligent life. In some places the walls between them are thin, and it is possible to move between them. I try not to kill to solve problems.”

Palomedes laughed. “He doesn’t need to. The Romans called him Venus Lucifer, do you know what that means?”

Elanor knew, as did everyone in her group, but Dave shook his head. Luke briefly showed an annoyed expression. Anna looked thoughtful, then said “Lucifer, the prince of Hell?”

‘Yes and No. I’m the one they talk about, but Prince of Hell is incorrect, I am not a demon. The early Christians gave me some bad press. Now Palomedes here is known as the Hunter - he hunts Vampires, Demons, things of that nature. He’s good, believe me; they named a constellation after him. Danny and Nalini are sometimes called the God Slayers, after they banished the Stealer of Souls, a very powerful god, one that is both chaotic and evil. Best not to get on the wrong side of them. Liz is the Kookaburra Woman, whose laughter lights up the dream time, while Elanor is the Tiger Woman, my companion, and the one who reminds me of my humanity. I say all this so you will know we can help you with your vampires. We are not ordinary people, as Nalini said before. Now, tell us what you know about this.”

Anna nodded, looking thoughtful. “I really can’t say much more than I said before. The vampire that visited me called himself Wilfred, but I don’t know him, or his family. Wilfred was old, at least five hundred, but he wasn’t the master. He offered a large amount of cash to work for him. I turned him down; he told me I’d regret that. Then this happened. Godric must be the same family, but why attack Carol?”

“Leverage.” Palomedes explained. “Historically vampires forced people to do their bidding. Godric intended to put you under his control and break you to his will, except we spoiled his plans. He will try again when you try to bargain for Carol. You won’t be safe as long as he or his master are alive. Enslaving people is part of their nature.”

“No wonder they try to keep that hidden.” Anna mused. “Humans would work together to exterminate them.” She sighed. “Godric or Wilfred will likely visit me tonight. What can I do?”

Palomedes snorted. “Kill them! But we need to rescue Carol first, and locate their master second. You will need guardians to protect you. Melanie, what do you know of Godric, Wilfred and their master? Answer truthfully.”

“Melanie is under control for the time being, but she won’t be harmed.” Luke commented. “Melanie, answer Palomedes truthfully, and hide nothing.”

The girl looked around dreamily when Luke spoke. Her voice was like a little girl’s. “There’s a new vampire family here. From Europe. They’re all very old. Godric said something about consolidating their control in the New World. The other families are resisting but they aren’t strong enough. Then someone started killing vampires in Godric’s family, starting with the younger ones, only two or three hundred years old, but last week someone killed Athelstane - he was over a thousand years old. I think they’re scared, and they want the Executioner working for them?”

“Who, me?” Anna asked. Melanie ignored her.

“Who is the Executioner?” Palomedes asked.

“Anna.”

“Why do you call her that?”

“That’s what vampires call her. She kills vampires. They know it isn’t her, but they say she’s the best, she’ll find out who it is.”

“Do your vampires have any ideas who it might be?”

“I don’t know - they haven’t said.”

“Is there anything else you should tell us?”

“No.”

Palomedes looked at Luke, an unspoken question on his face. Luke commented “She doesn’t know much, only what they let slip. Melanie, where does Godric live?”

“I don’t know. I’ve met him at Dracula’s Lair, and Club Cirque. I don’t remember where he lives.”

“Melanie, you can remember, someone ordered you to forget. A door opens, you step through to time you spent with Godric. Where are you?”

“He has rooms in Dracula’s Lair and Club Cirque, plus a penthouse in an apartment block nearby. It ha water views, but I don’t know the address or the name.”

“I know who runs Club Cirque, he’s not in Godric’s family either.” Anna commented. “There are three upmarket apartment buildings in the Docklands complex. I’d say his penthouse is there.”

“Except he isn’t any of those places.” Palomedes commented. “It’s a small apartment, he’s hiding in a cupboard in a bedroom, and another vampire is standing behind the bathroom door.”

“Before we go any further,” Luke interrupted, “I need to deal with Melanie. I don’t want some vampire picking things out of her memories.”

He held his right hand out, palm upwards. A silver sphere like a ball bearing appeared in his palm. “Melanie, look at me. You remember nothing after the club, except that Elanor and I took you home. You know nothing of this place, or our conversation.”

The ball bearing rolled around his palm as he spoke, and when he finished, out to the tip of his fore-finger, where it hung, defying gravity. Luke tilted his fingers vertically, then flicked the small sphere at Melanie. About ten centimeters from her body the small sphere spread out to envelop her in a silvery glow. It contracted, disappearing into her skin. Melanie gasped, then slumped back in her seat, asleep or unconscious.

“I have severed the ties that bound her to the vampires.” Luke announced. “When she wakes she will remember little, and there are now no memories for them to dig out.”

“Then you can cure Carol?” Dave asked.

“Yes. Now Palomedes, what are you proposing to do about Carol, Godric and his family, and Anna?”

“Luke, how did you do that?” Anna interrupted. “Sorry Palomedes.”

“He’s just using sorcery.” Palomedes replied. “Any of us can do things like that, he’s just better.”

“The silver sphere is merely to add credibility to something that is invisible and thus unconvincing.” Luke added with a smile. “Anna and Dave, both of you can learn sorcery, you both have powers. But that can wait. Anna, the two vampires are lying in ambush at your apartment, while Carol has been hidden away somewhere. Palomedes, I suggest you take Anna with you. Will you need anyone else?”

“Two eight hundred year old vampires? Probably not. Anna is a vampire hunter, so she knows what to expect. I’ll protect her. Dave, you should stay here with Luke, no offence, but you might be out of your league here.”

“None taken. I’m a werewolf, not an action hero. But I want to be in on Carol’s rescue.”

“I think I’m out of my league.” Anna commented. “But I need to face them.”

“All right. Anyone else want to come along?”

“We will.” Nalini said. “If you don’t think that will make things too crowded.”

“No, I intend to shift them somewhere quiet so I can question them. We don’t want to mess up Anna’s apartment.”

“I’ll stay here if you don’t mind.” Liz suggested.

“That’s fine, no sense in putting all of us in harm’s way.”

“Then I’ll stay too.” Elanor added. “I’m feeling lazy tonight.”

“Four’s a nice even number, Elanor.” Palomedes said, rising to his feet. “I’ll find us a convenient shadow and bring Godric there. You two can bring the other vampire.” he indicated Danny and Nalini. “It’ll be more of a surprise that way. Anna, stick with me.”

The other three rose to their feet. When they reached Palomedes he started walking with them. Their forms smeared into rainbow light and they were gone.

“Where’d they go?” Dave asked.

“The world you inhabit is but one of an infinite number.” Luke explained. “We call them shadows. They have shifted to another shadow. This is real sorcery, nothing to do with pulling rabbits out of hats.”

“Cool! Could I learn to do something like that?”

“You could. Danny and Nalini were once ordinary humans, as were Liz and Elanor. Elanor is learning to shadow shift, Liz, Danny and Nalini have learned. Though in a sense they are all still my students - there is much more they can learn.”

2

Anna was just as surprised as Dave. One moment she was walking across the floor, the next she was surrounded by a rainbow smear, and the next she stepped onto a wooded hill in twilight. “Where are we? What happened?” She stared around in panic.

“Parallel world.” explained Danny with a grin. “The pub is still there, we can return at any moment.”

““We call them shadows.” Nalini added. “They twist around each other, more like tangled spaghetti. We can cross into another shadow in a few meter, and eventually come to your apartment. It’s quicker than driving, but we have to locate the right shadows.”

Danny held up his hand. “Imagine my thumb is the pub...”

“...and the end of his index finger is your apartment...” Nalini continued.

“...and to get there you have to travel all the way down my thumb...”

“...and all the way up his index finger...”

“...it might take you half an hour.” Danny touched the tip of his thumb to the tip of his little finger.

“His other fingers represent different shadows,...”

“...so we travel from the shadow represented by my thumb to the one represented by my little finger.”

“It doesn’t take very long at all. Then we do the same...”

“...travelling from the parallel world of my little finger...”

“... to the one of his ring finger, again it doesn’t take long.”

“Another shift to my middle finger...”

“...and the same to his index finger. Four shifts...”

“and bingo, we’re standing outside your apartment.”

“Or in it.” Nalini finished. “We’re telepathic, by the way, we often finish each other’s sentences.”

“Except we’ll stop before we go into your apartment.” Palomedes replied. “I’ve found one that appears to be uninhabited. Let’s go.”

They started walking through the trees. After five steps and a rainbow shimmer the trees were gone, replaced with a cool wind and reddish brown heather, plus spotted granite boulders and stones. It was late afternoon, under a lavender sky. Anna stopped. “This is weird! The sky’s wrong.”

“Yes, you get that often. We’re not there yet, so we don’t really have time to sight see.” Palomedes responded. “The next one will be weirder.”

Metal rang under their shoes. It was a plane of gun metal grey, under a burnished copper sky. In the distance were blocky structures that might have been buildings, or an irregular wall. The light source was an elongated strip of yellow white.

“Might be artificial.” Danny offered. “But we’ve seen weirder stuff that was natural.”

“I don’t feel the urge to explore this one.” Anna replied. “But I wish I’d brought my camera.”

“Danny and Liz were the same when they started.” Nalini laughed.

“This is the human realm, most of the really weird shadows are far away, and the occasional one that comes close tends to move away just as rapidly. We could be trapped, or die on entry.” Palomedes added. “The next one is odd too.”

They stepped onto fine black sand, light enough to hang in the air when their feet kicked it up. It seemed to be night - the sky was black and starless, but there was a wood grain pattern in faint white, no brighter than stars. A large gibbous moon gave yellow light, a smaller one near it was coppery red. The plane was almost featureless, stretching up to distant black hills on their right, and down to something flat, black, but faintly luminous on their left.

“Wow!” Anna stopped to look around. “What’s that in the sky?”

Palomedes shrugged. “No idea, but there’s a sea to our left.”

“Maybe it’s streams of luminous gas?” Danny suggested. “Which means the center-point is some sort of dark star, maybe a neutron star or even a black hole. We’ve no way of knowing anyway.”

“Perhaps the star went nova tens of thousands of years ago.” Nalini added. “Those glowing rings would be the remnants, with a neutron star at the centre.”

“So you guys think this is a planet circling a dead star?” Anna asked. “That’s unbelievable! Where’s earth from here?”

“The pub we left is four shifts away.” Nalini answered. “As to pointing to it, we can walk in any direction and reach it, provided we focus on our destination. When you are shadow shifting you don’t measure distance, you measure the number of shifts you use to get there. But the shadows are moving all the time, so it may be more shifts to go home, or less, and we’d probably use different shadows.”

“I must be getting old!” Palomedes chuckled. “I don’t often wonder about things like this, I’ve seen too many. I think our next one will be more interesting.”

He led them forward, through another rainbow smear, and onto flat black rock. The crash of waves alerted them to the nearby sea, pounding the black rock into black gravel. The sky was pinkish orange, with a blood red sun and fluffy pink clouds. There were dark green branching things growing from the rock, looking something like staghorn corals. Here and there dark blue hued, multilegged, armored crustaceans scuttled about the shore. It was cold, and further away from the sea was a scattered covering of snow.

“All right, we’re stopping here.” Palomedes announced. “The next shift will take us to where Godric and his friend are waiting. I want to prepare first.”

“I’m cold!” Anna announced. “Couldn’t you find a warmer, er, shadow? And why do you call them shadows?”

“The why of it gets mystical. All so called parallel worlds are shadows cast by the archetype.” Palomedes explained. “They are all different, but none of us can tell you whether this shadow is the same as the one you’re from, only that this area is stable relative to where Godric and his ally are, there’s no intelligent life, and it’s safe enough for us. Here,” he plucked a black leather coat from thin air, “put this on.”

Anna looked at it for a moment, eyes goggling, then put on the coat. She took out one of her guns, the one loaded with silver bullets, and placed in in the coat pocket. Silver would slow a vampire, and cause the wounds to heal slowly.

She turned to see Danny and Nalini with swords slung across their backs, and each surrounded by a faint pearlescent glow. Palomedes looked like a biker in black leather, except this had a metallic sheen to it.

He smiled, indicating his clothes. “Dragon skin, it’s fireproof, bullet proof, ideal fighting clothes. Now, let’s get you shielded.”

He touched her head with his right hand and Anna felt something tingle across her skin. “You’ve a shield like the one Danny and Nalini have. It blocks most sorcery, will protect you if you’re thrown off a cliff, and only a slow blade can penetrate it. Put away your gun, the bullet might not be able to leave the barrel.”

“I don’t follow you.”

But Palomedes turned away. “I need to set up containment circles.”

“Hold out your arm.” Nalini ordered. “Now, see that slight shimmer about two or three centimeters from your arm? That’s your shield. Now, watch this.”

Nalini plucked a willow withe from the air, and struck Anna’s arm with it. The withe stopped at the shimmer above her arm, and bent with the force. “See? I struck fast, it cannot penetrate your shield. And it won’t while I keep applying pressure. However, if I lift it off” Nalini did so, “and then move it back slowly, it penetrates and touches you.”

“Take a look at your hand,” Danny continued, “and the way the shield flows around it.” Anna did so, noticing that it looked like she was wearing shimmery ski gloves.

“Now take your gun from your pocket,” Nalini continued, “and hold it as if you would shoot it.” Anna did so, noticing a slight tingly feeling as she held the gun.

“You grasped it slowly enough that it touches your skin.” Danny observed.

“Now look at your shield again.” Nalini continued.

It seemed to extend through the gun, about three centimeters in front of her hand. “It goes through the barrel, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” Danny smiled. “The bullet will stop at the shield. The gun might explode, or be blown from your hand. It’s on the inside of your shield, so you will be injured.”

“Oh, I understand now. Does this mean we can’t use guns when we’re shielded? How does it all work?”

“It’s sorcery, Anna.” Nalini said. “Please give me the gun for a moment.” Anna handed it over, Nalini held it as if she would shoot it.

“See how my shield does the same? Now watch.” The shield seemed to retract.

“Where’s it gone? It’s still on the outside of your hand.”

“It’s aligned itself with the outside of the gun, wrapping around the butt just like my hand. I can shoot the gun.”

“How did you do that?”

“Sorcery. You can learn to do that once you learn enough to activate a shield.”

“And Luke says you already do some sorcery.” Danny added. “So you can learn a lot more. We think he’s encouraging you to learn...”

“...and he might arrange for lessons.” Nalini finished.

Anna smiled non-committaly. “The more I see of what you guys can do, the more interested I am.”

Palomedes meanwhile, had chalked two circles on the dark rock. “What are they for?” Anna asked. “There’s no words of power or any magical glyphs.”

“I don’t need them. These are circles of containment, like you would use in a summoning, except these will be effective. The chalk is just to show everyone where the edge is.”

“Are you going to summon demons?”

“No!” Palomedes laughed. “Just your vampire friends. This circle is congruent with where Godric is in the other shadow, the other with his companion. Danny, Nalini, time for a quick lesson. What do you think I’m about to do?”

“You’re about to drag them out of their shadow...” Danny started.

“...and bring them here.” Nalini finished. “The circle I’ve seen before, Korum showed me. I take it you don’t trust chains.”

“No, vampires have powers, for all I know they can transmute their chains to sand. They won’t be able to breach these. Now if you were bringing them here, how would you go about it?”

“We’d shift in, stun them, then drag them back here when we shifted out.” Danny replied.

“Except your stunner would not work on them.” Palomedes grinned. “They’re a lot like me, plus I’m a lot stronger than you. Then you’d have a fight in Anna’s apartment, likely wreck the place, and they’d get away. I’m going to fetch them here. They won’t know what’s hit them. I’ve set up the spell for each circle, I’ll trigger it as they arrive.”

“You don’t really need us, do you?” Danny asked.

“No, but we can play charades. We’ll shapeshift to look like demons, then we tell them they’re in hell. Anna can be herself and pretend she asked as to punish them. How’s that sound?”

“You guys can shapeshift? You don’t mean like having were-animal powers, do you? Ok, I’ll go along with it.”

“Good, don’t be frightened.” Palomedes’ eyes were twinkling. He flexed his arms as if limbering up, then his form flickered, writhing and twisting like through a heat haze.

