

# SIDDHARTHA

## 3.2

# ALL THE WORLDS AT ONCE PART 1

### INTRODUCTION.

This is the first of four parts of a novel appearing pretty much simultaneously on efanzines. I have two hopes for this. Firstly that you'll read and enjoy it. Secondly that some of you might send me some critical feedback. Back in the day when there was an active group in the area I had fans willing to read and comment on my various mss; but everything changes.

This is the first thing I've completed in 20 years that I actually like but I need people to give me their honest opinions. I don't mind being told it's crap as long as you tell **why** it's crap.

# ALL THE WORLDS AT ONCE

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL  
BY

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(C.76,000 WORDS)

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“All the worlds at once, all the shadows revealed, and all our sins unhidden.”

Munyeen Ohrmuz, in a bunker, under London, under pressure, trying to save the world.

# 1. LOVE, LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING; WELL, THIS TIME IT DID.

How could I know? After all, it happens to people every day, doesn't it? I fell in love, that's all. Maybe it wasn't with someone I ever expected I could love, but I did anyway. You don't have any choice in the matter, it just happens.

How could I have guessed it would change the world?

No, not my world, not my personal world, though it did that too, changing it beyond recognition.

I mean, *the world*. That me, falling in love with a particular person, would lead directly to the world changing. All of it. Everything. Mind you, it would have changed anyway albeit very differently.

Unknown to me then, of course, the world, reality, or whatever you choose to call it, was already stranger than I could possibly imagine. I didn't know about the Shadows, the nightmares, the monsters, and all the rest of it, all so neatly hidden and covered up by layer upon layer of secrets; so many that even the people who thought they knew it all didn't.

Then I thought I was living in a love story. That's part of what this is about. Us. A love story, with warts and sores and blood and bone. Us, with all the rawness, crudity, sexuality and naked need, and if you don't think you can take that then go away, leave this for someone else to discover. But that is a part of it, just as the world is a part, that and the dark places of the world, the Shadows that I never suspected existed.

There was so much I didn't know then and I was happy in my ignorance. Too full of the world I did know, full of my world, full of myself (oh, yes so full of myself), and of my lover.

But nothing lasts forever, does it? Sooner or later destruction comes tumbling down around your head and nothing is the same again.

Ever.

And this is where it started: the story of our failure, of our life and our death, and more.

It had got to the stage where I didn't know which was me and which was her. Other than different textures of flesh, I didn't know what I was fingering, licking, kissing or sucking or what was being fingered, licked, kissed or sucked. Swollen nipples, fingers, tongues, hair, her/me, grunting, nails in flesh, the sharp smells of sweat and shaven armpits and sweet wet cunt, the textures of head and pubic hair. Hers, mine, who cared as nails dug into flesh, everything merging into one transcendent gloriously sweaty erotic orgasmic moment that should last forever but never did.

Debra rolled over, strong arms pulling me with her as easily as she would an old teddy bear and said, "Christ, babe, I could really do with a cigarette."

I moved my head from what turned out to be the underside of her left breast, the hardness of her swollen nipple briefly passing over my lips, and I sucked in air. I must have breathed before, I just couldn't remember when.

I reminded her, "You quit when you moved in last year." And threatened, "You better not have started again." I'm pretty tolerant of other people's vices –sex, drugs, rock and roll, whatever– but I just hate smoking.

She said patiently, "No, I haven't, I know I know. I still want one. Right after fantastic sex, it's best cigarette in the world."

I shuffled up so I was lying against her chest, her chin resting on the top of my head. "I want one too," I said and I'd never smoked in my life (not counting fatties).

"God that was wonderful." You could just still hear the faintest hint of a Geordie accent in her voice, which was strange as she'd only lived in Newcastle upon Tyne for three years between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, otherwise she was a Londoner. Impressionable age, I suppose. Either that or a deliberate affectation, I've never been too sure which and I'm not sure she is either.

"Oh yeah," I sighed and wrapped my arms around her waist, loving her warmth. "It nearly always is."

Well, hell yes, *nearly* always. If it was always *always* how would I know if it *was* wonderful and

not just great or good or merely average?

I'd never had sex like the sex I had with Debra. The difference, I suppose, between simple fucking and being totally in love. I lived for her, breathed for her. I thought I'd die for her.

*Instead, months later, I would die with her.*

"But you're not gay, are you, girl?" she said and planted a kiss on the back of my head.

And she had an annoying habit of disrupting my profound or romantic musings with sarcastic comments.

"No," I said, "I am not gay."

This, despite all the foregoing, was the simple the truth. Straight woman who loves being fucked by good looking guys with great bodies and (ideally) big dicks falls in love with a gay woman. Not the first time it had happened in the history of the world and not the last.

I said, "Human sexuality isn't as rig..."

"Yeah, yeah, for sure, babe," she said as her hands cupped my breasts and she began playing with my nipples. "Not gay at all," she said and kissed me and my mouth opened to her tongue and we started again. Sometimes life can be absolute hell and would become just that, literally, soon. But for now, more sex. Great sex.

Will you ever have sex this great? Oh I hope so.

Eventually, Debra got up.

"Got to go, babe," she said. "You know, research at that witch's place." Yes, I did know. After-shag doctorate research.

Which left me on my own for the rest of the evening. I waved an idle hand, rolled over, and decided to have a post-orgasm nap. Or maybe a glass of nice post-coital mellow merlot, from grapes grown on the south western slopes of the Andes. That's right, cheap Chilean plonk.

I'd met Debra eighteen months earlier in pub when she punched out a drunk racist. Just, she admitted later, to impress me.

And, I'm not ashamed to admit to it too, it did.

Here I am, a little earlier in the evening, at a professional's wine bar in the heart of London, prices starting at seven pounds a bottle (for beer –okay, brewed in a Belgian monastery and masturbated over by monks for all I knew, or cared; the house wine started at more than twenty), post-modern, all primary colours and neon lighting, fashion-statement furniture, irony; for many a place for a drink before going home or to start at and move on.

I played a game with myself trying to decide who were the lawyers, bankers, upper echelon civil servants, Harley Street plastic surgeons, management types, investment consultants, stock brokers; not that it mattered, there not being much difference between them, just all about money and playing the system, hence no software designers who, no matter how good looking, were still geeks at heart. I should know as I mixed professionally, and sometimes socially, with them all at one time or another, including the tunnel-visioned geeks.

Here's me in my Perez-Rive power suit and Jimmy Choo's (and, no, I'm not going to explain the cultural references or we'll be here all night: look them up, darling), short styled black hair, enough makeup –DouanierD naturally- to mean business without looking like a tart, necklace with one real and expensive diamond as a centrepiece (birthday present from my folks), briefcase by my slender legs, and sipping a too-chilled New Zealand chardonnay (Australian being just so *passé*), then nodding at something a senior partner said.

A group of us were clustered around a table discussing a couple of problem cases, obliquely of course, this being in public and you never know who's listening. Someone tried to mention the second successful London Underground suicide bombing but that went down as well as you might expect. I mean, there's a shared socially constructed reality and then there's the real world and the less said about that the better. Cocooned in a rarefied milieu, we thought the sun shone from where it famously doesn't.

Clustered around a nearby table were a group of people in their late twenties to mid-thirties, their clothes attractive without being clearly city-type professional. An rather pretty earthy blonde was laughing loudly, gesticulating with a cigarette. (The smoking ban hadn't come in yet. Do keep up,

my angel, this is late September 2005.) Media types wouldn't be seen dead in here so I reckoned they were college lecturers pushing the boat out –perhaps celebrating a promotion. Academics might have more credibility on intellectual, and particularly ethical, grounds than most of the people in this particular bar but financially they were definitely our poor relations.

While I watched, the blonde turned her head, caught me looking at her and winked. Attractive, I mused, in a rather obvious Aryan busty Essex-girl way. I held her gaze –solicitors don't cow easily- before looking away, unsure if I'd been challenged or assessed. Certainly her confidence matched my own. Amusing.

As if by some unspoken decision, we all decided to leave, most for home. A quiet evening lay ahead of me with only my two pet rats for company. It could be worse. I'd been working hard lately and needed some wind-down time. A couple of weeks in a *pension* in the Loire valley with some mates, good music, and lots of wine, cheese, baguettes and legs of tender lamb with meat dripping off the bone, would have been even better, but *belas*.

I could call my mother, I suppose, though that might not be the best thing for stress reduction. The older she got the more she became the archetypal Jewish momma as played by the actor Maureen Lipman (a sweetie, according to my mother who'd met her, oh, at least once). "You're twenty-seven," she'd say. "You're a very pretty girl. When are you going to find yourself a nice rich Jewish boy? The circles you mix in you must meet plenty." That was the trouble, I did, and they all, in terms of personal and professional characteristics, resembled me –pushy, ambitious, insensitive, out for themselves, and shallow as shit.

Did I say I was a nice person? Elitist, arrogant, snobbish, were all words that could be applied to me.

And don't think I'm disparaging male Jews as nearly all the people I met were like me, whatever their sex, ethnic origin, or religion. It went with the territory. We weren't quite the makers and shakers yet but we were getting there and getting desperate to arrive. We had edge, we had attitude, and we lived in a world we thought was real. If only I'd known that my cynical little world was about to be changed, for an all too brief time, for the better.

And then for the far much worse.

Just as I was thinking home and rats, a couple of the guys suggested a pub they knew. Not far away, they said, real character (i.e. spit and sawdust with the spit and sawdust taken out, the low wooden beams left and a token real ale pump sitting forlornly on its own on the bar top like an abandoned lover and, yes, I really did think in similes like that). And so, what the hell, I went with the two guys (one gay, one seriously spoken for but both kind of cute so fun but harmless, and haven't we all been there and done that?) and forty odd minutes and another two drinks and starting to feel tired and the idea of rat-fondling beginning to seem the more appealing option, I decided time to go home for a mug of free-trade coffee (a token gesture to my conscience; I'm sure I had one even then, though it did have the decency to keep mostly to itself) with two pretty piebald female rats.

I said my goodbyes, glanced round the room, noticing that Essex girl and most of her mates had had the same idea as us and were standing round a tall table near the door. She saw me looking but I avoided eye-contact, turned my body in the other direction and bumped into a tall crop haired geezer (hello? London?) causing him to spill some of his pint and loudly call me a *nigger cunt*. He pronounced it 'cahnt' in his quaint sarf Lonnen way, but he articulated 'nigger' very clearly.

Cue sudden silence and faces turned everywhere but in my direction.

Every single conversation stopped at the sound of the n-word.

He towered over me, red-faced, skin taut with anger, fists clenched.

"What the fuck did you call me?" I said staring up at him not even then realising the potential danger I'd placed myself in –a slender(-ish) five foot five mixed race woman confronting a probably drunk and definitely rather large enraged racist, and then and extremely unwisely adding, "You fucking Nazi shithead!"

Even my cousin Reuben the bookie wouldn't have given me decent odds under those circumstances.

Before I realised it, the blonde woman was at my side.

"Hey man," she said, "leave my bitch alone, she's spoken for."

She meant it to disconcert him, so I thought, but it didn't work. That just activated another prejudice.

"Fucking dykes," he snarled, "you're all over the fucking place," and raised his hands, nearly empty glass (oops) clutched in one of them. Whether he would actually have struck either of us is debatable, it may simply have been an aggressive warning stance that he wasn't to be fucked with. It didn't matter. Threaten Debra in any way and she reacts.

She simply kned him hard in the groin then brought a double fistful punch under his jaw knocking him on his arse, his head cracking against a table and that was it, apart from the brief fuss that followed.

Within a couple of minutes he'd been dragged away none too gently by bouncers, any mess cleaned up and the manager was standing in front of saying, "I'm sorry, ladies, for this. I'll call the police immediately." When we both indicated, and much to his relief and the saving of his reputation, that we'd rather not, he said, "Then please have a drink – a bottle of wine on the house."

I started to say, "But we aren't tog..."

Debra turned on the charm with a wide red-lipped smile and said in a husky refined voice, "That's terribly kind of you. It wasn't your fault but we won't be so ungracious as to refuse your offer. A decent red would be nice, please choose for us." Instant decision making, cool, in control. I liked that in a person. Reminded me of me, usually.

"Of course, madam, thank you." He turned and hurried off leaving us alone. Apart from a crowded pub that is, though for some reason people had made space for us, and our separate friends were staring at us trying to make their minds up what to do. It seemed as if we were inhabiting a kind of no-man's land.

"I can't thank you enough," I said.

"My pleasure. I'm Debra Affleck." Her voice had become a purr now, contrasting with the hard edge she used when dealing with the drunk, the tone warmer than when talking to the manager, with, it seemed to me (and correctly as subsequent events proved), a rather sensual edge.

"Rachel Green," I said.

I heard laughter from her friends. She turned her head and said, "Fuck off, boys, you were leaving anyway." The boys included two women and all of them seemed amused.

My crew of two looked at me. I shrugged and said, "Looks like I'm staying a little longer. It's the least I can do," I said to Debra.

"Let's find a seat," she suggested.

It seemed natural. A bond had formed between us. Besides I was curious about her because I didn't know what to make of her other than I suspected her to be a college lecturer, or perhaps a mature student. But apart from that, and I could have been wrong (yes, it does happen sometimes), she was a complete blank to me. In my profession it helps to be able to quickly and accurately assess individuals and as I grew in experience I'd been getting better and better at it but Debra had me puzzled. I'd taken her for an academic but she moved like an athlete and reacted like a trained soldier, fast and efficient.

