

The Wars of Magic and Man

Days of Magic's return

Akio, Jesus, and Margret

By, *Michael Lewis Collins*

LA to Tokyo

The plane went up to forty-thousand feet. The LA to Tokyo was on time and flying with two-hundred souls including the crew. This was the Boeing 777's fifth trip across the ocean since it left Boeing for Pacific Air. The crew was the same crew from the first trip. The plane was the state-of-the-art in every way. It could even land itself given the right airport. At cruising altitude, the pilot turned off the fasten seatbelt sign. Captain Akio Saito was born in Japan but raised in Hawaii. His father was Born in the states and served in Japan where he met Akio's mother. Captain Saito served in the US Air Force for twelve years before transitioning over to the airline industry. His crew loved serving with a man that flew the B2 Bomber. His co-pilot was Jesus. Born in Los Angeles, Jesus Tomas Fernando was never in the military. He was hired and trained by the airline. He was also specially trained by Boeing for this plane. Captain Akio had a sticker on his flight plan that said, "Jesus is my co-pilot." It was the truth.

Jesus said, *"that's funny"* as he reached for an indicator light. He said that the TCAS was offline. The traffic collision avoidance system was reliant on ground-based radar systems, but it acted independently. The captain said, *"I checked the charts we are the only ones this far out over the waves right now."* Jesus opened a flight manual hoping to find a clue on what to do. The captain said, *"when they sent you to me they said you were the most knowledgeable person on the operations of this plane. The book isn't giving me any confidence in your ability."* Jesus just shook his head. He said, *"this wasn't covered in any of the briefings or the material they provided."* The captain called out, *"tower this is Igloo, Tango Gulf 1564 heavy out of LAX please copy back, over."* There was nothing but silence. Jesus checked all the frequencies but everything including satellite connections was out. The Captain said, *"we are pilots first and an Apple store second. We fly in the air just like they did a hundred years ago."* The captain had once referred to the all-electronic displays saying it was like he was flying an Apple Store.

As they flew a storm seemed to build around them. Lightning filled their windows. The captain looked at the weather map then remembered the system was down. The Captain said, *"we fly into the infinite black with nothing but our wits and a star to guide us."* Jesus said, *"yes I*

am a little nervous too.” They would fly higher but without a working radar they could end up burning fuel for nothing. They both knew that this was a long flight. The captain said, *“turn on the sign and let the passengers know we may have some turbulence.”* Jesus got up and went to the door. The captain said, *“wow he as risen and it isn’t even Easter yet.”* Jesus said, *“one of these days someone is going to hear you and complain to the airline.”* The captain said, *“as long as they don’t say anything to your dad then I think I am ok.”* Jesus called over the head flight attendant and told her he needed her to let the passengers know about the turbulence. He knew it was stupid, but some people don’t like getting their flight information from a brown man with an accent. Even though his accent was from East LA. The head flight attendant Margaret Champ understood. As they spoke they hit their first bump. Margaret fell forward but Jesus stopped her from going down. She stood back up and said, *“Jesus saves again.”* She smiled then whispered, *“and just maybe he scores.”*

Jesus sat back down. The captain said, *“nothing but trouble.”* Jesus looked over at him. He went on, *“I knew this guy that hooked up with an attendant on the New York to Paris flight. By the time he got back he was unemployed and facing charges. You don’t fuck an employee of the company you work for. That one-night stand will end with you standing in the unemployment line.”* Jesus looked over at him again and said, *“I don’t think people stand in a line anymore. Most of that is done online.”* Just outside the cockpit window, a flash of lightning illuminated a shape. It was massive to the point of overshadowing the plane. Jesus froze in place. He then asked, *“did you see that?”* The captain turned to look out. He asked, *“what did you see another plane?”* As they both looked out the turbulence picked up. The captain said, *“call your hookup and tell her to prepare for worsening air and the nastiness that comes with it.”* After the call, Margaret got all the courtesy bags ready. Courtesy sounded so much better than barf bag.

The controls started to fight them as the turbulence grew. The captain remembered a time when he was in a trainer while flying underneath a larger plane. It felt like something big was disturbing the air around them. The captain saw something just outside his window. It was about a thousand feet away. Its head was the size of a hanger big enough for their plane to fit in. The wingspan went over the plane. He had seen blue whales in the ocean, but they were nothing in

comparison to this thing. A flash of lightning lit it up. The dragon was the biggest thing he or any of the passengers on his side of the plane had ever seen. The captain instinctively banked to the right. The plane groaned under the stresses of a maneuver it was never built for. Margaret and another attendant were thrown to the floor. Jesus asked, “*captain what the fuck was that?*” The captain now following the question answered what he thought he meant, “*I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out.*” They could hear the passengers screaming. “*Mayday, Mayday, this is flight ITG 1564 heavy out of LAX please copy. Anybody.*” Jesus screamed into his microphone.

The engines revved up then something struck the top and the bottom of the plane simultaneously. The screams from the passengers got louder. The sounds of the engines became too loud to take. Then one by one the engines went into the red line and shut off. They were flying without any engines. The back of the plane groaned and creaked. The sound of whatever was happening outside grew. They could hear the wind outside the door. The power went out in the cockpit. A foul smell came from the other side of the door. Another loud crash when the plane was falling. The door opened, and the rest of the plane was gone. The nose pointed down at the big black ocean. From a monitor in an office, two men watched the last moments of flight ITG 1564. The nose pointing down then the face of the dragon as it swallowed the front of the plane then nothing. One of the men asked, “*and you were able to block this before it got out?*” The other said, “*it was as we designed it.*” The second man then asked, “*what does it mean?*” The first said, “*it means they are back and the war is on again.*”

A forest in the Middle of the Ocean

Margret woke up still strapped in her jump seat. From where the wall should have been to the tail of the plane was gone. In its place was a forest and what looked like a castle in the distance. Some of the bulkhead was still in place. She carefully unbuckled her belt and got up. Her neck was sore. The door to the cockpit was slightly ajar. She opened it and saw Jesus and the captain face forward on the control panel. The nose of the plane had a shallow slope to it. The front was facing a steep incline with tree limbs pushing through where the windows should have been. For a moment she realized where ever she was she was all alone. Then Jesus moved. She said, "*Jesus you are alright.*" He looked back at her and said, "*why don't you call me Tomas for now.*" When he moved the flight-computer jumped back to life saying, "*pull up, pull up.*" The captain jumped back in his seat and pulled on the disconnected controls. Tomas said to him, "*I think that it's a little too late.*" The captain opened his eyes and saw the ground just outside.

The captain turned to his co-pilot and said, "*JT go see to the passengers while I try and reach the tower.*" Taking the captain's lead Margret said, "*JT, captain there are no passengers anymore.*" She opened the door and they saw the lack of plane behind them. The captain got up and looked out. He said, "*we were over open water with no land for hours.*" He hesitated then asked, "*where are we?*" JT said, "*we are where ever that second Dragon took us.*" The captain wanted to say that there was no such thing, but he knew what he saw. Margret asked, "*second?*" JT told her that after the first one bit the plane in half a second one caught the front before they hit the water. Margret looked out the door then she closed it.

Whatever was powering the flight computer was now dead along with the computer. They were able to put together a bag with a couple of energy bars, a few bottles of water, vodka and three guns. The two Glock 17s from the airline and a Glock 26 that was found on the plane and was going to be turned in when they got to Tokyo. On the ground, they went up to see if they could get their bearings on their location. The captain had the satellite phone. Up on top of the hill, all they could see was countryside for miles. Margret said, "*none of this makes any sense.*" JT added, "*are we dead?*" The captain turned and said, "*we are here and live that is all that*

matters right now.” He turned to JT smiled then asked, *“if I’m wrong could you put in a good word for us with your old man?”* Off in the distance, they could see the castle Margret saw from her seat. The captain said, *“just maybe some answers are there.”*

About a mile away from the castle they found a path. It was dirty and well-worn with wagon tracks and horse shit. They stayed just off the path to avoid the mess. About ten minutes on the road they saw a man standing in the middle of it. He was disfigured with poorly healed wounds all over his face and a hump on his back. The captain gave his gun to JT and said, *“wait right here.”* He walked into the road and said, *“we are lost. Our plane crashed two miles that way and.”* The captain stopped talking. The man kept tilting his head back and forth in an almost mocking gesture. He then pointed at Margaret and asked, *“how much for the woman?”* The captain said, *“she is not for sale.”* The man frowned then moved closer to the captain. At first, it looked like he was whispering to the captain. The man pulled his hand away. He had a long knife in his hand covered with blood. The captain fell away. He then turned to JT and asked, *“how much?”*

JT pointed his gun at the man. The man didn’t seem to understand what it was. He came at him with the knife. JT pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Margret fired the Glock 26 she had on her. She hit him once in the neck than in the head. The man stopped and looked at his hands. He seemed surprised to see blood. He then fell away. JT ran to the captain. He had a knife wound in his upper chest, but it wasn’t bleeding. He had died almost instantly after being stabbed in the heart. JT said, *“don’t worry Akio, I will make sure that dad treats you good.”* After a little searching and duct tape, they had made something to help them move the captain’s body to the castle. Margret took the Glock 17 from JT and showed him how to pull back on the slide to load the gun. Off in the woods, a man watched the interaction between the robber and the two that remained.

At a gateway to the castle, they were stopped by six men in some sort of armor. JT noticed it wasn’t the usual steel. It was some sort of green and black scale. It was the same color

as the large dragon from the flight. The six men surrounded the two and pointed long spears at them. JT and Margret pulled their guns and pointed out at the men. Just before it could escalate any further a voice came from all around them. It said, *“let them pass.”* The men fell to their knees. JT turned to Margret and mouthed the words, *“the great and powerful Oz”* the voice said, *“you two can keep your weapons just please put them away and come in.”* Margret asked, *“what about our friend?”* One of the men got up and said, *“don’t worry miss we will take care of your friend.”* JT looked back at Akio. He worked with him for about a year, but he felt like he knew him forever. He was one of the very few to look at him and see something more than just a Latino from LA.