His form came back into focus. Three meters tall, red skinned, cloven hoofed, curving rams’ horns on his bald head. He was dressed in a simple loin cloth, and carried a wickedly barbed spear. “What do you think?” His voice was deep and gravely. His skin was covered in whorls and lines.

Anna looked at him appraisingly. “That’s not an illusion?”

“No, it’s physical.” He laughed, pirouetting.

“Then your mass has increased. No werebeing can do that. And your clothes have vanished.”

“No? They can learn. Danny, Nalini? Your turns.”

They stood silently for several moments, then Nalini smiled and Danny nodded. Telepathy? Nothing else seemed to happen for ten long seconds, and then their original forms faded out while new ones faded in.

Both were about three meters tall. Danny was now a bronze skinned male with the head of a hawk like some ancient Egyptian god, dressed in sandals, a white linen kilt, and holding a short spear with a long blade. Nalini’s upper body was dappled like a leopard or jaguar, and she had the head of the animal. She wore a skirt oh the animal’s pelt, plus sandals and bangles at wrist and ankles, and carried a spear similar to Danny’s. Here breasts were bare.

“How’s this?” they said in unison.

“Awesome!” Anna exclaimed.

“Good enough to scare the crap out of any self respecting medieval vampire. They believe in demons!”

That gave Anna food for thought. Godric had to be from the middle ages, where superstition and fear of demons was absorbed along with their mothers’ milk. “You don’t think they can ever shake off the superstition of their roots?”

“They could, but they’ve been skulking in the dark for most of their eight hundred years. Anna, you stand there where they’ll see you. Danny and Nalini, stand over here. I’ll do most of the talking, Anna, you back me up. Now, let’s reel in our fish.”

Palomedes stood still as a statue for several seconds, before exclaiming “Ha!” There was a rainbow shimmer inside each of the circles, and a moment later a blond haired, black clad figure appeared in each.

“Godric and Wilfred, hiding in my bedroom.”

Anna barely said the words before Godric launched himself at her with a scream of rage. That turned to screams of agony as he collided with the barrier. Wilfred stood quietly, watching. Godric collapsed on the stone, then gathered his wits and stood up carefully.

“I will send you to hell for that!” Godric exclaimed.

“I don’t think so.” Anna replied. “Would you address your master like that?”

“You’re not my master!” Godric spat. “You will rot in hell for all eternity!”

“You don’t have that sort of power.” Anna was not gloating, just being matter of fact. “Don’t you recognise where you are?”

“What have you done, girl? Where are we?” Wilfred asked. He was standing very still, in the middle of the circle.

Palomedes laughed, gravelly and thoroughly evil. “Welcome to Hell, sinners!”

The two vampires turned like marionettes, jerking around far more swiftly than any human should.

“Who are you?” Wilfred asked.

“What are you?” Godric ground out.

“I am Orion, Prince of Chaos, son of Lucifer. Fear me.” Palomedes worked some magic then, and a wave of fear washed over both vampires, causing their legs to shake.

“Grovel.” Palomedes ordered, and both vampires were forced to their knees. “That’s better. You will be here a lo-o-ong time, and I will make you my special project. Just think, an eternity of pain, no respite, no escape, for ever.” He gestured with his spear, and both vampires spasmed uncontrollably, writhing and screaming in agony.

“I’m not entirely comfortable with this.” Anna remarked.

“Oh, this is just to soften them up a bit.” Palomedes replied. “Another forty seconds. We have to live up to our image.”

Nalini said “Think of all the people they’ve tortured and killed over the centuries.”

After a very long forty seconds the screams and writhing subsided. Both vampires had soiled themselves.

“That wasn’t even one minute.” Palomedes told them. “Imagine that continuing for ever. Anna stopped me because she wants to ask you some questions.”

“What’s she doing here?” Wilfred managed to get out. His tongue was bleeding badly. “Why aren’t you torturing her?”

“Ah, Anna is our guest. Even you low lives should know about the proper treatment of guests. Now be good boys and answer her questions truthfully. I can tell when you’re lying, and you’ll be sorry.”

“We were Saxon knights centuries ago, we are indifferent to pain.” Godric spat.

“Really?” Palomedes queried. “You have the manners of pigs and the honour of dogs. You lie in wait to prey on people. You broke your knightly vows centuries ago. Oathbreakers are one of the lowest forms of life, as you know well. Now answer Anna’s questions.”

“What have you done with Carol?” Anna asked.

“Nothing.” Godric replied.

“That’s a lie.” Palomedes commented. “I warned you.” Godric screamed in pain, writhing on the ground.

He stopped about thirty seconds later, exclaiming “Jesus!”

“He won’t help, you abandoned him centuries ago, oathbreaker, just like you abandoned all hope when you entered here. You chose that path. Now answer truthfully.”

Wilfred spoke. “We didn’t choose to become vampires. We were Saxon knights, we were captured in battle and held prisoner in a dungeon.”

“Keep talking Wilfred,” Anna commanded “you might say something that interests me.”

“Everybody chooses, Wilfred, or rather Wulfric.” Palomedes added. “You chose dishonour over death.”

“Not willingly. There were three of us, Athelstane, Godric and myself. And you’re right, I was called Wulfric, but I abandoned that name when I became a vampire. You know about breaking horses? How you keep working on them until you break them to your will? That’s what our master did to us, tormenting us and tormenting us until he broke us. We were all restrained to prevent self harm, we were held alone, unable to communicate with each other, force fed, and kept in utter darkness. All we could hear were screams of utter agony.

“It took years, but we broke. Athelstane first, then Godric, and then me. The master prevented us from dying, and once we broke we were the master’s slaves. Since then the master has always been in our minds, and we’ve done exactly what we were commanded.”

Palomedes’ form flickered, and he turned into a Pan like creature, a satyr, with cloven hoofs, body hair, a round face with a bulbous nose, brown curly hair and short horns on his forehead. “I am the Hunter, I have hunted creatures like your master for many thousands of years. I know much about breaking horses, and humans. Even here you still have a choice. Your master is gone from your mind. Now, tell us about your master, and what happened to Carol. You can still make a difference, you can make amends for all your wrongs.”

“Do you really give us hope, or is it just some demonic trick?” Wulfric asked.

Palomedes smiled. “Hell is a place of punishment for unrepentant sinners. But God in his infinite wisdom allows you to choose to repent, and to make amends. You can regain your soul, and cease being a vampire, but you’ll have to work at it. Now, what has happened to Carol?”

Godric and Wulfric exchanged glances. “I still think it’s a trick.” Godric said. “I will kill you if you give me a chance.”

“No, you can’t. I’m immortal. Think on this. I’ve blocked your master, and freed you from his hold. Gratis. You can now choose the path of repentance. And hell is a place of punishment - demons do God’s will by punishing unrepentant sinners. Now you can choose. You’ve nothing to lose - your soul is already forfeit, and much to gain - your soul and God’s forgiveness are the prize. This is the only chance either of you get. You can give me information willingly, as the first step in repentance, or I can force it from you, and you will have turned your back on God and Jesus again, of your own free will. Time to choose sides.”

Wulfric said something in a guttural language to Godric, who replied in the same tongue. “What are they saying?” Anna asked.

“Old Saxon. It’s a precursor to German and English. They are not sure what to believe.”

“Why would a demon offer a damned soul a chance?” Godric asked.

“Because it’s part of our job. The unrepentant stay here, those who repent can work for their release. It’s not yet Judgment Day. And it’s a matter of faith, you take the life of Jesus on faith, you take this on faith. Don’t take too long to decide, Anna wants to save Carol.”

The two conversed in Saxon again. Godric snarled something, Wulfric said something placating. Godric pursed his lips, switched to English. “I hate you demon, and I do not trust you one bit. I think you play us a trick. But we are already damned, and if God in his mercy should offer us a chance, even if it come from your foul lips, we should truly be worthy of damnation if we spurn His offer. What do we do to accept?”

“I’ll ask you formally. Do you repent of your actions, and will you work for your salvation?”

“Yes.” Godric replied in a small voice.

“Wulfric? Do you repent and will you work for your salvation?”

“Oh yes!”

“Then start by answering Anna’s questions.”

Anna had been looking from Godric to Palomedes, her mouth open. She drew a deep breath. “All right, what has happened to Carol, and where is she?”

“I have not harmed her,” Godric replied, “but I captured her and delivered her to my master.”

“Where is your master?”

“I cannot say where she is, but our family live in the old warehouse across the river, the one that was renovated last year. I delivered Carol there.”

“How old is your master?”

“I do not know, at least a thousand years older than me. She is a heathen.”

“What were you doing in my apartment?”

“We were to capture you and bring you to our master.”

Anna turned to Palomedes. “Their hideout is a fortress. I don’t know how we’ll rescue Carol.”

“Fortresses can’t stop us. But first, Wulfric and Godric, I want each of you to picture you master in your mind, what she looks like, what she sounds like, what she smells like, how she behaves.”

The two vampires looked at each other, then closed their eyes. They stood quietly, expressions of sadness and pain crossing their faces. Palomedes stood quietly.

Finally he shook his head. “It’s no good, I can’t locate her. Well boys, you’ll be staying here for a while.” He gestured, and items appeared in their circles.

“Buckets of clean water, soap, wash cloths and towels, plus clean clothes. Clean up, and rest. Someone will be along to release you in due course. I suggest you think about what you can do to make amends for all your sins. Good luck. Anna,” Palomedes turned to the woman. “We have to return you to earth.”

Danny and Nalini joined him, and the four walked forward, vanishing in a rainbow smear.

Wulfric spoke in Saxon. “Would you believe that?”

“I hope he does not play us false. I would like to believe we have a chance.”

“You felt his power, and the others. Not even our master has power like that.”

“How I longed to drink his power, and his blood. I expect we have to give up all that.”

“Yes, I expect so.” Wulfric began undressing. “At least we have water and clean clothes. I am more inclined to believe him. He behaved as if we are no longer of any interest to him.”

“He said demons in hell do God’s work. I’d never have considered that, but it does make sense. Angels can’t hurt people but demons can. I wonder if they gave Athelstane a chance.” Godric began undressing.

Danny, Nalini and Palomedes returned to their normal forms. They were standing on wet shale, with similar colored clouds scudding overhead. The shale sloped down into dark water that crashed thunderously against the shore, while seal like creatures dragged themselves onto the beach. “There must be millions of them!” Nalini exclaimed.

“Are they dangerous?” Anna asked.

“They’re wild.” Palomedes responded. “If you threaten them they will probably attack you, and if you get in their way they could hurt you by accident. We should be safe up here.”

“The trick is to radiate peace at them.” Nalini suggested. “I find it works with almost any animal.”

“But not humans?” Anna countered with a laugh. “Palomedes, how did you persuade them to talk so easily?”

Palomedes chuckled. “The same way Nalini calms wild animals. Give them something to believe, give them subtle suggestions, and let their own beliefs and hopes and fears work for you. Don’t forget they are medieval Christians, riddled with superstition and fears of damnation. They’ve worked with other people’s fears most of their lives. Remember that Godric threatened to send you to hell. I gave them some props and helped them to convince themselves.”

“What was that bit about freeing them from the master?”

“The circle of containment blocks their master. A master’s thoughts control his slaves in a form of telepathy. It works across different shadows. Their master now thinks they’ve died - she will blame you and fear you. I think we should rescue Carol while she is distracted.”

He paused for a moment as if listening. “Luke says to return, he can locate Carol. That makes it easy.”

“How?” Anna asked as she was whisked to another shadow.

“Luke and I can communicate via telepathy if we wish. Danny and Nalini do the same.”

There was barely time to look around at red leafed bushes and trees under a greenish sky before they were stepping into the pub.

“Won’t the people notice us coming and going?”

“Not if I don’t want them to.” He sat down, took a swig of his beer. “The two vampires are neutralised, but they’ll not be truly free until their master is dead. Luke, you’ve told the others what happened?”

“Yes. That was ingenious. I’ll visit them later. More importantly, Dave has been able to picture Carol well enough that I can locate her. I’ll show all of you now.”

Elanor sat still, thoughts quiescent, knowing what was about to happen. Her vision seemed to blur, and overlaid on it were a number of superimposed scenes, each one a shadow. There was a young woman visible behind them, terrified, sitting bound, gagged and blindfolded in a small room. Elanor felt she could almost reach out and touch her. There was also an impression of someone looming silently behind her. Elanor allowed the impressions to wash over her, felt something inside her gathering itself. The scene faded, but Elanor could walk through shadow to the woman.

“What just happened?” Anna asked. “I could have reached out and touched her.”

“You lack that power, Anna,” Luke replied, “but we can. Palomedes, you organise the rescue. Dave and Anna should stay here.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

“Because there will be many powerful vampires in their lair. Because Palomedes will be too busy to protect you.”

“What about you?”

“This is a purely human issue.”

“Anna,” Palomedes interjected. “Luke cannot interfere unless Elanor asks him to, and even then his powers are limited. He can only manifest in the physical realm if he follows the rules.”

Luke waved him to silence. “Anna, I keep the gods honest, not humans. Think of me as a gardener, or shepherd. I weed and prune and manure and plant. I keep the sheep safe from the wolves. I help and I guide. I never carry weapons, I don’t need them. I am not permitted to interfere in the affairs of humans except in the capacity of another human, albeit a sorcerer. Often I am limited to helping the dying, burying the dead, and rescuing the wounded. Vampires, werewolves and Palomedes are all just humans from that perspective, ones with some sorcerous powers. This may seem complicated, but it’s not.”

“Oh. Who or what sets the rules? What happens if you break them?”

“That is a very human perspective.” Luke smiled. “Normally I would reply ‘God’. But it’s more a natural law like gravity. If you throw a stone in the air it will eventually fall. It cannot break that law, but you can find ways to throw it harder, and maybe put it into orbit. Just so, I can work around the limits imposed on me when someone asks me specifically for help. It’s like changing a dream, you have to work within the logic of the dream. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so. I don’t understand it, but I don’t understand gravity either, I just now how it works. So, if I ask for your help, you will go with us to rescue Carol?”

Luke nodded. “Palomedes has decided it is too dangerous for you to go. He will either go alone, or with Danny and Nalini. If you and Dave each ask specifically for my help in rescuing Carol then we will all go.”

“All right Luke. Please help us rescue Carol.”

Dave sighed. “I want to help rescue Carol, even though I know I’m out of my depth. Will you help me to rescue her?”

“I will help. But first Elanor and I must return Melanie to her apartment.”

“How long will that take? Not long, less time than Palomedes will take planning. We’ll meet you at your chosen place, Palomedes.”

“Fifteen minutes.”

Luke nodded. “Elanor, will you come with me?”

“Certainly.” Elanor stood. She felt ready for action, and rescuing Carol was a cause she could identify with.

“Melanie, stand up, gather your things.” Melanie did as she was instructed in silence. “Now, imagine you are in your apartment. You see it now around you.”

Luke linked his arm with Elanor, and they walked around the table to Melanie. Luke linked his other arm through Melanie’s, and they walked forward through a rainbow swirl and onto white carpet. Everything was dark, but Elanor’s sorcerous sight allowed her to see furniture.

“Light.” said Luke, and the lights came on. They were standing just inside the entrance to a small, expensively furnished, apartment. The furniture was all black leather, black wood, and chrome - lounge suite, coffee tables, standing lamps, huge flat screen television. Behind was a round table with four chairs, and a small kitchen mostly hidden behind an internal wall. A doorway in front of them led through to a bedroom and a bathroom cum laundry.

“Melanie, undress, take a shower, and then go to bed.” Luke instructed. Melanie started undressing, to Elanor’s mild surprise. “When you awake in the morning you will feel refreshed and happy. Your attraction to vampires will be a distant memory. Last night you had fun at the club, drank too much, and do not remember anything apart from being at the club. Vampires no longer interest you.”

Melanie had stripped naked by now, and Elanor was amused to discover she appeared completely hairless, like a young girl. Luke smiled at her “Once it was the custom of the ancient Egyptians to do that. Melanie, go and shower, then go to bed and sleep. We are leaving now.” He turned and began walking back to the living room.

“Will she be all right?” Elanor asked. She could hear water running in the bathroom.