She was pretty but not beautiful and not as pretty as me, I thought then, being too Amazonian, almost indefinably mannish in appearance, contrastingly strongly with my petite elfin look (and as we all know, elves originally came from Africa). Her clothes were cheaper than mine though of decent quality and she inhabited them with a strong physical presence rather than them being draped over her. Like me she wore trousers and a blouse, both cream, but her jacket was pale blue leather, no designer labels that I could see. Stylishly cut straight blonde hair rested on her shoulders framing an even smooth-skinned wide face. Her blue eyes and red-lipped smile were puckish. She was taller than me by three inches, making her about five eight.

We'd barely sat down when the wine arrived, the waiter offering it to Debra to taste. She accepted, nodded and thanked him. "It's a really good one," she said when he'd left. "I knew it would be when I asked the manager to select it. He'd lose face if he tried to palm the house wine off on us."

Christ, she was as subtle as a lawyer. It's the sort of thing I'd have done if I hadn't been so disconcerted by the events of the previous five minutes.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” she asked. (2005 remember, and we were in a smoking area unfortunately.)

However I said, “You can start a bloody fire as far as I’m concerned after what you did.”

She chuckled, “I’m waiting for an excuse to give up, but until then...” she shrugged. “By the way, are you gay?”

“No,” I said, “why do you ask?”

“Just to avoid misunderstandings. Didn’t think you were. Gaydar,” she explained, tapping her forehead with a bitten fingernail. “Bothered?”

“Oh. No, not at all. A little surprised, perhaps.”

She didn’t follow that up, heard it too many times –the irritating presumption, but you’re too pretty to be a lesbian.

She said, “You interest me. I was watching you from time to time back at the other place, with your colleagues. You were easily holding your own and doing it by intelligence and force of personality. You’re pretty but not enough to get their tongues hanging out and you’re not physically imposing in terms of size. So.”

I thought I’d been complimented but I wasn’t completely sure –I know for a fact that quite a few men have had their tongues hanging out over me. No, that’s not quite the image I meant to conjure up but let it go.

I said, “Okay Sherlock, until you turned into Xena warrior princess-” me and my mates back at Cambridge (where I got a First, okay?) had loved that TV show for its campness “ -I’d decided you were a college lecturer in... media studies or sociology.”

Debra raised her glass and touched mine. “Excellent. I knew you’d be interesting. Social Sciences. Women’s studies, unsurprisingly.”

“And the rest?” I asked.

She lit a cigarette, inhaled, and blew smoke away from me. “Long story. Potted version, born in London, actively gay since I was fourteen, twenty eight years old, currently single, MA in Social Sciences, university lecturer in said subject at the University of Westminster, researching for my PhD on Wicca and the subjugation of women, black belts in judo and karate, moderately proficient at other forms of martial arts, enjoy talking to interesting men and women, preferably over a leisurely alcoholic drink, gregarious and loud but masking a sensitive artistic nature, of course. Nah, forget that last bit, it’s total bollocks. I’m an in your face confrontational sort of person who loves a good argument. And you?”

“Mm, my favourite subject.” And I told her my story, also the potted version, but I’ll fill that in as we go along. My mother, a keen bridge player, always told me never to reveal my hand at the beginning and this story is going to get quite convoluted. To continue the metaphor, let’s play out this hand.

We arranged to see each other for drinks a couple of nights later. Did several bars, got pissed, and had a really good time. Another two nights later we went clubbing and suddenly we were the bestest of friends. The night after that we did dinner and a movie. We quickly fell into a pattern of seeing each other two or three times a week. After a month, different commitments meant that I didn’t see her for ten whole days and I realised something strange was happening to me. When we were due to meet after that enforced break I felt a heady excitement at seeing her.

Truth: I felt more than that, much more and it scared me.

Several times lying in bed at home and masturbating, fantasies of doing it with her surfaced. I suspect most people have the occasional gay sex fantasy, they just don’t generally admit it to anyone. I did for Lucy Lawless/Xena –the hottest thing on television at the time- but just now and again you understand. At first I pushed these sexualised images of Debra away. Fantasising snogging Lucy Lawless (or Gabrielle, her femme sidekick) was one thing, but these were far more explicit than that and were too close to home. Only they wouldn’t go away because, deep down, I just didn’t want them to. Eventually I stopped fighting, gave up and accepted them.

*Welcomed them.*

We met at the pub, talked about what we’d been doing while apart. From time to time I



stammered, nervously stumbling over words, which is not like me at all. What am I doing here? I wondered. What the hell is she doing to me?

After we'd had a single drink I suggested we go back to my flat and order a pizza or something and watch a movie. We'd barely got inside the doorway when she kissed me. A gentle, even timid, soft kiss on the lips. I suppose I'd been expecting –or hoping for- a full-on face-sucker.

“Christ, I'm sorry,” she said, pulling away and holding her hands up. She gabbled, “I swore to myself I'd never do anything like that again. I didn't mean it like you think. Don't be offended, Rachel, please.”

I said, “It's okay,” and pulled her against me, pulled her face down to mine. I kissed her, my mouth bruising hers as I stuck my tongue inside her mouth, my hands on the back of her head making sure she couldn't get away.

I didn't know what I was doing. I did know what I was doing. I didn't care. I was in love.

We finally fell asleep around three in the morning. Which pretty much brings us back to the scene at the beginning. Okay, that particular one came much later but you get the idea. This isn't one of those full circle deals.

When I woke up I saw her face on the pillow next to mine, felt her warmth, watched her breathe. We'd made love together and just the memory of it made me want to cry. I'd never felt so happy waking up next to someone.

No, no more lurid details about our sex life; that's only important to Debra and myself. Besides, if you want lurid you'll get more than enough detail later on, just none of it about us fucking.

The simple matter is that we'd fallen in love with each other, though we didn't use that word for another couple of weeks. We –and this became more and more apparent over the coming weeks and months- were just made for each other. Both of us confident mature but still young professionals whose personalities clicked in every way. Where we weren't similar we complemented each other with neither of us insecure enough to feel threatened by our differences, and there were many –we just made space for them.

Our friends were a rather different matter, there was my circle and there was Debra's, two very different groups (or three if you counted her lesbian friends). As Debra got to know my friends and I hers, a third (or fourth) circle began to form, the friends of Debra and Rachel. Debra's were delighted for her, that, for the first time in years, she was blissfully in love (the lesbians particularly, jokingly –I think, there are some aspects about gay humour I don't get- jealous that she'd converted a straight woman).

Mine, understandably, had rather more mixed reactions. As if I'd instantly changed into a different person, some gave up trying to understand, didn't want to understand, didn't want to know; others decided that if my suddenly turning gay was odd to say the least, then at least I'd picked someone delightful and worthy of me, and a couple of them came out of the closet (well, to me anyway, as bisexual). I soon realised that Debra is a person who polarises people –they either like her a lot or loathe her greatly. While it is true that I can understand the latter group to an extent, I just think they're fucking morons.

So we became a couple and, after three months of skirting around the issue, she moved into my flat. There were good reasons for this. Apart from mine being modern, larger and generally much nicer, it was relatively equidistant between both our places of work and therefore mutually convenient. That was when the first of our differences became apparent though, oddly, the rats weren't one of them.

I hate clutter and I don't keep things I have no more use for, be it clothes, CDs, jewellery, furniture, books, or whatever. I discard and move on. Debra is a packrat who possessed about five times as much stuff as I did (and that may be a gross underestimate). Frankly her place was a mess and I never went there on more than a couple of occasions. However, rather than do the sensible thing and get rid of a heap of stuff –sell, throw out, donate, whatever- she was able, courtesy of a friend (Jake, of whom more *anon*) to store it in an old Victorian lockup. I told her she could visit it every other Sunday. Thus, having forced her to be ruthless, her stuff fitted into my flat without overflowing.

I felt prickly the first few weeks, territorial I suppose, and Debra simply wasn't as tidy or as inclined to do housework as me. On the other hand I have been accused of being obsessively neat and she did try, and the rats quickly took to her and she them, though she drew the line at playing with them in bed –didn't like rat *accidents*, she said, meaning rat shit and rat pee. Dunno why, it didn't happen *very* often.

Money could have posed a problem as I earned three times what she did. Luckily Debra took a pragmatic approach: "I always wanted a rich lover," she said but in practise paid half the utility bills, the groceries more often than not, letting me take care of the rent and other stuff. No big deal.

We were together, we were in love, we were achieving our aims in our respective careers, we had friends, we shared interests, and we were relatively affluent. After six months together we took a romantic week's holiday in the Caribbean (sod the Loire valley, I wanted to be sybaritic) and overdosed on food, sun, swimming, and sex in the most beautiful surroundings. Our life together was simply perfect –a mixed-race young straight Jewess and a lesbian Aryan Amazon in love. What could go wrong? Where were the problems?

Well, apart from my mother and until Debra turned into a zombie, there weren't any worth mentioning.

Ah, my mother, my mother. I love her so much I want to strangle her slowly with razor wire. Well, sometimes.

We'd been living together for three months before my parents met Debra for the first time. They'd heard of her because we'd talked on the phone and I'd seen them at least four times but somehow –can't possibly understand how- they'd gained the impression that Debra was no more than a new friend who'd needed somewhere to stay in a hurry and that I was doing her a favour.

I'd invited them for tea or dinner on a number of occasions but gave up when I realised that they wanted to meet her on their turf. So off we went like two good little schoolgirls, home to mummy and daddy.

The terraced house in Golders Green that I called home had to be worth a cool one and half mill but then Daddy was no fool when it came to money, or anything else come to that. A tall handsome black New York Jew, he met and fell in love with my mother while on a medical exchange programme thirty years ago. He never went back, eventually became a British citizen (me, I have dual nationality), but never lost his accent though not for lack of trying. I appeared a couple of years later, followed in rapid succession by a sister and a brother, both doing well and –seeing as you asked- happily married unlike their elder sister, thank you very much.

My mother was a London Jew born and bred, and if I keep harping on about their Jewishness then that's because that's how they defined themselves first and foremost. While they had many non-Jewish friends, the core of their personal lives centred on the Jewish community, and so did my childhood. Mum had a good degree in art history and worked for an art gallery where she met my father who said he had popped in to look at some paintings but had actually seen her through the window while walking by. So romantic. After taking a few years off to breed, she resumed work as a buyer, and very successfully too.

I'll cut to the chase. They made Debra welcome -I'd hardly expected anything else, their manners were impeccable- and had laid out a typical Jewish tea. Me, I'd had enough of bagels and gefilte fisch and rest when I was a kid. Keep kosher, no way.

Debra was on her best behaviour, laying her academic credentials and background on with a trowel (a first at Nottingham, mother a professor of English Literature at Newcastle University, father dead in a car crash a couple of years ago, along with his twenty year old Cuban girlfriend, a fact which Debra for some reason omitted to mention). She even flirted girlishly with my father –I hadn't known until then that she could even do girlish. I rather liked it.

"You know," my mother said, "while I'm so pleased that Rachel has such a good friend, Debra, I'm still surprised she invited you to stay. Rachel has never shared anywhere with anyone since leaving Cambridge. I know she likes her space."

Mummy dear knew something was up. She didn't know what but she damn well knew there was more to Debra moving in than I'd let on. I could tell the way her mind was working. Had Debra

found a way to sponge off me? Or was it darker than that? Was I on drugs and Debra my supplier? Was Debra hiding out from criminals or the police? She didn't necessarily believe a word either of us had told her.

Shit.

I took a deep breath. She wouldn't drop it until she knew and she had a built in crap detector when it came to her kids. She knew Shirley was up the spout about the same time her boyfriend's sperm hit the willing ovum.

"We're lovers," I said.

After a very long pause during which she pondered on a number of scenarios and possible reactions including considering that I just might be winding her up as it wouldn't be the first or even the five hundredth time, my mother finally accepted it at face value and said, "Oh dear, I was rather hoping that you'd committed a professional indiscretion and that Debra was blackmailing you over it. I'm sure I could have got you out of that. How long have you been a lesbian, Debra?"

She didn't miss a beat. Respect!

"All my life, Mrs Green," Debra answered.

"Did you seduce Rachel?" my mother asked.

Displaying amazing equanimity, Debra replied, "I'm sure you know that no-one can seduce Rachel unless she wants to be seduced. She's so grounded that an earth-mover couldn't move her. I fell in love with her."

"Ditto," I said, just to make it clear it wasn't a sympathy shag.

"Pity you aren't Jewish."

"I believe there may be some Jewish ancestors on my mother's side," Debra said.

My mother smiled, which meant run for cover. She said, "You've been very charming so far, Debra, please don't insult my intelligence now. Rachel."

I sat up. That maternal note of command which brooks no refusal.

"What?" I said. Not a question, just a monosyllabic response to indicate that she had my full attention.

"How long have you been a lesbian?" she asked. "It seems--"pause "--a little out of character for you. I remember your frequent adolescent crushes on boys, the pinup pictures in your bedroom, the prescription for the contraceptive pill you hid from me at the age of fifteen; such a sensible girl. Happy days, darling. So, when did you decide you were a lesbian?"

"I'm not a lesbian," I said as emphatically as I could. "I'm just seriously in love with Debra. I may grow out of it. I hope not though because the sex is great. I've never had sex with my best friend before." If mummy could go for shock, so could I. Dammit, she did make me feel fifteen again and she'd never said anything about finding that prescription. Cleverer than even I realised.

My father leaned forward, smiling, and said, "I've had sex with my best friend, many times." Adding, with his dry New York humour, "That's how you were conceived. Oh well. Darling, you'd better add Debra to our special birthday gift list. When is your birthday, Debra?"

I looked at Mum and said, "Aren't we going to scream and tear out our hair?"

"Perhaps later," my mother answered. "Without meaning to be rude, it might be best if you both left now. I'll be in touch."

"Well, that was a disaster," I said to Debra as we sat in the back of the taxi.

Debra held my hands in hers. "She seemed to take it rather well, I thought. And your dad was quite unfazed when it came out."