Inside the castle wall, they saw an open courtyard with open doors that smelled like horses. They were led to the castle keep. Four of the men carried the captain into a door on the side of the keep while JT and Margret went through a larger door. Inside they were led into a hallway, up to a set of stairs then into a chamber. It was a large bedroom. One of the men said, *“wait here and someone will come to assist you.”* The door closed, and they heard it lock. Once they were alone Margret started to cry. She didn’t want to cry for the captain in front of these people. They sat down on a bench near the bed. A young woman came in with a pitcher of water and a washbasin. The girl said to JT and Margret, *“strip and clean up. I will take your clothes and have them washed.”* She had an unusual accent. Not quite Irish not quite French. Some sort of mix. The girl smiled then said, *“some clothing is being prepared for you. It just will take some time. A bigger wash tub is also on the way.”* Margret said, *“we need to call someone and let them know we are here.”* The girl just looked confused. She then said, *“I can’t leave this room without your clothes so take them off or I will.”*

Moons Light

Margret and JT turned their backs to each other and started to undress. The girl that was sent to the room to get their clothes just shook her head. She couldn't understand why they were acting like this. Margaret looked over at JT. She always knew he was well built. The airline uniform couldn't hide his upper body. With his shirt off she could see more than a few tattoos. His whole appearance changed without his shirt. To Margret, he became just a little scary. Margret turned back to the wall and took her vest off. The vest did more than the bra with holding her in place. She then took off her shirt. The girl gasped. One night and a bottle of Irish Whisky later, Margret found herself with a new tattoo. A large Celtic cross. JT looked at the girl then at Margret. The girl just stared at the cross. She seemed more than a little shocked by the tattoo, but she regained her composure and said, "*I need your clothes.*" She hesitated then said, "*please.*" JT took off his socks then the underwear. Margret eyed his ass as she took off the rest of her underclothing. The girl came over and gathered their clothing into a basket. When she lifted the basket, her arms became visible. Soon it was apparent that the girl wasn't wearing a dress with some sort of funny markings, she was wearing a sheer dress that showed off an elaborate tattoo that covered her body.

A large wash tub was brought in and two ladies started to fill it with water. The women smiled and pointed at JT. Margret finally caught on to how she and JT would be sharing the tub. She said to JT, "*this is stupid. Just turn around.*" He turned around to see Margret nude. His first thought was how her carpet matched her red hair. Margret just tried not to drop her jaw at the look of this man, the tattoos, abs and the size of the man. One word escaped her, "*Jesus.*" He asked, "*what?*" They got into the tub. The water came up to just below her breasts. The girl came back in. She had changed into a pair of pants and what could be best described as a medieval tank top. The tattoos on her arms and shoulders were now visible. She had a pitcher and a sponge of some kind. She said to Margret, "*lean forward.*" She then cleaned all around the tattoo, but she wouldn't touch it. She did the same with JT. He thought that her hand went just a little too low for his tastes. He could see that her ink was real.

As they sat in the tub a table was brought in. Then two chairs. The girl directed two women with plates of food. The girl came back to Margret and JT and said, *“please eat. Your clothing will be coming soon. You will be seen in the morning so just make yourselves at home here.”* Before he could Margret said, *“we need to call someone and tell them what happened.”* The girl just looked confused then said, *“all will be understood soon.”* She turned to walk away then she turned back and said, *“my name is Iris and if you need anything I will try and get it for you.”* Margret turned to look at JT who quickly turned his gaze away from her chest. She looked at his chest then she turned to the food. She was suddenly very hungry. She said to JT, *“I am getting out and going over there to eat something. You can either join me or not just don’t think this means anything.”* When she got up she realized there were no towels. On the other side of the table was the hearth that was used to heat the water. Margret went to that side of the table and sat down.

The table had many kinds of food. From a ham to some sort of rice dish. Everything looked homemade and good. She grabbed a half of a chicken from a plate and started to eat it. As she did she watched the tub. About her third bite of bird, JT got up. She didn’t even try and hide her staring at his ass. On his right shoulder was a large tattoo of a thirteen with loops and swirls. He turned to see she wasn’t looking for his eyes. He walked over and took what looked like a plate of braised oxtails. The meat was very good, but it didn’t taste like any kind of beef he knew. JT asked, *“did you see the ink of Iris. Who tattoos a child like that?”* Margret said, *“we don’t know much about these people. It could be a part of their religion.”* Margret noticed a light just outside their window. She asked, *“I wonder just how old she is?”* she licked her fingers then got up and went to the window.

The window opened onto a balcony. She looked up and gasped. The moon was three times bigger than she had ever seen it before. It seemed to have a ring around it. That was when the second moon came from around the first. The second one was pale and almost seemed to have clouds. She frantically waved JT over. He tried to seem nonchalant as he walked over to her, but all pretense ended when he saw the sky. He put his hands on her shoulders. One of her arms slipped away and brushed his penis. Neither of them seemed to notice. All they could see

was the sky and the two moons. Until the third moon showed up. JT said, “*Jesus where are we.*” Margret replied, “*don’t talk to yourself like that.*”

Out of some instinct, JT put his arms around her shoulders. Margret thought about how warm he was and how he smelled good. In her mind, she wondered if she was dead. She leaned her head to the left then back up to him, so they had more flesh to flesh contact. As she did this her hand found him again. He kissed her neck then up near her right ear. She turned to him and the two made their way to the bed. He hit the bed and fell backward. From the first time, he saw her he dreamed about doing this. It was the same for her. They rolled around and kissed and touched. An awkward first encounter between two people who were friends before they came to this. Margret felt like she was going to burn up. She got on top and rode him hard. As she did her tattoo of a Celtic cross started to glow bright and purple.

Clothes make the Clan

Akio's body was placed on a table. Two women cut away his clothes. They cleaned up his body and prepared to wrap it in accordance with the burial traditions of their people. A woman walked into the room. She was tall with long black hair and deep purple eyes that seemed to almost glow. The other women in the room bowed to her then left. She was dressed in a red dress that was tied at the top. She untied the top and let the dress fall to the ground. Now naked, she climbed on top of Akio. She sat in his lap as if they were lovers in a sensual encounter. She put her hands on the wound. As she did the tattoos that ran down her back started to glow red then white. The palms of her hands started to glow over the wound.

JT and Margret woke up in bed. They lay together not talking. Eventually, she asked, *“what does the thirteen on your back mean?”* He kissed the back of her hand then said, *“when I was younger I joined a gang. Eventually, I grew to see it was just a dead end and I found a way to get out but at the time it was the only way to survive in my neighborhood.”* He realized he didn't answer her question. He said, *“the thirteen is for the original thirteen members and the chain links represent all the crimes I did.”* She turned to look him in the eyes. As she did she pulled away a little. He said, *“nothing but petty crimes. The worst was grand theft auto. I stole a car when I was fifteen that actually was owned by a cop.”* She moved a little closer than said, *“I stole an RV from my neighbors when I was twelve. I got all the way down the block before it ran out of gas.”* He did a sideways glance at her and said, *“thief.”* She smiled then said, *“banger.”*

The door to their room opened and Iris walked in with four women and a rack of clothing. Behind them came two men with a cart of shoes and boots. Two-step stools were placed on the floor. Iris said, *“ok its time to get dressed.”* She waved them over to the stools. Neither JT or Margret moved. Iris said, *“you don't have all day. You have a meeting with the council in an hour.”* JT got out of bed. No one seemed very interested in him or his tattoos. He got up on the stool and one of the women took a bolt of fabric and held it to his pelvis. It seemed to form a pair of boxers by its self. The woman with the bolt seemed a little confused by what it made. A small piece of leather was held up to his upper thigh. It grew into a pair of pants that

resembled a jeans bootleg cut. A large cotton-like fabric was tossed over him. When it came down it formed a shirt with laces at the throat. Margret got out of bed. She felt the stares of the two men but when she looked they were busy waving their hands over something being made on a table. One of the women gasped when she saw the tattoo. Iris went to say something about it when she did the same. She turned so JT could see the tattoo. It was just a black tattoo before that night but now it had colors. The cross was an orangish brown and the rest was a mix of red and blue.

Iris said, “*the council wants to see your markings, so you will need a dress that is open in the back.*” One of the women picked up a bolt of cloth and held it up to Margret. It wrapped around her breasts and pushed them up. To Margret, it felt more like a sports bra than just a piece of cloth wrapped around her. Another piece formed what Margret would have called granny panties. The final woman pulled a bolt of white material out. She asked, “*what would you say is your favorite color and pattern?*” She looked over to Iris then said, “*just think about it and let the fabric do the rest.*” The cloth turned into a sort of milk-like consistency and covered Margret. Then it changed into a green dress with a white flower pattern. What Margret’s mother would have called a sundress. It had thin straps on the shoulders and was very loose. It was also very short. Something Margret wouldn’t have worn even when she was just a little girl. None of the women in the room had seen such a dress.

Margret wondered just how she would sit down without flashing this council. The two men came over to JT and had him try on a pair of leather boots. They seemed to be made for his feet. When they came to Margret they had what looked like a type of shoe she would have called flats. It was her favorite style. The cobblers seemed to be embarrassed by the shoes. When it was all done JT looked like a reject from a pirate movie and Margret looked like someone on a vacation in a warm climate like Los Angeles or Hawaii. Margret picked up a scrap piece of cloth and put it on over her shoulders. It fitted to her and became a shawl. A young boy came into the room. He whispered into Iris’s ear. Her eyes went wide. She said, “*the page will lead you to the hall. I have to attend to something.*” With that said, Iris was off. The boy came over and took

Margret's hand. He led them down a hall to a set of stairs. On the way, he asked, "*what clan are you from?*" He touched the hem of her dress and said, "*I don't recognize the pattern.*"

They made their way across a catwalk that overlooked two rooms about twenty feet down. One was empty of people but filled with pillows, blankets, and rugs. There was also a smell of lavender and sweat. The other room was something out of a movie about Caligula. There were people everywhere. Side-by-side, on top of each other, and intertwined. Two people were actively making love. Everyone was naked. There was a heat coming from the room as well as a lavender and sweat smell. JT and Margret looked at each other. The boy just led them across as if nothing was off. On the other side, they came to a door than a spiral staircase. At first, they thought they might just be going into the room with all the naked sleeping people, but they turned down a hallway running parallel to the room then away from it. They came to a large foyer than a large set of doors.

What was left unsaid

The doors opened, and JT and Margret were led into a large chamber. On one wall in the back away from the door was a fireplace with an opening eight-foot high and ten feet across. In the center was a U-shaped table with a group of people sitting around it with the center open. There were six women and four men. The door closed behind them. JT whispered, *“now that’s not ominous. No, not at all.”* Nine of them were in red robes with the woman in the middle in a white robe with a hood. She looked very old. A man on the end of the table said, *“please step into the circle. On the floor was an alabaster circle.”* The woman in white said, *“there is nothing to be afraid of.”* Neither JT or Margret could understand why but they both felt at ease when she said it. The woman in white said, *“we need to see what has happened to the world we left behind before we can explain what is happening.”* JT turned to Margret and said, *“I knew it was dead.”* The woman in white said, *“Jesus.”* JT turned and asked, *“what?”*

The circle lit up from underneath. The light-filled their field of vision. The woman in white stepped into the circle. She pulled back the hood of her robe to reveal a much younger face than the one she had at the table. She said, *“my name is Gail. We are from your world. We came here many years ago.”* The rest of the group came into the circle. A few became much younger looking. Two of the women turned to children. Gail said, *“you see us as we arrived here.”* She turned to Margret and smiled. Gail went on to say that in the morning they would tell them all they need to know where they are and just maybe help them find a way home. One of the women that turned into a young child said, *“we can see you have many questions. Well so do we. In time we can help each other understand all.”* Gail said, *“until then you are our guests. Ask any of our people any questions. If you prefer we could help the two of you find a pile instead of sleeping alone.”* Margret thought about the people in that communal bed. Gail smiled and said, *“yes we might seem a little strange to you now, but soon you will understand.”* The light went out. JT and Margret found themselves alone in the room. Iris was waiting at the door for them.