“As right as any other. She will avoid vampires for a while, but I can’t block her - I can’t tamper with her free will. Palomedes is looking for a suitable shadow, we’ll join him in a minute.”

“How long does it take to find one?” Elanor had managed to perceive shadows, but only recently had she managed the rudiments of shifting, under Danny and Nalini’s tutelage.

“It takes practice, but you think about your target, then think about a suitable nearby shadow. Then a set of shadows suggest themselves. The process can take seconds, or minutes, depending on how detailed your requirements are. Usually they should be simple - somewhere safe, not too hot or cold, easy walking. Palomedes wants access to most levels of the building. It’s a factory converted into an apartment block, so you’d think he would need something similar. He’s decided, let’s go.”

Elanor stepped onto a broad, tree-lined path that seemed to be wood. It took her a moment to realise the path was a large bough of an even larger tree, and what she’d thought of as trees were branches growing from the bough. The path was at least three meters wide, and they some distance above the ground.

“This look a little like where Durathror and Imladril live.” Elanor commented.

“Yes, it bears a passing resemblance to the wood elves’ realm. The trees grow to over eight hundred meters, and the boughs pit down aerial roots that become secondary trunks. There are no wood elves in the vicinity though.”

Elanor smiled. “Something lives up here, the bark has been smoothed by the passage of many feet.”

“Perhaps this area has been abandoned?”

The others were standing closer to the trunk, and Elanor spied openings, like doors and windows, in the trunk, all partly overgrown. The wood elves lived in rooms cut into the tree trunks, enlarging natural hollows. This did look abandoned. “I wonder what happened here?”

Palomedes greeted them, adding “It looks like the Viharani used to live here, but they have left. I don’t know why. The room Carol is in is situated just here.” He indicated one side of the enormous bough.

“Are you intending to invade?” Luke asked.

“I was, but I am having doubts now. Perhaps we should rescue Carol and then pay them a visit through their front door?”

“A good idea. Only invade if you plan to kill them all.”

“I’d like to, there are some evil people in there.”

“We’ll get to them.” Luke replied. “Carol is our top priority.”

“Yes. Everyone be ready.” Palomedes stood still, but Elanor could feel him activating his shadow working powers. There was a long itching in her solar plexus, followed by a tugging sensation, and Carol appeared. She was seated in a chair, tied to it Elanor belatedly realised, and a vampire was crouched with his hands about her throat.

“One move and she erk!” the vampire cried. Palomedes had blurred into action, grasping the vampire’s hands and forcing them off Carol. “Stand still!” he ordered. The vampire stiffened, freezing into stillness.

He turned to Carol. “Chains begone!” her bindings shimmered and vanished. Palomedes placed his hands on her head. “I free you from the vampire. Your mind is unclouded. You will awake refreshed.”

The girl shivered and looked around. “What happened? Where am I? Dave, what’s going on?”

Palomedes answered. “You’re safe. You’re unharmed. We just rescued you from the clutches of a brood of vampires. I’m Palomedes, by the way.”

There was a look of fear in Carol’s eyes. “I won’t panic.” she said quietly. “So what happened? Dave, Anna, talk to me. Where’s Melanie?”

“One of the vampires at the club kidnapped you...” Dave began.

“It was Mel’s doing.” Anna interrupted. “She wangled the invite to the club. As near as we can work out, there was a vampire from another family there who was controlling Mel. He attacked Dave, and me, and these people helped out. You were kidnapped and taken to the headquarters of the other vampire family.”

Carol had calmed down. “How long has it been? I don’t remember much.”

“About an hour.” Luke replied. He introduced himself and the others. “We took Melanie home, she’s free of the vampire’s influence. She doesn’t remember much. Now, I think we should take you and Dave home, there is no need for you to be involved further.”

“Okay, I’d like to go home. What about the vampires?”

“Some of us are staying to clean out the nest.” Palomedes said.

Dave put his arm about Carol, she hugged him fiercely. “Let’s go home.”

“Good.” Luke smiled. “This way please.” Elanor guided Carol for three steps along the bough and into a city street before an apartment block.

“How?” Carol began.

“Magic.” Luke smiled. “I’m a sorcerer, a white wizard if you like. You’re home, and you’re safe. If you have any questions call Anna tomorrow.”

“Goodbye.” Elanor added. “And good luck for your future.” She and Luke turned, melting into a rainbow shimmer.

When they arrived back in the other shadow, Anna was saying “...I don’t want to go with you tonight. I want to go home.”

“By tomorrow they may make another attempt to kidnap you.” Palomedes countered.

“Anna,” Luke said, “you won’t be safe away from us until this is dealt with. We should take a look in their basement.”

“Why? I don’t care who is killing vampires. The less there are the better.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you about vampires.” Palomedes commented.

“I’d think that if something doesn’t kill them, they’d gradually replace humans.” Danny commented. “Standard predator prey relationship. There’s lots of prey, so the number of predators explodes until they decimate the prey. Once the prey population crashes the predator population follows. Just how immortal are vampires?”

“They can last a long time, depending on how much energy they have. But they could over-run humanity before they die.”

“Before vampires were legal,” Anna commented, “I’d do things like stake new vampires when I could find them.”

“Everything dies, even immortals.” Luke commented. “It’s the natural order of things. The basement contains some unnatural things - this brood has been experimenting with sorcery.”

Palomedes smiled a wolfish grin. “Well dad, if you think we should take a look, let’s do it.”

“You’re father and son?” Anna was looking from one to the other.

“A few thousand years ago.” Luke said dismissively. “He only calls me that when he thinks I’m bossing him around.”

“Which you do often.”

“It’s not you, I do that to everyone.” Luke countered with a smile.

“All right. Can we get to the basement from the parking garage?”

“Yes, it’s at the back of the first level, and the whole of the next.”

“Then follow me.” Palomedes leaped off the branch, landing on another about five meters below. He ran along, that, then leaped again to a branch about seven meters lower and about as far away.

“Yeah, right.” Anna commented.

“Luke can’t be his father,” Liz joked, “It must be the Monkey King!”

“You should always keep your sense of play.” Luke chuckled. “Otherwise you become old.” He plucked a rolled up rug from mid-air and unrolled it.” Everyone step aboard please.”

“What?” Anna asked.

“Flying carpet.” Danny replied.

“Danny and I were thinking of that.” Nalini added.

“It’s much more convenient than trying to levitate everybody.” Danny finished.

“Exactly.” Luke added. “Don’t stand too close to the edges. Ready?” The vampire followed the others onto the rug.

“What are you doing here?” Anna asked him. The vampire gave her a blank look.

“He’s under my control.” Luke explained. “He won’t cause any trouble.”

With that the carpet rose smoothly into the air. It flew in the general direction that Palomedes had taken, and then through a rainbow shimmer. They were floating a few inches above the floor of a parking garage. There was space for about thirty cars, around half were taken. The fluorescent lights were brighter than the forest they had left.

Palomedes was standing near by. “What kept you?” he grinned.

“I had to find a suitable rug. The door’s over there, climb aboard.”

The rug floated over to the heavily padlocked door. “Do one of you have lock picks?” Anna asked. “I left mine at home.”

“We don’t need them.” Palomedes smirked.

“You can unlock any lock by magic.” Luke explained. “But for a shadow shifter it is simpler to go around.”

As they neared the door there was a rainbow shimmer, and they found themselves floating under a pale green sky with fluffy yellow clouds, lit by a greenish sun. Beneath them was a Martian landscape of reddish sand, soil and weathered rocks.

“Where are we?” Anna asked.

“Congruent with the parking garage.” Luke replied. “I’m not sure if this place has a name, I don’t think there’s any inhabitants to name it.”

The rug floated forward about three meters and there was another rainbow shimmer. They were back in the parking garage, but on the other side of the door. Near the far wall was the ramp leading down to the lower level. Most of the area was packed with benches, and those benches had people sitting on them.

“Anna, what do you notice about these people?” Luke alighted from the rug and walked towards the benches. Everyone else followed him.

“They are sitting unnaturally still, and staring fixedly at us. Their eyes follow us, but their heads don’t turn. What are they? Are they under control?”

“Anyone else?”

To Elanor the people looked like typical poor in any western country. She switched to her sorcerous sight just as Liz announced “Their auras are weird. They don’t look human. Well most of them don’t. I can see a few that do look human.”

“Very good. What do think that means?”

“Erm, they don’t have human souls?”

“Correct. Give Liz a prize.” Luke smiled. “These are all dead bodies, reanimated by sorcery before they start to decay. Each one has a controlling spirit. Most of those are non corporeal, meaning they don’t normally have bodies. You’d probably call them devils, as in minor demons, small gods and the like. They’re imprisoned of course. The few humans have died, their souls have been captured at the moment of separation, and then reinserted into their reanimated corpses. Some of those have been allowed to decay slightly first. So you have a human soul imprisoned in its dead body, aware that it is decaying, and controlled.”

Do you mean they’re zombies?” Anna asked.

“In a sense. A real zombie is a live human under complete control. Hollywood style zombies don’t bear much relationship to the real thing. These things are reanimated corpses, with a spirit inside to activate it, controlled by their creator, and each one drawing power to keep them as they are. That requires a really powerful sorcerer. I doubt even Palomedes can do that.”

“No, I’ve been speculating about what manner of being could do this.” Palomedes commented. “We will need Luke to deal with this.”

“What are they for?” Anna asked.

“I think they are an army. Each one is practically immortal, as long as the power and spirit sustains them.”

“How do we deal with them?”

“You don’t. If it weren’t for me they would have torn all of you apart already. But their spirits want to quit the bodies. Let’s see now...”

Lightning bolts sprang from each of the creatures, striking Luke, blinding and deafening in the same instant. Then Luke and the zombies winked out, along with the lightning.

“What happened?” Anna yelled.

There was a rainbow shimmer, and they were standing on the red sand, beneath a green sky. “That would likely have killed us all if Luke hadn’t absorbed it. As Luke said, whoever is behind that is very powerful. We will stay here until he returns.”

“Then just how powerful is Luke?” Anna persisted.

“He keeps the gods honest.” Nalini put in. “Which means he is as powerful as any of them.”

“But this group of vampires have at least one very powerful ally.” Palomedes added. “Ah, ask him yourself.”

Luke appeared. “Well, that was a near thing. They know we’re investigating. They may think it is an immortal.”

“You’re not hurt?” Anna asked.

“No, I’m very hard to kill or injure.”

“What happened to the zombies?”

“Oh, I shut off the flow of power, that was what triggered that strike. Then I released the imprisoned spirits, they’ve gone off to the spirit world, and the bodies are dead and decaying.”

“So the zombie needs a spirit to stop decaying.”

“No, the body needs a spirit and life force, or power, to stop the decay. The power was animating the bodies, and keeping the spirits imprisoned. But the spirits are coordinating the power within the body. For example, you are alive because of the life force, and your soul. Lose the life force, your body dies. Lose your soul, something else can take up residence. Without the soul, the body will sicken and die, and then it decays. Once it starts to decay, it takes much more life force to keep it from decaying further.” Luke waved his hands as he spoke. “Now, there is a gateway of power on the lower level, but I am no longer inclinded to shut it down right now. Instead I think we should pay a friendly visit, through the front door.”

A few minutes later they were standing outside the front door to the converted warehouse complex. The old red brick had been cleaned up, rows of windows and balconies had been installed, and the wide doors had beed replaced by a plush lobby worthy of any upmarket hotel. The area around the factory had been grassed, making a park with ornamental garden beds dotted here and there. Surveillance cameras were in evidence, and a pair of armed guards were walking towards them.

“Machine guns, riot armor and protective helmets.” Danny remarked. “They don’t like visitors.”

“They look like space marines.” Liz chortled.

“I think the intended effect is stormtrooper.” Luke remarked. “Let’s go in before they reach us.”

“I wouldn’t come here alone.” Anna remarked.

“Given what we found in the basement, neither would I.” Palomedes remarked. He walked up the steps. The glass doors opened automatically as they approached, and closed behind them.

“Bullet proof glass.” Danny remarked. “Some of the thickest I’ve seen.”

The lobby floor was marble, there was gilt and polished marble everywhere. “Very seventeenth century France.” Luke remarked. The effect was spoiled by the black armored storm troopers who unslung machine guns, but didn’t say anything, and didn’t obstruct their passage to the reception desk.

“How may I help you?” The young man behind the counter had short blond hair, milk pale skin, and ice cold pale blue eyes. He was wearing a dark red military uniform decorated with gold and polished brass buttons. His mouth smiled a professional smile, his eyes didn’t.

“We’re here to see your master.” Palomedes responded haughtily.

“Really?” His look could have frozen water. “Do you have an appointment?”

“I think so.” Palomedes chuckled. “She sent some goons to collect us, but I’m afraid they’re a little tied up right now, so we came without them.”

“I see. Names please.” He was sizing up Palomedes as if he were planning to eat him, or possibly just use him to wipe the floor.

“I’m the Hunter, this is the Executioner. These two” he indicated Danny and Nalini, “are the God Slayers. This is Wolfsbane,” he indicated Luke, “this is Nightshade,” Elanor, “and this is Bella Donna.” indicating Liz. “And of course you know big Jamie here.” The vampire was standing l9ke a statue.

“I mean your real names.” he said with bored, icy politeness. “And what have you done to Jamie?”

““Your master will know us, even if you don’t. I realise you’re just the himbo who answers the phone, sonny, but do your job and tell her the people she sent for are here.”

Anger flashed across the man’s face. “Take that tone and we’ll throw you out and beat you to death.”

Palomedes laughed sardonically. “Oh so brave with your guards.” Without turning his head he ordered “Guards, shoulder your weapons and stand at attention. Do not move until I tell you to.” The guards all did exactly as they were bid.

“Now, sonny, fancy a little one on one? You and me? You may be a twelve hundred year old vampire, but I have hunted your kind down through the ages, and I know you wouldn’t stand a chance. So do your job and tell your boss we are here.”

The man looked at the frozen guards, and back at Palomedes. Anger dropped from his face like a mask, to be replaced with professional politeness. “Certainly sir, I am forgetting my place.” He picked up a phone, waited several seconds, then announced Palomedes’ party. He listend, then hung up.

“Please take a seat, they’ve gone to inform the master that you’re here. Would you like any refreshments while you wait?”

“No, we have everything we need.”

Luke spoke for the first time. “Tell the guards outside to put their weapons down before they get hurt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh very well.” Luke sighed theatrically. “Shoulder your weapons and enter in single file.”

A dozen black clad guards filed in, machine guns slung at their shoulders.

“Stand there with your comrades.” Palomedes ordered them. “Now, sonny, do you have any more surprises planned?”

The blond vampire shook his head mutely. Luke began whistling, a lively, Irish jig like tune. The vampire, a look of horror on his face, came out from behind his desk and began dancing to the tune. Palomedes tapped his foot in time. “We just need a violin.”

Luke began miming the playing of a violin, Palomedes joined him, and the sound of two Irish fiddles echoed round the room. The guards all laid down their weapons and joined the dancing.

They continued like this for about twelve minutes before the door opened and another vampire appeared. This one seemed about forty, with black hair and a Roman nose.

Palomedes and Luke stopped their music, and the guards stopped dancing. They milled around for a few moments, then formed up on one side of the room. The receptionist looked at Palomedes. “How did you do that?”

“Why are you dancing? Well Olaf?” the newcomer interrupted brusquely.

“They made us, sir.”

“Crap! Well, I want six guards to escort the executioner to the master.” Nobody moved, though Anna looked around.

“We’re all going.” Palo edes explained. “The guards aren’t invited.”

“Guards! You six, step forward!” Again nobody moved.

“Guards.” Palomedes ordered, “on the ground and start doing pushups.” The guards did as they were bid.

A look of anger crossed the newcomer’s face. “What are you doing? And how?”

“I told you the guards aren’t invited. You can escort all of us willingly, or unwillingly. Decide now.”

The man glared at them, then relaxed. “The master says to bring all of you.”

“Good. Guards, stop doing pushups, go and sit down.” Palomedes motioned, and everyone followed him through the door.

“Anna, how old do you think this vampire is?” Palomedes asked.

“I’m not sure. He feels a lot older than the other one, but I’ve not met vampires this old before.”

