

ALL
the
SHADOWS
of the
RAINBOW

Praise for The Vampires of New England Series

Mortal Touch

“...a wonderful fictional treatment of the authentic vampire tradition in this region... has the honesty and local color that brings the characters and their towns to life and makes the plot palpably real.”

Michael Bell, author of *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires*

“I think you'll be genuinely surprised by some of the twists. Regan is a sympathetic heroine, and Arthen's variation on traditional vampire lore is fresh and well thought-out. The story riveted my attention throughout.”

Margaret M. Carter, author of *Dark Changeling*, *Child of Twilight*, *Sealed in Blood*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*

“In this tension filled paranormal tale, Ms. Arthen develops a nicely detailed world with captivating characters and fascinating twists on vampirism. With a touch of mystery, suspense and passion, this is a wonderful escape from the ordinary.”

Kimberly Swan, Darque Reviews

“Inanna Arthen explores vampires in the modern world, attempting to account for both the mundane details and the supernatural, and she does so with relish. She makes vampires seem real, even approachable. That's what is so creepy about this book. You finish it and think— Oh, man! That is too real! I did not want to put *Mortal Touch* down until I had finished it.”

Tonia R. Montgomery, Curled Up With a Good Book

“Having read so many vampire novels as I have, it is seldom that I find one that surprises me or that strays enough from the vampire conventions to appear original, and this is why I was pleasantly surprised to read *Mortal Touch*...this is a work that is well written and that at times gets quite suspenseful and horrific...*Mortal Touch* is definitely a novel vampire fiction aficionados will want to add to their collection.”

Mayra Calvani, Dark Phantom Reviews

The Longer the Fall

“...offers a pleasant mix of vampire tropes and a convincing rural New England setting...the story comes to a satisfying conclusion.”

Publishers Weekly

“Second in a series of connected stories about modern vampires and their covert society, this dark fantasy by the author of *Mortal Touch* features memorable characters and a plot sure to attract fans of vampire fiction.”

Library Journal

“Intelligent, well-crafted, and tightly plotted, this book draws you in to a world of magical orders, powerful forces, and a different kind of vampire. If you like Katherine Kurtz's Adept series or Dion Fortune's novels, *The Longer the Fall* will have you staying up all night to finish 'just one more chapter.'”

Morven Westfield, author of *Darksome Thirst* and *The Old Power Returns*

The Vampires of New England Series

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Inanna Arthen



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

All the Shadows of the Rainbow
The Vampires of New England Series
<http://vampiresofnewengland.com>

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Perfect Paperback Edition
ISBN-10: 1-935303-15-5
ISBN-13: 978-1-935303-15-2
LCCN: 2013913328

Published by
By Light Unseen Media
PO Box 1233
Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-3233

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Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1955

1

Diana's return to the stone house off of School Street went as unnoticed as her absence had been.

She surveyed the area carefully from above to make sure there were no witnesses before ghosting to the ground and solidifying. The only live creatures whose body heat glowed dimly below her were small wildlife and a cat hunting them in the weeds overgrowing Thomas' stone circle. She nervously recalled what Thomas had told her about other vampires being undetectable to them. But the property *felt* empty—neglected, undisturbed, and half-wild, the new spring foliage expanding into formerly clear areas. She saw no sign that anyone had come closer to the house than the access road. Her old Chevrolet stood hubcap-deep in the smooth unmarked patch of snow that lingered under the north shadow of the house.

All her normal self-awareness and memories had returned, for the first time since she'd walked into the woods four months earlier. As she regarded the dark windows in the moss-stained granite walls, she recalled the last few grueling months of the athanor construction. She and Thomas had spent every waking moment working in the decrepit Schuller house until they collapsed in exhaustion to sleep on its bare floors, deserting this house to collect cobwebs and dust. Now Thomas and the Schuller place were both gone. The only evidence of their two and half year long magical working was a foundation hole full of rubble, Diana's vampiric state, and, she reflected somberly, a couple of new gravestones in cemeteries. For the first time, Diana began to truly appreciate Thomas' words about memory becoming a burden as the years accumulated but vampires remained unchanged. Standing there listening to the haunting echo of spring peepers in the distance, she made a decision.

I won't dwell on memories—ever. The past is past, and I have an unending future ahead of me. I'll always look forward. No sentiment, no nostalgia. It's the one luxury that I can't afford.

She reflected on her resolution for several minutes, allowing it to fully sink into her consciousness and Will. Then she squared her shoulders, dematerialized, and slipped through the crack of the bolted back door to solidify inside

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the kitchen. After taking a look around and some deep sniffs of the air, she lit a kerosene lantern and went to check the pipes. There had been water in the cistern when she left—given how cold it came from the tap, she guessed that much of it was still frozen. The interior of the house, with its thick stone walls, was at least twenty degrees colder than the mild air outside. As soon as she completed a cursory walk-through of the rooms, where she found nothing out of place, she started a vigorous fire going in the massive kitchen woodstove.

She occasionally paused to wince and rub her behind—both her buttocks and her ego still smarted from the recent encounter in the woods with Her Ladyship and the rest of...whoever they were. Thomas had called them the Tylwyth Teg, the Welsh name for the Fair Folk, or the Fae. Diana still wasn't sure she believed all the mythology about those beings, but she could no longer be skeptical about their existence, or their power over her. They had ruthlessly kicked her out of her self-pitying mope, laughing uproariously at her whining. The one whom Thomas had called Her Ladyship had ordered Diana to clean herself up and start acting like a responsible human being. As conflicted as her feelings toward the Teg were, Diana knew she was indebted to them for their intervention. She had no idea yet just exactly what she *was* going to do now, but rejecting civilization and rationality hadn't been a solution to anything.

She'd always been glad that the fictional cliché about vampires having no reflections was nonsense, but now she avoided the small bathroom mirror. She couldn't bear to confront the image that had spawned a local monster legend (*all covered with hair, one glaring eye?*), even though her conscience nagged at her to do so. She found some turpentine with her alchemical supplies, and it dissolved, somewhat painfully, the blackened, peeling layer of pine pitch on her face and hands. But her dark hair was so hopelessly matted into sticky, hardened dreadlocks that she finally located a pair of scissors and cut most of it off. She ended up with the boyish gamine look that was rather in fashion for the art and theatre crowd. The turpentine got rid of the last bits of pitch, and by then the kettle of water she'd put on the stove for a bath was boiling.

She burned her filthy, pitch-stained clothes, what was left of them, and spent the rest of the night cleaning the house top to bottom—all except Thomas' study, which she left closed and untouched. She was a little surprised that she wasn't hungrier, but—she winced at the memory—she had drunk more from the boy in the barn than she should have, and that had been right before the February snow storm. Evidently freezing solid had put her into a sort of suspended animation. Before she went to bed at dawn in her own room upstairs, she made a list of things to do the following afternoon. She'd wasted far too much time.

"Next time, fill out a card so we know you're going away," grumbled the postmistress as she heaved a large cardboard tray of mail onto the counter.

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Diana stuffed handfuls of mail into the shopping bag she'd brought without stopping to look at it closely. "Has anyone been in asking for me?" she asked, keeping her tone as idle as possible. The postmistress was not one of her greatest fans, disapproving of Diana's cohabiting with Thomas to begin with and scandalized when Diana moved in with Moira while Thomas so ostentatiously courted the dilettante artist, Catherine Jorgens.

"For *you*? Not that I know of," the postmistress sniffed.

Main Street looked the same as always, with one exception—Moira's beauty salon was still vacant, its windows covered with heavy brown paper taped to the inside. Diana could only bear to take a quick glance before she turned, blinking away tears, and walked rapidly north past the public boat ramps and ferry dock and on to Holliston House Inn. The Inn was half-hidden with painters' scaffolding as the Wilkinsons spiffed up the three-story façade for the coming season.

Mrs. Wilkinson was delighted to see Diana, and immediately asked where she'd been. As much as she hated fibbing, Diana had a plausible story ready, about needing to get away and visiting family. She managed to keep a straight face when Mrs. Wilkinson told her how lucky she'd been to miss the blizzard, historic even by Maine standards. "Why, the whole coast was shut down for three days! It was that bad!"

"Yes, I read about it in the papers."

Mrs. Wilkinson tsked sadly over Thomas' move to Europe. The Wilkinsons were among the few people in Pepperell who had sincerely liked him. "And I'm so sorry about Moira Waterford," she added. "I know what good, friends the two of you were." She managed to fit a universe of meaning into the tiny pause before "friends."

"Thank you. I'm surprised no one has adopted her thriving business, with the town growing and the economy improving."

"Oh, I'm sure it won't be empty for long."

"Is there any word about..." Diana hesitated.

"Her young assistant, the Beauvais girl?"

"Yes, Carole."

Mrs. Wilkinson shook her head sadly. "Still in the sanitarium, and even worse, from what I've heard."

"Worse?"

"Oh, completely deranged, raving about all kinds of wild things. Witchcraft, werewolves, I don't know what all. Her family actually tried to call in an exorcist."

Diana stared. "You're kidding."

"The diocese refused, apparently. But the family has moved down to Portland to be nearer to the sanitarium. Of course, she had such a horrible shock, losing her fiancé like that. That poor Crothers boy, only twenty-one, supporting his

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whole family, and still thinking about college and improving himself, and then to be blown up in that horrible fire—didn't he do some work up there for Mr. Morgan?"

"Uh...yes, he did, for a couple of weeks..." It took a moment for Diana to answer, she suddenly felt so chilled. Was Carole raving about vampires when her medications wore off? Maybe she wasn't as insane with grief as everyone thought. Brent's death had stunned all of them, Diana and Thomas not the least...*because it was all our fault. We fouled up and he paid for it. And we never found out how much he told her...*

"Are you all right, Miss Chilton?"

"Oh—I'm sorry. I was just thinking about poor Carole."

Mrs. Wilkinson shook her head, her expression momentarily tragic. Then she snapped back to a business-like mien. "Alma Patton in the Assessor's office says that you own all that property now, is that right?"

"That's correct. And there's an escrow account to pay the taxes, so she won't have to chase down any more pesky liens. I'm sure the town will be relieved, with that shiny new school going up."

"Will you be living back there all by yourself? Or are you making other plans?" She paused, fixing Diana with a piercing look.

"I have no plans to develop the property, or sell it, if that's what you're wondering. But live there year-round?" Diana was silent for a moment. "I haven't decided what I'm going to do, Mrs. Wilkinson. I just got back, and...well, life has been pretty crazy the last six months or so. I have a lot of thinking to do." *And even more thinking, after this conversation,* she added silently.

Dusk was falling by the time Diana finished her business in town, and she walked west on School Street toward the hilly region where she now owned some five hundred acres of land. She'd intended to walk only until she found someplace she could duck into the bushes and dematerialize without being seen, but she was so deep in thought, she kept on for nearly three miles. The information about Carole worried her. *Maybe I shouldn't stay here. Maybe I should go someplace else for five years, or ten years, until the details fade in people's memories...* But where would she go? Back to Boston? As far as she knew, she was still a member in unblemished good standing of the Order of the Silver Light, the three hundred year old magical group in which she had been born and raised. Would that still be true if they found out what had happened to her? But Thomas had been a member, as had her mentor, Levoissier, who was something quite extraordinary indeed.

I'm just a white-livered coward. I don't want to have to explain to everyone, and deal with all their reactions. Could I just not tell them? Or would they know, the minute they saw me? There was no way to answer that question except by testing it out in person.

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A bat flitted by her ear and startled her out of her deep reverie, and she looked around in confusion for a moment, she'd been so oblivious to how far she was walking. She realized that she'd lived in Pepperell for three years, and she'd never seen this stretch of the road except from a car or from the air. Nothing waited for her at the end of it but a cold, empty house with no neighbor for two miles in any direction. *Thomas said I'd need a place to call home, but this isn't it. What am I going to do here? Plant a garden, spend my nights sneaking up on cows?*

She had a feeling that the Teg would intervene forcefully again if she attempted to isolate herself the way Thomas had done. But more importantly, she desperately wanted to find other vampires, those whom Thomas had mentioned or any others. She also intended to somehow, someday, track down Gregory Fitzhughes, who she had last seen walking down this very road on his way to join their mentor Levoissier in Montréal the previous June. She couldn't do any of those things if she was too nervous to set foot outside of midcoast Maine.