Iris showed them around the castle making sure they knew that doors with red marks were off limits. Doors with yellow marks were pile rooms. She told them that when they first

arrived they had very little and many were just children. They spent many nights in a pile of people to keep warm and feel safe. This became the pile. A form of communal life where people did everything together and out in the open. It was why she didn't understand their need to cover up or be shy around people. Iris said, *"I have seven partners and twenty-three in my pile. We share everything from work to fun. I couldn't sleep without the others."* JT asked, *"so no monogamy then?"* Iris answered, *"there are many kinds of wood here."* JT said, *"I have seven brothers and sisters, but I wouldn't have slept in a room with any of them if I had my choice."* Iris said, *"so you are the child of fifteen. So am I."* JT thought about it and said, *"no I meant seven total."* Iris frowned and said, *"wow such a small family."* Margret put up her hand and said, *"only child."*

The tour went on to a room filled with children. Two of them had the beginnings of the complex pattern tattoo Iris had. Iris pointed to a girl of about three or four. She said, *"that one is my daughter."* Margret asked, *"just how old are you?"* Iris turned to her and said, *"if I understand how you do age I am twenty-two. and to answer your next question I have six children and a seventh on the way."* Iris held up her left elbow and pointed to a tattoo. She said, *"this spell makes me age slower, so I can give birth to more magical people."* She went on to say how one in a thousand were born with the ability to use magic. She said, *"the children of two magical parents have a one in three chances of being magical and out of them a one in two chances of being a grand mage. My daughter Nada is well on her way to becoming a great mage."* The girl brought her arms up and three balls went into the air. JT wanted to question her math on one in three equaling one in a thousand. Iris brought them back to their room. She showed them what could be best described as an indoor outhouse. Next to it was a large bath. Iris said, *"I strongly urge you to try and follow our customs as much as possible. Use the bath, sleep without clothes and try and loosen up."* Iris left the room.

They spent a little time staring at each other. Margret eventually said, *"we need to fit in or they might just force us out."* JT knew that while it was left unsaid, she was most likely right. She looked over at the door to the bath. She then looked back to JT. Without saying a word, she started to take off her clothes. JT caught on and started to strip. Naked again, she went into the

bath. The room reminded her of the ancient baths of Rome. She stuck a toe in. The water was very warm and had a tingling sensation. She stepped down into the water. After a few steps, the water was just below her breasts. She thought that it felt like being in a glass of carbonated water. She turned and watched JT climb into the water. The pool was somehow lit from underneath even though they didn't seem to have any kind of electric light. JT met her in the middle and they kissed. They sat down on an upper step and let the water come up to their necks. Iris came into the room. She was naked allowing her tattoos to show. The tattoo was more like one pattern rather than multiple individual tattoos. She had a petite figure that betrayed her assertions that she was twenty-three and the mother of six. As she walked into the water her tattoos started to glow. JT noticed that Margret's tattoo was also glowing.

She turned to them and said, *“to understand you must first be open to the possibilities of the truth. You must understand that everything you know about your history is wrong.”* Another girl came in. She also looked young and was naked. Unlike Iris, she was full figured. She got into the water and went over to Iris. They kissed. Iris introduced her as her partner Jenee. They looked at each other than Jenee said, *“the others are too afraid to come in.”* Iris's smile seemed to fade. She said, *“all most of us know about your side is that they betrayed us and trapped our ancestors here a thousand years ago.”* The water started to glow. Jenee came over to JT and put her hand on his knee. She then slipped her hand up his thigh. Iris smiled at Jenee and said, *“let me take you back to the beginning.”*

Steam and Stories

Iris cupped her hands and put them in the water. She came up with a ball of water somehow holding its shape. She let go and the water stayed in place. It started to glow then rise. When it got to the ceiling it burst and the water formed a mist then a blanket of steam descended. The steam filled the room. Iris said, *“once there was a place where all the people lived. You call it earth. That place was an Eden with millions of people. Those people-built civilizations and great works. And there was magic. The magic was used to help people build great works such as the pyramids. In time, those with great magical abilities banded together and formed four great houses. Among them was Atlantis. Eventually, Atlantis grew until it became what you would call a superpower. A war started among the houses of magic until all that was left was Atlantis and the small clans that lived in what you call Europe.”* As she talked the steam formed images that became a map of Asia, Africa, and Europe. It also showed an island in the middle of the Mediterranean.

Iris went on to tell them about how their ancestors, the ones known as the clans gathered to gather for one last fight. She said, *“by then most of their mages were gone and all that was left were the children. They understood that if Atlantis won then mankind would be enslaved. One of the last elders a man named Zed formed a plan to raid the island and disperse the great magic reserve at the heart of Atlantis. The people of Atlantis were trying to pull all the magic into a great pool that they could control.”* The steam formed what looked like a giant jar with a man to show its height of nearly fifty feet. Jenee said, *“what most people didn’t know was that his plan would doom Atlantis to the void. What he didn’t know was that it would pull everyone marked by magic with it.”* The steam showed a small man by the jar. He did something then the jar cracked. All around the room little steam people started to glow. The jar rose in the air then it turned into a vortex. The vortex pulled in all the glowing steam people than the island.

Iris said, *“when the clans arrived they just had the clothes on their back and whatever they were able to hold on to. Atlantis came all in one piece but nearly fifty feet in the air. The fall killed many.”* Jenee said, *“not enough.”* Iris just shook her head. The steam dissipated. Iris said,

“the pool of magic covered Zed and he was given access to magic that was unrivaled. He used it to rebuild Atlantis and make himself their emperor. He also used this power to try and take over this new land we found ourselves on. The clans banded together once again and built this castle. Many of the elders sacrificed their lives to imbue it with a security Zed couldn’t break. This was the start of the war that lasted nearly three-hundred years. That war ended with a truce.” Iris pointed to the west. She said, *“about a hundred miles that way is the border with Atlantis. We don’t go there.* Iris turned and went over to a stone on the side of the bath. She held it in the water. The water started to warm up. *“Our ruling council thinks that Atlantis has been trying to find a way back to your plain of existence. They found a way to send magical creatures over but there was a price. The dragon they sent to take your plane machine died when it came back. It was one of the elder dragons. The one we sent behind it was a juvenile in comparison. She survived but was greatly sickened by the trip. It was why she dropped you out there instead of bringing you here.”*

JT asked, *“why our plane?”* Iris said, *“to prove they could do it.”* She told them that it started with the machine then how they were now pulling children from their side of the void over. Iris said, *“there can only be two reasons to do that. They are either trying to build an army on your side or sending those children back to die.”* Iris explained how for someone to use magic they had to be fortified to be able to hold that power in. This took three years of special training and diet. She said, *“someone with potential but unready to contain it would become volatile.”* JT said, *“a suicide bomber.”* Iris went to Jenee. She sat on her lap and the two started to make out. Margret came over to JT and said, *“I guess that’s all for now.”* They left the two to do whatever they were working up to in the water. JT and Margret lay in bed thinking about what they just learned and that they might not ever get back.

Across the compound, a man lay naked among many others of all ages and sexes in a pile. He was sore and tired, but he still had a hard time sleeping. This communal sleeping was new to Akio. He was also worried about his friends. He could remember the flight, waking up and the walk. He could also remember the knife in his chest. He woke up naked having sex with a woman he didn’t know. At the time he couldn’t move. He also could have sworn he saw a set

of wings on her back like a bat. She was riding him until he finished then she came down to him face to face. The woman looked more like a girl of maybe twenty. She had fiery magenta eyes that glowed and long red hair that seemed to alternate between shades of red, orange and that magenta. Her pale skin was awash in what he thought of as tribal tattoos. Akio thought about his husband back in Seattle. What would he think of him and this woman? Even as he missed Dennis he also thought about her.

Learning to Pile

JT woke in their bed and stared out the open window. He could see Margret's back and the tattoo. Something seemed wrong. The tattoo had lines coming out of it and a crossed her back. They seemed like new tattoos. Something tribal, but she was not being inked. It was like the tattoo was growing. He thought about what they learned last night. How magic was a power that could only be controlled by people with training and exercise. She had neither. Margret wanted to try and blend in. To become part of their society. She had said, "*we are here now. We should do what we can to fit in or just maybe be thrown out.*" JT wondered if her wanting to be a part of their society was her or the tattoo. Either way today they take a large step toward that. Margret rolled over and onto JT. She stared into his eyes and said, "*I guess we are going to have to learn how to do this with the company.*" In a corner of the room, Iris said, "*it's time.*"

Margret and JT got out of the bed for the last time. Iris seemed just as alarmed as JT when she saw Margret's back. She sent the others out of the room then had Margret stand still so she could see the lines. She said, "*I have never seen them grow so fast.*" JT asked, "*so you expected this?*" Iris said, "*please understand that to us this is all natural. I am sure there a going to be many things that will be new to you but second nature to us. Just like I am sure there are things about you we won't understand.*" She took off her dress to show her tattoos. Her sudden nudity was a shock to both Margret and JT who tried to recover quickly. She pointed to a line on her upper shoulder. She said, "*this was my original mark. From there the others formed. As they formed they revealed my power and purpose.*" She told JT to put his finger on the line then trace it down her back. She said, "*its ok it won't bite.*" When he touched the line. It lit up and the light followed her curves and traced the growth of her markings.

After Iris, Margret and JT got dressed the others came back. They came in and disassembled the bed. Then they swept the floor. From there they started to assemble the matt. A layer of what looked like bamboo with another layer going across the first all in a large circle. Three people started to lace the ends with a red ribbon. The lace was then woven into the bamboo and up toward the center following the circular pattern. Then a gray ribbon was laced in.

This second lacing all but covered the bamboo. Iris stripped off her dress and walked to the center of the circle. The tattoos on her feet then lower calves started to glow. She put out her hand to one of the men in the group. He took off his clothes then walked into the circle. He took her hand. The glow shot up her leg and into the arm of the guy. She pointed to a young-looking girl who stripped and joined them on the matt. This was repeated until all seven of the people in the room were on the matt and glowing. They turned to Margret and JT who stripped and joined them on the matt. The group embraced. For the first time since arriving, JT's tattoos glowed. From what he could tell the others were relieved. From there they layered rugs on top of the bamboo circle. when it was all done the circle had the feeling of a firm mattress.