“Our friend downstairs is about twelve hundred years old, this one is between two thousand three hundred and two thousand four hundred. Am I right?” The vampire ignored him.

“How old were you when you became a vampire?” Again the vampire ignored him. “I can make you tell us.”

“There’s no need.” Luke commented. “Caius Flaccus Scaevola, second son of Flaccus Cassius Skaevola, a proud family that once defied Tarquinius Superbus - Tarquin the Proud. You were born before the Punic wars, saw action in some of them. That makes you a knight of the old republic.”

“Did you know, Anna,” Danny spoke, “that back before Rome had conquered all of Italy, Carthage was a trading power richer than Rome? The Romans fought them for over a hundred years, and during that time they stole the Carthaginians’ knowledge of commercial scale farming, metal working, and many other things. When they finally defeated Carthage they didn’t just sack the city and enslave the population. They massacred the population, enslaved the survivors, and destroyed the city so thoroughly that not one stone stood upon another, and then they ploughed salt into the fields so it would never grow crops again. This was when salt was valuable.”

“Do I detect a trace of bitterness in your voice?” the vampire finally spoke.

“We were there, Roman.” Nalini spoke. “The Roman savages butchered our children, but we managed to get away. We were some of the few who stood on a hill and watched the Roman barbarians as they raped and pillaged and destoyed. They never invented or created anything, they stole their knowledge and art and culture from those they conquered. They even stole their gods from the Greeks. We were there, Roman, we will never forget.”

There was silence for several moments. The vampire looked discomforted, Anna looked at Nalini with disbelief.

Luke broke the silence. “I was there too. I rescued a few people, yourselves included. I gave you the small girl I saved. Remember?”

Nalini and Danny seemed to gaze into the distance. “The Egyptian physician. Yes.”

“And you are wrong about the Romans never inventing anything. They invented the Mafia all by themselves.” That seemed to lighten the mood.

“Now Roman, or Caius, I believe you were twenty three when you became a vampire.”

“Yes, how do you know so much about me?”

“I make it my business to find these things out.”

“Twenty three heya?” Palomedes commented. “Then you have grown to middle age now. Anna, do you see? Vampires are not immortal, they slowly grow older. Some can’t handle growing older, even if it is slowly, knowing that they will die eventually. Others can’t handle the supposed immortality, and die of boredom. Most vampires don’t make it past about one hundred and fifty. If they do they might live thousands of years.”

“If you people claim to have been at the sack of Carthage, you’re all very well preserved.”

“Heh, you have to give up being a vampire and study sorcery instead.” Palomedes commented. “But that’s hard for a vampire. Vampirism gets in the way of sorcery.”

“How much further?” Luke asked.

“There are stairs at the end of this corridor. It is not easy to get to our master’s sanctum. Three flights up, and along another corridor.”

The stairs were an internal fire escape. There were vampire guards at the entrance, and again when they exited into the corridor above. These were dressed similarly to the ones below, except they carried swords at their belts, and short spears. It seemed to Elanor that they were heading back toward the center of the building, where the elevators would normally be. Both corridors were plushly decorated, like an expensive hotel.

“You don’t trust these guards with guns?” Anna asked.

“It is not that. Anyone who gets this far is likely to be bullet proof. Swords and axes do a far better job of killing someone so they stay dead.” Caius replied.

They reached a pair of wood panelled doors with six vampire guards stationed. One guard opened a door, and Caius ushered them inside. There were four more guards inside the door.

The room was quite large, with chairs, lounges and coffee tables scattered around. There were three large flat television screens around the room, all on, with the sound muted. A male vampire was seated in front of one showing a soccer match. A second was showing news, the third a modern film.

An expensively dressed, middle aged, red haired woman was seated in a single lounge chair at the far end of the room, reading a hard cover book. There was some kind of gauzy shimmer about her. Elanor recognised this as sorcery, but couldn’t identify it.

“You may approach.” the woman ordered, putting her book down and closing it on a bookmark. “Kai, please remain with us. Everyone, please take a seat on the lounges. Refreshments will be served shortly. I am lady Athena, you have met Kai. I recognise Anna the executioner, but not the rest of you. None of you appear to be normal humans.”

Palomedes performed the introductions, giving each person their name as well as the titles he had accorded them earlier.

“Danny and Nalini, godslayers. What god have you slain?”

“We’ve slain four. The self styled Angel of Pain, a lesser god, similar to the gods of Ancient Greece.” Danny replied.

“Then there was Agranash, lord of the Seven Darks, one of the Old Gods.” Nalini continued.

“Then there was Yolgotha, the Red Sphinx, who had the misfortune to be enslaved by an immortal. He asked us to kill him to free him from his slavery.” Danny continued. “He was one of the New Gods.”

“And, before the others, the first one of the Ancient gods - the Stealer of Souls.” Nalini finished.

“How many sorts of gods do you distinguish?” Athena asked.

“That’s what Luke told us.”

“There are as many classification schemes as there are religions.” Luke commented. “I classify them roughly according to power, so there are demigods at the bottom, above them lesser gods, then greater gods, then new gods, then old gods, elder gods, then ancient gods, and finally the archetypal beings. Only the new gods and below can take on physical form, the others have to work through intermediaries.”

He’s left most of it out, Elanor thought. But that doesn’t matter to most people.

“What about the ones who need a relic and human assistance?” Athena asked. So she knows something about that, Elanor thought.

“As a general rule those who cannot manifest here without assistance would be old gods and above. They are powers which can be trafficked with. Something you want to avoid lest the power end up causing your ruin, and owning your soul.”

“Hmm.” Athena nodded and dismissed him. “Anna, when you look at me, what do you see? Am I beautiful, am I young?”

“Er, it’s difficult to make out. I think you’re middle aged, but your features are blurred, indistinct.”

So Anna has powers of her of her own, Elanor thought.

“Anyone else? Elanor, what about you?”

“You’re wearing a glamour. All of us can see through that. Underneath you look like you’re middle aged. Sorry.”

“You were young when you became a vampire, weren’t you?” Palomedes asked gently. “How old are you really?”

“I was fifteen. I am originally from the mountains in the north of Greece, I was born a few hundred years before the Trojan wars. How do you people stay so young?”

“So you are something like three thousand years old,” Palomedes mused. “You could live as much again before dying of old age.”

“I do not relish thousands of years of decrepitude! Neither do I wish to die.” Athena yelled.

She is a very old woman who is scared of dying, Elanor thought. Jesus, she’s close to three and a half thousand. How many humans has she killed to live this long? But she’s lost her humanity along the way. Luke’s older, but he still has a human side.

“Are you people as old as you claim? How do you do it?” Athena persisted.

“It’s possible medical treatment will improve sufficiently over the next thousand years.” Palomedes suggested dismissively. “But you should learn to shapeshift, and find a source of power that is not living beings.”

“And not one you traffic with.” Luke commented. “Every living thing dies. Even the stars and planets die. Your physical body cannot live for ever, no matter what you wish. And you have killed well over a million humans to live this long.”

“And who are you, Luke Wolfsbane, to lecture me?” Athena snapped back.

“I do not kill humans to stay alive. You would know of me as Apollo Leukeios”. Luke switched to a foreign language, one Elanor didn’t understand, but at the same time, she heard Luke in English in her mind. From the looks of the others, they understood as well, including Anna. “Leukeios can mean both light bearer and wolfsbane. The shepherds set up shrines, as you would remember.”

Athena looked at Luke with an expression of disbelief. “You speak the ancient language of my people, I have not heard that for thousands of years. Apollo Leukeios, the light that keeps the darkness at bay, the light that keeps the wolves at bay. What brings you here?” She was suddenly polite.

“I came because Anna asked me. I came to keep the wolves at bay. I have yet to decide if you are one of the wolves. You tried to kidnap Anna, now you can tell us why.”

“She’s definitely one of the wolves!” Anna spoke angrily. “She kills humans to stay alive! You’re no better than Genghis Khan or Hitler.”

“I kill to live. They killed for profit and pleasure.” Athena spoke archly. “There is a difference, child.”

“Wolves kill to live.” Luke put in. “It’s part of the natural order of things. Hitler and Genghis were lesser demons incarnate. A number of human leaders have demon souls. Any spirit can incarnate if it wants, and be born in the usual way. But why do you want Anna? Answer me.”

Athena shuddered. “You would compell me, Apollo? That doesn’t work on me.”

“If you want Anna’s help, you need our help. So you will tell us why you want Anna.”

Athena’s face went blank for a moment, then she smiled. “The refreshments are here.”

Two young vampires entered, one bearing a tray containing cups, saucers, milk, sugar and three large pots. The other bore a tray containing two plates of an assortment of home made shortbreads and baklavas. “There is coffee or tea, hot water if it is too strong, and milk if you need.”

“Black coffee, one sugar, please.” Luke responded. “And I’ll have some of those dainties.” Elanor assumed this was a polite way of saying the refreshments were safe to eat and drink. Everyone followed his lead.

When everyone was served, Athena sat back with a smug smile and announced “I have decided to be frank with you. Most of my family have been with me for over a thousand years, and some more than two thousand years. We are family. I love them all, and they all love me. But every week for the last five weeks, one of me family has been killed. Never a young vampire, always one of the older ones. Last week it was Athelstane, one of my favorites. If the killer follows the pattern, there will be another vampire killed tomorrow.” Her smile faltered.

She had been looking at Luke, but Palomedes responded. “There have been five deaths then? Each one a week apart? Where was each one killed?”

“The first three were killed in the docks area not far from here.” Anna answered when Athena hesitated. “The fourth was killed on the street behind here, the last one was killed in the parking garage. In each case the bodies had been torn apart while they were alive. It looked as if some wild beast had killed them, then eaten part of each body. The skulls were broken and the brains gone, alone with hearts, livers, some of the muscles on arms and legs, and the shin bones had been broken open for the marrow. I read the police reports.”

“You killed them!” Athena screamed. “How else would you know these things!”

“A vampire is much stronger than any human.” Palomedes put it. “I doubt a lion or even a gorilla could tear one apart. It’s beyond Anna. Is there anything else?”

“In each case the fresh blood had been used to mark a magic circle about the remains. The police asked me to try to contact their spirits, but I was unable to.”

“Their shades are beyond the reach of your Christian or Satanic magic. Vampires belong to the old gods, though Apollo Leukeios may use a different label.” Athena spat. “I still think you had a hand in their deaths, bitch.”

“They were all ancient vampires, strong in power. The oldest vampire I have killed was a mere three hundred and fifty, and I barely survived. I had help, but I carry the scars to this day.”

Anna unbuttoned her blouse, removed it. Her arms and torso were a mass of pink scars, ragged parallel lines like knife cuts, or perhaps teeth and claws. She put the blouse back on. “I had plastic surgery on my face, but that was only knife cuts - they heal clearly. Vampire bites don’t. I had nothing to do with the murders, but if I cannot contact their spirits there isn’t much more I can do.”

“It’s a pity one of them didn’t finish the job, Executioner.” Athena snapped.

“Don’t threaten me, Athena.” Anna said coldly. “I am a fighter and a surviver.”

“Get out of here!” Athena shouted.

“SILENCE!” Palomedes thundered. “Sit down, Athena!”

Athena shut up and sat down angrily, glowering.

“I want to go home now.” Anna demanded.

“In a few moments.” Palomedes replied. “Athena, when will the next attempt be made to kill one of your people?”

“Tomorrow evening, after dark, but before midnight.”

“Then I suggest you keep all your family here tomorrow. Luke and I will return before sunset. Perhaps we can put a stop to this then.”

“How dare you order me about!” Athena flew at Palomedes, fingers extended. Claws appeared on the end of each finger.

Palomedes stood his ground, and a golden nimbus shimmered around him. Anna took two steps away from him, drawing a gun. Shimmering glows sprang up around Danny, Nalini and Liz as they activated their own shield spells. Elanor whipped an arnate chopstick from her hair and tapped it against her palm, activating a shield spell of her own. She felt a slight prickling across her chest and arms. Luke didn’t move, but then he was in no danger. That left Anna as the most vulnerable person.

Athena raked Palomedes with her claws, screaming in pain as they struck his shield. She staggered back, conjuring up a basket ball size sphere of bluish energy and cast it at Palomedes. It struck his shield where it flared and faded.

“Is that the best you can do, vampire?” Palomedes taunted her.

Athena screamed in rage, conjuring a lightning bolt from between her hands. It struck Palomedes hard enough that he staggered under the onslaught, but still he refrained from retaliating.

“Can’t touch a mere human sorcerer! You’re weak vampire!”

Athena conjured two balls of energy, one with each hand, and cast them at Palomedes.One struck him, causing him to stagger, the other sailed past and struck the wall, exploding like a bomb.

Elanor ducked instinctively, though her shield spell protected her, making the explosion like a move - sound and visual, but no substance. As the smoke and dust cleared she noticed that Danny, Nalini and Liz had all ducked. Anna was standing beside Luke, surrounded in a protective shimmer, her gun back in her holster.

Part of the wall was missing, along with part of the ceiling, but there didn’t seem to be enough debris.

Athena had been thrown half across the room, and was bleeding from several cuts. As she got to her feet the cuts were visibly healing. The guards were lowering their guns, standing quietly in their positions.

“Guards! Do something!”

“They can’t obey you until I release them.” Palomedes explained. “Still think you can kill me?” He raised his right hand, showing a basket ball sized sphere of glowing energy. “Fireballs are so primitive. Raw power and nothing else. Anybody with a little power can do them.” The globe shrank to the size of a tennis ball, and changed color to bluish green.

Palomedes tossed it in Athena’s direction. She ran, screaming, but it followed her, striking her in the back as she twisted. With a shriek her form shimmered, and a large ugly toad sat there, blinking at them.

“Much better. I think I’ll leave you like that. I’ll be back before sunset. Do not leave this room!”

The toad uttered an angry croak, but didn’t manage anything resembling words.

Palomedes turned to the vampire who had been watching television. “Your master is indisposed. You will not tell anyone what has happened. You will provide her with water and some morsels of raw meat. You will also see that everyone is within this building before nightfall. We’ll be back before sunset tomorrow to see if we can catch whatever is killing you vampires. Now see to it.”

“Is that all?” he replied. “Is her Ladyship still aware in a human fashion?”

“I believe so. There’s not a lot of point to turning someone into a toad unless they are fully aware of what happened. We’ll be leaving now.”

Palomedes gathered everyone by eye, and then walked to the door. “Guards, nothing untoward has happened here. Now let us out and resume your normal duties. Caius, you won’t mention this to anyone, but you’ll help what’s his name over there if he needs help. We’ll find our own way out.”

Palomedes led the others silently to the entrance, and out into the garden in front. They walked through the gates and down the road. There were few people about. Once they reached the boundary of the property Palomedes shifted them to a busier street, thronged with people and lined with cafes, several night clubs, and a few shuttered shops.

“We can talk now.” Palomedes commented. “Anyone fancy a drink or a bite to eat?”

Elanor smiled. “Something to eat sounds good, along with a stiff drink.” There were nods from several others.

“We will be going home soon?” Anna asked.

“Of course. We won’t be long here.”

They sat and placed their orders. With the exception of Anna, who only ordered fruit juice, everyone else ordered food.

“How did you turn her into a toad? And where’s all the extra mass gone? And what was that glowing thing around us?” Anna’s words came out in a rush.

“Sorcery.” Luke responded. “Something you could learn, Anna. That’s why the rest of us are hungry. Use sorcery and you consume energy, which your body needs to replace.

“The glowing globes and lightning were raw power, something Athena seems to have in abundance. She is untutored though, which is just as well, she could be a very powerful sorcerer with training.

“Transforming her into a toad is simple shape shifting, though in this case imposed by Palomedes’ power. Shapeshifting is not about physically rearranging your body features - that would prove fatal. The physical body is like a projection of the spirit, so if you change the projection you change the appearance, and the mass.” Anna looked disbelieving.

“It may seem to violate the principal of conservation of mass energy, but there is a spirit realm equivalent that absorbs or releases it. If matter is ice, and energy is water, then the spirit realm is steam or gas.

“And the glowing thing is a shield. It stops things like bullets, knives and punches, but you can still touch things. The drawback is that a slow blade can enter.”

“Oh yes, Palomedes explained that earlier. Where do you get the power for all that?”

