Chapter 1

September, 1915  A mountain forest near Mojkovac, Montenegro

Crust from the sword hilt’s rust spattered on cat fur as Tolga finished filet cuts along the inside of its legs so the pelt could be extracted in one yank down to the wiggling head. It was not so different from cleaning rabbits on his uncle’s farm in Turkey. Feral cats were risky fare. Some were rabid, but this one had no signs. He had tied it to a small tree for three days after he coaxed it from a smoldering hovel at the edge of the battle zone. It was angry, eyes of fire, yes, but not foaming or refusing water. Hardly appetizing, but the only paltry remains left in the dreary forest. Birds didn’t nest. Boggy springs about him reeked of sulfur and peat. Ground smelled of rot and dismay, but not as bad as blood-soaked battlefields in Gallipoli, he’d left behind, after his reassignment to serve with Austrians in Montenegro. The War was dragging on. He wondered if he would see nineteen sixteen. Battle lines were being drawn nearby against the Montenegrins.

Tolga turned to pare away the filth from turnip roots left in a cellar of the nearby village’s rubble. They were hard except where half-rotten. He cut away the dark tops, with most of the greens now grown black with fungus. The spoiled part of the white roots fell quickly away under his carving, even with his dulled blade. Two turnips remained for dousing into a boiling pot of water. He prayed it had boiled long enough to kill local parasites from the stream leading to an open meadow. He jerked back as a white form appeared suddenly to his left. His rifle was ready and aimed.
“Who are you? Speak!” He yelled at a young girl standing ten feet from him. The constant cannonades in the trenches had left his hearing dulled and with only partial vision in his left eye. Still, his sense of survival from a year of hand-to-hand combat had never failed him before this surprise.

A pale girl walked forward, practically gliding across bushes and rough terrain. He marveled at the cleanliness of her long frock and white feet. Locals he had killed wore rags and filthy bits of homespun. This waif appeared with the bearing of wealth…maybe even nobility. A reward—no better yet, a ransom came to mind. Tolga rubbed his pockmarked face and scraggly beard, as his squinty eyes paced over his silent guest.

His dark features blended into his worn and tattered uniform. The rank markings were removed in battle to prevent disclosure that he had once been an officer. Men of rank were easy marks in the trenches at Gallipoli, from foe and friend alike. His torn epaulets hung sideways like disjointed roof tiles ready to fall off his shoulders. Even in his disarray, he stood tall and threatening. His rifle added to the intimidation, especially to a lost child.

“Are you deaf?” He made the sign on his mouth with one hand while he rested the rifle with the other. She was wide-eyed and silent. He noticed her magnetic eyes for the first time. They were like settings of greens stones set in the palest skin imaginable. Her fiery auburn hair softly framed them like forest fire around a gleaming pair of emeralds. Her thin mouth was a mere slit of red beneath a tiny, upturned nose. She reached her right arm and hand out to him, in a gentle gesture.

“Are you here to hurt things, like that?” She pointed at the skinned cat.
He could hear her clearly, but he did not see her mouth move. It was a pleasant inflexion of his native tongue, which only those in the far Caucasus would recognize. She might be Hungarian royalty, lost behind the lines as the War waged across unclear zones of control.

“I’m starving. I must eat. So must you. Come, it is much like rabbit, but there are no rabbits in these woods. There are no deer, boar or birds of any kind. This will have to serve us until we can find your parents. How did you come to be here?”

“Did the furry thing give you permission to take its life force?”

“Its what? Ho, you are a funny little thing. I wonder what strange Christian priest has been talking in your ears. Come, we eat or we are eaten…that is the only rule we live by. Don’t you understand?”

“Is that your rule?”

“Of course, don’t be silly. Come and sit by the fire and stay warm. You must be freezing out there. The pot is boiling and we’ll have a stew in an hour or so, if we are lucky. The sun has gone down. It is getting dark. I have an old blanket. We will share it.”

“I will follow your rule.”

Tolga did not turn to acknowledge the child’s response. He did not hear her movement as he trudged with the gutted carcass to the fire. All his thoughts were on roasting meat, slowly, and then slicing it into thin morsels for the stew. He would add a bit of flour he’d found in the village. The bones would break up nicely to provide nourishing juices…but that was his last thought.

Six days later a patrol entered the forbidden area as the local villagers returned to their recaptured lands. Some told the Montenegrin regulars of the lone enemy soldier who fled into the black scrub beneath the towering beech. It took only a day to find remains of Tolga’s camp
consisting solely of his uniform spread neatly next to the remains of a putrid cat’s carcass. Burned turnip root filled the area with an acrid scent, even after nearly a week of cooling in the soggy environs. Tolga’s moth-eaten socks still poked out of the perforated soles of his boots…boots still tied, but empty. All that remained of the memory of the lost soldier was the outline of a man’s shape in an abandoned uniform, but the legend of his disappearance emblazoned through the Montenegrin army— that no man was ever to travel onto that hellish ground, even in the battle to come to defend the town of Mojkovac.
December, 2002   U.S. European Command Offices, Stuttgart, Germany

Captain Craig Neil stared into the scratched men’s room mirror. He shuddered, just fifty feet down a polished hall from Article 32 military hearings. His father’s photos from Marine duty in Belgium flashed before him, with the same heavy brow, strong eyebrows over large brown eyes, the stiff black hair—every follicle in place, the sharp nose, high cheek bones and distinctive cleft in a square chin. Women coveted his presence when he entered a room, though he did not loom at just under six feet. Men envied him from a distance. Craig wondered if he would live longer than his father, a hero protecting innocent bystanders in a San Francisco shootout while honoring his badge. Now, before his own major confrontation, Craig Neil fought for composure. The cool rim of the standard, square sink was a steadying saddle for his restless hands. In minutes, he would have to protect the honor and military career of a brave Marine Lieutenant, twice awarded for valor in battle. Her crime: another Marine’s testimony that she had been seen, off base, entering a known lesbian bar where a murder was committed. Although she was not tied to the homicide, her presence at the scene made her vulnerable to the military’s witch-hunt under the ever present hammer of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell—DADT.

Another splash of cold water to his face chilled his shaking. He used the dry, rough, brown paper towels to wipe away any scent of fear. The prosecutor would smell it. The five judges chosen from the Base Command would catch cologne of failure. He must be strong, even against his own JAG Commander who had told him, privately, “Let the bitch fry. She knows the rules.”
Neil made a final adjustment to his tie, checked for any weakness in the crease of his uniform, any dust…even a loose hair would show up on the dark green jacket. The service ribbons and medals on his left chest were all in order…where and how he had performed before becoming a JAG lawyer. His Captain’s bars were straight, even and shone like fresh-minted silver dollars. He finally donned his officer’s hat. The black brim reflected back against the monotonous green walls. He glanced back at his transformation, focusing on the Marine insignia. He spoke softly to the man before him as he lifted his leather case, “Semper fi, Dad.”

Stainless steel buttons on the hall pay phone were hard to press as he held the receiver close to his ear, taking care to avoid pressing the cloth on his hatband with the receiver. He waited quietly as the antiquated German switching system connected him. After a series of long, droning rings, his party answered.

“This is Captain Neil. Is the delivery on the way?” He paused, shifting his weight from the pain in his right leg. “Good. Have them role them directly into the court. I’ve set everything up with security. They expect you. Danka.” He replaced the bulky head set back in its cradle before taking another deep breath. He lifted his leather valise again, moving towards the waiting hearing room. The lead Judge had approved bringing materials that were solely for testing the veracity of the prosecutor’s witness. Neil pondered if his preparations would keep the Judge from halting proceedings once the deeper strategy was revealed. It was a huge risk.

Captain Neil struggled with his slight limp from embedded shrapnel, but he was careful, opening the doors to the room, concealing his disability. It was not his role to garner sympathy as a wounded warrior. He passed the seated rows for the public, media and a scattering of military personnel from the Navy and Marine Corps. Their gaze on him was crushing. He might just be the most unpopular man on base. The psychic pressure from the peanut gallery confirmed it.
He stopped crisply at the defense table, rested his brown satchel in front of him, and stood with the defendant, Lieutenant Grace Nicholson, in her dark-green Marine officer’s suit. Her light brown hair was cut to exact regulation and pulled tight, back and away from her face. She stood rod stiff, awaiting the Judges’ arrival. She also wore the ribbons of combat and her medals on her neatly pressed outfit. Neil noticed how pale she was under the harsh overhead lighting. Her thin eyebrows and tight lips disappeared under the glare, leaving just her hazel eyes to accent her rounded face.

Neil did not look to his right to acknowledge his enemy. Major Armando Villanueva was a brilliant attorney. He was occasionally seconded from the Army Criminal Investigation Command for Marine cases when NCIS felt the nature of the offenses were inappropriate for their prosecution staff. That didn’t happen often, but with the civilian coverage of this case, and Congress’s concern over homosexuals in military service, it was Naval Command’s opinion that there was too much liability to be involved for an inexperienced prosecutor. DADT was becoming a sore spot, leading to the expansion of the order to “don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass.” Neil was sure the Marine Base Commander was exceeding the intent of the order in this case, but his protests in that regard had not quenched the fury of the Marine Brass. They wanted any hint of homosexuality drummed out of the Corps, no matter who was slaughtered in the process.

“All rise,” was ordered by the Bailiff. The judges entered. The presiding Judge was Navy Commander Felix Henderson from Italy. He was transferred for temporary duty to lead the general court martial. Henry Jackson, the Marine Colonel for the local command, had recused himself. Lieutenant Nicholson had served under Colonel Jackson in the Middle East. He had awarded her both medals for valor. His testimony of character was completed days
before…when the defense was building its case for dismissal of the charges based on the strength of Grace’s service record. That attempt failed. Neil clutched the handle of his case, preparing to face his toughest challenge. Villanueva had a solid eyewitness. Chief Warrant Officer Jesus Mentirosa had identified Nicholson as entering a known lesbian bar in the city. His location at the time was unassailable. His testimony was further strengthened by unusually powerful recommendations of the Chief’s character from the Pentagon.

“As you were,” Commander Henderson directed to the court military personnel. He sat alone to the left of four court martial jury officers picked from the upper ranks. Neil knew them all to be fair officers, but they were all men and known to follow the Uniform Code of Military Justice to the letter. Neil rested his hat next to Nicholson’s, with both brims pointed towards their chairs.

“We will continue with the proceedings from yesterday, following the end of witness testimony from Chief Warrant Officer Mentirosa. Chief Mentirosa, please take the stand again. I remind you that you are still under oath. Captain Neil, you may cross-examine when Chief Mentirosa is seated. I also want to warn the visitors to this courtroom that you are here at my discretion. I know the Bailiff has already given you my directions, but I want to reemphasize that there are repercussions for those who can’t control their actions. If there is another expression of emotion or any comments from the observer’s section again, as there was yesterday, I will close this hearing. Now, if you are ready Captain.” He nodded his head toward Neil. Neil rose to address the Warrant Officer.

“Chief Mentirosa, you established yesterday that on the night of Sunday, September eighth, two-thousand and two, you were at Emma’s Brauhaus watching a football game. Is that correct, for the record?” He looked at the Mentirosa’s dark, Latino complexion, closely shaved head and
heavy black mustache. His dark eyes squinted so there was no white showing, just two pieces of jet. When he spoke, he sometimes slurred his words, which Neil noted was from a severe overbite.

“Yes,” he snapped back. “Of course. I already told you that.” He was noticeably uncomfortable in the highly polished, wooden witness chair. He squirmed a bit.

“Chief Mentirosa, I am not challenging your statement. I just want to make sure I have the date and time right. So, you claim, while sitting at the bar across the street that you turned and looked outside to the street and you saw Lieutenant Nicholson enter the Illusions nightclub. How could you be so sure it was Grace Nicholson if was already night and you were across the street?”

“Your Honor,” Villanueva rose to protest. For the first time this day, Neil had to turn and face his opponent. Villanueva was gangly, thin and pasty faced. Little of his wavy brown hair remained. Nature had bestowed him with the head of an egg that seemed barely balanced on his undernourished shoulders; his thin hands and soft features camouflaged a killer instinct. JAG only called him out when they absolutely needed a knife to the throat of someone accused by the Navy or Marines. Even the Army Command disliked him. He stood a half-foot taller than Neil. Like a powerful bulrush flailing in the wind, he thrashed at the defense from his position behind his table.

“Yes, Major,” responded Commander Henderson.

“This is all evidence we have already covered in great detail. The streetlights were on. The defendant was wearing a bright red dress she is known to own. We produced the dress as evidence for the prosecution as Exhibit A, which is still displayed to your right. Is it really necessary to repeat all of this?”
“Major, I agree. Sustained. Get to the point, Captain. Don’t waste the time of the Court.”

“Yes, your Honor,” Neil replied, crisply. Villanueva seemed pleased at shutting off the defenses rhetoric as he return to his chair, until he noticed a slight smirk on Neil’s face as he turned away from the judges.

Neil had reviewed Mentirosa’s files for weeks. There was nothing to note a hint of indiscretion. One JAG investigator in Washington replied with a short note to Neil’s assistant, “Don’t touch him. Tied to Ron Brown’s crash. He’s got an eagle over him.” That was code for Presidential sanction and protection. Neil knew that Mentirosa worked on the AWACS over Bosnia in April of nineteen ninety-six. That was a highly unusual assignment for the Marines. It was written up as a joint-operation project to transfer understanding of AWACS capability to Marine ground radar operators. He was a lowly lance corporal before Ron Brown’s plane hit a mountain near Dubrovnik. By the end of the year, Mentirosa was elevated to the rank of sergeant, without battlefield experience. That was highly unusual for the Marine Corps. A year later, he had a Presidential letter promoting him to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer, making him one of the youngest Latino men to achieve such an honor. Clinton had made a big deal about it and awarded the letter in person at the White House. Anyone who questioned the advancement was quickly reassigned to duties like Guam or Adak, Alaska. When the JAG investigators talked to those serving under Mentirosa, or over him, identical comments were repeated robotically: “He’s the best we have. I’m proud to serve with him. He’s a credit to the uniform.” After five interviews, it was clear everyone was coached and afraid. Even with George W. Bush in office, there was still a veil of protection around the Warrant Officer.

Neil was stymied. He saw no chink in the defense’s armor…not until he had approached Mentirosa on the stand two days before, after he was first sworn in to testify. As Neil
approached with photos taken in the evening hours, showing how dimly lit the streets were near
the Brauhaus, he had noticed something odd about the service ribbons on Mentirosa’s uniform.

Neil turned to continue his cross-examination. “Yes, we established all of this before, but I
want Chief Mentirosa to confirm again, to this court, that he was absolutely sure that Lieutenant
Nicholson, and not some other woman, was entering the nightclub.”

Mentirosa looked over at Villanueva, who then snapped a nod. “Yes, I’m sure. Anyone on
base who’s ever seen her in that red dress would know. I don’t mean any disrespect, but it was
the sexiest thing any of us…ah…that I had ever seen. I mean, she was a real stand out. She
came out of the Officer’s Ball last year and everybody there was stunned. Those of us serving
the officers saw how the wives whispered. I saw several pull their husbands by their arms.”

There was a wave of snickering in the audience.

“I won’t tolerate even the slightest disturbance in my court, ladies and gentlemen. That is my
final warning.” Commander Henderson was red-faced and barely composed.

“That’s quite a bit more detail than I was expecting, Chief.” Neil approached the Judge and
spoke quietly, away from earshot of the onlookers, “I would ask the Judge if he would be so kind
as to strike the comments about the officer’s wives from the record. That’s inappropriate and
opinion unrelated to this matter. Is the Bailiff prepared to allow the entry of my testing
materials?”

The Judge looked at the court reporter and nodded. “Make it so. I appreciate your discretion
as an Officer, Captain Neil. Captain Neil, you may proceed with the testing materials. Bailiff,
allow entry into the courtroom when the materials arrive.”

Mentirosa could not look at the prosecution desk. Villanueva was glaring bullets through
him. The Major’s lips were pursed so tight that they disappeared. Neil looked across at him, as
he returned to the defense desk. For a moment, he noted darkness about his nemesis, as if a storm cloud had taken the sunlight from his surroundings. It distracted Neil as he began rustling through papers he pulled from his satchel before turning to face the witness stand.

“Since Lieutenant Nicholson shops locally, wouldn’t it be possible that someone else might have been wearing the exact style of dress? How good is your memory, Chief?” Neil waited as Mentirosa hesitated.

“Chief, answer the question.” The Judge added a stern frown to his command.

“Maybe. I don’t know about such things.”

“But,” continued Neil, “You are claiming to be an expert witness. You’ve stated you are sure that no other woman in Stuttgart could own the same dress. Yes or no, Chief?”

Villanueva began tapping his pencil hard against his desk. He gave no direction to the witness.

“I’m a trained radar expert. I know how to identify shapes, figures, designs, patterns and any geometrics you can throw at me. I don’t think I’d make a mistake about that dress. I memorize hundreds of patterns. I teach others the same thing. I can draw you a diagram of air traffic I saw a month ago. Just name the day.”

There was a slight commotion at the back of the courtroom as a visitor moved a rolling wardrobe bar towards the defense area. The Bailiff waved the JAG defense assistant to move the three, bagged garments to the front of the Defense table.

“What is the meaning of this, your Honor? You did not make me aware of any introduction of new evidence. This is highly unusual behavior. Rule 9.1 states that…”

“Sit down, Major. Don’t quote the court protocols to us. Let Defense explain, and then I’ll make a ruling.” The Judge turned his sharp gaze back to Neil as Villanueva returned to his chair.
“I assure this court that I am not introducing any new evidence from the scene or that was collected from the witness or Lieutenant Nicholson. This is simply a test of the witness’s account based on previous testimony. This is to verify his memory is capable of recalling details from months ago. That is allowed, I believe, and does not require previous disclosure to the Court or to the Prosecution. Your Honor?”

“You are correct, Captain, but this Court has had its patience tested already. Major, your objection is overruled. Go ahead, Captain, but this had better be relevant.”

“Thank you, your Honor. Now, to the identity of the dress. I am going to address that in a moment, but first I want to challenge whether the Chief was actually watching the football game that night at the bar. Do you consider yourself a fan of the teams that were playing, Chief?”

“Only the Packers,” Mentirosa returned, sitting up straight. His comfort level was returning.

“And do you recall who they played and who won?”

“Yes. The Packers. It was a squeaker. They won by three points, thirty-seven to thirty four.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Absolutely.”

“So,” continued Neil, “If I was to show you the jersey of the quarterback for each team, you could identify both the team and the quarterback? And please, I just want a yes or no answer. Don’t give me any names or numbers yet.”

“Yes.” By now, Mentirosa was sitting with full attention and leaning towards the Defense.

“Your Honor, I would request the Court to advise everyone in this room to remain absolutely silent and to make no motion of any kind when I reveal these jerseys. The Defense does not wish anything to interfere with the Chief’s ability to provide proof of his ability to recall the facts relevant to that evening.”
“Captain, you are straining our protocols, but I will honor the request. And Major, you put down your pencil and look towards the attending judges. I’ve seen the directions you’ve given the witness. I have no intention of this case going to another court for appeal because of coaching during testimony. To those of you in the audience, especially our friends in the media, be warned that any movement or talking on your part will be considered as contempt of this court. You are on a military reservation, as civilians, but you can be charged for interference of our proceedings…so zip it! Captain?”

“Thank you, your honor. All right, Chief Mentirosa, I will hold these two jerseys up in a moment and you tell me the name of the quarterback and the team he played for that night. Do you understand, yes or no?

“Yes.”

Neil called one of his assistants from those seated behind the defense table. Neil had the assistant hold two of the black, plastic clothing bags by their hangars as Neil unzipped them. He pulled them off the coverings, clearly revealing one outfit with a large number four and the other with a large number seven.

“Your Honor, I request the Court to label these jerseys as Exhibit Roman Numeral one and two. Chief, can you see the numbers plainly enough for identification, yes or no?

“Yes, I can see them.”

“What are the numbers, Chief, and just the numbers?”

“Four and Seven.”

“Will the Court please note that?”

“So noted, Captain,” the Judge replied, pointing to the Court Recorder. “Proceed.” The Judge was now leaning toward the Defense.
“To ensure we don’t confuse the court about the NFL Teams and their clothing, I just want to explain that they don’t wear their home colors when they are on the road. Chief, do you remember where the game was played, and who would be wearing their home colors?”

“Yes. The game was at Lambeau, in Green Bay. So Green Bay would be wearing their dark colors and Atlanta their light ones. Looks like you got that right.”

“Now, Chief, tell me who the quarter backs are and the teams they play for, based on these uniforms.”

“Piece of cake. Everybody knows I’m a detail guy. Four is Brett Favre. Everybody here should know that. Seven is that rookie, Vick. He’s something else. Now prove me wrong.”

“The witness will refrain from questioning the Defense, or I’ll place you in contempt. Do you understand, Chief.”

“Yes, Commander, uh…your Honor.”

The courtroom was dead silent. Neil could feel the fury rolling off of Villanueva. He could not protest the proceedings and he was under the direct observation of the entire Judges’ gallery. Neil gazed past him, quickly, and got the sense of a smoldering fire ready to erupt.

“You have named the quarterbacks correctly, Chief.” Neal turned the two jerseys around and held them up so the judges, the witness and the audience could all see that the names matched the witness’s testimony.

“Then we have verified you know your teams well, and who played that night. Atlanta with their white and red colors—Green Bay with their gold letters on Green. Are we in agreement so far, yes or no, Chief?” Neil raised each jersey as he noted each team’s name.

“Yes.”
“Good. Then let me show you one more test for the purpose of your memory.” Neil pointed at his assistant to come forward again to help open the third covered garment. “I request that the Court identify this dress as Exhibit Roman Numeral three. This, Chief, is the same style of dress we found at a local dress shop in Stuttgart. We still have the Lieutenant’s dress on display in this courtroom, to your left. Isn’t it possible that you just saw someone else wearing the same dress, now that you’ve seen both? Yes or no?”

“No, not possible.”

“No?” Neil questioned sharply, stepping away from the second dress he was holding up.

“And on what basis can you make that statement?”

“I told you I know patterns. Look at the bottom of the dress you have. It’s cut even. The dress the Lieutenant wore was cut kind of crooked. I don’t know what you call it, but they aren’t identical.”

“So, based solely on the design of the cloth, you are sure these are not the same dress?”

“Yes, that’s the difference.” The Chief settled back in his chair and let out a sigh. There was no signal or guidance from Villanueva.

Neil placed the dress he was holding on the table directly in front of Nicholson. He looked at her face and her expanded irises. He held a finger to his lips while his back was to the witness.

“Would you tell the Court, Chief, how long you have been a Warrant Officer?”

“Five years.”

“So, you should know all of the responsibilities and qualifications for your rank. Is that true, yes or no?”

“Yes.”
“Then I will tell you something you don’t know, Chief. Your Honor, may I approach the witness?” The Judge nodded in agreement. With that, Neil walked briskly to the witness stand and barked at the witness. “For all those years you had the lives of hundreds of Marine and Navy pilots in your care and you couldn’t tell the difference between red and green. That’s a direct violation of military regulations for anyone to serve as a Chief Warrant Officer, especially in sensitive positions. Isn’t that so, Chief? Answer the question.”

Mentirosa’s eyes popped wide open. He grasped the arms of his chair to support himself from slumping backward from the Captain’s onslaught.

“Your Honor,” Villanueva rose, poised to fight. “This is badgering the witness. We are not here to question the…”

“Sit down,” the Judge said, slowly. “And if I hear another objection from you during this cross examination it will be the last you ever raise in this or any other military court.”

“Your Honor,” Neil interrupted. “Someone helped this man forge his papers and to falsely pass one of the basic tests required for entry into any of the armed forces. He’s a sham. He has no credibility. He couldn’t tell the green dress we produced here to the Court from the Lieutenant Nicholson’s red dress just ten feet from where he is sitting. He couldn’t tell that we changed the colors on the football uniforms. It is not the Defense’s responsibility to charge this witness with crimes against this Court or the Marine Corps, but I do move for immediate dismissal of U.S. versus Lieutenant Grace Nicholson. This is a mistrial as there has been false evidence brought against an honorable Marine. She has shown valor more than once in the field of battle: a place unworthy to be walked upon by the likes of this witness.” Neil pointed at the witness and then turned back to face his client. He could see the tears welling in her eyes.
“Captain, based on what this Court has seen today, I have no choice but to dismiss all charges against Lieutenant Nicholson, with the approval of my fellow judges.” Henderson turned to the panel of sitting judges. “How say you?” Each responded with a yes, for the record. “With that, Captain, your client is released back to service and this trial is closed. The witness will be remanded to the Bailiff for incarceration until the court agrees on formal charges. And Major Villanueva, you will be called to a review board within thirty days to evaluate placing an admonishment on your record as a jurist for the United States military.”

Villanueva stood again, this time throwing a challenge back at the Commander. “You Navy people have no authority over the Army. You invited me to this kangaroo court. You can’t challenge my right to prosecute based on this witness.”

“Maybe they can’t, but I can.” A bellowing voice rose out of the visitors’ ranks as the media headed to the doors to send in their reports and guests moved forward to support Nicholson.

“And who are you, sir?” Commander Henderson scowled at the silver-haired man in golf clothing.

“I’m Colonel Otis Hastings from JAG. I heard about this trial this morning when I flew in from Naples, so I thought I’d pop in unannounced to do a silent review of how the UMCJ is being administered in Germany. I’m going to leave in a minute. I’m running late on my way to a golf game with General Mendelssohn, but I had to see how this was going to conclude. You run a great court here, Commander. That Captain did the Corps a great service today…and as for the former Major, here…well, I think he’ll fit just fine in a Lieutenant’s suit for a while. Maybe a little visit to the front lines might clean up his respect for superior officers.”

Neil only heard part of the exchange going on behind him. Most of his attention was focused on Grace Nicholson and the support from her family and friends. He had his assistant seal up the
clothing to return them to the JAG offices. Neil then turned and walked past the bailiff as he was taking Mentirosa away in handcuffs. Neil continued briskly to the far side of the courtroom to retrieve the famous red dress so he could personally return it to its rightful owner. He unknowingly stepped into the crossfire between the bench and the Major Villanueva.

Slimy, pale hands were around his throat before Neil had a chance to think. His warrior training took over as he struck Villanueva and left him struggling on the floor.