"You could tell him a comet was going to hit London in a minute's time and he'd suggest we all have a farewell toast. When my mother doesn't create a scene with me over something I've done that she doesn't like is when it's time to worry."

Except, oddly, she seemed to accept it and welcomed Debra as much a part of our family as she did my siblings' partners. Really strange. You see people in a particular way and when they act out of character it's disconcerting. On the other hand she did marry a black man --a wonderful, cultured, intelligent charming, funny person maybe- but still black and even in the mid 1970's that was no mean thing even if he was Jewish.

But I still didn't get her acceptance. Anyone else's child shacking up with someone of the same sex, fine, but her own, no way. She was planning something. Had to be.

Nevertheless, eighteen months passed without my mother throwing a fit or being anything but nice to Debra and myself and thus bringing us to four hours later from where this chapter began, minus the preamble.

Nearly one in the morning and Debra arrived back from visiting the Wiccan coven where she'd been researching for her doctorate. I woke from a doze just as she came in the bedroom and automatically switched the bedside light on.

Her face was a ghastly white and dried flecks of blood stained her chin.

"You look awful," I said.

"It's worse than looking awful," Debra said, her eyes dark and hooded, "much worse. Someone killed me tonight."

"Killed?"

In a monotone she said, "I'm dead, Rachel. I'm dead and I'm very hungry."

## 2. Debra Affleck and the Wicked Witches of Ealing Central.

My turn.

It's mostly Ray-Ray's story but I wanted to have some input if only for balance. She can be a little coy and oblique when it suits her and, sometimes, she completely avoids the truth, seeing only what she wants to see. Her mother, for example, is a warm and lovely person who, once she realised how much I loved and cared about Debra, managed to ignore any negative feelings she had about our sexuality and was never anything less than welcoming to me. Still, who doesn't see what they want to see?

Actually, I'm the answer to that. I saw what I shouldn't see.

So, here's me and I'm not feeling too well.

I only considered it a slight exaggeration when I said to her, "I'm dead, and I'm very very hungry."

So I turned on my heels and went through to the kitchen where I opened a small tin of Rachel's borlotti beans and more or less poured them down my throat, chewing only as much as I needed in order to avoid choking. I don't particularly like borlotti beans, they just happened to be the nearest thing to hand. That staved off the immediate problem of me going into shock -good vegetable protein plus carbs.

I suppose I could have called in at a MacDonald's on the way but I just had to get back home. Ignoring Rachel, I opened the fridge, removed a plastic dish containing chicken chom chom with rice left over from a couple of days ago and, still chomping on the beans, bunged it into the microwave.

"Debra, what's going on?"

I really hadn't wanted Rachel involved in this world. Another couple of weeks and I'd have completed my research and been free. I'd sworn to myself that I'd never bother with the Shadows again.

Ah fuck it; I'm being just a tad disingenuous here. In other words, I'm lying through my teeth. I'd had a funny feeling that the coven wasn't quite kosher and had begun compiling a file which I intended, assuming I uncovered evidence to prove my suspicions (and with the expectation of some suitable compensation for my trouble), to pass on to the PDF which, in this case, isn't a type of text file. Patience, my child, all will be revealed sooner or later.

"It was a dark coven," I said and watched a look of complete incomprehension dawn like a dim sun on her face. So much to explain. So many impossible things to tell her before breakfast but by then we'd have to be long gone out of here. Like bats out of hell, right?

"Pack," I said. "Essentials only and hard wearing stuff. Trainers, jeans, leather, cotton."

"What's a dark coven and what do you mean about being dead?"

She was shouting at me and not swearing. Bad sign. Rachel, for all her affectations and pretensions, had a mouth like a docker. Now she wore worry on her face as crude and obvious as a sad clown's makeup.

I told her the truth, part of it, the short version, the sad ugly facts behind the mask of the world.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "Magic is real. All the dark places are real. The monsters are real. It's the hidden world, the dark face of our reality. We call it the Shadows.

"Where I've been, it turned out to be a dark coven -witches, real witches, not harmless sweet twee altruistic Wiccans- and I was trapped. I think they suspected I was PDF -I'll tell you about that later- and set a trap. I was working through data on their pc and I came across a sigil. Any normal person wouldn't have recognised it. They probably wouldn't have even seen it. I did and I'd opened it before I could stop myself -a compulsion, part of the magic. I'd opened a death curse -a mind ripper, whatever you want to call it, and it was through my eyes and into my brain before I could stop it.

"Fortunately I wasn't totally unprepared and I had a counter to that kind of stuff implanted years ago in my subconscious only it was so long ago and so deep that it didn't react quickly enough - just milliseconds too slow. Right now they're fighting each other and my counter-spell is losing. I need to eat to boost it, boost my energy levels, but it's a delaying action at best. We've got to find a Man of Power who's willing to help me. If we don't, it will eat my consciousness until there's nothing of me left

except a mindless body, a living corpse. We've also got to get out of here before the rest of the coven arrives.

"There were only three of them there tonight. I think I killed one –I'm sure I broke her neck- and the other two won't be getting about much for some time. You don't want to know what the others will do to us if they catch us. Move, Rachel, for your life, please get ready."

I turned to the microwave, emptied the chom chom onto a plate and started eating it with a spoon. Rachel didn't stand around asking stupid questions, she got on with packing and getting ready. At one point I heard her leaving a message on her office phone telling them that some serious unexpected family problem had arisen and that she'd be away for a few days, possibly out of the country. That's one of the important characteristics we had in common –when something had to be done, no matter how painful, we got on with it. She was like the Terminator, covered in flesh which hid a frame of solid adamantium.

Her account of how we met is pretty spot on but, understandably, I have a slightly different take on the matter. So, while Rachel's getting ready, I'll tell you about it.

The group I was with were all younger college lecturers and we'd just finished our first week of full lectures and we were in the mood for some serious recreation (drugs not excluded and don't be so prissy. Ray-Ray had hardly been a stranger to gak –the then-current slang for cocaine- in her time) and we'd visited three or four establishments before this. I was busy being Debra-holding-court when I glanced around and saw this stunning mixed-race woman staring at me, a younger slimmer Halle Berry was my first impression. I didn't know why she was staring at me, maybe my exuberant behaviour, but didn't care either. I brazenly winked at her and she just held my gaze for a moment to establish something before turning unhurriedly away. Nice, I thought, but probably a super-cool bitch lawyer. I certainly got that one right.

When that asshole in the pub did what he did I could have kissed him but flattening him was the best option. So we talked and liked each other and saw each other again and after two weeks I was horny and frustrated as hell and realised I'd done the most stupid thing in the world and fallen in love with a straight woman. One evening I went to a lesbian bar and picked up a very feminine woman. Not hard, I'm pretty but I can do butch, not that the two are exclusive. With me, I leave off the makeup, tie my hair back tight, wear a loose man's shirt (blue check works well) and dungarees, deepen my voice a little, and stare intently. That's usually enough with femme lesbians unless they're into the totally mannish type, or other femmes of course. This one had left her wedding ring at home. After a brief grope and groan in the loo followed by a line each off the toilet seat, we went back to my flat for a couple of hours uncomplicated sweaty sex and every time I closed my eyes I imagined she was Rachel.

And it got worse. The more I saw her the more I wanted to see her. And the more I wanted her. The ten day break didn't help, despite me pulling three times. If anything that just made it worse yet. I wasn't with these women even out of genuine lust, they were just substitutes. Nothing helped. All I could do was think about her. In short sentences.

When we went back to her flat I kissed her quickly on the lips, not a pass but to show her I'd missed her. Then I saw a look on her face and misunderstood it. I started to apologise and then she was shouting at me and sticking her tongue down my throat. Never look a gift horse in the mouth is my motto especially when the horse is ravishing and you're in love with it –her.

For someone who'd never had sex with a woman before, Rachel took to it immediately –her lips and tongue and fingers had explored every one of my orifices within half an hour leaving me like a quivering erotic jelly. (She's always denied it, but I reckon she watched some lesbian porn before building up the courage to kiss me.) The next night I brought along a strap-on, knowing without asking that she'd like me screwing her with it. She loved it but it turned out that she also loved fucking me with it too. Rachel might be delicate-looking (more illusion than reality) and feminine but she isn't a passive partner in bed by any means and for that I am eternally grateful.

I tease her a lot about her being gay but the truth is that she's being honest when she says she's straight; a straight woman in love with a gay woman. It happens. You just meet that special someone and everything clicks into place and the sex of that person doesn't matter to you. I could have fallen in love with a man, though I find it difficult to believe, but it could have happened, and I have had

heterosexual sex –I lay back and thought of England; another story. I showed her some of my lesbian erotica DVDs but they didn't interest Rachel at all (she said, though we still ended up making out after watching them) and she didn't want to visit any gay bars. Mind you, I didn't do it that much. John Waters the movie director once said that being gay was about fourth or fifth down the list of how he defined himself. With me it's about third.

(Unless I'm in love or just horny and then it is first.)

So, love and happiness, more or less.

Rachel is, yet again, being somewhat disingenuous about our differences. Me being a packrat is true and it really hurt having to decide what I had to leave behind in Jake's lockup. Mind you, I'm not compulsive about it. I don't keep everything. If I find I don't like a CD I've bought I'll either give it to someone who I think will like it or donate it to a charity shop, Oxfam or any local animal rescues are my favourites.

I also buy a lot of stuff from charity shops. I do this for several reasons. I'm a great believer in recycling and was even before it became fashionable, never mind essential. Charity shops are worth supporting simply because they exist. They are run by people who want to help what they believe is a good cause. You choose which you want to support. They are also a valuable social service by providing decent goods –books, clothing, music, whatever- at cheap prices to people who don't have much money. Plus I liked to rummage to find the silk purse among the sows ears.

And I'm lecturing. Well hell, that's what I do for a living. The point is that Rachel had never really thought about any of this. She was all designer labels –notice her label-dropping in the first chapter? She didn't realise you could be stylish without it.

To put it bluntly, Rachel was as superficial as shit. She didn't have any thought out moral code or principles or ethical values. She lived in a superficial world, taking the easy road by going along with the values of the people among whom she worked and socialised. Shallow as a paddling pool.

Maybe not quite, though she did like to give that impression. She had a healthy cynicism about her own lifestyle and was able to stand back from it. She just hadn't found anything else to, not replace, but supplement it.

Until me.

I challenged her on every level, but particularly the intellectual. I forced her to analyse her belief system, to examine her supposed values, to apply her own intellect to herself. And we had some terrifically enjoyable arguments, rather like intellectual fencing matches. She gave as good as she got, while honestly reassessing herself.

My mother called in while on a brief trip down from Newcastle. She got on with Rachel almost as much as I did, particularly approving of her because she was such a strong personality and wouldn't be dominated by me. Mum couldn't understand what I'd done to deserve her. Rachel told her that if I had a penis I'd be perfect, which was a fairly typical Rachel remark.

I settled for asking Mum how her current cradle snatching relationship was progressing. Mum just purred, oh twenty-nine is hardly cradle snatching, darling. It is in my book if you're fifty-five even looking forty which the old bag did. Still it's nice to know I have good genes.

And so on. Once I'd finished with the coven I'd planned to ask Rachel to marry me and make it as legal as English law would then allow. Well, that was all well and truly fucked up.

"How did you get involved with all this?" Rachel asked, from the bedroom door. She wore a leather jacket, jeans, trainers, socks, and clutched the straps of a half-full red backpack in her left hand. Good enough. Wasn't sure about the Chanel perfume but I put that down to habit.

I said, "Second year at university and one evening a werewolf tried to rape my girlfriend. I garrotted it with a silver crucifix chain."

"Rape? Not kill and eat?"

Oh boy.

I told her on the move while I got ready. "Most werewolves are just interested in raping their victim. It's only the real scum of the pack that mutilate, indulge in a bit of cannibalism, or actually kill."

"What about female werewolves?"

I pulled on trainers. "There aren't any. They're all male. They don't turn into a wolf either. They

do get a bit hairy, their teeth are usually already sharp, and their nails lengthen. They're also solos, not pack hunters. Surviving a bite doesn't turn you into one and anything can kill them. It was just a coincidence I was wearing a silver chain. But they are *other-human* and obviously so."

"You're saying you killed a rapist, Debra. You actually killed someone." She seemed to have forgotten that I'd already confessed to killing a woman tonight. I could still hear her neck snap.

"Not intentionally and you'll excuse me if I don't feel too guilty about it. If I hadn't been close when he attacked then Barb would have died. Turned out he'd raped and killed three other women, maybe more. In this world you're either predator or prey. You should know that, Rachel *Grumfeld*. In your civilised world of law you're a very mean predator, unfortunately there are more worlds than yours and you've just dropped out of yours and into my nightmare."

Give her credit, she took it all very well. There was a distinct possibility that I just might be having a psychotic breakdown. I wasn't, but Rachel couldn't possibly know that. She may even have assumed that to be the case and was playing along until such a time as she was in a position to help me.

Of course at that point she interrupted my thoughts, asking, "Are the police likely to be involved?"

"Only inadvertently and if we're either lucky or unlucky. The coven will want to sort this out themselves. If they still think I'm PDF, contacting the police would be the worst thing that they could do."

"Why can't you contact this PDF whatever it is?"

I spelled it out. "*Preternatural Defence Force*. Because they are a defence against supernatural infestations. They have weapons, not powers or spells. They consider any supernatural manifestation as something to be destroyed, including a Man of Power which is whom I need to find. And I will contact them and tell them about the dark coven but as for helping us, all they'd offer would be a cup of tea, a biscuit and some sympathy, maybe protective custody but that wouldn't keep me alive and they just wouldn't consider co-operating with a Man of Power. They'd kill him, or her, from long range on principle."