The food arrived, and they started eating. Luke smiled at his food. ““Some of our energy comes from this. But every living being channels energy from the spirit realm. With training you can widen the channel, and do more with that energy. Make yourself young, shapeshift, shadow walk, or many other things. Vampires generally don’t widen those channels, they suck what they can from others.”

Palomedes swallowed, and added “Athena has far too much power for a vampire. She’s found a source of power she can use. Trafficking, we call it, as opposed to channelling. She shouldn’t be able to throw power about like that.”

“Trafficking? Like selling drugs?”

“Or souls, or slaves. A power you can traffic with is sentient and intelligent. It will demand a price for it’s power.”

“And fail you when you least expect it.” Luke added. “Most of those powers are some form of god, though you would probably call them demons. They are almost always inimical to free will, and life in general.”

“Oh! I stay away from things like that. I’m not even sure I believe in them. Why did she attack Palomedes like that?”

“Your Christian world view may not be a correct theory, but it serves well enough to guide you, and steer you away from evil. Every culture has its demons.” Luke replied. “Palomedes and I can smell the taint of demon on her, and we were provoking her. She was about to summon her power when Palomedes thwarted her by turning her into a toad. That is the real reason he and I will return there in the evening.”

“Should I come along with you? I won’t be able to do much, but I’m curious about what can kill really old vampires so easily.”

“Once it has killed her family, it will kill her, and then it will be free to prey on the general population.” Luke looked at her solemnly. “If I am right, it will lay waste to the earth, sterilizing it of all life. I intend to stop it.”

“Are you serious? And are you that powerful?”

“I am serious, but I will know more tomorrow. As we’ve said, I am someone who keeps the gods honest. I am something like a trouble shooter.”

“I thought a demon would vanish when you killed whoever summoned it.”

“No, that’s curses and magic spells, where the sorcerer is the one empowering them. Whoever summons a power is the only one who can control it. Once the summoner is dead, the power has a free hand.” Luke paused for emphasis. “That was the real story behind Faust, the reality of Faust’s bargain. He summoned the demon, he received what he asked for, and that lasted twenty years until the demon managed to get him killed. Then the demon went on a rampage. Usually someone like me is waiting for it, and stops it.” Luke shrugged, and returned to eating.

Palomedes turned to her. “Anna, would you be able to try raising the shades of the dead vampires again? With our help you might gain some useful information.”

“When, Palomedes? I’m rather tired tonight.”

“Tomorrow afternoon?”

“I can’t summon the dead in daylight!”

“That’s what you think. You’ll find out different.” Palomedes smiled and returned to eating. “Besides, Luke and I will be there to help if you need any.”

Anna snorted, then nodded. “Okay, I’ll see if I can get access to their personal effects that are being held as evidence. How do I get in touch with you?”

Palomedes looked at Luke. Luke stretched out his hand. “Give me your phone please.”

Anna handed it over, expecting him to enter a number. Instead, Luke held it for a moment, nodded, and handed it back. “It’s under L for Lukeios.”

Anna checked, then asked “How did you do that? I didn’t see you type anything.”

“I’m a sorcerer, remember?” Luke grinned. “Now everyone, eat up, this young lady has to get her beauty sleep.”

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A small group of people gathered in a vacant lot at the back of a disused warehouse. Anna was there in her official capacity, along with Luke and his group, D.I. Murrey Stone, a heavyset man in his mid forties, his sandy hair thinning, and two uniformed police officers.

Anna would have preferred the cemetery, where she usually performed her rituals to raise the dead, but during daylight there were too many people around. The detective hadn’t been comfortable with Luke’s party being there, but once Luke shook his hand, he’d not only acquiesced, but was showing signs of respect.

Anna marked out the boundaries of a large circle with a length of rope and set about consecrating the area. Palomedes walked to a pile of things near the warehouse and wheeled over a wheelbarrow full of fragrant wood. Luke laid a fire, but did not light it.

Danny, Nalini and Elanor went to where Palomedes had obtained the wheelbarrow, and dragged back a cart with a large block of stone on it. It was heavy, and hard work for the three of them. Palomedes grasped the stone block and lifted it easily, to the surprise of the detective and the police. “Your friend must be a vampire to be that strong.”

“No, I just work out.” Palomedes replied as he gently placed the block between the circle and the pile of wood.

“Okay, we’re ready. Detective, would you place the items on the stone. Luke, could you please start the fire? Everyone else, into the circle through the gap in the rope.” The detective opened a small suitcase and took out a number of items in plastic bags, each with an identifying tag. He arranged them on the stone slab. Luke took a wooden torch from the cart, lit the flammable end of it, then thrust it into the wood pile. Within a minute the wood caught, burning with sweet smelling smoke.

Luke was the last one through the gap in the circle. Once inside he closed the gap. Anna was about to close the circle magically when a tingling sensation told her he’d done it. She felt a rush of power flowing through her, far stronger than she’d ever felt before. Luke had promised to loan her some of his power.

“Normally I would sacrifice a chicken at this point,” Anna remarked. “but today there is more than enough power within the circle.”

“My skin is pricking.” detective Stone remarked. “I presume that’s due to the power you are talking about.”

“Correct.” Palomedes commented. “We are adding our own powers. But it’s best not to talk.”

Anna performed her summoning ritual. If everything worked, the spirit would appear in the smoke, and the bystanders would be able to hear it speak. She felt power coursing up and down her spine. As she raised her arms in the final part of the summoning, power tingled down her arms, and it felt as if a light switched on in her head.

Everything around her changed. Every person in the circle was surrounded by a coloured aura. Luke had warned her this would happen. She looked around, realising there were a lot of odd shaped beings hovering around the outside of the circle. Most were balls of swirling colours, several had a cloudy resemblance to a human form, and there were several stranger ones. One was a bright blue flickering flame, one looked like a purple and red sea urchin about the size of a barrel, and three looked like featureless pillars three meters tall, one black, one white, and one gunmetal.

“Spirit beings.” Luke’s voice said in her head. “They are all around us all the time, but normally we can’t see them. The gunmetal pillar is a guide, they are very knowledgeable. Ah, here come our souls. It’s your show.”

Anna wondered what the others saw. The detective was looking around as if he could also see the spirit beings; Luke’s party she was sure could see everything she could see. A party of seven human looking spirits had appeared, two clad in white suits, both with androgenous faces, one coal black, the other alabaster white. “Angels.” Luke’s voice said. The other five had the look of spectral vampires, dressed in old fashioned black suits like undertakers. They were looking around.

“Spirits beings and spirits of the dead, I welcome you.” Anna spoke. “I have summoned you here to ask five deceased humans how they died. Could the five of you form into an orderly line, and the first to speak please enter the smoke.”

A blond haired man entered the smoke. He seemed in his early thirties. “The angels said the smoke will help us talk with the living. Can you hear me?” Anna was surprised that his voice sounded like any living person, and not the thin, reedy voice she usually associated with spirits in smoke.

The two policemen were staring at the smoke. Anna replied “I think we can all hear you and see you. Is there anyone who can’t see the spirit in the smoke?”

“All of us can see you and hear you.” Luke supplied after a moment’s silence.

“Thank you. Spirit, what name were you known by while you were alive? Can you tell us how you died?”

“I am Athelstane. I was a Saxon knight, you may be aware I’ve been a vampire for more than a thousand years. I didn’t think anything could kill me.”

He chuckled. “I’ve run at machine guns and killed the gunners. I’ve been blown up by bombs during the London blitz. I’ve killed wild bears with my bare hands!”

He paused, looking around the group. “I was in our parking garage, I needed one of our cars. Something attacked me from behind. It had long talons, fangs, and its skin was like a suit of armour. It was much bigger than me, and so strong! I could not break its grip, though I tried with all my strength. Instead it gripped my upper arms and pulled until it to my arms off. I fell to the ground, tried to run and lost my balance. It sprang and bit me, almost biting me in half. It must have cut my spine, because I could not feel anything below my chest. Then it turned me on my back, ripped out my heart, lungs and intestines and ate them. I kept losing consciousness and recovering. Then it drained me of my power, and I died. I floated over my body and watched while it ate parts of my body. Then death came for me, and led me to purgatory, where I’ve been.”

“Death came for you?” The detective exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

Athelstane appeared amused. “Skeletal fellow, wears a black cassock and carries a scythe. I was floating there watching this thing eat my body, when Death appeared. He didn’t say anything, he just stood beside me in mid air and watched. Finally he said “Messy way to go, but I suppose it was fairly quick.” Then I said “It was a bit of a surprise. I wasn’t expecting you to show up though.” Then he said “You know why I’m here. Who were you expecting?” Then I told him I thought I was damned so I was expecting the devil. Then he told me that while I had done much that was evil, my heart wasn’t evil, so he was taking me to purgatory so I could work off my sins.”

Anna looked at Palomedes with an incredulous look. The detective used the pause to ask another question. “So what’s it like being dead?”

“It doesn’t feel much different from being alive. I have to attend classes and things, but they told me I’d be reborn many times because I’d need them to atone for all my sins. We all have the same deal, we’re all pretty chuffed about that. We have our chance at salvation.”

“I guess that’s something to be excited about.” the detective continued. “Can you describe the creature that killed you?”

“I would have said it was a demon, because when it finished eating it simply vanished. It was big and powerful, reminded me a little of a gorilla. It had short legs and long arms. Its akin felt like wood or metal, but it might have been wearing armour. It was dark, almost black, but there were red gleams where the light reflected. It had some sort of harness about its body - I could see buckles and straps. There were short horns on its head, and maybe a crest. No tail though.”

“Athelstane, I’m Palomedes. We’re going to try to catch your killer. Can you tell us what’s in the parking garage? It has several levels, but access to them is blocked by a wall.”

“I know what you mean. That area is off limits except for the Master and her trusted few.”

“Can you name them? Have you heard any rumours of what’s behind the wall?”

“I’ve heard it’s a dungeon, where she keeps her new playthings. A few she turns into vampires. The rest would die.”

“Is she that powerful? That would be beyond someone your age, or even a thousand years older.”

“She made me vampire a thousand years ago. She has the power, but I don’t know where she got that. I think she is the only one in our family that has the power.”

“Yes, a godlike being makes the first vampire, or the first few, in a family. Only those ones have the power to make others. Who are her inner circle?”

“Kai, or Caius, who dates from the early years of the Roman Republic, Patrocles, who claims to have fought in the Trojan wars, Aineios, who claims to have fled the sacking of Troy, and was one of the founders of Rome, and Apollyon, who is the Master’s lover, and is as old as the master.”

“Let’s see, the Trojan war was about three thousand one hundred years ago. We are dealing with some really powerful vampires here. None of them have been targeted by this demon?”

“No, we’re all the oldest of the outer circle.”

After a few more questions Anna thanked the spirit and asked another to enter the smoke. The others told very similar stories to Athelstane.

After Anna had bade the spirits depart and closed the circle, the Detective asked “Where could you hide a beast like that?”

“It’s no beast,” Palomedes responded, “it’s at least as intelligent as you or I.”

“Do you think she’s hiding it under the parking garage?” Anna asked.

“We need to have a look.” Luke replied.

“I might not be able to obtain a search warrant until tomorrow.” the detective cautioned.

“We’re going back tonight.” Palomedes replied. “We won’t need a search warrant, she’s expecting us.”

The detective sighed. “Then I had better go with you.”

“There’s no need.” Palomedes countered.

“You’re not police, I am. I need to close this case, so I need to go with you.”

“One more mortal to protect.” Luke smiled at Palomedes.

“All right, but you’ll need to do as you’re told. She’s very dangerous. Anna, you can fill the detective in on where we’re meeting.” Palomedes said.

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The sun was setting, but the drop in temperature meant the humidity was worse. They were a large group now, ten in all, since the detective had brought the two police officers. Palomedes buzzed the gate intercom. “Palomedes here to see the Master. She’s expecting us.”

“Enter.” There was a click and the gate swung ponderously open. Two black clad guards were waiting for them, machine guns slung over their shoulders. One motioned them towards the entrance foyer, then they fell in on either side of the party.

“Private army?” the detective sneered. “Molesworth, make a note to check their employee list and firearms licenses.” One of the policemen scribbled in his notebook.

Caius was waiting for them. “We cannot locate Godric or Wulfric. Everyone else is accounted for.”

“They are safe.” Luke replied. “They requested asylum, my people are looking after them. Now, order all the guards indoors. I can’t protect them if they are outside.”

“Very well.” Caius issued orders. “Is your entire party going to visit the master?”

“Yes, the police want to close this case, they would be in danger away from us. Shall we go?”

They were ushered into the same room as last time. Athena was there in human form. “I thought you turned her ...” Anna began.

“Yes,” Palomedes cut her off. “She reverted during the night. I expected that, it’s her most stable form. Any were creature does the same.” As agreed, he walked to the front of the group, with the others a couple of paces behind him.

Caius introduced them to the three other vampires there, Patrocles, Aineios and Apollyon. Patrocles was short, thin, wiry with classic Greek features and red hair. He was wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans and was barefoot. Aineios had dark eyes and dark curly hair, blue jeans and a black t-shirt, and was also short, thin and wiry. The two moved to Palomedes’ left.

Apollyon was taller, with saturnine features and a tidy beard. His eyes were like chips of obsidian. He was dressed in cream slacks and a blue shirt. His head was shaven. Everything about him said killer. He moved to Palomedes’ right.

“Ah, the inner circle, the vampire makers.” Palomedes smiled. He nodded to Apollyon. “In Greek your name means Destroyer.” Luke moved away from the group, and began examining some ornaments on a nearby shelf.

“Yes, mortal. Fear me. In ancient Hebrew I am Abaddon, angel of destruction.” A wave of fear spread through the room, but their shields stopped all but a taint of it.

“This is how vampires control ordinary humans.” Palomedes commented to the others. “Except it doesn’t work with us.”

“Athena said you are a sorcerer, and very difficult to kill.”

“She could be right...”

“She is right here in front of you!” Athena screamed, leaping from her chair four or five meters to land in front of him. “You deserve to die for the insult alone!”

The three male vampires attacked him without warning, coming up against his shield and rebounding. Athena hit him with some sort of lightning bolt, then Patrocles and Aineios joined in. Palomedes staggered then fell to his knees. Apollyon moved so swiftly he blurred, then froze behind Palomedes as his left hand, bearing a silver blade, moved slowly enough to pass unimpeded through Palomedes’ shield, stabbing him in the back.

Luke made an urgent hand signal, checking Danny and Nalini as they surged forward. Palomedes yelled “Is that the best you can do?”

Apollyon’s right hand passed through Palomedes’ shield, and his other blade sliced Palomedes’ head off. His left hand sawed the other blade back and forth, cutting through Palomedes’ spine. There was a corona discharge of energy, throwing Apollyon, Patrocles, Aineios and Athena several meters. Palomedes’ form shimmered briefly, and he stood whole before them. “Not good enough, I’m afraid. Rat!” Apollyon’s own form shimmered, and a moment later he was a black rat scurrying about the floor. “Kitten!” Patrocles’ form shimmered and a small black and white kitten sat on the floor in his place.

“Why won’t you die?” Athena screamed.

“Nothing mortal can kill me. Puppy!” Aineios shimmered and a small brown puppy stood there, tongue lolling.

“Blood and souls Mordialok! We have found our immortal!”

Imagine the world is a bell, and you strike it, causing it to ring a note you cannot hear, a note that is fear and terror and black despair. A note that is vast and powerful and makes you feel small and insignificant, and note that washes the colour out of the world. Something vast and ancient squeezed its way into a world too small for it, folding itself down so that it did fit. A being that looked like burnished midnight stood behind Palomedes, fangs and talons and a reddish glint where the light caught it.

Palomedes leaped aside, the being leaped at where he was leaping to, while Danny and Nalini shimmered into the forms Anna had seen before. “Stay!” the being commanded, and everyone except Luke stopped moving. Then Danny and Nalini stretched, moving behind the being while Luke moved in front. There was a blade in Danny’s hand and a ring on Nalini’s finger and an aura of power about both. Palomedes moved again, putting himself behind Athena, who was stationery.

“We have four immortals.” Mordialok’s head swung as if sniffing the air. “No, one immortal, and three who are...” His form flickered with rainbow light.