“Major…why…I didn’t know…” Neil knew the repercussions for striking a superior officer, especially with witnesses, and in a courtroom.

“If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll kill you, you stinking…”

Villanueva couldn’t complete his curse as the bailiff pounced on the Major like an angry wasp, clubbing him and then dragging him away, bloodied and incoherent, along with his star witness.

Neil finished his task, though still shaken. He rested the dress in front of Nicholson. She looked at it and handed it back. “No, you keep it as a reminder of today. I could never wear it again. I wouldn’t call it a battle trophy, but if I could turn it into a medal I’d pin it on you.” She smiled, weakly, and joined her family out of the courtroom.

Neil felt another hand on him, but this time on his right shoulder. “Outstanding, Marine, just outstanding work as a Judge Advocate’s defender. I wished I had you under my command.” Commander Henderson smiled broadly into the weary eyes of the Captain. “So, what gave it away? How did you figure the Chief was covering up his own lies?”

“Pure accident, I guess. During the first day of his testimony, I noticed the Chief had his Meritorious Service ribbon and Commendation ribbon switched. Nobody in the Corps would make that mistake, unless they couldn’t tell them apart. They both have the same pattern, but
one is red and one is green. Then the second day the ribbons were fixed. That just didn’t make any sense. So, I just thought I’d play the hunch. I could have been wrong. It’s not in his service record.”

“That was quite a gamble. Do you think it was worth it?”

“You mean, is she guilty? Not my call, Colonel. I just know she’s a fighter. We need good Marines who are full of grit and smarts. She earned the right to walk out of here back where she wants to be. That’s all I need to know.”

“Officer and a gentleman, as always. You ever need anything, just call. I’ll be putting in a commendation for you to be our next Senior Defense Counsel. You saved all of us a lot of headaches today.” He shook Neil’s hand firmly and then turned back to confer with his judiciary colleagues about formal actions against Villanueva and Mentirosa.

Neil left the jurists behind and headed back to his car, wondering about taking some time away from the stress and publicity of the trial. There would be plenty of coverage in the military press, as well as many of the public rags. He didn’t care. All he wanted now was a place far off the beaten path where no one cared about war, officers or people’s sexual preferences. He was almost out of the building when a woman in a dark-blue, knee-length dress stepped forward out of an alcove. Neil was taken back by her exquisite German features, her height and striking, periwinkle-blue eyes. However, he couldn’t remember ever seeing her on base before and she wasn’t a client.

“May I talk a moment?” she asked in a heavy German accent.

“What is the nature of your business here? I don’t believe I know you.”
“Oh, but Captain Neil, I know you so much. There is so little I can give for thanks for what you did today. I cannot say much. I am not supposed to…but you have the red dress. It was my gift, once.”

“I get it. Okay, you can have it back.” He reached to unlock the leather case.

“No, no,” she stopped him, her hand on his wrist. “You were heroic. So…so smart and brave against them all. She is like that, too, but alone in all of this. Everyone abandoned her. They forget the holes in her body from her battles. They forget her nights, alone, in hospitals, wondering if she would live. I don’t forget. I won’t forget you.” She stroked his forehead just under the brim of his hat.”

“Look, fraulein, I just did my job. It’s what my family has always done…uphold honor and justice, and protect the innocent. I wish you well but I really can’t talk to you or I risk being questioned. It really is best that I won’t see you again.”

Neil walked away but unable to keep his promise. In three years, he would be the one hiding from the crowds, in a grove of trees overlooking that same veiled young woman in a dark-blue dress, dropping a rose into a grave at Arlington National Cemetery.
Chapter 3

June, 2003   U.S. European Command Offices, Stuttgart, Germany

Max Newsome was a hulk. Courtrooms were smaller when he entered. Oxygen was depleted. At six-foot-eight and almost four hundred pounds, Max propelled shadows that wilted lawns from lack of sunlight. His giant, black paws rested calmly on his pistol handle, even if he dozed for a second—habit from the battlefield before he became part of the base Military Police.

Neil trusted Max and his gentle nature, while knowing full well how powerful the giant was in battle. No JAG officer could ever want for more security during proceedings than from a bailiff like Sergeant Newsome. The life Neil experienced in San Francisco was as foreign to this Alabama native as life on the Moon. Their friendship was based on a shared trust in ‘good people and good beer.’ Germany was kind to Newsome. There were no lynchings of black men in the depths of night. He didn’t have to take care to stay in the approved parts of town. Men and women of all races and cultures spoke to him with respect. Even though Neil was an officer, the issue of fraternizing was never raised. They spoke to each other as two brothers. Neal could never thank him enough for claiming Max struck Major Villanueva to the floor after he attacked the Captain. It saved Neil’s rank and a messy court martial.

“Yes, I’m going to take a long break this time. I should have taken a vacation after the Nicholson case, but then the trial for the sexual assault on a civilian came in. Lucky me. I never wanted that case, but you don’t have a choice in those things. There were times when I wanted to off that defendant Samuels myself. Three cases later and I’m cooked…fried. I haven’t had a decent day off in six months.” Neil lifted another tankard of Berliner Weisse. The tangy bite was
refreshing after tough closing remarks in initial hearing for an officer caught in a drug-smuggling ring. Neil’s success with the dismissal, based on lack of evidence, made his growing reputation even stronger. Commander Henderson’s commendations were raising hackles with his boss. Craig’s elevation in the eyes of Command officers threatened his JAG supervisor. He remembered what his Major in Kuwait City had told him as he pinned his silver star onto his hospital pillow, “You earned your medal, Lieutenant, but there will always be some desk jockey that envies you. Beware of those lounge-lizard types that have the Pentagon in their eyes.”

Max’s bear paw wrapped around his chilled pilsner. He belched lowly, turning away from his companion. “Sorry.”

“I told you about that light stuff. Too much carbonation for me. You have to be thinking about your figure one of these days, Maxie.”

“Wife’s got me on a new kick…cut the bread and red meat. God awful. Even replaced potatoes with cauliflower?”

“Not possible. That could kill an Irishman.” Neil smiled as the waitress brought his fresh brat sandwich.

“Hmmmm, and you have to eat that in front of me. I thought you were against torture.”

“I can only imagine your diet in Alabam’: grits and pork rinds. But no taters? I’d choke before I ate a cauliflower.”

“It’s not too bad. You come over some night and I’ll show you. You boil ‘em up and add chicken broth. With a little salt and pepper, and a good blender, you might not be able to tell the difference.”

“Oh, I’ll take that bet. Catholics eat so many spuds we have eyes in the back of our heads.”
They both laughed and took fresh swallows of their brews. Neil pulled a folded map out of his pocket and spread it on the small, wooden table they shared.

“What I wanted this time was to get where nobody can yank me with a phone, telegraph, or an MP charging in on a four-wheel drive jeep. This ought to do it…out there in Montenegro.”

“Neil, are you shitting me? That’s a hot spot. Nobody from the U.S. would dare poke around those parts. They’re still killing each other in little private slayings and they aren’t too hep on some of the aid Clinton gave the Muslims. The Klan has nothing on those folks.”

“I’m aware. I’m headed down here, near Mojkovac, a few miles from the Biogradska Gora National Park. That’s on the other side of the country from Pljevlja. Wouldn’t go near that pesthole, even if you were guarding me with an Abrams. Don’t happen to have one handy, do you?”

Neil tapped his glass against his pal’s, but there was no smile across the table, only concern.

“C’mon. What the hell could be so important you’d risk going into that mess…and into some god forsaken forest full of gypsies or worse.” Max made his glass disappear as he wrapped his hands around the frosty suds.

“See, that’s what too much time in courtrooms will do to you…like jail duty. You see everyone as scum, cheats, liars and killers. Thank God, that’s just a small part of the world. And hey, I’ve got Roma friends. Gypsies are pretty neat folks once you get to know them…gadjo.”

“It’s got to be something I don’t see. Some woman out there who’s going to meet you with a sleeping bag and a bottle of Napoleonic brandy? Please, tell me it’s that simple.”

“Sorry, Max. Life’s a little more complex than chasing tail. Besides, after my wife died from that flu bug, I just kinda gave up on caring that way again. Just too much pain. I should have been there instead of in some hospital in Kuwait.”
“Wasn’t your fault, man. Really. You gotta move on, bro. There are a hundred women on base who look at you like my Rottie looks at a fresh steak. Time to get back in the game.”

“No games for me. I never want to let another woman down like that. I should have been there for her.”

Max looked away, clearing his throat. “And this trip is going to cure any of that? I don’t see it.”

“Call it a bucket list item. I might not be in Europe forever so I’ve got some time off to capture something few have seen…and it might not even exist.”

“Okay, so you’re going after Big Foot among the loonies.” Max shook his head. He couldn’t look Neil in the face.

“I told you about my father, the cop in San Francisco. Right?”

“Yeah, a few times.”

“He was different than his partners on the force, but they trusted him, anyway. Nature was his hobby. He would take us to Arizona, up to the White Mountains and kibitz with the Apaches. I got a real awakening about nature and how everything is connected.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think ‘kibitz’ is the right word for Indian experiences. Kind of mixing your cultures, huh?” Max smirked, finally hoping to catch even a brief faux pas.

“Okay…the point being, I took up photography and hunted with a camera. I didn’t want to do the Ansel Adams stuff. Sure, the grandeur of mountains and sky are wonderful, but I wanted to get into the living things no one else sees or cares about. My first macro lens let me capture beetles, ants and flies that even the entomologist at San Francisco State couldn’t identify. It was terrific. But I never told him where I took them because he’d just go there, grab them, and then
stick them with a pin or pickle them in alcohol. That’s not what the Apache taught me, or my old man.”

“Christ, no wonder you’re a defense lawyer. This explains plenty…and yet you fought on the battlefield. I don’t get it.”

“There is honor in defending yourself when what you believe is true, even if others stand against it. Dad only had to use his service revolver once. He didn’t miss. I understood that and honored his sorrow for the taking of life, but he never regretted defending others when he had to use force.”

“That’s straight. Clear. You ought to write this shit down some place. It might help others understand.” Max raised his hand for the barmaid to bring two more.

“No…enough for me, buddy. I’ve got to catch a plane in the morning. Got a redeye to Sarajevo, then rent a motorcycle and drive to Mojkovac. Weather looks good and should be perfect for camping while I pursue the rare Papilio alexanor.”

“You even know her name? I thought there were no broads on this trip.”

“You are a wonder, pal. No, this one is bright yellow with a swooping, delicate tail. You might have seen one like her back home. Ever notice a swallowtail butterfly?”

“The big yellow ones? Sure. I remember them in summer. We used them for fish bait.”

Neil shook his head and sighed. “Well, then you caught nothing. The yellow and black is a warning sign in nature. Supposedly they taste awful.”

“Can’t say I ever ate one…but I never ate a bullet, either. Listening to you ramble on about bugs for your vacation makes me want to play Russian roulette with a full chamber.”
“Now, now. I thought our little forays into the Brauhaus kept you sane.” Neil tipped back his glass to empty the last dribbles on the bottom to clear the last of his food before he prepared to rise.

“Sure. Who else can I discuss the daily bullshit with that goes on in that courtroom? The wife doesn’t want to hear it. Nobody else would understand. This is sort of my version of cheap therapy. Better than having the head hunter shrink wrap me.”

Neil pushed back his chair and chuckled with his cohort. “I’ll remember that line. Not that I don’t respect Major Cummings, but she can be a wandering pain in the ass at times. Never did care for her mind games, but that’s her job to check on us after the garbage we collect in the courtroom. Hey, don’t forget to tell the gal to only bring you just one. You’re driving yourself home.”

“After the butterfly story…I’ll need the extra. Here’s the deal, though. Don’t make me come looking for you, Neil. I mean it. That’s a chunk of hell you’re headed to for fun. There aren’t many folks I’d go busting into the dark side to find. Friends are a rationed commodity around here.”

“Same to you, Max. I’ll watch my back. Just keep that light in the window.” Neal put his leather jacket on to protect from the chill of the stormy air in Stuttgart.

“For you…buddy…I think I’ll keep a net handy.” Max forced a weak smile as his companion headed through the noisy crowd and smoke into the dank of the Stuttgart fog left after a late-afternoon shower. For the weary lawyer it was a gentle reminder of San Francisco summer nights.
The flight on Croatia Air was comfortable by European standards, typically sterile in its blue and white interior. The plane was only half-full for a mid-week hop that stopped at Zagreb first before Sarajevo, and then on to Dubrovnik. The open seating was a bonus, helping to prevent crowded conditions amongst Croats and Serbs who found bathing only a weekly necessity at best. The fresh morning fare was a surprise, with strong coffee to keep his eyes open. Neil was the lone passenger to exit at Sarajevo. There were no passengers waiting on the tarmac to board. The pilot wasted no time in turning to leave Neil alone with his baggage, without ground transport to aid in the long walk to the customs checkpoint. His passport and military standing were carefully evaluated by the military police and customs agents. They questioned his camera and laughed at his reason for visiting, until he mentioned visiting the forests in Montenegro. He knew enough of the language to decipher one officer calling him a fool. Tensions grew after the metal detector found shrapnel remains in his leg. Questions also arose about his neckwear. Marine dog tags had to be worn at all times. He had no choice. The seven-pointed star surprised them as it appeared on the Croatian flag posted behind their desk. He was interrogated about his loyalties in the civil war and if he worked for the Croats. Everyone in Europe was on edge after the 9/11 attacks. American anger might strike anywhere. After an hour of tense discussions, and visits to the Internet connection in the airport, Neil was able to convince them that the silver star he wore around his neck was cut out of his father’s badge from the San Francisco Police Department. One of the customs officers had been to San Francisco, leading to many smiles and shared cigarettes. Finally, with his passport cleared, he retrieved his backpack and camera.

One of the security guards offered a ride to the nearby rental agency where a motorcycle reservation was waiting. The rental agent reflected the state of local buildings, eroded and missing parts, and in her case, most of her teeth. The rest were black and painful protrusions. She
smelled of liverwurst and onions, but the paperwork was amazingly brief. Neil passed on the free map, noting it had been used by others who left food and other spew on the edges. He was happy to see Sarajevo far behind in his rearview mirror, with its pockmarked buildings, as he headed south to Montenegro.

A five-hour drive, that’s what the guidebook suggested. Yes, there would be several border crossings to deal with, but he had planned for that, with extra cash to wheedle through the corruption, but entering Montenegro proved painful. Guards there had never been to San Francisco and were less supportive of American military visiting, especially with a camera. The ride before the crossing had been uneventful, outside of the breathtaking scenery, including precipitous drop-offs with burned-out troop carriers and even a tank deep in the recesses of mountainous canyons. He didn’t stop to take pictures. Battlefield memories already percolated in his sleep. The scenery made it clear the war between Serbs and Croats would be a deep, fresh wound on this trip. Max’s warnings became more relevant as Neil prepared to mount his ride, painfully, after a recent body cavity search. *Just a few more hours to Mojkovac,* he thought, *where clean sheets and a long rest were waiting.*

Heat and chill repeated as he repeatedly crested peaks unprotected from summer blaze and then descended into deep shadows of ancient forests. The vegetation of Montenegro had more ominous odors than the sweet, pine covered woodlands of the Sierra’s Neil and his father visited often near Lake Tahoe. There was no pine incense from overheated beetle pitch-outs. Some of the clearings in the twisted Montenegro roadways still effervesced of sulfurous propellants from positions of heavy artillery that once pummeled the passes on either side. Thankfully, rotting bodies were missing, with their stench of putrescence ripping the air sterile. Still, his memories from cordite pushed the acid from his stomach up to his throat. This bucket list number was not
worth the price. He moved ahead, pushing the rattling engine hard around hairpin
turns…anything to get away from the vapors of his past.

Mojkovac nestled below the peaks ahead as his bike topped the last peak. It seemed quiet
enough through the shallow valley. The town was spread out with the typical whitewashed walls
and red tile roofs left from the Roman Empire influences. Slices of shadow were already
covering the mountains to the east so Neil did not tarry to grab a Kodak moment. His legs were
tired, and pained as the shrapnel reminded him he wasn’t eighteen. Potholes and bike noise had
removed any aftereffects of Mr. Pokey at the federal border crossing. All he could think of now
was a soft pillow after a cold beer.

“Pivo, molim,” he asked a crusty bartender serving his table. The tavern was a short
walk from his room at the bed and breakfast. The owner there, Marta, recommended the quaint
bar. His basic Serbian language training from Monterrey, California sufficed to get him through
a few days with locals, but beyond that, he’d be scraping the barrel. The beer he ordered came in
a ceramic stein. Neil preferred to see anything liquid to be brought in a glass since his time in
Kuwait, but after the torture chamber ride, he would have taken mule piss.

“Can I get something for you?” The bartender asked in broken English. He was
obviously the cook and the owner of the rustic dinner. The layout reminded Neil of the tables in
Nevada County, California, where the Basque shepherders all shared whatever came from the
kitchen at a roundtable of strangers playing ‘guess what that is?’

“Do you have Ćevapi?” That seemed a safe bet. Meat pie was common throughout the
Balkans. Every country had their own twist on the recipe, but inns and taverns usually had one or
two at the ready.
“Oh, we have best. My wife has fresh. I back shortly. You Canada? I had people Winnipeg last year, visiting park.” The overweight server struggled with each English word and was pleased that his visitor was following him as he wagged his head at Neil.

“No, my Mother was. I’m also going to the Park, tomorrow, but way back away from the lake, along the back trails near the streams and far meadows. I’m looking for areas people don’t go.”

Neil had forgotten about the bright, red maple leaf insignia on the back of his leather jacket. That habit came long before this trip, whenever he traveled alone. No U.S. flags or hardware. There was a growing dislike of Americans worldwide after their entry into Iraq in Desert Storm. Neil learned that hard lesson on a recovery leave to Paris in 1992 when he wore a Yankees’ ball cap. Now he made sure his dog tags were buried under his t-shirt, but he’d forgotten about the star on his silver chain, which dislodged after a quick change in his room. It drooped forward as he leaned over his stein.

“My mother was French Canadian from Quebec City. She met my father during the Korean War when he was Scottish military police assigned to NATO in Brussels. She was an interpreter for the Royal Canadian Mounties working on Interpol cases. She got her man, all right, and then they migrated to the U.S. They both wanted a fresh start so they settled in San Francisco, where my father was on the police force for thirty years. Mom was a professor at San Francisco State. I wear the jacket to honor her, bless her soul. She was a wonderful person. I miss her, deeply.” Neil’s head remained lowered as he opened up, blathering out his life story. It slipped out of him like syrup that had waited years to find release after being pent up in a cold refrigerator. He looked up but there was no one around, not even at the other tables. He was mystified, hoping he hadn’t embarrassed himself by being too open to strangers.
Davor whispered to his wife, Bula, behind a pantry door in the kitchen of the inn. “He is the one Marta told me about. He is a crazy American. Who knows why he is here? Maybe they will attack us if they think Muslim terrorists live here.”

“Davor, we are safe. Jesus is with us. Give him the Ćevapi. Take his money, but don’t say anything.”

“But Bula, he wears the Croat star and he is headed into…” Davor looked up as he made the sign of the cross.

“Aye, maybe you should warn him,” she stressed. “That star won’t protect him there.”

“Wife, we owe him nothing. He could be hunting for Muslims. Maybe he makes a mistake and we are bombed, again. Let the woods take him. He’s not one of ours. Maybe Marta will share his things when he doesn’t come back. Who would come looking for him here? That idiot from Poland didn’t listen. Nobody came for him…but who cares? He tried to rape Marta.”

Davor brought the pie on a fine ceramic plate and warned Neil that it was still hot. Fumes of fresh herbs and finely roasted lamb rose up to the visitor’s tired nostrils. He smiled at the server, but Davor moved quickly back to the kitchen, avoiding gazing at the seven-pointed star and its cursed owner.
Chapter 4

June, 2003  Mojkovac, Montenegro

Chill from exposed toes woke him, not sunlight escaping slowly, migrating over his scruffy face through wooden shudders above an overstuffed mattress. Morning phlegm grappled with his throat. Rubbing his eyes vigorously above the new dark baggage beneath them, he remembered duck feather allergies. An oversight, to be sure, but motorcycle fatigue overwhelmed his caution to screen his hosts before crashing in his rented room. He cleared his sinuses with a mighty sneeze as he rose, startled from collateral damage from down’s comfort.

“Ah, shit,” he muttered, after checking his watch. It was ten thirty. He had lost the morning. After a quick run to a shared restroom, followed by a sloppy shave, he raced to dress, left the room hastily and rushed downstairs to catch a bite before heading to the national park. His camera slung sideways across his back as the strap rubbed from the front against his bare neck. He disregarded the possible chill of the season by wearing only his favorite long-sleeved chambray shirt over a pair of tan cargo pants leftover from college days. They were filled with field snacks, additional photo supplies and his created local maps.

He had hoped for a scrumptious breakfast bar waiting below in the rustic kitchen. Even a leftover dumpling or breakfast roll would suffice. He might survive a hurried reconnoiter into more unfrequented portions of the ancient groves with just a few bites of heavier carbs. Hoof beat crescendos filled the half-empty first floor as Neil charged downward, forgetting etiquette and visitor’s manners. A quick scan of the dining table and empty kitchen made it clear he had missed breakfast. There would be nothing left for a quick bite. Not here. He slicked back his hair.
and headed for the inn down the main drive where they might start lunch early, at eleven o’clock. Luckily, he scrounged a bite of börek and a quick beer…just enough to mute his growling innards.

Sputtering starts were expected from contaminated fuels sold along the route to Mojkovac, especially at Dobrilovina where a road vendor sold milk and petrol from identical, cloudy plastic bottles. Craig was glad this was a rental and not his bike begging for months of repairs as bits of yogurt or cheese drifted through the fuel lines, only to end up stuck in the engine block. Somehow warmth from midday sun kept the engine gurgling as he headed south to the Biogradska Gora National Park. The park’s layout was indelibly etched in his memory. Craig’s eidetic skills served him well in law school and on battlefields. He could remember instantly, in graphic format, any information he had ever studied since childhood. Maps were his strong interest, second only to mental catalogues of wildlife, especially butterflies.

The beech woods near the park entry added another layer of surprise for the senses. Primeval forests exuded a mysterious essence, even with their pockets of shredded tops excised from artillery blasts. The lush vegetation seemed inviting, but stood incredibly dense. This was not an area for errant hikers to challenge. Yes, an ancient place, but not necessarily friendly to visitors. He felt invisible eyes on him, sequestered in thick brush. It was a survival sense developed in reconnaissance patrols.

After passing through an entry portal for registration, where he was given a poorly printed site map, he continued along the main road past crude camping locations and docks lining a scenic lake huddled beneath idyllic mountain backdrops. This was not his target. He stopped suddenly, almost toppling the bike. A tan and black rope moved across his path, hesitating for a moment to writhe, curl, and then move slightly forward, still blocking the trail.
Craig had heard of European Adders, but in all his hikes through the forests of northern Europe, he had never seen one, even when digging through thickets to find small butterflies hidden under overhanging branches in the Black Forest. He turned the bike key to off and pushed the kickstand down, leaving the bike secure as he moved on foot toward the snake. Placing his left hand palm downward, toward the ground, he walked ahead slowly, whistling in a high pitch. He edged forward with his right index finger pointed directly at the serpent’s head. The viper’s wiggling increased as he neared. Craig’s whistling grew louder. And like that, the adder sped away into the debris-filled ditch and off into the leaf litter of the adjoining forest.

“Deaf, my ass! Those herpetologists in Arizona have a lot to learn from Indians.” He smiled after his short tirade, heading back to his ride after reviewing blurry black-and-white lines of the map provided by the park ranger. It certainly did not match with the aerial reconnaissance provided by an intelligence officer he knew in Naples. Of course, during the war, having an accurate map was reason enough to be shot by an enemy. Even park rangers still had fears of returning hostilities. After securing the paper, he looked at the sun’s position and growing shadows to evaluate his travel strategies for the day’s remains.

“Not much time left, buddy. Better scout out a shoot for tomorrow, early. Butterflies will be slower then, anyway…and hungrier. Okay, off we go.” The bike roared back to life.

Student visitors from Greece and Albania were far behind him as he departed the main road, heading for a riverbed on his maps. He anticipated a clearing near a spring in an off-road zone: a holm brimming from the recent rains as overflow lapped from the nearby Katun River. He paid no regard to signs warning to stay out of the area. There were no minefield logos, just a red hand with the word “STANI,” followed by six exclamation points. The international symbol
with a skull for minefields was missing. Forbidden, yes, but not because of munitions left from civil war.

Dust, small mud clods and leaves flipped behind him as he pushed on in low gear, avoiding rocks and limb falls along a deserted logging road. It was slow going. He stopped to inspect several ruins to his right, remnants from an abandoned village centuries old and overgrown. Eroded chimney spikes rose above vines and softened outlines of fallen stonewalls. After relieving himself behind the remains of a rotting fireplace, he peeked through the brush to evaluate the path ahead. He caught a glimmer from a flat area where a creek parallel to him meandered into an opening in the dimming forest. That would be his final destination.

After the bike struggled over a collapsed section of road, where flash flooding had scooped out a six-foot depression, he crested a short rise and found himself at the edge of a clear, high-mountain pond reflecting light streaming through the canyons far ahead. Dragonflies swarmed in massive armadas about rushes and weeds lining the banks. Other wildlife was missing, even common swallows and black birds. He was aware there could be a stray predator wandering this low beyond the peaks, but the spring had been wet. They might not be foraging to the river until fall. Probably too early for migrating birds, he thought, but this spot is bound to be a haven for a rare chamois or bear wandering down from the mountains at night. I wonder if my butterfly finds this a place of safety. I wouldn’t want to camp here after dark.

Flowers were plentiful on the perimeter, past the granite-lined creek flowing to the right of a spring-fed pool. Stalks of dark purple monkshood rose above scattered vines and weeds, as did lighter purple bellflowers spreading across rocks raised along the pond’s edge. Vibrant pink water lilies buffeted in the East wind breeze rising through the cool emerging shade of beech, hornbeam and occasional maple trees pressed close together to the stream’s edge.
It all seemed idyllic to support a healthy ecosystem, with food, water and foliage protection for every vulnerable creature. The stillness surprised him as he planned his shooting schedule and preferred butterfly haunts. Over a hundred bird species, including eagles, should have appeared over the river and pond, but it was still, except for the whispering of the breeze through the treetops.