As a result of strangling the werewolf I'd actually been arrested by the police on suspicion of murder, the Crown Prosecution Service had been consulted and it looked like a manslaughter charge at the very least until the PDF stepped in, got all charges dropped and offered me a job when I finished college. In the meantime they'd give me special training and pay me for the time I spent doing it which sounded good to me.

So I got martial arts and weapons training, psychological defences embedded, and other neat stuff. I also got an education in the underbelly of the world we know. There are worlds other than ours, parallel worlds (though that's just a convenient term, *quantum multiverse* being another) and energy leaks from them, affecting individuals. Some it turns into a kind of magic user –the *preternaturals*. Others, well I didn't know about the *others* then so let's save that for another time. There are also soft places where it is physically possible to pass from one world to another, though these were rare and it took a specific mindset to be able to do it.

At the end of my course I turned them down, acting instead as freelance agent when and as convenient, or if I needed the tax-free cash. I kept a toehold in the Shadow world but preferred the real one. Perhaps I should have put quote marks around the 'real', just like that. Too late, I found out that what I knew of the world and the Shadows wasn't nearly enough.

### **3. The Road Less Travelled.**

Okay, so it isn't everyday that your girlfriend comes home and says a death curse is turning her into a zombie and that a coven of cannibal (whoops, getting ahead of things here) witches is on our trail. Also that parallel worlds and supernatural monsters exist.

I did have a problem with this. Although being Jewish and raised in an orthodox family I also happen to be an atheist. Being Jewish is part of what I am and it is an important part of my identity but it is the cultural and not the religious part. By intellectual process over a number of years, mostly but not exclusively during my adolescence, I came to the conclusion that God did not exist. If God did not exist then nothing supernatural existed and science ruled supreme. We lived in an ordered rational



universe that, if not necessarily predictable (I believed in free will), was one in which everything that happened had a rational explanation, probably involving quantum physics.

Until Debra effectively said: fuck that, you're wrong.

I felt the situation to be a curious one. In the lack of evidence to the contrary plus the (assumed) fact that Debra had never lied to me about anything serious (or not that I'd discovered in our time together and I am very astute at putting two and two together and arriving at the correct sum), I decided to appear to take matters at face value and follow Debra's lead. She said put on hard wearing clothes so I put on hard wearing clothes. She didn't mention money but I did collect all my spare cash, including the emergency wad I had stuffed in the mattress (no, that wasn't a joke, why should it be?) and three core credit cards. Left a message at work, but she's already mentioned that.

So, I got ready.

That done, now I had to face reality. Slight problem though, darling. What precisely *was* the reality of the situation? I had several to choose from.

The first being that Debra was telling the unadorned truth of the situation which, I confess, I did find highly unlikely. As I've already said, despite having been raised in an orthodox Jewish household, God and I had never been on close terms as I placed him on the same level as the fairies at the bottom of the garden. Except, if what Debra said was true, then they might be less of a fairy (excuse me) tale than I'd previously thought. Perhaps they'd been dancing there at midnight, sticking their tongues out at me while I lay asleep and unbelieving in my bed.

The second choice of what to believe in involved Debra simply telling lies. Of all the possibilities, this seemed the most unlikely because it meant she was setting me up for something which would be just so out of character as to not be the person I fell in love with. This simply could not be the case. Her personality was just too consistent. She didn't hide who she was from anyone and no-one had ever suggested that she had any form of hidden personality disorder.

I don't count insanity of course; I mean a malicious or malevolent side to her. Sure, she could indulge in a taste for *schadenfreude*, but who doesn't?

She did have a liking for fantasy and it is possible that she had a rich inner fantasy life that had finally consumed her. In which case she needed someone –me, of course– to look after her and prevent her from either harming herself or (if she hadn't done so already) someone else. Or me.

All possible explanations seemed equally unlikely. I had known Debra more intimately than anyone in my entire life and during our time together her behaviour, her personality were all consistent. Except the fact that, true or not, she had hidden something completely earth shattering from me, plus the not insignificant fact that she had once –perhaps twice– killed someone and that, if true, would be documented somewhere on the Internet had I but time to access it. Hmm, perhaps I did, my mobile phone being of the all singing all dancing kind including Internet access.

I wasn't really sure which possibility scared me the most. All I could do was play along until I could discover the truth, whatever that might be and might not necessarily involve any of the options I've just outlined above.

“Now what?” I asked.

“We're meeting Jake at the lockup,” she said. “He probably won't turn up for a while but I've a key and only a few people know about it so we'll be safe there.”

Ah yes, Jake. It would be easy to say that Debra had strange friends but the truth is that she didn't, always allowing that butch man-hating dykes aren't strange. *Chacun a son gout*. Jake, however, *was* strange, so strange as to be, I suspected, borderline psychopathic, a borderline that he probably crossed quite frequently.

He didn't like me which automatically made him suspect. How could anyone not like sweet, self-effacing demure little me? When in a room with me he'd sit as far away as possible, avoiding all eye contact but sneaking glances at me whenever he thought I wasn't looking. In my company he never said much, though he and Debra had a kind of verbal short-hand where one or two words could stand for an entire sentence and I suspect some of it to be rhyming slang at that.

Jake looked normal enough. Well he would if he dressed like a human being, went to a proper barber, shaved regularly, and maybe bathed more than twice a year. Okay, that last part was uncalled for.

He probably had a bath about once a week. So was the crack about clothes, almost. He bought anything that would fit him from the cheapest charity shops. Debra bought clothes from charity shops too, out of principle (several principles), but her sharp eye for, and eclectic good taste in, clothing made her look distinctly chic. It might have helped too if Jake walked like a human being. He sort of loped slowly, shoulders hunched, eyes flickering around him like someone expecting an assassination attempt. Which, I later learned, he was. With good reason.

He might have been decent-looking if he ever made an effort. I mean, six foot, a lean rangy muscular build, fair hair, good complexion, a hawk nose that seemed to suit him. Pity about the tiny chin which spoiled the effect. But the basics were pretty much there except he just didn't seem to care. He lived in a world that wasn't the same as the one rest of us lived in. Debra, however, seemed happy to visit it so, after a while, I just left them alone. Sometimes they went out for a drink, sometimes they stayed in, in which case I made myself scarce, either going out with friends or holing up in the bedroom with a DVD, bottle of wine and a packet of cashew nuts.

Jake was also fascinated by weapons –guns, knives, you name it. Eee-ew! Psycho plus! Male fascination with weapons. Sick! Sick! Sick! Much as I like men, some of them are just sick fucks, particularly Americans but don't let me get started on their obsession with their penis-substitutes.

“And bring the rats,” Debra added. “Jake will look after them. He likes rats.”

“He does?”

“Yes. And he likes you for liking them.”

That was news.

I picked up the rats and we climbed into the taxi Debra had ordered while I'd been packing. It dropped us off at Victoria Station. We then walked a half mile, got another taxi which dropped us off about a ten minute walk from Jake's lockup.

I said, “You know you've been keeping secrets from me.”

“Not enough and too many,” she answered, making no sense at all to me, and sighed, pausing to wipe sweat from her brow.

“You okay?”

She said, “Been better. I've got stuff at the lockup which will help.”

A train rattled along above our heads, high up and not far away. Nearly there. We were in a part of London that, at night, looked as it would intimidate even an S.A.S. squad.

Ha! There I go again, showing my ignorance. It looked scary to me, the middle class Jewish girl whose most frightening experience had been to fall off a rock face three hundred feet up. Of course I was belayed and didn't fall more than twenty feet but I damn near shit myself.

I ...

No, it's too soon, there's a story to tell and this part is Debra's, not mine. Perhaps she should be telling it, not me.

What we have here is the portrait of someone trying to put off being honest about themselves. I fell in love with Rachel because she was cute, sexy, intelligent, funny, warm, and a bit of an arrogant cynical bitch in that supercilious way only someone so totally unthinkingly at ease with themselves can be. Rachel had sailed through life with the grace of ballet dancer, gliding through the world without ever letting it affect her. She had the confidence that only brains, looks, money, a loving home, and contacts can bring. Other women envied her. Men ... well, we know what they wanted to do to her. The same thing I did, the difference being that I got to do it with her.

I'm calling her Rachel but at this point in the narrative she was really Ray-Ray, emotionally still barely a couple of years out of university. I loved her deeply but she hadn't earned the right to be called Rachel. Though she will, as you'll see. Just as I once and nearly half my life ago earned the right to call myself Debra, not Deborah the real elongated version of my name. And if that seems a small thing to you, you don't know me. That act, that simple act of renaming, held so much significance for me, but that is another story and not the one being told here.

I put a key in the door and pushed it open. No lights were on but that didn't mean Jake hadn't arrived. He always played it cautious. Just because he'd told me he'd get there after I did didn't mean he would. I slipped inside into the darkness, motioning Rachel to stay where she was. Pausing just inside

the door, I listened, hearing nothing but the echoes of silence. I reached out with my right hand and flicked the light switch, half expecting to see Jake standing in front of me, wearing his crooked smirk that passed for a smile. But there was no-one, just the clutter of boxes and shelves and tables and locked metal units and shadows cast by stone pillars supporting the arched roof like elephant's legs.

As I turned to speak to Rachel my bones liquefied and I slumped against a cold pillar. She came to me, holding me up.

"I'm okay," I said, overstating matters somewhat. "Just a reaction. I'm feeling better now. See?" I held my hand up in front of my face. It shook. "Crap, I hate being weak."

Still holding me, warming me with her body, Rachel pushed her face against mine. "I know," she whispered. "When you had flu you were a lousy patient."

"I. Can't. Afford. To be weak. Not. Now."

"The Laertes Sigil," said a voice. "It's like the sea, the tides, the waves."

Jake moved Rachel gently to one side as if she was a small child, pulled up my left sleeve, slid a needle into a vein and depressed the plunger.

I gasped as the surge of adrenaline hit me. "Oh yes," I said, "that is good."

The fog around my brain cleared as if the room had flooded with sunlight. I inhaled sharply, clenched my fists, flexed my muscles. Better, much better.

"Thought you'd have the kettle on by now, girl," Jake said, looking at Rachel.

"Tell me where it is and I'll do it," she answered, showing great restraint.

Jake gestured at the back wall beside some bookshelves and Rachel headed in that direction.

"She knows?" he said.

"Some of it," I replied.

"Believe you?"

"Don't know but she's sticking by me."

"Good. Brought the rats I see. Well, if I get hungry..."

I laughed. Rachel kept quiet. She'd found the sink and was filling the jug kettle.

Jake sat on an inverted barrel. "Dark coven, then. Only know of one other in this country. All dead now. PDF?"

"Not yet. They'll probably have second identities."

"So, Man of Power?"

Our short-hand.

"Little magic," I answered.

"Yeah?" Prove it.

I got a copy of a large road atlas and opened it on a table. It showed the whole of England. Then I picked up a small narrow piece of wood several inches long from the ground, probably ripped from a packing crate.

I said, "Rachel, love, come here a minute."

"Hold this," I said and gave it to her. Then, without looking, I grabbed her hand and slammed it down on the atlas. Rachel yelled and jerked her hand away, a splinter stuck in the base of her thumb, some blood. Good, that would help.

"There," I said. "Why am I not surprised? Newcastle upon fucking Tyne."

After pulling out the splinter with her teeth and holding a tissue against the small wound, Rachel looked at the atlas and said, "Actually, it crosses through Sunderland as well."

I tried not to be patronising but said, "Nothing interesting ever happens in Sunderland. It's Newcastle and- "I peered closer, "—it looks like the Jesmond area."

"So?" Jake said.

"Newcastle it is," I answered.

We were sitting in a semi circle, if three people can actually form a semi-circle rather than a triangle; Rachel cupping a mug of coffee and staring at her feet, Jake and I looking expressionlessly at each other.

"Wasn't what I meant," Jake said. He was smoking a rollup which he stabbed in my direction. "You fucked up, Affleck. You just couldn't give up dancing on the edge of the darkness. You flirt with

it and then you back off, disappear into your regular world with all the other normals like you was one of them which you aint. Still, that's fine, it's your life, your choice. But you shouldn't have involved Rachel."

Rachel looked up at the mention of her name.

"Got nothing against you, Rache," Jake continued. "Don't dislike you, don't like you either 'cept you make my girl here happy and that's good. You just aint a part of my world. And you should never have been.

"Debs, you been unfair to her. Should've either told her from the off and given her the choice, or you should've quit it completely. Now she's marked through no fault of her own. She didn't ask for it and she doesn't want it. Whatever she's doing –and she probably thinks we're both crazy- she's doing it for love."

I'd never heard Jake speak so openly in front of an outsider before. I never thought he could empathise with anyone who didn't share his world. There's always something new to learn in life. Including the fact that you, yourself, can be a total cunt, just as Jake had so accurately pointed out.

I hadn't been able to give up my flirting with the darkness. It provided an excitement, a hidden depth to my life and it had never occurred to me that it might end up putting Rachel's life at risk.

She wasn't part of it. She didn't need to know. It had nothing to do with her. Just a damn hobby I didn't share with her. Me, playing hip cool Debra Affleck, dancer on the edge of darkness. Debra Affleck, total fuckup. Nothing, after all, had changed in ten years. Bloody fucking nothing.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to... I don't know to whom, it might have been Jake or Rachel, or both. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." There, I'd said it three times. It must be true. Am I forgiven?

"Doesn't matter," Jake said. "Done is done. Only survival matters. Let's work on it."

"There's nothing to work on," Debra said. "Rachel and I leave here. We hit the Road Less Travelled, get to Newcastle in time for breakfast, find the Man of Power, I get cured, then we come home and sort out the crap with the coven."

"For a woman, you're very direct," Jake said as he crushed out the remains of his rollup.

"That's a compliment," Debra explained to me.

"Do you think it's easy to find a Man of Power?" Jake asked.