Iris told them that the six of them were the core of her original pile. The ceremony they just performed was to establish a new pile with them. JT asked, *"I can tell you are disappointed."* She said, *"you are going to be able to tell many of my moods from now on as we will be able to do the same."* Iris turned to Margret and said, *"we would have never kicked either of you out."* She then turned back to JT and said, *"I am a little disappointed that more of my pile didn't join. Many of them have been with me for years."* The first man that went up to the matt walked over. He said, *"I think that it's amazing that you can set aside such shyness and let yourself be a part of us."* He walked over to one of the other guys and kissed him. JT looked back at the two women who were just smiling at him. Iris said, *"you will learn how to find balance in the pile and eventually control your rampant emotions. For now, we will limit our awareness back to make you comfortable."* Margret said, *"no don't, we need to be a part of this not just guests."*

The day flew by and soon it was time. When they finally made it back to the room it had changed. There were several fire pits setup with smoldering embers of lavender and some other sent neither of them could recognize. JT thought he could smell the faint smell of marijuana. But it had been many years since he knew that smell. Two of the people were already in the room. A man named Drake and Jenee. Drake was the man that was kissed by the other earlier in the day. He and Jenee were next to one of the smoking fire pits. They were breathing in the smoke and making love. JT and Margret got undressed. She saw that his tattoos were changing. They went over to one of the other fire pits. Margret breathed in the smoke and immediately felt at peace

and more than a little sexual. She pushed JT onto a pile of pillows and went for his lap. Soon it was like they were the only people in the room. They made love like they hadn't seen each other in years. Like the act could somehow merge them into one giant orgasm of heat and light until everything was one. Margret could feel hands on her back then chest, but it was like they were miles away or a distant memory. When they finished, Margret slid to one side. They found themselves on the mat surrounded by the others. Margret slipped closer to JT. A woman whose name he didn't know yet moved next to him. She put her arm underneath his close enough to where he could feel her body pressed up against his. Iris did the same with Margret. They didn't know that the others were afraid to touch the tattoos on Margret's back. They didn't know it, but they felt it.

Benefits with Friends

Akio watched as the sun rose in the sky. As it did the shadows of the three moons faded. One of them with a ring around it like Saturn. He said, “*an alien sky and a distant shore. All I do is long for familiar things.*” He looked back at the group of people laying on the strange circular mattress. Like him, they were all nude. He stared at them and thought about his husband back home. One of the people in the pile felt his longing. She got up and led him to a table. There she gave him a cup of some sort of tea. It had a licorice taste with a hint of cloves. She said to him, “*we are trying to contact your side. When we can we might be able to send you home or bring Dennis here.*” For some reason, Akio felt like this girl was not very optimistic about their chances to make any of that happen. The woman he first knew as Elvira came in and said, “*it’s time.*”

Two days ago. Akio woke up underneath a naked woman with long black hair and large breasts. She reminded him of Elvira Mistress of the Dark. They were doing something he had never done with a woman before. He was hard, but he felt uncomfortable like there was something wrong. As she rose and fell Akio felt his strength returning. He could remember the plane, the crash, the forest and the glint of steel stuck in his chest. All around him were other people. None of them were Jesus and Margret. The woman arched her back. As she did Akio thought he saw large black bat wings on her back. They were thin but very long. He closed his eyes and came. When he opened his eyes again the woman was gone. He was surrounded by others on this strange round stiff mattress. Everyone was naked and lying in a pile. The room smelled of lavender and body oil. He touched his chest. It came back oily. Someone had used the body oil on him.

Akio woke up in the pile. His chest hurt from where the blade was jammed in. He turned to his right and saw a naked man around the age of twenty or twenty-one. He was lean and fit with an unknown ethnicity. Like everyone else, he had the tribal tattoos that went from his neck to his feet and were even on his genitals. Akio laid back and asked, “*where is Jesus.*” The man said, “*oh, no don’t worry you didn’t die.*” Akio thought about it for a second then said, “*no I*

mean the guy I was traveling with Jesus and Margret.” The man looked to the left. A voice came from that direction asking, *“the man’s name is Jesus?”* Akio turned to the voice to see a petite woman with green hair that faded down to white. Like the man next to him she was naked and covered in tattoos. She walked over to Akio. She pushed him back and got on top of him. Akio said, *“I’m married, and I don’t lean your way.”* She smiled and said, *“I don’t understand any of that.”* The man leaned in and kissed him as the woman started to have sex with him. Akio tried to get up and stop it, but he couldn’t move. As she went up and down her tattoos glowed and pulsed. As this happened the man kept kissing him on the mouth then down his chest. The man replaced the woman on Akio and started to go down on him until he finished. The woman came up on his side and started to rub his chest. All the while Akio felt like he was cheating on his husband.

Akio woke up and found he could move again. He had a scar from the knife but no pain. The green and white-haired woman led him into a room that reminded him of the ancient Roman baths. He got into the warm water and felt better. In there she told him her name was Askia and the man was named Klein. The woman he saw as Elvira was named Alaya. She was an elder and one of the greatest healers with their clan. Off in the distance, he could see a rising moon. The moon was bigger than he had ever seen it before. Then he saw the rings. He got out of the water and stared at the moon. Then the other two moons. The first woman that he had sex with came in. Her hair was just white this time. When he first woke up with her on top her hair was strobing in colors. She said, *“your friends are ok and are being taken care of. When you are ready we will take you to them.”* Akio turned to her and said, *“I am ready now.”* She said, *“we can understand how you feel but here we think we know best.”* Akio asked, *“where am I?”*

The door opened. The woman named Askia led him down a hall. They passed many doors marked with red and black banners. The hallway opened into a large room with a glass ceiling that was maybe forty-feet up. He could see the first shots of sunlight break across the glass ceiling. The room was about the size of an American football field with end zones. They crossed it and into another hall. Up a flight of steps and down another hall until they came to a dark ebony wooden door. The doors opened and inside he saw Margaret and Jesus. They were

both naked and staring out at the rising sun. They turned and saw him. The three embraced. Akio asked, “*why are you naked?*”

They spent the next hour talking about what happened after he died. They did this after getting some clothing on. The three walked onto a balcony that overlooked the forest. JT had asked that Akio call him JT and not Jesus. He said, “*the name seems to confuse them.*” Akio told them that the people he was sleeping with said they had a way to contact our people across what they called the Void. JT and Margret told him the history they were told and shown. Then they showed him the tattoos and how they were growing. After they checked Akio’s tattoo on his back they could see that all their tattoos were doing the same. Akio said, “*I wonder if it wasn’t just a coincidence that we were the ones that survived?*” Akio told them how he saw the dragon breathed fire into the plane in its mouth. The flames jetted through the fuselage like a flamethrower.

Seeing from a Distance

Margret and JT lay entwined with one another on the large mat surrounded by the others. They slept this way to keep from being used. They both quickly learned that the others didn't understand that no meant no. To them, sex was just an act. They had no concept of intimacy or binary relationships. No couples. They found out that Jenee was just one of many people Iris saw as her partners. Akio told them how when he was being treated for his death he was for lack of a better word molested by the people in the group. They used some sort of force to keep him still as they took turns. The night they were reunited they asked if he could join their pile. Iris had said, *"yes, anyone can join."* She hesitated then said to Akio, *"we are sorry about what happened to you. Your ways are very different from ours. To us the act you call sex is just an act. Also, much of what you saw was from the treatment."* He lay there naked next to his friends trying to understand a society that had no concept of privacy or intimacy.

In the morning Iris came and told them about a way to communicate with their world. She said, *"I wish we had more time to prepare you for this. There are things that were done to survive that you will learn. I hope you can see us for who we are and not what was done in our names a thousand years ago."* Akio asked, *"can I speak with my husband?"* Iris gave him a confused look then she seemed to catch on. She said, *"I am not sure how this works, but if I understand it then we can only speak to the person or persons at their mirror."* Iris looked at the door then back to the three. She said, *"we don't have a lot of time. When we get there, you will understand."* On the way, she told them that she and Alaya would go into the water to speak with the other side. If things went well then, they could come in and talk to them. She said, *"just maybe they could talk to your husband."*

They found themselves in an open courtyard. In the middle was a large reflecting pool with a silver disc suspended over the pool. A light filled the space between the pool and disc. Iris took her shirt off and stepped into the water. Her markings pulsed. The water came up to her knees. She turned to Alaya. She took her shirt off and got into the water. A voice came from the disc and the water. It sounded like the voices of a boy and a girl speaking in unison. They said,

“step into the water so we can begin.” Margret thought she heard someone say something about not taking off her shirt then another agreeing with her. After what felt like an eternity a woman stepped into the water. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties with a pixie style haircut dyed blonde. Margret thought to herself, *“soccer mom.”* She began to start to sink into the water. Iris said, *“either take off your shirt or step out of the water. You can’t enter the pool with your heart covered.”* The woman stripped off her shirt then bra. She had a tattoo on her left breast. It was a cartoon eye. She had an identical one on the other side. As she stood in the water one of the tattoo eyes blinked.

A man of around seventy stepped into the water. He had scars all over his chest and a few tattoos. The man tried not to look at Linda. Alaya and Iris thought that their mannerisms were strange yet just like the three just on the outside of the water. The man started to sink into the water. He looked around, but he couldn’t see what was wrong. Margret recognized one of the scars and the lump from the pacemaker. He had to step out leaving the woman named Linda to speak for their world. Iris came over and kissed Linda on the lips. She said, *“let me be the first to welcome you to our reality.”* To Linda the woman that looked like a tatted-up Elvira then asked. *“are we ok?”* The younger looking woman nodded. Linda asked, *“so the kiss is a security check?”* Iris said, *“this mark lets me see people’s intentions. But I have to kiss them to see.”* She pointed to a tattoo of an open eye on her hip.

Linda looked at the two then said, *“well I’m not sure what we are supposed to do here. Before today I thought that magic was just so much mumbo-jumbo.”* Alaya said, *“I know what you mean. Before a week ago I would have said the stories of the old world were just that, stories.”* A voice mumbled off to the side. Linda asked, *“what happened a week ago?”* Iris turned to the three who were already taking off their shirts. The voice mumbled something just out of view. Akio stepped forward. He said, *“I am Captain Akio Saito from IGT 1564 flying from Los Angeles to Tokyo. This is my co-pilot Jesus Tomas Fernando and head flight attendant Margaret Champ. We came here about a week ago.”* The woman smiled then put out her hand and touched Akio’s chest. When he seemed real she backed a little away. Linda said, *“hold on, Jesus was your co-pilot?”* JT said, *“oh god, not another one.”* Linda said, *“the three of you are dead. They*

found the charred wreckage in the ocean.” Akio said, “my guess is they found what the dragon left after it was done.” A voice mumbled but it was clear on Linda’s face when he said dragon. Linda said, “Game of Thrones dragon or Dragon Heart?” Margret said, “think the dragon from the end of How to Train your Dragon. The one the size of an island.” The man mumbled. What he said got Linda’s attention. She repeated his question, “what about the other dragon?” Iris said, “he is on our side and was sent to try and protect the machine.”

Something felt false to Margret about what Iris said. Iris could tell that something was wrong with Margret. Linda asked, “*why are you attacking us?*” Alaya said, “*no that’s not us. Those attacks are coming from Atlantis.*” Linda asked, “*Atlantis survived the war?*” Alaya and Iris looked at each other then Iris said, “*yes, they rebuilt and nearly took over this side with the help of their emperor Zed.*” Linda asked, “*the one that saved the world from Atlantis?*” Iris said, “*that wasn’t his plan. He wanted all the power for himself. It made him immortal.*” The voice from the mirror spoke. It was just the voice of the boy. It said, “*the connection is fading. Nothing lasts forever.*” Margret hugged Linda and said, “*thank you.*” The light faded. As it did so did Linda. After all the light was gone, the five of them felt cold.