When she got back to the house she dumped out and sorted through the bag of mail. Most of it went to feed the stove, but there was a small stack of envelopes left to open and read. She had letters from her parents in France and several friends in the Order. The Board of Bread and Roses, the charitable foundation she had launched with her trust fund money at the tender age of twenty-one, had sent its quarterly reports. There was nothing from Gregory. The last letter she opened was from Phoebe Hudson, a somewhat dilettantish member of the Order whom Diana had mentored as a novice. Along with her usual chirpy gossip, Phoebe asked rather plaintively if Diana might consider attending the Order's Beltene festivities this year. Diana, to her own surprise, was sorely tempted, but uncertain it was the best choice for her first interaction with other magicians of Adeptus and Magus grade. The tone of the request piqued her curiosity, however. It almost sounded as though attendance for this year's Beltene was in danger of falling below quorum.

That would be a shame, she thought archly, and had to smile, remembering her attempt to explain this unashamedly licentious celebration to Moira. The date was only two weeks away. Boston offered all kinds of potential, provided she could handle the sensory overload of a major city. If other magical adepts would recognize her as something no longer human, she might as well find out and get it over with. Even more important, someone in the Order might be able to give her some leads as to the whereabouts of Gregory or Levoissier. She went to find some notepaper and a pen to send an RSVP.

As she'd expected, the car refused to start, and needed to be towed and serviced before she could drive to Boston. Diana wondered if she could travel that far semi-materialized, but the practical barriers seemed daunting.

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Getting the car repaired made her miss Brent as poignantly as she had since his death. Her memory too vividly evoked the image of his bright red crew cut and sweat-shiny, painfully young face, his cheery voice saying, “You have any trouble with the car, you bring it here, nothing I can’t fix...” With effort, she forced both the image and the pain from her mind. The car’s problems proved minor, and within ten days Diana was southward-bound, firmly pushing her apprehensions to the back of her mind.

She hadn’t done much driving since she’d changed, and she had a number of close calls when she overcompensated or miscalculated. By the time she reached the Massachusetts border, however, she had adjusted to driving with her enhanced senses, reflexes and strength. In Boston, she took a room in the Hilton and spent a day walking around her usual haunts, accustoming herself to the sensory impressions that were so familiar and alien at once. Only after she had begun to feel somewhat less out of place did she call Phoebe, who was overjoyed to hear from her.

“Diana, you just can’t *imagine* how much everyone has missed you!”

Diana had to smile—Phoebe lived life on a high vibrational level, to say the least. “Well, that’s always nice to hear. I missed all of you, too.”

“Are you coming back to live in Boston now, back for good? You gave up your apartment, where are you going to live? I can’t *believe* you gave up your apartment, it’s impossible to find a place in the city now.”

“Well...it’s a long story.” Diana wasn’t sure how much to reveal about Thomas giving her his property—how would she ever explain that? “Right now I’m staying at the Hilton, and I haven’t really thought about what I’ll do next. I haven’t been back to the Motherhouse yet. Are they holding Beltene there this year?”

“I haven’t heard anything different. Lot of stags this year, though. People just aren’t excited about it the way they used to be. It doesn’t feel right.”

“I heard that a lot of members have left the city.”

“Oh my god, the *country*. And they’re not even coming back for the festivals. The House in France is bigger than here now. It’s crazy.”

Diana pondered this. If Phoebe had heard any rumors about the magical working and its blowback, she was certainly playing innocent. She was silent long enough that Phoebe cleared her throat delicately. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Oh, that’s all right, I’m sure it must feel very strange to be back in the city after so long.”

“It really does. This is my first trip...home in three years. I hardly ever even went to Bangor, while I was up in Maine.” She could almost hear Phoebe, a confirmed urbanite, shaking her head incredulously over the phone.

“Well, listen. I’m having some people up for cocktails in a couple of hours, a

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sort of pre-Beltene loosening up kind of thing. Why don't you join us? It's mostly people you know. I think there will only be one or two you haven't met before."

Diana hesitated, feeling a qualm at the prospect of meeting a whole group of magical people at once. But Phoebe's invitation would be a good way of dabbling her toes in the water. How Phoebe's friends reacted in a casual social situation would give her some clues about what to expect at the Beltene ritual a few nights from now. "Sounds fun, I'll be there with bells on." Only after she hung up the phone did she think, *Oh, damn...what on earth do I have to wear?*

2

By 8:00 p.m., Diana was pressing the buzzer outside of Phoebe's apartment, so nervous that if she'd still had a pulse, it would have been racing. As it was, her imitation of life, as Thomas had called it, was authentic enough to supply shaky hands and a wildly fluttering stomach. It had been so long since she'd worn even modest high heels—especially brand new ones—she was wobbling on her feet like a debutante, and she prayed that she'd gotten all the store tags off the sapphire blue cocktail dress.

The door opened so abruptly, Diana started back and almost turned an ankle. Phoebe, frothing with pink satin ruffles, stared at her blankly with her mouth making a little O of surprise. Taken aback, Diana said, "I'm not too early, am I?" Phoebe's face suddenly went through a series of expressions like rapidly flipping pages of a book: recognition, embarrassment, slight confusion and exasperation.

"Oh! Diana! I didn't...I'm sorry...no, you're not early at all, we've been waiting for...I mean...oh, how stupid of me, come in!"

Diana stepped carefully into the apartment's tiny entryway, and almost unbalanced on her high heels again when Phoebe flung arms around her shoulders in an exuberant hug.

"Oh, it's *so* good to *see* you!" she shrilled into Diana's right ear, as Diana flinched with pain. It wasn't that, however, that made Phoebe stiffen slightly and pull back, her brow creasing. Diana watched her warily. "Are you okay? You feel..."

"What?"

Phoebe's eyes were searching Diana's face and arms in bewilderment, as if she wasn't sure what she was even looking for. "You feel very...*cold*. Did you walk?"

"Uh...yes," Diana improvised. "I've been away from Boston for so long, I've been walking everywhere, just getting back into the groove of it all, you know."

"Oh." Phoebe kept on staring for a moment, then she gave her head a little shake and smiled brightly. "But your *hair!* What have you *done* to yourself?"

"You don't like it?"

"It's just so *different*, that's why I didn't recognize you. But come in, here,

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let me take your wrap, and get you a drink. Art's mixing for us tonight, you can just *imagine* how hard I had to twist his arm..." Diana trailed Phoebe into the living room, where about half a dozen guests all turned expectantly toward them. She knew everyone present except one young man, and yet each smiling face echoed the confused reactions that had just flickered across Phoebe's. As each man or woman met Diana's gaze, she saw the smile falter, the brow crease, the eyes darken with momentary doubt. Then each guest blinked and smiled again, but the cheerful greeting seemed forced, and no one else proffered a handshake, far less a hug. Diana sternly repressed a powerful impulse to dematerialize on the spot.

"Diana, you'll have a Gibson Girl, right?" Phoebe was already waving to Art, who reached for a martini glass from the bar setup on the long sideboard against one wall.

"Actually, I'd like a Scotch and soda," Diana said, without thinking.

Art and Phoebe both stared at her, then Art grinned. "*Well*," he said jovially as he swapped glasses with a flourish. "So that's what comes of living out in the back woods for three years. Would you like a cigar to go with that?" He snapped his fingers over the glass and a puff of gray smoke swirled out of it, reeking distinctly of Havana Gold.

"Phew, Art, stop that," Phoebe said, wrinkling her nose.

"That's what you get for dating an alchemist—and letting him tend bar at your parties. So where's my leather armchair and brace of hounds?" Diana bantered back, and several people laughed. *Good*, she thought, *maybe everyone will relax and stop trying to figure out what about me is bothering them.*

They did, or least they pretended to. "Wherever did you get that *chic* haircut?" teased Evelyn, whom Diana just barely remembered as one of the Novices admitted shortly before her departure in 1952.

"Oh...I just got sick of washing it in the rain barrel, so I found a rusty pair of scissors and chopped it all off." This largely truthful statement evoked another burst of laughter.

"For a minute we thought you'd turned into one of those Beats," Art said as he handed Diana her drink.

"Or run off to join the Actors Studio and go on the stage. Are you going to start reciting poetry for us?" asked Calvin, a slight blond man who was virtually glued to Evelyn's skirt; they had been admitted in the same group of Novices.

"Oh, please. I have been reciting things every day for the last three years, in multiple languages. I'm taking a break, thanks." She sniffed at her drink—Art wasn't as mischievous as Gregory by any means, but his party cocktails occasionally had surprising effects.

"Reciting things every day?" Fran, a contemporary of Evelyn and Calvin,

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set down the drink she was holding and took a half step toward Diana. “Could you...could you tell us a little bit about your working? I don’t mean—” she added hastily as Phoebe made a reproving sound, “I don’t mean anything confidential, of course. But it’s just...we’ve heard all these hints and rumors...”

“Hints and rumors?” Diana’s words came out more sharply than she intended, and Fran’s cheeks grew pink.

Calvin cleared his throat, obviously coming to Fran’s rescue, and Diana wondered when she’d gotten to be so intimidating to these younger members, who were far from Novices. “We’ve just heard that you were doing something very ambitious, something with a very long scope. Naturally, we’ve been curious to hear some of the technical details. My mentor said no one has done a working like this for a century.”

“Where did he hear about it?” Diana was genuinely bemused. Calvin glanced around at the others and shrugged helplessly. Diana took a sip of her Scotch, relieved that it seemed to have no magical effects aside from a faint undertaste of cigar smoke. She thought she could make a fairly astute guess as to the source of any hints and rumors, and struggled not to fume. So was Phoebe, Diana saw from the corner of her eye; she was furious that her guests were prying. But Diana, seeing the intent expressions around her, wasn’t surprised. *They’re spooked. They can feel that something is off, and they want some explanation that makes sense to them. Maybe I can stop all those imaginations from running off over the horizon before someone hits on the truth.*

“Look, it’s okay,” she said finally, with a nod at Phoebe. “I don’t mind talking about it—Phoebe’s heard a little, and there are other people who were in on the whole plan. You all know what not to ask, and what not to repeat.”

Several people nodded; Fran appeared to be holding her breath. Diana tried not to fidget under the weight of their undivided attention. “All right... we needed something that would collect power in small increments over a long period of time as we focused energy into it. So we built an athanor...”

“An athanor?” Calvin sounded as though he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly. “You mean one of those ovens for processing alchemical compounds, like the one at the Motherhouse?”

“Art’s got one of those,” Evelyn said.

“This had a sealed core, though,” Diana said. “It took six months to build, we barely made our deadline. We were working every day, setting in every brick ritually, one by one.”

“Oh my *god*,” Calvin said.

Diana went on for some time, explaining the elaborate magical construction of the athanor itself and the pattern of the daily workings, although she left out some fairly large details. Among those was the actual purpose of the working,

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any information about Thomas, whom she referred to only as “my partner,” and the final outcome. She knew her listeners were biting their tongues to keep from asking questions about these glaring omissions, but they were all too experienced and too well trained to break taboo.

When she stopped talking, there was a thoughtful silence. Fran let out a long sigh. “It’s hard to even imagine. Three years! I’m envious, on the one hand, but on the other...I don’t think I could do that. I really don’t.”

“So, was it all worth it?” asked Evelyn, who was studying Diana’s expression more intently than Diana was comfortable with; she perceived that Evelyn was the most psychically gifted person in the room. She glanced around at the curious faces, unable to snap off a glib reply, and took a hasty gulp of her second glass of Scotch.

“I guess not,” Calvin said wisely.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*, exactly,” Diana said. “But we didn’t get the results we were hoping for.”

“I’m sorry,” Fran said. “After all that work, and all the time you spent on it...”

“It was a big gamble, and you know how those go,” Diana said.

“Would you ever do anything like that again?” Evelyn asked.

It had never occurred to Diana to frame the issue quite that way, and she gave it a moment’s serious thought. “I don’t know. I wouldn’t rule it out, but...I’d have to consider the Intention very carefully. I’m not sure I did that enough before we started this one. We sure raised power, though. And I learned a lot, I have to admit that.”

“Who was it who said you learn more from your failures than your triumphs?” Art said.

Calvin chortled. “The New York Mets?”

“Besides them.” Art rolled his eyes.

Diana braced herself. “I seem to recall hearing some such bromide from Levoissier, a few times.” She saw no reason to repress the acid edge in her voice, but regretted it when the room abruptly fell quiet. Evelyn and Fran exchanged uneasy looks. “What? Did I say a dirty word? It’s not carved into the lintel of the Motherhouse ritual room that no one dare speak the name of my former mentor, is it?”