"I already have. That line will go straight through his house, near as dammit. It has to or I'm effectively dead. So, no choice."

I coughed softly just to get their attention. "Why me?" I said. "Why not Jake?"

"Because I get noticed," he answered. "I prefer the shadows. Besides, you'll see things I won't."

"How? I know nothing about all this." Which was true. And I still hadn't seen any evidence to the contrary. Debra and Jake could be involved in a shared psychosis.

"You aren't used to the strangeness. I see Shadows where ever I go. I expect it. Besides, I consulted the I Ching before I came. If I go, Debra dies." He stood up, stared at the floor for a moment then added, "Course it didn't say you'll succeed but it was pretty clear it'd be a disaster if I went."

Which didn't leave much room argument so fifteen minutes later I was clambering up behind Debra on her Yamaha nine fifty which she kept stored here since she moved in with me. Leathers and helmet and a pain in my arse.

"We'll hit a MacDonalds in Newcastle some time around six."

"I thought you said this was quicker. That's fourteen hours away."

"Not the way we'll be going, it's two hours tops."

And that settled that. Fantasy land. We were south of the river and it would take nearly an hour just to get out of Greater London, even starting at four in the morning.

Jake waved us off and we hit the highway. Okay, lots of backstreets, then a main road, heading north to Newcastle upon Tyne, until Debra took a left for Hyde Park.

As we went through the gateway, Debra began accelerating hard.

"Close your eyes. Now!" she shouted.

I closed them but said, "I'd rather see what's going to kill me!"

We must have been doing close to a ton by then when the sun suddenly came up.

I opened my eyes. We were on a dirt track, the sun was just above the horizon on our right which meant we were heading north. On either side were fields of wheat ready for harvesting.

We must have done twenty miles like that, the scenery unchanging for the entire fifteen minutes it took. Then it changed again. The sky abruptly darkened, the road transformed into two lanes with a fluorescent light green painted line down the middle. Rain hit hard and horizontally across my visor but Debra didn't slow down. I clung onto her waist. Visibility was about a hundred and fifty metres. On either side of the road was a high and possibly electrified fence. As I stared at it I caught a glimpse in the rain-dark dimness of what looked like a hairy elephant.

Time out, as an American cousin of mine always says when we we're having an argument and he's losing, which is every time we meet.

As you realise, I am not a stupid person. I have, in my time, also taken hallucinogenic drugs, and I know when I am hallucinating. This was real. I was riding a bike and travelling across, presumably, it being a little early to tell, a string of parallel worlds and I had just dimly seen a mammoth, or some such.

So, my child, Debra had not been lying to me, apart from by default by not telling me anything about it in the first place, but the Shadows of the world did exist and I was among them, clinging desperately to my blonde Valkyrie on a bike heading towards God knows what.

Scenery changed. The road got motorway style better, it got no road at all worse and all roads in between. We rode through forests and through fields, through small towns and villages, through the quaint and the modern, through wind and rain, and sun and more sun, and abruptly across a high bridge into a large modern city.

"Where's this?" I asked.

"The Tyne Bridge" Debra said. "Newcastle, you dummy! Christ, I've shown you plenty of photos."

"Oh."

How should I know? I'd never been further north than Birmingham in my life, if you don't count a holiday in Iceland. For all I knew it could be just another phantasm and would disappear in seconds.

Sorry, I'm joking. I did know where we were, I just wasn't sure it was *where* we were supposed to be. The newly risen sun gleamed on the river which headed seawards under the high rising curved arc of a footbridge which came to rest on the south side of the river by a massive slab of a structure which had, I knew, once been the Baltic Flour Mill and had latterly become the Baltic Arts Centre and close by that the modern Sage Music Centre, two places Debra had never stopped boasting about despite the fact that she hardly ever visited Newcastle and that they were on the south side of the river in Gateshead. As I realised another time, Newcastle gets the credit for anything that happens north of Middlesbrough and south of Berwick.

I didn't see much of Newcastle from that point on as we shot down the motorway underpass and in less than two minutes were on the far side of city centre and heading north to Newcastle's suburbs a couple of miles away.

The traffic was starting to build up despite the fact that it was barely just after six thirty. Debra pulled in in front of the MacDonald's on the main street. We went inside, I ate a Big Mac with fries, not my ideal breakfast, and Debra had two, then we went a couple of doors down to a Starbucks –like the coffee was better, duh. What happened next stunned me more than anything that had so far happened.

A man came though the door just as we arrived. Debra looked at him for a moment, then she grabbed hold of the back of his head with both hands and kissed him on the mouth.

"Betcha that doesn't happen to you very often," she said to him.

"Getting kissed by a leather biker dyke?" he answered. "Debra, you'd be surprised at what happens to me these days."

"Joe Cool, wow! You have changed, Col."

"You don't know the half of it, Debs."

"Hmm, I think maybe I would. Or not."

Her eyes were focussed on his face as if it was the only thing in the world. I knew who he had to be. This was Colin, her one and only boyfriend to whom she gave her virginity (if you don't count the first woman she'd had sex with, so we're talking about penetrative heterosexual sex here).

I'm very good at forming instant opinions about people, not necessarily accurate ones I have to say. However, he struck me as very confident but laid back. Also, when I saw him move properly, a little later, he seemed to me to be someone who hadn't quite got used to his new body. While of medium build, there wasn't much fat on him and, as I later learned, the muscles were relatively new.

Unusually new.

## 4. Friends Reunited.

Here we are, it's a bright early late-summer's Thursday morning in the Newcastle upon Tyne suburb of Jesmond and the three of us are standing outside Starbucks. You know what we look like, us leather dyker bikes or whatever, but what did this one-time male lover of Debra's look like?

Perfectly ordinary to be honest. You'd probably give him a second look, think: hmm, possible, maybe. Then pause for a moment and go, naaah. Or perhaps I just have high standards as it is true that all my boyfriends have been very good looking. I simply could never imagine going out with anyone who wasn't. As other men would be jealous of him, I wanted girls to be jealous of me. Yes, that is vain and shallow but that's the way I was. Debra, as long as she keeps her legs covered (thick calves), is drop dead gorgeous, but I suppose I'm biased.

Colin, a bland but masculine unshaved face, just average stubble without any of your *I can grow a beard in three hours* look which I always hated, unfashionably long brown hair that covered his ears in a back to the sixties cool only in teenagers in a post-modern look; medium non-fat build, a touch under six feet tall. More: a garish futuristic Grateful Dead t-shirt which was either totally cool in an ironic post-modern way, or Christ aging god damn hippy shit; navy jeans and no particular distinguishing features apart from a nearly-healed four inch long cut on his right forearm which looked like, but couldn't have been, a claw mark. Unless he had an exceptionally large and vicious cat. So: he was either *uber-cool* or a fashion disaster and I really couldn't decide which, though, this being Newcastle, I patronisingly tended to lean towards the latter.

Debra said, "This is my partner, Rachel."

Colin turned his head and smiled at me. For a moment his pupils dilated, I caught just a faint swift sharp intake of breath, the smile briefly widened, his upper body inclined itself towards me. All this happened in about two seconds before he caught himself and stopped before it became overt. He found me extremely attractive. Good, I liked that. But he was too polite to let it become overly obvious. I liked that too. Good manners. All things considered he impressed me more than he unimpressed me, but it could still go either way.

"Hi," he said pleasantly and turned back to Debra. "Your mum told me she thought you'd found the love of your life."

Debra's eyes widened. "She did not!"

"Not in so many words but I can read between the lines."

"You didn't used to."

"We all grow up, love. Listen, I do want to talk to you but I've got to get these coffees to my girlfriend before they get cold. You two look as if you could do with a shower at the least." He fished in a pocket and pulled out a set of keys which he handed to Debra and pointed to a street not far off. "Number six," he said. "Maggie lives a couple of doors up. Give me half an hour. Just one thing, for God's sake don't let me find you having sex. It's way too early in the morning for shocks like that."

I chipped in, "But later in the morning, that's okay is it?"

Colin said, "Yeah, that would be great, thanks." And off he went.

These days everybody thinks they're a comedian.

And I just hate people who get in the last word. Other than that I decided I liked him.

So we got on the bike, went round the corner, and parked near his house which already had a nice new Audi in front of it. The area seemed quite affluent. All the houses were late forties semis in very good condition with a minimum of overt use of UPVC and consistently neat and tasteful and totally unimaginative front gardens, so boringly suburbia.

Debra unlocked the door, which was UPVC and mostly glass with an overly large green glass '6' in the centre, and we went inside. A young short-haired tortoiseshell cat miaowed at us from the foot of the stairs and allowed Debra to stroke her. A grey cat of similar age fled upstairs like a cat out of hell. We took off our boots and hung our jackets up in the hall and Debra went into the kitchen and started making some coffee. The kitchen was neat, compact, all modern, shining surfaces, and tidy. Everything was new and looked moderately expensive. I found some cat food and filled two bowls. The grey cat appeared, eyed us warily, then went to eat, pushing his sister or whatever out of the way. The

other cat simply went to eat from the second bowl.

I took the mug Debra proffered me and inhaled the sharp spicy aroma. “Turkish!” I exclaimed. “How lovely.”

Debra said, “He gets it from Grainger Street Market. There’s a specialist tea and coffee stall which has been there for decades. Nice house. Let’s explore.”

“Isn’t that a bit rude?”

“Colin would be surprised if we didn’t. He as good as invited us to look around when he gave us the key.”

“Considering you haven’t seen him in ten years, he’s very trusting.”

“He’s a good guy. I hated myself for what I did to him.”

The living room was minimalist and designed purely as a room to watch TV on a huge plasma screen and listen to music from a top of the range system. Ultra modern stylishly tall and slim speakers stood at various strategic places. The walls were slate grey, a simple tasteful gas fire was set off the floor into the bare-brick chimney breast. A two seater settee, one chair, coffee table with one book (a coffee-table size environmental tome) on it. Nice.

The back room, with a conservatory built on like a carbuncle, looked out onto a trim well-kept garden that had a spiral motif blending blue gravel and grass with a vaguely Japanese fountain in the centre. The room itself, however, was where Colin indulged his real obsession –music, playing and listening. Two walls were covered with shelves, from floor to (lowered) ceiling and contained nothing but CDs and vinyl albums, mostly, so far as I could discern, Blues, albeit with a scattering of rock (including a plentiful supply of Grateful Dead albums), folk, and a handful of African –Fela Kuti, Youssou N’dour, Amadou and Mariam, Femi Kuti, Colin Allen- where our tastes finally collided –I love dancing to Afrobeat. No classical, jazz, or pop (with the honourable exception of Blondie and, in a gesture to the sixties, The Who), and no electro or rap (hardly unexpected). The other wall bore two framed posters, one of a middle aged black guy whom I later learned was Albert King, the other of The Grateful Pushing Up Daisies. Look, I’ve since listened to some of their stuff and the word boring springs rapidly to mind, though Debra doesn’t agree. Whatever, Colin quite clearly liked raw earthy music and the electric guitar.

But that was only the background. This was a room where he played music and contained the paraphernalia of a musician –several electric and acoustic guitars, a set of harmonicas, amplifiers, collections of music scores, and similar such stuff.

“I wonder where he keeps his porn,” Debra mused completely breaking my train of thought with a totally irrelevant remark, an annoying habit of hers.

“What?”

“Come on, he’s a single guy living on his own. Unless he’s become a fundamentalist Christian, he’ll have some porn somewhere.” Debra could go off on quite bizarre irrelevant tangents when it suited her. Thinking about where somebody kept their stash of porn was not one of the things that springs to my mind on entering someone’s house for the first time. Or any time.

I said, “I’d rather have a shower than look for it. It’s probably on his hard disk anyway.” Now she had me going.

We went upstairs and, passing an open door, saw his book collection.

“Aha!” Debra said, “the game’s afoot, Watson. Nothing is so revealing about a person than their personal library.” So spoke someone who actually possessed a personal library (though most of it had been consigned to the lockup). Me, I’m not a big book reader except for work research –case law, that kind of stuff. I read magazines for relaxation rather than novels. Debra, possessing a surprisingly bookish streak, disapproves

“If they have one,” I said and pointed out, “Not everyone these days buys or even reads books. There are too many alternatives which is why libraries are diversifying.” That came from my mother who is a staunch advocate of public libraries.

What? Something had to rub off on me. No biggie.

Debra ignored me. “Science fiction, crime, Stephen King, boring boring predictable. Zadie Smith, Ali Smith, Sarah Waters. I’m a new man. The occult, witchcraft, mythology, The Golden Bough. Getting interesting. Cookery, cats, no it isn’t. Horror movies, been there eaten the entrails. Graphic



novels -doesn't everyone have Maus and V for Vendetta these days?"

"Enough with the running commentary already," I said, ignoring the uncomfortable and considerable overlap between his book collection and Debra's. "Shower! Now!"

We showered, washed our hair, kissed a bit, more for reassurance than anything else and didn't have sex which neither of us felt like anyway, brushed our teeth, got dried, then feeling somewhat more together went back downstairs just as Colin came in.

"So, Debs," he said. "Have you analysed the psychodynamics of the house and used it to construct a feminist theory of my personality?"

Debra prodded him in the chest and said bluntly, "You've either inherited a hell of a lot of money or you've won the lottery."

So much for personality analysis, straight to the point. God, but I loved her to bits.

"Nine months ago, just two days after my childless ex-wife remarried forfeiting any claim on my estate, six point three five eight million pounds plus change, and my immediate resignation from the Civil Service."

"You're living very modestly in that case," I observed. Even paying cash for the house and everything in it would have left him with change from four hundred grand. In Newcastle, that is, back in London it would be more likely at least triple that for the house in a very modestly tolerable area.

"I have everything for my needs, but that really wasn't what you were asking."