“Stay!” Luke commanded, and Mordialok’s form solidified.

Mordialok sniffed the air again. “The Eagle’s gifts, the Godslayers, and Morning Star. I have no quarrel with any of you.”

“But we have a quarrel with you.” Luke replied. “The shadows are straining under your weight.” A silver sphere the size of a ball bearing appeared in his right hand.

Mordialok glanced at the sphere, which was swelling, then glanced around. “Straining perhaps, but nowhere near breaking point. And don’t think to threaten me, I’m as powerful as you. You’re just a lackey.”

Luke smiled. “Then leave, if you can. Lackey? No, I am one of those who keep the gods honest. When gods meddle in the affairs of mortals there is no justice, but there’s just us, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Gods do as they please because they have power. That’s the natural order of things. Don’t lecture me!”

“You know you cannot fight all of us and survive. But right now I am interested in an artefact, one that allows you to take substance here.”

The silver sphere was nearly the size of a basketball. Luke tossed it at Mordialok, who made a warding gesture.

A wind blew away the world, or at least turned it inside out. Anna would have screamed if she had a mouth. It was like a bad dream, with a sickening feeling of falling, combined with no other bodily sensations, no sight not sound. Then with a wrench she was tumbling in a kaleidoscope of swirling colours, trapped in some thunderstorm of light, with three hundred and sixty degree vision.

An electric shock ran through her, and with that her body returned. She was floating inside some kind of bubble, along side Elanor, Liz and Palomedes. Outside was swirling colors, shapes and random sounds. It wasn’t just thunder, there were snatches of music, bells, animal noises, screams and babbling voices. Her companions seemed hyperreal - she could see every pore and hair on their skins.

“Where are we? What’s happened? Where are the others?”

“Beyond the fields you know.” Palomedes stated solemnly. “Beyond even those I know.”

Anna looked at him in puzzlement. “What are you talking about?”

Palomedes looked worried. “We are so far that I cannot find where we came from, I cannot bring us home. I was just explaining to the others, we are no longer in the physical realm, we are no longer in any of the shadows of the archetype. I don’t know where we are, but outside this bubble is some sort of primordial stuff from which the physical realm was created. Our entire physical realm, all the infinite shadows, is strung like a curtain between the pillars of Order and Chaos. Outside of that, is the black nothing of order, and the white nothing of chaos. Outside that is the emptiness, the eternal nothing. We are creating that maelstrom outside, because we are a mixture of order and chaos. We are somewhere outside the realm of Order and Chaos, somewhere in the wastes of nothing behind the shadows.”

Anna looked at Liz and Elanor, floating nearby, their heads pointing in different directions, like astronauts in the space station. “Do either of you understand what he’s saying? What happened, where are we?”

“Honey, we’re somewhere outside the universe.” Elanor explained. “Luke spun that bubble we’re in, to keep us safe. The vampires are in another bubble somewhere. Luke, Danny, Nalini are out there somewhere battling that power that Athena summoned. The power of beings like what’s his name are limited in the physical realm. He didn’t want Luke to banish him, so he jumped outside the universe, and we were all dragged along. He can use his full powers now, but so can Luke, and Danny and Nalini. That’s putting things in human terms, it isn’t strictly correct.”

“So why is Palomedes so funny?”

“He’s not used to human restrictions. It scares him.”

“I’m not scared, just shocked!” Palomedes retorted. “I feel helpless.”

“He’s just a big baby.” Elanor quipped.

“Then what’s so special about Luke, Danny and Nalini?” Anna continued. “Why are they out battling that creature?”

“That creature is some sort of power. So is Luke. The difference is that Luke has the interests of mortals at heart, most powers see mortals as toys. I’m not sure about Danny and Nalini. Either they are powers in their own right, or those artefacts, the dagger and the ring, the Eagle’s Gifts, are actually powers, and they make use of Danny and Nalini. They both claim they were born human though.”

Palomedes added “I’d vote for the second. They told me it’s as if something peers through them, and if they invite it, it takes over for a time. The first time I met them, they had to rescue someone’s spirit from one of the hells. They brought her back, that’s not something I could do. They’re helping Luke, which implies he thinks he needs help.”

This was all too much for Anna. She fastened on one aspect. “I thought powers had to be summoned through magic, and were confined to circles of containment.”

“Yes, that’s how your modern magicians think, because they regard all powers as demonic. Older ones didn’t think that way - they weren’t summoning demons that would harm them, but gods who would help them if they bribed them. The gods might be capricious, but they wouldn’t hurt the summoner.” Palomedes explained.

“In this case, Luke thinks there is an artefact that enables the god to appear when Athena summons, with all his powers. You must have felt him squeezing himself into existence. He can’t do that without some specially made artefact.”

“What do you mean by an artefact?”

“Often it’s more like a relic - you know - the sacred tooth, the sacred finger bone, or toenail clipping. Sometimes it’s the god’s heart or eye or blood, in which case it isn’t really, but something made to resemble that. Surely you’ve heard of things like the heart of Ahriman, the hand of Nergal, the eye of Horus? They’re all artefacts. They allow a Power to bring their powers with them. Destroy the artefact, and you banish the god. If they want a physical form, they have to be born, just like the rest of us.”

“We’re stuck here, aren’t we? What are we going to do?”

“Wait. Just wait. Luke or one of his friends will be along in due course.”

“How long could that be?”

“Don’t worry. We won’t get hungry, or thirsty, or even need to use the toilet. We’re not physical, we only seem like that!” Palomedes laughed. “But there’s really nothing we can do about our predicament at present.”

Shapes loomed outside their bubble from time to time. Mostly they were vague, dreamlike things, but sometimes there were faces with eyes that looked in. Palomedes dismissed them as “imagination due to the human propensity to see human faces. You can see them in clouds too.”

Twice they had the impression of something vast moving nearby, and once something jewelled and armoured, insect like with dragon fly wings, peered in at them.

They talked desultorily, passing the time with details of their past. Luke seemed to be a common thread - Elanor and Palomedes had met Danny and Nalini through Luke, but Liz had known them for years. Luke had introduced Liz and Palomedes, Luke had saved Elanor on several occasions before they’d come to know each other. Time dragged.

Eventually a raven tapped on the outside. Anna was surprised when Elanor announced “Mifunwi’s here. We’ll be back home soon.”

“That crow out there?”

“Mifunwi is Luke’s sister, she’s the Raven Queen. She gave me her medallion many years ago, before I met Luke. The ravens are her eyes and ears.”

For a few moments nothing happened, then with a swirl of colour, and a bodiless sensation of falling, the world turned inside out again. An electric shock, and they had bodies again, and the world poured back. They were standing on pinkish gravel beside a burbling brook, surrounding by soaring leafy trees. Brightly coloured birds darted here and there. The break in the canopy afforded by the stream showed them a green tinged sky. A fifth person stood nearby - a tall female with green eyes, milk pale skin and long dark hair in nine braids, twined with silver, and each one ending with a black feather. She was dressed in a flowing white dress, belted about with a black and silver cord, and sandals. She looked young, no more than mid twenties.

“Hey Mifunwi! Good to see you!” Palomedes exclaimed.

“Hi Mifunwi. Where’s Luke?” Elanor added.

“Hi everyone. Luke is keeping a power busy. Elanor, I’m glad you still wear my medallion, it makes it easy for me to find you.” Mifunwi hugged Elanor.

Then she turned to look at Anna. “Ah, the vampire slayer and shaman. I am Mifunwi, the Raven Queen, or the Morriganu - the Queen of Terror. Lukeios keeps the gods honest, I give them reason to fear.” She spoiled the severe look with a smile. “I would love to sit and chat, but we have work to do. There is an artefact I must destroy.”

“My name’s Anna. I’m not a shaman.”

“No? You talk with spirits but you are not a medium. You claim to raise the dead for a living - that makes you a shaman. Now, follow me, and use your sorcerous sight. We are seeking a power object, one a god uses to manifest here. Lukeios told you it must be destroyed before his summoner dies, or the god is free to do as he pleases.”

Mifunwi led the others forward. There was a rainbow shimmer and they in the back of the parking garage, behind the wall, in the section where where the captives had been held. Anna mentioned that.

“The god needs the life energy to maintain his presence here, like a vampire. They were his food.”

“Some of them were zombies. What can they provide?”

“A true zombie is a reanimated corpse. You need power to do that, and power to maintain that. Athena was experimenting with immortality. Her power comes from the god, and he needs blood and souls to maintain his presence. What do you think was killing the vampires?” Mifunwi led the way down the ramp.

“I suspected something like that after I questioned their souls. I could see the creature that attacked them as they described their deaths. Anything that could kill a vampire like that had to be immensely powerful. But then, so are you guys.”

“Lukeios and I are eternals, Palomedes is immortal, the others are powerful sorcerers. Sorcerers can banish gods, if they know how. Now, tell me what you feel down here.”

The lower level of the parking garage was lit with yellowish lights that flickered and flared like flames. The concrete was covered with throw rugs and furniture. Anna was surprised to feel a throb of power, something she associated with the living, not concrete.

“He has warded this place.” Palomedes remarked. “He has warded so well even I cannot go in.”

“Thank you Palomedes, I was hoping Anna would notice.”

“Sorry Auntie Mifunwi.” He said it formally, and it made him sound like a small child. Mifunwi smiled at him.

“That’s all right. Anna, I know you notice things. What can you tell me?”

Anna explained about the power. “But it looks like a shimmery curtain across the opening. Is that what Palomedes meant by warding?”

“That’s good, you show promise. Palomedes, Liz and Elanor should all be able to focus on something inside and then walk through shadow to it, bypassing the wards. The power has blocked access to there from shadow, not something a sorcerer can do. The outer curtain will make you wish to flee, the inner curtain will kill anything, including immortals. Approach and see what you feel.”

Anna expressed reluctance, Elanor and Liz volunteered to walk with her. As they approached the curtain a sense of unease grew. Three paces from the curtain terror rose upper threatening to choke her and tur her bowels to water.

“Anna, push it away.” Elanor advised. “Use your power, and push the terror away.”

It took several minutes, but finally the sense of terror evaporated. “Would a shield spell protect us from the danger?”

“Yes,” Mifunwi replied, “but you would not be able to pass through the curtain. From here I cannot deactivate the wards. So, gather around and I will take you inside.”

There was no rainbow smearing of a shadowshift. Instead the world blew away, leaving her bodiless, blind and deaf. A moment later everything came back, and they were inside the god’s lair. “I think I prefer shadow shifting.”

“Being bodiless can be disconcerting. Now all of you look around. We are seeking the artifact.”

“It’s so big!” Anna exclaimed. “And weird.”

“Where are we?” Elanor asked.

They appeared to be standing inside a very large bowl, with a pinkish yellow sky. The light seemed to come from the sky itself, in the form of bluish white clouds and greenish auroral displays. Lightning bolts struck the basin’s rim. They were standing on an area paved with alternating squares of green marble and blue grass, each square about a meter. The paving stretched into the distance, with tiles of different colour appearing randomly. Nearby Grecian style columns of yellow marble led to something that looked like the Parthenon, but constructed of pale red marble, and guarded by bronze sphinxes.

In the distance they could see other structures such as pyramids, tall cylinders, and block shaped objects. The sides of the bowl were a patchwork of colours; some looked like fields of crops, some containing animals. Some green patches contained fluffy white objects reminiscent of sheep. Other animals were less recognisable, with odd shapes, too many legs, and varigated hides.

“This is a pocket universe the god has constructed. It gives him access to our shadows.” Mifunwi explained. “He has one artifact hidden here, where mortals and immortals cannot come. Palomedes, I know you know where it is. Ladies, I would like you to try to feel it.”

“What’s a pocket universe?” Anna asked.

“Hmm.” Mifunwi replied. “You know about shadows? Right, they could be considered like a bowl of noodles - all twisted up, and where they touch you can cross from one to another. Then a pocket universe is like a broken piece of noodle that’s fallen on the table. It’s quite separate and self contained. It doesn’t touch any other, so no shadow shifter can shift in or out. An Eternal can. This pocket universe protects the god’s power object from sorcerers and immortals, so he can manifest in shadow as he pleases once his summoner is dead. I must destroy it to banish him. So, what can you sense, Anna?”

“There’s power here.” Anna felt she had walked into a dream, nothing seemed real anymore. “I think it’s stronger in the direction of that temple.”

“Definitely that temple.” Liz added. “But there’s danger too. It’s like a pall over everything.”

“This whole place is like a boobytrap.” Elanor had her arms spread, and was turning slowly around. “Everything around us is boobytrapped. But there’s something in the temple, I’m not sure what though.”

“All of you are correct. This place recognises its creator and is deadly to anyone else. I can keep you safe. Anna, this is like a dream, and we have to work within the dream logic. Do not stray from the paths, they are safe enough.”

“This is some new meaning of the word ‘safe’.” Liz joked. “One we’re not familiar with.”

“Yes, the paths are boobytrapped.” Mifunwi smiled. “Everywhere else is deadly. Watch.” She tossed a stone between the pillars lining the path. There was a zzt and it vanished.

Mifunwi waggled her head and arms, stretching in a way that reminded Anna of a bird. Then she reached out, drawing a spear from thin air. It had a shaft of black wood and a leaf shaped blade of silver, with three black feathers tied just behind the head. The whole thing was not much longer than Mifunwi’s height.

The pillars drew back from her, turning a narrow path into a wide road. “Now it knows who I am.”

Anna wondered what Mifunwi really was, and what she meant. Mifunwi turned to look her squarely in the eye. “I am the Raven Queen. My ravens are spirit messengers. The gods call me Mor Riganu, the Queen of Terror, the Queen of Death. I am someone they fear. As Lukeios says, we keep the gods honest.”

Anna wondered how it was possible to kill a god. Mifunwi answered her thought. “The same way you kill anything else. The physical shell dies, and the soul goes elsewhere, unable to interact with the physical world. It can gain a new form by being born, but few gods want to be born as mortals, or even immortals. Without a physical anchor, their powers are limited. If they are born, their powers are limited. In many ways they are as limited as ordinary mortals.”

Which was why Mifunwi and Luke were limited and yet powerful, Anna thought. Mifunwi smiled at her, reminding her of the Cheshire Cat. “Follow me.” Mifunwi ordered, leading the way down the path toward the temple.

The gravel of the path wavered underfoot like a mirage. It was possible to see grass or marble, though it still felt like gravel. Anna wondered what was happening.

“The paving here is treacherous, I am forcing it to be a gravel path, but it is fighting back.”

After a few more meters Mifunwi asked them to stop. “Something is forming just ahead. Stay in the centre of the path.”

The adjacent pillars were swelling, and as they watched each swelling formed an ugly, tentacled, clawed creature. Each one was different, each one ugly and fearsome. Some resembled a cross between a rhinoscerous and a crocodile, others a cross between a gorilla and a bull, while others were unfamiliar. Palomedes cursed “I have no weapons. And my sorcery doesn’t seem to work here.”

The creatures pulled themselves free of their pillars. Mifunwi threatened the nearest with her spear, but remarked calmly “What is my hunter without his bow. Look to your left.”

A flock of ravens appeared over the pathway, one carrying a large bow, another a quiver of arrows. They dropped them into Palomedes’ arms, then divided into two and landed on the path fore and aft of the group. Anna was debating whether to run, but they were surrounded by creatures, with more pulling free of columns along the path. The ones nearest Mifunwi were jockeying for position, trying to get past the spear point that seemed to flicker to whichever was closest, causing it to draw back while another advanced. Palomedes strung his bow.

The two flocks of ravens changed into two packs of white dire wolves the size of horses. Their breath steamed in the air and snow began to fall. Three of the misshapen creatures crowded Mifunwi, who swung her spear in a vicious arc, cutting two of them and stabbing a third. They bellowed and began to burn. A tentacle snaked toward her, but the spear point caught it, and it withdrew, spewing flames.

More rushed from the other side. One near Anna charged, a fearsome site that looked like the offspring of a granite gorilla and a bull, but with a mouthful of long fangs and armor plating. She went for her gun, but came away empty handed. The creature was almost within reach when a long arrow sprouted from its chest, and it began to burn like a roman candle. A second, one that looked like a tyranosaur, also sprouted an arrow, and burned swiftly.