“No, of course not,” Phoebe said hastily. “It’s just that...”

“He gives you the willies, I get it. And you all call yourselves magicians.”

Fran waved a hand, looking flustered. “We’ve all been told that it’s not respectful, that’s all. I know you worked with him, Diana, but the rest of us... well, my mentor dressed me down eight ways from Sunday just for asking questions about L-Levoissier.”

“Mine, too,” Calvin said. “And that was after I was raised to Adeptus.”

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“Anyway, Levoissier isn’t around Boston now,” Evelyn said. “He left more than two years ago.”

Diana took a smaller and slower sip of Scotch. “Seriously, though. Have any of you heard any...hints or rumors about where he might be? Is he with one of the Order’s other Houses—San Francisco, or France, or Chicago?”

Phoebe looked at Art, who just shrugged. She turned back to Diana. “There’s a new House, you know, it just opened up, in Providence. In fact, Roderick Vale has gone down there to serve as their P.M. They practically begged him.”

“Roderick Vale left Boston? You left this bombshell out of your letters, Phoebe.” Diana scowled at her friend, who flung up her hands.

“It just happened. The Providence House was only chartered at the Vernal Equinox.”

“Well...” Diana suddenly laughed. “I’ve been monopolizing this conversation for the last hour, and I’m the stranger in town. Come on, fill me in on what else I’ve missed. Have any of you visited the House in France recently? What’s their new Motherhouse in Paris like?”

That opening got her off the hook for quite a while, as the others filled her in on gossip about who had been initiated to the next level, who had left, who had moved to France or Providence or San Francisco, who had gotten married or divorced or had a baby. She fielded a number of curious questions about Pepperell and what it was like to live up there. After a little while, she sat down in a chair, noticing that the rest of the guests, even as they chatted happily, had shifted somewhat away from her. It wasn’t an obtrusive movement, but as the group settled into seats or corners, Diana was like the thumb to their fingers.

As the lively conversation bubbled on, however, Diana was repeatedly distracted by the one person who had been silent since she arrived, except for an occasional nod or short comment. It was the young man she didn’t know. While everyone was riveted to Diana’s story about the working in Maine, and during the bustling chatter of gossip, the young man had remained in the background, and there was no opening for Diana to ask his name.

But as time passed, Diana’s curiosity about him steadily increased. He was without doubt the most gifted and magically powerful individual present, after Diana herself. She could feel energy coming off his aura in pulses, like a slow heartbeat. If Phoebe had invited him to this gathering, he must be connected with the Order, but Diana was sure she had never seen him before. His eyes were so dark brown, they appeared black, and he was watching her with such intensity, she had glanced back at him half a dozen times before the rest of his face registered. All she could remember at first was eyes. He had thick curly dark hair that seemed to be trying to escape from his scalp, full lips and a rather large nose, but to balance those eyes, it needed to be.

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Phoebe circled the room offering canapés. As she took one, Diana said casually, “I don’t think I know the boy sitting by Calvin. Is he from the Boston Motherhouse?”

Phoebe looked over at the boy in question, gasped in horror and clapped a hand over her mouth—by this time she’d had three of Art’s martinis. “Oh, I’m so *sorry!*” she said, in a tone of voice that would have served if she’d accidentally maimed someone’s child. “Of *course*, I *completely* forgot, and he wanted to meet *you* just *desperately!* Here—” Putting the tray of canapés at great risk, she gestured with her free hand at the young man, who had deduced that he was being discussed and came to join them.

“Diana—this is David Hofstein. David, Diana Chilton. David came out here from the San Francisco House two years ago, that’s why you haven’t met. But now he’s...um...I’ll let him explain, actually.” Flushed to the roots of her light brown hair, Phoebe corrected the tray’s list to starboard in the nick of time and bolted for the kitchen.

Diana looked up at David inquisitively. Now that he was suddenly in touching distance, he seemed stricken by shyness and wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Pleased to meet you,” she said as brightly as she could. “Have a seat, why don’t you. Tell me why you wanted to meet me so badly.”

David flung himself into the chair next to her, making an impatient motion with his oddly large hands. “Oh, that’s Phoebe, she always exaggerates everything, I’d just heard people talking about you—good things, I mean. About your foundation and all that.”

“Bread and Roses. I haven’t been active with them for a while, you know.”

“Still. They’re an example for the whole city. And then there was...well...you know. That trouble you were in.”

“Oh, so people talk about that, do they?”

He turned towards her and that ferocious look was back in his eyes—at such close proximity, it almost seemed tactile. Diana thought that if she tried to stare him down, she’d end up with a migraine. “Only the ones who agreed with you, who thought you were right and the Council treated you like dirt.”

“I see...”

“I’m quitting the Order, that’s what Phoebe got so tongue-tied about. She didn’t have to be embarrassed, I’m not making any bones about it. It’s the right thing for me to do.”

“Okay...then you won’t be at Beltene, I take it?”

“Not sure I would have gone anyway. But no, I’m done, I’m out. Phoebe just asked me here tonight because we’re good friends, and you would be here.”

“How long had you been with the Order?”

“About six years. I went through all the training in San Francisco, then my

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mentor for Adeptus decided to come out here, and I just tagged along. I didn't have any ties in California."

"So you're Adeptus grade?"

"No, I—" he sighed heavily. "I was supposed to go through initiation two months ago. But I came off the retreat knowing it just wasn't the path I was meant to take. My mentor was pretty disappointed, but she said she understood."

Diana just nodded. It wasn't uncommon for members to hit a crisis point and leave just before reaching Adeptus. Something about that particular transition had a way of forcing issues. "So where do you think you might be going from here?"

"Hey, it's a big world. The Order isn't the only game around, you know. And plenty of people work solitary."

"None of which answers my question. You're lousy with talent, and don't try to deny it. If the Council wasn't all but drop-tackling you to keep you from leaving, there's got to be something you're not saying."

He grinned, a little sheepishly, which suddenly made him look rather appealing. He had very white teeth. "They weren't happy when I turned in my resignation. Of course, I don't have your *chutzpah*. I didn't tell them everything I was thinking."

"About what? You must have some serious beefs to get this far and then throw it all to the winds."

"Yeah, well...probably not their fault. The Order is what it is, I can't expect it to change. But I just realized..." he leveled an almost shifty look across the room toward the other guests as he trailed off, and leaned toward Diana, lowering his voice. "I just felt that I wanted something more practical, you know? I wanted some way of applying magic to the real world, use it to solve real problems. Something like your foundation does, except using magical techniques. I don't know, does that sound idiotic?"

For some reason, Diana's mouth had gone dry. *Déjà vu*...a mocking voice in her mind echoed. She licked her lips uneasily before she could answer. "I don't think so, not at all." She was afraid to say anything else. It was as though the floor had tilted, like a funhouse. David leaned even closer, and her fingers tightened on the chair arm involuntarily as she firmly resisted pulling back from him.

"That trouble you got into? Somebody told me that you were pushing the Council to—" he broke off as she shushed him, not even understanding why. She'd never been hesitant to talk about her censure and what led to it before now.

"I understand what you're saying, believe me. But this isn't the kind of conversation we should have at a cocktail party, David."

"I know, but—" this time another voice cut him off.

"Hey, what's going on over there? Are you two conniving some sort of subversive plot in the middle of Phoebe's living room?" Art's voice was louder

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than it needed to be, and there was a hard note underneath the humor. Suddenly affronted, Diana stiffened.

“Of course not, don’t be silly.”

David suddenly stood up and took a step toward Art, and Diana was alarmed to see that his lips had turned white, the sign of real anger.

“Are you calling Miss Chilton a subversive? Or me? It’s none of your business what we’re talking about. The jackboots don’t go with that sports jacket, *Arthur*.” He somehow made the name a scathing insult. Art’s face flushed deep red.

“Don’t you pull that sh—that nonsense with me, David. Diana had enough trouble ten years ago, and she finally got her head on straight, she doesn’t need you pulling her off into any more crackpot radical schemes.”

“Excuse *me*, Art!” Diana would have been angrier if she hadn’t been so astounded by this sudden eruption.

As though too furious to speak, the two men locked eyes in the kind of glare Diana imagined preceded a knife fight in Sicily, not that she’d ever seen one. She stood up herself, just as the electric lights flickered—probably in the whole building, given the combined abilities of the combatants. The floor shivered, and all the glasses on the sideboard rattled musically. Phoebe drew in a sharp breath.

“Boys, *stop it*,” their hostess said in a voice completely unlike her usual trilling deference. “Art—if you—if those bottles start—don’t...you...*dare!* *Either* of you!”

After a few tense moments in which Diana was genuinely unsure what might happen, etiquette prevailed. Art stepped back, shrugged his shoulders as though his jacket was too tight and turned to walk into the kitchen, muttering something under his breath which Diana was very glad no one but she could hear. She’d never have thought Art was anti-Semitic. Maybe he and David had squared off before. Phoebe made an impatient sound, threw down the small towel she’d been holding and followed him, shutting the door behind her. Suddenly deflated, David looked back at Diana. “What the hell?” he whispered. “What made him think we were—” He broke off as she urgently shook her head, afraid that any more furtive exchanges might get someone else started. The room was very quiet, and Calvin had put his arm tightly around Evelyn’s shoulders. To break the shocked stillness, Diana went over to the sideboard to put her empty glass on a tray.

“You know, it’s getting pretty late,” Evelyn said. “I need to be at work in the morning, and you’re teaching a class, aren’t you, Fran?”

“Well, not until...I mean, yes, I probably should be getting home.”

“Oh, for gods’ sake, don’t everyone rush out while Phoebe is in the kitchen,” Diana said. “She’ll never forgive you.”

“I’ll go,” David said firmly. “I’m really a fifth wheel in this crowd now, anyway. I knew that when I made up my mind to resign.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m glad I got to meet you, Diana.”

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The others murmured politely in response as David tersely said good-night, with a wave half over one shoulder at them. He walked rapidly down the short hall to the spare room to get his coat. Diana, mindless of what anyone thought, hurried after him.

“No, wait—” She caught his arm as he emerged with his coat and pulled him across the hall into Phoebe’s bedroom where there was a phone with a pad of paper by the bed. “Give me your phone number, at least.”

He stared down at the paper and pencil she pushed against his chest. “Why?”

“We need to talk. After Beltene would probably be best.”

“Well...” he slowly took the pencil and scribbled briefly. “I’m looking for a job, so I’m not home very much.”

“I’ll keep trying.”

His mouth crooked into a half-smile. “Pushy, aren’t you? My Bubba warned me about girls like you.”

Diana couldn’t repress a short laugh. “I kind of doubt that.”

Late the next afternoon, Diana was still brooding over the cocktail party an hour after she’d woken up. She couldn’t shake the uncomfortable suspicion that the little tiff between Art and David had been her fault. Doubtless there was some history between them which had nothing to do with her, but she was sure that her presence had made everyone tense. She felt more apprehensive about attending a large ritual than ever.

She finally remembered that she had asked not to be disturbed, and checked with the front desk for phone messages. To her surprise, Phoebe had called several times.

“Oh, Diana, I just wondered if you’d like to meet for lunch, but I guess you were out.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I still don’t know whether I’ll be staying here after Beltene or not, but I thought I’d look at the apartment listings.” This was technically true, she’d just happened to be reading them at 4:00 in the morning.

“It’s pretty grim, isn’t it? The only places worth considering have waiting lists a mile long.”

“There are options, though.”

“It would be wonderful if you stayed. Can I make an appointment now for lunch tomorrow? Fran would like to come along, too, if that’s all right.”

Diana was so astonished, it took her a moment to reply. “I’d love to, and Fran is welcome to come. I’d enjoy getting better acquainted, I barely know her.”

“We can do some shopping, too. You mentioned that you hadn’t brought much with you. We’ll be in the hotel lobby at noon, okay?”

After she hung up, Diana sat looking at the phone for some minutes, wondering if she could trust her own assessment of any situation these days.

3

Over the next few days two lunches, a long shopping trip and an evening of cocktails in a small lounge all went congenially, although people still seemed a little uncertain around Diana. Those who got together with her repeatedly, like Phoebe and Fran, seemed to shrug off their feelings and relax into normality by the second or third meeting, at least as far as Diana could tell.