"You've become you," Debra said, went over and hugged him. "I'm so glad."

"And you've become you too," he said looking down into her eyes, "and I'm glad."

She said, "What I did to you was one of the worst things I've ever done in my life and I've never been able to tell you until now."

"You've never seen me until now," he said. "Ten years. I've been married, divorced, and met someone else really special in that time. Never mind all the other stuff. We've both done all right, Debra. We've become good people, maybe not perfect, but good."

"How do you know?" she sniffed.

"Your mum, remember? We regularly e-mail each other for a chat and meet for coffee a couple of times a year. She's always loved you've but never through rose-tinted spectacles. If she says you're a good person –and for a long time she wasn't sure- that's good enough for me."

I said, "I fink I'll fwow up if this mutual adoration society doesn't bweak up pwetty soon."

"Shut up, Ray-Ray!" Debra snapped. "We're having a moment here, a long-overdue one."

"Christ spare me from sentimental dykes," I muttered. "Wake me up when you've disentangled yourselves." I wasn't being completely sarcastic as, apart from a nap before Debra returned from visiting the coven, I'd been awake for over twenty-six hours. I closed my eyes, curled up on the couch and within minutes did fall asleep.

I woke up three hours later with the grey cat breathing in my ear. As soon as it realised I was awake and threatening to touch it, it was off and away.

The soft thump (it was built like a small barrel) of it landing on the carpet was enough to wake Debra who'd been asleep in the armchair. She yawned and stretched and said, "Coffee?"

"If you're making it. Where's your new boyfriend?"

"Gone shopping with his girlfriend –whom I haven't met yet. He's invited us to stay while we're up here."

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'll probably need another fix of adrenalin in a couple of hours. Colin said to make ourselves some lunch if he hadn't come back. Just as well as I have to eat anyway. It's there, you know." Debra touched her forehead. "I can feel it inside me, eating away at myself. For a moment, when I woke just now, I couldn't remember who you were."

I sang, "Call me, Ms Forgettable..." All right, so I have to make a fucking joke out of everything. Doesn't mean I wasn't worried sick. "How do we find the Man of Power?"

"He's not far away," Debra said. "Can't be. But there's just something off."

"Are you psychic or something?" I asked. I'd got to the point where I'd believe anything now.

Only hours ago I'd been riding a bike through several different realities. Or someone had slipped me some damn convincing psychotropic drugs.

"No, but when you start being aware of the Shadows you become kind of sensitised. Something's not right here."

"Here?"

"This house, this street, I don't sodding know, Rachel. I'm feeling like my brain's wrapped in cotton wool. I've got three days at best before I become effectively non-functional, another three days after that and I'm totally gone, not that I'll care by then."

"I will," I said. "I love you."

"Please don't," Debra pleaded and took hold of my hands. "I need you sharp, not sloppy. We've got time to get our bearings. It's not deleting anything from my brain, it's like a thief. If it can be caught in time and destroyed, it'll release everything it's taken. If we can find the Man of Power by tomorrow evening, I'll be okay."

If.

I said, "What is a Man of Power?"

"A person with very strong magical gifts. Male or female, it doesn't matter. Person of Power just sounds stupid. They can see spells and counteract them. Don't ask me how. Despite that little trick with the map, I'm not really a magic user and I don't understand how it works. I just know it does and know just enough to enter the Shadows and come out alive." Debra coughed out a sour laugh. "Until now."

"Are they benevolent?" I asked.

"Don't know, never met one. Neutral, I've heard. Doesn't matter, I've no choice. You do. We find where he is; you keep away till I come back. If I come back."

I said, "I'm not leaving you, Debra." I felt like crying. I didn't want to lose her. I'd never loved anyone like I loved her. I'd never loved anyone *until* her.

There, that's the truth. I'd never put anyone first before her. I'd do anything for her. "I'd die for you," I said aloud and knew I meant that. I loved her and she was a much better person than me, the vain superficial spoilt daddy's girl. "I'd die for you."

Cue holding each other and crying and whispering loving words to each other, kissing tear-stained lips, clinging tightly, and all the rest of that romantic shit, and all of it meant so profoundly.

But then I'd never faced the fire.

But I would, and though I didn't realise it, it would be soon.

But first, a little fun and games and a very long story.

Maggie Hasselbank, Colin's girlfriend, turned out to be a five foot two busty plump dark haired bundle of sharp witted fun. She came bouncing in, introducing herself, kissing us both on the cheeks – a stretch when it came to Debra who happened to be standing up.

"You're both too pretty to be lesbians," she said and burst out laughing. Well spoken, I thought, but couldn't place her accent which, with hindsight, was hardly surprising.

She said, "Sorry, I'm afraid I'm not too politically correct, but, let's face it, the women you find in lesbian porn are just for male wank fantasies. Come to that I suppose all women in porn are. Did you spot where he keeps his naughty DVDs? They're next door beside the Blues DVDs. I'm not sure if he thinks that's clever or just the place that no woman would think to look." She laughed again and then said to me, "Look, I know about Debra but nothing about you. If you're going to be staying with my boyfriend, I rather think I should."

Which was only fair, so I obliged but kept it short and light.

"I thought you didn't look like a lesbian," she said.

I'd begun to wonder if Maggie was ever serious.

"Actually," she said, "we've got something in common – the law. I have a degree in Law from Newcastle University and I'm in chambers here. I'm going to be a barrister. And yes, I was a late developer. I didn't go to university until I was twenty-two, five years gone."

"I thought they paid peanuts for trainees," I said.

"They do. I have a small but perfectly formed inheritance to keep me in the manner to which I'm accustomed." So she wasn't after his money then, I assumed.

She continued, "I met Colin when I moved into the street. You know, the polite good mornings between strangers who vaguely recognise each other, followed several encounters later by 'nice weather isn't it?' After three weeks of this he finally, terribly apologetically, hoped I wouldn't be offended by him asking, asked me out. Only two weeks and six days after I'd have said yes. Men! And that was three months ago and he's the loveliest man I've ever met."

The loveliest man she'd ever met stood, partly leaning against a wall, trying to decide if he should look embarrassed or smug.

He said, "I'm playing at a pub tonight, with the band I'm in. Maggie isn't really into the Blues so I wondered if you two would like to come."

Debra quickly agreed for the both of us. I had no opinion either way and didn't object to not being consulted which I might have done under other circumstances.

"I'm more of a folkie," Maggie said. "Sometimes I talk him into playing guitar when I sing. We work well together but he can't work up enough enthusiasm for us to play the folk clubs."

Knowing how to ingratiate herself, Debra said, "Why don't you sing for us?"

"Colin," Maggie said, in a light questioning if you wouldn't mind, darling, really, tone but which both Debra and I understood to be the voice of she who must be obeyed if you want sex tonight.

Sounding distinctly underwhelmed, Colin muttered, "Yeah, yeah, okay," left the room and came back with an acoustic guitar which he proceeded to spend several minutes tuning before he finally said, more brightly, "Okay. What?"

"Tam Lin," Maggie answered and Colin said, "Yes, it would be."

Rather than some gentle folkie tinkling, Colin finger-picked out a sharp beat punctuated by the percussive thumping of the guitar's body with the base of his thumb.

Maggie opened her mouth and sang, attacking the song with a high pure yet earthy voice. Together they took the song of a human being's tragic encounter with the world of the fey –the elven kind- at a fast canter that left us breathless. They were really really good.

When the song ended, Maggie said without pause for breath, "The Sea." Colin immediately began picking out a quiet rhythm as Maggie breathed a gentle love song.

At the song's end, Colin said, "She wants to be Sandy Denny."

Before I could ask, "Who?" Debra said, "She died about thirty years ago, British, folk-rock singer-songwriter, had a voice that could make you weep buckets, made amazingly beautiful music and equally amazingly Maggie didn't do her an injustice. That was really lovely. Thank you. And when did you get so good, Colin?"

"Ten years of practise. I'm an overnight success." This time he couldn't help but look smug, he knew he'd played well despite being overshadowed by Maggie's voice. It wasn't the type of music I'd normally listen to but, just maybe, it was time I did.

Maggie was ahead of me. "Colin, put on one of the Sandy CDs I left here."

He did and after forty five minutes I'd been converted. The woman really had been amazing, and the musicians she'd played with weren't slouches either. One of them, Richard Thompson, had apparently become a cult figure. When I mentioned I liked Teddy Thompson, having heard a couple of tracks by him, I was informed that Richard was his father.

Isn't this a great narrative? Chills, thrills, lesbian sex, and a musical education. Okay, we'll get to the chills and thrills shortly, promise.

The four of us ended up talking about and listening to music for the next two hours. Afterwards Maggie popped back to her house, returning in a few minutes with a large home-made lasagne which she popped in the oven and made a salad while it was heating up. We ate it all with a bottle of good Chilean cabernet and continued conversation.

"Bizarre," I said to Debra as we got changed in spare room, with double bed. "I've had a really good time this afternoon."

"Me too," Debra agreed.

"They're a really lovely couple. I like them both a lot."

"Yes, so do I. If we come out of this alive, perhaps they can come and visit us."

On our way out I asked Maggie what she was going to do with herself while we were gone."

"Bottle of wine and a DVD," she answered, uncomfortably albeit inadvertently reminding me

of what I usually did when Debra saw Jake.

Colin's band all turned up in a large grey and quite new (no signs of rust) transit van. We crammed ourselves in the back with his guitar, amp and all the rest of the gear. The ride was uncomfortable but –hey!- us Blues chicks can take it. And it only took ten minutes before we were unloading it in the walled forecourt of a grimy looking pub in a less than salubrious area called Heaton. The sort of place where cats travel in packs and dogs are nervous.

They set up the gear in a reasonably sized back room that had tatty red leather couches around the walls in a semi-circle and a dozen or so battered tables, chairs and stools in front of them, and the stale acrid odour of a million dead cigarettes. The band played on a raised dais. It took them half an hour to set up as the room gradually began to fill. By eight o'clock when they were ready to start there must have been about thirty-five people in the audience including us. This, I was informed, wasn't a bad turn out and should increase by another twenty to thirty over the next hour or so.

Colin, at the tender age of thirty three, was actually the youngest in the band by a decade, the eldest having twenty years on him. They were a good-natured intelligent bunch comprising a doctor (the eldest, on drums), a librarian (keyboards), and an accountant on bass and co-vocals. They played, they said, because they loved it and it got them out of the house and also got them free drinks in lieu of actually being paid, though they might get a back-hander if the bar takings had been good.

At five past eight they suddenly stopped shuffling about the stage, the drummer launched an onslaught, then in came the bass as they set up a fast staccato rhythm. After about thirty seconds of this, Colin stepped forward to the microphone at the centre of the stage, closed on it and belted out some loud harmonica –harp, I should call it- before commencing with a raw ragged vocal and then back to a harp solo.

“That was Billy Boy Arnold's ‘Shake Your Hips’.” He drew in breath and placed the harp in his pocket and brought the guitar round from his back. “This is ‘Cold Feet’, a number by my favourite blues guitarist, the late, the great, Albert King.”

The sound changed completely. This time keyboard, bass and drums came in smooth as silk and then Colin delivered a guitar solo as sharp as a cutthroat razor.

I had, in my ignorance, assumed the Blues to be somewhat monolithic. Instead, Colin and his band played in several styles. They did two forty-five minute sets and finished at ten. While the others were happy to hang around for a while, talking Blues with several punters, Colin picked up his amp and guitar and handed his case of harps to Debra.

“We'll put them in the van and get a taxi home, The guys will drop them off later. Okay?”

Whatever. He had a hot little number back home so who could argue with that?

Out we went into the night. The forecourt was dimly lit with the van parked several feet from a high wall. As we put the gear away I heard a car engine start. We had the sliding door open and had our backs to the wall when the car slid into the gap effectively hemming us into a small quadrangle.

Two men got out and smiled at each other, both of them lean and angular, both swarthy and hairy, jeans and open check shirts and medallions. Jesus! If lack of style could kill, these two would be mouldering zombies.

But they weren't, anything but.

“A bonus,” said one. “Two girlies to play with when the deed is done.”

The other didn't speak but just grinned exposing long sharp teeth. His jaw began to protrude slightly and he held up a hand revealing long claws.

“Werewolves,” Debra said.

“She knows what we are,” said the second.

“And usually they just wet themselves and whimper,” said the first.

“And I've got claws of my own,” Debra said gruffly as she pulled out a long knife from inside her leather jacket.

Then Colin surprised us.

His voice sounded like ice as he said, “Tell me who sent you and I'll let you live.”

At the same time he moved to stand in front of Debra and myself. We glanced at each other, simultaneously mouthing, “What the fuck?”

“Bravado,” said the first were. “It won't make any difference.”

“Don’t say I never gave you the chance. Oh, sorry, you can’t.”

He dashed forward so quickly the movement barely had a chance to register on our retinas. His right hand shot out at the throat of the first were and dug in, fingers spearing through flesh and tissue until it was wrapped round the windpipe.

He crushed it as easily as an empty aluminium beer can. Then he ripped it out of the man’s throat.

The second were jumped him and took Debra’s knife across his face by way of a reward for his effort. Reeling, he staggered in my direction and my kickboxing training took over.

(What? Was I supposed to have told you about going to kickboxing classes for the previous three years? Oh, okay, well I suppose I should also mention that I almost made the women’s fencing team for the 2000 Olympics. There. Happy now?)

I pivoted on my left leg and powered a high kick at the guy’s jaw knocking him straight at Colin who didn’t waste a millisecond. He snapped the guy’s neck easier than popping a champagne cork.

At this point I decided going into shock was the most convenient thing to do so I just stood there and observed. I’d throw up later, quite copiously, all the beer and the lasagne and salad, back at Colin’s place.