The other attackers backed away from their burning compatriots, and the wolves took them, the flames of their demise seeming to bother them not at all. More attackers burst forth from the pillars, and even more wolves appeared, seemingly forming from the falling snowflakes. Palomedes shot more than thirty arrows, though his quiver never seemed depleted. Mifunwi’s spear point was a silver blur that left a trail of flames. Eventually there were no creatures left between the group and the wolves, and Mifunwi relaxed a little. “We’ll continue along the path. My wolves will protect us.”

Anna found everything had a surreal, dream like quality. Why wolves and snow? And why should they be able to defeat the monsters? They had no razor blade claws, no eyes of fire, or any real weapons .

“Anna, the Raven Queen collects those who die in battle. My wolves are Death’s own emissaries, they are known as ‘White Death’. They are just one of the reasons the gods fear me.”

Palomedes laughed. “Anna, you know of the legends of the Titans. They were beings more powerful than gods, and far more ancient. It took the combined powers of all the gods to defeat just one Titan. They defeated many one by one. Of course, the gods claim they defeated all of them, but that’s a lie.”

It was all becoming too much for Anna. “Are you saying the the Titans were real?”

“Lukeios and I feature in your legends.” Mifunwi replied. “To the ancient Greeks we were Titans, to the ancient Egyptians we were the old gods, and sometimes the new gods. To the ancient Kelts we were from the region of the summer stars, and we were supposed to have created the gods. Mor Riganu became the Morrigan, while Lukeios became Lucifer. Then the Christians lumped us all together and called us demons, though we are nothing of the sort.

“Right now Lukeios is doing battle with several gods, while I am about to storm a god’s fortress. There is much at stake here that you know little about. You will come to understand in due course.”

“Anna, you stick with us.” Elanor commented. “It’s a lot to take in at first. I’ve been friends with Mifunwi since my children were small. My youngest would be older than you now.”

“Okay. I feel a bit overwhelmed. Why are the three of us here? We can’t do anything.”

“Don’t feel powerless. We’re learning valuable lessons. One of which is that we can make a difference, and we are not completely powerless.”

“It isn’t far now, ladies.” Mifunwi commented gently.

They’d reached the avenue of sphinxes. Snow covered many of the sphinxes, though many more were missing. Some of those were being herded towards the temple by the wolves. Puddles in the snow, along with traces of soot on the snow, suggested they’d burned. One of the snow covered ones protested fussily to Mifunwi as she passed “Your Majesty! We are supposed to ask you a question which you have to answer correctly before we can allow you to pass. There are rules, you know.”

“I am one of those who set the rules. Therefore you allow me and my party to pass. Who am I?”

“Mor Riganu, Queen of Terror and Death.” the Sphinx admitted.

“And what do your rules say about me?”

“The rules do not apply to Death and her emissaries.” the Sphinx sighed. “We withdraw our protest. Will your wolves now stop harrowing us?”

“They will when all of you stop attacking us. You see, it is your choice. Now, is there an easier path than this?”

“This is the only path to what you seek.”

“Very well, we’ll be on our way.”

Everything outside the path had vanished in the white out of the blizzard. The wolves lined the path, like an honour guard. Anna found it disconcerting to be walking past wolves as big as horses.

“Did you know” Liz commented, “wolves like this used to take down mammoths?” obviously noting Anna’s discomfort.

“I don’t think we’d have a chance if even one of them turned on us.” Anna replied.

“You are safe with these wolves.” Mifunwi joined in. “There are things out there hunting us, the snow and the wolves protect us.”

As if on cue, a wolf howled somewhere out in the blizzard. It was taken up by a second and then a third. It was the most blood curdling sound Anna had ever heard, something that bypassed her brain and went straight to her body, making all her hair stand on end, and her blood run cold.

“They have found one of the hunters.” Mifunwi commented, leading the way along the path.

“Do you know why their howls are so terrifying?” Palomedes asked. “Very few large predators hunt in packs. Dire wolves were almost invincible to ancient humans. They were smart enough to get past a fire, and they could kill an entire tribe. Their cry scares me!”

“Stop trying to scare everyone.” Miifunwi scolded. “The wolf pack is mine, they are here to protect us. It’s the hunters out there who should be afraid of us. Our next problem is the gate ahead.”

The path passed through two colums with a lintel on top. Through that was the raised, flattened area surrounding the temple. The left pillar was white marble, the right black marble. The lintel was red. There was a faint pearlised shimmer between the pillars.

“They look like the pillars of creation.” Palomedes commented.

“Except the pillars of creation define the boundaries of the multiverse. Anna, everthing that exists is a dream in the mind of God. That dream is like a tapestry strung between the pillars of creation. They are the edges of that tapestry. Only the mind of God can pass beyond those edges. We know absolutely nothing about what lies beyond those edges.

“These pillars before us are simply dangerous. Walk between them and you’d die horribly. Now let me see.”

Mifunwi stood silently for several minutes. “Walk between those pillars and you would be transported into the primal chaos. Even gods would die, their souls undreamed.”

“What do you mean by ‘undreamed’?” Anna asked.

“Dreaming is what the Mind of God does. Undreamed is what Palomedes would call unmade. The Mind of God wipes the dream of your soul, and you have never existed. Nothing you have done has ever happened. Your existence has been edited out, and no one is aware that has happened.”

Anna shuddered. “Does that happen often?”

“No, except when you are dealing with gods and more powerful beings. Their souls are born from primal chaos, sometimes they are reclaimed by it.”

Mifunwi suddenly thrust her spear into the white pillar, which began burning. She spun and stabbed the black pillar. As they watched the two pillars burn and disintergrate, Anna asked “Why did you do that?”

“Gateways to primal chaos are an abomination, something ghag should not exist. Now, our destination lies in another pocket universe.”

The shimmery gauze between the pillars boiled out towards them, but before it could reach them the bodiless, inside out sensation enveloped them. Anna still did not like it, but at least she had some idea what was happening.

The world returned, and they were standing on a leafy path on the side of a hill. Ahead the top of the hill had been cleared and flattened, and a Grecian style temple built there. The stone glowed with golden light, and the whole complex was surrounded by larger than life statues of naked humans. They were a mixture of male and female, most in heroic poses with weapons, sometimes with slain monsters at their feet.

Mifunwi led her small group into the cleared area. “This area is relatively safe.”

As they approached the temple the statues came to life and moved to surround the group. One statue, a bearded man naked save for helm, leg greaves and short sword, stood on front of Mifunwi. “Access is forbidden!”

“I am the Raven Queen. Do you know what that is?” A raven appeared out of thin air and alighted on her shoulder, while a white wolf the size of a horse padded to her side.

The bearded statue’s eyes and mouth opened in surprise. “White Death! She whom the gods fear. We cannot bar you, but we have been ordered to do so. Turn aside or we must attack.”

“And you would all die.” Mifunwi smiled.

“A warrior’s death, my lady. There is much honour in that.”

“My brother would be disappointed at needless deaths. Honour lies in following orders. So, hear my orders - sheath your weapons and form an honour guard for me and my companions.” She raised her voice to carry.

The statue lowered his sword. “Yes, there is more honour in following higher orders.” He stepped back a pace and raised his sword in salute. “All hail Mor Riganu! She who brings death to the gods.”

The statues sheathed their weapons if they could, or shouldered them if they couldn’t, and formed up as a guard of honour.

“Lead us into the temple.” Mifunwi ordered.

Inside the temple was an altar of polished while marble, through which ran gold veins. On the left of the altar sat a single white candle, its flame burning steadily. On the right side sat a crystal vase containing three large roses, one alabaster white, one coal black, and the third ruby red. In the centre was a gold chalice. An alabaster woman with writhing snakes for hair stood before the altar with a white bladed knife in her hand.

When she saw the newcomers her eyes blazed and she dashed the challice from the altar, spilling its contents in their direction. The liquid appeared to be fresh blood, bright red and spraying out in thick, ropey filiments.

Mifunwi made a warding gesture and the spraying blood and path of the chalice were reversed, like a video, and returned to the altar. The woman flew backwards, bursting into flame. The flames burned up from her feet in a ring, leaving something dark in its wake, something that glowed a dull red.

“Was that the Medusa?” Anna asked.

“She possibly gave rise to the legend.” Palomedes replied. “We should keep out of her way.”

The woman’s body now resembled iron from a furnace, glowing cherry red. Flames streamed from her head instead of snakes. She cast something small and dark at Mifunwi that exploded ferociously before it reached her.

There was no time even to duck, but the explosion beat fruitlessly against a transparent wall separating Mifunwi’s party from the woman. Mifunwi was somewhere outside that wall.

The smoke cleared and the thunder died, to be replaced by a high pitched keening. There was a tableau before the altar - Mifunwi, right leg advanced, spear extended so that it spitted the woman. The woman’s head was thrown back and her mouth wide open, spewing fire that seemed to roll off Mifunwi like water off a duck’s back.

A ring of silver flames spread out from the spear, consuming everything. Though the woman screamed and writhed, she was unable to pull free of the spear. The silver flames spread rapidly, leaving nothing in their wake. The scream shut off before the flames reached her head, and then the face was gone, and the flames streamed out from her head an vanished.

Mifunwi placed the butt of the spear on the ground. “It is safe to approach the altar now.”

“Why would we want to do that?” Elanor asked.

“Because what we seek is on the altar, and requires the touch of a mortal to destroy it. Each of you must take a flower, do not touch anything else.”

“Typical!” Palomedes laughed. “No mortal could get in here without the sort of help Mifunwi gave. But only a mortal can destroy it. What do the other things do?”

“The woman’s glance would have turned all of you to stone, even you Palomedes.” Mifunwi explained patiently. “Touching the crystal vase will overwhelm you with order, and turn you into crystal. The chalace contains chaos, its contents will disolve everything it touches. Touching the candle will burn you the way things burned in the previous pocket universe. Touching the altar will simply kill you. Palomedes might survive that one. So ladies, each of you carefully take one flower from the vase, without touching anything else.”

The three women looked at one another, then Elanor moved first. “Luke always tells me he needs my help in his work.” She reached out for the red rose, plucking it from the vase. Liz took the white, leaving Anna the black.

It was almost an anti-climax after what they’d been through. Nothing seemed to happen. Mifunwi however, gathered them all together, including the large white wolf. “It’s happening.” Mifunwi announced.

“What is...” Anna began.

“Look arround.” Mifunwi advised.

At first it looked as if the temple were crumbling, but then Anna realised that the sky and the ground were shredding, the shards and shreds turning into strange shapes that swirled from one form to another in the blink of an eye. There seemed to be a shimmering bubble around their small group.

“You three have triggered the destruction of this universe.” Mifunwi explained. “It’s reverting to chaos stuff.”

“You’re protecting us?” Anna asked.

“Yes, that pearly shimmer means we are inside our own pocket universe.”

“Every living thing in those universes has died.” Elanor commented. “Did you also destroy their souls?”

“No Elanor, you know me better than that. Firstly, the destruction of these pocket universes was not my doing, that was triggered by you three women taking the flowers. And secondly, while everything has been destroyed, my ravens have collected their souls and conveyed them to a suitable realm of the dead.”

Their bubble was now completely opaque, with only vague shapes of light and shadow visible. Beneath their feet were paving stones, not the remnants of the temple floor as Anna had thought. The flowers in their hands had withered.

“Please place the flowers on the floor here.” Mifunwi ordered. “The wolf will see to their disposal.”

Anna had forgotten the wolf, standing still and silent behind her. She started. “Oh, he’s not dangerous? He’s tame?”

“She has a name.” The words formed in her mind. Anna turned to look at the wolf, who was looking at her with a suggestion of amusement. “Yes, I am talking to you. I am White Death, I am neither tame nor wild. I am a personification of a natural phenomenon - death. I am not alive, so I cannot die. And I am extremely dangerous, but you are safe at present. It is not yet your time.”

“How can Death be a person? Or animal? I mean, people just die, don’t they?”

“Death stalks everything that is dreamed. What you see is merely a personification, as is this form.” There was no sound and no transition. A white skeleton stood before her, with glowing blue lights in its eyesockets, a black hooded cape about its body, and a sythe in its hand. She gasped, and another figure stood there - a grey bearded man clad in a tunic and rope sandals, carrying an oar in one hand and a lantern in the other.”Before Death had human form - the Reaper, the Ferryman, death was a raven,” the Ferryman was replaced by a solitary black bird that came to Anna’s waist. “and the dire wolf.” The white wolf returned. “Do not fear Death, it is a natural part of life, a necessary part of the dream of creation. Place the flowers here.” White Death’s paw patted the ground.

Anna placed her flower, then Elanor. As Elanor rose to her feet she bumped Anna, pushing her against the wolf. There was an eery sensation that made her shudder, but no sensation of touch. “What? There’s nothing there.”

“That is incorrect, child. You felt something. I have no physical body, that is all.”

“I felt like someone was walking over my grave.”

“I walk by your side every minute of your life, so close you can reach out and touch me. One day I will tap you on the shoulder and tell you it is time to leave. You are a sorcerer, you can see me if you wish. Sometimes I will be the white wolf, sometimes I will take human form. And sometimes you will see me collecting others, whose time is up. I give meaning and poignancy to your lives. I will see to the flowers.”

The bubble lightened and became translucent. Mifunwi walked out, saying “Follow me.” Their small party walked out, finding themselves on the floor of the parking garage, roughly where they had been before. The wolf stayed behind, the bubble vanished.

“I’m glad the wolf is gone.” Anna exclaimed.

Mifunwi smiled. “Look to your left, out of the corner of your eyes.” Anna did as she was bid. What ever was at the corner of her eyes stayed at the corner, almost out of sight. But if she let her vision roam there was something white to the left, always to the left something white and wolflike.

“As she said, you will always see her.” Mifunwi commented. “Now, my work is done. The four master vampires will return here soon. Palomedes is well equipped to handle them. Until we meet again.” She smiled and vanished.

A moment later there was a ‘ding’ and the elevator doors opened, disgorging the detective and his assistants. “What happened? Where is everybody else? The lady in white said we’d find you all down here.”

“It’s a long story.” Palomedes replied. “The others should be along any minute.”

Anna found the events were fading. “It was like a dream, and it’s fading now. We destroyed some mad god’s artifact, and banished him. And ... Er ... The lady in white said the others would be here soon.” Anna didn’t feel like admitting she knew anything about Mifunwi.

“And here we are.” came Luke’s voice from somewhere near. They turned to see him, Danny and Nalini walking out of a darkened section of the underground parking garage.

“Now, I suggest the police stand over here with Anna. You’ll be safer that way. Anna, I’m afraid you’re out of your league dealing with these vampires.”

The police joined Anna, and a golden shimmer formed around them. “I’m more than happy to observe from safety.” Anna commented.

Luke gathered Elanor and Liz, and the three of them walked near to Anna’s group. Danny and Nalini formed up behind Palomedes. Five meters in front of them a pearly sphere appreared and settled onto the floor of the parking garage. It faded, revealing Athena and her three male companions.

They were facing away from the group, but they all spun in time like marionettes. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!” Athena screamed. The edge to her voice made Anna weak at the knees, knotted her bowels and made her want to scream with terror. The detective fell to his knees, groaning; his men rolled on the floor, holding their heads.

“Where are your protrectors?”

Was she mad? Luke was standing just two meters away. On impulse she said “They left.”

“Fled? Or dead?” Athena smiled horribly. “You will all die, surrendering to me, your life’s blood forfeit, your soul forfeit. You will die knowing that your soul has been torn assunder, and consumed.” She licked her lips lasciviously. “Come child, you shall be first.”

Anna shook her head mutely, horrified. There was a strong compulsion to walk to Athena, but she was unable to move.

“You can’t be that strong.” She spun like a top, rising io the air as she did so, her hair crackling with lightening. “It’s a trap!” Power poured from her fingers, raking the group. At least it would have, but for the bubble around them. Pieces flew from the floor and walls where her lightning hit.

Patrocles and Aineios joined their powers to Athena’s attack; Apollyon blurred into motion, appearing just outside their bubble. Couldn’t they see the others, standing in plain sight amonst them?

Apollyon placed his sword and his pistol against the shield and pushed. His predatory smile faded as he realised this shield wasn’t porous to slow movement.