The glory of late spring should have left him smiling and quiet, away from the noise of his ride, after a late start from a previous day’s hard travel, but there was no such calming comfort. The screaming meemies, as he called them, rolled over his skin, raising the hair over his neck. He reminisced to a decade before where he visited hard-sand coves around the Bath House ruins in San Francisco, below the ragged riprap hugging the cliff walls. Even in summer, the sparse, late-night crowds on weekdays in Frisco huddled near driftwood fires to keep chills off their California skin. He remembered one night in late July, as he searched for beachcombers with a fire on the beach…anyone. A shapely young woman sauntered past him, ghostly, as she shamelessly stripped bare before entering the cold Bay waters, filled with riptides and sometimes sharks hunting wayward seals. He remembered shaking his head, casually repeating the image of her ivory behind disappearing into black waves beyond his view. He moved on, twenty yards, to join a quiet gathering singing with a lone guitar producing blues, John Denver and even a country western favorite in a California ménage of accidental troubadours. He sat quietly, staring at rustling coals, hardly noticing as the swimmer joined them, now dressed in an orange industrial jumpsuit more fitting for a construction site than the beach. He recalled how her wet hair dried near the fire pit, evolving from dripping dark coils along her shoulders to becoming, in an hour, a flare of red flame with blonde accents. A blue dolphin tattoo on her right hand continually drew his attention.
The music faded as early morning hours crept over the ad hoc tribe, leaving urban vagabonds serenaded by slaps of Pacific waves. It wasn’t unusual to share a fire pit this late, even with occasional interruptions from meandering panhandlers or creepy passersby oozing out of the cityscape. Conversations rose and fell, as a bottle of peppermint schnapps made rounds. There was talk of wars in the Middle East, changing laws about medical marijuana and the loss of friends to AIDS. Then it stopped. The waves stopped. An inky blackness churned just off the water line, hovering above them without warning, blocking out the stars and lights of passing cargo ships. He felt his gut churning as the urge to urinate overwhelmed him. The others sat stunned, speechless, in a catatonic state of fear…and just as suddenly, the specter disappeared. Waves returned. City traffic sounds echoed again against the cliffs as stars replenished in the horizon. Everyone but Craig and the strange, redhead swimmer scurried inland, speechless, scrambling back to their cars for a quick retreat. That odd, unexplainable horror somehow bonded Craig to the night swimmer, eventually leading to an altar and vows in only a month of furious courtship with his soul mate, Anne.

Even in the pitch black of desert battles, Craig never felt the deep terror again that he felt that night in California during a bizarre visit from an unknown force prepared to swallow him up from the ocean’s depths…until now…as he felt something creep like an invisible fog from the beech forest’s abiding shadows around the perimeter of the water, where all should be tranquil and soothing. Something was near, watching. He felt compelled to rush back to his bike, but he hesitated. PTSD could play tricks. He often wrestled at night with unfamiliar shadows in a dark bedroom. They spooked him to violent action. It was part of him now—battlefield fatigue. There were no pills to vanquish constant vigilance, or shrinks to rewrap parts of his brain to remove blinding memories. He shook it off and continued after suddenly spying his prey.
The Canon Digital Rebel came off his back and into play immediately as the rare yellow and orange fluttering before him settled precipitously on a slender thread of a nearby log’s arm stuck above the water line. Slices of light from a descending sun caught panes in the butterfly’s wings, perfectly illuminating both wing scales and delicate antennas coming from the insect’s head. He held his breath, focused quickly and began a series of slow, measured sweeps to catch multiple shots at a variety of angles. This was, indeed, the rarest species he sought. Chances were astronomically small to come across this target in the borrowed light on a first visit. He kept a complete focus ahead until he felt a cold breeze behind him and heard snaps of small branches and leaves crackling. He turned.

“Ehh!” he cried out, totally surprised. A blonde girl of about sixteen stood within six feet beyond his reach. She was barefoot and dressed in a simple white gown which, though flowing, did not hide the maturity of her body. Her face fascinated him, as an artist, for it had what he knew as the ‘fey’ effect… unearthly, yet intriguing. Fashion photographers dreamed of models with that compelling charisma, but he was here for the butterflies, not some overcurious local.

“Did I startle you?” she asked, barely above a whisper, in perfect English.

“Yes…and I…well, can you tell me what you are doing out here? You speak flawless English, so you are probably one of the tourists. Shouldn’t you be back with your family?” He was growing a bit concerned, as the road back was perilous, even with the bike. Someone barefooted was likely to acquire serious injuries walking back to the lakeside encampment.

“No, this is my home. I live here.” She came closer, almost floating over the boggy ground.

“That’s interesting. If you’re from here, where did you learn to speak like that? Did you go to a missionary school or something? I thought most schools were closed during the war.”
“There have been many wars here. I did not go to any school. Were you going to harm that creature in front of you?”

He frowned, stepping back as she continued to approach. “Of course not. I don’t kill anything. I just take pictures so other people can see their beauty that I’ve seen. The small, delicate butterflies give many people hope after they have suffered great pains. There is a saying, *Natura in minima maxima* –Nature is the greatest in the smallest things.”

The girl retreated a few feet. “No one has spoken the old language here in thousands of years. Are you one who follows the two eagles?” He could see her eyes widen and a frown grow cross her face.

“You are an odd one, you are. Did the people in the inn send you out here to spook me? Really? Two eagles? That’s the Romans. I’m from the United States. We follow only one eagle, but it is out of respect, not fear, like the Romans.”

“And you have suffered much pain, have you not? Does that butterfly help heal your wounds?”

“That’s really none of your business, little one. This is a gorgeous pond, but it will be dark here soon. I need to get you back to safety, if you let me. It’s dangerous for you to be alone out here.”

“I am never alone. So you are not a warrior? You live in peace with all around you?”

“Aren’t you the inquisitive one? Yes, I was a warrior, but one who tries to create peace. Now I help find justice and hope for other warriors who are lost and broken. I don’t expect you to understand that. So where exactly is your home? Your people will be worried.”

“Are you worried for me?” She smiled softly, as he felt a twinge go up his spine. She floated nearer accompanied by fragrances of jasmine and cedar.
“Hey, just take it easy. I’m just passing through, trying to enjoy the beauty of this place.”

“This is my home.” She stretched her arms about her and toward the forest. “And you, Craig, I have waited for one like you for so long. You are the most unusual of men. Your heart has deep injuries in it from both love and death. I can heal all of that.”

“What the…” He backed away in shock, dropping his camera, stepping a few inches into the pond water.

A mist rose around the intruder as she swirled in form, morphing into a virtual blonde goddess— a Nordic Valkyrie rising from the grasses and muck. She was magnetic, drawing him back to her. He pressed her away, terrified as he stared into her bottomless, coal black eyes. His strange visitor recognized his agony. A transformation began again, this time with his young wife materializing before him, calling his name and murmuring their secret love words. He fell into her arms, never feeling the tree roots gathering around him. Wooden tendrils invaded through his feet and into every organ of his trembling flesh as the Queen of Dryads, Balanis, blended with his tortured soul.
“Major Vincennes,” Max Newsome said, sitting tall before his commanding officer in the 300th Military Police Company, “I don’t make this request lightly. Lieutenant Neil was the most dedicated JAG officer I ever encountered. I’m not talking about his skills alone, but his belief in all of us, equal under the law. He represents our motto, “Of the troops, for the troops.”

The Major’s office was small and carefully appointed with required flags, command awards, bookcases and a single window looking across the quad between military post buildings. There was little room for more than a single chair in front of the worn mahogany desk separating the two men. Max suffered in this sweatbox, as all base units were on energy restrictions. Room temperature was in the eighties, beyond standards for military police headquarters. It showed on sweat over Major Vincennes face, which he wiped occasionally between adjustments of a small fan on his desk. Max had no such relief from office heat.

“Yes, I’m sure he does, Sergeant, or did, but there’s certainly more compelling issues for me to deal with right now. Besides, he’s really the Marine’s problem, not mine. Hell, this heat wave hitting Europe knocked out half the base utilities. We’re guarding secured areas with skeleton crews since the power outage took out cameras and alarms. Then I get word we have to deploy security personnel for NATO going into Afghanistan to take over the peacekeeping operations. That’s horseshit. To top that, yesterday this black out on the East Coast. Hell, we’re still trying to run investigations to see if this is the Reds testing the U.S. grid. Lucky D.C. is still up and running, but the Pentagon is hopping mad. We’re running at elevated threat levels in case Europe
is targeted. Can you imagine how many more would have died in Paris if all their electricity went out across the EU in this heat?”

“I know we’re short. I’ve been stretched all over the place, even with the court shut down for two weeks. I’m not trying to rush a decision on my request late on a Friday afternoon. All I’m asking for is a four-day furlough…time to get down to Montenegro and back to get some clarification on where he went?”

“NCIS sent an agent last week. After a day, all they found was a folded uniform on the forest floor and a rented motorcycle. Nobody in the town knew a damn thing, except for some superstitious mumbo jumbo. I don’t have time for this crap. Sergeant, we’re in the middle of a shit storm. We need all hands. Besides, he’s not the only AWOL. That piss ant prosecuting officer, Villanueva, escaped before we could get the final paperwork to send him off to Kansas for a nice, long stay at Leavenworth. Last I heard there were some accounts of him heading into the mountains in Romania where he has some contacts. Not going to risk sending our folks in there. Romanians still don’t like us on their turf. That’ll change someday when they realize Russians still have an evil eye to rebuild their empire.”

“Can’t say I know anything about that, but I hope Villanueva freezes in a mountain pass. That one was pure trouble. If you remember, he attacked me in the courtroom.”

“Huh, he must have been nuts, alright,” the Major grunted, reviewing Max’s size. “Yeah, almost forgot. Neal cleared you on that. So is this about a debt or just your duty?”

“Maybe a bit of both, but I’d leave the service when my re-up comes next month if I can’t do something to retrieve this guy, no matter what NCIS found.”

“Even for a big guy, you got balls, buddy. You can’t threaten your way into a furlough. Christ, where do they get non-coms these days?”
“Maybe this will change your mind, sir.” Newsome pulled a file folder from his courtroom attaché case. He opened to a specific page for immediate review. The Major’s eyes grew wider as his eyebrows lifted.

“Holy Mother of God. Who else on the base knows about this? A silver star, a bronze star and two purple hearts? He was recommended for a Congressional? Why did you hold this back, Sergeant?”

“I didn’t think I would need this, but these facts obviously trump the call up. We ditch somebody with those honors and we’ll both be back sweeping floors in Leavenworth with Villanueva.”

“Okay,” the Major conceded, leaning back in his chair, letting the squeak in the springs fill the small, dreary office. “I’ll let you have two days. But you be back here by Monday night, or else. I can’t imagine how you’ll do that now, it’s already two o’clock.”

“Already have the tickets and itinerary,” Max replied, tapping the outside of his jacket pocket.

“Big assumption on your part, soldier.”

“Sir, to the bold goes the day. Now if I can just have that NCIS file for the names of who was contacted and what was found during their investigation.” Newsome held his giant paw out towards the stunned officer.

“Okay, friend. I just hope they find someone like you to come looking if I go off the reservation.” He rolled his head back and forth; as he pulled the file drawer open to the left of his desk to retrieve an official inquiry folder. The name Craig Neil was at the top with a red line drawn through the name. He transferred it to the Max, and then sat back. “You can look at it here, and take notes…but the file stays.”
“Can’t ask for more, sir. This won’t take long.” He began skimming through the findings and flipping pages back over to review photos and brief interview notes which he copied from to his personal note pad. In five minutes he handed the slim packet back to the waiting Major.

“One more thing, Max, before you leave…and this is absolutely off the record. We never talked about this.” He leaned forward as he turned on a radio to his left on the dented surface of the polished desk. Sweat from his hand brightened the black knobs.

“I get it…don’t cause an incident. They don’t exactly love us down there and we have no embassy or base to pull my ass out if I get into trouble.”

“More than that.” The Major held his index finger to his lips as he turned up the radio volume. He leaned forward and began to whisper. “Defense Secretary Cohen spent a lot of time with Đukanović in Yugoslavia during the Serbian War. We need a presence on the north side of the Med. The Department has been working a deal with Montenegro to allow one of our ships to port in and out of Bar later this year. Next, in a few years, we’ll have an embassy there. The Ruskies will hate it, but we need it for monitoring some other players. So, you fuck this up, mister, and we’ll be the ones having brooms used on us in Leavenworth. Get the picture?”

“Clear and out.” Max leaned back, stunned by the final revelation before his journey. One mistake and an entire military strategy would be destroyed, along with his career. He rose, saluted, and turned to leave as the Major turned off the local rock station.

Flying red-eye junkets on turboprop carriers was one of Max’s fears. He’d seen them crash enough times in fog in the woodland hills of Alabama. Luckily, the weather into Montenegro held during his flight. He only had to use the barf bag once. At the airport, he rented the single car available, a 1999 yellow Yugo. It was rusted across the bottom, matching the various bullet
holes across the right side door. Obviously, the Montenegrins didn’t enjoy these cars after the President of Yugo denounced Montenegro’s independence. Max prayed he wouldn’t get hit by a crazy truck driver, or be driven off a narrow road by a goat herder. Rescuers would never get him out of this groaning metal coffin. Every bump pushed his head into the unpadded roof. He considered his future chiropractic bills. Nonetheless, even in darkness, he managed to reach Mojkovac by 8:30 A.M. on Saturday. Though dead tired, he forged ahead to the same bed Neal used before vanishing. After registering, he napped before heading out for interviews.

The tavern was already lively and busy with tourists by noon. Max noted the variety of travelers coming to the village, mostly young with a mix of a few elderly pushing through the crowds with their canes and walkers. He pushed his way to the bar to order a quick bite before going to the park.

“Can I have three eggs and one of those sausages?” He pointed to the plates offered behind the bar along a dimly lighted display.

“You American?” asked the plump bar maid. She was squeezed into a traditional outfit resembling the worn side of a St. Pauli girl. Her red and gray hair was thrown together with pins and an old turtle shell comb. Her pockmarked skin and moles rested over heavy wrinkles and a puffy red nose.

“Yes, and do you have cold milk?” Max looked around the back of the bar for a refrigerator.

“Yes, American, no doubt. Yes, cold milk, but only goat’s milk.” She smiled, revealing a tooth missing from the front over many disquietingly yellow companions.

“Mmm…just a beer then. Yes, I’m from America. Do you know where I can find Janica Rastoder?”
“She’s in the back making dinner. Do you have business?” Now the server frowned, leaning away from Max. He noticed some of the locals near him moving further away as if the black bear might bite them.

“Yes, I want to talk to her about a friend of mine who disappeared in the park. This was the last place he visited before he left. I thought maybe she had an idea of how he was acting that day.” Max took the plate of food and paid for it quickly, as not to draw attention to his money belt. He could hear his wife screaming ‘cholesterol’ as he stared at the platter…but hell, it was a short trip. He had his statins. He waited for a response.

“I’ll tell her you’re out here. I suggest you sit outside. Too noisy in here and too crowded. I don’t think you’d fit in our booths.” She laughed and turned to exit through a double door to the back rooms.

Max took his meal to one of the bistro style tables outside the tavern, under the trees. It was blistering hot, with a wind bursting around the building, but he’d served through worst conditions in the field. Besides, the beer was cold in a frosty stein. That would cut the blast furnace for now. After a few minutes, a tall, wispy woman approached him, with a full white apron over her traditional dress. Her fragile, thin hair was tied back with black ribbons. Just like the bar maid, her face was scarred and wrinkled, but appointed with a sharp, crisp nose that seemed almost as pointy as the butcher knife she carried.

“I am Janica Rastoder. You need to talk to me, like that other strange fellow who came before?”

“Yes, thank you. I see you are busy. I just wanted to ask you if you remember my friend the Canadian. He disappeared suddenly. Was he upset that day? Did he look worried?”
“Funny, you didn’t ask if he was with a woman, or something. Not like the other American who came here. No, he was, I think, just in a hurry. He ate quickly and left on his motorcycle. He did not say much, but he seemed tired. You Americans always look tired.”

“I said he was Canadian, not American.”

“Same to us, but he was not Canadian. He tried to pretend, but we know the difference. Sorry, he was a handsome person. He should not have gone into that part of the park.”

“Oh. What does that mean? Are there wild animals there or maybe criminals?” Max perked up and leaned forward. Janica paused, crossing her arms and pointing the knife to one side.

“You are strong…I see. He was not weak, but he could not defend from what lives back there. No one can. It would be best if you forgot about him and went back home. Nobody who disappears there ever returns. No one. I go now. Food is waiting.” She turned and left Max to finish his meal, perplexed and uncomfortable at being dismissed with her warning. He didn’t look forward to the drive in the confining Yugo to the land of no return.
Chapter 6

August 16, 2003    Biogradska Gora National Park, Mojkovac, Montenegro

Max cursed the unpadded Yugo’s roof pummeling his shorn head. Other base MP non-coms would likely ignore any bruises left on his black skin. Pothole hell continued toward the park, short distance or not. He almost parked to walk, but his flight fatigue was catching up to his normal charge-ahead style. It was a relief to finally stop at the park’s sentry gate, if only for a few minutes. Blinding heat made the yellow toaster almost unbearable, even with all the windows open. His lemon cage had no air conditioning. He noted the steel logging chain wrapped around the park’s controlled entrance arm.

Reflections of the midday sun through shack windows hid the guard’s identity until she emerged. She caught Max off guard. He’d expected a local thug, not an attractive blonde. As the young woman approached the Yugo, Max squeezed out of the car’s boiling confines to catch some fresh air, if he could find any escaping the heat wave.

“Oh, you are the big black American, aren’t you? Much bigger than they told me. You wanted in, yes?” She sauntered towards Max, like a runway model. He picked her for early twenties, bottle-bleached blonde, and ripe as a Georgia peach in July. Whore radar went off in his head, like he felt in Iceland where local women pulled rape charges against any American soldier found alone with them for a few minutes…anything to escape their frozen island.

He pulled his official badge out and held it between them. “I’m authorized to complete the investigation of Captain Craig Neal’s disappearance in this park. The authorities in Podgorica already cleared my entrance to the park, so why is it locked down?” Max attempted to stare past
the guard, over her green military-style cap, as she pushed open the two top buttons of her blouse.

“Would think smart American would know everything, especially with this heat. Are you carrying a weapon in that belt pack you wear? You can’t fire it in the forest. The risk is too great.” She pointed at his fanny pack with one finger. Max could see the sweat on her neck sliding down her open blouse and the wet below soaking through to expose more than he needed to see.

“No, it’s just tools for the investigation. Why is the park closed? I’d think you’d want it open for tourists to come to the lake. They do still come here?” Max looked away, focusing on returning his badge.

“Budalashe! Lake? What lake? For a month, everything is cinder dry. If it isn’t in your country, you pay no attention. Forests are burning from Romania to the Adriatic Coast, even in Russia. This sudden heat and drought. We pray for the August rains to stop it. Achh! And to think my Aunt Janica said you were smarter than that one that came a few weeks ago. Huh! At least he was a good Catholic boy and he didn’t go past the clothes.”

“So you are Janica’s niece?”

“Yes, I’m Petra Rastoder.”

“Petra, were you here, then, when NCIS…or the other man…found the clothing?”

“Yes,” she replied, walking slowly, closer to Newsome. He could smell a dark, spicy whiff of Maja fragrance. Women in the Balkans were famous for using it to cover poor hygiene.

“Listen, Petra. I’m here strictly on business…and I’m married.” He pointed to his ring.

“Don’t get the wrong idea.” Max shuddered. This was way beyond breaking his cholesterol diet.
“Silly. I’m married, too, but not so seriously as most Americans, except maybe your President Clinton.” She paused and held her simple silver band out, and then took it off. “I have relatives in Chicago. They have been there since before the first big war. They tell me much about the black men who they have known…you know?” She rubbed her middle finger across her sweaty lips.

“Yes, I’ve got relatives in Chicago, too. I went there, once, and had my car breakdown along the lake during a blizzard. Almost froze to death. No, don’t believe everything you hear about Chicago. Let’s leave it at that. How about you unchain the fence and take me to the place where they found the clothes?” Max turned as he reluctantly headed back into the canary oven. He hoped his direct actions would distract Petra away from her intentions. It worked, to a degree, as she turned and walked away in a huff. She stood in his path after she freed the gate arm and lifted it up just enough to let the Yugo enter.

“I will ride with you, big black man.” He shuddered slightly as he unlocked the passenger door, forgetting the window was already open.

“Whatever. Just direct me to where the clothes were found.”

Petra squeezed into the seat with ease. She was more petite than he had estimated. Her perfume filled the car. Max felt a migraine coming on from it and a bit of her nastiness oozing about her that even Maja couldn’t cover.

“We will only go to that point, and not beyond,” she whispered, just loud enough to be heard over the engine. She leaned toward him. “You have such nice big hands.”

“Oh, does the road stop there?” Max wanted to keep a simple dialogue going to avoid Petra’s overt breast jiggling.
“No, we must walk a bit after the road stops, but not too far…and no farther. We don’t go into the place your missing officer went…no one here will do that, ever.” She moved back to her seat, upright, with a severe downturned mouth.

Ever struck Max hard, like the never return warning in the village. Still, he had to keep focused on Neil. They drove past the lake, or what had been a lake, with the docks now hanging out over cracked mud and brown, desiccated water plants. In just a few months, the drought had pulled the life out of the river and any sense of recreation on the ghostly remains of a lake. A houseboat floundered on a dry bank a hundred yards out from a useless pier.

“Doesn’t look much like the tourism pictures. I had no idea it was this dry.”

“We are almost there. You will need to pull over to the side, the road stops just over the crest. Be careful not to park over dry grass. Fire danger.” Petra pointed to a short rise just ahead. Max was relieved to squeeze out of the Yugo confines after parking, now following his promiscuous guide over a path and up to a warning sign on a sagging barbed wire fence.

“Is that a mine field?” he asked, pointing beyond the posting.

“No, they didn’t use mines in here. Everyone living here knows what that sign means.” Petra paused and turned to lecture Newsome, like a wayward schoolboy. She stood feet wide apart, hands on hips. “My cousin, Maya Filipović, was the original guard who quit after your Captain did not come back. She knew there would be trouble if an American disappeared. We hear stories about your Seal teams. Her brother, Davor, went back with the other American and found clothes stacked next to the ruins on the other side of this fence. Davor’s part gypsy, so he had no fear of this place. Moravian Gypsies long ago built a little village back there, before the War of Roses…before our area was attacked and buildings destroyed. When they tried to rebuild their homes, the gypsy king broke his word to spirits of the land to not cut the trees back further by a
pond. One day, the entire village disappeared, except for their clothes, folded neatly. Everyone vanished…even the children. Sometimes other gypsies would camp near this place. They did not fear the old village, but they came less after the first Great War. A few tried to hide near here a few years ago, but they were killed by Serbian rebels. Serb soldiers liked to torture them and cut them in pieces to be left by the road. That pig-devil Milosevic was behind all that.”

Newsome paused, thinking about the slaughter so poorly covered in U.S. papers. This visit made it painfully present. He could almost hear the screams of victims rising off the roadway.

“I am sad to hear of atrocities from the Serbs. Yugoslavia cost us some of our people, too, just trying to stop the bloodshed, but this story of a whole village disappearing…I’m not buying that. It could have been from disease, or maybe raiders. People don’t just disappear without a reason.”

Petra pointed to a clump of trees barely visible through brush. “You go there, by that group of beech near that big oak. You will find the place your Captain’s clothes were resting. I will go no further. You are big and strong. Maybe you will return, but do not go past the village. Just don’t.” She pulled back her lower lip and squeezed it with her teeth. He saw her eyes dilate. The fear was real.

“One last thing before you wait for me…in the clothes there was a silver chain, but nothing attached to it. Did your cousin say anything about finding a star or a badge hooked to the chain?”

“No. Davor would have mentioned it. We never take anything out of this place. It would carry the curse. You better hurry. It will be dark soon. Nobody stays in this park after dark. I won’t even wait for you if you are late.”

Max shook his head and moved to the fence line. He ignored the posted warning sign, walking briskly to the grove Petra identified. Little was disturbed on the dirt path covered with
leaf litter. Without rain and wind, the forest floor remained a preserved desert, intact except from intrusions by wandering deer and rabbits seeking streams long dried. He could see the footprints left by CSI and another set of heavy boots with logging spikes in the soles. Davor must have known the forest well. Max began to wonder if Neil had been the victim of a local criminal out to take whatever a lone traveler might be carrying. The tracks stopped at a small circle of flattened, fragile grasses. Beyond that were some barely detectable imprints, from another boot, this time military style. There was no doubt now that Craig had walked this path, with a circle of splayed turf debris demonstrating the resting place of his clothes. The odd thing was there were no tracks coming out from the trail...just those going further into the glade, towards darker shadows. Newsome could make out some stumps of ruined chimneys from the abandoned village.

Max turned to wave at Petra, but she was gone. He wondered if she had just abandoned him out of fear or she was calling her cousin to come and kill another lone American...but the CSI doofus made it out. Some were smart guys, but not tough. Most were just Academy ring knockers with a few months of training at Quantico. He'd worked beside them on a few cases, but was unimpressed—just not enough common sense for his tastes.

An ache meandered in Max’s guts. Maybe it was murder and the trail was cold...but those footprints going one way stuck in his craw. He followed the light impressions, going back and forth over an old trail parallel to overgrown brick and rotting timbers. Even the vines were dying back from one of the few remaining walls of the gypsy village. Max moved ahead until he came over another mound looking over a surprise...a pond full of water. Life gathered everywhere around it, except for birds. Deep woods surrounded the perimeter of rocks and blooming flowers. He’d seen an oasis during his black ops in Saudi, but nothing like this. It made no sense. Now the boot prints were deeper, still preserved in soggy mud and peat. The size matched those on the
trail. A glint caught his eye. Something was out of order, giving off shiny metal reflections. He stepped ahead slowly to the pond’s edge, testing the ground for quick mud or traps.