Nevertheless, the night of Beltene, Diana arrived at the Motherhouse with considerable trepidation. Very few people would be present whom she knew well—in fact, she thought she had seniority as an Adeptus over everyone except Daniel Cobert, who as the new Presiding Magus was officiating for the ceremonial portion of the night. Of the other Council members still in the Boston area, all were visiting the first Beltene celebration of the House in Providence. Diana sternly refused to speculate on how recently they'd decided to do so, *en masse*, and why—Providence was the first new House to be established in fifty years, after all.

When she cautiously greeted Daniel, his reaction was no more perspicacious than her friends'. His unctuous smile disappeared for a moment and he raised his eyebrows, then seemed to dismiss his perceptions and turned to greet the next attendee. Diana heaved a small sigh of relief, although Daniel had never been the brightest star in the Order's magical firmament.

She wondered if she would be left a wallflower for the first time ever. It happened—the rule about Beltene was that participants never questioned what took place after the lights were extinguished at midnight. You simply accepted whatever did or did not ensue—one partner, several consecutively, several at once, or none at all.

The ceremony itself was a bit dull. With everyone in the customary masks and toga-like drapery, Diana honestly wasn't sure who some of the participants were—a significant number had become Novices during the three years she'd been away. She saw immediately what Phoebe had meant about there being a lot of stags—the term the Order used for male participants who outnumbered the women present. With so much attrition and so many relative newcomers

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to the Order's traditions, Diana detected much less tense excitement than she was used to. *I really am a relic*, she thought wryly. *I'm actually thinking, "it's not like the old days."*

For her, the intensity of the smells and sounds were highly distracting and not always very arousing. She'd been careful to hunt earlier that evening, so she wasn't bothered by blood thirst despite the close quarters. But her apprehension was proving justified. Insofar as the ritual constraints allowed, the other people in the cavernous hall were drawing away from her. One man, whom she hadn't seen before everyone was garbed and didn't recognize from what parts of him were visible, seemed to be staring at her rather intently—at least, she caught him looking away when she glanced at him at least half a dozen times. Initially he was on the far side of the room from her, but as people moved in the steps of the ritual, he alone kept shifting closer.

Diana had completely forgotten that when the lights were extinguished, she would be able to see in the dark. She was a bit startled at how self-conscious she suddenly felt, not because anything was going on that she hadn't seen many times, but because she knew that no one else present realized they could be seen. Diana recalled what Thomas had said about darkness giving an illusion of privacy. The mild intoxicant in the chalice wine had no effect on her whatsoever, and she felt, not just awkwardly out of place, but rather like a voyeur. She sat down on the thick carpet and turned toward the wall behind her, frustrated and embarrassed at once, and regretting that she'd agreed to attend. There was a lot of movement around the room, as usually was the case at first, so she didn't realize she was being approached until someone knelt behind her and put his or her hands on Diana's shoulders.

She started, then relaxed as the hands slid down her arms. Whoever it was seemed to be utterly fascinated with the coolness of her skin. Diana sat still for several minutes as the hands roved over her body, less sensuous than curious. Finally she turned around to face her inquisitive partner, and as she'd guessed, it was the man who had been watching her all evening. He hadn't removed his mask, and that wasn't per custom. She could feel his fingers trembling, as though he was both afraid of her and irresistibly attracted despite himself. Now that he was closer, she thought he seemed familiar, but she couldn't quite connect the way he smelled to her now, and the way his warm skin glowed to her night vision, with what she remembered of people she'd known in her old life. He had learned all he could by caressing her skin, and he leaned in to kiss her, at first tentatively and then harder and more aggressively. Diana couldn't identify him by taste or feel, either, and decided to stop worrying about who he was and just enjoy this unexpected pairing for all it was worth.

Her unknown partner kept both of them occupied for several hours, and

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his lovemaking was similar to his initial approach—exploratory, as though he was collecting information about her, inside and out. Diana felt something of the same inquiring mood, however. Beltene etiquette denied participants the right to ask a partner's name. She got the feeling that this man knew how badly she wanted to know who he was and was amusing himself by refusing to tell. That may have been an illusion, but it was odd that the only scrap of clothing he never took off was his mask. She wanted to abandon herself to the intense pleasure he was giving her, and found this annoyingly difficult. The intoxicant would have helped, of course, but an even greater hindrance than sobriety was the fact that Diana kept thinking, almost obsessively, about Gregory. It was as though something was persistently reminding her of him, and she didn't know what that could be. Several times, Diana took the lead, pushing the man down and fucking him astraddle as hard as she dared without revealing her real strength, but no matter what she did, he wouldn't speak or even moan out loud.

No one else approached the two of them, and when dawn came, Diana was as exhausted and sleepy as the rest of the circle. Some people left the ritual chamber, either to retire to a private setting or to preserve their anonymity, but the masked man seemed in no hurry to leave. Eventually they fell asleep, curled up against each other on the deep, soft Oriental carpet, along with those others who were too satiated or blissful to move from the hall.

Diana wasn't sure what awoke her, and for a moment or two she blinked groggily at a blurred rectangular outline of light that seemed to be hanging in space. The apparition resolved itself into daylight shining around the edges of a window blind on the wall thirty feet away. She remembered then where she was, and sat up slowly, wondering what time it could be. She usually didn't awaken before mid-afternoon, but Beltene revelers seldom slept so late, even with chalice hangover. Those who'd stayed frequently went out for late breakfast or lunch together, taking a sly glee in picking some highly conservative venue and feigning nonchalant normality. She looked around and saw the masked man sprawled on his back next to her, snoring softly. His mask was askew, and as she pondered whether she could get away with tugging it off, he stirred, and suddenly sat up with a gasp, groping to his side with one hand. She remembered that for him, the room was still very dark, and she clasped his hand. He started but didn't pull away.

"It's all right, I haven't gone anywhere." She kept her voice low, because there were a dozen or so other sleepers in the room.

"What time is it?" His voice was gravelly and he was slurring his consonants—the intoxicant hadn't been inert for him.

"Gods, I don't know. I'm not sure why I woke up." It would have been nice

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to awaken to bird song and bubbling brooks on May Day, but what she dimly heard, through the thick exterior walls, was the traffic on Beacon Street. “Are you hungry? I thought maybe we could go somewhere and talk.”

He glanced toward her. “I’m starving,” he finally said. “And you’re right, we do need to talk.”

With those words, Diana recognized his voice, and a shock ran through her. She started to speak, but caught herself until they’d left the ritual chamber. She got to her feet, and he followed suit much more clumsily, groping for her hand. She led him cautiously around their sleeping peers to the changing room at the side of the hall. *He does know I can see in the dark*, she thought. When they were inside the changing room and had closed the door behind them, Diana turned on the light, both of them wincing despite the dim wattage intended to spare the eyes of those walking in from the darkened hall.

“All right, you can take that mask off, Jack.”

He grinned then, and pulled off the mask, tossing it jauntily aside. “Ya got me.”

“The minute you opened your mouth, finally. No *wonder* I couldn’t stop thinking about Gregory all night. I was with his best friend! So what gives with the Lone Ranger gag, anyway, and why even bother? Do you think I have x-ray vision or something?” The light humor in her tone was entirely dishonest.

His grin disappeared, and he glanced at the door. “We don’t really want to talk here. Let’s get dressed and go someplace private.”

4

They went back to Diana's room at the Hilton, because they couldn't talk in a public setting. Jack wanted a steak with all the trimmings, and Diana obligingly ordered him one from room service.

"I thought you were in Colorado," she said after the food had been delivered.

"I was."

"Obviously you didn't quit the Order, after all. Now I feel silly."

"Is that what you thought?"

"That's what I assumed—but so did nearly everyone else. You just disappeared. No one reported seeing you at one of the other Houses and nobody heard boo from you. What else would we think? So what happened?"

She had to wait for a reply because Jack was chewing steak with great élan, washing it down with gulps of Coca-Cola. "I took a leave of absence, that's all," he said finally. "It wasn't anyone else's business. I was mad as hell at the Council for what they did to Gregs and I just needed to cool off."

"Why didn't you speak to the Council on his behalf, then, if you were so mad?"

Jack gave her a quick mirthless grin. "You mean like you? I didn't have your connections, sugar. I tried and got told to shut my face or get the same boot Gregs did. I wasn't ready for that, I'd just made Adeptus. Besides, I was flat broke. My dad offered me a job with his firm out in Colorado, so I decided to go out there and work for a while, just to get flush. I've been back here a couple of times to see Gregs, I just didn't come into the city."

"Gregory didn't tell me you came back here to see him." Diana felt a little miffed, although she realized that she should have guessed Jack had been in touch. That explained why Gregory knew that Jack was out in Colorado back in 1952, and why his tone had held no rancor when he'd mentioned his old friend.

"That's Gregs. He never was a talker, that's why the Council was so fouled up, thinking for one second that he'd go blathering secrets around. Everyone who knew Gregs knew how screwy that was."

"There was something else behind all that, I know it."

"Yeah, well, you made enough noise about it then to make them damned

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uncomfortable. I'm surprised they let you off so easy."

"I was formally censured, Jack."

"I'll say it again—you got off easy, from what I was hearing. Roderick always had a soft spot for you. Take it from me, anyone else would have been banished along with Gregs. Of course, maybe they were too scared of you."

"Scared? Of *me*?" Her startled reaction wasn't exaggerated.

Jack just grinned at her and applied himself to his food. Diana was silent, letting him eat in peace. He looked like he needed it: he was considerably leaner and hard-muscled than she remembered, and his dusty brown hair was already thinning at the crown and receding from his temples. It was no wonder that she hadn't recognized him by feel, although she should have remembered his unusual hazel eyes, the colors of a muddy river. He hadn't commented on her failure to order any food for herself, and she was letting that topic hang between them.

When he'd all but licked his plate clean, Jack sprawled back in the armchair where he'd sat to eat, heaving a blissful sigh. "Well, thanks for buying me lunch," he said with a teasing half smile.

"Anything for old times sake. But you know what they say about a free lunch."

He grinned. "Yeah, I know, you're full of questions, aren't you?"

"And you're not?"

His grin faded. "Maybe just a few."

"You're not running off to any appointments or anything, are you?"

"Well, no, but...truth is, I don't really have anywhere to stay at the moment. I just blew into town a couple of days ago, and I've mostly been sleeping on sofas. The rest of the Order is as surprised to see me as you are, so I don't feel terribly welcome."

"Sorry to hear that. The Hilton would take a dim view of you sharing the room with me, I'm afraid. We'll be tossed out for indecent behavior."

"I know."

After they'd looked at each other for a moment, Jack wearing his most insufferably endearing puppy-dog face, Diana heaved a loud sigh. "I *suppose* I could hide you for a night or two—if you promise to be discreet."

"Swear on a thousand gods, they'll never know I'm here." He straightened up. "Okay, now that we've got that settled—who wants to start?"

"I'll start. Have you heard from Gregory since last June?"

Jack blinked. "Last June? No. No, honest, Diana. We didn't really keep in touch, y'know? I'd heard from him...let's see. It's been more than a year now. He told me that he'd seen you again, and he told me you'd gotten divorced, but you weren't free yet. That sounded cock-eyed, but I knew I'd be wasting my time asking him what he meant. I got the message, between the lines, y'know, that he was hoping he'd pick you up on the rebound somehow."

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“He might’ve, too, if he hadn’t fouled things up. So you didn’t hear about him selling his house in Manchester and moving on?”

“What? No. Shit. I was going to go up there and see him.”

“By now, there’re probably three new houses on the lot, or at least the foundations.”

“Jesus. What gives? Where’d he go?”

Diana hesitated automatically. There was no reason not to share information about Gregory with Jack—all three of them were Adeptus rank and practically siblings in the Order. But it wasn’t Gregory’s confidentiality that restrained her. Thomas’ voice echoed in her memory: *One doesn’t talk casually about Levoissier...* Then she stiffened. *He can kiss my ass*, she thought, recalling the way she’d seethed at Gregory’s news in June.

“He’s back with Levoissier,” she almost snapped. Jack gaped at her, his expression a portrait of utter stupefaction. After a moment in which her friend seemed incapable of composing a spoken response, Diana said dryly, “You’re wearing about the same look that I did. I can’t verify this news independently, mind you. I’m only repeating what Gregory said.”

Jack finally closed his mouth and swallowed so hard, even a mortal would have heard the gulp. “When did this happen?”