Finding a Place in the Pile

Akio sat in the water that served as a bath for his new family. He thought about how funny life was. How there was a time when he would have found such a place as this to just want he wanted. A society that wouldn't have held his sexuality as a deviance. His first boyfriend was as closeted as he was. He was ushered into his sexuality in a literal closet. During this time, he also tried to date girls, but he just didn't see them that way. When he came out to his family they told him that he could either say he was gay or be a part of the family. Not both. He kept his sexuality a secret during the "don't ask don't tell" years as he served in the air force. He knew that it was a badly held secret. When the policy was lifted he decided he would step away from the military rather than come out as a gay airman. It was in his training where he met his future husband Dennis.

He was the son of a soybean farmer from Iowa. The ninth child. Where Akio's family was closed to the idea, Dennis's family always suspected he was gay. When he came out one day at dinner his mom in her characteristic mid-west tone said, "*yeah no kidding. Pass the potatoes.*" Dennis spent his early days in a series of broken relationships trying to define himself. After a while, he came to see that he couldn't define himself by who he was with but who he was when he was with them. He went to work for the airline as a mechanic. Most of the pilots didn't speak with the mechanics, so when Akio came down to inspect his plane it was a surprise to him that he wanted to meet the crew on the ground. Akio was from the military and he was a custom to knowing the crews that maintained his plane. They met and talked. That became dinner which transitioned into breakfast. From that day neither of them would see another man.

As he sat there a couple came in. They both seemed much too young, but Akio knew better. The people aged slowly here. A woman that looked like a teen could easily be in her thirties. Like everyone else the couple was naked. Instead of getting into the water they stayed just outside of it with his feet in the water and her in his lap as they made love. This wasn't a new site for Akio anymore. The people here were open and active. They also seemed to be all bisexual. The woman that walked in with this man was with another woman just an hour ago. He

had said to JT how every night was like a night with Caligula. He said, *“there was a time when I would have seen this place like it was heaven, but now all I can think about is Dennis.”* He watched these two make love and wondered just how long he will be able to hold out before they start to talk about how he just doesn’t fit in. The other two also didn’t seem to fit but at least they found the courage to be with each other among the others.

The woman named Jenee came in. She walked over to Akio and sat next to him. She said to him, *“just maybe if you let this inflexibility go you could enjoy what is being offered.”* She said, *“close your eyes and think about him.”* Akio closed his eyes and thought about Dennis. As he did she reached down and took him by the hand. He thought about a weekend they spent on a gay-friendly beach in Greece. The nights in the hot tub as they made love. He opened his eyes to see she had shifted from his side to be on his lap. She whispered, *“keep your eyes closed.”* He kept his eyes open and watched her shift up and down. He put his hands on her hips and started to move with her. He wanted this to be over. As he came she whispered, *“I will show you how to keep your feelings to yourself, so you won’t hurt people’s feelings.”* Akio asked, *“how can I do that and keep to who I am?”*

A few hours later, Akio went into the shared room to the pile. JT was off in what they came to call the indoor outhouse. Margret lay there trying to look like she was asleep. She thought that if she pretended to be asleep then just maybe no one would try anything. Akio knew better. He came in close and whispered, *“let’s just do this and let them see we are open to their ways.”* She looked at him then to the door to the privy. Akio said, *“Iris pulled him into the bath to talk with him. She is worried that he and I are not fitting in.”* Margret asked, *“what about me?”* He said, *“with your tattoos you are special to them. With that, you can act any way you want, but he and I need to act like them or find our selves being asked to leave.”* She whispered to him, *“it would be like fucking my brother.”* He rolled over and said, *“oh shit your right.”*

Iris led JT into the water. She climbed into his lap. She said, *“I will try and help you hide your feelings and fit in.”* She started to shift her hips in his lap. JT looked out at the pile and saw

Akio next to Margret. They were talking and laughing. JT looked to Iris and became aroused. He brought his hands down to her hips and soon the two were having sex. He did so while staring at Margret. Iris turned his head to her. She said, *“when you act don’t think about anyone else but yourself. Think about the act and the feeling.”* JT laughed. He said, *“that is the opposite thing every girl has told me since my first time when I was fifteen.”* Iris said, *“think about the boy you were and try and find that train of thought. Then sometime tonight find a woman in the pile and just do it. They will look past your preference just not your lack of group participation.”* JT asked, *“what about Margret?”* Iris said, *“she is too important to the war. Her markings make her powerful. If Atlantis got a hold of her the war could be lost. But having said that the group still won’t offer protection to the two of you for long.”*

JT came out to find Margret waiting for him. She took him by the arm and led him to the pile. She led him to a woman in the pile. She was the same unknown mix of race that seemed common here. She also looked like she was a teenager. Margret laid down next to her. She guided him down to the other woman. Margret came up and kissed him than her. She said, *“I don’t want to stay in a place where you aren’t.”* They both looked over to Akio. He was with another man but really, he was facing himself and the kind of man he saw himself as. This man lying in front of him was the epitome of what he would find sexual. But now all he wanted was Dennis. When he was finished Akio decided to find a way back.

Servicing the Emperor

Siya bowed with her knees together and her arms pointed out in front of her to the door. She kept her head down as she waited for her god. She was in a burgundy and gold Sari that went back more than a thousand years. It was a design that her family wore from the beginning of the empire. As with the rest of her family, she was the third girl in her line, so she was now the property of their god, the emperor. She would serve him in whatever capacity he would need. Her great-aunt was still in service to the emperor while her mother's sister was chosen to serve in his bed. This was the biggest honor anyone could be chosen for. If she was chosen to serve in his bed, she would earn her immortality. To meet his expectations, she was trained in the traditional ways to please the emperor.

The door opened, and she heard footsteps. They stopped just in front of her within inches of her hands. A voice she has only heard from a distance spoke to her. The Emperor said, *“raise my child so I can get a better look at you.”* She arose with her eyes staring away so she wouldn't see her god. He said, *“no my child, I want to see your eyes.”* She looked at him. He was more than a thousand years old, but he looked like he was in his thirties. Zed was tall with a pale skin and ginger hair. His eyes glowed. The color changed from blue to silver to gold. He told her to walk into his chamber. She walked in then heard the door close behind her. All she could think about was the colors of his eyes. Then she felt him start to undress her. She said, *“my lord it is my job to serve you.”* Zed said, *“and I will now see just how you are going to serve me.”* In the corner, Siya saw her great-aunt. She was wearing the same style of dress as she was in. She stood there and smiled at her niece.

The emperor removed the last of her dress and she stood there naked in front of him. He stood behind her tracing the markings on her back with his fingers. The magic ran from his fingers and onto her skin. It lit up her markings. Her body tingled all over. He said, *“my, my how beautiful.”* He walked around her. As he did he ran his hand over her flesh. He walked over to his bed and motioned the others in the room to leave. Siya saw how her great-aunt's expression changed from happy to sorrowful. Then her god stepped into her view. He ran his hand over her

face and down her breasts. She felt the tingling of the magic emanating from his hands. She realized he was choosing her to serve him in his bed. Zed walked over to the bed then took off his robe. She was now staring at her god in all his glory. He seemed just a little normal. His penis was average size. She had seen bigger in her training and thought he would be something special. He brought her head up and kissed her. The kiss lit her up and soon her misgivings about his being ordinary were long gone.

Zed picked her up and carried her to the bed and tossed her in. He pulled her to the end as he spread her legs. She watched as he grew hard. His erection glowed. He climbed onto her, then mounted her. The magic ran through her body electrifying up her spine. With every thrust, the magic grew. Siya said, *“my lord I am supposed to serve you.”* Zed stopped, and they rolled over, so she was on top. She began to ride him as the magic grew in her. He watched as her markings glowed from gold to a bright white. She sat back as the light ran through her body. The light emanating from every marking and every orifice in her body. The light gave off a roar that drowned out her screams. The light burned out her eyes. Blood ran from her ears and mouth. Her fingertips turned black as did her lips. Her hair caught fire. As all this happened she never stopped grinding on him until he was finished. When he did finish he pushed her body off himself. She fell to the floor twitching as her pelvis kept throbbing in a reflex of sexual energy.

Zed sat at the edge of the bed and looked at the body. He said, *“what a pity I had so much hope for her. She didn’t even make it through the first time.”* He turned to one of his servants and said, *“dispose of this.”* Siya picked up and took the piece that was named after her out of the room and to the young dragon’s pens. Zed walked to the window and looked out. As he did his main servant came in. He asked, *“is there anything else my lord.”* As he asked he looked around at the destruction the girl’s body left. Zed said, *“while that was fun it didn’t completely satisfy me. Send for another.”* He said, *“very good my lord I will have another one here within the hour. Is there anything we can do to serve you until then?”* Zed said, *“bring me the mirror.”* Three minutes later and six men brought in a large oval mirror. Like the others, this one hovered above the ground.

He gazed into the mirror and saw a woman with red hair and a Celtic cross tattoo on her back. The cross was now covered in colors. He said to himself, “*she is coming along nicely. Soon I will have someone that will be able to bare my child.*” The doors opened, and two men dragged in a young woman. His head servant said, “*after someone willing to serve you I thought that you might want someone to take.*” They tossed her on the floor where she tried to run. Zed waved his hand and she stopped. He ordered his servants out. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He whispered, “*if you survive this then you will be a goddess. If you don’t then what would it matter.*” He eased his hand down the front of her top then pulled it off. He brought his hands around and caressed her breasts. As he did her markings lit up. He said, “*I think you are going to be some fun.*”

Tolerance for Magic

Iris stood on the balcony just off the shared room. She stared back at the pile. A man just to her left said, *“the emperor won’t wait for long.”* He looked at the pile then back to Iris. He said, *“even now he watches her through the mirror. He said to me that as soon as her markings are on her back he would come for her and kill anyone who tries to stop him.”* Iris said, *“no one can stop him.”* Iris closed the door to the room. She turned to the emperor’s servant and said, *“we are going to start to send our power base to her. Her tolerance for magic will grow with every coupling. Soon she will be able to withstand him and just maybe save us all.”* The servant said, *“see that you do and understand that the emperor sees all and knows all. He will be watching.”* The man seemed to fade into the wall. Iris looked back to her new friends and wondered if she could really betray them like this. She also wondered if she had a choice.

