

Chapter 7: Catacombs

A large tapestry meticulously hand crafted from the wool of peasant sheep sprawled across the mosaic tile floor. My eyes remained fixated on the intricate pattern of stitches. The center was a conglomerate of tight, single stitches forming neat rows forming a basic square. As the tapestry spread out, the single stitches gave birth to doubles combines with practical knot work. Finally, the fringes, where there should have been signs to heat and fire, instead the tapestry revealed its best for last. Hand stitching in its most elaborate worked the wool into a haiku of simple meets elegance giving the eye the appearance of lace. It was a shame that it ever should lay at the feet of men. Its very existence seemed surreal. As a modern observer, its' place was laughable. If the ends of my own hair hadn't somehow remained singed, I would have thought the entire night some kind of mental melt down or deranged nightmare. The fibers of the tapestry were certainly telling no tales. Neither was the rest of the Library.

I wondered to myself if Anna's willed the power of destruction and reconstruction equally at her fingertips or if the entire firestorm had been some kind of illusion. Just as Alandrea had convinced my dream self that my only chance of ridding my body of demonic possession was to tear out my eyes, perhaps Anna too held the captivating power of suggestion over De'Vok and me. I dared not ask for an explanation as the two poured volume after volume into my tiny, golden orb.

There was something else that had been wearing on my mind that was far safer to ask them. "How is it that Heiner and Mrs. Miller came to work for Michael if Heiner is who you say he is?" I asked. Since De'Vok's explanation, I had been wondering how the very first person I'd met in Otherworld had tricked even the general of an infinite army.

"Well, not all of us are gifted like you are" Anna replied, still with a bit of jealous venom in her voice.

De'Vok smiled nervously and elaborated. "It is very curious that someone of innocence like yourself could see the possessed Mrs. Miller at all. It was one of the reasons Michael, uh" he paused to try to think of the proper word. He glanced quickly at Anna and rephrased his reply. "It's the reason that Michael had the doctor gave you such a thorough exam. Most humans, while alive cannot see any of the Dark Matter that surrounds them. You, so newly dead, so close to your human life should have fallen under the same category.

Which brings me to the next point, which is equally important. Not everyone here in Otherworld can detect the nature or presence of demons. After life, some take on the forms of their true nature; no longer limited by the confines of DNA. Rotting flesh, animal form, wings, hooves, talons all are the free expression of themselves through Dark Matter."

"If I understand this correctly, Michael didn't know Mrs. Miller was Heiner's host?"

"Correct"

"We learned she was possessed when Mrs. Miller began to rebel. But we weren't absolutely sure who it was you had captured in your book until Steven found you attempting to tear out your eyes. That, I'm afraid is the signature of Alandrea and her brother. It was Mrs. Millers rally to free herself that made her a candidate for intervention."

As De'Vok explained, Anna brought a few volumes from a time and place in my future. The disks were clear and appeared unmarked. I sighed, wondering how I would ever talk to books of the future. Anna detected my reluctance. "Authors of the future are not limited in language. They understand the power of expression in all forms and will understand you as easily as your most ancient family members."

Nice touch, I thought to myself. Only once had I referred to the books in my orb as my family but she had picked up on it straight away and would use it to keep up my reasons for leaving De'Vok behind. The two said little to one another, but rather continued to advise me. They were like two parents sending a child out into the world.

"I'd like you to keep Frank with you in his entirety. He is intimidating at first sight. Having never explored the tunnels, I have no idea who or what you might encounter." De'Vok's face was a combination of worry, regret and defeat. "I've armed you with every possible topic I could fathom." He set his hand on my shoulder.

Anna was quick to intercede. "I'll take you to the door, if you're ready."

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It seemed as if we had walked for miles; twisting and turning in the unfathomable alcoves and rooms of what I had thought was an average sized library. When we reached the small chapel, I felt stood in awe at the ornate details; obvious work of the faithful. Six short rows of wooden benches stood in formation. I sat to rest in one nearest the back.

The seat hand rail was intricately carved with symbols I recognized from college classes and modern society; the star of David, a cross, a moon and star, a pentacle, a palm with the index finger pointing north and the symbol for Namaste. The seat in front of me depicted the Eye of Ra, a hammer, a winged serpent, an eagle, a unicorn on its haunches and a turtle. The carved reliefs were so captivating, I thought the symbols might move. I stood to make my way to the next bench when I noticed Anna, kneeling at the feet of a statue of a woman I didn't recognize. She seemed to be praying as she made an offering of wine and incense. De'Vok was across the chapel lighting tiny candles and talking in whispers.

I sat down on the next bench, a couple of rows up and traced my finger along a new line of carvings. A solid line of $\aleph_0 < \aleph_1 < \aleph_2 < \aleph_3 < \aleph_4 < \dots < \aleph_{\omega-2} < \aleph_{\omega-1} < \aleph_{\omega}$ "What's this one?" asked Louella.

"That is the symbolic representation of the *Continuum Hypothesis*. It is a direct consequence of the *Axiom of Choice*," answered De'Vok.

"Excuse me, the what?" questioned Louella.

"*The Axiom of Choice*.... it's the key element to the religion of mathematics. Don't tell me you don't know anything about it."

"Mathematics...a religion...you're joking right? I mean, I had a geometry teacher who really made me believe that hell exists but that is about as close as I have gotten to believing in math as a religion."

"Let me explain. *The Axiom of Choice* was a key point in the evolution of the mathematical religion. At the discovery of *The Axiom of Choice*, the mathematical religion split drastically. It evolved into two sects; those who believe in the axiom and those who don't. Two mathematical universes were created. Like with many religions there were conflicts about whose belief was truly correct. In the end, *The Axiom of Choice* led to greater mathematical freedoms and in turn, it won out and the others were destined to exist only in the annals of history."

"Who's history? I've never heard of it".

"It has yet to bloom into a religion from your place in time. In your world, it's just a theory. Its potential will not be realized for nearly a century according to where you stand."

The bench across the aisle appeared blank at first but as the candle light danced upon the wooden surface, an odd sheen seemed to emulate like a sheet. I recalled the Northern Lights in Upper Peninsula Michigan near the Canadian border in summer rippling sheets of light across the night sky. De'Vok watched me with amusement as I was drawn like a magnet; abandoning his explanation of the historical future.

I ran my fingers over the wood with a feather like touch at first. There was no hint of the light's source. Far brighter than a stain or a varnish, I was compelled to look under and around the seat for some energy source. Nothing. I returned to De'Vok in defeat.

"Let me guess. We haven't even met these folks from where I stand on the timeline."

"That would be a fair assessment. Yes" said De'Vok, with the added tension in his voice that indicated Anna was moving on to the door. He purposely cut his explanation short and looked to include her in our conversation.

"Isis wishes to bestow a blessing on you. She is the reigning Goddess here at this Otherworld portal" Anna said as she pulled me to her side.

I looked around the chapel. It suddenly made sense why this little powerhouse of symbolic protection was nestled into a back corridor of the library. De'Vok had admitted he had never explored the tunnels "below". I had an inkling that I may have now begun to understand what he was trying to tell me. I was leaving Otherworld for something deeper and darker.

Lost in all of these thoughts running through my head, I wasn't paying attention to the guidance of Anna's pull. When my mind had returned to reality, I was alarmed to discover that I was standing at the feet of a twelve foot tall stone goddess. She was carved in the classical Egyptian style with her features meticulously crafted with mathematically precise specifications. "Isis" I recalled, "The ideal mother, wife and mistress of magick".