“When I saw him in June, he was on his way to some mysterious rendezvous up in Canada. He had to get up there without anyone’s help—he was thumbing rides, he said—and meet Levoissier in Montréal. Of course, where they went from there is anyone’s guess—the moon, for all I know. Except that the whole Order seems to be migrating to France these days—or at least Providence.”

“Well, not exactly, they were just leaving Boston, because—” he broke off and looked at her sharply. “You *know* why because.”

“You tell me.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Diana, let’s not beat around the bushes, okay? I’m not trying to be cute, I just haven’t had a chance to talk yet. Because of your working, of course, the one that turned on you.”

“How do you know about that? Nobody else here seems to, and you’ve been out in silver lode country.” Her eyes narrowed, and she saw him draw back a little. “Did you get one of those warnings?”

“Well, I—I got *a* warning.”

“From *whom*? Levoissier?”

“Jesus, Diana, don’t give me the third degree! It’s not my *fault*!” As she glared at him, trying to control herself before he fled the room, he flung up his hands. “From Gregs, but it’s not what you think. He didn’t tell me any details. He just said he was helping you with something he was afraid might get out of control in a really big way, and I should be aware of it. He said he took down

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his athanor to break the connection, just in case.”

“But why did he tell you, what did you have to do with it?”

“I helped him build his athanor.”

Diana sagged. “Oh. But...why didn't he tell *me*? Why didn't anyone warn me and Thomas, if so many people knew—”

“Would you have listened? Would you have stopped it? *Could* you have stopped it?”

“I suppose not.”

“Did it really turn, Diana? See, I really don't know. All I know is...”

“Is what?”

“All I know is what I see,” he said softly. “And feel. And sense from you. I know what you are now.”

She studied his solemn face for a moment. “If that was true, you wouldn't be alone with me.”

“I'm not afraid of you. I don't get that kind of feeling from you, at all. And I ought to know, after last night, wouldn't I?”

“So what am I, Jack, since you're so smart?”

He shrugged. “Okay. Vampire?”

She looked away from him. “Am I the last person in the Order to find out about this? Is that why everyone's been shying away from me since I came back—everyone else has known all along that—”

“—that there are vampires running around and you're one of them?” Jack broke in. “Hell, no. I'll bet most people in the Order are more skeptical about the supernatural than your average church-going Christian. But you see...I've met one, a vampire, I mean. A couple of them, actually. They usually don't come out in the open and let anyone know, and you can see why. You practically get lynched for selling comic books these days. How long would a vampire last if he showed up on *The Tonight Show*?”

It was Diana's turn to stare open-mouthed, her voice choked off by conflicting emotions of stunned astonishment, betrayal and anger at the unfairness of it all. “But—where did *you* meet other vampires? How did you recognize them, and why did they let you know they were real? Thomas said he knew others, but he wouldn't tell me anything about them, no names or where they could be found or what they look like, nothing. He just said we'd probably cross paths sooner or later, and some kind of vampire etiquette prevented him from breaking their confidence.”

“I can't tell you much more, Diana. Besides, I don't know very much, probably not even their real names, or at least the names they'd be using now, and...I don't remember everything I knew.”

She blinked. “They blotted your memory?”

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“Some of it. I asked them to.”

“You *asked* them?”

He nodded, his eyes distant.

“Gods, Jack, there’s a hell of a story here, I can see that.”

“There is, but not a tenth of the story that you’ve got. Is *this*—” he reached out and touched her hand, and she knew that he meant her cold skin—“what you wanted, Diana, or was it just a side effect?”

“It wasn’t what I thought I wanted, but...the Sidhe always know what you really want, that’s what Gregory told me, before it all even started. I didn’t know...vampires...had anything to do with it until I got to Maine. And even when I knew, I never thought I wanted to *be* one. Gods, I...I should have known better than to get involved.”

“So, how *did* you get involved, then?” Jack was studying her intently, and his voice was quiet in the way he got when he was so focused that he begrudged the energy to speak more loudly. “Tell me, Diana. If you think your whole adventure is gossip fodder, you’re wrong. Everyone knows that something’s happened to you, because they can see it, and feel it magically. And they’re spooked, I won’t lie about it. But these are the same people who got the shivers around Levoissier, and no one knows *what* he is. They don’t know what you are, exactly, they just know that you’re something different now, something else. I only know because I’ve seen it before, and not one person in ten thousand can say that, at least not who remembers the encounter afterwards. *You* know what I mean. So tell me what happened, and how Gregs was part of it.”

“If I tell you all that, will you tell me about these vampires you met?”

“As much as I can, I swear.”

“Did you meet them in Colorado?”

“No, it was here.”

Diana was silent for a while, thinking. She was remembering the stifling afternoon, not quite a year ago, when she’d sat at Moira’s kitchen table spinning the whole fantastic tale out to her, while Moira let cigarette after cigarette burn out, forgotten, as she listened entranced. She didn’t think the affair would strike Jack as quite so exotic. She drew in, from habit, a deep breath to compose herself. “All right. You’re sure you don’t want another Coca Cola or something? We’re going to be here a while.”

He shook his head, smiling a little. “If I get parched, I’ll get a glass of water from the bathroom. Should I worry about how thirsty you are?”

She smiled grimly. “I’m good for another day or so. I might order something chocolate from room service later on, though.” She considered for a few moments. “I better start back when Gregory was expelled from the Order, in forty-seven. I don’t know if that’s really when it all began, but that’s when I started consciously

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taking the actions that put me on this path.” She launched into the story of how Levoissier recruited her as an apprentice after Gregory and Jack had both left the Order.

5

It was late afternoon by the time she finished her story—Jack had a great many questions. What struck Diana about his reaction, though, was that he didn't seem as interested in vampires or the physical destruction of the spell's turning, or the apparent reality of the Tylwyth Teg, as she'd expected any magical person to be. He seemed wholly absorbed by another aspect of her tale entirely.

"So...tell me more about this idea of yours that started the whole thing—this crazy idea you had that there's some kind of secret cabal out there pulling strings? Did you really think that?"

"Come on, Jack, you know I thought the Order had some level that was working politically. I still think they were exerting some pretty suspicious influence during the war. How else did Stephen manage to spend three years on a tin can gunboat and never see action? And I think the Order must have helped Thomas fake his 4-F and get into the civil defense command up in Bangor."

"You said he was a lawyer, and loaded, he didn't need the Order for that."

"Maybe not, but it's still fishy, and he admitted they'd helped him in the past. Those are just examples, there's lots more—all little things, but they'd have to be, or they'd be noticed."

Jack shrugged. "So why didn't you keep on pushing it? I know, I know, you were censured—but then Levoissier took you under his wing, that made you gold. Wouldn't he have told you if you were on the ball?"

"You're kidding, right? Levoissier? Tell me anything I actually wanted to know?"

"My, aren't we bitter, though."

Diana snorted. "Jack...you have no idea."

"We're getting off the point."

"So what *is* your point?"

To her surprise, Jack got up and paced across the hotel room, then back, scowling. He stopped in front of her, hands behind his back. "You mentioned something about asking Thomas Morgan if he'd ever thought about starting an underground group himself. He said it was impossible for something like that

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to be completely secret and do any good. I think he was bulling you about that.”

“What do you mean? You mean he really does know about groups and he was just lying to me? Oh, Jack, I really don’t think so—”

“No, I’m not calling him a liar, not about that. But I don’t agree that you have to be public to work real change. I think it is possible to exert influence and still be unknown and unseen. What it takes is...” he started pacing again, and Diana watched him, frowning. She wondered if the ritual intoxicant had quite worn off yet. “What it takes is power, and resources,” he went on, his voice rising a little. “And you’ve got those now, Diana! I mean, you always had money, but you never used any of it. You gave it all to that white elephant of yours—”

“Excuse me?” She bristled at this characterization of Bread and Roses, even though she had stepped down from its Board three years ago.

“Oh, hell, I’m not saying it didn’t turn out pretty well, but it just sucked you dry, you gave it everything you had. And for what? It didn’t make you feel good about yourself. You said it, you just got more and more overwhelmed and frustrated, because no matter how big your charity grew, it could never do more than scrape the surface. You couldn’t feed and house everyone on the planet, educate every child and bring about world peace. But nothing less than that would have satisfied you, in the end.”

“Well...” Suddenly irritated, she fumbled for a reply. “So what? Would Bread and Roses have done any better if it had gone underground and operated like some kind of—”

“No, no, no, I’m not saying that. It’s great, for what it is. But it wasn’t really what *you* wanted. I always thought that, and now I can really see it. And now this working of yours, you know—Morgan was right, what he said to you, about it not being a failure at all. You did get what you wanted, what you’ve always wanted. You’ve got power and you’ve cut free from all your ties, including Bread and Roses. They’re flying on their own, you’re free, your conscience is clear. Now you can do what you really were meant to be doing, what you’ve wanted to do, right from the start.”

“You mean—”

“I mean found another group, a totally different kind of operation, one that doesn’t plod away at street level, that attacks everything that’s wrong with society right at its roots.”

Diana studied him silently for a moment. “Sounds like a tall order.”

“What did you go to Maine for, then? What did you go through all *this* for?”

“I didn’t choose it, Jack! Thomas told me that he didn’t know of any groups and he didn’t want to start one. That was the end of it. I got involved with the working because...” She hated to admit it out loud even now. “I was just drunk with the idea of that much power. I couldn’t even think about what I’d use it

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for. I just *wanted* it. And the worst thing is, I was the last person to know that. Thomas saw right through me before the end of our very first conversation. Levoissier knew it, that's why the bastard set me up to meet Thomas in the first place. Even the Teg knew, damn it. *Everyone* knew that I was nothing but a power hungry egomaniac wearing the sheep skin of a do-gooder."

"Oh, that's ridiculous. You're no egotist! Diana—" Jack came rapidly back to her chair and dropped down to one knee, taking hold of her hands as though he was going to propose to her. Diana drew back a little at the intensity in his eyes. "Don't you see, that's what's wrong with the world now, the wrong people have all the power, and the people who *should* have it, think they don't deserve it, or can't handle it, or that it's wrong to even want it. Women, y'know, *women* should have the power, then maybe we wouldn't live in a hell of faceless corporations and wars."

"You remember what Lord Acton said. Doesn't power change people?"

"Nuts to Lord Acton. I never believed that bullshit. Did someone die and make him God?"

"Of course not, but I think a lot of people have observed independently that power tends to corrupt people who get it."

"Because the people who go after it, and get it, want it for evil reasons to begin with. Who's ever proved that someone like Hitler or Stalin, or Ford for that matter, were one bit different before they got hold of a lot of power over people? All those slobs you see griping and complaining on their way to and from work, and stabbing their coworkers in the back to get ahead, and gypping the little old guy in the corner store out of ten cents every time they can get away with it—what do you think they'd be like if someone gave them a million bucks and put them in some big office?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"But then there are people like you. You have a trust fund, for god's sake, but you didn't grow up into some white-fingered society lady."

"Well, I didn't exactly have a normal upbringing, did I?"

"Neither did Stephen lah-di-dah Winthrop, your precious ex-, and look how he turned out. No, you're just naturally principled, Diana. You deserve what you've got, because you can handle it."

"Well, that's a very flattering thought. Not everyone would agree with you there."

"Nuts to everyone agreeing."

"So who died and made *you* God?" He scowled at her and got up, pacing back and forth a few more times. Watching him, Diana felt uneasy. "Jack, I think you need to calm down a little. Maybe the day after Beltene isn't the most auspicious time to discuss something this...serious." When he threw his arms

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up in an exaggerated shrug, she went on, “Is there some kind of hurry? And where are we going with this, anyway? So, I’ve got power, or that’s what you think. So what? What’s it to you?”

He went back to the armchair and sat down again, finally—Diana thought he must have been getting tired by now. “It’s obvious. I’m asking you if you want to start a group, a movement, whatever you’d call it. With me. And other people, we’ll find more. With someone like you at the core of it, we won’t be like all the associations and guilds and unions out there. We’ll be something different. We’ll be what you’ve been looking for. Remember what they say about searching the world over for what’s in your own back yard? You’ve been looking in corners for your own tail. It’s been a part of you all along.”

“You want to co-found this thing with me?”

“Yes!”

“You mean you want to be a vampire, too.”

He blinked. “What? No! I never said that.”