The next morning, Margret woke up to see Akio on the balcony staring out into the distance. She was still a little unnerved at the sight of her colleague naked. She saw the former air-force pilot as an almost father figure. She could see the tattoos on his back or what they called here his markings. They had grown since he caught up with them. Two of them made strange shapes on his back near his shoulder blades. One on each blade. Rounded rectangles with a different color in the middle. Margret learned that having different colors in the natural markings was unusual and signified that the magic that would be channeled through them was strong. She walked over to him. As she did she realized he seemed taller than before. She put an arm around him and stared out. He seemed surprised. He turned her around. She tried not to stare at his genitals. Akio asked, *“Margret what is going on? You seem so much younger than just yesterday?”*

There were no mirrors in the room. Margret went to the bath and stared in. She was near thirty with the subtle changes that first showed a person’s age the night before, but now she looked like she did when she was just turning twenty-one. She knew she felt healthier than before. At the time, she just chalked it up to the clean air and food of this place. Margret felt a hand go across her back. It traced one of the fresh markings. Iris said, *“this one is why you now*

look so much younger than before. It will keep you like this for many years.” She turned to Iris who showed her the same markings on her back. Iris said, *“I lied before. I am not twenty-three. I am about a hundred and twenty-three.”* Margret stared at Iris’s body. She had the frame and build of someone in her late teens, but she was saying she was an octogenarian. Iris said, *“it is a burden to live long. You lose so much as time and everyone else passes you by.”* Iris leaned in and kissed her. She said, *“to find someone you can bond with for many years is a blessing.”* Iris slipped behind Margret and hugged her. Margret thought about what she just said and wondered if she would be better off accepting this woman’s love rather than holding on to her heterosexuality. As Iris hugged her she could feel something akin to sorrow emanate from her as well as an image of a tall man with bright orange hair.

After some questioning, JT found himself in a big hall with a glass ceiling. A man passed him the ball. He kicked it to the right as he followed it then back to the left. He came up with a man that tried to kick the ball away but with a quick fake and tap he passed him and made it to the goal. At the goal, he stopped and turned to the man he faked. JT said, *“don’t watch my feet or the ball follow my eyes. they will tell you where I am going.”* JT played soccer or what his father called football since he was just a little kid. Now here he was teaching the game to a people that never heard of the game before. He found the hardest part of coaching was keeping the hands off the ball. Off to the side, he saw a younger version of Margret. He thought how she could be her sister. He then realized it was Margret. He was wearing a loose pair of shorts while most of the players were nude. He said, *“it seems that they play their games like the ancient Greeks.”* She couldn’t help but notice that his physic had grown. He was always well built but now he seemed more like a bodybuilder than an airline pilot. Iris whispered, *“it’s the two triangle markings on his arms.”* Margret said, *“when in Rome.”* She went to her knees and pulled his shorts down. Iris asked, *“I thought he said Greece?”*

As they watched them play the game they remarked on just how much the three had changed. Iris said, *“you three have a high tolerance for magic. I have never seen anything like it before.”* Margret stopped watching JT’s ass and turned to her. Iris said, *“it usually takes years to have such powerful markings form.”* Margret said, *“pick one of the players and ask him or her to*

step out.” Iris pointed to a player off to the side that seemed a little lost. When he stepped out, Margret pulled her dress off and joined the game. At first, no one would approach the woman with the sacred markings, but after a while, the game returned to normal. Iris stared as Margaret’s markings grew in the light of the sun that shown through their most sacred place. She thought about what the servant said. She knew that the emperor was watching and that soon all her lies would be found out. But for now, they had this moment. She was going to enjoy her new friends for as long as she had them. She noticed that Akio was not with them.

After a quick search, Iris found him near one of the main gates. He was with one of the traveling parties. These groups went from castle to castle with news and correspondences. She could tell that he planned on going with them. She said, *“so you are just going to leave without saying goodbye.”* He said, *“I left a note and I didn’t want to argue the point. I also didn’t want to risk them saying they were coming.”* It was left unsaid that he knew it was dangerous to go out in the open. He said to Iris, *“I am counting on you to keep them safe.”* He looked to the stairs that led to the hall where they were playing. He said, *“I may be going but I will never leave them alone.”* Iris knew she should keep her mouth shut but she found she liked this strange man. She said, *“make sure that your traveling team finds deep cover in two days.”* Akio asked, *“what is happening?”* She answered, *“the first of every month the dragons search the woods for food. Anyone caught in the open is eaten.”*

Traveling to Ravenwood

Akio's traveling party made it to the cockpit of the plane. One of the men asked, "*how does that fly?*" Akio tried to explain how the plane works and why but after a while he just stopped. He climbed inside and went through the supplies. While inside he found a picture of Dennis. It was taken in Greece. They had printed a cropped picture to cut out the nudity. He thought about that day on the beach. They were among friends and like-minded individuals that wouldn't judge them for who they were. The week they spent felt more like a few days. Back in Seattle, they came home to find their car vandalized. Akio had suggested that he could base out of almost any city. They could move to a place where they could be who they were and not hide it. A year later and same-sex marriage became legal. They married and decided to make Seattle their home no matter what.

The leader of the party was a man named Kale. He unrolled a cloth map and laid it out on the ground. He pointed to the center of the map. He said, "*this is Haven.*" He pointed back to the castle. He said, "*our first stop is called Ravenwood. It's a four-day walk. The trouble is that the dragons will be out hunting in the woods in two days.*" He pointed to a place about midway between the two spots. He said, "*this is a safe place. The dragons know not to harvest from there.*" Akio asked, "*why would they stay away from any place they could find food?*" Kale pointed to a symbol and said, "*this place was marked by the one that calls himself the emperor. The dragons know that he would wipe them out if they went anywhere near one of his marked spots.*" Kale rolled up the map as they gathered their supplies. The trip to the safe zone would be more of a run than walk.

A large black cauldron was brought into a dark room. It was filled with water. It was placed on a three-legged stand. The men that carried it in bowed to a dark corner of the room then left. The emperor walked out of the corner. He seemed older than before with his long ginger hair streaked with white. His skin was pale and covered in wrinkles and spots. He was in a burgundy robe open in the middle. He walked up to the cauldron and put his hands into the water tossing some into his face. As he did the age melted away. On the sides of the cauldron were

raised markings. Zed cut his finger and let the blood drop into the water. He then took hold of the raised markings. Where he touched the cauldron, the raised parts lit up. The light followed the raised markings on the outside and the inside of the cauldron. The water started to bubble then boil. In that water, he saw Akio and the men on the road racing to the waypoint.

Seven hours into the run they came to a stop. Akio was an experienced long-distance runner. He ran the New York and Boston Marathons multiple times. Still, he was just an amateur in comparison to these men. Kale said they would take an hour then go back to running. Akio developed a cramp in his right leg. One of the men came over to him. He was named Adolf. He was tall and either deeply tan or of the mix of races that were so common here. He took Akio's leg and helped him massage the cramp out. Akio felt that there was something more in his touch. He came out here to escape temptation only to find it running with him. He did his best to hide his interests. A short time later and they were back on the run. They would run until it was too dark to see.

They came to a place off the road with a circle of rocks. They stopped and gathered enough wood to build a big fire. By the time it was dark the fire was raging. Adolf asked Akio, *“so this Hitler guy, what was he like?”* Akio said, *“let's just say if you ever come to our side tell people that your name is Al. No one uses his name anymore.”* Adolf looked at the picture. He asked, *“you are willing to risk everything for this man?”* Akio looked at the picture. He thought about that day. He then thought about their last words. The adoption was going slow. Dennis wanted children. He wanted his own children. Akio said, *“I would rip a hole in the universe to get back to him.”* Kale sat down next to Akio with a cup of what looked like tea. He said, *“wait until you see Ravenwood. It was built on the side of a cliff using a natural cave for the living space. The builders spent five hundred years carving the elaborate wood carvings throughout the structure.”* He gave the cup to Akio. He said, *“this will help with the cramps and help you keep up with us tomorrow.”* Akio took a drink. It had a ginger and licorice taste. Kale said, *“you did well. You kept up with us on a good run. Most people drop in the first mile.”*

Something moved in the fire. Kale looked at the fire then back to the others. He screamed, “*run.*” The fire lurched forward. A foot made from flames and ash stepped out of the circle. Then another foot and another. The flaming form had no recognizable shape. A fiery mass that just took to walking. Adolf said, “*it’s a fire demon. They live out here waiting for flames to help them take form. The ring of rocks was supposed to stop it from taking our fire.*” As they ran they could feel the heat from behind them. Someone screamed from behind. Kale said, “*don’t look back just keep running.*” The four remaining men came to a cliff. They collided then went over it. They dropped around twenty feet then rolled into a river. Akio looked back to see the fire demon. It had taken a human shape but in flames. Kale struggled. Adolf and Akio helped him stay afloat. The fourth man never came up from the bottom of the water. They crossed the water and looked back. The flames were out and all that was left was a form made from burnt wood and ash in the shape of a man.

On the other side of the river, they found out that kale had several fractured bones. He was also burnt on his back. Akio and Adolph made a travois from fallen branches. About an hour later Kale was dead. They buried him in the woods. From there they took off running. The day was ending, and that night would bring the dragons. As night fell they reached the opening to Ravenwood. It was a place where the rock had fissured open just big enough to let a person squeeze through. This went on for about a hundred feet when it opened to a courtyard that led to a large set of doors. The doors were open. Adolph said, “*wait here.*” He walked into the doorway. As he did a shock of blue energy shot from within. The bolt struck Adolph in the back lighting up his markings shooting sparks from his fingertips. A second bolt stripped the flesh off his body leaving his skeleton standing.

A bolt shot back and hit Akio. It knocked him back ripping off his shirt. The fissure closed. The rock floor in front of the doorway cracked. The mountain shook then the face gave way. Ravenwood fell off the mountain leaving Akio trapped hundreds of feet up. He felt something different on his back. He was alone many miles away from the others in a place that was about to be overrun by large hungry dragons. The two strange shaped spots on his back glowed. From then came a pair of glowing wings. The wings moved with him. Akio thought to

himself, “*wings on a pilot. Groovy.*” Off in the distance, he heard a roar. The dragons were out and hungry. Akio looked down at the ground and wondered if he should just jump and learn to fly on the way down. The song from Tom Petty came to mind. Then the song from Van Helen Jump. He said to himself, “*we fly into the infinite black with nothing but our wits and a star to guide us.*” Akio Jumped.

Bad Bargains

Iris came into the room to find Margret on the pile with Peter. She was on top of him riding hard. As she swayed her markings pulsed. The markings or what she called tattoos were now across her back and around to her chest. JT was gone. She needed to speak with them both. Today everything was going to change. She was going to protect her people and set a future that would be free of the emperor. She had made a bargain with this monster to orient a woman to their ways. But after getting to know Margret she found herself hesitating in her duty. One of the men was taken out on a trip that he wouldn't come back from. She was ordered to get rid of the other one. He was a distraction. As she watched Gena came up to the two. She sat on his face and kissed Margret then she turned around, so Peter could have a better angle on her. She leaned back, and they kissed as they made love to this man.

At fifteen Iris was brought before the emperor. She was to be one of many in a long line of people to serve him in his bed. None of them made it past two nights. As was the custom she was naked and in a bowing position. Zed came into the room. He was angry about something and he meant to take his anger out on the first person he saw. As he walked in he saw her but at first, didn't see it. Then he saw the mark of long life on her back. Zed looked down at the girl. She was smaller than what he liked. He knew that she wouldn't last one time with him. Zed was tired of this endless series of encounters. He wanted someone that could stand beside him or at least be able to last longer than ten minutes. Zed told Iris to stand up. Then he came up behind her and stroked her breasts. She could feel his power emanating from his hands. Iris knew that she was about to die but she was ok with her death. She was a servant of the emperor and this was her lot in life. Zed then put his head on her shoulder and whispered something into her ear that would change her life forever.