The towering statue turned her head towards me and smiled, "Lest we not forget, the Goddess of Simplicity; greens fields, bread and beer" she added and her voice echoed loudly in the tiny, chapel. I fell backwards in the absolute shock of a twelve foot statue coming to life.

"That prostration suits you better" Anna added curtly.

"You go with your newly adopted children in one hand and a prisoner who would surely kill you, given the chance, in the other. While your hands are full, you seem to carry them equally." A light ringing in the air, like a human voice mixed with brass bells echoed softly. A small cup appeared at my feet. "A gift. May it help you to keep children alive and well wherever the world below us may take you."

I picked up the cup and examined it. It was a simple coil pot perfect for small hands to hold. There was the practical part of me that wanted to explain that my children were books incarnated into shapes and forms I found helpful. Water was practically their enemy. But I hadn't the heart to turn down the kind gesture. "Thank you" I whispered, in awe of the honor.

Ann and De'Vok pulled open a large wooden door, flush with the floor near the candles where De'Vok had been lighting them. "What, no gift from your god?" I teased De'Vok who seemed guilt ridden.

Anna snorted but hugged De'Vok simultaneously. "De'Vok believes that the Devine will not return and reassemble until all the religions come together at one moment in time."

"So" I asked him "who is that over there?"

"She has chosen to stay and help Michael's army as have some of the others. But we will not know peace until all are present at one table. "

"Who's missing?" I asked, perplexed.

"Only time will tell. When it does, their symbols will appear in representation on the two remaining seats" replied De'Vok with certainty.

"Then what were you mumbling when you were lighting the candles?" I asked, stalling for time as the notion of walking in a confined space suddenly had me wishing I could run in the other direction.

"I was thinking of an appropriate send off" De'Vok sighed, glancing over at the door. "And I believe I have recovered one that is directly from your place in time." He cleared his throat and looked at me as if the words were his own.

“Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

We’ve given Frank a friend or two who will help keep you safe in the forest beyond. Make sure to keep him with you at all times. He may be slow, but he looks intimidating.”

“Robert Frost’s version of the Winter Solstice” I remarked. “Let’s hope all I’m facing is the longest night of the year. I’ll even let Frank hold the flash light” I joked. Although it fell flat as De’Vok made his way to the door in the floor. Anna turned a crank for something I couldn’t make out just below the surface.

I was getting nervous the more I watched De’Vok’s face. The metal on metal clanking was unnerving. “Rolling out the red carpet for me?” I tried to make light of the situation again. He didn’t seem to hear me. I sighed and made my way to the door. It was now or never. I checked my pocket for the orb which safely stowed Frank, a million volumes of information De’Vok thought helpful as well as my orphans. I tucked the small cup into my other pocket and took a deep breath. Anna had found a satchel for which to carry the book imprisoning Heiner and I slung it over my shoulder like a back pack; keeping my hands free. I made it half way across the floor and called to De’Vok. “You won’t forget the box and the letter will you?”

“I will keep it safe until you yourself are able to deliver it” De’Vok said, trying to be over confident. This time it was my turn to say nothing, doubtful that I would ever make it out from the world below. Standing right over the door, my eyes adjusted to the crank and its mechanisms.

“You’re joking. No stairs?” There was far too much panic in my voice already. “Look, I need the stairs to, you know, go at my own pace.”

Anna looked confused but her attention was immediately taken off of me as a clatter down the corridors made her look away. “I’m claustrophobic as it is.”

Before I could argue further and plead my case, De’Vok was helping Anna to shove me in the glorified bucket. Shadows in the room swarmed and leapt along the walls. “I thought Steven chased Alandrea out!” shouted Anna.

“It appears she has returned with reinforcements!” De’Vok yelled as he kicked the crank pin with his foot. My tiny little floor, comprised of an old wooden bucket fell away from my feet. The chapel door slammed tight over my head. De’Vok yelled over the crank. “Leave your orb light off!”

Falling, plummeting down, my hands instinctively reached up, over my head, reaching and straining through the blackness. They swam at nothingness in the air. As I desperately grasped at nothing, I felt Heiner and the satchel float above my head. My hands grabbed him in the last second before the bag could come away from my arm. I tried to spread my feet to feel for the edges of the tiny bucket. I was falling so fast, my hair whipped up across my face. Tiny, flexible objects stuck in the walls sliced my arms and ripped at my hips.

I hadn’t realized how narrow the passage down had become in the dark. I screamed as they came faster and in multitude. The sensation of running out of air washed over me. In order to shield myself from all that was unknown, I tucked into the tiny bucket at my feet, willing my knees to bend, but not send me crashing back into the walls. I hunched over the satchel in my arms until everything I owned and everything I was folded up into a ball inside of a bucket. Preserving what little remained of my belongings, fearful for the friends I left above me, I cushioned my mind and waited. There was nothing else I could do.

Weightless and silent, the descent into the world below became surreal. I could have easily convinced myself I was dreaming some nightmarish version of Alice in Wonderland, or Dante’s Inferno. Tiny droplets of argument came to the forefront. The push from De’Vok, to separate me from whatever was attacking felt real enough. This was no dream.

A whirring sound from somewhere above gave me the sickening feeling that I was about to come to an abrupt stop. I cupped one hand over the back of my neck in a feeble attempt to prevent whiplash. I pictured a springing effect like a bungee chord knowing the rope had run out seconds ago. My prediction was dead wrong.

The old rope snapped and instead of a whiplash spring, I was plummeting faster. The bucket had been set off course by the snapping of the rope. My world became chaos. The darkness made it

impossible to tell which end was up. The bucket and I had fused into one at the mercy of yaw and pitch and the sides of the sacred well. Pieces of wood broke away at the bucket's sides. The next time it bounced on one section of the well, the counter reaction sent my head to the neighboring side. My mind became narrow as if it could only take in one set of information at a time.

De'Vok, with his kind old face stepped into my memory. "Frank" he whispered. "Call Frank. He will help you. Think only of Frank" De'Vok directed. I nodded, processing his simple instructions. I concentrated on the act of breathing, then reaching into my pocket. Next came the near automatic formation of picturing Frank and calling for him. The familiar light sprang from the orb. There was a rush of paper as it flew to the fathoms below. Just a glimpse at the sides of the well sent my head spinning. No air. No room. No escape. No Frank. I started to shake when I realized I'd already begun to hyperventilate.

I tried to hold back the reaction. The light and a good look over the side of the bucket sent my body over the edge. My stomach rolled and vomit, hot and acidic exploded from my mouth. Without rational thought, I aimed for the bucket at my feet but it flew up and tangled into the flying locks of my hair. I cursed myself. That was going to be disgusting! Another uncontrollable wave, this time, pointed straight up to the top ended in my own louder cursing.

I wiped my mouth and with a gentle thud, everything stopped. I gasped, waiting for the falling sensation to begin again. Nothing. I touched my head to find it wet and already beginning to get cold. With trepidation, I illuminated the orb. Instead of finding whipping roots and blackness, there was a face befitting a bust, or possibly Mt. Rushmore. I burst into tears and threw my arms around Frank.

"Mama" said Frank, patting my shoulder gently.

"Mama? You have a name for me?" I blubbered.

"Steven teach me when you sleeping".

"Oh Frank" I hugged him tighter, the giant lug stood helpless as I sobbed in his arms.