“But, Jack—that was my whole idea when I went looking for Thomas Morgan, don’t you remember? Anyone can found a group. I was looking for immortals, or at the least, people with an extended lifespan. I may have been disappointed, but my rationale for that hasn’t changed. If the group’s members can’t survive more than a generation, the whole thing will fall apart. How can you and I change that, if you’re mortal and only good for a few decades? What’s going to make this group so different from all the others?”

He leaned toward her. “*You*. You will be the continuity at the core of this group. You’re what will hold it together.”

“While everyone else gets old and dies, and I keep having to train new people who do the same, over and over? Wow, what fun for me.”

“Don’t take such a selfish view, Diana, for god’s sake. I might change my mind, I’d have to get used to the idea. I don’t know very much about it, and I’m not ready to give up steak dinners for a liquid diet. Oh, yeah, I know you guys can eat food, but I saw the way you wrinkled your nose up when room service left the tray.”

“So political idealism is trumped by fine dining?”

Jack shook his head, looking frustrated. “Why are you dodging this?”

“I’m not dodging it, Jack, it’s just...this is all coming at me from out of the blue, and I guess I need some time to think about it. Before this morning, I never thought I’d see you again. I came down here for Beltene, and also to see if magical people would run screaming from the room when they saw me, which is almost the case. What are you doing here?”

Jack shrugged. “Same as you, I was asked—Daniel sent me a note. I think he was just trying to reel in as many absent members as he could so he’d have

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something to preside over. That self-important ego of his would never recover if his first major ritual got cancelled for lack of attendance—especially a Beltene.”

“But all the way from Colorado, with no place to stay? Come on. What did you do, leave everything behind and hitchhike all the way out here?”

“I didn’t have much to leave. I’ve been living in my parents’ basement. And I took the train, for your information. Trouble is, the train ticket cost most of what I had.”

Diana sat back in the chair, frowning as she pondered the possible significance of all this. *Seven years and seven years*, she recalled Gregory saying. It had been seven years since she’d last seen Jack, and now they’d simply run into each other—and he knew about vampires. Where the Teg were involved, was there ever any such thing as a coincidence?

“What?” she heard Jack say, and realized that her expression must be unsettling to say the least.

“I don’t *know* what, just yet,” she said, because “nothing” would be dishonest and evasive, and Jack deserved better. “Look, Jack, we can talk more about your idea, all right? You promised to tell me about these other vampires you met. I’m assuming none of them was Thomas, or you’d have said something—wouldn’t you?”

“No, I never met him, but I have to confess: I’d heard of him. Not by that name, but when you described him, I realized who he was.”

Once again, Diana could only stare at him, even as she chided herself for being surprised by anything at this point. Thomas could hardly know other vampires without their knowing him, but apparently, these other vampires didn’t share his respect for discretion. “Go on.”

Jack’s bombastic attitude had suddenly deflated. “I think I’ll get a glass of water,” he mumbled, and Diana waited patiently while he went to the bathroom, unwrapped a glass, filled it at the sink and returned. The glass sloshed a little water on the carpet when he sat down, and Diana realized that his hands were shaking. She raised her eyebrows but didn’t say anything to call attention to her observation. Jack cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

“You understand, I’ve never told anyone about this. Not Gregs, not my mentor, no one, not ever.”

“It stays in this room, I swear.”

“I know. I didn’t mean that so much, just that—you keep jumping to the conclusion that people haven’t been telling you things. It’s not like everyone knew this but you, and I sure don’t want you to think that Gregs was holding out on you. He really didn’t know.”

Diana nodded. “I appreciate you telling me that.” She realized that he was stalling, and refused to feed into it.

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“It was during the war. I had a leave, in October of forty-three, but it was only five days, so I didn’t have time to go out and see my folks. We tied up in New York City, and I took the train up here to see Gregs, but that was about all I could do except goof off. I didn’t have a girl waiting for me or anything like that, and most of my other friends were in the service or out of the country. You were totally taken up with Bread and Roses. I was at loose ends, so I just went to bars and got plastered with other servicemen. I didn’t even pick up any of the good time girls, that’s how pathetic I was.

“I was up until all hours, because I hated to be home and just sleep. The second night I was in some dive at about three in the morning, and I noticed this fella standing across the room. The way he was dressed, and the way he acted, he wouldn’t have stood out in a crowd anywhere, but for me, he might as well have been tap dancing down the bar. I couldn’t tell you anything specific, you know—there was just something different about him. I was pretty drunk, and that made me stupid, so I was staring at him a lot, trying to figure out what it was that bugged me about him. Finally I realized that he was looking back at me. Then he came over to where I was sitting. ‘Got a problem, pal?’ he said, but he didn’t say it the way most guys would. It almost sounded like he was reciting a line. He had this cultured voice.”

“What did he look like?”

“Well, that was another thing. He didn’t look like he ate his Cheerios, that’s for sure. Thin, not too tall, smooth skin, moved like a dancer—had that sort of...girlish feeling. Like Peter Lorre playing the fairy in *The Maltese Falcon*. But he was a lot better looking than Lorre.”

“Okay, but, come on—blond, brunette, redhead? White, Negro, Oriental? Can you give me a *clue*?”

“Oh, well, white, dark hair, gray eyes—a lot like yours, actually—clean shaven, pale. Looked a little like a frog, if I had to guess his nationality.”

“Did you find out his name?”

“He gave me *a* name. But you’re getting ahead of me.”

“Sorry. So, ‘got a problem, pal’—then what?”

“I just mumbled something. He looked like I could have mopped up the floor with him, but I wasn’t fooled. I could just feel the power coming off him, and he knew it, which was even creepier. I could see this curiosity in his eyes, he couldn’t figure out why I picked him out when no one else in the room did. What was I going to say, ‘hi, I’m Jack, I’m a magician?’”

“Nothing like cutting right to the chase.”

“No, thanks! All I wanted to do was get out of there, but I didn’t know what I’d do if he followed me. I was about ready to piss in my pants. But then something outside caught his attention. His head jerked around, and he looked

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at me and the door a couple of times, then he jumped like he'd gotten an electric shock, and he was just—gone.”

“Gone? You mean he literally vanished?”

“I don't think so. I think he just moved that fast, plus took advantage of my being distracted, because I kept looking at the door, too, to see what he was looking at. Anyway, I'd had enough by then. I went up to the bar and paid my tab and asked the bartender if there was a back door. He'd seen me talking to that guy, and he just waved me out through the kitchen. 'Keep an eye out, sailor,' he said. He asked if I wanted him to call me a cab but I didn't want to spend the money, I had a room only a couple of blocks away.

“The back door opened out into an alley, and right away I was sorry, because it was darker than an old cellar out there. They turned all the lights off that late, like Boston was going to get air raids or something. I was standing there trying to get my bearings, and that's when something grabbed me from behind.”

“Mr. Got a Problem Pal?”

“Turned out not, although that's what I thought in the first few seconds. It was so fast, and whatever grabbed me was so strong, I couldn't even take in a breath to yell. I was in a one-armed chokehold, and the guy's other hand was yanking my head sideways, and then I felt something clamp onto my neck, and there was this horrible *tearing* feeling...” Jack paused, swallowing hard. “But then he let go of me, and suddenly there were other people there and I was in the middle of a wild fight. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear grunts and curses and the sounds of fists hitting flesh, and a body slamming into the wall, hard—you'd have thought bones were breaking, from the sound of it. Then something hit me and I blacked out.”

Jack took a long drink from his water glass, and Diana could tell he wished it contained something a lot stronger. “I woke up tied to a chair in a room someplace.”

“Tied to a chair?”

“Not...it was just a loop around my arms and body, like they didn't want me to wake up and jump up without them knowing. But someone was standing right next to me, a little behind so I couldn't see him right away. I wasn't blindfolded or anything like that. Across the room there was a little group of people, and they were talking to some...character...who was tied up a lot more thoroughly than I was. It was a woman, doing the talking. She was taller than you, had one of those lean, hard bodies like female athletes have, not sexy at all but she looked like she could handle herself. Dark, kind of swarthy skin, the kind of woman who shaves more often than I do—you know the type?”

“I think so,” Diana's tone was a bit wry.

“Hey, I'm not trying to be smart-alecky, just descriptive. You wanted to

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know what they looked like. I heard someone call her Janna or Janice...but not quite that. It was an unusual name, so I probably didn't hear it right. There were three guys standing with her, and then the one from the bar was standing next to me. He saw that I'd woken up and put his hand on my shoulder, that's how I saw who he was." Jack paused a moment. "That's all I actually remember."

"That's it? You mean they blanked your memory out?"

"Yeah."

Diana's brow creased. "But, Jack...how do you know that? You said you asked for your memory to be erased. If you don't remember asking—"

"I saw them again—well, the one from the bar, and one of the guys who'd been standing across the room. I think they were following up to see if their memory-blanking had taken, and whether I was going to blow their cover. Apparently, I'm very resistant to whatever it is that they do. It might be because of the magical training, I don't know. But when I told them what I still remembered, they admitted a few things to me. I swore up and down that I'd never breathe a word of it to a soul—but I have this feeling that you wouldn't be included in that promise."

"Why?"

"Because I'm sure they'd want to know about you, which means they probably would want you to know about them."

Thomas had said essentially the same thing, but Diana still pondered it dubiously. "So, they claimed that you asked for your memory to be erased?"

"I believed them. I had this very uncomfortable sense that I'd seen something...ugly. I know that sounds like a strange thing to say when I was in the Navy, and there was a war going on. But I was never in the thick of the action there—like your precious ex-, somehow I always seemed to be stationed someplace pretty safe. You won't hear me complaining about that! But I just had this feeling..." he shuddered, to Diana's amazement. She'd never thought of Jack as squeamish.

"Did you ask them what that might have been?"

"Yeah. Yeah, they told me. They said I'd walked right into an ambush, basically—oh, not of me, they were staking out that block tracking down some kind of rogue vampire. They said they had to destroy him, and I saw it. They didn't give me any details. I didn't want any. I did feel a little less—sticky—once I knew what was bugging me."

"Rogue vampire...Thomas never mentioned that."

"Sounds like there's a hell of a lot he didn't mention."

"He seemed rather confident that I'd run into some of these other vampires sooner or later and learn the answers from them. You said they gave you names?"

"The one who was in the bar said his name was Avery. The other one

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introduced himself as Ned. They didn't give any last names. Ned was the one who did most of the talking—I had the feeling that he was glad to have someone he could be honest with. Avery was quieter, and he kept giving Ned looks, like he was saying too much, although he didn't drop any bombshells as far as I could tell. He's the one who told me that there were only a small number of them, but they did a lot of different things in the normal world, and he even knew one who was an attorney, and did a lot of progressive political stuff. That Ned had quite a talent, though. He could open locks—not pick them, just open them, like magic." Diana looked up sharply. "Yeah, he'd just put his hand on the doorknob, and bingo. That's how they got into my room." Jack grinned weakly. "Have you got any special talents like that?"

"You want to see me dematerialize?" Diana hadn't mentioned that in her long story—like Thomas, she felt somewhat reticent about this particular gift.

"Ha. You're kidding, right—*Jesus*." As Diana reappeared, slightly off kilter to the chair so that she dropped onto the seat and made the springs squeak, Jack's face turned almost gray. "Don't *do* that. I can't...I can't believe...is that for real, or did you just make me see that?"

"It's for real. I don't *need* to open locks. I just go through the cracks. Come on, you're an Adeptus, you've been around the magical block a few times. You knew Levoissier, for gods' sake."

"I know, but...don't tell me you didn't bat an eyelash the first time *you* saw that."

"It's amazing, isn't it?" She smiled wryly. "Well, I can see that I'm going to be sleeping alone from now on."

"Well, no—I mean, I didn't expect that—god, Diana, just give me a minute."

She smiled faintly, and glanced past him at the window. The sun had set while they talked, and she was feeling the change. "Are you hungry? We've been talking for hours. We could order something up for dinner. I wouldn't mind something sweet, myself. Or we could go out, there's no reason we have to hole up in this stuffy hotel room. Do you need to go pick up your things anywhere?" All Jack had brought with him was a small overnight bag that he'd had at the Motherhouse, and most members of the Order brought at least that much with them for big rituals.

"No, I've got everything with me. I traveled light, because I thought I might be going back home after a couple of days."

"Have you changed your mind about that?"

"Well...that's kind of up to you."