Muck sucked at his size fourteen boots as he grabbed a camera out of the reeds. He was careful to hold it by the straps, making sure he left no fingerprints on the body or the lens. The cap was off, still hanging on the support strap. Dirt and debris covered the optics, but other than that, there seemed little damage. Max dug through his fanny pack to retrieve his latex gloves. Once protected, he tried to activate the memory for surviving pictures; he needed any clue for any last things Craig saw or captured. Amazingly, the LCD screen came to life. It was small but revealed sights the captain marveled at in canyon country during his road trip. Then there were a few frames of the town—the inn, the street vendors and eventually the guard shack to the park where he focused on the sign showing Biogradska Gora Park. Max didn’t recognize the young woman wearing a park uniform, but it might have been Petra’s cousin. There was also one photo of the lake with a crowd of visitors, when there was still water. It must have been late in the day, Max figured, as the reflections were edgy across the water. Next, there was one shot of the warning sign not to enter. After that were just photos of butterflies, with the last shot blurred and full of movement—nothing else. It was clear that whatever happened was fast enough to catch a trained warrior completely unprepared.

Newsome twisted around like a cat, but not fast enough to avoid the tendrils wrapping around his arms as he dropped the camera. A slithering sound first alerted him, but too late. He was yanked hard, face up, onto the soggy undergrowth. Putrid rot rushed into his clothes from pond debris decaying below him in primordial peat. Lassos of vines held him tighter as he screamed out in terror. He looked skyward, unable to see what monstrosity bound him. Screams turned to gurgles as more restrictions pulled at his throat. His struggles were futile. Urine flowed freely as
he lost bodily function control. There was nothing to cry against...nothing to identify as the wet ground soaked his clothing. There was little he could do, even as his attacker made her presence known, hanging face upside down above him.

“You are a violent warrior come to destroy my home,” a voice rang out through him, not through his ears but through his entire body, as vines became telephone lines to his brain. She, whatever she was, ravaged his mind. Memories of his entire life whizzed past as she read his files of existence. He ached to yell, cry out, anything...but the restraints held fast about his throat.

“Killed, I see it. Your own kind. You have killed your own.” Pictures of the Green Zone in Baghdad appeared in his mind, reliving the day he stopped a small car filled with weapons charging the control point. The words, from something pretending to be a human, ripped through him. He felt pain from the terrorists as his pistol fire ripped through their windshield and into their heads, before the car exploded in flames.

“You bring flames of death, like other warriors of your kind. You are strong, yes, but you bring the death. You need to return to the soil and be no more.”

Newsome’s heart pounded out of control. He was nearing collapse when another voice, a familiar tone, interrupted his death sentence.

“No, my love. Balanis, stop. He is my friend. Here...observe.”

Max felt his bondage loosed as videos appeared in full color of his protection of Craig in the courtroom and of their moments together after hours in the beer gardens of Stuttgart. The voice came again, compelling and demanding.

“Prove to me, warrior. Prove to me you are friend to my beloved. Tell me of the Seven Points. If you know, then you know him. If not, you will become food for my roots.”
Newsome’s throat was freed from restrictions but his breathing rate was so erratic he could not speak. He tried to refocus. The ‘black zone’ had brought him near to a heart attack, which only his cholesterol treatment was stalling. Training for underwater demolition helped him recover. *Do the counts…do the counts.* He focused on coming up slowly from the dive, moving with the air bubbles, no faster. His vision finally widened.

“Tell me now, Max Newsome!” Balanis shook him with her hold about his extremities. His clothing was now saturated from the ground and his own bodily fluids. *She knew his name.*

“Seven points…Craig talked about it all the time. His old man’s badge in San Francisco. They stand for virtue, divinity, prudence, fortitude, honor, glory…” Max paused, trying to remember the last point. It was a drinking game. Each time they met if he couldn’t remember them all, he had to buy a round. Fear hormones clouded him. Death was near, yet he could not remember.

“For God’s sake, Max, get it right!” Craig’s voice echoed through him, again, pushing him on.

“Yes, yes…the seventh is praising God. Praising God! Do you understand? Please understand!” Max cried out his final plea. With it, the leafy ropes withdrew and a strange, brushy hand helped him rise up from his containment. Still in shock, soiled, and fearful, Max turned to face his attackers, then fell to his knees as his heart pounded wildly again.

Max Newsome wept and moaned like a baby, overcome with terror. Before him stood something that might once have been Craig Neal…but now? Only rustles from trailing of roots over boggy vegetation gave away Craig’s presence. Newsome felt binding lianas pulling him up, this time to stand upright to face an alien couple. Veins stuck out in his neck as his labored breathing moved him to hypoxia.
“Max, it’s me…a new me. Please, I know this is an awful way to find me, my dear friend. I never imagined anyone would take this risk, but I should have known. If anyone, it would be you. What you are seeing is real. You are safe…now. You took a huge chance coming here alone. Even Balanis, my beloved, is impressed by your pure heart.”

Black tunnels closed Max’s vision to a pinpoint reality. He was in the zone where warriors lose control of their actions and seldom remember their deeds at battle’s end. Before him was a face of wet, undulating leaves and bark revealing a primitive mouth, perhaps a bulge for a nose and then eyes, but he remembered the eyes. There was no denying the voice and eyes could be no one but his missing pal. Breathing steadied. The dark tunnel widened as Max came back under control, standing on his own, looking up at his two nine-foot captors.

“I…,” coughed Newsome. Words were hard to form as his larynx had tightened. “Help…help me understand. Am I dead?”

Echoes of laughter filled the glen, bouncing around the surrounding hills like chimes in the wind.

“No, Max Newsome,” Balanis replied, as she started transforming into a more human shape before her astonished visitor. “Here, beloved, for his sake, return to your human shape for his comfort.”

Newsome watched as the leaves and roots of the giant dryads twisted, turned, and finally slithered into what he now saw as a lovely human couple, Craig and his redheaded companion. His mouth was agape in shock.

“Not possible,” spurted out of Newsome.

“Max, please.” Craig reached out to hold Newsome close to him, but his former comrade pulled back.
“Don’t touch me. This is witchcraft…evil.” Max had heard of the evil voodoo spirits in deep Alabama woods where slaves cursed their masters while drinking the blood of chickens. His Baptist upbringing kicked into high gear. “You are Satan and she’s Lilith, come to tempt me into hell. Jesus!” Max yelled out, “Come save me!”

No laughter followed his cries. Craig simply stood quietly, with Balanis, waiting for Max to relax. They did not come forward or retreat, but rather, they began to hum lowly, producing a peaceful, rhythmic chant to calm their visitor. Minutes seemed an eternity until Max’s shoulders relaxed. Newsome dropped his arms and unfolded his fingers from the powerful fists he had formed moments before in his call to Jesus.

“That’s better, Max. No one is going to hurt you and I need your help.”

“What, to sell my soul? Get thee behind me!” Max began breathing heavily again, pausing to spit on the ground.

“Sacrilege,” Balanis cried out, her eyes turning pure black in fury.

“Wait, Balanis. He still doesn’t believe. How could he? I wouldn’t. Remember how you shocked me. He is a good man, but this is asking a lot of him so soon.”

Balanis stepped back, turned and moved towards the tree line. “I will wait for you until you have finished with your friend, but we have much to discuss.”

“Surely, beloved, but let two old friends resolve our issues first. Thank you for understanding.” Craig turned back to his still enraged visitor. “For God’s sake, Maxie, don’t spit on this ground again. It would be like pooping on the pulpit in your church. Trust me…you don’t want to do that again.”
“And who, or what, are you to address me as a friend? The Devil knows our thoughts. You are trying to trick me. Is that what you did to my friend before you left his clothes piled up down the road?” Veins popped up, again, as he retightened his fists.

“Put on the brakes, bud. Really. This is not what you think. Hell, by now they must be writing me off as a deserter or worse after all this time. I need that to continue. Only you can close the books for me so I can be at peace, here, at last.”

“At peace?” Max interrupted. “You think Craig Neal would give up his career to be a fucking bush? You can do better than that.”

“Huh, probably deserved that, but remember how unhappy I was before I left the base. That was real. The weight Sarah’s death back home was crushing me, no matter how much success I was having in the courtroom. Shrinks weren’t helping. I thought my heart was broken forever. Then this place happened…and you’ve met Balanis. I never had a chance against her…her love.”

“Her love? Are you out of your mind? That thing isn’t even human, and it’s dangerous. How could you?” Max loosened up and began interacting with what really seemed to be the remains of his colleague.

“Look, I don’t have to explain all this, and time is short. You need to get out of here before nightfall. I survived because Balanis knew I was coming. She knew we were soul mates. Humans who come here don’t leave. I can’t protect you after dark, so, please, let me ask one last favor of you. You cared enough to come this far. C’mon, Max, I need your help.”

“Soul mates my ass! You never believed in that before…even about Sarah. What could I possibly do for you now, get a hedge trimmer and clean up your beard?” That slight break into dark humor opened a door. The tension between them dropped away for the moment.
“That’s the Max I knew, and by the way, bud, you’ll need a shower when you get out of here. In case you didn’t notice, you lost it all down your shorts back there.” Craig laughed lightly as he pointed to the stains in Max’s clothes.

Max hadn’t noticed, but now felt the embarrassment from lack of control. “Hell, it happens. Same thing when that RPG hit a patrol car coming into the Green Zone right in front of me in Baghdad. It’ll come out. Damn, what have I gotten myself into?” He took a series of deep breaths and looked away from Craig. Looking up, finally, it was obvious darkness might not be far away. He had to skedaddle out to make it back to Petra and the Yugo.

“Has command officially declared me AWOL?” Craig asked.

“Yeah, you and Villanueva. That bastard broke out shortly after you left and headed for somewhere in Romania. Nobody seems to give two shits about either of you. Your case file was closed except for my reopening it. What the hell do we do now?”

“Villanueva…really. What a waste of humanity. Maybe the Romanians will eat him.” They chuckled over that thought. “Look, Max, I’m part of a new existence now. I’m happy, and believe it or not, loved deeply and completely. I would never go back. Just tell them you found the camera and that it looks like I was attacked. Tell them some of the Serb gangs probably caught me alone and killed me. There’s still some around. It shouldn’t be hard to sell.”

“From what I’ve seen of this area, not hard to believe at all. I just don’t know what to say about what I’ve seen here…I mean…now that you’re not the Devil, what the hell are you?”

“They used to call them dryads,” Craig replied, “but, they are far more than some idle tree spirits. Even the Apache recognized their presence, but this place, and Balanis, are the core—the heart of where they all began, millions of years ago. They were here when dinosaurs crossed this land. There is so much to know. And, Max, they feel everything alive on the planet. It’s
almost overwhelming. Why I was chosen to join with them is still a mystery. Apparently it happens so rarely that few of her kind have any memory of it, but here I am, and with Balanis I am complete.”

“Sounds like horse shit to me, but hey, you always had a good line of bull. This is way over my simple country boy head. I’ll fix the files, if that’s what you want, but I don’t like losing my one trusted ally I had at the base. I owe you one, so this will square us. So you’re going to be okay?”

“More than okay, my friend. Believe me, if you ever cared for my happiness, this is it. I got a second chance. Maybe I didn’t deserve it, but I got it.” Neal reached forward to touch Max in parting, but Max pulled away.

“I can’t do that, Craig. I just can’t. Let me remember you as you were. You good with that?”

“I’m good,” Craig whispered, pulling further away and giving a salute to the sergeant. “And one last thing, take this. I won’t need it anymore. You know how much it meant to me.”

Max pulled out his father’s police badge, with its glowing seven points, and offered it to his stunned adventurer. Max let it drop in his hand, and then quickly secured it in his fanny pack.

“If this wasn’t weird enough,” Max said, shaking his head. “An ossifer signing off to a non-com. Okay, I’m out of here. I wish you the best but we won’t see each other again.”

“No, and remember me how you will. Your friendship will never be forgotten.”

Max turned away as he walked past the artificial shape of Craig Neal. His mind was set on the path back as twilight set in. He hoped Petra had not stolen his car. As for his promise, and the shock of the last thirty minutes, he compartmentalized the meeting in places next to where he hid memories of beatings from his stepfather or the lynching he watched one night as he hid in
the Alabama bushes. For now, his target was getting back to the hotel and cleaning up his soiled clothing. He had no idea he would find a telegram demanding his immediate return to the base along with two new airplane tickets.

Craig returned to his dryad form as he merged into the landscape of the beech and oak forest. Balanis was there to greet him.

“I felt the pain of that parting. He truly is another amazing human, but so full of fear for what he cannot comprehend.”

“Yes, Balanis, but so was I, at first, and now I will never see Max again.”

“That may not be true, for you have become the Schean Du, which means you can walk in the world, among the two-legged. Great Mother knew you were needed and She brought you here to fulfill your destiny. I fear you must leave me, my beloved, for you and your friend have released a monster into the world. There is a karmic debt to bring that beast to justice for what he is now unleashing onto the world. There is so much to tell you and prepare you for, before you journey to face a great battle. Come; let us talk of this after resting and retreating from the pains of this time.”

With that, the two forms disappeared into shadows of a parched forest.
Heat subsided under continuous, soothing rains revived brown fields, desiccated marshes and parched lakes. Devastating fires dissipated throughout Europe, but not before leaving black ash scars over precipitous slag, portending landslides of mud with charcoal trees. Civilian death tolls skyrocketed during Augusts’ unexpected widespread onslaughts of wildfires striking small, poorly protected villages without warning. Deadly choking smoke finally cleared, revealing massive losses to old growth forests. Rock and debris from new runoffs descended in unstoppable walls, covering previously parched farms and isolated herder’s shacks.

“I feel renewed, again, Balanis,” Craig, now Schean Du, whispered to his mate, while wrapped in a vague cloud of filigree existence, unified with his new mate, far from human sorrows created by fires and flooding. His senses grew into a wide net of reality touching every living thing, from bacteria deep in dark soils to migrating birds tens of thousands of feet above the dark forest rim.

“It is rain, Schean Du. Its return renews hope. Water is life. Elements combine to provide life, but now are out balance as a violent final battle looms. Fire dragons are being loosed into the world to destroy all life so that nothing but rock and fire remain.” Her voice was not gentle.
Schean Du felt her weariness and fear. It was a new emotion in their blending. Even Max’s intrusion did not elicit an upwelling of terror.

“Is our world…this dear, sweet world I now know, at great risk?” He waited for her answer. She was slow to respond.

“It may be at high risk,” she replied, in their mind melding. “This has much to do with your return to us. You were brought to us as a promise hidden from your birth mother. You have a destiny, Schean Du…one kept secret. Did you never wonder about that bump in your forehead that began to grow for no apparent reason as you grew into manhood?”

Schean Du felt over what he imagined was his forehead. A protrusion met his fingertips. As he pressed it hard, looking for familiar discomfort it typically provided, a light erupted through their combined mists. Colors burst in patterns as if a kaleidoscope had been focused on a thousand neon lights.

“Amazing! Wondrous! I can create this? It was just a nuisance since college, especially when I had to wear my helmet in the field. Docs looked at it and said it was just a bone spur and not to pay any attention.” He continued to rub the lump as source of the light show. The harder he pressed his irritation the more intense and coherent the light became until he could touch bands of color and move them with his imaginary hands into any shape he desired.

“It is good your medicine men did not attempt to remove this crystal,” Balanis whispered as she came closer to his mind. “Only a few changelings are honored to carry this magic. You will see soon enough the powers it brings to you and how unique you truly are. Did you never notice how out-of-step you were with other children? Were your times alone in the forests near San Francisco and in Arizona not the few times you felt you were home…and at peace?” Balanis twisted the rainbow bands into delicate, intricate geometries as Schean looked on in a trance.
“Yes, but I’ve never told anyone…but you knew. You seem to know everything about me from the moment we met. How is that possible? What is this business of a changeling and secrets?”

“Surely by now you should know that I…we…can feel and know the core and life center of every living thing on this planet and beyond. Perhaps I have opened you too quickly. I sensed at times, your faltering from weight of knowing. A cup should not be overfilled. Some have shattered from such experiences, before they were ready.

You were chosen, before birth, for a destiny. Every experience you have encountered shaped you. You might have failed and fallen from your path. That is the risk of incarnation. Still, here you are, with me…and all of us…who have waited so long for you, wondering if you would come in time.”

“Belanis, I am no more special than anything in the universe. I learned this from the shamans. We are all made of stardust. Dust with hubris risks being blown into a drifting, lost cloud of ego.”

“Still the philosopher, but you were designed to be here. Your parents knew you were different. They knew full well they were incapable of conception…yet there you were… their little miracle. You never knew the full reason she often called you her little miracle. Our kind, the spirits of the Earth, came to her and brought your seed to be born among humans so you would know their hearts and be able to walk among them with a barrier that still evades us—we who disdain the presence of their savage race. Their dark thoughts are so toxic we cannot be fully present to reveal ourselves to most of them—except for children who are still innocent and full of curiosity and joy. You suffered the pain of learning their ways and minds. That was a
heavy price to exact on a child with your heritage, one of us, a child of the Dryads. Have you never felt you had a destiny?”

“I’ve avoided feeling that since high school. There was a wonderful, young black girl in my high school in San Francisco. Her art enthralled me, but not her teachers or other artists in the city. Her work was used for posters for new bands playing in the Haight. That was all the exposure she could muster. No gallery would touch her paintings. She told me once she thought she had a destiny. She shared with me that an artist with no one to share their work with is like being the king of an abandoned land that no one will visit.”

“Others do feel destiny, you see. She did.”

“No, Balanis. One day she stood in front of a train and just let it destroy her. There was no destiny for her to walk in with joy…it was all her imagination. After that day, I never wished for a destiny or hoped for one. Such fantasies only bring disappointment and pain. Just surviving is enough.”

“I feel your agony in that memory. A young life of a gifted soul, even if human, should not pass like that, never to be recognized.”

“That was the irony of thinking one can live their destiny. It only took a year after her death before her works were suddenly shown in galleries all over the city, then in Los Angeles, Seattle, and eventually New York. Her destiny came only after her loss. That’s when I smothered any remaining feelings I had about a greater purpose. It is meaningless to suffer like that, only to have the vultures gain from your treasures.”

“Perhaps I have been less than honest in holding you here so close. I do not want you to feel you have been forced into this fight against your will. There is a greater purpose for you joining with the Dryad Kingdom and me. Can you trust that it is not your imagination?”
“So our love…my love for you…it’s a ruse to open my eyes to some greater plan? This is all part of some scheme of the beings I never believed in until now? I’m just a pawn?” He felt pushed into a corner, possibly trapped by a great betrayal.

“Hardly. Your soul and mine were bound before, long ago. I have waited for your return for many of your centuries. No human who came to my safe haven ever wanted more than to destroy, burn, kill and rape. I sensed whom you were when you stepped on this sacred site. I was cautious…but I knew. To prepare you for what is to come, I had to swiftly open your eyes to the millennia we have reined with harmony and deep passion over this part of the world so that all things lived in balance. You will see…but events are moving quickly now, demanding your hurried awakening. Take your finger away from your crystal for now and follow me to a new place.”

“Wait,” Schean Du interrupted. “There’s something I must know before we I’ll go any further. You questioned Max about the seven points on my father’s badge. Why was that so important that you would remember it and use it to judge if he lived or died?” The swirling colors subsided back to the continually warm, green glow always present in shared Dryad consciousness.

“That is a fair question. Those qualities from your star align with our own. That you believed in them so completely, without question, was confirmation we had chosen well. There is a sacred object called the Faerie Star, bound to our realm from our beginning here as recognition to the power of plants, elements and even the planets and stars working together. It was a trousseau from our creators to remember them. Its many points attest to love, healing prosperity and the support of all life. Yours was of metal, which we do not touch, as it is a blending of elements forced artificially to bond in the element of fire, which is no longer our ally.”
“Not an ally? What of your love for all things? How can fire not be part of your encompassing world view?” Schean Du felt their forms moving as Balanis charted a new direction for their movement.

“Ages ago, Schean Du, after the Earth was cleansed and reformed by outside life forms, we came to be placed here, even when all land was one land. There was much fire from the bowels of the Mother, but it was in balance with the air, sea and winds. We, forces of green, blended it all into a stabilizing environment without judgment or antagonism to the elements about us. We all gained in a dance of beauty and growth. Life changed. Skies changed. It was a concordance of joy until a new outside force entered our solar system. They vilified our bonds with a disregard for the work other races had brought to this planet. They were parasitic—creating nothing…taking everything. First they scoured a nearby planet, you call Mars, until it was lifeless. Earth was next.

To make the air on Earth compatible they forced the volcanoes to rise up against us. Beasts of fire grew from that pact. The life force was threatened as these invaders fed on everything that moved on the surface, below in the oceans or in the air. Their scaly race annihilated vast herds of all other reptiles that roamed about, except their minions of maniacal predators known to you as dragons. Even the giant humanoid beings could not stand against them, the ones your ancestors recall in myths.”

“But, Balanis, the last point in my father’s star, about belief in praising God…it seems strange you have never mentioned a belief in God, especially after all the history and beings you’ve introduced to me. Truly few humans believe in fairies, gnomes, elves, trolls and so many other life forms that I now know exist. Our…or my…well, the world’s concept of God is an all-knowing creator that is all-powerful. I’ve seen none of that from your sharing, just the
overwhelming combining of all things in one consciousness, including the soils, rocks, sky and so much more. In fact, aliens destroying our world would seem to prove there is no God preventing evil from doing whatever they wanted. Never, in all this, have I felt the creator as a personage I longed for, looking out for us to protect our way. So, how can you praise God, if there He does not exist?”

“Your vision is still young. We all understood that would be the case at first, but the insight and comprehension you seek is far beyond your current capacity. Life, as an imperative, exists throughout the universe…and through universes we cannot see or feel most times, except where and when veils are thin. Surely, you remember how the fish in a bowl could not understand people who lived beyond the glass. It simply seemed impossible. Humans call it a paradigm. You simply cannot experience a creator you seek because of the fish bowl you inhabited, but that view will evolve. Exposure to new realities will allow you to jump free of your aquarium.

We know the presence. We feel it in each of us and all things, even those who bring evil and imbalance. That is how creation makes itself…not as he or she…present in our consciousness. That is quite enough for us to know. It fills us in ways no other view of existence can equal. We honor and obey that presence. It is timeless. Our actions have value in unique ways, but not with our full understanding of all consequences. There is at least one community of humans who understands this concept, almost as we do.”

“I am not sure which one that would be; there are so many metaphysical and spiritual enclaves. Just one?”

“Yes, and they call themselves Findhorn. The humanity in them fails at times, but they have achieved the closest connection to understanding us, even though they exist in a human culture that now bedazzled by false powers, toys and greed. We have come so near to fully
revealing ourselves to them and another community in your Southwest…but not yet. The time will come when you may need assistance from both colonies. Scaled aliens have brought new forces to bear against the Earth’s forests to make the surface a barren cinder full of suffering, dying animals. This is their dream for the future: to make the Earth as Mars is today. When they have taken all, then they will leave.”

“This is why I’m here? I have no abilities to deal with such powers. If I was raised to be your champion, you picked the wrong knight. I’m already beaten up and full of metal from wars. I merely struggled to protect now, not slaughter.”

“Exactly, this is why you are our best hope. Only that purity of your spirit will survive tests ahead. Your role will be to preserve and save not only world forests, but also humans you know and love. Their entire species is at risk of becoming a final food source for darkness spreading through Europe. As for your metal fragments, those will be removed. That process was started at our melding.”

“This is a stretch. I’m troubled that this agenda will tear me from you, now that I have found the peace I so dearly sought. Even if I could leave your side, I have no skills or weapons to overcome enemies you’ve described. Besides, I would be recognized by those still looking for me. That would make me a target even among humans at risk of being destroyed. No soldier takes on a battle knowing an enemy is on both flanks.”

“We are aware. Your friend, Max, has taken care of your files. Your trust in him was well founded. You are lost in their system and no one will search for you now. Besides, you will not look anything like the Neil in your previous body. Here, look into this pond’s reflection for how you will appear, walking in the world of men.”
Balanis moved her limbs to expose a shining mirror made from pond water. It revealed a graying, middle-aged man, lightly bearded with a broad, strong face, with a haggard tan. His new eyes drew Schean Du’s immediate attention. It was a wolf’s stare, black pupils over irises of winter skies laden with snow. He moved his head several times to ensure it was his new appearance.

“I guess it could be worse. I could be a drag queen.” He chuckled. Balanis was silent.

“Your Dryad name is sacred…never to be spoken outside of our presence. And this, the one you called Villanueva, will be an archenemy in your battle to prevent Earth’s demise. He has also changed.” She cleared the reflection, rippling the waters, revealing a new, frightening face.

“My god! That’s not him…that couldn’t be. It’s a monster. The eyes—they glow like…”

“Like fire, yes. He has sold himself to reptiles that defile spirits of fire. He also feeds on human blood, like his masters.”

“There is no way I could stand against that. None. This is preposterous!”

“Come, Schean Du, for we have preparations to make. I will teach you powerful ways of magical war at our armory. Even the Dryads, and their kin, have faced powerful enemies in battles beyond the time of human memories. You will also need allies along this journey. They will be led to you…but now, we must go to Dantuathanan, a crypt for our most ancient secrets deep within Great Mother.”
Raw flecks of half-lit tobacco drifted down from Babik’s pipe bowl as a fruity cloud billowed over his sleepy eyes. Burned burl wood from the bowl rubbed against stained fingers. His nails, worn short and unattended, retained captured soil beneath the cuticles from a farmer’s garden he had raided the night before for fat beets. Borscht boiled fresh behind him in a communal pot stirred by his great nephew Kem. Babik’s wrinkles rose in furrowed detail—the geography of his angled face uncovered as sunrise crept over Ungra’s streets, past huddled two-story hovels barely withstanding recent torrential rains. Muddy streets just beyond the men were carpeted with scattered garbage and general household debris piles Roma threw for other Romanians to reluctantly gather. Volunteers had to discard the filth in a community garbage dump to keep rats from owning the village. Community waste was deposited south, toward the river Olt, where winds kept the stench away from Ungra’s open windows.