"Mama, you make me soggy and you smell yucky."

"Huh? Oh" I sniffed as he gingerly set me feet on the stone floor. "Sorry Frank. It's just....it's just that you did a great job! "

"Frank did good?"

"Frank is Mama's hero!" I hugged his giant hand. I took a deep breath and tried to clear my aching head. A fleeting mental note flashed through my brain marking the healing time of my injuries seemed to be getting longer. I wondered if vampire venom wore off or if my increasing humanness was acting as a counterpoint. I cursed to myself, wishing Steven would have given me a few seconds to ask questions.

As tired and disgusting as I felt, I was, after all, alive. I checked my belongings, starting with Heiner and the satchel. No noticeable damage was evident and his occasional trembling within the confines of the bindings reassured me that he was still well kept. I tucked the cup safely into my pocket and held the orb in my hand. There were only two choices; start down the tunnel at my feet or climb back up from where we'd just come. The choice was simple. With the orb lighting the way, Frank and I started down the stone wall path.

The air was dry in my mouth. Dust drifted up from the floor with each step of our feet picking at the back of my throat. The corridor was hand craved masonry so old, I couldn't make out its origins. I thought about the chapel above. In my world, religious institutions built over the top of those they had conquered. Part of me wondered if the Library chapel was built upon some former site of worship of a conquered people. A pang of anxiety hit me square in the solar plexus. Were De'Vok and Anna the next wave of believers to be conquered and replaced with a chapel devoted to the evils of all realms? I clutched at Heiner and the satchel angrily and vowed as soon as he was imprisoned in the lake side cliff, I would go back and help whoever was left. No matter my feelings against Anna, the two had kept danger at bay and risked their lives to protect me. I owed them a trip back.

The floor stones leveled off in precise steps. On this lower level, deeper along the corridor, strange desert looking vines clung to the walls. Our footsteps echoed on the floor's surface. I turned to gently instruct Frank, "Walk softly. We don't want to make the walls cave in. Gently, Frank. Gently." Frank tried to quiet his giant feet made of leather and paper. But in having to remember to duck down with his head, he had trouble coordinating the silence of his feet. The vines soon produced odd blossoms as we travelled along the path. Oval shaped and white, with intricate patterns, the blossoms were topped by two bluish grey berries. I stopped to put the illuminated orb closer for a better look.

To my astonishment, the blossoms were not plants at all but rather some kind of animal resembling a trigger fish. I stared hard at the odd creatures with their nonsensical symbiotic relationship to the vines. For a moment, I suspected that they must be preserved from some ancient sea bed. I grew hopeful that De'Vok's sketchy map was accurate. I deduced that if petrified deep water fish remained petrified this close to the dry well, perhaps the likelihood of a lake was in our near future. I began to pick up the pace and called for Frank as he lingered, enamored with the odd fossils.

A yelp and a thundering cry sent me back from where I'd come. Clouds of dirt and pulverized rock billowed like a screen between us. I waved my hands to dispel the clouds all the while yelling for him to stop. There was Frank, hopping and yelping with his large sausage like finger stuck in the giant teeth of the trigger fish. Other "blossom" fish were champing their jaws along the tangled vines. I pulled on Frank's hand as he continued to scream. He was shaking uncontrollably as my final tug brought the sound of ripping paper. "Shhhh" I whispered in the hopes that he was hold back his sobs for a second and listen to me. "We'll make you a new one" I continued as he stared, horror struck at his missing forefinger. His screams died down to sobbing as I placed my hands over the gaping hole. From there he quieted further to a mild whimper whenever he looked down at his hand.

“Don’t look at it” I said as I wrapped the hole in his hand in a piece of my torn shirt. “And no more petting the scary fish” I added, sternly. As Frank stared at his wrapped hand, I watched the moving vines. Each fish had somehow detected the presence of food in the direction of the fish who had bitten Frank. Blindly they dragged their vines to the center; their gaping jaws ripping and tearing in the lead fish’s direction. Soon others arrived and snapped at some of the lucky ones who had managed to tear a shred for themselves. Within minutes a moving wall mural turned feeding frenzy as the cannibalistic creatures turned on one another in a swarm where surely few winners could prevail. I took Frank by the arm and kept his attention on the light that shined ahead of us.

Walking from then on became mundane. Stone by stone, yard by yard Frank and I walked through the stone tunnel. I didn’t ask him how his hand was for fear that I might remind him of his injury. He slumped along behind me after a while, sniffing the air and wrinkling his nose. While I was still grateful to be alive, I wished for an unlikely oasis with clean water and a miracle bar of soap. Frank wasn’t the only one who had noticed the smell of drying vomit as it flaked off from my hair and onto my clothes. It was relief to see a wide mouth some thirty or so feet ahead. I tugged at Frank to hurry up.

The tunnel opened up into a small octagon shaped room with elongated shelves at each side stacked four high. I searched the very center in the hopes of some sign of a water source for the oddly living vines from before, but there was no sign. Disappointed, I decided to check to see what the built in shelves might have that we might find useful. Pulling back the thick, spindly cobwebs that had formed a near fabric across the opening, I found that I had again been naïve in my initial assessment of the room. “Skeletons!” I announced to Frank as a shudder ran down my spine. A few wrappings were all that was left on the shoulders of the first resident. The next shelf down revealed an older skeleton by the looks of it. There were absolutely no clothing fibers left at all. I delicately peeled away the webbing on the bottom shelf to find bone mixed with dust. “Looks like they buried one atop the other” I grimaced. “Ugh” I shivered again. “Okay, I’ve seen enough. Let’s go, Frank”. Frank looked tempted to investigate further but a cautious glance at his hand wrapped in pieces of my shirt made him think better of it. He stared at the bones but fell quickly in step with me as we ventured on.

After nearly another solid hour of walking, I thought I detected the light timbre of a high pitched sound. I questioned very wishful thinking as my heart leapt in the thought that it might be water. Our pace quickened as the sound grew louder and louder, each tonal pitch a stronger and growing argument that my hopes might be right. Soon, a large cavern opened before us. At first, I thought we’d arrived at the lake De’Vok had described but the shimmer of light off of the pool was far smaller than it sounded. Carefully, I handed Frank the orb to hold over the water. Cupping the water in my hand I smelled it. Soon the temptation was overwhelming and I was pouring cupfuls of the clear liquid over my hair and face.

Scrubbing my hair, I plunged my face into the small, shallow pool, holding my breath, rinsing the blood, vomit and dust. When I came up for air, Frank was laughing. Twisting my hair to ring it out, I threw the long, clean locks over my shoulders. Then I smiled back up at Frank. “Better?” I asked.

“Good” Frank said simply.

Our moment of happiness was abruptly interrupted by a rustling noise just beyond the edge of our light. I took the light from Frank and squinted in the inky darkness to no avail. "Who's there?" I asked.

"Better question is, who the hell are you? AND I don't know who you are but I know what you are. A bloody thief I dare say!" replied a high pitched screechy voice. "My master is gonna be none too pleased when he hears you've been stealing his property!"

"I wasn't stealing" I hedged. "I just needed to wash my hair, that's all" I tried to explain.

"Mama was stinky" Frank added as he wrinkled his nose.

From the shadows emerged a small skeletal animal with the few rag tag remains of fur and rotting flesh. As he came closer, his graceful steps and fluid grace suggested that in life, he had once been a cat. He hadn't seemed to have noticed the full height and size of Frank until he had nearly reached my feet. Frank took a step towards the cat and he hissed and reared his back in reply.