"Ah. Are we back to your idea of plotting world domination, then?"

He didn't smile. "Well, Diana...what *are* you going to do? You've given up Bread and Roses—"

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“Not exactly, Jack. I did think I might get back onto the Board of Directors.”

“Be serious, Diana. You’ve got way too much vision to be happy with that.”

“And you’re proposing, what, instead? Just the two of us, and you think we’ll accomplish more than Bread and Roses does with a staff of fifty and a million-dollar budget?”

“And all the red tape and oversight that comes with it. We’ll be operating under the radar—we won’t have to follow anybody’s rules. We’ll be using influence, money—”

“My money.”

“To start with. But more than that, we’ll be using magic—and that, I can contribute to, as a full equal.”

“And the, continuity, so to speak? My vision was a secret society of immortals, or at least, long-lived adepts who could continue their work for generations. Will you sign on for that? What if I say that I need you to step up to that level, at least eventually?”

He looked down uneasily. “Like I said...I need to think about it. Maybe you can understand why, after the story I told you. And your description of what it takes to change isn’t exactly a sales pitch.”

“I agree with that.” She sighed. “The last time I made a magical commitment...”

“I’m not asking you for a formal vow. This isn’t a working, not like that.”

“I know.” She was silent for a moment, thinking about the past four years and everything that had happened. *It’s all brought me to this point, she thought, as anti-climactic as it seems after what I went through, and what I hoped for. The Lady kicked me out of the woods, literally, and as soon as I got home, I got invited to come down to Beltene, and there was Jack, and here we are. Thomas would say it’s the hand of Providence again—or of the Lady. Either way...* “All right, Jack. Let’s give it a try.” She extended her hand toward him, and for a moment he just stared at it incredulously.

“You mean it?”

“Mind you, I’m not even sure where we’ll start, let alone where we’re going. I hope you have a lot of ideas, because I’m open to hearing any plans you suggest. And I should warn you: I have another agenda, which is going to take up some of my time and energy. I need to find other vampires. I have too many questions to ask and puzzles to unravel. If you can accept that, then let’s shake hands and talk about what we’ll do next.”

Looking stunned, Jack reached out, grasped her hand and gave it a firm shake. “Then we’re in business.”

“For the greater good, I hope. Now, do you want to go out or order in? I need chocolate.”

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“Are you sure this is the address?”

“Positive.” Jack frowned up at the modern steel-and-concrete eight-story edifice, most of which was occupied by an insurance company. Diana had wanted to see the bar where Jack had first encountered Avery, but that establishment had been on the first level of a three-floor nineteenth century brick building. Its twins still lined the opposite side of the street, and even the back alleyway remained intact. But of the original building and bar, not a trace was left.

Jack peered across the street and pointed at a small shoe repair shop in one of the storefronts. “That place has been there since the Depression. Let’s see if they know anything.”

The shoe repair shop smelled of old leather and fresh glue. Despite its tidy front counter, business did not appear to be booming. The wizened proprietor, gray tufts of hair framing each large ear, greeted them with the rigid smile of someone whose dental plates tend to slip. Diana looked around and selected a handful of assorted shoelaces and a couple of tins of polish. As the proprietor rang up the sale, she asked casually, “That big shiny skyscraper across the street sure seems out of place. How long has that been there?”

The proprietor rolled his eyes. “Not long. Wasn’t happy to see that go up, no, nor anyone else around here. Blocks all the morning sun.”

“Wasn’t there a building there before, just like this one? With a bar on the ground floor?”

“Little joint called Sully’s,” Jack added. “Nice place.”

“Oh, lord.” The proprietor’s face fell into tragic lines. “That whole building went up in flames, musta been, oh, forty-eight. Terrible thing. Killed eight people. Guttled the place, nothing left but the walls. They tore it down, and a couple of years later, up goes that thing. Lots of folks thought they should leave the site for a memorial, a park or something, but you know how it’s been since the war. Build, build and build some more, anything for a dollar.”

“It wasn’t arson, was it?” Diana quailed at the thought that the building’s destruction might have some connection to the vampire activities Jack had run into there. But the proprietor shook his head.

“No one ever thought so. Some drunken fool on the second floor fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth, firemen said.”

“What a tragedy,” Diana said. “Well, thank you.”

“I guess that’s the end of that,” Jack said as they crossed the street to where Diana’s car was parked. “What are you going to do with that stuff, anyway?”

“Bread and Roses will hand it out to needy men.”

“Oh, of course.” Jack hopped into the passenger’s seat, but Diana stood for a moment, looking helplessly up and down the street around the tall building.

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“There’s not going to be anything here, Diana.”

“It’s just...do you think they took you far from here? You said you had a room within walking distance...”

“I have no idea. They could have had a car. You claim you can fly, not sure I believe it, but who knows how fast or how far they could have moved?”

“I know, but...gods. If only memory blanking worked both ways. If I could just undo what they did to you—”

“It doesn’t and you can’t.” Jack shut his door with a solid thump.

Diana sighed heavily. Jack’s story had sounded more like low-level gang activity than an organized group with either superpowers or a lot of money. Logic suggested that they couldn’t have gone too far—they might have been upstairs in the same building. But that meant nothing, twelve years after the fact. The vampires Jack had met might not even be in the United States any longer, far less in Boston. *I’ll just have to stay alert and pay attention. Thomas said, we tend to cross paths more often than chance would dictate—and chance doesn’t seem too operative in my life now.*

Jack rolled down his window. “Come on. I promised April we’d be there by four. You really don’t want to stand this girl up.”

“April? You found us a magician named *April*?”

Jack didn’t smile. “Wait ’til you meet her.”

6

It was a tribute to American craftsmanship, Diana thought wryly, that the Formica tabletop wasn't buckling from the sheer psychic energy shooting across it from every direction.

It was June 12, 1955, and the first formal meeting of their clandestine coven which had, by Diana's conservative estimate, more raw power than the entire Council of the Order of the Silver Light. It had taken some weeks for them to reach this point due to Jack's concern for complete secrecy.

"We don't need to rush this and start off half-cocked. It's important that we don't leave any clumsy traces that will give us away."

"Give us away to whom, Jack? What are we going to be doing, that anyone would actually take seriously? The U.S. government doesn't believe in magic, and the police only harass people for telling fortunes."

He hadn't answered her right away. "Okay—then let's be sure we establish a solid foundation to go on with. Let's put it that way."

Their first solid foundation was a derelict house surrounded by warehouses and industrial buildings in the Boston suburb of Woburn. Using several layers of dummy trusts and corporations and two different proxies, Diana had transferred the title of the house to what appeared to be a lien-holder in New Jersey. To avoid any public utility records, they set up a camp stove in the kitchen, lugged in jugs of water and dug a deep hole for a privy in the dirt floor of the cellar. A fireplace would warm the main room enough for winter meetings. They surreptitiously reinforced the board fence that ran around three sides of the tiny lot, then added magical protection to both the house and the boundaries.

The four of them were sitting around the wobbly kitchen table Diana and Jack had rescued from a pile of trash on a curb, on mismatched chairs of similar origins. An assortment of candles and kerosene lanterns sat around the room.

They all knew why they were here. Jack and Diana had met several times with each of their recruits separately. It had taken Diana a couple of days to catch David at home, and his job search had borne fruit, although he wasn't very excited about keeping the books for a small warehouse in Somerville. His initial wariness at her invitation quickly blossomed into enthusiasm when they

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met and she could explain their plans in more detail. Their fourth member, April McFarland, had been as eager as a Thoroughbred at the starting gate from the moment Jack introduced her to Diana. Tall and statuesque, with irrepressible waves of the most vivid flaming red hair Diana had ever seen, April's riveting appearance still shone dim compared to her aura of magical energy that even surpassed David's.

Neither David nor April, as yet, knew more about Diana than her history with the Order and Levoissier. She'd decided to get to know both of them better before she sprung vampires and the Fair Folk on them. April herself was rather mysterious. She had never been associated with the Order, and yet she clearly had had years of training, and good training, too. Jack evaded questions as to how he had met April, and April responded to inquiries simply by smiling and saying she "pled the Fifth." As with many other things concerning Jack, Diana was letting it pass—for now.

"But you see the focus of what we're going to be doing." Jack was finally wrapping up a long review of Bread and Roses and Diana's search for a magical group that worked politically. "Grassroots and direct community efforts are fine, for limited results. Or for emergencies. But just like Diana said—" Diana had, indeed, gotten a few sentences in here and there—"—that stuff is superficial, band-aids, and it never lasts. We're going to go far beyond that, or not beyond, but beneath it. We're going to work at influencing the roots of power, the actual decisions and actions. We're not going to challenge power directly, we're going to make it change itself. Power protects itself, confrontation makes it stronger. You have to bore into it, like a weevil, or infect it, like a virus. That's what sabotage really means, sawing through the floor underneath your enemy before he even knows what you're doing. We're invisible to these people—they'll never, ever see it coming."

"So we're...magical saboteurs?" David said.

"Yes! But that's only for starters. We'll eventually get way above that level."

"What do you mean, above?" April said. "In what sense? Do you mean actually infiltrating governments and seats of power ourselves, or well, not us per se but people who join us later on?"

Jack shook his head. "No. We aren't going to go near that kind of thing. We're keeping our hands totally clean. Don't you see, that would just play into all the paranoia that people have about underground groups already, all the xenophobia and fear that make the masses such willing puppets for demagogues like Hitler or Stalin or Mussolini. Millions of people already believe governments and boards are infiltrated, they really believe stupid shit like the Jews running all the banks, or Communists are taking over school boards, or the silly comic book publishers have some grand plan to corrupt youth. Trying anything like

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that in reality would probably just backfire. We need to do things that no one would believe or imagine are being done. We need to make the most trusted agents of authority do exactly what we want them to, without their even realizing themselves that they're not following their own will."

David, April and Diana all exchanged looks. "What?" Jack said impatiently.

"It just feels a little...manipulative," Diana said, as the other two nodded.

"Of *course* it's manipulative! That's the whole *point!* What, you really think all those idiots should just be allowed to go on happily robbing the rest of us blind, starting wars and writing laws to suit themselves? If that's how you feel, then let's disband this group and go home now, and I won't bother any of you again."

"Damn it, Jack, keep your shirt on. We're never going to get anywhere if you're going to blow up every five minutes. Sit back down."

Jack thumped back down into his chair. "Look." He was obviously making a great effort to be reasonable. "We need to be *unashamedly* manipulative, yes. Our whole objective is to change the hearts and minds of men with the political and financial clout to make the right decisions, the decisions that benefit everyone, not just the generals and fat cats. We're going to be pushing people just enough so they go in a different direction—not even conscious of what they're doing until it's too late to reverse it. If we pick the right people, and hit just the right historical fulcrums, there's almost no limit to where we can take this. They'll be little changes that have a domino effect, but yes, it does mean manipulating people's heads."

"Be honest, Jack. You're flat out saying that the ends justify the means," Diana said.

He slammed a hand on the table, making them all jump. "I am *not!*"

Before Diana, who was suddenly angry enough to stand up herself, could react, April said, "You said we'll need to hit just the right people, just the right pivot points. How will we know what those are? That sounds like nine tenths of the problem in itself, identifying what to aim at."

"That's a very good question," Jack said, looking pleased, and Diana relaxed back in her chair, sighing. "We're going to be spending a lot of time on that, no doubt about it. We'll use divination, we'll use perception and meditative projection techniques, we'll do a lot of good old-fashioned research and investigation. We won't work magically until we know exactly what we're targeting. And we might, if everyone agrees..." he paused.

"You want the suspense to kill us?" David finally said.

Jack took a deep breath. "I have some...*enhancements* that I'd like to suggest we try. But I think I'll wait to discuss those. We haven't even done a basic ritual together yet. Let's do some very small projects and evaluate the results."

Once again, his three listeners exchanged glances, but this time their shared

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thought was, *sounds like a fair enough suggestion.*

“All that information-gathering sounds like a lot of work, though,” David said. “I don’t mind telling you that I didn’t do well with that kind of thing in school. Math was more my line.”

“Don’t worry,” Diana said. “Some of this is work we can hire out. In fact, I’ve already talked to a couple of research assistants who thrive on this sort of minutiae-mining, and one of them works for a couple of P.I.s, so he can access public records and all kinds of things.”