“So, Kem,” Babik said slowly, sniffing the air to test if the pot had enough fresh dill for flavoring. “Have you decided what to wear for the wedding tomorrow? Many will come to the abia Friday night. Will you play your lavuta for the dancing by the Olt?” Babik opened top buttons on his ragged, gray jacket as night chills evaporated beneath sunrise glows. His nephew continued stirring, starring at beet slices bubbling thick, red juices up through floating onion slices intertwined with flotillas of garlic.
“Mother is letting me wear Father’s wedding gad. It is my honor. She says I look like him when he was fifteen. My mustache is just a shadow, but I may someday have one like those in his pictures. I will wear the red sash of her people, but not Father’s coin vest. Not yet. Not until next year. Do you remember Papa when he was young?” Fragrant steam rose around delicate, thin hands of the slender, dark youth poised over the cauldron.

“Of course,” Babik replied. “My nephew was a giant among us. He saved us from Serbs more than once. Those pigs feared him.” Babik spit on the ground. “He would be proud of you, Kem, as would your grandfather. You have fed us with your hunting skills. Eye of an eagle—that you have, but your music…aaah. That was a gift from your mother’s side. Everyone will expect you to play your violin. Believe me, Ladin will watch from heaven’s door and clap with the crowd for his son. We all miss him, but he is always with us.” A slight breeze rose suddenly, wafting beet aroma across them. Babik felt hairs rise on his battered, liver-spotted arms. Babik said nothing of it as Kem swirled and dreamed of his missing father’s smile.

Laughter over drumbeats filled open fields occupied by Roma for their lavish wedding celebration, the abiav, after formal bonds of the young gypsies were completed Friday evening. Within a rough circle of carts and motor homes stood scores of families enjoying clear twilight skies featuring myriads of stars sporadically appearing far from limited village lights. Pungent odors from roast pig saturated the festivities as fresh janija stew was served constantly, accompanied by myriads of fresh breads brought from ovens in Ungra. Juices from loose sandwiches flew from dancer’s hands as they swung in circles around a central bon fire. An exhausted wedding couple sat protected under a central, white gazebo. Both were somewhat glassy-eyed from many rounds of cognac, vodka and warm beer. Those in the crowd without drinks and food grabbed and fondled anyone nearby, regardless of age, sex or marital status.
Gauja outside of Roma culture would call it a drunken orgy…but for Roma, it was a moment to discard continual pain as a lost people, troubled by every culture encountered throughout history, including Nazi’s who decimated them in World War II.

Djevrija Mazrek was thirteen, yet was already weighted with responsibilities as Ferka Holomek’s bride. His clan in Lupsa had provided a massive dowry to fulfill bonds sworn to when they were both only six years old. She and Ferka rested, quite spent, as Lupsa women adorned in white vests with red trim stepped into a line before the bride and groom. They began an ancient version of *dans tiganesc* under tantalizing accompaniment by Kem. He started slowly, building to a climax everyone anticipated, as his fingers flowed effortlessly with bow over his violin strings. All others beyond the swaying women were silent, rocking in place, remembering their place under the heavens. Their elders had told them secretly of ancient promises no Gauja could know, of ancient ones who gifted Roma with *the sight*, music and an indefinable urge to migrate under night’s distant lights.

“Ah, Ladin, you see,” whispered Babik, after taking a long swallow of vodka from his resting place against a weathered wheel of a festooned cart. “He is a treasure, your son. A treasure.”

By three-thirty only blue and flaring cimarron embers wrestled in the bon fire’s bones. Exhausted, drunken and bloated bodies lay scattered round about. Occasionally muffled moans rose from a wagon where bodies continued wrestling. Only dying bon fire flares illuminated white dresses and tunics spread across the crumpled grass. Babik looked on, resting against stiff cart spokes just outside the main gathering. His matches took to his cherry tobacco as his trusty pipe filled his lungs again its mysteries as he pondered memories of women long vanished beneath gravestones. In the distance, a veil of cool fog pushed from the noisy riverbanks,
promising limited time for weary revelers to recover for Sunday mass. It would be a challenge, once drinking started anew around Saturday morning’s sharing of boiled eggs and fried pork.

Babik’s tired eyes squinted, half-blind from cataracts. Piercing lights were coming from Ungra. That made no sense. Villages were asleep in darkened bedrooms, without outside lighting, by ten, or soon thereafter. These were bright lights. Fear struck him, remembering Serb helicopters sweeping over their night encampment with bursting spotlights followed by machine gun fire. Ladin had retaliated with an RPG, but crossfire tore him to shreds before three copters collided and exploded. But that war was over. This was rural Romania. There were no forces hunting his people.

Burning blue lights fogged his damaged cornea. Some blinded him from far above, as shooting stars appeared overhead, suddenly, in silence. In seconds, three saucers hovered over the sleeping camp. Pillars of blue-white beams descended from their sparkling bellies, striking all below dumbfounded. No one could move. Babik felt his hand burn against the burl of his pipe. He could not withdraw. However, the bowl quickly extinguished, as did every candle flame and the bonfire. Forest animals stopped their night cries. Dogs in camp were mute. Nothing stirred.

From one eye, Babik watched a single figure descend from above, supported by a column of cohesive light. His advance was slow, direct and purposeful. It left the tall, dark figure in front of Djevrija Mazrek, still frozen to her wedding chair, eyes now open and wild. An arm moved from the invader’s long cloak onto Djevrija’s shoulder as the gazebo flew away behind her. She screamed, unable to strike out, as the shadow moved over her body with his long fingers. His faced moved over her now bare shoulders as he licked her face. He waved to those above him. In seconds, all Romas, including the groom, began to rise, pulled by a dozen similar tractor beams.
skyward from whatever position they were found, except Djevrija. Babik could hear his friend’s shrieks and swearing, their tumult of terror as Daniel and Mirga clans were culled from their resting places. The light on Babik moved quickly away towards a white-shirted shadow scampering from camp, leaving Babik free. It was Kem, fleeing toward the Olt with his violin. Babik screamed aloud, trying to distract Kem’s hunters. Kem jumped over the banks into cold rapids of the flood-choked river. He was swept violently away, out of range of searchlights blocked by thick fog, but Babik had sacrificed his opportunity for safety. In a rush of anger, he charged at the monster near the trapped bride. A burning tug in his heart stopped him just feet away from his target as the villain turned, elevating just his right hand. His invisible powers ripped open Babik’s heart, now floating off the ground, a dried husk as blood flew from his dying carcass into Villanueva’s mouth.

A gentle, blue glow caressed Villanueva and Djevrija, still petrified in her bridal chair. His hands aimed at her, causing her to float upward towards him and suddenly flip upside down. His claws quickly tore away all her finery, leaving only her pink socks and a single garter remaining to cover her snow-white skin. A cacophony of shouts and agony escaped from ships above him as his reptilian allies vivisected their trophies, from newborns to octogenarians, letting warm fluids gush over their spindly frames in sprays of carnage. Villanueva let his victim cry out as she gurgled in her sputum. She writhed as he ignited her luxurious piles of black hair dangling below her, their anointed curls aflame, creating crisp fumes of her immolation to fill her lungs. Heat and fire bypassed Villanueva as Djevrija’s skin began to crackle over her skull.

“How I love this Rh-negative blood,” he whispered to her while nibbling off the end of her left earlobe. “Even if it comes mostly from you disgusting gypsies. You are not from this world. You do not belong. I hate you all, even the sweet port of that old one. His vintage was
near edges of vinegar, but a fine note of cherry remained. His wonderful flavor served as my
appetizer. I am filled with anticipation for you as my main course,” he continued, staring directly
into her dull eyes and open mouth poised directly at his eye level, as he scratched her breasts.

“Terror fills your veins with spices so delicate. Hormones from fear of death…so
delightful…mmm, and you have such an essence about you, virgin child…”

He signaled again to his transporters above. “No, I will finish her here. You can throw
remains in the waters. No one will care if a few parts appear on the way to the sea. Now loose
our children on the forests. Let them scour the land. This scum will be blamed for it. Leave the
village alone. We don’t need to be obvious. We’ll get them all, eventually.”

Smoke began to drift out of Djevrija’s skull as her writhing diminished. Above, the sky
echoed crescendos from squadrons of scaled wings spewing cataclysm through the forest night,
consuming all living things to charcoal. Villanueva stretched his giant, clawed fingers above
Djevrija’s dying gaze. In her last moments, she saw only his shining fangs below his furnace
eyes as he exploded into a feeding frenzy. He swarmed over her, a great white shark devouring a
squirming baby seal…a shilmulo, a walking dead, shredding her innocence with talons while his
rotting body swelled from her warm juices like an engorged sheep tick.
Chapter 9

December 2003    Deep within the Earth in Primordial Caverns beneath Europe

“Careful…stalactites!” Balanis warned Schean Du, pushing his head lower through a tight-fitting tunnel. “You can still be damaged. Take care. It is a tricky passage.”

“Without this phosphorescence from moss on the walls I would be blind. How does it live here, without sunshine or water?” He supported himself against the wall as they exited a crystalline causeway into a monstrous void, so tall that light from the thick growth could not reveal a ceiling. It remained an ominous darkness above them.

“Notice the moist air. It is enough. These life forms were planted here by ancients, even before our arrival. They are the oldest colonial forms living on or in the planet. Some humans have lived below ground during surface catastrophes, surviving by consuming only these growths. We need not feed that way, not as Dryads.”

“Yes, Balanis, I noticed a lack of hunger from our first blending. It is odd for me, as a changeling. Without cycles of hunger, thirst and wastes, it is hard to measure time. I’m still adjusting. I see something ahead…another opening. How far have we traveled in this endless journey? It seems boundless, trekking through these passages. Do they go on forever?”
“Almost ten miles down by your measurements. We do not know their extent as the system was designed by others. We know safe routes where temperatures are moderate and air will support life.”

“Amazing. We should be dying from heat and asphyxiation. How is this possible?”

“We know of many air shafts and cooling vents that lead to the surface. Some open under great fresh water lakes. The air and water mix in massive bowls below ground. An exchange occurs through tunnels below where water and air swirl. Shafts were built close to magma plumes and then away. This creates a pressure change in the tubes, causing a pulsing that exchanges air constantly. We avoid those great transfer shafts, as their sheer turbulence would rip us to pieces. I have come close to those places. The noise is terrifying. It is like Great Mother moaning in pain.”

“I have heard that sound once when my Dad took me to Moaning Caverns in California one summer, on our way for frog jumping contests in Calaveras County. Rangers said humans had been in and out of those caves for over twelve thousand years. That must be a major entrance. He took me to Wind Cave in South Dakota a few years later. It was so huge, but nothing like wonders we have traversed to here. Is the entire Earth covered with these extensive diggings and natural passages?”

“I cannot speak for all of Her. I can only relate my experiences. Occasional callings below, to secret holdings of ancient technology, allowed me to visit routes known to beings of the forest. There is nowhere above us that is without such entries, even the vast deserts. Sand has covered some. Earthquakes have concealed many, as have some of your leaders who wanted the truth hidden. However, there are just too many sites to seal completely. Your Amazon and Antarctic are examples of locations of entrances that remain almost pristine from interference by
governments, though some invaders have tried and failed to discover them.” Balanis halted as they stood before a tilted entry to a vault protected by two six-foot pillars carved from stone. Each was topped with a sculpture of a screaming humanoid skull locked in an alien grimace. Above the entrance was an alcove holding another skull in its recess, but this one looked somber with red jewels stuck in each eye socket. A row of squared-off stone teeth topped the lintel of the carved doorway, imitating a mouth ready to swallow any passing intruder. Its lintels were carved in scripts long lost to current races.

“This looks like a warning to me,” Schean Du whispered, readying for a fight should the portal be guarded.

“Ah, the warrior in you. No need to fear guardians here. The builders perished in wars millions of years before mammals even appeared in our forests. This place has been named by your Celtic people as Cerridwen’s Cauldron. It is true, by your legends that no humans who enter may ever return unchanged. This hold is a site of profound transformation, as it has always been. The last changeling I brought here was no exception. You now call him Merlin, but in that place and time to us he was C’ol Madru.”

“You knew him?” asked Schean Du, somewhat stunned. “He was real?”

“Yes, and one who brought hope that reverence for forests would be renewed. He trained many others for lifetimes, building Druids to a great power, such that they traveled the world bringing peace. It was our attempt to heal great wounds which humanity created with their wars and pillaging. However, after he traveled to the green islands he was challenged by forces we thought had left this world. It never seems to end, this constant bickering for power. So, here we are again, hoping you, our champion, will bring back balance using tools and alliances we presented to C’ol Madru, as well as many he did not see, for he could not have managed them.”
“If Merlin, your C’ol Madru, could be outdone by humans and magical forces, what could ever make you believe a tired, washed-up soldier…and lawyer, for God’s sake, could ever stand a chance against aliens and Villanueva?”

“There is more you do not know,” Balanis answered. “C’ol Madru was rare in that he was male. Most changeling males never reach maturity for a host of reasons…and certainly not half bloods. He was only quarter blood, for his mother was also a changeling from elves. A great Dryad king of that time came to her and from that breeding came C’ol Madru. He was the last male changeling to survive puberty—until now. You, my love, not only survived, but you are the first, half-changeling of all time. None believed it possible. Your mother suffered greatly during childbirth, but she never told you. Both of you almost perished. Still, here you are, damaged from a life among humans, but powerful beyond your imagining. After we enter the Cauldron, you will begin to feel immediate changes. There is no escape from blossoming in transition. I cannot know all of what that may mean until you emerge, but it promises to be glorious.”

Schean Du was immersed in her anticipation and hope, but a terror raged within him. “And if I decide, even now, not to enter, do I have free will to denounce this challenge? What then?”

“Then, beloved, I fear our day and time is lost. You have a choice to deny your right, but what a loss to so many gentle and caring children of the World, both magical and human, who will perish in extinctions to come.”

“I am being asked to give up my short life for a fight I did not start. All I yearned for was peace and perhaps a chance to love again…but now, I could have just this brief moment with you and then…I’m gone.”

“Another misgiving I should address. There are limits to what I can reveal, even at this critical point in your emergence. When you take of our blood, our essence, you inherit long life.
C’ol Madru lived for a thousand of your years, but could have lived even longer if not for his entrapment, just as some men who are noted in your holy books of myth. As a half-ling, you have a heritage almost equal to my own. Survive this battle and you can continue our blending practically forever. There is no aging within you, as you understand, once you complete initiation into the greater mysteries within this sacred space, beyond this gateway. Do you understand this? Do you trust me?”

Schean Du paused. His reluctance grew stronger each minute he stood next to guardian posts outside the cavern ahead. Relinquishing his humanity frightened him. What would he become? Would he be some forest monster or maybe an old stump somewhere butchered by a hungry forester? Self-doubts raced through him. He shuddered as tears filled his eyes. Memories of his Marine recruiter flashed before him. He was hood winked before after being lured with lavish promises and regalia of honor, after visiting a Marine base and using their firing range with fully automatic weapons. It all seemed intriguing, long before 9/11. His father’s warning and impassioned talks against enlisting were disregarded. Was this precipice any different? It could be a dark trick…that moment the devil gets a signature.

“This is me…this is love,” Balanis whispered to his soul as she intensified their blending.

“Please, believe, I would never…could never do anything to harm you. It is beyond my capability, no matter what the Earth Mother or any power beyond this world would ask. You are my joy and my completion. My sacrifice to the World is to let you become more, only praying you will not discard me for others after your experiences yet to unfold.”

“And how could I ever…how could you think I would ever…”

“Schean Du, I have seen some of what may happen. Your human side will find loves beyond us. It is your humanity. I have seen other women drawn to you during this journey, for comfort,
for companionship and even for reproducing a new changeling. These are all things I cannot offer from my form or my Dryad existence. Bringing you towards those realities is my risk. You may not return to me, but the World, Great Mother, must be preserved regardless of costs to me. I humble myself before your destiny.”

“Do not…please…” Schean Du moved toward the carvings and ran his leafy fingers over raised loops and curls of the stele. “I have made that sacrifice once in my life. I lost someone I loved deeply. I could never ask you to voluntarily cleave your soul like that. You said few changelings made it this far. Know that I almost took my own life after my loss. My cup was not half-empty—it was broken when Anne passed. I often wondered if blocking that IED blast was a death wish. So, no, I understand what you are willing to put on the table. That is a terrible price to pay for protecting others.” With that, he moved away swiftly from her shadow under the verdigris glow, rushing pell-mell into the yawning Cauldron’s mouth without regard to his past or his own humanity.
Chapter 10  Germany Island Föhr  January 1738

Joseph Stockhausen moved through grime and filth of the Föhr’s piers, seeking passage after the War of the Polish Succession had ended. Human offal, hidden away in alleyways and corridors behind stored barrels and bales, did not withhold rotting stench. To his left rocked tethered whaling ship with fetid aromas of rancid oils and molding blubber before their stores’ final processing. January cold and rain did not interrupt his search for a ship heading to sea for green pastures of Ireland.

There had been lush fields of wounded bodies to feast upon almost continually for forty years in Europe, from the Lithuanian Civil War, Great Northern War, Ottoman-Venetian War and even the War of Quadruple Alliance. Uprisings and rebellions were so frequent that he had grown fat on fields of battle, searching at night for agonizing strains of those untended, dying from their wounds. Almost every great city had ready stocks for punishing a fool charged with religious heresy, later left bound in a forsaken field at night outside protective urban walls.

Mainland Europe offered little hindrance to his escapades until migrating Romani sniffed his trail. Now there would be no hiding place safe enough as their bands sought out stories of outrage from battlefield commanders and warring survivors. Eyes were all about. Bavarian authorities had offered an outrageous reward for his capture, but gypsies wanted revenge and his screams as they tied him in iron chains before burying him alive, upside down, in an unmarked grave sealed with boiling water. He knew their habits of driving iron needles into a victim’s mouth and heart, then ears and eyes. Some from the Caucus even added a stake of hawthorn through vampire legs for good measure. Joseph had seen his brethren, those he had turned to his life as companions, brought to trial and execution. They did not have his ability to transform into
any human race, sex or appearance. That camouflage had served him since his priesthood in
temples of Amun Ra, under Ramses the Great’s rule. Unfortunately, his followers received full
fury from Roma hunters as they lacked his powers of concealment from their day raids in caves
and abandoned basements.

A one-eyed sailor in a heavy, threadbare pea coat crossed the gangplank from his ship to
confront Stockhausen. “You looking for passage to Ireland?” He blocked Stockhausen from
moving toward other ships along the wharf wall.

“Yes, but not your whaler. I could not tolerate the stench.”

“She won’t be hunting on this trip. I’m hauling slave cargo to gentry in Dublin. They’ve
got a taste for this gypsy trash. Romanians sold ‘em to me for a bargain price. They’re mostly old
ones and mothers with new babies. Not fit for cane fields or the mines. I see you got mud on
your boots,” he noted, pausing as he looked at Stockhausen’s dirty shoes. “So, you been north to
the marshes? Nobody goes there, just some searching for peat bogs. You a bogger, are you?”

“No, and I’ll kindly ask you to keep questions to yourself. I’ll accept your offer. Here’s
what I will pay for passage, not a thaler more.” Stockhausen dropped three coins onto the
captain’s grimy paws. Their clinking echoed against rotting wood of splintered pine boards
covering dock support buildings along the wharf.

“More than what I would normally charge, but it’s your money.”

“I expect my privacy, including leaving my name off the ship’s log. That’s covered by
the extra. I want my own quarters and to be left alone.”

“Not much space for that, but I’ll let you bunk in my spare stores area I’d normally have
fitted with whale hunting supplies. We can make that comfortable enough, but there’s no
window for light. It will be stuffy in there, especially if the winter seas kick up.”
“I’d prefer that. And, I’ll bring my own food aboard. I prefer to eat alone.”

“Fine, stranger. That’s more for the crew and whatever slop we have for the merchandise.”

With that, the captain turned and welcomed his new paying client aboard, never realizing that he would be emptied of more than his pockets before his ship docked in Cork.

_Cork Ireland 1740_

Stockhausen resided in Dublin as a traveling aristocrat for two years: Baron Roeshtag. His carriage was now abandoned on the outside edge of Cork’s port bustle coming to and from shipping berths. His devoted carriage driver was pressed below fine velvet seats, emptied of his heart’s juices. There would be no further need for his services.

Nightfall only partially restricted constant movement of cargo bales bound for Dublin or northern clothing factories. He paid little attention to straining bodies and drays bustling past as he headed for fresh passage. Though foraging was rich outside Dublin, in open farmlands, the gypsies freed from aristocratic homes ravished by foreign fevers, rising from famine throughout Ireland, had created an army of escaped brigands searching for his destruction. Their foreign blood had somehow rendered them immune from much of the famine’s disease, as they watched their masters perish. It was easy for them to escape their enslavement.

On his initial arrival to Ireland, Roeshtag refreshed himself by scrounging the surrounding rural villages, ransacking entire peasant hovels in one night. Few cared about retched farmers dying of another new disease brought from the Americas. Half of Europe was terrorized by pox and fevers sailors transmitted through whorehouses along coastlines. Perhaps it was the ultimate victory for raped natives subdued under flags and crosses of a dozen distant royal houses.
Roeshtag collected new wealth, as well, from confiscating gold and silver in fine homes built on trade of cotton, coffee, sugar and slaves. From his perspective, such invasion of upper classes did not serve as punishment for ignoring suffering of thousands of unwashed he devoured. It was simply a beneficial offering from corpses who served his palate. He left no one behind as a witness, not even serving staff. He made that mistake once after arriving in port from Föhr. A lone pregnant girl was spared. Perhaps it was her resemblance to a temple worker he had loved in Heliopolis. In a rare moment of weakness, he let her survive as he left that floating mortuary adrift in Cork’s harbor, with the captain’s tortured body left tied to the mast.

She became the lead other gypsies needed to track him to his new hunting grounds. Only a subterranean tunnel saved him merely nights before as gypsies set his hiding place ablaze in the poorest tenement section of Cork. His revenge was swift, but sunlight kept him from eliminating all of his attackers. Now it was time to escape, again, to new horizons. There would be few of their kind in the New World outside of their chains borne in cane fields and plantations. America’s shores would be teaming with other stout, healthy adventurers to fill his menu without gypsy hounds howling for vengeance.

Connecticut Battlefields in the American Revolution 1780

After the Battle of Trenton, Lieutenant Roeshtag fed on fresh Hessian blood throughout the night, even after their surrender to Washington following his surprise night attack. This excursion led to Roeshtag’s advancement to Captain. He had joined other Pennsylvania Germans in the Provost Corps led my Captain von Heer, which later became the Marechaussee Corps. Roeshtag was unique in organizing dark raids to confuse and thwart British movements. His efforts brought him to the attention of General von Steuben, who was pleased to speak with another officer well versed in German. Roeshtag convinced the Baron that he could not
participate in daytime affairs because of a disease his parents had acquired while traveling in the Caribbean. Still, his organization of nocturnal guerilla operations won Roeshtag honor. He was finally awarded the privilege to serve on Washington’s protective guard.

After the Battle of Connecticut Farms on June 7, 1780, he was raised to the rank of Major for his leadership to surprise the enemy and create an unexplained reduction in their pickets guarding critical supplies, which Roeshtag’s men then destroyed. Overall, through almost a month of fighting, Revolutionary force’s losses were small compared to the British. No one seemed to care that eighty-five Hessian Jaegers were never accounted for after the battles. Throughout the war, his thirst for fresh German flavors went unquenched. He had missed the fat-laden streams from his lost German homeland. He was also drawn to rolling Connecticut countryside where he later settled in quiet solitude with a fine military pension. His fortunes from forays in Ireland kept him in high style as he feasted on new immigrants and native tribes still struggling to cope with colonial advancement.

_Griswold Connecticut  April 1814_

Roeshtag moved to Griswold, Connecticut in 1810 to hide his appearance and identity. His accent had changed enough that he could now pass as a Danish landholder operating a major dairy farm. Adam Larsen seemed a perfect cover within a growing and prosperous agricultural economy. His attendance at weekend balls made up for his lack of visibility during the weekday. He wisely hired a dairy manager to act in his behalf. His holdings grew as nearby farms came up for sale after disappearances of entire families. Such crimes led to suspicions that Indians were still raiding after confiscation of their lands through broken treaties.
The invasion by the British in 1812 allowed him a new flock to target. Traveling by horse gave him access to as many Lobsterbacks as he desired, but to his surprise, his menu could also be supplemented with an occasional Hessian who was foolish enough to return to battle in the Americas. As the war grew further inland, Larsen conceded he needed assistance to keep the invaders far from his farming cover. Within two years, he had six confederates helping to secretly cull the ranks of the Brits, especially the officer corps. In gratitude to the colonists, Larsen passed any intelligence gathered by his raiders back to American forces through his willing farm manager.

In April of 1814, British forces surprised Connecticut residents by rushing far inland along its rivers and inland ports to burn the U.S. warship Essex, along with some twenty merchant ships they declared were privateers. One ship, the Carolina, ported on the Thames, was a merchant vessel carrying a year’s worth of cheese and sausages on its way to Virginia from Larsen’s dairy. His products had grown in fame, especially blood sausages which Larsen prepared himself from victims dragged to his smokehouse. Although he risked exposure by stepping into another war, his substantial losses on the Carolina drove him to volunteer his skills directly to the American forces.

His popularity grew substantially among the local colonists as the Red Coats soon feared to enter into rural Connecticut. It was widely believed that he was leading a guerilla group against the invaders, like the famed Swamp Fox from the Revolutionary War. Unfortunately, a competitor dairyman from nearby Rhode Island grew angry at the popularity of a seeming upstart’s success. Jacob Palmer turned in Abel Hutchins, Larsen’s farm manager, to the British military as a suspected spy. He was hanged from the farm’s barn during daylight without any
protection from his employer. Abel Hutchins was not even fit for draining once Larsen emerged. His usual composure turned to absolute rage.

By now, Larsen commanded a secret force of over fifty vampire elite. Even though he considered them ‘hollows’, as they had few of his powers, their numbers made them a force of reckoning. All were sworn absolute dedication to their lord and master, and to feed now only on the British interlopers. His telepathic call to his followers that night led to a blood bath in local British encampments. Forty shriveled soldiers were hanged in an apple orchard, bled dry for all responding troops to find, serving as a call for surrounding residents to rise up. No military hangings of civilians ever occurred again in rural Connecticut after this atrocity against the invaders.