"Don't touch, Frank" I said smiling.

"Get out of here right now!" challenged the cat. "Go on! Go back from the direction you came and I won't tell my master about the trespassers I discovered in his pool. Hurry up now before I change my mind."

"Uh, well, we're just passing through. Now that I'm all cleaned up, we'll just be getting on our way" I explained.

The cat hissed and raised his back as we took a few steps to continue. He growled low and hissed again. Frank laughed and tried to pick the dead cat up in his giant hands. The cat meowled in protest and took off like a shot into the darkness.

"Frank!" I yelled. "Don't pick up dead things!" Frank hunched over and sighed. The two of us set off further along the path. A few minutes later we heard the cat and another voice up ahead. The cat was trying to get whomever he was speaking with to go off to bed. As the voices grew louder, torch light flooded a large, open room. I motioned for Frank to stay behind me in the hopes that we might have more success with the other voice if only we didn't start off by scaring him or her to death.

"Hello?" I said sheepishly. "Sorry to walk through so late. Knock, knock!" I added. I stepped over the threshold of the room and presented myself slowly with my arms slightly raised in truce. The undead cat hissed and growled near my feet. I paid him little attention, slowly drawing Frank in behind me.

"Well, I do say I wasn't prepared for such a large party of guests this evening but you are surely welcome!" said the jovial voice of what I realized came from the full skeletal remains of what must, at one point been a man of influence; considering the crown on his head. As Frank stooped under the

header of the door and straightened to his full height in the room, the cat hissed in retreat clawing his way up a large wooden pole and perching in the rafts above.

“Pay no attention to Thadeus. He abhors company of any kind.” The cat hissed and spat down at him. “My name is Tulvekka, High Astrologer to King Wen of Zhou in the third Dynasty. I famously defeated the Empress of Death at the Lunar Eclipse Festival of Games some eight hundred years. A new competition was introduced and it was there that I won my immortal life.” He sighed and looked up into the rafters. “But immortality is not stomached by the living so easily. You might say that is how I came to know Thaddeus.” He sighed as if he were resigned to the friendship.

“You won immortality in a game?” I laughed. “Those were some high stakes!”

“Astrologers, magicians, military generals; we are all jugglers of risk and strategy. When the Empress came to the festival to introduce a new game, we were like moths to the flame.” He seemed to chuckle to himself looking back at the memory. “Perhaps I did not calculate all of the angles of such a winner’s purse, eh Thaddeus?”

The skeleton cat just hissed, sulking in a corner of the rafter board.

“Give me just a moment and I will make proper accommodations for you all. Will one tent suffice for your large family?”

I looked at Frank and myself and laughed nervously. I wondered why he kept referring to my family. “Oh, don’t go through any trouble just for us. We are just passing through.”

“Send them away, Ol’ Tulley! Why, I caught the lady stealin’ water from your skrying pond just this evening. We don’t want to share our roof with no thieves!” argued the cat.

I bit my bottom lip. “Sorry” I pleaded softly. “I honestly didn’t know it was yours. I just wanted to clean up.”

“Well, while thievery is punishable by death” said Tulvekka. He looked up stroking the space just below his chin as if it had once held a long beard. I gasped quietly. “I think in eight hundred years we might make an exception to the first lady to grace us with her beauty.” I smiled nervously in relief. “But I do insist you stay for the night.” The smile drifted from my face.

Taking a large, wooden stick hand carved and depicting scenes of men riding horses with engraved phrases I couldn’t make out, he began to point the end and chant. From thin air, the lich produced a large, gypsy style cart with a cloth, tent like covering over the top. “That should accommodate a lady and her family. Do you require a holding cell for your prisoner or have you the proper security?” Tulvekka nodded in Frank’s direction.

I tried to play dumb. “My prisoner?”

“Surely you don’t entrap just anyone in the confines of a sealed book? Besides, I recognize your charge. He is Heiner, the demon who prays on the old, convincing them of their uselessness in the winter of their lives. We have met.”

I defensively placed the satchel behind me, in between myself and Frank. I was sure we could outrun the skeletal man who lacked tendons and muscle to power himself in a dead heat. But I knew Frank nor I were a match for his magic. Tulvekka’s empty eye sockets appeared to enlarge as if to stare at my preparation to fight incredulously. He thundered a laugh and held his exposed rib cage with his white fingers.

“Please, please, my lovely lady do relax. I will not interfere with your court or your justice. Am I to understand that you are taking him somewhere where he can no longer prey on the innocent?”

“I am” I said with caution.

“Then you have my solemn promise that I will not assist in helping him escape. On the contrary, your prisoner is my enemy and it will be a glorious day when Heiner is confined for some term of eternity.” I relaxed slightly but was mindful of the satchel from then on. “Tomorrow I will throw a party in honor of the Return of the Lady to my humble home. The games will begin at night fall!” With a flash of light, silent and quick, both the lich and the cat were gone. Tempted as I was to attempt an escape, I somehow knew that leaving would be impossible for the night. I crawled into the gypsy tent with Frank.

“Holy crap!” I shouted. “This place is a lot bigger on the inside!” The inner tent held a small round table, floor cushions and a rug. The wall even had a mirror, with edges gilded in gold. “I think this guy is a bit old fashioned.”

“That’s the least of your worries! Open the orb immediately!” the voice from the orb was so direct and so cognate of the last crazy few minutes that I opened the orb without a second thought. A clear, translucent disk fell out and immediately began to glow with an intense blue glow. An image emerged across the front of the disk and soon spilled into three dimensions before my eyes as a shimmering, real time person. This person in particular was a boy, I guessed about eleven years old.

He was dressed much like the boot soldiers from Michael’s front line with a suit that seemed to meld to his skin and lights from panels near his chest. As soon as he was in full form he began pacing from one corner of the room to the other. Frank and I watched him as he seemed deep in thought. “I’m Louella” I started, finally.

He abruptly stopped walking and stared wide eyed at me. “I’m not an idiot. I know who you are. De’Vok packed my life’s work into your orb in the hopes you might get bored and want to pass the time. Quite frankly, I found his reasons insulting. But you! You put your entire goal in one unknown game to be played tomorrow! How could you be so stupid!”

“What? He never said...”

The boy raised his hand up. "Stop talking! Just stop talking. Think about it. He is throwing a party. Blah, blah blah, whatever. But he twice equated you with the Empress of Death and said that tomorrow the games will begin. You don't actually think he'd just going to let you go, do you? He's reliving the glory days, honey, and you are going to have to challenge him to a game in order to get out of this mess."

"Look you little know it all, you will not talk to me like that!" I demanded. "What the hell is your name?"

"Sam. If it's so vitally important" the boy replied.

"Good. Now I'll know which book to tell De'Vok I threw into the lake!"

"Are you finished? Because the more you stand here in your Neanderthal like rant, the less time I have to teach you game strategy." Sam pulled out one of the chairs and sat down with a deck of cards in his hands.

"Where did those come from?" I asked.

"Still wasting time I see" he raised his hands.

I set my jaw in defiance. Sam slammed the cards down on the table. "Fine. Why don't we just set Heiner free right now, eh? Then, you can go have some primal human love affair with Astrologer Bones out there and live, well a few years until he tries to beat the Empress of Death at another hand of cards. Who knows, he might even beat the odds and win. Then, its catacombs for eternity with Heiner as an occasional dinner guest, popping in for the holidays. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

"Shut up and deal" I pulled the chair out and slammed in down on the floor. It landed hard with a thud.