Debra stood with hands on hips and glared at Colin. She said indignantly, “And when the fuck did you get super powers?”

“And when the fuck did you learn about the monsters?” he snapped back as he used several paper tissues to wipe blood from his right hand.

No-one asked me how I could accomplish such a perfectly executed kick.

“Never mind,” he said, “Let’s go back inside and call for a taxi.”

“And leave two dead bodies on the ground beside the van?”

“They probably won’t be here when I come out,” he answered then sighed. “But I suppose I should make some attempt to tidy up.”

With no apparent effort, he picked up one of the bodies with his right hand and slung it into the back of the car. The other he positioned in the driver’s seat. Then, putting the car in neutral, he pushed it almost as easily into a parking bay in the shadows of a tree.

I tried to say, and did manage it a little later but not then, “Debra, do you ever get the feeling we’re supporting characters in someone else’s story?”

We went inside. Colin phoned for a taxi on his mobile and it arrived in ten minutes. We went outside to find that the car was gone and the werewolf corpses with it.

Still in shock, I said nothing, though I might have ventured, “Neat,” had anyone asked my opinion.

We got back to Colin’s house. He ran into the kitchen and threw up. I went upstairs and did the same, copiously as I’ve already mentioned. When I got back down he was in the living room sitting on the floor, leaning against Maggie’s legs, sipping scotch and stroking the tortoiseshell cat with his spare hand.

Debra I found leaning against a wall, glass of red wine in her right hand, glaring at Colin, again.

No-one was speaking. Tension filled the air like a broom handle inserted up someone’s backside.

I picked up a bottle of wine and the clean wine glass from the low glass table and poured myself one. Having thrown up I was feeling much better. Better than the gruesome twosome who’d just discovered they had more in common than music and some shared past.

Maggie looked at me and said, “I’m phlegmatic about these things.”

“Wish I was,” I replied. “It’s still all too new to me.”

“Want to compare notes?” she asked.

“Could do,” I agreed without exactly committing myself.

Colin stood up and said, “Debra, come next door with me, please. I think we’ve a lot to say to each. I have a lot to say.” He looked over to me. “Debra can tell you whatever she wants later. I just need this to be between us.”

“Cool,” I said.

“Open a bottle of that Wolf Blass shiraz for us before you start, darling,” Maggie said.

“So,” I said some five minutes later when the room was empty but for Maggie and I. The lights were low, hushed folk music –June Tabor, Maggie informed me- played softly in the background. I relaxed on the sofa with a glass of cheapish but tasty wine, feeling all nicely mellowed out (as opposed to indulging in some hysterical screaming which might have been more appropriate given recent events) but with my brain in high gear clicking on connections I wasn’t even sure I realised but would still be willing to place a bet on.

“So?” Maggie said.

“So,” I said, “why do I feel you know more about this than Colin does?”

“Good question,” Maggie replied. “It deserves a good answer and you’ll get one. But first you should know Colin’s story.”

## 5. Of Man And Monsters.

“P.D.F?” Colin said.

He leaned against the kitchen bench and took a sip of coffee as he tried to order his thoughts. “What’s a text format got to do with all this? I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about, Debra. Look, never mind, you can tell me later.”

“It’s a security organisation, highly secret,” Debra told him. “Hope this house isn’t bugged. They’re good at spotting strange goings on. If it is, matey, you’re in deep shit.”

“Yeah, right,” he said as if he didn’t really believe her or just didn’t care. “Listen, the beginning of a story is always arbitrary. I could begin with the night I thought I’d come across a vagrant being mugged but that comes later.

“Life isn’t like a story, it’s full of dead ends and no-one really knows when anything begins, so let’s go back ten years, to the day after the last time I saw you.”

Debra waved a hand. “Feel free,” she said, thinking, this is going to be long, el triple oh en gee.

Colin said, “I felt okay, so I told myself. We’d come to an accommodation. I knew who you were and why you’d done what you did. What you had to do. You’d finally come to an accommodation with your mother as well. You’d begun to understand yourself and, Christ it took you long enough, her.

“Me, I was just a loose end that had stopped being part of your story. Unlike stories, however, in real life people go on. We’re all supporting characters in someone’s story. You’re a supporting character in mine.”

Debra noted, “Rachel said just that earlier.”

“Did she? How amusing. Well, she is funny in a somewhat bitchy way. Attractive –like I need to tell you- but not my type.”

Yeah, right. I’d also noticed his body language when we met. Subtle he never was. Looked like he hadn’t changed either.

He said, “Shut up and listen because this isn’t easy for me.”

For a long time I withdrew into myself. The hero, his sensitivities wounded, retires from the scene. Alternatively, a twenty-one year old kid who is so immature he can’t deal with the fact that his first really serious girlfriend turns out to be a lesbian. Not exactly wonderful for a hypersensitive ego like mine. Goes with being an only child –you get spoilt rotten, made to think you’re the centre of the world and even if you know you’re not on a rational level, the child within –Freud’s id, if you will- never quite believes it.

So, sorry Debs, but, except when we were actually going out, you didn’t do my ego a whole lot of good either.

I lived my life, going through the motions, going to work at the tax office, seeing my friends, kept practicing playing the Blues on harp and guitar, but I’m existing not living. All I’m doing is distracting myself.

My doctor finally diagnosed me with severe depression, put me on pills and recommended that I get fit and go on as many holidays as I could afford.

The pills lifted me enough to take his advice. I started swimming regularly, joined the local ramblers club, watched what I ate and generally got myself into good shape. Took the best part of a year and a hell of a lot of effort but I finally quit the pills and had a renewed attitude towards life. For the first time in ages, if ever, my body and mind were in pretty good shape.

Went on holidays too. Ibiza. Yes, E, booze, clubbing and girls. All the clichés, including the easy to come by sex. Like I said, I was in good shape and perfectly acceptably looking enough to score. Shallow, tawdry, sordid, yes, all of the above. Also a hell of a lot of fun. There’s nothing quite like a good looking girl having an orgasm underneath you to boost your ego, especially when your previous girlfriend was a lesbian who faked all the pleasure when you made love to her.

Sorry, did that sound bitter? Maybe you never quite shake off the past.

After a couple of years of this we went upmarket –Gran Canaria, where you could have coherent conversations with women before you both got pissed and had sex. And that was where I met Mary from Morpeth whom I foolishly married less than a year later.

There seemed good reasons at the time. She was pretty with large breasts and liked sex. More than one of my friends called me a 'jammy bastard' to have landed her. So I ignored her flaws like the jealousy, her dislike of my family and friends, her resentment of the fact that I was more intelligent than her, all that and more.

Yes, and maybe I did make her feel inadequate. I never claimed to be perfect.

We lasted two years before she went back to Morpeth and the dole but was happy enough for me to pay maintenance. I sold the flat, splitting the meagre profit with her though she hadn't spent a penny on it, moved back with my parents and got my head down again. It seemed that me and happiness just weren't made for each other.

Things looked up when Mary told me she was getting married. They looked up even more when two days after the event I won the lottery. I'd like to be able to say that it was the result of a casual flutter but I put a fiver on every Saturday, same numbers, and had never won more than ten pounds at any one time until then.

I kept it pretty quiet. Told work I had a new job. I've always liked computers and told them it was as a sales rep. Told my friends several weeks later I'd won half a million rather than six –enough to live a modestly comfortable life, by working class standards, without ever having to work again – plausible enough. Treated them to a wine Rhine cruise. I'd have bought Mum and Dad anything they wanted but they like living where they are. Dad enjoys his job and is happy to work till he retires, so I bought them a top of the range Fiesta and replace any household items they need. They are delighted with that and sometimes I think they only accept them because they know it makes me happy to think I'm making them happy.

Suddenly I was faced with the fact that I could pretty much buy whatever I wanted, go wherever I wanted to go. Doesn't that sound like the most exciting thing you can imagine, to have, on your own terms, total freedom?

Well, you've seen what I did. A sensible house, sensible car, good but not stupidly expensive wine, top of the range equipment (for the area). I wanted to blend in not stick out like a sore thumb. Why would I want a mansion or a Ferrari or a helicopter? Why cultivate a taste for expensive wines when I'm quite happy with a ten quid or less bottle from Asda? If I buy a book I'll check out what Amazon's selling it for and if I can get it for even less than that I will. Unless it's something I really want like a new Peter Jackson movie, I won't buy DVDs when they first come out. In six months they'll be half the price.

I wouldn't appreciate the so-called finer things in life if I jumped in with both feet. Maybe my appreciation for wine might develop over the years but... I think that the key to enjoying a windfall like this is to stick with what you like only a little better.

Gosh I can see you're impressed. Yeah, maybe I am prevaricating as well.

I got my new life in order. I met the guys in the band when they were playing at a local pub and, after chatting to them during a break and telling them that I played as well and giving them a few samples, I jammed on harp with them on a couple of numbers and sang backing vocals on several others. They were impressed enough to ask me to play with them again as they didn't have a harp player. Then they realised I could sing and play decent guitar and as their current guitarist was leaving to move to Scotland I got invited to join the band which was about a year ago and it's been great fun ever since. It is a hobby for everyone, though we've played all over the North East and even North Yorkshire and the Borders. We've built up a reputation enough to play some free Blues festivals and we're talking about recording a CD to sell at the gigs.

You can stop yawning, Debra. There's more to life than killing werewolves or whatever they were. And you seem to know more about that than I do.

Then I got really lucky. A 'For Sale' sign went up two doors away. Three weeks later it changed to 'Sold', and a month after that it disappeared. One morning just before half eight I was about to open the front gate to go for my daily paper (The Times, thanks for asking) when this small smartly dressed woman with a briefcase strolled past, glanced at me, said good morning, and continued on her way.

Love at first sight? Lust, definitely. No question. I was surprised that drool hadn't formed a puddle around my feet. Just the sight of her was enough for me to know that this was someone special.



Whether she would be special for me I didn't know, but I was bloody determined to find out.

And you know what happened because Maggie told you earlier. What she left out was what happened between then and now.

Frankly she makes whatever I felt about you seem like a casual flirtation. What happened happened quickly but it didn't seem like that. We went to the cinema –the Tyneside- something European and arty. (I haven't forgotten what it was, I'm just not telling you because you'll probably sneer.) We went for a drink and talked and got a taxi home and I said goodnight on her doorstep and didn't even attempt to kiss her. The next time, a few days later, we went for a meal –a gourmet pub near Ponteland. Maggie told me she liked the countryside so at the weekend I took her for a walk along the Wall -Housesteads. Although she'd graduated from Newcastle a year earlier she'd never actually been there. It was a lovely day and we held hands for the first time and for the first time I kissed her goodnight.

We just talked and talked about likes and dislikes and all the other stuff you tell people when you're first getting to know them, especially the ones you fancy like crazy. It was so easy. We just meshed so well. I'd never felt so relaxed with anyone and Maggie said she felt the same way about me.

We just click, Debra. Of course we have our differences in terms of interests and attitudes but we accommodate them, we make space for them so they don't interfere with what's important. I've never been happier and Maggie tells me she hasn't either. She's met mum and dad and she's talking about me meeting her parents. That's not so easy to arrange as they spend a lot of time out of the country. We pretty much live together now. Where we spend the night depends on which house we're in when we go to bed. Maggie is pretty busy at work and sometimes brings it home with her so we aren't together all the time. Because I don't work I occasionally do some cleaning in her house but it isn't particularly my forte so I pay my cleaner to do hers as well. Nothing is a hassle between us and we just don't have arguments, not emotional ones at least, more heated debates on the state of the world or a movie we disagree on.

If that was all that had happened then life would simply be wonderful. Only, as you've realised, my life has recently become very complicated.

There is a hidden war, Debra, between the forces of Light and Darkness. Once every hundred years a champion is chosen and tested. The side alternates. This time it's the side of Light and I have been chosen as the champion.

Debra, I am the Son of Light.

(Time out. Rachel –that's me- is briefly back in control of the narrative.

Well, what do you do when you hear a line like that?

In Debra's case, and probably would have been in mine too, was to burst out laughing. She howled, clutching her sides, bending over and trying to bite her lip. None of it worked. Tears streamed down her face.

"You," she said fighting for breath, "have got ... to be... f.ucking kidding!"

We heard her outburst in the next room.

"Ah," Maggie said. "He's told her he's the Son of Light. It gets better." And she winked at me.

"It's not funny," Colin said angrily. "You don't know what's been happening to me."

"Jesus Christ, Col, I have never heard anything so ludicrous outside of a crap fantasy movie by Jim Wynorsky." She *did* say that as well. Debra has a curious taste for awful cult-type movies that hardly anyone's ever heard of. Come and watch the DVDs, I'm sure we still have them. You'll also have to forgive Debra's grammatical error as using the term 'crap' to describe a Jim Wynorsky movie is tautological.

Now on with the show!

Dark, of course. Isn't it always dark? Don't thick black clouds scud across the sky as if they were fleeing from Hell's demons? Doesn't wind create strange eerie sounds that might just be at your back? Doesn't a chill run down your spine and you want to turn round but are afraid of what you might see?

Not this time.

It happened a month ago on a mild evening not long after eight, still light. I'd been in town in

the afternoon for a meeting with my solicitor and had bumped into an old school chum I hadn't seen in years. We went for a coffee, found ourselves enjoying the conversation so much, we continued it in a comfortable pub with a good line in real ale and I ended up drinking four pints which put me in a pleasantly mellow mood. I got off the Metro and took a short cut home down some back lanes. I was on autopilot listening to music, my Ipod playing a Grateful Dead concert from 1977 when I walked into what I thought was a mugging.

My initial impression was of a hoodie-wearing thug kicking the crap out of an old homeless guy. The hoodie had his back to me and I'm proud to say I did the right thing. I grabbed the man by his arms and hauled him off, literally throwing him against the wall. Oddly he was lighter than I'd expected.