Palomedes appeared behind him, holding an assegai, a spear with a short haft and a long blade. “That won’t work.” He thrust the blade into Apollyon’s back as the vampire registered his presence. Danny and Nalini moved to intercept the others.

Just as when Apollyon had tried to kill Palomedes, there was a corona discharge. When the flash cleared, Apollyon was pinned to the stone floor by the assegai, like an insect in a display case. There was an aura of flashing colors about his body, and it kept flickering like an old movie. One moment it was Apollyon, a middle aged man in modern clothes, the next it was a young man dressed as an ancient Greek warrior in bronze armor, and then back to the middle aged man. He writhed, unable to free himself.

“Apollyon, your name in ancient Green means ‘Destroyer’. One immortal created you, another can destroy you.”

Palomedes turned to the other vampires. They were penned between Danny, in his form of an eagle headed man, and Nalini, in her form of a jaguar headed woman. They were trapped in a net of light that came from Danny and Nalini’s outstretched hands.

Palomedes plucked a heavy, double curved bow from thin air, did the same with an arrow as he pulled the string back. The net writhed, and Patrocles was pushed free. He ran at Palomedes as Palomedes loosed. The arrow struck him in the chest with such force he was thrown backwards several meters, falling to the floor where he writhed and twitched.

Palomedes knocked a second arrow, the net twitched, and Aineios was thrust forth. A moment later he too was stretched writhing on the floor.

That left Athena, who was screaming and spitting fire. One particularly violent spit rebounded on her, leaving her injured and moaning. Danny and Nalini collapsed the net, releasing her. She scuttled backwards, then tried to form a fireball with her damaged hands.

“She’s scared.” Nalini commented.

“As she should be.” Palomedes blurred across the space between them, solidifying astride her, the assegai rammed into her chest. Athena tried to scream, but blood fountaining from her mouth turned it into a gurgle. “You were made by an immortal, now another unmakes you.” Like the others, her body flickered between two forms, a middle aged woman and a much younger version.

Luke walked over to Patrocles, who had almost stopped moving. He had ceased form shifting, returning to the middle aged man, breathing in short, sharp gasps. “Patrocles, you were named for the hero companion of Achilles. In another minute you will be dead, your soul released to pay for its misdeeds. I offer you a chance at life, and redemption. Will you take it?” He was speaking ancient Greek, yet the others understood his words.

Anna noticed with concern that the white wolf stood with Lukeios, grinning down at Patrocles. “What... do... I... do?” he gasped.

“The White Wolf is waiting to carry you off. I can give you life as a human, and a chance to make amends for the wrongs you have done over the course of your very long life.”

“I... want... to... live... What... do?...”

“Will you work to make amends? That’s all.”

“Yes.” That was almost a gasp.

“Then live. Patrocles, stand up and be a hero like your namesake. Follow me.”

Patrocles stood, a young man. “I feel different.”

“You are no longer vampire. Abide, I must deal with your companions.” Luke turned. “Aineios, your namesake fled Troy and founded Rome.” Luke made Aineios a similar offer, which he accepted. He moved to stand with Patrocles.

“Apollyon, self styled destroyer of humanity. You took the name of a Christian demon. I offer you one chance as a human to start making amends for your evil.”

“What would you... Have me do... Immortal? ... Be good to humans? ... They are cattle... They are natural prey!” Apollyon gasped.

“The wolf is waiting to collect your soul. You must choose to make amends. Choose, and the burdon will not be heavy. Reject, and your burdon will be heavy.” Luke answered reasonably.

“Life as a human... I want your immortality!” He broke into a fit of wet coughing.

The wolf spoke. “Look around you. All those you killed have come for you.” Anna could see hazy figures hovering around, seemi to stretch out beyond the walls in their throng.

“I spit on you all! ... The strong survive ... The weak die ... Aiyee!” With that cry he fell back. A cloud formed above his body, taking on human form, still tethered to his body by a cord. The wolf’s paw lashed out, severing the cord. The shadowy figures crowded around, striking and jeering Apollyon’s soul.

The wolf sprang. Apollyon fled, followed closely by the wolf, and flanked by jeering spectators. They vanished in the distance.

Luke turned his back on Apollyon’s corpse and walked to Athena. Anna was surprised to see the white wolf flanking him.

Luke made Athena the same offer he made the others. “What did Apollyon choose?” she ground out.

“Patrocles and Aineios chose life. Apollyon chose death. There is still time.”

Athena closed her eyes. Tears leaked from under her lids. Finally she spoke. “He was the best... But he was a fool... I want to live.”

“Then live as a human. Stand up Athena, you are healed.” Athena was transformed into a young woman, scarcely twenty. The wound and blood stains had vanished.

“What happens now?”

“Palomedes will deal with the rest of your vampire family. The power that sustained them is gone - they will revert to ordinary mortals. The other families will have scores to settle - Palomedes will have words with the other masters...”

“Yes,” Palomedes interjected. “I’ll offer them life as humans, or death. There are ninety eight remaining masters, seventeen of them reside in this country. Give me three months and I’ll rid this planet of vampires.”

“What happens to me?” Athena asked.

“I honestly don’t care.” Palomedes replied. “However, Lukeios has offered to help.”

“You, Aineios and Patrocles will follow me for now.” Luke responded. “After thousands of years as master vampires, you need to unlearn some behaviours. It will be interesting, I can promise you that. But first you should deal with Apollyon’s mortal remains.”

He turned to the others. “Detective, I believe you need to write a report on this. Palomedes can help you with some of the details. He’s not human, this should properly be seen as a dispute between vampires.”

The detective smiled a wry smile. “I would like to see vampires and warewolves treated legally exactly the same as humans. However, we know that isn’t the case. As police, our job is to enforce the laws and apprehend those who break them. The law allows vampires and warewolves to settle disputes among themselves provided no human is harmed. Palomedes and the rest are free to go. This is just a dispute among vampires.”

“Good. Anna, your work here is done too...”

“Get me a mirror!” Athena interjected imperiously.

“You are human now.” Luke countered. “It helps to say please.”

Athena made a mou of discontent. “Could someone get me a mirror, please?” impatience in her tone.

Palomedes gestured, and a full length cheval mirror appeared before Athena.

“How did you do that?”

“Sorcery.” Palomedes replied.

“Something you could learn.” Luke added.

Athena pirouetted before the mirror. “I’m a girl again! That is something good about this sad affair.”

“I would think that regaining your humanity would be a good point.” Luke countered. “You are no longer on the road to hell. Surely that means something?”

“I was never a christian.” Athena rejoined. “I never saw us as evil. We were predators, and humans were the prey, Mordialok told us.”

“If you are to have a place in this modern world,” Luke replied, “then you need to learn some things. Otherwise you will get yourself killed. You will follow me for a time, and I will teach you. But now you should attend to the dead, then we can attend to the living.”

Apollyon’s body had crumbled to dust, though it looked like ash. “We will place his remains in his coffin, and place that in our crypt.” Athena explained. Her eyes looked watery and, Anna thought, they looked ancient.

Athena would not let anyone touch the remains; she meticulously swept them up herself and placed them in the coffin. She turned to Luke, ignoring Palomedes. “His real name was Kodon, he was my lover.” She spoke softly. “We were lovers before we were vampires. Have you ever loved someone for over three thousand years?” Tears trickled down her face, but her voice was steady.

“I believe most people have lost someone they love. I am tens of thousands of years old. The ones I have lost have returned many times. You will see him again.”

“His spirit survives, and will be reborn?” There was a hint of hope in her voice.

“Of course, Darota. He will be waiting for you when you die. When you are reborn you can be together in the flesh.”

Athena stared at Luke for several moments. “Only Kodon knew my real name. How do you know it?”

“It is my business to know things, Darota. Tonight, when you sleep, I will meet your spirit, and take you to meet him. I think both of you will benefit from that.”

Athena put a hand on Luke’s chest. “What manner of being are you, Lukeios? You slew a god, yet you walk the underworld. And how is it that the dead can return to life? The Styx flows into Hades, not out, and the Ferryman only ferries one way.”

“There is a barge that returns the dead to the world of the living, where they inhabit babes in the womb, and are reborn in due course. Eventually that will happen to Kodon, and you. In the meantime, the living may visit the realm of the dead, though it helps to have a suitable guide.”

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Later, on they walked to the cars, Anna asked “Luke, how much of what you said to Athena about life after death is true? You told Godric about Hell and damnation, but to Athena you talked about reincarnation.”

“All, and none.” Luke smiled. “People need stories that match what they believe. Godric and Wulfric are christians, they believe in Hell, and they believe in an angry god who will damn them for eternity. When they die that is what they will experience. Their belief will make it happen. Athena and the others believe the abode of the dead is a gloomy underground place, that is what they will experience. It’s all about the story they believe.

“Give them small doubts and they will be able to change that story for a better one, one that will improve their circumstances after death.”

“What about punishment for sins?” Anna asked.

“Stories within stories.” Luke grinned. “It’s more about learning lessons. That’s what living is for. Death is for reflecting on life, its lessons, how well you learned them, and what you should learn next. Locking yourself in Hell won’t help the situation.”

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A little later, Elanor and Luke were standing before Godric and Wulfric. Luke had just finished explaining what had happened with Athena and the others. “She has been allowed to return to life as an ordinary human. The same will be done with you two. Your vampire family is no more, but the family still exists as humans. You may wish to return to them, or strike out on your own.

“Tomorrow I, or one of my companions, will contact you about working on your salvation. Apart from that, genglemen, you are free to go. Before we conduct you back to your world, do you have any questions?”

“We’re humsn, right?” Godric asked. “That means we’re mortal, no powers. We’ve been reduced to the level of prey. The other families will move into our territory and wipe us out. We might live a week.”

“Which is why the other families are being dealt with the same way. Once the family’s master vampires lose their powers, or die, the ones they created revert to human.” Luke responded. “But you still have whatever powers and skills you developed your long lives. You can still use those powers for your defence.”

“Life is suddenly interesting again.” Wulfric supplied. “We were growing bored. I have no wish to return to the family, I have my own apartment.”

“I have one in the same building.” Godric added. “I’d like to go there too.”

“What’s the street address?” Luke asked. They told him. He nodded. “I have located it. Let’s go.” He and Elanor began walking.

“Do you know what I regret the most about being human?” Wulfric announced. “I won’t live to journey to the stars.”

The black rock and red sun gave way to rusty red rock, black staghorns, greenish sky and small orange sun. Godric and Wulfric looked around. “Where are we? How did we get here?” Godric asked.

“This appears to be an earth like planet orbiting a cool K or M class star.” Luke announced with a grin.

“I think it’s M.” Wulfric commented. “G is yellow, like our sun. M is orange, K is red. How did we get here?”

“Let’s just say there are an infinite number of parallel universes.” Luke explained. “Thus there are an infinite number of parallel earths. This is one of them. We will pass through several on our journey home. Think of this as a shortcut.”

“Are you demon or angel? Or perhaps some ancient and terrible god?” Wulfric asked.

Lush blue grass under a pink sky with yellow clouds and a greenish sun. In the distance soaring, snow covered mountains. A chill breeze rippled the grass. “I’d love to gallop a horse here!” Godric exclaimed.

“None, and all.” Luke replied. “To the ancient Egyptians I was Horus the Dawn Hawk. To the Babylonians I was the Herald of the Sun God M. To the ancient Greeks I was Apollo Leukios - Apollo Wolfsbane or Apollo the Light Bearer. The Romans also called md Light Bearer, and equated me with the morning star. These days I introduce myself as Lukeios or just Luke.”

The grass vanished, and they were walking along a rutted logging trail through a pine forest. The soil was Martian red, but the sky was blue. The sun was orange again.

Both ex vampires stopped, inhaling deeply. “This reminds us of our homelands in summer. We’ve been cooped up for too long.” Godric remarked.

“It’s well past time for a change.” Wulfric added. “I wish we could explore these worlds we are passing through.”

“Another day there will be time to explore some of them.” Luke replied. “Today we are travelling home. But since we are walking, there is time to stop and look.

“There is an infinite number of them,” Luke continued, “some are subtle variations on one another, though many are quite different.”

There was another rainbow shimmer and they stepped into a crowded, dusty street. The street was paved with rough blue grey flagstones, the squat buildings on either side were built from either bluestone blocks or a pinkish stone with shiny flecks. The people walking around were not human.

Bipedal, but short legged and three toed, they reminded Elanor vaguely of a velociraptor. Their skins were a mixture of colourful reptilian scales and brightly colored feathers that ran in from a crest on their heads down their spines and along their upper arms and legs. They had reptilial looking muzzles full of teeth. They wore leather harnesses, leather belts with long-bladed knives and other undefineable objects. Some wore short capes of feathers. Most walked, some rode upon large, ostrich like animals.

“This is nowhere on earth.” Wulfric muttered.

“They walk around us, but they don’t seem to notice us.” Godric commented.

“Yes, I often have that effect.” Luke replied with a smile. “They’re a warrior race, we don’t really want them to notice us, they could be extremely dangerous. They won’t take notice while I’m with you though.”

They walked about fifty meters along the street before Luke shifted them again. They were in another town, one with a wide, paved street, ornate stone buildings of pink sandstone, and dusky skinned humans. It was warm, and the air was redolant with the smells of horses, sweat, and spices. Clothing was mostly light, loose pantaloons and jerkins, brightly colored, many embroidered. Women dressed similarly to men, though they had longer hair and wore jewellery.

“It is possible that with training either of you could learn to do this.” Luke commented. “It is also possible that you could live to see starships become common. Vampires have some mild sorcerous powers; you haven’t forgotten what you learned. But you will need to find an appropriate power source you can chanel.”

From the broad street they shifted onto a wooden warf, sailing ships docked and stevedors loading or unloading. The ships were square rigged, the people human, their clothing remeniscent of the nineteenth century.

The next shift brought them to a narrow street almost choked with parked cars. There were several high rise apartment blocks rising from the sidewalk, and the beginnings of a shopping precinct. “This should be your apartment building. It’s late afternoon. We will say goodbye here, though you will see me again soon, possibly tomorrow. Go about your lives, I will find you.”

Godric stood with his eyes closed, head turning. “I can’t feel her anywhere. You’ve given us hope.”

“She is human again, like the two of you. She will need reminding of what that means.”

“And so will the two of you.” Elanor found herself adding. “That can happen to anyone who is powerful.”

Luke smiled indulgently. “Elanor reminds me of that. I have lived so long that I need reminding.” Then his smile faded. “When you forget your humanity it is time to die. We will meet again.”

“Thank you for your help.” Wulfric replied.

“Goodbye, and good luck with your lives.” Elanor said. She and Luke turned to go.

“Before you go,” Wulfric said, “Will you answer one question?”

“If it’s not too difficult.” Luke smiled.

“You said your name means Light Bearer, and the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans linked you with the morning star. We both speak latin; the morning star was called Venus Lucifer. That would make you Lucifer Morningstar, Prince of Hell.”

“And that worries you?”

There was a small nod from Godric. “Just a tad.” from Wulfric.

Luke smiled an engaging, innocent seeming smile. “Lucifer as Prince of Hell was a Christian invention from the third or fourth century as they turned any pagan power into a demon. I am much older than that; I am neither god nor demon, just someone who keeps them honest.

“Be that as it may, you have both been granted a chance at salvation, and I am one of those tasked with guiding you. Go about your lives as humans; I will find you. In your hour of need I will be with you.” He took Elanor’s hand; they turned, vanishing in a rainbow shimmer.

Wulfric turned to Godric. “If they are neither gods nor demons, then they must be angels.”

“I am not sure what to believe any more, Wulf. The hunger has gone. I can watch all these mortals walk by without feeling the urge to drain them. We should see if we have any powers left, as humans we could be quite vulnerable.”

“We have new lives ahead of us. We are still Saxon knights, we are still dangerous. What do you think we should do now?”

“How about going for a walk in the sunlight? Some drinks at a bar, dinner at a nice restaurant? Perhaps we could pick up a couple of girls later.” Godric smiled. Let’s enjoy what we have, we could die soon.” Godric was grinning as he spoke.

Wulfric laughed. “Two Saxon knights who laugh at death! Let’s enjoy the moment.” His eyes were shining, for the first time in many centuries.