"Very mature" Sam mocked as he shuffled. He flared his nostrils in contempt holding in some further abrasive comment as he succeeded in holding my attention. "Right. If the game he played with the Empress was new for roughly the year 1200, then all of the Norse and Middle Eastern card games are out." The cards flowed from his top hand down into his bottom with a fluid wave of motion. "The Muslim countries didn't allow cards at the time because they required an artist to depict humans which in any form was considered blasphemy." Sam spread the cards out on to the table and rolled them between his fingers. "Modern game. Modern game" he repeated.

"What if the game wasn't new to Death?" I asked in contemplation as I stared at the orb.

"Meaning?" Sam asked impatiently.

"Meaning that the reason I don't set that orb to an hour before I died and go home is because changing time has consequences that are often worse than the original problem at hand. It's one of the hang ups of time travel."

“Says you. What’s your point?”

I took a deep breath trying to control my temper. “My point is that the only “person” who doesn’t seem to fall prey to the paradox is Death. She is in all times and all places and her outcome is the same for everyone. Her function is so clear and simple, she seems to slip through the problems.”

“I’m getting tired of listening to you babble about nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. What is the most exciting game of all time involving calculated risk and high mental strategy where the stakes could literally be life or death?”

A huge grin spread across Sam’s face. It was as if he had been given permission to take a drug; a pleasure denied him for a long time. “There’s only one game in all of time that is that perfect. Poker.” His stare was far off and dreamy. He snapped back to reality and met my gaze again. “And the great thing is that its popular through your old times. All I need to do is help you brush up on twenty third century strategy and you’ll be out of here before sundown tomorrow.” He was beaming.

I put my head in my hands and moaned. “Poker. Does it really have to be poker?” I groaned.

“What do you mean? Poker is sleek, its streamline, its calculating and its out of control all at the same time. It’s better than a planetary jump during a solar flare!”

I kept my head buried in my arms at the table. “Great” I said muffled. “Then you play him! I’m terrible at poker. Whist, Eukre, Gin, even a smattering of Bridge. But poker” I trailed off.

“What is so intrinsically difficult about poker?” Sam was getting angry. I was obviously killing his buzz.

“I get nervous trying to remember what hand beats what but really it comes down to one thing. I’m a terrible liar. My opponent always knows when he has me beat. And you want me to fool at lich?” I started laughing and I sounded hysterical.

Sam drew in a deep breath. “With no actual sun to gage when “tomorrow” will actually come, our time is limited. I’ll deal. You start mentally reviewing the sinning hands in their sequence.”

And so it started, nearly the longest night of my life next to giving birth started with the shuffling of the deck. For that matter, I think losing hand after hand, bet after bet to a genius eleven year old kid might have been more painful than delivering a baby. Somewhere in the wee hours, Sam cursed. “Hasn’t any of the pattern sunk in? Look at what’s been dealt. The chances of a pair of aces sitting in my hand, when they are not in yours is easy to calculate. Just remember....”

“I know. I know. You’ve told me a hundred times. Look, I’m just tired” I said, defeated.

“You can’t be tired. You’re dead” Sam noted frankly.

“Yeah, well yes and no. It’s complicated”. I rubbed my collar bone where Steven’s teeth had once met my skin. “And some of the safety nets seem to be wearing off some how”. I sat back in my

chair and stretched my back. A tingling sensation of inspiration touched the top of my head and my eyes sprang open.

"I don't have to remember all of this stuff." Drunken happiness washed over me. At that moment, I could have started dancing. "I don't have to lie or bluff or count cards or any of it!"

"Clearly you've lost your mind" Sam said dryly.

"No, think about it. I'll write down the Latin phrases for pictures and numbers and you can whisper the commands to the cards. It's that easy! I don't have to play him. You will. It will just look like I'm playing him."

Sam started to put the cards away. "You've completely lost any ability to make sense."

"No, listen. My gift is being able to talk to books. If I ask them to do things or tell me things, they will. They'll even come apart and reform into different shapes or with different designs if I tell them to. I can manipulate their materials and they help me. So, I'll just bring my own deck to the table and you can call the shots."

I stared at Sam in blissful relief. Sam was sourly staring back. "Have you any idea what a modern author sacrifices to release his book to the world?"

"Oh come on. What does artistic suffering have to do with anything? This is about team work!"

"No. You absolutely do not understand nor would I expect your ancient brain to."

My dreams were withering like flowers in rubbing alcohol. "Explain it to me".

"Shall I use small words?" he hissed. I crossed my arms and waited as I gave him a look that I wish could have knocked the brat to the floor. He rang his nads and his expression changed from smug to thoughtful.

"I am assuming by the way your female frame carries a formal man's trouser that you were born after Darwin?" he asked.

I was suddenly very thankful that neither of my own children were present to hear that question. Images of them howling with laughter on the floor flooded my head and I fought hard to keep any emotion that bubbled to the surface at bay. Instead, I focused on Sam, trying to be patient with him.

"I come from roughly the turn of the century, 2000. Darwin's theory of Evolution is a widely accepted scientific premise in my time."

"Good. Then you will recall that computers arrived on the historical time line roughly in the late 1900's. Presently, if you were still alive in your own time, those computers will have become small and smaller and cutting edge technology would be suggesting to you that you might even wear them on the outside of your body for say, medical purposes and so forth."

I remembered at student who had a computerized insulin pump that she wore on her hip with electrodes embedded in her skin. Another student had been hospitalized and fir with a pacemaker. I shook my head in agreement with Sam that he was right with his history.

“What you might not have noticed is that with greater food supplies and better nutrition, the human race, at the turn of the century was beginning to rapidly evolve. The changes were taking place so quickly that science had trouble confirming one mutation when another arrived to take notice. While some things were advancing, so human traits just grew deeper; stronger in the bonds of DNA. Now I will tell you something of your future.

The greatest evolutionary advances in human development took place not in the logistical minds of scientists, nor the perceptive, intuitive persona’s of political negotiators; unfortunately. Nature selected writers, artists and musicians to lead the next wave of advancement. Here is where technology and the arts meet, roughly fifty to one hundred years in your future. I am the product of years of genetic refinement after the leap.

As humans started on their path to existence, they did what they had to do. Then, industry came along and humans worked where they were cast in society; some breaking through those social barriers but most taking up their expected lot in life. But the artists, writers and musicians of your near future chose to do what they were called to do; what they were destined to do; to create something from nothing. The technological merge was extraordinary and saved the planet from complete self destruction.

In my case, I had been a child of strategy and also one of words. My mother said I had one foot in each world. By the time I was ten, I had mastered nearly every logical game, puzzle and brain teaser ever thought of. And then, I wrote about how others could further their mind by telling them how I solved it. Writing became my passion. It was the ultimate high to teach someone else something new and watch them succeed. My parents agreed to allow for my implant, something most children wait on until after puberty, early.” I looked at Sam confused.

“In the future, you won’t go to your computer once you’re past puberty. The computer is inserted into you.” He pointed to a tiny grey mark on just below his left ear. “I write, edit and upload all with my mind. Artists and musicians have slight variations in their implants but the concept is the same.