That was over a hundred and eight years ago. She was sent back to the castle to act as an administrator to the next generations of servants. Iris was told that one day someone would come with a sacred mark and it would be her job to prepare her for the emperor. She saw several over the years with sacred marks. None of them would live past their first contact with him. She came

to see herself as a mentor to the dead. One night a flash of light struck across the sky which opened to show stars that didn't belong. Someone found a way to the other side. A week later and then something happened. The sky opened to a new sky and rain. Two of the dragons went through the opening. It was clear that they were hit with a force that weakened them as they went through. When they came back the older dragon fell to the ground dead and the other dropped something in the trees. It flew back to the nesting grounds to heal. As she watched this a young girl came up behind her. She was naked and completely covered in silver. She was the providence of the castle. It told her she was to retrieve a woman from the road and prepare her for the emperor. It also told her to eliminate anyone with the woman. Before she could act one of the men with the woman was killed by bandits living in the woods. The strange man and the other had markings like she had never seen before, so she defied the emperor and ordered them to save the men.

That was then. She made love with them as she got to understand where they came from better. Iris grew to see them as her family and not just a bad bargain she made to save her life. Her first real act of defiance cost them their providence. Zed turned the mirror back to the girl then he forced himself on her. It was the highest sin in their world. He then drained her of her power as a mirror and killed her. Iris didn't know the girl, but she knew the mirror. She was made a mirror over three hundred years ago. Zed made a new mirror out of one of the many that lay in waiting. With that mirror, they contacted the other side. The new one was a boy and loyal to the emperor. Her latest act was to warn Akio about the dragons, but that seemed not to work. He left and soon word came that Ravenwood fell. Her punishment for what she did was to take Margret to him. He would most likely take her as well. He would finish what he started when she was fifteen. Emperor Zed would gain this power and open the doorway, so he and his followers could go across. When he was gone the others would remain safe and forever away from him.

Iris waited for the three to finish then she went to Margret. She told her that the ruling council wanted her in their capital to answer questions on their world. Iris said, "*it is a high honor to be asked to speak to them and one that can't be refused.*" It was both a lie and the truth. Iris told her that JT would have to stay behind. She said, "*only those that are invited can go.*" It

was clear that Margret didn't want to leave him behind. Iris told her another lie. She said, "*you will see him soon.*" Margret smiled then kissed her on the lips. Margret wrapped her arms around her and Iris did something no one else would do. She did the same thing to her touching the marks on her back. The next day they were off to see the emperor. Iris could feel JT's eyes on them as he watched from a balcony as they walked away. That night he wasn't happy to stay behind. It was Margret that convinced him to as she put it, "*stay in character.*" There was ten of them in total. All of them were women of different ages from Iris at a hundred and twenty-three to Talia at fourteen. Some of them would become servants while others would be used then fed to the dragons. Talia was an offering to the emperor, but she just might not be needed. The emperor would soon have Margret and the need for others would fall aside.

A night and a day later and they found themselves encamped near the emperor's palace. Iris and Margret sat by the fire. The others were asleep. As with any trip, they brought with them a tent that would work as a pile. It was infused with the essential oils used in the rooms. The two lay together staring at the flames. Iris knew her life was about to end. She was going to be ended for her act of defiance. She looked at this strange woman. She was the salvation of her people and all it would take was to sacrifice her to the emperor. Iris whispered into her ear, "*I can't do this. You are being given to the emperor, so we can be free.*" Iris told her how the emperor saw her through the mirror and took them from her world, so he could have her. All the people on the plane died so she could come to him. She told her everything she knew about his plan.

He meant to go back to the world and rebuild Atlantis. Then he would use magic to conquer and subjugate humanity. At first, Margret laughed then she remembered what she saw. She knew that it would be easy to conquer a people dependent on technology. She said, "*shut off the lights and the people will do whatever they are told to get them back.*" Iris said, "*it is all dependent on you. If we can get you back to your world and to something called the Order, then just maybe we can stop him.*" That night they took off and headed to a place where the bandits encamped. Iris knew that they hated the emperor and would do whatever they could to help. It took all of Iris's will to leave the others behind. Most of them were loyal to the emperor and

would stop them if they could. She stared at Talia knowing this new plan would send her to her death.

In the morning they found six of the bandits as they surrounded and killed a deer. The men saw the women as they came out of the woods. Margret saw that one of them seemed to know Iris. He said, *“hello mother it’s been a while.”* Iris said, *“yes Jacob it has been far too long.”* The man was in his forties and looked more like her father than son. Jacob smiled then nodded to the others. They moved in and took the women. Jacob said, *“the emperor said you would do this. He said we should wait here for you two and protect his investment.”* He then punched Iris in the stomach and across the face. They tied them both up and carried Iris back to the others. Jacob told Margret how they were promised what was left of the world after the emperor was gone. They would take the castles and become the rulers of this world.

The Forgotten

The throne was made from the base of a massive piece of pottery and the skull of a dragon. The jaw served as a platform for a chair while the top of the skull loomed over it. On either side of the throne were the skeleton wings of the dragon that was so big they nearly wrapped around the throne room. Iris knew that the pottery was the remains of the vessel used to collect magic while the dragon was the last one to go against the emperor. In a row up against the wall and around the room were the skulls of those that tried to betray the emperor. She also knew that there was a place there for hers. Halfway into the room, the emperor's guards stripped Iris then tossed her to the stone floor. She took a familiar bow and waited for her end to come. Emperor Zed looked down at her and said, *"no she isn't worthy of a spot as one of my trophies. Take her to the pit of forgotten dragons and feed her to them."*

Margret watched this from the side of the chamber. She had guards on either side of her holding her back. A guard came up to Iris and kicked her in the face. Another guard picked her up and took her away. Zed looked at Margret and said, *"sometimes as a ruler, you have to do things that seem distasteful. Leadership means sacrifice."* He waved to Talia who came over to him. Zed said, *"I will make you a deal. Either you will willingly sleep with me or I will forcefully take her."* He opened her shirt and stroked her breasts then said, *"you could survive while this one won't last more than ten minutes."* As he stroked her Margret could see welts forming on her skin. Zed said, *"maybe I'll do her here, so you can watch."* Margret shook off the guards then she slipped her dress off letting it fall to the floor. Emperor Zed saw how the markings now covered most of her body. They included some marks that he didn't recognize. Zed let Talia go and went to Margret.

He stroked her left breast with his right hand. The markings glowed but she didn't burn. His touch felt like a shot of adrenalin to Margret. Zed turned to a servant and said, *"prepare her for tonight."* Six women came up behind Margret and led her to a bath. They finished stripping her then bathed her. Margret couldn't help but notice how they all had hand shaped burns on them. Some could be accidental contact while others were clearly not by accident. One girl

clearly was burned in places that a man should never touch. Margret knew that appearance was subjective here, but this girl had only the beginnings of the marks and was maybe twelve-years-old. They dressed Margret in a sheer robe. Four men came in with a litter. A chair that was made to carry a wealthy person using the backs of their servants. One of the men picked Margret up and put her in the litter. She was told that she wasn't to touch the bare floor until after she was with the emperor. They carried her into the royal chamber. In the center of a round room was a large round bed with a canopy that was suspended from the top. Fabric panels draped down.

The two guards carried Iris to an open pit. Inside the pit were five dragons. They were small with misshapen wings that kept them from being able to fly. A flightless dragon was not worthy of serving the emperor, so they were tossed into this pit and considered forgotten. They served as the ultimate form of punishment. Being fed to them was the equivalent of being damned. One of the guards said, *"it's been weeks since they have been fed."* The other said, *"no we tossed in the bodies from Ravenwood yesterday."* The first guard said, *"yes but they don't like to be fed dead meat. They want to do the killing."* As they spoke a streak crossed the sky casting a shadow over the pit. The guards looked up, but they saw nothing. Then another streak. One of the guards looked over at Iris. She was tied up and on the ground. He said, *"it's a shame we can't have any fun."* The other guard said, *"you don't want your scent on her and give the forgotten a taste for you."*

The first guard turned to Iris. He picked her up by the shoulder and crotch and put her over his head. As he did he heard a scream. He turned to see the other guard was gone. The first guard dropped Iris and went to the pit. Inside he saw the other guard in the pit being ripped apart by the dragons. He turned to Iris then back to the pit. A moment of indecision cost him his life. Akio swept down and pushed him into the pit. Unlike the other guard, the first was unlucky enough to live to see the bottom and was eaten alive. Iris turned her head to see Akio with his wings. She wasn't sure if she was saved or just as dead as before. Akio untied her and helped her up. Iris said, *"we can't go back to the castle. They are loyal to the emperor and would kill us on site."* Akio asked, *"what about Margret and Jesus."* Iris said, *"he is most likely dead, and*

Margret was given to the emperor.” Akio grabbed her by the arms and said, “we are going back for Jesus then together we are getting Margret.”

Margret stood by the bed. She wasn't sure if she should get on it or just wait. The emperor walked in. He was in a red silk robe that was open in the front. Unlike everyone else, his markings were in color and they extended from his neck to his ankles. When he stepped into a beam of light from a window the markings vanished. He walked over to Margret and pulled the robe off her. He then walked around her staring at the markings. Then he came back around and faced her. Margret was never one for delaying the inevitable. She pulled his robe off him and pushed him to the bed. In the last thousand years, no one had treated him like this. Margret got on top of him. With every touch, her markings glowed and pulsed, but her skin didn't blister. The emperor grew hard from her touch as she was aroused by his. He was like an adrenalin shot with every touch. When he was ready she mounted him, and he had his first lover that could withstand his touch. With her, he was one step closer to conquering the world.

Dogs don't need Clothes

JT sat on a stone bench and watched the others practice. He tried in vain to stop them from using magic while playing. They turned a simple game of soccer into a three-dimensional multi-goal clusterfuck. He soon found he was no longer in their league. With Margret and Akio gone he was alone with a crowd, the odd man out. He had the tattoos that grew markings, but none of them seemed to do anything. All that morning he felt like someone was watching him. The sudden moving of Margret and the disappearance of Akio didn't seem right. He also felt a little sick. His head felt both light and heavy with a sweat that wasn't merited by the activity of watching others play. Across from JT was four men he had never seen before. There were many people in the castle, and he saw new people every day, but these men were watching him.

JT left the hall and went for the room he shared with the others. The four men followed him. Halfway to the room, he felt them closing in. There was an unwritten rule about not entering a shared room without being invited. JT felt like the hall filled with electricity as they approached. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. The first man struck low as he went for JT's waist trying to bring him down as the second and third went for his upper body and legs. The fourth one was standing back holding what looked like a ball of electricity, but JT knew it was raw magic. When the first one hit a wave of adrenaline like energy shot through him. The man hit but didn't bring him down. The second went for a strike to the face, but his hand broke on contact shattering from the knuckles to the wrist. The third one tried to slide out of the way of the fourth man who tossed the energy ball like a baseball at JT who put his hand out in a last-ditch effort to stop the fight. The ball struck him in the arm, and the energy was absorbed by it. As he absorbed the energy, all his tattoos and new markings glowed the blue color of the ball.