The homeless guy looked up at the hoodie and he said, "Too late, Razzen, he's here."

Then his eyes glowed and, for a moment, swallowed me up.

I heard him say, "Quick, behind you!"

Turning I saw the hoodie coming for me, hands outstretched. Except they weren't hands, they were claws, and the hood was part of his leathery almost featureless face.

I reacted, thrusting my arms out in front of me and some kind of energy pulsed from my palms into the –not a hoodie- the creature knocking him a dozen feet backwards.

He rolled to his feet and snarled. This time I could see the sharpness of his teeth, the protruding jaw and the snake-like eyes.

"So be it," he said, "You have your Son of Light but I do not think you have chosen well." Then he turned and was gone. He didn't run away or dart round the corner, he was simply *gone*.

I went to the old man who stretched out a hand to me. "Listen," he said, "this is not easy but it is the truth. There is a contest between Light and Darkness, a champion is chosen from one side or the other every century. The champion is tested. If he or she succeeds in these tests then their side will dominate. For the last hundred years the Dark has been ascendant.

"You have been chosen as the Son of Light. An ordinary human being, yes, but you have intelligence, skills, and a strong heart. Succeed and you change the world. Fail, and the world will despair.

"I have given you some power beyond human but it is sorely limited. Use it carefully, use it wisely. But above all, use your mind. Not everything you encounter will be as it seems."

And then he too was gone as if he had never been and I was sitting alone in a back lane and it was getting dark. I'd messed my pants and, by the looks of things, thrown up.

And someone had stolen my Ipod. Luckily I hadn't been carrying my wallet, just some spending money and what I'd had left after the pub had been taken too. My house keys, thankfully, hadn't, though if I'd had some identification that might not have been the case. I staggered home, rang Maggie and exaggerated how long I'd been in the pub and said wasn't in any fit state.

After that I showered for a long time and wondered what the hell had happened to me. Was I having some kind of psychotic breakdown?

I'm not a great fan of science fiction or fantasy, though I've read the odd book. I don't have fantasy fantasies if you know what I mean and I'm not a fan of super-heroes. It has never occurred to me to want to be extra-human or whatever you want to call it.

I didn't sleep well that night but when I did wake just after five, I felt buzzing with energy so I went out for a run. I reached the airport in about thirty-five minutes, and that's eight miles away and I wasn't even tired out. So I ran back which turned out to be a mistake as my energy levels suddenly plummeted after three miles and I had to call a taxi. Thank God for mobile phones.

Within a week I'd put on several pounds and all of it muscle. Whatever fat I had, not a lot, had also turned into muscle. I'd also learned that this new energy only lasted a short while. The time varied depending on how I used it; jogging would last longer than intense weight training.

On the eighth day after my encounter, a vampire attacked me. I'd got up for an early morning run before it was light and was cutting through a back lane when it jumped me.

Shaven headed, not much nose, very sharp elongated canine teeth, cloak, burning eyes. All the clichés.

It jumped down from a wall, landing in front of me, hissed like a snake and tried to take a bite

out of my neck.

Before I knew what I was doing I had literally punched its heart out. I hit it so hard in the chest that my fist broke through the rib cage, hit the heart, and drove it out through the vampire's back. I ended up arm-deep in a vampire which then dissolved in front of my eyes.

The following night I heard what I thought was a cat-fight in the garden, went out and was attacked by three of them. Ripping their heads off proved just as effective as punching out the heart, except these must have been young vampires as they didn't disintegrate. I went back into the house to see if I could get something I could use as a stake but when I went back outside the bodies had gone. They hadn't disintegrated –no dust, and believe me I looked carefully- just gone.

For the last six weeks I've been attacked by just about every monster you can imagine –dragons (small ones), zombies, lizard-men, sea monsters, extremely large insects, giant crabs- depending on whether I've been in the country, town, or by the seaside. I can't get away from the bastards. And it's always when I'm on my own and always, as soon as my back is turned, the corpses disappear, and I'm getting fucking sick of it.

It's as if I'm monster central. I've got a target pinned on me which says 'free meal for monsters'.

And every time, I rip them to pieces. Sometimes it's harder than others and they seem to have become stronger. It's almost as if...

I don't know what it's almost as if.

A test?

Some kind of perverse game?

A puzzle I'm supposed to solve? A puzzle. And if it is a puzzle, what sort of puzzle is it? Where do I look for the answer?

Go back next door, Debra. I want to be on my own for a while.

## 6. The Truth about Maggie.

There we were, Maggie and I relaxing in the living room, sipping a rather nice rioja having finished the shiraz (had better, cheaper). I'd recounted the events which had occurred since Debra came home from the coven and Maggie had just finished telling me, in a much abbreviated form, what Colin was currently telling Debra.

"Sounds like someone's been watching a load of bad horror movies," I suggested.

"That could be where it came from," Maggie agreed.

"Why do I feel you know more about this than you're letting on?" I asked rhetorically, not expecting an answer.

Maggie smiled, somewhat slyly I thought, and gave me one anyway. "Because, as Debra's friend Jake observed, you're an outsider. You notice things that someone steeped in the Shadows might miss even if you don't actually know you're seeing them."

Oddly that made perfect sense to me. I'd always been good at sensing when something wasn't quite kosher even when I couldn't put my finger on it immediately. Not always, not all the time, but often enough for me to dig into something, as if my subconscious was seeing patterns that weren't apparent to my conscious mind. Useful in my line of work.

This time it was Maggie. Something about her and Colin had been gnawing away at me. So I said something without even thinking about it.

"Are you human?" I asked and immediately wished I could take back the words. If I was right I could just be signing my death warrant. If I was wrong I would look like a total and utter prize tit. I wasn't sure which I'd prefer. I said, "Are you the |Man of Power?"

"To answer your first question –it depends on where you're standing," she answered, leaving me more confused than ever. "As for the second –no, I'm not. I'm something else entirely."

I said, "Wha...?"

"Physiologically there's virtually no difference –well, some, not a lot- between you and I. But I wasn't born on this world."

"Oh," I said feeling not any more the wiser but the calmness of her reply suggested I wasn't really in any immediate danger.

I said, "So what are you then?"

Maggie grinned, full lips peeling, rather alluringly, back revealing a film star's perfect teeth. Disturbingly I'd begun to find her attractive, in a sexual rather than an aesthetic way, as if she had some kind of glamour about her. She said, "I gave you a hint earlier, sweetie. Haven't you guessed yet?"

And then I realised. "Tam Lin," I said.

"That's right, darling," Maggie said brightly. "I'm a fairy."

There was only one response to that.

We fell back in our separate seats and howled with laughter. This was turning into a very amusing evening. I mean, fighting with werewolves, flirting with the fey.

I glugged back some wine. "You're not joking," I said.

Eyes wide and bright, her body leaning forward, breasts prominent –and for a moment I had a fantasy of what Colin did with them- she said gleefully, "No, I'm not."

"What's your real name or aren't you allowed to say?"

Maggie made a mock-petulant face. "That old superstitious rubbish. You know my name. I didn't make it up. You should, however, preface it with Princess. And curtsy when you say it."

"Princess Maggie Hasselbank. You still aren't joking."

"It's Princess Margarethe Eliane Louisa Hasselbank, and, no I'm still not joking and that's what this tragic farce is all about. I'll tell you all of it but you will not repeat a word to Colin."

"Why not?"

"It would ruin everything and I would be so annoyed that I wouldn't tell you how to find the Man of Power."

"You know?" I said.

"Oh I know," Maggie said. "I know who, what, and where he is. But I can only tell you the

where. The rest isn't for me to say."

Her manner of speaking became formal, serious, as she cast off any hint of giddiness. Finally, she'd begun to show her real self, or at least the part of herself she'd kept hidden from us.

She said, "Now listen to me, Rachel Green, but understand one thing above anything else. I love Colin with all my heart. I would stand with him against the forces of Hell (if Hell existed, but you know what I mean). Had I the choice I would marry him in a second and be done with all this. Sadly, potentially tragically, I do not."

I had a feeling a long story was coming on, so let's do it as another monologue and skip all the irritating she said then I said drank wine farted walked round the room scratched arse looked out of the window yawned sat down again opened another bottle went what you mean oh my god not that good heavens I never dreamed it can't true surely physically impossible he's that good in bed with a what!

Here's Maggie!

It was easier to cross over centuries ago but since the rise of technology on this world it's become harder. No-one is sure if it is the more so-called rational mindset, a collective subconscious gestalt dictating reality, or just a coincidence, but soft places are harder to find. It can be done, it just isn't easy. How you do it is a combination of will and genetics. It's easier for royalty in my world and, please, don't think in clichés.

My country, Bretan, is very similar to Britain. I come from a democracy with a figurehead but essentially powerless monarchy, a very large royal family and most of them work for a living, like me. We use technology too, somewhat differently, but technology none the less.

Personally, I don't believe in magic. I don't have pointed ears either, or wings and I most certainly can't fly, though I do possess a *glamour* if I choose to exert it. I think you noticed that. Sorry, just a little teasing. I didn't mean to get you hot and bothered. My lifespan is about half as long again as yours; I'm just a bit naturally healthier and will keep my looks for most of that time.

I'm also tenth in line for the throne – we have large families- so I wasn't missed much when I decided I preferred living here. I'd visited for several years, took A-levels at a tertiary college then came up here to Newcastle to study Law. I went home for vacations and was glad to get back here. Home is a pleasant place but dull, rather like a country backwater. We don't have the political upheavals and opposing ideologies of this world. Besides, I'd made many friends, good friends, whom I'm ashamed to say I've been neglecting somewhat since I met Colin. No doubt you and Debra are or have been the same.

What I haven't made clear is that it is a society dominated by tradition, by protocols and by precedent. One of these precedents is that anyone who would marry a princess of the royal house must --and I do mean, **must!** in a very loud voice-- undergo a trial to determine if he is of the correct moral fibre to make him worthy. The princess does not have any choice in the matter. *This* princess most certainly doesn't. Our people understand the nature of these trials and voluntarily undergo certain procedures to help them survive.

And I think you're beginning to understand what is going on.

This Light and Darkness War is a scenario created to test Colin to see if he's worthy of me.

Yes, it's a setup and there's nothing magical about it.

The old man was my paternal grandfather, something of a practical joker by nature, and Kieron my brother played his attacker. He wore lots of latex. They injected Colin with a tranquilliser, took him back to my house where a surgeon implanted a genetically designed organism into the base of his spine. What that does is force his body to build up muscle –Colin noticed his increase in appetite and muscle quite quickly- but also improves his reaction time and speed by altering the composition of his adrenalin. Debra's injecting herself with adrenalin to stave off the effects of the sigil, isn't she?

All this only lasts for a few weeks. Any longer and it would permanently damage his body, though there are ways around that. So, he has a few weeks in which to prove himself and solve a certain mystery.

He knows now, or very strongly suspects, that he's being tested. What he doesn't realise is that the tests, if not exactly rigged, aren't quite as dangerous as they first seem. It's his courage that's being tested not his skill which, by the way, he almost completely lacks. From what I've heard tonight (and I

received a report minutes after it went down), I suspect that, without his extra strength or speed, he wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with either Debra or even you.

But I'm not in love with him because he's a macho moron but because he isn't. I've only had four lovers before him. I chose them carefully and went out with each of them for several months, sometimes longer. Then I met Colin and I realised he was everything I'd been looking for in a husband. He's kind, compassionate, honest, and so much more and none of the bad things. He's not perfect but his imperfections are trivial compared to what is good about him. Trust me, I could go on for a while about why I love him so much but I don't like embarrassing myself.

Ah yes, the second part of the test, the mystery. I think he's just beginning to realise that he has a mystery to solve. That he has an opponent, the mastermind behind these tasks. Did I say there were four outcomes? I forgot one –that he fails to solve the mystery, in which case we go our separate ways-but I think this the least likely scenario.

The one I hope will happen is that he sees through setup, realises that I am the prize, and we live happily ever after. Or he realises he's been setup and feels he's been used and doesn't want to see me again, but at least we are both still alive.

The third possible outcome and one I would find very acceptable is that he discovers I am his mystery nemesis and doesn't care. He forsakes the Light for me. Then we tell him the truth, he laughs, and we live happily ever after.

But the fourth, the fourth. Here he discovers that I am the agent of the Dark and he attempts to kill me, the viper in his bosom. He fails and I kill him. He succeeds and I die. Then my family kill him in turn.

I don't like that very much. But I don't believe it will happen. I know him too well. He does truly love me and when he learns the truth he will still love me. We will marry and I will become a good barrister and have at least four children and we will be happy until the ending that parts us all.

Quietly, Maggie began to cry.

It seemed as if it was a relief for her to unburden herself to an outsider, perhaps even seeing me as someone who could be a friend.

I went to her and held her, cradling her in my arms as she wept.

"I don't want him to die," she sobbed, "but that risk, taking that risk is the only way I can keep him."

"It will work," I whispered to her, "it will and you will be happy ever after."

After a while Maggie regained her composure. I refilled our glasses and moved back to the couch.

She said, "In the morning, go to Sunderland. I recommend staying at the Marriott on the sea front. Look around the place –Sunderland, that is- it's far nicer than you might imagine. About seven in the evening, go and have a drink at a pub called Jameson's, it's part of the Wetherspoon chain so you know what to expect. It's opposite the museum so you can't miss it. Don't eat there, it's not bad but there are several decent Italian restaurants you might try first. Then you'll be contacted."

I asked, "How will he know we're coming?"

Maggie pulled out a tiny glowing device that had to be either magical or the product of a technology so sophisticated as to be indistinguishable from magic. We really were more alike than I realised. I had exactly the same make and model in the pocket of my leather jacket.