By the time I turned eleven, I had reached another precipice that few humans ever reach. My parents agonized over it. I thought my mother would never stop crying. But in the end, they let me.”

“Let you?” I asked afraid of the answer but too curious not to know.

“There is a place where the art can’t be separated from the artist. In my case, I had become my work of writing and teaching. I was the work and the work was me. But it wasn’t enough. I thought about other races, other planets I could teach if only I could out live my mortal shell. Authors of my time had the option. The day I turned twelve, the same day I mastered the solution for Riemann’s Cube of

Imaginary numbers and then wrote how I came about the solution, I fused body and soul with my work for eternity.”

“You died? For a book on games?” I choked.

“I fused with my journalistic work of games and puzzle solution. To solve one’s problems in a game is to find a way to solve the troubles of reality.”

“I see” I said. This prodigy of my future had given up childhood and mortality to solve the challenges and work out the theories through games so that they might help the ages solve real problems. “And I just asked you to cheat.”

“Dishonoring all that I live and died for. Cheat on the game battlefield, cheat yourself in life” Sam retorted smugly.

I groaned and slumped into my chair. Sam sat across from me as still as a stone; waiting. I sighed. “What beats a flush again?”

* * * * *

Sam and I had played nearly a hundred hands of poker that night. In those hands, I might have won five total. I was still terrible at lying. My poker face was actually the “tell” that gave me away. Sam tried to help me by trying to get me picture something else, other than my losing hand in my mind. The face I made always sent him into fits of laughter. It was hopeless.

After so much practice the logistics of the game were at least semi hardened into my brain. I ran the pyramid of increasing winning hands that beat the previous run over and over in my head. That was pretty much all I had going for me. When my hand was bad, I hesitated as to whether to fold or whether to bluff. That gave me away. When my hand was good, I often became eager to recoup my losses from hands past and bet too much, which also gave me away.

Movement outside of the tent indicated we had played cards all night. I had sent Frank back to his multi book form in the hopes that he might stop agonizing over his missing finger. Sam may have been an immortalized fusion of technology and creativity but he looked tired from his attempts to present the concepts from every exhaustive angle. I was also tired, again. If I saw another deck of cards in a million years, it would have been too soon. I needed a break.

“Well, there is only one more thing I can do” Sam announced in our silent break.

“Are we desperate enough to pray yet?” I asked as I rubbed my burning eyes.

“Not quite what I had in mind. I think I’ll test the boundaries of this place and see if I can strike up a conversation with your opponent.”

“What will happen if you try to go too far?” I panicked.

Sam laughed for the first time in hours. “The disc will yank me back. “ He started to climb out of the tent when Telvekka arrived to greet us. Sam smiled and turned to meet my worried face. “Immortality has its draw backs. I won’t go far” he added. The lich host seemed surprised at the boy’s words and cocked his skull to one side.

“I hope you had a pleasant evening” Telvekka asked me as he helped Sam from the cart. “It was productive, thank you.” I ducked back inside to give Sam his chance to talk with the lich astrologer.

It was a relief to have some quiet time, alone. I needed some time to think. There were important points I needed to solidify in my head before I went out to try and win my freedom. First off, I had to remember that Telvekka had said he could see my children. That meant he could see into the orb somehow. He saw Heiner through the satchel and the book bound prison. I glanced over to confirm that his confines were still secure and continued.

Logically, that meant he could have seen through my card trick most likely. But how to beat an opponent at cards if he can read your hand? That was something I needed to work on. Something else that had been bothering me surfaced. What was the currency here? How would I raise or even place a bet? I would have to worry about that later. That wasn’t something I could answer for myself.

A light tapping came to the tent’s edge and another skeleton; this one dressed like a woman in a beautiful dress handed me a large box. “Telvekka sent these for the party.” As quickly as she’d arrived, she left. I watched her as she walked into what had overnight sprung into a town resembling gold rush era California. The only thing familiar about the place from last night was the dust still forming clouds as the bony feet walked across the floor.

Ducking back in my tent, I took the box to the small table. I opened it to find a note and a pile of clothes. The note was from Telvekka. “I noticed your affinity towards men’s trousers. I hope you will enjoy these new clothes in celebration of tonight’s festival. Please meet me at the card table as soon as you are ready.

-T”

So, Sam had been right all along. Telvekka had must have learned to play poker from the Empress of Death all those hundreds of years back. Somewhere in those high stakes hands, she must have described the town in the Telvekka’s future where cowboys shot it out with weapons that spat mini cannons. A good man was defined by a good horse, the love of a patient woman and a severe bravery when thieves rode into town. Not much had changed since dynastic China save the liquor and a new card game that tested the nerve of the toughest warrior cowboy.

I put on the light brown pants and the crisp, white cotton shirt. He’d kept every detail in mind right down to my new snake leather boots and a black ranching hat. Apparently, Telvekka had missed the whole notion that black hats indicated the bad guy in the world of black and white. Then again,

maybe he hadn't missed a thing and I was playing my assigned part. Either way, the clean new clothes made me feel recharged. I walked over to the mirror to take stock.

My hair had definitely grown since I'd last seen it. I twisted it up into my hat. The scabs on my face were all but healed leaving pink streaks where my nails had once torn away the skin. My wedding ring and left hand still held color with a few odd strands of my hair.

I packed the orb into my new pants pocket and synched the satchel tighter for safe keeping of Heiner. Taking a deep breath I stepped out into the gold rush town made up of Tulvekka's illusion and magic. The streets were full of catacomb inhabitants reanimated and dressed for the occasion. Some walked on the sides of the street. Others rode skeletal horses who snorted if you walked too close while shaking their reins and chewing on their bits.

Most of the night's patrons were headed to the heart of the town; the saloon. It was there I was sure that I would find Sam and Tulvekka. All I could wish for was a few stolen moments with Sam so he might give me some hint as to how I might play not only the cards but the man behind the cards. I pushed my way through the throngs of the decaying and the skeletal until I reached the saloon doors and stepped inside.

Cheers from the corner table of "Louella's here!" floated over the timber of the crowd. I tipped my hat to say hello and checked myself. I was getting way too deep into this character and I chided myself, remembering where I was really and what was at stake.

I sat at the table with Sam who seemed the happiest since I'd met him. He and Tulvekka were playing a game of chess. Apparently, they had been at the same game since the morning. Chess was a game I enjoyed watching people in the park play and I looked on with enthusiasm. A waitress dressed in a bustier sans the fleshy cleavage came over to the table to take an order. Tulvekka ordered a pot of tea, Sam and I declined. Tulvekka looked up from his match. "What, no beer or western whiskey? I worked hard to make that authentic."

Sam met my eyes for a split second and I shook my head. "Women didn't really drink the whiskey in the old west. That was left to the cowboys and the gunslingers." He seemed satisfied with my answer and went back to his game with Sam. Two skeleton cowboys were singing and laughing at a nearby table. From across the room, I spied an old friend and took my chance to leave without question.

I quickly made my way through the crowded saloon and sat down on the old pine bench. The keys under the tips of my fingers made me feel as if I'd gone home. Effortlessly, I started to play the old piano and a round of "Whiskey, You're the Devil" glided over the tops of the conversations. Soon, a bar maid was dancing a jig while I played accompaniment to a singing old stagehand who belted out his own words to The Irish Washerwoman and the Red Haired Boy. In a frenzy of fancy footwork, the bar maid slipped off the end of the bar and landed into the arms of the stagehand for an unexpected big finish. The whole saloon erupted into fits of laughter.