“Can we trust them?” April looked dubious. “With all you’ve gone through to keep this house secret, and no phone, it just seems that hiring assistants—”

“They won’t know why they’re collecting clippings and news for us. And even if someone did get suspicious, what could he do? They don’t even know this group exists, apart from me.”

“How will they get in touch with us, then?” David asked.

“They won’t. I pick up a portfolio from them once a week at their office. If I don’t show up, they have an anonymous drop box to mail it all to.”

David frowned. “What do they think the information is all for?”

“I said that we’re setting up a specialized wire service for journalists. I’m paying them a lot, they’re not going to risk a steady income stream by getting all curious. Confidentiality is part of their job description.”

“Are you already doing this?” April looked startled.

Diana reached down to the floor by her chair and heaved a large leather portmanteau with straps onto the table. Jack said, “We’ve been collecting news for a month. It takes a while for patterns to start showing up.”

April snorted a half-laugh. “We’re going to need a file clerk. And don’t look at me.”

David also looked skeptical. “We can’t trust all that stuff, you know that. The newspapers print nothing but disinformation, at least when it comes to anything that counts—labor, foreign policy, atomic bomb tests—you know what’s happening on the fifteenth, right?”

“The big atomic attack safety drill, I know,” Diana said. “Massachusetts isn’t participating in that.”

“It’s all a plot, it’s just to scare everyone,” David went on. “What better way to make sure that no one in this country dares to question the government, or even wonder if communism might not be totally evil, or suggest that anything here needs changing, if the whole population can’t think about anything but bombs wiping us out any minute? A terrified nation turns into sheep, they’ll do anything the Army and the White House say. If we take all our information from the papers and official channels, we’re just playing into the whole game.”

“That’s why we’re not relying on that except as a starting point,” Jack said.

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“We’ll be using magical techniques for our fact-checking. We’ll always be a step ahead of the status quo. We know better than to take anything at face value. But we do need the news to find out where things are starting to get troublesome, while they still don’t appear serious enough for the authorities to lock down information.”

“Are we always going to be working in this little...hovel?” April sounded only mildly curious, but she wrinkled her nose slightly. Jack gestured toward Diana.

“Oh, sure, someone brings up housekeeping and you give me the floor. No, April, at least I hope not. I’m going to be scouting around for some better locations—hopefully some that are a bit more secluded, so we don’t have to be so careful coming and going. This is just the first one I could play all the financial games with. Eventually we may want electricity and a phone, too. We don’t have to stay right in the Boston area. I can check out Worcester or Lowell, for example.”

“Well, I’ve got to keep my job,” David said uneasily. “My apartment is just a studio and the rent isn’t too bad, but I don’t want to be living on the streets, and I’m about one paycheck away from that. I don’t have a car, and neither does Jack.”

“I can cover your expenses, David, you know that,” Diana said. She was covering Jack’s, although neither of them ever mentioned it.

“No, no, that’s okay. I appreciate it and everything, but I really don’t need a...I mean...”

“A woman to support you?” Diana said dryly, and David flushed.

“Maybe we should all just live together,” April said. “After all, it would make things a lot easier.”

“And make us more conspicuous as a group,” Jack said. “Believe me, we thought of it.”

“Still,” Diana said, “It’s something we can keep in mind, down the road. Eventually we may be far less conspicuous staying together all the time than constantly coming and going to a meeting place—and our meeting place will be a lot safer and more secure with someone living there. But for now...” she sighed. “David, I respect your principles, but please let me know if you need anything, and don’t just suffer in stoic silence. I inherited my money and my will names Bread and Roses as my chief beneficiary. You wouldn’t have to feel badly about it.”

David stared stiffly down at the table. “You know what people say about Jews,” he said softly. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I don’t have to mooch off of anyone.”

In the long awkward silence that followed the three non-Jews in the room struggled to think of something to say that didn’t seem offensive, and failed miserably.

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Finally Jack said, rather loudly, “Nobody here believes any of that crap about Jews this and Jews that, so let’s forget about it. Those Nazis and anti-Semites are the first ones in our cross-hairs, and we all know it. The same goes for the people who hate Negroes, or Catholics, or homosexuals, or any other scapegoat.”

“It’s not the same thing,” David said.

“I didn’t say it was. Look, we all need to agree on our priorities, David. We’re not crusading against any one kind of injustice or bigotry. Those are just the poisonous fruit that you see. We’re going to dig up the whole stinking, nasty weed by its strangling roots. All these individual causes are just distractions. That’s exactly why people fight and fight against them and get nowhere.”

The two men stared at each other unflinchingly, but the pure antagonism that Diana had seen between David and Art was missing. Nevertheless, both she and April were pressed up hard against the backs of their chairs, and a sudden cold draft made all the candles gutter. Something was passing between the men, but Diana couldn’t interpret it. Jack’s expression was earnest, almost pleading. Suddenly David’s shoulders sagged and he sank back in his seat.

“Okay...okay. I see your point.”

“Well, good. Don’t think I’m minimizing. Anything but.”

“I know. I guess you’re right. I guess that’s why I’m here.”

Diana let out a long, noiseless sigh of relief, but a new doubt had kindled in the back of her mind. *I think I’ve severely underestimated Jack. Just because I don’t feel obvious power around him doesn’t mean he hasn’t got something. It just means he’s learned how to hide it—and that’s much more impressive.* He obviously had some abilities to influence people directly that she hadn’t seen since she’d broken ties with Levoissier. Abruptly, she recalled his story about the vampires he’d met in 1943, and his claim that he was resistant to their memory blanking. At the time, Diana hadn’t attached much significance to that part of Jack’s story, she’d been so emotionally involved with the fact that he’d met other vampires at all. Uneasily she wondered if any of her own recent decisions might not have been entirely voluntary on her part. She didn’t think so, but...*oh, gods, I hate second-guessing myself!* She blinked as she heard Jack speak her name, and realized that it was the second time.

“Uh, Diana? Are you with us?”

“Oh—sorry. I just got lost in thought for a moment.” She forced a weak smile around the table, but avoided meeting Jack’s eyes for more than a second.

“I was saying, I think we should all try a short working, just to see how our energies mesh. Nothing ambitious, just an attunement, and maybe we can try that little trick with the candle that they teach in the Order—April, you haven’t done that one, but it’s pretty simple.”

“I’ve done something like it. It’s a basic technique.”

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“Okay, then.” He looked around the table, meeting each of their eyes. “Are we ready?” They all nodded.

They got up and filed from the small dining room, where the table was set up, across the hall into the larger front parlor, which was entirely empty, cleaned and swept. Diana, last in line, closed both doors behind them. Jack carried a single candlestick, which he placed in the center of the floor. They all sat down cross-legged on the floor around it.

“No robes or anything?” David asked.

“We’ll feel that out as we go,” Diana said. “We may not need any accessories for the kind of work we’ll be doing.” She hoped so; the two years of ritual work in Maine had left her heartily sick of hand-sewing magical robes, and somehow she doubted that April did needlework. She and Jack had magically cleansed and consecrated the entire house, with special attention to this room, several times over the last two weeks, and Diana could sense that they’d done a good job. It felt very comfortable as a magical space—more than that, it felt *safe*. Just from the way the others were relaxing as they opened their psychic awareness, she knew they felt the same.

Jack reached forward and pinched out the candle flame, plunging the room into thick, palpable darkness. “Five minutes, tune in,” he said quietly.

Diana closed her eyes, so she could no longer see the room and the warm bodies of the others glowing to her vampire vision. She shifted so that her limbs were symmetrical and her spine straight, hands cupped and just touching on her crossed legs, and she sensed the others around her doing exactly the same thing. But they were adjusting their breathing, deepening and slowing it until, by instinct, they were inhaling and exhaling in unison. Diana could imitate them, but it was distracting, and easier to cease bothering with breath at all.

She was already in a deep enough trance that Jack’s voice sounded oddly hollow, and she knew he was going to speak before she heard him.

“Connect.”

Tendrils of energy, like extensions of their hands and arms, expanded from each of them into a circle around their seated bodies, twining and thickening until they were knitted together in a web that connected and enclosed them. Diana had done this hundreds of times before, and yet somehow this felt different. The enveloping harness of etheric energy building around them was almost tangible, and it was growing much larger and denser than she’d felt before. She had the odd sense that it was taking on a physical presence, so supportive that if she’d lost her balance and fallen backwards, it would have held her up. It was instantly intoxicating. She wanted never to stop feeding this, wanted to keep on building it as far and as long as they could make it grow. She wondered if it was actually visible, not like energy or light but like the ectoplasm mediums used

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to produce in séances. But opening her eyes went against the flow, she didn't want to see. She was so deep in trance, and so intent on the moment, that she wasn't capable of asking herself what this could mean. Connected as closely as they were, she could feel the others' minds, at least superficially, and they also were completely and unquestioningly absorbed in what was happening, although they shared Diana's delighted astonishment.

It seemed like a very long time passed before Jack finally said, "Focus." Unthinkingly, they each shifted into the next step of the pattern. The result was instantaneous, totally unexpected and profoundly shocking. It was as though four sections forced apart from each other with great effort had suddenly snapped back together and completed a whole that had yearned for reunion for eons. Everyone gasped aloud, flinching as though there had been a deafening sound. They had become a single entity. Their bodies were paralyzed; they were locked into a flood of power pouring through them, as though they'd contacted a high-tension power line. They had achieved, although Diana only understood this consciously after it was over, perfect magical unity.

Diana smelled hot wax and felt heat on her face, and then Jack said, "Ground." With more effort than usual, all four of them cut the flow of energy and directed it down into the earth below them, slowly regaining feeling and movement in their muscles as their minds cleared. Her eyes still closed, Diana had a vague sense that something wasn't right. Just as she finally took in a breath, and choked on greasy smoke, David said, "Oh, *shit*."

They all opened their eyes then, and reacted to the fact that the room was on fire—or on the verge of it. The magical exercise which Diana, Jack and David had performed dozens of times was intended simply to light the candle. Typically, a good percentage of tries resulted in nothing but an ember or a little smoke rising from the wick. Their candle, which had been almost new, had melted completely, leaving the empty candleholder standing in the middle of a large puddle of flaming liquid wax. Bright yellow light flickered on the walls of the room.

They hadn't even thought to bring in a container of water, far less a fire extinguisher. April ran to get a pan of water from the kitchen, but there was no time, and Jack pulled off his shirt, bunched it up and used it to vigorously beat out the flames before the scarred wooden floor caught. This risky maneuver worked, although he hissed as burning paraffin splattered on his bare skin. April returned with the water, into which Jack stuffed his wax-soaked shirt just to be on the safe side and then poured water onto the floor, which spat, bubbled and steamed like a hot skillet. It had been a close call.

It took some time for all of them to stop shaking and regain their equilibrium, even Diana, whose imitation nervous system, she discovered, did not like scary

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burning floors. But as they cleaned up the mess, drank some water and ate some cookies to help ground and center themselves back into ordinary reality, a deep sense of excitement began to bubble up among them. It was taking a while to sink in, but they were starting to understand that the four of them were such perfect complements to one another, their individual power was amplified a hundredfold. None of them had foreseen it.

It was getting late, and David needed to be at work in the morning. April didn't have a job as far as Diana knew, but she wasn't a night owl. They sat at the table, planning to leave separately at intervals after carefully checking outside to avoid being seen exiting the house. Diana, of course, would dematerialize and meet Jack at her car parked about a half mile away, so she had to stay until David and April were gone. April was giving David a ride, and Diana privately wondered how long it would be before she persuaded her new covenmate to move in with her—wherever she lived.

"Tomorrow, we'll try our first real project," Jack said. In the candlelight, his eyes almost seemed to glitter, like they had facets, and this was unnerving.

"What is it?" David asked, yawning.

"Something very small to start. I'll explain it all in detail. We're too tired to get into it now."

"With luck, we won't set whatever it is on fire," April said.

Jack laughed. "We'll see."

Diana sat alone in the dark house after Jack had gone, giving him time to walk ahead, since she was able to cover the distance much faster. As she thought over the evening's events in quiet solitude, she began to feel a little uneasy. A coven could experiment, adding and dropping members, for years and never even approach the kind of synergy that the four of them had stumbled into, apparently by pure chance. That was why it bothered her—it didn't seem as though it possibly *could* be chance. If their meeting had been arranged somehow by something beyond themselves, what was the purpose? Where might this end up taking them? *Where the Teg are concerned, is there ever such a thing as coincidence?*