Some of Larsen’s legions migrated westward to assist efforts against Indians allied to the invasion. Entire villages disappeared as legends of a horrible monster rippled through the tribes, especially the Mohawks. Many believed Flying Head, Kanontsistóntie, had returned to act his vengeance. Tales of missing settlements rose to Tecumseh and Chief John Norton, but were ignored as larger battles loomed against colonists. Thousands of Native Americans vanished, considered victims of settler revenge and oppression.

1835 Rural Rhode Island

Larsen attempted to control his growing family of vampires, but some revolted, ignoring his direction, becoming bold in their attacks of anyone, instead of strangers and newcomers who would not raise suspicion. Pressures grew against his farm as nightly gatherings with his cabal drew attention, including rumors of witchcraft, since Larsen was never seen during the day. A
new manager did not help Larsen’s situation after he began to whisper frightening stories to locals about his employer, with hopes his owner would be driven away, leaving him the farm. In an act of punishment for his underlings, Larsen called his followers into the main barn one night, and then set it ablaze himself. He ensured that his troublesome manager would be implicated by throwing his empty drained shell deep into the fiery structural remains. That cleared Larsen of any complicity, but foreshadowed the need to move on with a new identity.

He moved for a time to Exeter, Rhode Island as a Belgium immigrant schoolteacher, Herman Maes. He would earn a place to sleep during the day by tutoring children at night. His consistent client was an immigrant family, the Browns. He became fond of them but had to move on as word came that gypsy slavery was close to being prohibited throughout Europe. He considered implications of their likely migration to America along with a surge of other peasants starving from crop failures across the Continent. He had turned the Brown’s daughter, Mercy, into one of his converts out of desperation for companionship. With news of the growing threat of new hunters, he suddenly left her behind, vacating without remorse or consideration for her future as a husk of his making.

Herman’s decision to move to the West in late 1845 was timely as a wave of gypsy immigrants roared upon the East Coast starting in 1850. In 1846, he was on a wagon train headed for California. The new gypsy arrivals wasted little time in their pursuit of him. They began to immediately seek out bloodsuckers wherever there was news of unexplained deaths and disappearances. The few survivors who had not attended Larsen’s barn burning in Griswold were later dispatched by 1853. A final destruction of a straggling band in Jewett City,
Connecticut occurred in 1854. By then, even Mercy Brown had fallen to hunters, leaving none of Larsen’s bloodline left to feast in the Eastern colonies.

**October 1846 Donner Party**

“Get out! Get out, damn you!” Louis Keseberg’s boot kicked dry, wrinkled fingers hanging onto the struggling Conestoga’s backboard. Screams gurgled up from the sixty-year-old Belgian begging for pummeling to stop as he hung on, dragging his bare feet along the rutted, cold trail. Twilight was taking over the landscape which would soon cover Keseberg’s evil act. Cold would soon finish the victim in the Sierra Foothill frigid air.

Ernst Hardkoop had paid the wagon owner three hundred dollars in gold to let him stay covered and warm during the day under quilts between Keseberg’s supplies before he left Fort Bridger. They could be in California in four weeks if all went well. It was already unusually cold for late September. If they didn’t hurry the Sierra snows might catch them. It was clear to the rest of the Donner Party that their new member was struggling with the weight of his cargo up the steep hills near Winnemucca, Nevada. Keseberg’s patience ran out, or maybe his greed overwhelmed him. All the other immigrants were walking beside their rigs, pushing while the oxen struggled against the incline. Hardkoop had refused to join the toil during the day, even though it was clear he was too sickly to accommodate any strenuous challenge. Keseberg never questioned the old stranger’s disappearance from camp at night. Hardkoop’s absence left the wagon free for his rest. All he knew was that for weeks his guest returned more vigorous, only to disappear under the curved white cover, beneath blankets, as sunrise struck camp, yet became gradually weakened again as time passed under gray skies.
Jacob Wolfinger saw this crime play out as his wagon was just ahead of Keseberg’s. He stopped pushing his cart to help protect Hardkoop. Jacob cried out to him in German that he was coming, but Keseberg pulled a rifle from under his seat, threatening Wolfinger and his family. Wolfinger was helpless. He retreated to catch the Donners before dark. Hardkoop never reached camp and was never seen again. Later, on October 15, as the train continued into the early snows of the Sierras, Keseberg secretly paid Joseph Reinhardt and Augustus Spitzer to go with Wolfinger back to his cached wagon that had broken down as others moved on. There they killed Wolfinger so there would be no witness to prosecute Keseberg in California. Upon reuniting with the Donners, they claimed Paiute Indians had committed the crime. Suspicion grew about Wolfinger’s death, as the pain and sorrow within Wolfinger’s young family remained, while everyone struggled through deepening drifts and impassable trails.

Hardkoop, however, observed all of this. He had abandoned the name Herman Maes before he traveled west, but he also took the form of an old frail man. After Keseberg’s vile actions, he followed the Donners just behind their doomed route, feeding on Indians and dying members of the wagon train until they were rescued. His feedings infuriated the Paiutes. They struck back by stealing almost all of the Donner Party oxen. Through his shadowing, he never forgot the kindness of Wolfinger. Spitzer died of suspicious causes on February 8 at the Breen Cabin. Reinhardt followed soon after at Alder Creek from an undisclosed illness, as Hardkoop drained him slowly each night to extend his suffering. In his delirium, Reinhardt finally confessed his treachery to Leanna Donner. By then, there was so little blood left that he passed in a paroxysm of unbearable pain. Strangely, the murderer’s body disappeared and was never recovered after rescue teams finally arrived at the trapped Donner camp. However, Keseberg remained a survivor found by saviors fighting to relieve the trapped migrants. Though he
claimed his innocence of cannibalism, he was hated and haunted with accusations until his lonely death, long abandoned by his wife and his retarded children. He was not even aware of the slight urge for blood and human liver transmitted to him in his sleep by someone he had once thrown to a lonely Sierra death.

*Mexican American War 1846*

Hans Krueger was wrenched around violently from his vantage point near the prow of the United States fighting ship Congress as she entered port in Baja California under full moon, fully armed for a night battle.

“Strip him down and tie this stowaway to the mast for punishment.” Lieutenant Anderson’s harsh tones broke the crew’s anticipation of a safe landing after conflict.

Krueger would have destroyed his captors had there not been almost a full complement of Marines surrounding him.

“Lieutenant, stop this!” Jeremiah cried out. He was a rugged inexperienced youth serving as a sailor aboard ship. “That man fought with Marines bravely last night and helped turn the tide. Ask any man about us.” Jeremiah pointed his powerful hand toward circling men.

Lieutenant Anderson was not amused and repeated his order, but this time also commanded Marines to arrest young Johnson for a simultaneous flogging. No Marine moved. Anderson pulled his pistol and held it to Johnson’s head. “You, stowaway, you want me to blow this whelps brains out on the deck?” Krueger nodded no, and moved toward the sheets tied to cleats around the mast base. “Good. And you Marines, anyone refusing my order will be keelhauled when we’re underway under light tomorrow. You, Sergeant Benson, you go tell the
Captain what’s up. He’s still got dysentery or something. He cannot come topside. Too bad. He will miss seeing this. Any of you sailors with no stomach for it, you step up. You’ll join Johnson for his forty…”

Anderson didn’t finish his sentence as Johnson’s giant fist impacted his face. Wood splinters from the gunwale splattered behind Johnson as Anderson’s pistol missed its mark as the flash lit up the deck. A ‘hurrah’ rose from Marines and sailors in unison. Other officers were forced below deck to prevent interference to the mutiny. In a few minutes, sailors had the ship tied off with the gangway set for Johnson and Krueger to escape.

Johnson never looked back as they prepared to split their paths. “Where are you headed, Jeremiah?” Krueger asked.

“I figure to change my name back to my first name, John. These bastards will come looking for me, but I’m heading up to Montana country. I hear there’s lots of gold to be found lying out about where a man can pick it up by the fist full.”

“Don’t let that fever get to you, Jere…John.” Krueger broke away his grip and looked hard at someone he’d come to respect…someone who didn’t probe and demand information about his past. “You’ve got a strong heart, Johnson. That’s tough country. I’ve been through it once. Watch the Indians. They don’t much like us.”

“I’ve heard, but they’re not all like that. You come look me up sometime. You always got a place to stay wherever I live. I’ll be in southwest Montana territory. Remember that…gold country for sure.”

He shook Krueger’s hand before sneaking through the rustic Mexican village. He had saved Johnson’s life in an earlier skirmish through amazing swiftness in darkness, leaving
dozens of Mexican soldiers dead long before Marines and sailors could begin their landing
engagement of a Mexican stronghold. All of the combatants realized how many American lives
were saved by this savvy civilian immigrant appearing at opportune moments in battle, but who
remained hidden aboard the Constitution.

Johnson did not see Krueger circle around and return to dark decks aboard the
Constitution where Anderson still rested unconscious in his bunk. By morning, there would be a
war ship docked with no officer corps and with only baffled Marines and sailors helpless to
explain how all the bodies disappeared in a single night without witnesses. It would become a
story hidden from the public after the war’s end.

**Montana Territory   1847**

Johnson’s eyes were red, not so much from weeping. He was past that. His vision blurred
from hours of staring at the sky burial of his wife, Swan, wedged in crooks of young alders
growing apart in a tight splay of wooden fingers. Her tightly wrapped corpse had a clear view
over the fading aqua of a high-mountain lake. Sunset pulled a shadow over distant Canadian
Rockies as night breezes rose up the valley floor to rustle white-tipped eagle feathers drifting
below her bindings, attached by leather thongs, interspersed with her favorite beads. Not all
Flatheads used these rites, but he knew her deepest beliefs, even during their short time together
before a Crow band butchered her. No woman had ever treated him so gently. She stood by his
struggles to find shiny metal as he aged into a bitter, frenzied explorer. His extraordinary
marksmanship kept them well fed; however, there was no treasure. Fables had dragged him to a
forsaken mountain wilderness, far from his home in New Jersey. Now, all he felt was shame and
seething fury against the Crow who had ripped open his life, leaving a festering wound for a soul.

“I have come far to find you, Jeremiah, but your sorrow troubles me deeply. I hardly recognize the young pup from the Constitution.” Krueger beheld a heavily bearded man, not the lighthearted lad he had known. A year had aged Johnson a lifetime. He was also bent in pain from a recent hatchet wound a Crow warrior had provided.

Johnson swiveled like a cat, knife pulled, and ready to strike. His blurred vision cleared to reveal his war ally standing before him, dressed out in Western garb of local miners. A slouched hat pulled low over Krueger’s gaunt face, but his eyes were still visible, penetrating, and unforgettable from days they fought side-by-side against Mexicans.

“Can’t be,” Johnson said, lowly, almost in a whisper. “Heard you were killed by them Mexicans, the ones who butchered all the officers aboard the ship. Lots of stories flying about how you got hunted down and killed by them bastards…almost as bad as… stinking Crows.”

“Apparently I outlived my death reports. Not the first time. It’s always good to see your enemies breathing their last when they think they’ve done you in…but this…,” Krueger pointed at Swan’s shadow above them, “There are no words I can offer for this violation. I heard plenty about what happened as I tracked you up here. You two were revered and respected by everyone I met. It’s rare to find deep companionship in this dreary world.” He reached out with his left hand; pushing Johnson’s knife hand down as he placed his right upon the human wreck’s left shoulder, giving comfort. Krueger could feel his friend trembling as Johnson fell to his knees, weeping openly.
“There is no reason to go on. I just want to lie here, on these rotting leaves. Let the wolves come take me. I couldn’t save her. Why should I save myself?”

Krueger knelt, hugging his friend tightly, trying to absorb some of the tortured soul’s tragedy. Johnson stopped his shaking and pushed away.

“No, it’s not right. Here you come all this way and look at the mess I throw at you. Not right. I’m just not myself. Don’t want to be. Maybe you should just go on and not remember any of this.” Johnson threw his hands flat to the ground, tossing his knife to the side as he rolled into a ball and wept.

Krueger’s night hungers were rising. Johnson’s heavy heartbeat echoed like a war drum to his thirst, but he pushed it aside. Johnson was not a gypsy wench to be spared…he was a brother in arms. He reached down with one hand and raised the bedraggled widower straight up, suspending the bear of a man off the ground, shocked and petrified as the vampire’s grip held him like a trout out of water.

“You hear me, Jeremiah, there is little justice in this world, but there is evil. I can give you justice…vengeance against your enemies. I can do this because I am the evil that walks this world. Even the Crow fear those like me, they call us Nirumbee. We come in the night. They say we steal their children and their women. You will become that, Jeremiah. You will have your justice for Swan.”

Johnson wriggled helplessly in clutches of the powerful denizen. Krueger could hear his ally’s heart pounding to the point of bursting.
“Resistance against this is useless, my dear friend. I will give you the ability to walk amongst men in the daylight…a gift I was not given. Yet, at night, you will have the skills and hunger to punish those who took your joy away. Some of the Crow already believe you have hunted them, for I grew hungry through their lands as I wandered here. They already call you *Dapiek Absaroka*. Be warned, you must treat them differently than I would…so I have left a sign of your anger. You will retain your daylight exposure with no ill effects as long as you eat the liver of your victims. Eat it whole and bloody while they wriggle under your onslaught. Butcher them and leave them writhing with their veins emptied. I give all this power to you before I pass from here to make my way south to territories where no one will know me. You have given me new hope that perhaps there is love left to be found, no matter our past. Now I give you my gift.”

Krueger pulled the flailing mountain man close as his fangs entered Johnson’s horrified veins, initiating him into the ranks of the night thirsty.

*October 1864  Civil War in Bloody Kansas*

The Second Colorado Cavalry continued its ongoing battles with fierce rebel guerillas along the Kansas-Missouri border as the Civil War raged on. Quantrill’s Raiders had struck Lawrence, Kansas the year before where an army of his guerillas destroyed the city, murdering hundreds of civilians. The Second Cavalry later supported a Union response that raged back into Missouri, ravaging four counties while driving residents from their homes and farms. No one was spared, including children and the elderly. In some villages, there were no survivors left to bury the piles of corpses left at the town square by brutal Yankee troops.

Johnson joined the Second in St. Louis after these atrocities. He had wandered south along the Missouri River after leaving a swath of carnage throughout the Crow Nation. The few
labor jobs he could find, including cutting wood for the paddle wheelers on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, hardly paid for a place to hide away between his recurring lusts for human blood. His strategy was to hide his tastes within military actions of war, just as his maker, Krueger, had found as an effective disguise for thousands of years.

Captain Jenkins of F Company pointed at Private Johnson after explaining future troop movements along the map for tomorrow’s next attack. Oil lamps sputtered overhead as his Lieutenants listened silently.

“And you, Johnson, you know what I need from you. These rascals need to be softened up before we get at them. Bloody Bill Anderson has no qualms about butchering our men. We’ve lost almost two hundred since this summer. You saw the bodies of those unarmed recruits he chopped up on the train. This isn’t a man we’re dealing with…but a rabid dog. We need your unique skills to ensure our main body gets to his camp here.” Jenkins pointed to a furrow on the map, indicating a protected hollow. “Can you take out their guards and snipers tonight without arousing Anderson’s main force?”

Johnson’s red-eye stare left Jenkins unsettled as he nodded his head. Jenkins felt a cold chill down his back. Johnson saluted the officers, and then turned, leaving them to their planning. “I hate Anderson with all my soul, gentlemen, but as a man, I regret using that monster against them. May God rest their souls tonight.”

Reins from Johnson’s horse were tied off near a spring a quarter mile south of Anderson’s guerilla camp. There could be forty or more seasoned fighters planning their next raid against Kansas. Winter might be early, he thought to himself, walking silently through heavy
dew settling from the chill. A low cloud cover was moving in from the north, keeping the terrain blank to most humans, but powers invested from Krueger gave him heightened eyesight, hearing and smell. Drifting aromas from fatback and beans over a small fire gave away the main encampment, but his primary target would be pickets strategically located throughout a galleried forest lining a stream leading into the canyon recess.

Charles Merrick never heard his predator. His Sharps rifle fell away from his chilled hands as Johnson snapped the young man’s neck, before fully imbibing from his first kill. There were at least two more victims ahead. Remains of their urine and offal left behind, under nearby bushes, gave away their posts. Johnson raced undetected around and through dense thickets to capture Walter “Goober Pea” Harris for his next meal…but the sniper was already dead and empty. His arms had been ripped off by some great force, then used to support his torso half upright as a warning.

“The fact you never felt me is disappointing. You’ve grown sloppy from hunting Crow. They are tasty, but slow moving game. Still, you must improve if you wish to survive a long life.”

Johnson swirled, pistol cocked, but unable to pull the trigger. All of his surroundings froze as his body froze in mid stride. The bearded mannequin stood helpless as a young, blonde figure in worn Confederate garb swirled about him, laughing.

“I gave you the means for your revenge, old friend, and how you have abused it. Were a dozen or more of your enemies not enough? No. You have drawn far too much attention to our kind…my trusted offspring. I’ve heard the rumors. What is it, three hundred at least? More like a
thousand from what the Crow tell, but the whites don’t dare believe that. You’ve become a monster among men. That makes you a problem for me. Let me free you from your silly anger now, for we must talk.”

The figure waved his hand, allowing Johnson to move and collapse to the ground. He quickly rose in amazement, holstering his pistol.

“Krueger? Can that be you? You don’t look anything like…”

“Like I used to? Of course not, but you don’t have those abilities. I could be a child, a woman, and even a giant if I wished. The goal is to be invisible within the prey herd. You have lost that lesson. In that single day I took to teach you, warning of the things you would lose, like the ability to have children, the desire for normal food and even close friendships…so many drawbacks to your new life, and you forgot the most important of all…anonymity.”

“I didn’t create the legends. It was the damn Crow!”

“Because you left witnesses. You wanted them to know it was you. Just leaving the liver as a calling card was not enough? No, you allowed some of them to return to their tribe to tell the story of watching you devastate their kin. That must stop…and tonight will be the end of it. Those peckerwoods order you like a pet dog to feed. You have no idea who our real enemy is. It is time to let you know the real cause we fight for and your secret opponents.”

“I don’t understand any of this, or what I should call you.”

“Now…now I’m Paul Bender, a German immigrant from Missouri, fighting for the right to keep slavery alive. Quantrill listened to my advice for a time, but then inflated his ego to the
point he could not be useful. Then this idiot Anderson followed. Remember the Constitution? I have no love for anyone named Anderson. This fool was easy enough to direct to ensure there would be just enough raids that my feasting would be hidden. Now, he has also bloated his self-importance far beyond his capabilities. Ah, how these Americans thrive on the ego of some imagined glory, when life is so short for them all.”

“How could you support their madness? Slavery? It is inhumane and must be stopped.”

Johnson slapped his hands together, emphasizing his point.

“Jeremiah, hear me out, and never forget this. We never become part of the squabble, unless there is reason for our own safety. Wars provide us with a feeding ground, nothing more. They are our cattle. Forget what you once were. Our sworn enemies, foes with an ancient origin, are now invading this land. They were freed from slavery in Europe and now they seek us out as we hunt for fresh lambs each night. They are the gypsies that have come out of chains. They have used their powers to influence this President Lincoln with their Christian mysticism. I fear he will find a way to stop all slavery, freeing our nemesis upon us. That is why you must learn to hide your new life. When this conflict is over, leave these idiots behind and move to new feeding grounds.”

“That, Paul, is a huge bone to chew on. Look at you…killing your own comrades. Is this the insanity I face?” Jeremiah pointed at the pitiful remains of the picket before him.

“Listen, and hear me in every part of your body.” Bender suddenly stood close to Johnson, grabbing his shoulders and burning his red gaze through his disciple. “These are not your comrades. They provide sustenance and nothing more. Slavery has been a part of human
consciousness since the beginnings of this pitiful race. Even your Indians practiced it, long before white men arrived. It is in their nature, just as it is in ours, now, yours and mine, to continue by culling their ranks. Don’t ever confuse them for more than food…they are no more than a meat pie with an opinion.”

“So you felt nothing when you killed those twenty unarmed recruits on the train? I could not imagine who would have left such carnage…but now I know.”

“It helped escalate the conflict. It brought your soldiers here. They’ll blame this poor fool’s disassembly as Yankee brutality. That will make Anderson even crazier come morning, which is a stretch considering his drunkenness. I was able to convince him to camp in a dead-end canyon. He can’t possibly escape in an assault. Your troopers will surprise them tomorrow and, with some luck, wipe out most of them. I had hoped for no less. I knew you might be here tonight. Your association with the Yankees got around…and that must end. After tomorrow, drift away from such duties and eventually leave quietly. This war will be over next year. I have a sense for that after thousands of conflicts.”

“And if I refuse? If I want to continue this battle and ignore the gypsy threat.”

A violent howl rose out of Bender, shaking the ground, trees and filling surrounding brush with a brilliant red glow. “Then I will leave you like this frail twig at your feet, but it will be much worse for you…unimaginable. You were chosen. You do not disobey. Obey and be reborn.” Johnson knelt before his master in utter terror and compliance.

“I will see you no more, Jeremiah. My debt to you is paid. Do not disappoint. In a way, you have gifted something to me. Your bond with Swan stayed in my mind for years. In my
battles back and forth in Kansas, I saved a woman and her two children in Lawrence, while hundreds were butchered by Quantrill. I once saved a woman when I first came to this land. I pray this outcome will be different. After tomorrow, I will try to find a new life in Kansas with a family—not by birth or Christian bonding, but by gifting a longer life instead of being piled in a mass grave used for her neighbors in Lawrence. That is another reason I have forgiven you your failings these years since your gift was provided. Now, leave this place and report that you have cleared the guards. I will find my new path in Kansas and pray to Amun that gypsies fail in their quest for our deaths.”

Nothing preceded Bender’s disappearance…no wind, flash of light or shadowy movement. Johnson simply rose and moved away from the disgusting remains of Anderson’s picket, returning to his company commander to report that the path was clear for attacking the rebel camp.
Olt’s turbulent floodwaters twirled Kem through swirling mud, foam, brush and branches. His head struck against heavier debris, but not enough to knock him unconscious. Hypothermia overtook his muscles, though his thin, delicate fingers formed a death grip on the violin’s neck, across broken strings, as if it were his life jacket. He took air whenever his head popped over the tumult, but he could feel his focus weakening.

Campsite horrors from the massacre drifted through his mind as his will to breathe weakened. He replayed memories of a dark shadow standing in piercing blue light, tearing open the bridegroom’s throat while suspended helplessly in air, drifting skyward with all Roma in camp. Then Djevrija, his cousin, being stripped of her wedding gown and left naked in shame to be viewed by all Lupsa rising for slaughter. He remembered his dear Babik screaming for him to continue running, but he never looked back as terror’s hand pushed him to the river’s edge. Kem’s red celebration pants were already stained with his fear dribbling down to his boots.

Even in thick fog he could feel blue searchlights upon him…pulling at him at the river bank, but Babik’s attack distracted the searchers, as did an accidental strumming of instrument strings as he fled. He was not sure why that was, or why he held onto the violin instead of dropping it behind, but someone controlling the beams did not like its sounds. It gave him moments he needed to dive recklessly forward into the rushing floodwaters, praying he could survive horrors inflicted on the wedding party.
He immediately drifted quickly downstream, pushed under water, soon almost a mile from the original campsite. No lights pursued. As consciousness receded, he felt a hard push below him as something grasped his arms and legs. Still, he gripped the violin and emerged with it, onto the shore, as he was thrown from the river onto the wet bank beyond the Olt.

Kem could hear a twittering, light laughter—foreign and frightening. Fog obscured his view as waters rushed past nearby. He imagined a tree root had caught his leg, throwing him out of the savage stream, but then roots pulled around his legs and torso, lifting him into surrounding galleried forests of ash and beech. Branches and leaves formed a hammock to suspend him while he dried, while making a windbreak to protect him from further chill.

Delirium took hold of Kem’s mind. He tried to play his broken violin with an imaginary bow. His eyes swelled shut from his river beating. He was blind to throbbing orange glows wavering silently from his violin. Still, he swallowed hard, keeping his voice alive as he whispered verses of his favorite Roma song as he imagined he was playing before wedding guests:

*A Gypsy plays his violin like fire*
*Move on, Gypsy, move on*
*Never stay at one place too long.*
*Don’t stop.*
*They love to hear the violin,*
*hear the beat of the drum*
*the singer’s soothing voice*
*the violin, the nightingale*
*the sweet voice of a baby.*

After repeating verses twice, he collapsed into coma, still protected by Dryads surrounding him and his rescuers nearby, the singing river nixies.
Chapter 12  March 2004  Deep within the Earth in Primordial Caverns beneath Europe

“Sense of time seems to drift away in this cave complex. Have we been here days…months…longer?” Schean Du’s mind was filled with Cerridwen’s Cauldron’s wonders.

“That sense does not serve Dryads well,” Balanis replied, stroking his forehead. “We do not break the flow of time into little pieces, even if humans find joy in slicing our bodies in half to read our rings. And you call us brutal?”

“I never accused you of that,” Schean Du responded, slightly irked by her accusation.

“No, true you never did, but think of millions of foresters and lumberjacks through the centuries cursing my brethren as they felled them before carving off their limbs and their skin to make houses, furniture and their toilet paper. How would you feel if your relatives were turned into such things?”

“Obviously, pretty pissed off. I never looked at it that way. I can’t berate an entire species for those actions, especially when they had no idea trees might be conscious. I would be beating an outside dog for peeing on new carpet after it ran inside to get out of a storm.”

“Your metaphor escapes me, but we must continue. Be aware we did not go without vengeance against humans for their atrocities to our forests. Over the centuries, we have released great plagues to punish civilizations that devastated us, from Asia to Europe to the Americas. So be it. Now, are you ready for additional readiness beyond what you have been told? Can you handle more?” Balanis faced him, searching for weaknesses or resistance.
“Let’s roll. I’m all in now that I know the scope of what these bastards want to do to Earth. What is this…some kind of giant mirror?” Schean Du stared at a twenty-foot tall surface set back in an oval alcove of cave rock. Its surface reflected green luminescence while emanating a cold aura outward from silvery ripples rolling back and forth across its surface. Writing along its outer edge matched the cavern’s mouth hieroglyphics.