Sam tapped me on the shoulder and invited me to join the game that was starting back in the corner. He could have dumped a horse trough over my head for the feeling over icy dread that covered me in that tapping. As we slowly made our way through the drunken crowd, he made small conversations.

“He’s actually a very wise man. He devoted his entire life to the study of planetary alignment in the royal court.”

“Fabulous, if there’s an eclipse, I’ll know to bluff” I snapped at him.

“I know. I’m suddenly not much help. It’s just he’s had no one to talk to for eight hundred years and he’s fascinating!” Sam tried to explain.

“He has the stupid cat!” I whispered through clenched teeth as I took my place at the poker table. The rest of the seats along the edges between Tulvekka and me were empty. “How many more are we waiting on?” I asked in mock cheerfulness.

“Just us” Tulvekka smiled as he began to shuffle the cards.

“Just us?” I whimpered. Looking around the room at the jovial crowd of corpses, they were all in various states of decomposition with the bones exposed where their evening’s costumes failed to conceal. I scrutinized the faces for some fellow idiot to help take the initial focus off my hand of cards. In the end, I knew it would be down to the Tulvekka and me. I just needed a little time to ease into the game. In the sea of singers, lovers, hired guns and bar maids, none would meet my eyes directly or accept the pleading invitation on my face. It was as if there was an unspoken understanding between the Astrologer and his guests.

When I returned my attention back to the table, a neatly stacked pile of colorful poker chips were beside me. I took a piece from the top and felt its smooth edges. My stomach flipped when I realized that it was likely made of bone. ‘Who’s bones?’ I wondered to myself.

“Sam informs me that you are a novice at my chosen game so I suggest we begin by betting on a small wager and work our way up. Do you agree?” asked Tulvekka as he continued to shuffle. I noted how he always seemed so cheerful when Thaddeus wasn’t around.

“Ok” I agreed.

He dealt out the cards with clank of his bone fingers. It was rhythmical, reminding me of reggae music. Each card had its own slight spin in the air before they hit the wooden table, face down and stopped. When he was finished dealing, he threw two chips out onto the table. Picking up my cards, I tried to focus and arrange them properly in my hand. I mimicked the two chip bet and threw my own chips onto the table. They slid towards the center, coming to a stop once they had joined their counterparts. Tulvekka must have wanted to keep things simple for me because he didn’t raise the bet, he called for the hand. He laid his cards down.

His hand revealed three fives, a jack and an ace. I looked at my hand as my heart hammered inside of my chest. I glanced at Sam who motioned for me to set my own cards down. I wasn't sure if I'd won or lost I was so nervous. Sam leaned in and happily called out the results. "Louella's straight beats Tulvekka's the of a kind. Louella wins the hand."

A grimace mixed with a forced smile spread through Tulvekka's exposed teeth. Suddenly, I noticed Thaddeus had joined him at the table. The skeletal astronomer stroked the cat's partial remains of the cartilage of what had once been the cat's ear. The cat put his two front paws up on the tablet to get a clear look for himself.

"Sheer beginner's luck, that's what that is" he sneered.

The next two hands did not go as well for me. In the first, Tulvekka bet his usual two chips but after analyzing his hand, raised the bet. When the hand was called, he beat my pair with a straight. Thaddeus was so thrilled at the comeback that he jumped on the table and gathered the chips with a swish of his tail over to Tulvekka's side of the table. Tulvekka grimaced at him and the cat jumped down and scampered away. The next hand I was down a considerable amount of chips as Tulvekka again raised the bet. I was so focused, running the list of hand rankings in my head that I forgot I had the option to fold. He beat me again, this time with a flush. Sam groaned as he declared Tulvekka the winner both times.

Calling for a winner's cup of tea, Sam pulled me aside and reminded me to play not only the cards, but the opponent; the person sitting across from the table as well. He remarked that in only losing one hand, it was difficult to say what the Tulvekka's "tell" was, but he had would keep watching. This last part he vowed but I could see the pain in the boy's face. It was obvious that Sam truly had grown fond of the old lich in the short time they'd spent together. A cup of tea was set before Tulvekka and another in front of Sam. I could see that poker wasn't the only game the astronomer was playing as he encouraged Sam to try the oolong. The short intermission gave me time to clear my thoughts and focus. I prioritized my goal, above all was to win my escape. I told myself to play the person in front of me, not the cards as Tulvekka began to shuffle again.

"Let's make this round a bit more interesting, shall we?" Tulvekka asked as if venom were dripping from his long ago shriveled tongue.

"How so?" I asked, cautiously.

"If I win, you have to take that dress that Mae is modeling this evening and wear it for the remainder of the tournament" he proposed.

"And if I win, you have to give me back all of the chips I lost last round" I countered. The sockets of Tulvekka's eyes seemed rounder as if he were wide eyed with the excitement of a slightly higher stake. I glanced uneasily at Sam who gave me a slight nod of approval. I stared at the cards, my jaw set as he shuffled. "Not cheating" I added.

“To set these eight hundred year old eyes on a real pair of breasts showcased in a real bustier , it will be nearly impossible to remain an honest man, but I will keep my resolve to remain a gentleman in all outcomes.” He stopped shuffling and handed the cards to Sam. “For this hand, will you shuffle and deal?” Sam looked uneasily at the deck. He was definitely having a conflict of interest. The battle within his moral boundaries that plagued him on the inside twisted and contorted his outer body language and expressions. He slumped down in the chair and drummed the tips of his fingers on the table; all the while staring at the deck of cards. He looked up and glanced from Tulvekka to me and back to Tulvekka. Finally, he picked the cards up and began to shuffle.

“There will be no mental or magical manipulation of card faces in this hand” he said to both of us. “I will not host a game where cheating is involved. Do you both promise to uphold the rules of conduct?”

“Yes” Tulvekka and I said in unison and the hand was on.

My temper was rising in increments as the parameters of the bet sunk in. If I lost this hand, it would mean waltzing over to Mae in some assumedly embarrassing scene to acquire the dress, traipsing upstairs to put the dress on, walking downstairs in a grand entrance and sitting in that humiliating costume all the while Tulvekka sat across from me and my breasts. By the time I picked up my hand, I was red with rage. Gritting my teeth, I tried to remain contained as Thaddeus returned to the table and sat in Tulvekka’s lap to get an up close look at his hand.

“The bet is the dress and the return of the previous round’s purse. Call” said Sam, trying to sound as objective as possible.

Tulvekka sighed and placed a pair of three’s and a pair of six’s face up on the table. I suddenly breathed a sigh of relief and failed to contain my smile as a placed a straight, card, by card happily across my side of the table. Louella’s straight beats two pair, the last round’s purse is returned to her.

Tulvekka slammed his fist on the table and threw my winnings hard across the table. From across the room, Mae was laughing and caressing her bones that filled the western maiden’s aristocrat gown. “Why don’t you shut the hell up?” yelled Thaddeus at Mae.

His objections at her were quickly drowned out as Mae went from caressing her own corpse body to screaming and tearing away at the hook and eye fasteners. She twisted left and right, yanking and pulling try to separate her bones from the fabric of the dress. Smoke began to billow from under her petticoat and in an instant Mae burst into flames. She writhed as she threw herself to the floor, hopelessly attempting to extinguish the flames that engulfed her from within. The flames grew higher and with more intensity until they blew out as quickly as they had ignited. Mae and the wagered dress were reduced to a small pile of cinders on the floor.