“You are the first in over two thousand years to face Celliden’s Well. My teachers believed it ancient far before implantation of Dryads, when there were two moons—pink and blue. Great battles ensued between species we know little about. Your star charts indicated they came from the Vega system. One race was destroyed; while the other perished slowly from biological weapons fired by their enemies in a final confrontation. Somehow, those final survivors used their technology to meld their consciousness into the Well’s liquid metal. Here are both their memories and all those of Earth’s history from the time of their encapsulation. Look at this example.” Balanis waved her hand just above the surface, as if pulling a curtain away from a window.

“How is this possible?” Schean Du asked, stunned by vistas of an Earth covered by unrecognizable continents and seas, as two moons colliding above it, rocked by gigantic explosions. Eons rushed past as parts of shattered moons devastated Earth’s surface, while remaining shards formed large rings of debris around the planet. As panoramic visions continued, planet-sized spaceships arrived. He watched as new aliens captured space debris to build a white moon, with a hollow center, constructed to act as a monitoring station to protect their terraforming work. Balanis moved her hand, leaving the screen darkened.

“Let us pause so this reality can be fully absorbed.”
“I’ll admit I’m awestruck. Everything I was taught as a human is a lie. If people knew about such things, it would change their hearts and minds. I know it. If we only knew.” He shook his head. These revelations left him dizzy. He rested back away from the Well.

“Your Merlin also felt strained, but it was much worse for him without a sense of technology and space travel your time has accepted. Unfortunately, all of these past visitors left similar records under the city you call Jerusalem. They were found by a greedy band of opportunists called the Knights Templar. We know for a fact that these and many other important histories were brought to your Catholic leaders…yes, your leaders. They have hidden the truth to control souls for their purpose in accordance with alliances with the scaly ones.”

“The Reptoids you showed me? The Grays?” Schean Du asked.

“Exactly. However, like so many of these past alliances with human leaders, it often becomes evident that there are no advantages as lizards eventually slaughter at large. When humans resist, aliens simply change the climate, starving the cultures through droughts, while still feeding on them at will. It has been repeated hundreds of times with human civilizations, long before your Atlantis.”

“That is perplexing. Who would dare resist an advanced civilization? It would be suicide.”

“Some did, “Balanis continued, “but not residents from Earth. Even before the end of your last great ice age, another race visited us. They injected a form of humans who were resilient against conformity and control. These new species, which did not rise from the ape predecessors, have Rh-negative blood. They have secretly led a war of attrition against Grays and their allies, while being cursed by humanity they are sworn to secretly serve.”

“And who would these secret saviors be? I’ve never heard of them.”
“Yes, Schean Du, you have. You call them gypsies, but they mostly call themselves Roma. Of course, there are other groups from the original implantation that are well known, like the Basque and some of the original tribes of Israel. We’ve had a substantial history of coexistence with their leaders, but sometimes they drift away from the road of life. We have had unfortunate misunderstandings between us, but we still believe in them. So many were lost in your last great war…but they remain. Here, let me show you some who will come to support your struggle against your enemy.” She opened the Well’s vista to a new menagerie of faces.

“Surely some of these are not human. They would draw too much attention if they walked among humanity.” He pointed specifically at one woman’s face with an eye staring out in the middle of a greenish forehead.

“All of these will play a role in hunting demons you seek. Some of gypsy women occasionally portray a recessive gene from their alien origins. Those special ones are kept hidden away from mankind. If they fail, the curious and fearful search them out and burn them as evil spirits. It is a continuous failing of your insidious race—one we have considered for thousands of years as a sign of a failed experiment. There is far too much of the reptile DNA in humanity.” Balanis was silent again. Schean Du felt her pain in remembering a long history of atrocities.

“So the reptiles have something to do with people being here? What about evolution…the record of human development?” Schean Du held Balanis and stared in her glowing green eyes.

“Most of your beliefs about origins and development of humans is based on half truths, with important pieces missing. That’s why Grays feel they have a right to consume and enslave as
they please. It is a tangled mess as many fingers played with genetic code going back millions of years…far beyond what you had imagined.” She lifted her hand over the mirror again, opening a new display.

Before them were huge dioramas of open plains filled with brontosaurus through about tall, tropical trees topped with huge fronds, as winged lizards filled the air above them. Schean Du was shocked by what seemed a Hollywood production, except these dinosaurs made strange noises and had reflected iridescent sheens, some of which changed colors as different species came too close to each other. He recognized the Pterodactyls and other pterosaurs…but then—

“That’s not a dinosaur! Christ, that’s…”

“Yes, you would call it a dragon.” Balanis interrupted. “They were a wonderful, intelligent species, once our allies in balance. They could live for thousands of years, but when invaders came from Mars, all of that changed. They killed most dragons and dinosaurs…some for food, but most for amusement, like your people shooting buffalo from trains.”

“Not one of our finest moments.” Schean Du replied. “But…oh that’s not possible.” Riding on backs of many dinosaurs were gigantic, red-haired humanoids. Some even rode soaring dragons, in a peaceful symmetry.

“You see, my love, a wonderful communalism existed between biped and beast. Before alien poison was injected, high cultures arose where dragons and musicians lived as one. Plucking of strings produced soothing frequencies for flying giants. They were at peace, playing in clouds as riders wove their symphonies over soaring red scales that would otherwise be infuriated by vibrations from clashing tectonic plates, as Great Mother constantly reforms the land. It seems odd that such memories are thought of as pure
fantasy in your modern world, but they are primordial racial flickers of what once was...before the degradation. These were giants living in peace and harmony. It is a lost world hidden in residual memories; it still stirs deep yearnings in many of your children, but then such thoughts are driven out by blindness forged by controllers...those in secret collaboration with Martian invaders.”

“So much lost...disturbing. And yet you have not been able to reverse the invader’s interference?”

“Be assured, Schean Du, we have attempted many times to stop this. There is more to this challenge than you can imagine. We even failed in part of your recent journey, with our hopes of producing a powerful being that could aid us beyond your existence. Did you never wonder about your wife, Anne? How when you first met you were overwhelmed with her strange power of attraction?”

Schean Du pulled back, once again surprised by what Balanis knew of his previous life.

“Is there nothing about me you do not know?” he asked.

“Not since our merging, but there was much before you came back to me that was carefully planned. You were to be a progenitor of something never before attempted...blending a half-changeling male with another half-changeling female—you of the Dryads and she of the Nyads. Anne was never aware of her true genetic line, but sea’s call was so powerful she could not deny it, day or night. Unfortunately, Nyad spirits are especially sensitive to human lung diseases. You could not have known that and no medicine in the world could have saved her from that virus. Her death was a stunning loss for all of us. She was beloved
even beyond you. So, yes, we have had many attempts to find a way forward to victory.”

Schein Du sat on the cavern floor, away from Celliden’s Well. Thoughts of his loss overwhelmed him even with new knowledge that Anne’s death was beyond his abilities to prevent, but he also felt anger for others who had manipulated a loving couple.

He spoke slowly next, measuring his words carefully. “You must know this revelation has built mistrust between us, Balanis. Anne and I were used for some larger plot that was never our choice to join. Do you understand how wrong that is…really? You talk about human failings as if they were hopeless and flawed, but this action alone is proof that the Dryads are no better. I think letting me know this truth was a risk that may have catastrophic implications for your plans for me.”

“I do not ask forgiveness for any of these things, but understanding. We are facing annihilation. Our methods are gentle compared to our enemies’ tactics. Yes, we have failed and taken missteps. One of our errors was when we allied a thousand years ago with a human wizard named Gwydion to help in a fight between humans you call the Cad Goddeu. That was a terrible mistake and led to a schism of cooperation that once existed between humans and Dryads. My dear friend, Achren, lost her life in that conflict when we came against iron weapons men had created. So, we have made grave errors, but we moved ahead because we must.”

“Perhaps humanity would be better off had all these interested parties just left them alone.”

“That is a fantasy, Schein Du. We will show you how the universe is alive everywhere. There are life forms living in what you consider pure vacuum. Even suns have life percolating in their centers. Not life as you understand…but life. There is no place in the heavens where forms of the great consciousness do not interact.
It always amazed the Dryad Council how your current civilization denies myriads of alien culture visitations every year, when previous cultures were so open to such realities. Unfortunately, many visiting explorers have brought vectors and virulence. That is the real Pandora’s Box…but the surprise that Pandora releases after all the evil escapes is humanity’s DNA. It has an advanced resilience and capacity to resist emerging diseases. Sometimes your own explorers eradicated entire populations unknowingly, like the Europeans spreading plagues among native tribes worldwide. We watched this and shuddered, wondering if a changeling hybrid could ever survive in such a germ-infested climate…but here you are…so let us move ahead to your next phase where you are given powerful ancient technologies to assist your resistance to this Villanova. And know he is much like you, although he has thousands of years of existence in his current body. He is, nonetheless, a hybrid. Grays have been injecting them into human populations with limited success throughout history. He is the only one they’ve created having such longevity, which may be due to his incessant rampaging of victims from human herds. You will need substantial powers to overcome him. He is not to be underestimated.”

“But he did not destroy me in court,” Schean Du replied.

“That is a wonder. After I touched Max, and read his record, I came to believe Villanova was surprised by your friend. I was unaware of this weakness in your opponent— he cannot adapt quickly to unanticipated outcomes. That is a Gray characteristic. They have a robotic, single-minded approach. When anything unexpected occurs, they freeze or move about as if stunned. Use that to your advantage. Darkness does not adapt to spontaneous creativity.”

“I doubt my split-second reactions are going to stop alien technology. If he is really part alien, what chance would I have against him in battle?” Schean Du shook his head, still
wondering if he could walk away from this insanity…with immunity from his own destruction by Dryads. “And who is this Council you keep talking about? I thought you were the high muckety-muck or something?”

Balanis paused before answering. “You should not take the Council so lightly. We are a collaboration of many types you would call elementals who have survived on this world for hundreds of millions of years. Some existed from formation, such as fire and earth spirits. We are bound in consciousness and select representatives to oversee planet zones just as you have mayors, governors, presidents and kings. For Dryads, we have twelve primaries in distinct geographic areas to oversee all plant life. I oversee an area similar to what you call Europe, but not with exact boundaries.

There also remains discord among elemental partners on some issues, just like your United Nations. For instance, in this long conflict with the Grays, the Sylphs, those representing the air, have taken a neutral stand as fire elementals allied with the invaders. In your confrontations, you will find alliances and support from the Nyads, the elementals of water, just as they brought you and Anne together. You will meet as many varieties of water spirits as you have earth and plant life forms, but the Sylphs will remain aloof. You might call them neutral, like Switzerland was in your great wars. The Sylphs have their own issues with humans for they hate smoke and pollution pumped into air they protect. It is hard to define how they see their current role since they despise humans.”

“What about weapons? As a former soldier, I know the value of field gear. What can you offer from these old civilizations that can cover my ass in a fight?”

Balanis laughed lightly. “That is an odd reference. You are so strange to me in some ways, but there are tools we have gathered and protected for millennia. For instance,” she continued,
guiding Schean Du into a barely lighted recess to their right. “Here rests armor made from
dragon scales. It is impervious to fire of any kind. This vest creates a protective field around your
entire body as long as you wear it as a breastplate and plackart. Notice its weight.”

Schean Du donned the rugged vest, surprised it was lightweight. It felt like a t-shirt over his
chest.

“This,” Balanis continued, “will stand up to any of the dragon
creatures Villanova might call to attack.”

“He can do that?”

“Yes…or should I say his allies can? He has limited powers
over fire elementals as he is still a hybrid.”

“Then what happens when I call on my contacts in the earth and water elements? Will they
ignore me?”

“They respond to requests, not commands. You know the difference.”

“That, my love,” Schean Du clarified, “is the difference between ordering and leading. I get
it. If that is understood by everyone, we should do fine.”

“Let me show you several more secrets. Here is the torque you will wear on your right wrist.
Pure Dryads cannot wear it for it is metal, but not of this planet. It was forged from meteorites
untold ages past. With spheres at the end placed inward, toward your wrist on your pulse, you
will have the power of blue fire. It is pure magic. We do not fully understand its power as none
of us dares to wear it, but we have memories of those who used it in great conflicts on other
worlds. This blue fire will overpower even the most intense energies from alien foes.”

“Handy,” Schean Du said, twisting the bracelet over his wrist. “But, if it’s on all the time,
that could be dangerous.”
“That is why you must flip the bracelet upside down when you do not want the power. It shuts off the source. That is all I know. You will have to experiment more on your own to develop its full capacity.”

Schean Du imagined himself as Merlin, holding blue flickers in his palm, ready to strike an invading army of Norsemen.

“Take this with care and wear it when you are assured the Grays and their pets will be near.” Balanis handed Schean Du a bright red, three-foot cloth snake. It had more weight to it than the armor and twisted in place around his throat like a moldable toy. He wrapped it as she indicated, but it seemed to have no value. Schean Du shrugged.

“Okay, I’m game. Nice for effect, but what value does a snake scarf have?”

“You won’t feel anything when you use it. However, any reptile within miles will be completely disoriented, dizzy and unable to function when you squeeze the head of the snake. If their spaceships are close, they will probably fly them into the ground. Dragons will crash. Reptoid soldiers, and there are some, will collapse and struggle, writhing and stunned.”

“Classic concept but without all the fancy explosives we might use. That could be a game changer in close combat. These should be enough, if the bracelet actually works, to stop Villanova.”

“But,” Balanis continued, “There is much more to give you. Each has a different function and power.”
“My love,” Schean Du interrupted, “One thing every soldier learns early is to take only the weapons you absolutely need to ensure success. You can’t take everything you’d like…but what you need.”

“Then take them for later use, if you like, for we will not come this way again. Once is all. A second visit to the Cauldron is forbidden by old laws and the doorway. You will find now that the dragon armor has already bound itself to your skin. The torque is drawn tight to you. It will no longer be removable. Your serpent scarf will hang close to your neck, but will not work until you activate it. You are now bound to these secrets. However, others will not see any of these…only you and other Dryads.”

“So that’s the deal? I get weapons but they become part of me…like moss on a tree? Would have been nice if you warned me. Speaking of that, how am I supposed to keep in contact with you while I’m on these campaigns? We haven’t been apart since blending.” Schean Du stretched his body with his new costume and jewelry.

“If you touch over your head you will feel the new crown you bear. It is the sign of the White Stag. You will become the Green Man of your lore. These horns transmit thoughts allowing unlimited simultaneous communications with all allies. That branched rack produces a powerful sound field to both summon assistance and to disable opponents. The Green Man bore legends of even calling the earth to quake and lightning to strike with these extensions. Know well I cannot tell you all the powers you will hold, for I have never attained them, just maintained these tools for others.”

“Then I will be glad to consider even more…if I can bear their weight. It seems a small price for my destiny to save the human race.”
Balanis pulled away from Schean Du. He felt her coldness and displeasure. The pause was long and curious…longer than any he had experienced from his new mate.

“Schean Du, this you must know. This duty you are honored with is not to save humans. In fact, the elementals could care less if that species was completely annihilated. Their value to us is limited. Their threat to us…immense. You will now have the Green Man’s power of life glowing from you, though humans will see you as a quiet, gray-haired man of middle age. Yours is to return balance and prevent Earth from becoming Mars. This is not a battle to save humanity…but to save elemental existence. We, like humans, are colonists, brought here from afar…but long before these furry little pests were thrown on Earth. A few of them have been exceptions, like one the Nyads spoke to long ago through his water bowl as he meditated. He was a French mystic you call Nostradamus. He saw what would eventually happen and why the final battle would come to pass. He wrote:

*Kings steal forests, the sky will open, the fields will be burned by heat.*

Mankind was warned of the conflagration to come if their leaders destroyed the world’s forests under influence of Grays. As our struggle continues, remember this—you fight for us now…not for descendents of apes.”
Crusts of ice fashioned over dry hands pulling a Mormon handcart across desiccated Turkey and Buffalo grasses covering late fall Kansas prairies of 1870, five miles outside of Labette Kansas. John Bender felt nothing as he bore his new first name, ensuring there would be no recognition that he was the monster Paul Bender of Bloody Kansas. Walking corpses dread no chill, nor did his lifeless family suffer, staring ahead with glazed eyes, bound to him by a blood curse. Their girl infant, Kate, held in Elvira Bender’s arms, was as frigid as spokes in the cartwheels, though she continued maturing at an alarming, inhuman rate after each feeding of blood. Unlike her half-crazed young brother, John Jr., she was still a fetus when Paul Bender turned an isolated farm family into night creatures. In a few months Kate would develop into a wild, compelling woman with animal wiles to lure any man to her side.
Full moonlight behind them created a cameo silhouette of a pioneer family, with a ten-year old boy pushing from behind as they transported miniscule belongings needed for digging their next hiding place before sunrise. Bender did not feel love or belonging with his artificial mirror of Johnson’s lost family. He merely played out his role as a demonic *de domo patris*, hoping these damned lives he had forced into his darkness would draw to him with time as they fed together on wandering settlers in Kansas flatland wilderness.

None of the Labette residents met the arriving family, hidden in a fresh sod-house burrow for months after their nocturnal arrival. It was a hard winter. Few ventured out in open prairie except to find lost cattle. Paul continued hiding from bright sunlight until one December night as he roamed alone over prairie trails searching for Osage Indian villages to raid.

Crystal skies revealed the Great Hunter, Orion, hanging over frigid Kansas grazing pastures. Its belt stars shone especially bright…then suddenly, those three luminaries began to move and descend toward Bender’s location. He was not stirred to run or hide. His memories of a similar encounter in ancient Egypt excited him, almost warming his still, lifeless heart.

*His* name then was Amenare, a trusted and powerful priest in the Temples of Amun. His reputation for prophesy for Pharaoh was renowned. Ramses II called for a private meeting with Amenare after his great victory at Kadesh. Rumors flowed throughout the ancient world of a battle led by a Pharaoh reported to have slaughtered thousands of his enemies single-handed. Amenare was thrilled at such an honor, but also felt troubled by his own auguries warning of great dangers ahead.
Amenare stood alone in open plains beyond the Pharaohs’ great capital. He watched diligently for sounds of hunting lions and jackals. Desert heat rose in waves off rock walls of rolling hills beyond him, into the ink of the star-filled skies. No moon interrupted their distant glow, as if the heavens were burning their torches for Egypt’s hero of Kadesh.

In early hours of darkness, Amenare heard clattering from a single chariot cruising through loose rocks scattered randomly about a simple goat path he had followed to the rendezvous. Even in starlight Ramses impressed in bold stature and armor. Amenare noticed Pharaoh glowed from within, not just from fine armament reflecting two torches bound to the chariots front basketry. A black team of stallions pulled up sharply in front of the waiting priest, raising a short burst of dust that drifted quickly past Pharaoh’s loyal servant.

“You are blessed beyond all of my people, Amenare, and I salute you for your visions which led me to supreme success at Kadesh. I have the Gods in my soul, now, and they have told me to bring you into their presence.”

Amenare was already prostrate before the god-King. The words of his master left him confused and frightened.

“Great Ramses, please, I am not worthy of your presence or this honor. All hail to the lion of Kadesh. All hail!” With that, he raised and lowered his arms before him in adulation and subjugation.
Amenare heard whirring above as the stars disappeared. It reminded him of the rustle of hummingbird wings among the flowers in Pharaoh’s palace gardens. It rose in intensity until it shook the ground around him. A tunnel of blue light surrounded him as he rose, frozen in terror, into a blue circle hovering above him…a vessel of the Gods. Consciousness passed from him.

Amenare awoke, startled, aboard a sacred hold of primordial creators. He stood before Ramses, joined by strange beings behind him. The shorter workers were obviously slaves to giants…powerful Gods of Egypt striding slowly behind Ramses with their power staffs and lighted eyes, surrounding by even larger winged beasts with black and green scales. Amenare felt dazed as if awaking from a deep sleep in his temple chambers, but his body felt foreign with an unusual strength and restless power.

“You have been gifted by great beings of light living among the stars. They anointed you chosen of Ra while we voyaged within their magnificent flying city, roaming about the stars for some time; but, you are not fully aware. For days, you have been suspended in their magical liquids with many loops of metal surrounding you as you lay near death. Look down to your arms at powerful new golden wristbands with their blue, glowing stones like those I wore into battle. We have both been born anew into bodies that may live forever. This could not have been done without secret wisdom left by my Father. He needed these allies to work with him to raise Egypt back to its ancient glories. The old kingdom, so distant, went through great darkness centuries before us, almost leaving Egypt barren of life. Seti’s vision was to understand the lost secrets, especially in architecture and use of pyramids to call back sky gods who had abandoned
our predecessors. We now have abilities to lead our people back—to become lords over the world. I rename you now as Amenemonet, Chief of Medjay, as my Overseer of works on all my monuments to come. Your inner vision is increased tenfold so you shall be First Prophet of Amun and Isis.”

Amenemonet lay prone before his master, overwhelmed with his new station and all he had learned. Even his visions from childhood had not revealed such a role in the future of Egypt.

“I serve you as your loyal servant forever, my lord,” he whispered, as he stared at glowing sandals upon Ramses bluish-green feet. This was the first he had noted changes in the Pharaoh’s skin.

“Furthermore, Amenemonet, you shall be the overseer of my source of magical powers as the Chief of the harem of Amun. Your position comes at the cost of your own line, for you will never be able to reproduce. That is a power left to me. You will also need to avoid Ra, himself, for his light will turn you to ash. However, in the shade of the temple depths you will safeguard thousands of women who will produce many sons to follow me, for I will enter into them with my spirit, never dying, simply changing my name as I move on as Pharaoh in new bodies, to eternity.

Masters of the night skies have demanded we construct monuments in praise of Ra and Amun throughout the kingdom, and where my discarded remains will be honored so the people will be ignorant of my continuation. The higher Gods demand it, so they are not exposed as the source behind this adulation. Those gigantic works will be your everlasting children, bearing your name carved into eternal stone. You shall lay plans with me, with your great vision, to
expand our kingdom to the south, west and east, against Syrians and Nubians, and surely the Hittites.”

“Master, you are aware of the horrors Hittites laid across my family in the eastern provinces. I pray for that day when I see them all in bondage.” Amenemonet remained prone upon a strange metal floor that offered no cold or heat, nor caused ache to his knees, as if he rested on a pillow. He felt his body rise, floating to an upright position, where his eyes now stared into the glowing hollows filling his Pharaoh’s face. A beautiful young woman in a dancer’s veils was suspended between them, below the Pharaoh’s armored body, held in midair by the command of his lord’s left hand, while his right held the staff of power reserved for Egyptian royalty. A twisting ball of yellow, glimmering light issued from an Eye of Horus chest piece bound over the Pharaoh’s solar plexus by metallic straps and a girdle connection from his waist. Amenemonet watched as a mist of the spirit of the floating woman below rose from her to Ramses’ clawed hands. The victim’s body immediately desiccated to dry powder, drifting with her clothes to the floor, as the glowing orb entered into Pharaoh’s metal wristband.

“Here, Amenemonet, this was once one of the Hittite King’s daughters. She, like many more to come, will bear me children to feed my immortality. Then these Hittite whores will sustain my eternal life. You, however, will only gain your power by feeding directly on their blood, and from many others I will have bound to your temple. You will thirst and you will survive to serve me to achieve Seti’s dream”
For weeks, the two new immortals fed from the hold of captured Hittites as they designed strategies for a dynasty to come, before the three space craft returned them to the desert near the silent pyramids.

_Sod_ walls fell away in the spring as the Bender family finished constructing their one-bedroom shack with no windows. Pa Bender, as he was known, always came into Labette late as the last customer at the lumber and hardware store. Strangely, he never bought victuals or other supplies common to dirt-farm settlers. Yet, Bender always paid in gold or silver coin. Any concerns about the strange family were forgotten after the family expanded their home to manage it as their rustic inn offering night shelter to new arrivals. There were fewer rumors as the way station prospered, even though no one saw Bender’s family in the daylight. After December of his first winter near Labette, Bender appeared quite regularly in the late afternoon, though he did prefer to stay indoors for most activities. His tawny appearance and German language left him apart from most of the community, but he could point at what he wanted with coin in hand. Merchants were eager to listen and serve his needs.

Some travelers told stories of their night stays and having their fortunes told by Ma Bender and her psychic daughter, Kate. Their son would interpret as John and his wife only spoke German in public. A few of the more superstitious even claimed Kate was practicing sorcery or witchcraft, but none tied the small family with its pale skin and haunting eyes to any of the recurring missing persons in the area.
In the years that followed, visiting settlers continued vanishing while moving through Labette County. Body parts were sometimes discovered along abandoned trails, but nobody knew whom to blame. Many believed it was a renegade band of Comanche. Eventually, Labette locals held a public meeting to hear a gypsy leader passing through, warning them that a great evil was among them that must be destroyed. There was resistance to such stories, especially from hated gypsies, until children’s bodies were found, torn to shreds after disappearing weeks before in a violent storm. Townspeople agreed to form a party to search every house in the area, but this was delayed by more bad weather. When searchers finally reached the Bender place, the family was long gone.

Gypsies helped rip through the floors after their dogs sniffed death. The excavation led to a secret basement, below where floorboards were stained. Townspeople were sickened as their boots soaked in an inch of blood kept in a circular pool retained by a berm of hardened clay. The homestead grounds were also swept for evidence. Eight butchered bodies were buried in the garden, with throats cut below smashed skulls. In the weeks following the discovery, many more remains were unearthed. The Benders were never found. No one was ever able to count how many travelers became victims to the Benders over their years of predation. The whereabouts and destination of the murderers remained a mystery, although rumor and suspicion followed for decades as rewards grew for their capture. Arrests and investigations never led to the beasts of Labette.
Cave gloom gave way to radiance from soothing sunlight peeking in and out of fresh leaves in Montenegrin forests. Occasional gurgles reached the couple as spring runoff from white-capped mountains rushed through the pond area, rising to slap against grassy shorelines, moving fresh lilies back and forth atop clear pond waters. Crisp air massaged his tired lungs, still aching from dingy fumes of subterranean passages. Schean Du felt deeply alive and refreshed, as though ages had been lifted from his soul. He held Balanis’s arm as they edged toward fresh water. He dipped a hand to bring cool nectar up as his mate sent roots deep into surrounding silt to absorb her fill. Schean Du later turned as her face transformed into a visage of a young girl he first encountered at the clearing. Suddenly, butterflies gathered around her in clouds of robust orange and yellow, settling over her gentle curls and ruby lips.

“How long have we been gone? Months? Years?” Schean Du rotated his neck while looking skyward.

“It is next year by your time, and spring is flourishing in this valley. It is my favorite season as life returns, upwelling through verdant earth, combining with waters from our sister mountains. It is a promise of renewal and hope even after great fires of last year. Come hold me again, my love.”
They rested together, entwined in pleasant shade, caressed by wafting spring breezes moving towards peaks beyond them. Memories of weapons, fighting and future horrors seemed distant—an annoying mist that would dissipate under each burst of sunlight through the verdant canopy above.

Days passed in pleasant reverie as Schean Du and Balanis bonded deeper within the sacred grove. Their blending filled with shared memories of Earth’s beauty and songs of every living thing rising to spring’s call. After a week of recovery, Balanis awoke her lover by stroking his brow while calling his name.

“Schean Du, awake to me, please. There is much to discuss this morning. Change is in the air.”

Schean Du wrestled with his new body, filled with mysteries, powers and tools of war that still felt foreign to his human side. He had no sense of his actual appearance in his empowered form, but it felt clunky and disconnected for the time being, like a closet over stuffed with too many souvenirs.

“Must we? So early? Surely, we have more pleasant days ahead. Let me rest in your arms for a few more hours.” He tried to return to sleep but she shook him slightly again.

“Conditions have changed rather abruptly. Your European humans are forming alliances to stop the fires the beast is starting. I can feel their fear, but also their resolution. Unfortunately, they have no idea what they are facing as an opponent. They will need your help, and soon. Come now, the resting time is over. We knew this need would come eventually. There is much to prepare for our parting.”
“Our what?” Schean Du sat upright and stared into a troubled face above him.

“We are bonded for an eternity, but our destiny must separate us for now. Please, remember you commitment before Celliden’s Well.”

“I remember. If I merely brush my arm, half of my body is suddenly covered in a myriad of weapons and armaments. How could I forget that? I’m like a walking battleship.”

“Truly. A good comparison, but you are also leading the assault on mindless beasts. There is none other like you in this world. Those invaders have no idea what they will face in you. That is your most powerful tool…utter surprise.’

“I had hoped there was more time to practice and evaluate all…all of this.” He stretched, breathing deeply, feeling the pressure of the myriad of connections now awakening over his skin.

“Again, time means little to Dryads, but the threat is another story. Villanova is moving against gypsies throughout the Balkans. There have been horrible reports of slaughter and new fires, even after the winter rains. We must move now as humans struggle against each other to resolve this horror.”


“We are aware of an international shadow government supported by the aliens, and yes, some of your previous understanding of your military is present on both sides of the equation. But remember, my champion, you are not part of that world any longer. The visible government
leadership is fighting to maintain power and to fight forest onslaughts. Your battle is at another level of conflict which humans will not recognize or suspect. That actually gives you some cover for your actions, most of which will be invisible to humans. There is no way to prevent some being reported because of the scope and location of conflicts to come.”

“You make it sound like World War III.” Schean Du shuddered at the thought of entering another battlefield.

“Take heart, warrior of the woods, for our vision foretells of losses, but also victory. How could I send you into this, my dearest, if I thought you would never return? It would be beyond me, even with my duty to preserve the world’s forests.”

“But so many others will perish…if this is to come. I will always feel for humanity. Always. That cannot be stripped away. An all out conflict could mean hundreds of millions of innocent civilian fatalities. Is that what I must face? Cause? Resolve?” He shuddered.

“Why do you love me?” Balanis asked, quietly, not stirring.

“Why do I…” he hesitated. “What in the world would make you ask a question like that?”

“The fact you had to pause…to think about it. That is why you can leave me. We are bonded, yes. We are in tune and filled with desire and more…but love is something beyond all that. You are still not ready to fully love anything again. Did you not love your wife and child?”

“You are pushing things, Balanis. Is this some kind of act to drive me away? You know damn well how I felt about them.” Schean Du’s appearance grew dark and
troubled. His armor and weaponry flickered in and out of his skin as though he were under attack.

“Then, Schean Du, consider how I love this planet and all the green things it bears. That is love. It has stood for tens of thousands of years. Our brief mewing together does not compare. My bond with Earth does not compare. You say you care for humanity, but do you love them enough to leave this place of sanctuary to defend them, or is that an empty boast?”

“How dare you!” Schean Du stood, gathering his anger about him like tree rings. What was a pleasant sleeper became a roaring giant standing twenty feet above the birch and pine. His eyes shown like burning emeralds as heat rolled in waves off his dragon armament.

Balanis grew as well, equaling his stature and energy. Hers was a healing rush of green mist that touched him, slowly, gently, until he recovered his composure and settled back to the normal features of a middle-aged man. She joined his side, also reduced to human proportions.

“What the hell was that? Suddenly I’m King Kong roaring over the jungle? My god, what have I become?” He felt his hands shake visibly as he held them up between the couple.

“That is a power only a Dryad master can hold…and only when energy from your deepest emotional state is unleashed. Now
you know. Villanova has no such ability. Certainly, no human could imagine it. I had to see for myself that you were truly transformed and ready. You are a master of forests and a worthy lord for our spirits. You are ready for what will come, both the friends and lovers made, and lost, like the battles before you.”

“You speak in riddles again. Do you want to torment me or just unleash me like your angry dog?”

“Torment you? Really? Look back at your human history. Even now, they hack each other to death with big knives, build rape camps, transport slaves around the world and murder at amazing capacity through anger and warfare. And you feel tormented? You can be such a child, sometimes.”

Balanis ruffled the leaves in the galleried forest with her gentle laughter, which left Schean Du disturbed.

“Yes, we…my other half…yes, violent and malicious. I would have thought better of you to taunt my anger. I hate losing control.”

“You needed motivation. We now have little opportunity to explain all your powers and gifts. As you say, the ends justified it. Or have you forgotten that motto?”

Schean Du grunted, remembering he had used that phrase freely during battle after losing friends to snipers. Calling in air support that would endanger civilians was no longer filtered by weighing the balance of lives lost. He had forgotten until Balanis recovered his battle cry.
“So it is. I will use that again, I’m sure, in dealing with Villanova, it will be necessary. He has no sense of dignity or decorum in battle from what I saw in the courtroom. I’ll have to put civility aside if we are going to beat his allies…and for god’s sake…dragons.”

“Remember, the flying lizards were forced into this. Their minds are blurred under the embrace of the binding the aliens have secured to their necks. Without those yokes the scaly ones would turn on their masters, but for now they wreck havoc on all life below them at the direction of their rulers.”

“You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t feel any remorse for dragons. If they become an issue then St. George will have his way. So, if I’m to leave now how do I find my adversary? We have no way to communicate once I leave your arms.”

“One never knows what experience may do to transform your prejudices about dragons…but we’ll see. As for knowing your way through the challenges ahead, just follow the butterflies. They are, to some degree, your totem animal. Hope and promise, those are instilled in your walk through life.”

Schean Du watched her turn, smiling at him, as an azure butterfly lighted onto her delicate fingers.

“Seems ridiculous, but who am I to evaluate what is ridiculous now that I’m a damn tree…excuse my French? But that is only part of the logistics. Let me be blunt. I’ve noticed my interest in eating, eating anything, has disappeared, so how do I survive? Oh, and one of those
little things they never discuss in fantasy novels...how in the world am I supposed to pass, well, my waste products when I do eat? Really? I’m almost afraid to hear the answer. No wonder writers never try to address those issues in novels about imaginary beings.”

“Did you not notice the changes in you as we went through Celliden’s Well? Surely all the secrets donned upon you should have been signal enough that your entire body was evolving.”

“After a hundred of those gifts I quit counting. I cannot imagine how I’ll ever need all those, yet I don’t feel weighed down. I should. And in this time out of the caves, I feel stronger and refreshed, but other than water, I haven’t taken anything for food or drink. I should be starving.”

“I went hungry, with pains, for some time in our journey. I expected it. Luckily, water still meanders through the grottos below, but without direct sunlight, I am starved. You have finally emerged into your Dryad nature. Now, when light strikes you, food will be made internally. The only waste will be water vapor and oxygen. As your scientists say, you absorb greenhouse gases and give back life-supporting elements. However, that will not make up for all the carbon dioxide being sent airborne as my sister and brothers are mercilessly immolated by that beast. One warning is that you must take care when digesting for if you are in a tightly closed space, excess oxygen can be toxic to humans. It may also increase the risks of spontaneous fires.”

“Great. I eat food and still get gas…and now I’m a walking matchbook. Terrific. Well, at least I can still eat a burger and fries in my human form.”
“Absolutely not!” Balanis frowned, glaring at her lover. “You may no longer attempt to eat anything, especially plants…especially plants. And none of those milk shakes. You know they have cellulose in them for filler. You know where that comes from, right?”

“This couldn’t get much better. Risk my hide and take away my favorite foods. And you said I’ll find other loves out there? Let me guess…no hanky panky, either?”

“Out of the question.”

“Platonic love? Is that it?”

“Worked for Plato.” Balanis laughed and turned away. “Of course, you could fantasize being a naughty pine.”

“That’s pure bull…” Before he could finish his sentence, a glowing blade appeared at his side. “Is that supposed to be symbolic? So I think about it and I get a magic knife? How Freudian is that? Besides, Plato had tendencies, from what I read.”

“Sometimes,” Balanis interrupted, “a knife is just…”

“Yeah, I got it.” Schean Du cooled and the weapon disappeared back into his body.

“Your question was delightful. I haven’t had so much fun jousting with a mortal since Merlin. However, it is time to hunt, my Herne of the Woods. You must seek out
first the master of strings. There is a waterfall in Romania where he is hidden and protected by Dryads and other watery allies. Find the Bigar Waterfall and you will meet your first partner in this quest. Now it is time to leave.” With that, she surrounded him in her naked glory as they merged and manifested back into their Dryad forms in a parting of sorrow.
Chapter 15
June 2004  Bigar Waterfall, Romania

Schean Du crept over burning embers and smoldering snags—leftovers from an intense forest fire blaze. Soil beneath his boots was powdered charcoal releasing wisps of black smoke drifting aimlessly in surreal devastation. He twisted past a single surviving trunk, just before reaching Bigar Waterfalls, as a nearby stream rushed past, unwilling and unable to soothe the carnage lining its banks.

He rested against a charred post while wondering the plight of Dryads once guarding this holocaust…and his target contact—master of strings. No violin would survive such an onslaught. He searched skyward, carefully hunting for sign of dragons or alien ships.

“They are long past, protector…and you are late.” No compassion for his tardiness was present in her voice. A long, garbled wheeze filled the air after the scorched Dryad spoke.

Schean Du turned to face her dark blue eyes encased in a crusted face, possibly once beautiful, but now a funeral cairn for a spirit burned nearly to death. Shock was evident in his face. He had no magic or weapons to reverse ruin of this Dryad spirit before him. She faltered, barely holding onto a remaining tree trunk still smoldering under her burnt fingers.

“Who are you? My God, what has happened here?” His questions stuck in his throat as he watched her fall to her knees.

“Tianara, watcher of this waterfall forest. Balanis does not know of our fate. When we are vandalized in such fires, our ability to share at a distance is destroyed in ash. Tell her we
fought for his protection. He still lives, deep in our waterfall cave, beneath flowing waters. Nyads protect him now. Even the fiercest of fire dragons will not enter their domain. There are primordial spirits that could rise from this place to consume any violating their sanctuary. Go, Schean Du, into their watery hold to fulfill prophesies. We held them…” Tianara faltered, listed forward, falling at his feet. She disintegrated into glowing piles of charcoal as a cloud of her dust rose above, into fiery streamers drifting skyward.

His jaw ground back and forth as he marched to the side of singing waters now filled with black kernels of what had just hours ago been lush forest along banks feeding the Bigar Waterfall.

Fifty yards around the falls were clear and untouched by conflagration, leaving a protected circle over hanging mosses and vines of the waterfall. It remained pristine, like an emerald bell with luminescent, blue Christmas lights draped from dripping lines into its basin below. Schean Du had never seen the like in any of his travels. It was a treasure, no doubt, but obviously guarded by great powers forming an exclusionary zone perimeter.

He wasted no time in finding a path leading into a cave beneath the falls. His tools included climbing ropes and supports to lower him deep into the sacred caverns. With the forest canopy destroyed, ample light-flooded passages appearing below, with overhanging fern-encased walls encompassing a deep pool in the center. A myriad of dark tunnels ran in every direction from its core.
Schean Du heard twittering echoes bouncing across surrounding cave walls, which at first seemed like chirping of canaries kept in a distant room. Their pattern changed to incoherent laughter mixed in changing frequencies up and down a foreign musical scale. As he entered a side opening, he felt a hand behind him. He turned to face a sword-bearing being, covered in aquamarine scales, projecting anger and power as water from the pool dripped from her. Her teal hair flowed long and wavy over her armaments, as she stood upright on her webbed feet.

“You are Schean Du, the one?” She stepped back, pointing sword tip toward his throat.

“I am Schean Du, here to rescue the master of sound. Tianara’s last words were of you protecting him from the fire dragons above. May I pass to see him? I have powers of healing.”

“No pass,” she replied, replacing the sword back into its hilt at her waist. “Too near death when Dryads pulled him here. Changes made. Many changes. He is no more.”

Schean Du’s brow sank as he considered his next words. “But Tianara said I would find him safe below.”

“He is no more. She walks now. She plays the magic. Evil fire so desperate to destroy all, for she could control them when she is complete. Not yet.”

The Nyad waved her green hand above while whistling similar sounds Schean Du heard reverberating earlier. Out of the water rose a dozen Nyad warrior women. They held aloft a young human woman surrounded in a perfect air bubble. She was dressed in a red ball gown that highlighted her wild hair streaked in brown and yellow flares. Her thin arms controlled
a red violin in a gentle grasp as she began to play mesmerizing melodies that were a blend of Roma folk and classical violin solos. Her delicate fingers flew over the strings as the bow swam over them. She did not pay attention to her Nyad audience or Schean Du, all now silent and in awe. Her silhouette was surrounded by red skies above, still visible through the cavern roof. She suddenly stopped playing as a dark shadow passed over them, created from something flying far above.

Nyads quickly pulled the violinist back beneath cave waters, still inside her protective bubble.

“They dare!” shrieked the Nyad warrior still standing near Schean Du. “Then death will be their fate.”

“I know there were once water dragons. I have seen the history in the Great Mirror. But I was told they are no more. They cannot appear to battle with those enslaved beasts above us.”

“No, the red and blue battles are no more…but worse for them, slave or not, is something else and there will be no pity for them.” The Nyad withdrew her sword as she moved toward the walls beyond them.

A blast of sulfurous flame reached down through the opening, burning off one sidewall of ferns into a sloppy, gooey mess of melted plant juices.

“Enough!” She twirled her sword, striking it against the newly exposed rock wall beneath melted ferns.

Schean Du could not make out the words in her chanting, between the continued sword strikes that echoed as ancient anvil blows through the cavern. The floor shook below him as
pond waters rippled in ever-growing circular waves, reflecting the pattern of her magical call and pounding metal. Another shadow passed overhead. Schean Du prepared for more charring blasts as his own armor came alive, covering his body for the fiery onslaught sure to follow.

Suddenly, up from the waters rose a massive, semi-transparent blob, glowing red, full of its own light. Its sparkling luminescence was blinding in the restrictive cavern confines. Soon, it began unfolding, separating into several separated masses, billowing out as if balloons were being inflated for a parade. These gelatinous masses floated skyward, rapidly, dangling thick ropes of glowing tendrils beneath. Schean Du felt himself pulled back into a dark alcove. The Nyad Warrior dragged him safely from descending tentacles.

“No touch. Not safe for any. Now they pay for their burning of the forest. They pay.”

Schean Du watched as several orange, giant sky jellyfish rose through the cavern opening into reddened skies. There was no fiery attack by dragons. He could hear horrifying screams from far above. There were rumors he heard in Iraq about people seeing such creatures in evening skies over the mountains…even photos, but those were all considered myths and Photoshop hoaxes. Nothing in the memories of past civilizations had revealed this myth of sky jellies as real. They might be so ancient that even aliens were unaware…and unaware of the threat to their plans as their fire troops were absorbed in a painful, lingering death floating in the heavens.
Chapter 16  

October 8, 1871  

Chicago, Illinois  

Chicago Fire  

Gillie held his firebrand torch overhead through narrow passages between stables and nearby carriage houses. A blacksmith was just closing his shop doors as a band of gypsies skulked behind a corner of a local distillery. Pungent vapors from a nearby tannery crawled over alleyways from adjoining warehouses. A lone, shuttered and abandoned shed, once used as a hayloft, sat kitty corner from them. Abandoned for years, its purpose and use had been forgotten. Roma spies sought out rumors of vagrant families, typically foreigners, living in similar hovels of rickety ruins while they struggled to find work and sustenance. This dark shack generated such stories. Chicago’s northeast side shuddered from grizzly body counts of homeless immigrants found along Lake Michigan each week, drained of life, with no means of identifying ravaged remains.

Paul Bender dragged his latest victim, half-emptied, through sodden streets filled with horse manure and emptied night pots from dwellings above workshops and rotting storerooms. Halting for a moment, sniffing the air, he felt someone else in the darkness. He twirled, but found no one, not even Chicago’s criminal brand trolling for an easy mark in unlighted passages. Bender moved ahead, adjusting a Polish sailor’s paunch over his shoulder as he unlatched two hidden locks in a ramshackle door. He slipped within to his famished family, groaning for an overdue feeding in pitch black. His forays had been reduced and carefully planned for too many eyes were searching for a mad killer. He was forced to leave his wife and three children without means sometimes for days. He felt their agony, but still not a love he had
so yearned for after listening to Johnson’s stories. His oldest daughter, Kate, was a cold, empty hulk, while other children, even John Jr., were eyesores of their previous humanity. However, for the moment, gurgling slurps were enough to satisfy his desire to be at least a provider. Even his infant vampire giggled as fresh blood oozed over its elongated, razor-sharp fangs.

Gypsies quietly circled Bender’s den after they lighted their torches from Gillie’s. Each had a role; set a blaze along the edges of the bottom, alight any doorway or window, set the roof ablaze, all at the sign of a low whistle from Gillie. Gillie kept his giant torch near the front doorway to incinerate any who dared rush through smoke and flames to escape into Chicago’s dank night.

Kate was first to smell smoke as flames from a back wall caught quickly onto her sodden dress, now tattered from its journey from Kansas. Her mournful screams and cries alerted Bender to run to her, but too late, even in such small confines. Black smoke ate away his vision. He felt for his three children but they flailed out in terror, ripping at his arms instead of accepting his aid. He could only hear Ma Bender’s screams in a far corner’s flames. There was no way to save his family as he rushed headlong into the rickety doorway, crushing a shocked Roma outside as a wave of Bender’s hand sliced Gillie nearly in half. Bender ran further as Gillie’s companions rushed to aid. Bender did not look back to see flames spreading quickly to an adjacent stable, then to filthy tenement housing and beyond. He cared less for many who would burn to death in their sleep that night for all he cared for now was revenge against all of humanity. He swore to use fire wherever and however he could to punish the Gypsy scum who had dared to destroy him. He would start by feeding on
burn victims until he could find another path west from Chicago where Gypsies would lose his trail. *There would be an accounting for this night,* he promised to himself.

**Northern Pacific Railroad 1872-1888**

He kept the name Paul Bender as both a clue and a warning for those who still pursued. It was time for a return to the West, but this time across steel rails being laid across frozen plains and torturous mountains from Minnesota to Seattle as the Northern Pacific Railroad began.

Paul learned to conceal himself in overhead compartments of a Chief Engineer’s car, or within shanty encampments following construction. Winters were the worst for many, with record cold and snow crippling progress. Thus, an occasional frozen body raised little surprise as frostbite and suicide hung over the project. Indian tribes were also fertile feeding grounds, once again, for the voracious vampire. Minnesota and the Dakota ranges offered adequate blood feasting from many temporary railroad workers, but his favorite were Scandinavian farmers in their isolated sod shacks. Many nights he left their plump, empty corpses piled in corners, only to be found weeks later as frosty mummies, described as victims of vicious winter storms.

He also set wildfires in prairie grasses during dry summers and falls, burning numerous Indian villages. Then, at night, he would meet with surviving tribal leaders, telling them of white men burning them to death, especially those traveling in small wagons with bright colors.

When railcars were burned at night, Bender was first to raise rumors that Indians had attacked the trains, or perhaps gypsies who had been denied employment by railroad companies. Soon, every rail boss had carte blanche to shoot any Indian or gypsy coming with miles of railroad construction. But he didn’t stop there. Most of the northern tier of states also came to believe gypsies set townspeople’s houses on fire, robbed widows and stole children. Many
contract workers on rail lines were Chinese with experience from building the Continental Railroad for the Union and Southern Pacific lines. Bender had stirred Irish and Polish workers against any Oriental as a ‘job thief’ sent to undermine European migrants. Through his enterprises, by late 1880s, Seattle and other coastal cities were rife with race riots against anyone with yellow skin or folded epicanthic eyes.

San Francisco Earthquake April 18, 1906

While in Seattle at the turn of the 19th Century, Bender sought to find another means to hide his presence among his blood pies. He found solace, this time, in a thriving Latin community where he changed his name to Villanueva…literally a ‘new house’ for his body. His nightly walks along the city’s chilly streets moved him to shelter on occasion into the new Seattle Library in the Occidental Building. Though empty at night, except for an occasional surprise visit by Librarian A.J. Snook, it still provided mental comfort to this crazed denizen. He began to read through legal volumes to the degree that in 1894, he dared to take the bar exam for Washington State and passed. His requirement to avoid sunlight seemed to dissipate in Seattle. Something had changed in his metabolism. He could now walk among the living in sunshine with no consequences, though his appearance was still gaunt and forbidding. His free services and reputation as a profound defense lawyer drew him honors and growing support in the Latin Quarter. However, questions arose about the disappearance of witnesses against his clients, with a few being found bereft of their blood. Villanueva felt pressed to escape attention. He joined the Army in support of the Spanish American War in 1898. He was to disappear in the mistakes made in the Battle of the Bay of Manila, where his blood lust was undiminished and hidden within casualty numbers that were
not planned. There were no reprisals from American military. A dead Spaniard was simply that…dead. He was awarded a medal for valor and sent back to the States.

His reputation now enhanced, he settled into raucous chaos and squalid corruption of San Francisco, far from investigations in Seattle, now long forgotten. Once again, his brilliance in the courts brought him wealth and influence, especially among the most vile and powerful who needed witnesses to disappear quietly. It was Villanueva’s shock to find himself digging out of the rubble of his home. The April 1906 earthquake shook his house into matchsticks and dust. He was unscathed but surrounded by the dazed, desperate and wounded. Every collapsed building provided him easy meals for the suffering crying out pitifully, identifying their plight under lumber and stone. Until the military decided to blow up the Chinese sector to build a firewall, he was undisturbed in his hunger. With their crazed explosives plan enabled, Villanueva was driven out, but not before visiting the San Francisco Mint. He left California with a treasure of raw gold bullion in order to start another life again, this time returning to Germany.

World Wars and More

Paul Bender relished the wealth and prominence he found in Berlin as the Kaiser rose to influence. He found culling homeless and tenement communities an easy path to quench his thirst. Unfortunately, by this time gypsies had managed to secretly integrate some of their members into the Berlin police. Their investigations began anew as WWI broke out. Bender secured his wealth in a Swiss Bank and headed for the slaughter fields of war, knowing that his victims would be simply another cost of mayhem between sides. Bender entered the theater of
war in 1913, traveling widely with Bavarian reserve troops. Though he disappeared often in the heat of the fighting to prey on enemy troops, even he was astonished at carnage in the First Battle of Ypres in October of 1914. In three weeks, nearly twenty-thousand men were dead or wounded. Most were left so mauled he could not find a full meal. He regretted such waste.

For two years, he roamed trenches near Mons in Belgium, ripping throats out at will on both sides. Cries of terror rolled through fogs of No Man’s Land, as patrols disappeared continuously, only to be found on occasion as shredded corpses. The Hellhound of the Battle of Mons eventually stopped as Paul moved on. He covered his trail by secretly releasing a fake journal of an imaginary scientist, Dr. Gottlieb Hochmuller, claiming he had placed a crazed criminal’s brain into a dog and let it loose as a horrific war weapon on unsuspecting troops. His ploy worked as the story became one of the great mystery stories of WWI. Bender’s single act of generosity in the War was his decision to aid a blinded Bavarian soldier from a gas attack in October 1918. This Lance Corporal asked for his name, which Bender freely provided, as he guided him to an aid station. He did not know why he had saved this particular young courier, but he was somehow drawn to this casualty named Hitler.

After the War to End all Wars, Bender returned to Berlin. Bender once again restarted his law practice in a devastated Germany. The plucking of humanity was easier than ever as alleyways and hidden passages were crammed with starving and ruthless vagrants. Bender was also politically astute, supporting influence of a growing Nationalist Party. His money helped support their interests for years, even through devastating defeats and the imprisonment of some of its leadership. He visited one of the prisoners, reuniting with the Lance Corporal he had saved from mustard gas nearly a decade before. He promised that June of 1924 that he would work
with the Nazi Party to find political and legal pressure for Hitler’s release. By November, Bender was successful. He became a secret confidant of the rising leader. During his many visits at the prison, he introduced the intense Hitler to the dark arts, the stories of the Aryan Race and powers kept hidden from the general public by the Gods of Old...including sacred magical arts of ancient Egyptians. Bender had at last found an ally among the living that would further his interests in destroying Roma Gypsies through despair and fire.

In time, Bender would be a counselor to Himmler, through direction of Hitler, educating him on ‘inadaptables’ that would make a Third Reich weak from within as long as inferior races and free spirits roamed without control. Eventually, all Gypsies would have a green ‘Z’ pinned to their clothing, identifying them as the Zigeuner. He helped Himmler lay out plans for the ‘final solution’ by designing plans for Hodonin, Lety, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, Buchenwald, and Ravensbrück. Bender’s influence led to annihilation of five-hundred-thousand Gypsies, including using mass graves to hide the holocaust of 90% of them in Romania and Moravia. The Gypsies would never know who their secret enemy was behind the hands of Nazi power; they would simply know this extermination as the Romengro murdaripen.