“That’ll learn ya” spat Thaddeus, breaking the dead silence that had fallen over the crowd as they watched her burn.

“New round” announced Tulvekka. “This time, I will return as dealer, thank you very much. With our purses equal again, I think it’s time to up the stakes again. The bet is half the chips” he pushed half of his chips into the center. I called and did the same.

Tulvekka dealt the cards. We both sat, staring at our hands. When I could, I tried to read him like Sam had instructed. The task was nearly impossible. He had no eyes that shifted, no lids to blink nervously. He never moved or shifted in his chair. He didn’t sweat. His face did not flush. I sat for the longest time waiting for him to give something away.

The crowd was silent in the packed saloon room. Onlookers from the bar stepped awkwardly over Mae’s ashes to get a better spot to watch the final round. Sam sat against the wall with his hands firmly on each side of his face. He was clearly fearful of whatever the outcome of the cards after such a display of anger from Tulvekka. I wondered how he felt about me cheating now in the face of such uneven odds.

Thaddeus turned himself round and round in Tulvekka’s lap as if he were trying to find a comfortable spot for a nap. For some reason, the action struck me. Tulvekka stroked the cat’s bony head and side of his face. He looked at his cards again.

“I raise” and he pushed all of his chips forward to the center of the table.

Sam ran his fingers through his hair as he stared at me with absolute fear on his face. I stared back and blinked. Taking a deep breath, I pushed my half in as well to meet his chips in the middle. “Call” I replied. Light gasps from the crowd and whispers fell. I let them fall away so I could regain my focus. I had the feeling I was on to something but I couldn’t quite place my finger on it.

Thaddeus rubbed lovingly in very feline fashion as he sat up next to his master’s cards. I watched as the skeleton’s body still gave away nothing no sign of a proper “tell”. I glanced over at Sam who was also staring at Thaddeus and cocking his head slightly. Tulvekka seemed to notice our careful observation and proceeded to backhand Thaddeus off of his lap. The undead gat growled in protest as he gracefully landed on his feet. Angry yet determined, the cat remained sitting next to Tulvekka’s chair as if he were glued to it.

“Raise” announced the old astronomer. “If I win, you remain here with me. If you win, you leave at your own free will”.

Something else was forming clearer in my mind as if the gears of a lock were all beginning to align to open a mental vault. The tumblers turned in my memory. What was it he had said? Heiner was the demon of uselessness that preyed on the elderly. I stared down at Thaddeus. Sam was following my train of thought but I wasn’t sure he’d reached the same logical conclusion I had. It was a risk....no, it was a gamble. The gamble of my life made me close my eyes as I said, “Call and raise”.

“This time the room was a wildfire of instant conversation. “What more can she raise with, her eternity is on the line? What is she doing? He’ll never let her live whether she wins or loses”. All of

these and more circulated around the table in waves. Sam stared at Tulvekka with a childlike face that begged him to tell the crowd differently.

“People, people” Tulvekka called out with his hands in the air. “Whatever the outcome of this hand, we are both opponents with honor. We will follow the verdict that the fates hand to us without argument.” He looked directly across from me. “Isn’t that right, Louella?”

“Absolutely” I agreed.

“Now, my sweet girl, what more could you possibly raise than your very life?” he asked.

“Sam” I said simply.

“What?” protested Sam.

“If you win, fine you get me forever in your stupid bar maid’s dress. But Sam goes on with the orphans to imprison Heiner for good. Remember, you promised not to interfere with his final sentencing. But if I win this hand I leave immediately to take care of Heiner. Sam, on that case, is free to stay or to go, whatever he wishes.”

Sam looked at me calmly. He could see that with careful wording, I was stacking the deck. Tulvekka said nothing for a long time. Silence permeated the room. He drummed his fingers on the wooden table. They clicked endlessly. Thaddeus growled and hissed, clawing the leg of the wooden chair. The cat’s growling grew in intensity until finally Tulvekka declared, “Call”.

All eyes were on his hand as he turned each card over, “ace of spades, ace of hearts, two of clubs, three of diamonds, four of spades” announced Sam after each reveal. “One pair, aces!!”. Horror washed over him as he looked at me. It was clear he did not want to be the leader of a mission to banish Heiner forever. He bit his lip as the room quieted down for my reveal. Sam announced each card in turn to the crowd. As I reached to reveal my first card, a sharp electric shock ran through my fingers. For a moment, Sam and I watched as the cards in my hands seemed to blur in that fleeting instance. Dread drained any hope I had as Sam swallowed hard. “Ten of hearts, jack of hearts, queen of hearts, king of hearts, nine of clubsstraight! Louella wins!”

I had expected for there to be some kind of cheering but there was nothing. With a snap of the finger Sam, Tulvekka, Thaddeus and I were sitting again in the plain stone room in which we had arrived the day before. Thaddeus was crouched in the corner hissing and swiping at all of us with his claws extended.

“Would you like me to give Heiner a companion? After all, with Sam here, you shouldn’t be troubled by the demon of loneliness anymore” I offered.

“It’s been so long that I’ve been in his company, I am afraid to be without him” Tulvekka admitted. “When did you figure it out?”

“Only in the last round. You clung to loneliness when you had been dealt a losing hand” I said.

“I had no idea I developed a tell” remarked Tulvekka.

“A tell you did NOT have the day you played death” Sam added.

“Right you are” he smiled at Sam. “And it is about time I started living without that little demon again. Louella, would you do the honors?”

With my orb in hand, I chanted in whispers to the orphans of paper and leather bindings. Soon, Thaddeus was surrounded by a swarm of tiny paper bees. He batted at them but they swamped and overcame the cat. Constraining him in sheer volume, Thaddeus, the demon of loneliness was swallowed by a small hand sized book where the bindings instantly reformed and sealed the book shut. Tulvekka walked over and picked up the book, cradling it in his arms as if it were still a familiar or pet.

“That’s the funny thing about loneliness, it makes you think you are safe in the emptiness all the while it’s slowly killing you” I said gently, prying the small novel from his boney hands.

“Now you have time for a game” Sam remarked cheerfully. “I am interested to have you explain the dynastic Chinese basis for Mahjong. You know, there are striking similarities between the ancient game and twenty third century three dimensional geometry.”

The two sat down at the small table that had once been in my gypsy tent. We said our goodbyes quickly as I secured that captured Thaddeus in the satchel with Heiner. Tulvekka hugged me one last time. “If I can ever be of assistance, please do let me know. I am in your debt.”

“Tu!” I said casually. “Before I set down my cards, I thought I felt, you know, a shock run through my fingers and quite possibly my mind. Tell me, really, did I win that last hand or did you....”

“Oh don’t get primal on me here” interrupted Sam. “We have studying to do!” Sam pulled at the outer bone in Tulvekka’s left arm. The old lich just turned and walked away.

With Frank reassembled and two prisoners in my bag, the orb in my pocket, we started again for the lake and the cliffs that would end our assignment under Otherworld and hopefully return me to the fight and the unknown plight of my friends and the greatest army in time.

“Louella!” yelled Tulvekka as I made my way through the next tunnel.

“Yeah?” I yelled back.

“Not everything down here is as willing to play as I was. Be careful. Call me and Sam if you run into an emergency” he instructed.

It felt good to think that someone had my back as I was leaving. “Thanks” I said and headed on through the catacombs.