The four men backed away and ran down the hall. JT followed them noticing how the hall had shrunk somehow. At the end of the hall, JT found he was nearly three foot taller than when he went in. He looked down to see his skin had darkened and his hands were thicker. In a mirror, he saw a stranger looking back at him. The four men made it to the other side of the newly deserted playing field. JT looked at the four men. His perspective changed from the nearly

nine-foot tall man to something closer to the ground. He felt himself running on his hands and feet. The whole change felt natural as did the running and what felt like a tail. He also realized he was growling. He made it across the room in seconds, just behind the men. He struck the door they just closed, and it shattered inward taking the jam and stone around it down the hall. As he struck the door, he seemed to change back into the tall man. The four men went into a circle with the fourth man forming a ball of energy that filled the hall. When the magic dissipated all that was left was the skeletons of the men, polished white and standing as they were just before.

Jenee appeared at the opening to the hall just in time to see the remains of the four men fall. Then she saw JT and fell to her knees. As she did he felt his new height slip away. *“it has been many years since there has been a changeling here,”* Jenee said while facing down. JT asked, *“what is going on?”* Jenee replied, *“I wish I had more time to explain. Not every clan supports what happens here, but some are more loyal to the emperor than others. Iris was supposed to send word when it was safe to send you to her and Margret, but she is most likely dead, and Margret is with him.”* JT grabbed her by her arms and asked, *“with who?”* Jenee gasped then said, *“the emperor. She was to be taken to him when she was ready, but Iris had another plan.”* Jenee looked JT in the eyes and said, *“there isn’t any time. You might just save her if you go now.”*

Akio flew closer to the castle watching for trouble. On the ground was a monster of a wolf running in the direction of the border. It would cross where Iris was. On its back was a woman riding it like a horse. Akio flew down and got between the wolf and Iris. The wolf was larger than a Clydesdale horse with a fur that glowed an electric blue. On its back was the woman named Jenee. Iris saw Jenee and started to go to her. Jenee dismounted and ran to Iris. When she dismounted the wolf changed into JT. Iris stopped running when she saw the change and dropped to her knees. Jenee pulled Iris back up and hugged her saying how she thought she was dead. With one eye on JT Iris explained what happened with her son and the forgotten. How Akio saved her from being eaten and how they took Margret to the emperor.

Akio went to shake JT's hand, but JT went past the outstretched hand and hugged the man. Akio said, *"it's good to see you too. You do know that you're naked, right?"* JT said, *"I guess dogs don't need clothes."* Iris grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around JT's waist. Then she said something in a strange tongue and the blanket became a kilt. She did the same thing with a strip of white cloth that became a shirt. Iris said, *"the magic should preserve the clothing as you change becoming whatever is appropriate to the form."* JT said, *"I'm not Scottish or Irish, so a kilt isn't appropriate."* Iris asked, *"what's a kilt?"* Akio said, *"man skirt."* Jenee said, *"the color and pattern determine the clan you are a part of."* JT shook his head then he said, *"we don't have time for this. We need to get Margret and then the fuck out of here."* Iris said, *"neither of which will be easy. By now Margret is with the emperor and maybe dead."*

Margret lay next to this strange evil man. She hated him even as she vibrated from the masterful sex they just had. The energy he gave off was so strong it burned away her pubic hair. She gave in willingly to save a young girl. He took advantage of this and violated her. What he didn't expect was her surviving. He searched for years to find a person that could tolerate his touch. This woman could give birth to a new body that would be from their side. It was essential for the body to be from their side and not the magic realm. He hoped that it would take a few tries because it was over a thousand years since he had a partner that lived past two times. She would have a child, he would take it over and then let the magic transform it into a shape that would be able to destroy the ancient form on the other side and then conquer the world.

Invasion (part 1)

The emperor walked into a circular room lit by torches. The center of the room was sunken and made of a highly reflective black marble. Two men brought in a young woman around the age of eighteen. Inayah was trained from birth to serve the emperor. She knew that at any time he could call on her and she would have to give her life for his pleasure. He said, “*stand in the middle of the room.*” She got up then went back to her knees. The Emperor went over and pulled her up to her feet then said, “*no, stay on your feet.*” He looked from her face down her body then he ripped the robe off her. He stepped back and looked Inayah over saying, “*my, my, my, where have you been my little pretty.*” He caressed her left breast leaving red marks where his fingers touched. She winced trying not to show emotion. The emperor said, “*if I had more time than just maybe I would send for another and take you, but the time is here.*” He walked to a table and produced a short, thin sword. She knew what was coming, but it still was nothing she was ready for.

With the sword on his shoulder, he came back to her. Once again, he ran his hand across Inayah’s chest then down her body. The hand left a red mark like it was covered in red paint. She could smell her burning flesh then the hair as he found his way between her legs. He said, “*like all that serve me you are a virgin, and it’s a waste of such good flesh, but I need you to remain so.*” He walked behind her then said, “*I need you to stand as long as you can. If you drop early, I will need to do this again, and if I understand it right, you have a younger sister.*” Inayah thought about her sister. Hiba was thirteen and just learning how to work in the castle. Not knowing if it was her place to speak to her god Inayah just nodded her head. With a flick of his wrist, he cut her on the back with the sword. The blade was sharp, and her skin parted quickly. Blood welled up and ran down her back. Inayah winced but didn’t scream out. The emperor ran the blade up one arm then down the other hitting arteries causing the blood to pulse and pour out. Her pain jumped as she bled out. A few more cuts and the floor was a pool of blood. Inayah started to stagger but caught herself and remained standing even as half her blood supply was now gone. The emperor held her head back and kissed her. His kiss burned her lips till they were blisters. He stuck the long blade into her chest between the ribs into her heart. He said, “*you did well, and I have enough to finish the task. I will release you now.*” He slightly twisted the blade

ripping the heart. Just before Inayah dropped, he said, *“I think I will find that sister and see if she is half as good as you.”*

He caught her before her body fell into the blood. He needed as much of it as possible. He picked up her body and tossed it out of the sunken ring trying not to disturb the blood. Two servants closed the door. The emperor disrobed and walked to the edge of the rim facing the black marble slicked with blood. With the sword in his right hand, he cut his left palm and let the blood fall to the blood covered floor. The blood hit but didn't mix. It just sat on top of the pool. The woman's blood moved away from the emperor's blood-forming circles around the drops. As the blood moved it filled the circle. The emperor's blood migrated to the center of the circle. When it reached the center the blood mixed. The center of the pool started to bubble then fountain up as the volume increased until it met the rim in the floor when it stopped. He picked up the Inayah's body and tossed it into the blood. The blood bubbled up around the body and started to consume it from the back to the front. The flesh parted from the bones and slipped into the blood then the skeleton sunk in. The blood turned black then solidified into a glass-like substance. The emperor said to himself, *“I have a little time before it's ready. Maybe I'll find the sister.”*

The emperor pushed the smoldering body off himself. When she fell, she hit the body of the other servant he burned. The emperor turned to the young girl standing in the room. He said, *“after having a woman that can withstand my touch this sort of gratification just isn't good enough.”* Hiba stood in the corner of the room and watched as the emperor burned through his servants wondering if she was next. She was dressed in the traditional robes of the junior serving class with a top that was sheer to the point of being transparent. Hiba tried to cover her nearly exposed chest as she waited to find out why she was there. The emperor said, *“put your arms at your sides, or I'll cut them off.”* The emperor smiled and said, *“I told your sister I would find you and you are every bit as sweet as she was.”* A tear ran down her cheek at the mention of her sister. She knew she was next and like Inayah, she wouldn't last long. He saw that she was shaking and said, *“no my child, don't worry I don't eat a peach before its ripe.”* The door

opened, and another woman came in. The emperor looked at her then fell back into the bed saying, *“let’s try this again.”*

Margret sat in her locked room listening to the screams coming from the emperor’s bedroom. She wanted to get as far away from this place and that man as she possibly could. Alane came into the room and went to her knees. She was a thin woman with a deep reddish head of hair and a figure that would have made her a model back on earth. She was assigned to act as Margaret’s servant, but Margret didn’t want anything. Alane said, *“I know this isn’t my place to say this, but the great master could use your company.”* Margret looked at her without saying anything. Alane said, *“the great master won’t take something not offered but the ones that are willing wither to his touch.”* Margret said, *“so what you mean is I have to let him fuck me, or he will keep killing those other women.”* Alane said, *“no and yes. You must show him you want him, and he is already looking to the girls. He has a young one right now in his chamber. Hiba is thirteen by your type of calendar.”* Alane looked to the window then back to Margret and said, *“I was to be next, but I was assigned to serve you. Hiba is in my place.”*

Alane told her how the emperor’s magic was growing. When he came to this new land his power adapted to it and grew to the point that it was no longer compatible with her side. He could send parts of himself as astral projections, but he couldn’t go. So, he devised a plan to split himself into two. One would be what Alane called a reflection, and the other would be the emperor in a new body. Alane said, *“he will take over the body of the child you carry and make it his new vessel to rule both worlds. The reflection will attack your world and destroy most of it. that is when he comes in and destroys the reflection and takes over.”* Margret asked, *“he can’t think that will work?”* Alane said, *“the great master has watched your world and has seen the chaos of your existence. He knows you need him.”* A scream from the other room seemed to wake the two women up. Alane said, *“that was Livonia, she was just sixteen. The youngest so far.”*

The emperor lay on his bed with a pile of smoldering corpses next to it. He still had a stiff erection and seemed nowhere near satisfied. Hiba stared at his manhood knowing it would soon be her job to satisfy him but in reality die harpooned by a fleshy lightning rod. The door opened, and Margret walked in. He didn't see who it was. The emperor lay on his bed with a pillow over his eyes and said, "*just climb on and let it happen.*" Margret looked at the young girl in the room. She was pretty and very young looking. Margret dropped her robe and got on top of this man she wanted to beat to death with a hammer. When she did, he felt the change. Margret was a real woman, not the young women he was burning to death. He moved the pillow and saw Margret on him as she eased him into her. Like before he was like riding a bike in a hailstorm. She could feel the energy build in him as she shifted up and down. When she felt that she just might get lost in this feeling, he came inside her, and the storm ended. The emperor said, "*I waited so long to have something that can serve me.*" Margret wanted to cut his manhood off when he called her a thing, but she knew many would suffer and she also knew that to save this girl and the others she would have to fuck this monster whenever he wanted.

Invasion (Part Two)

Two days ago.

Nancy Kelley was having a bad day. Her phone died sometime in the night leaving her with no alarm to wake her up. She went to her car and found it was dead. A ninety-dollar taxi took her to work where her boss first threatened her then hit on her in the same conversation. Because she wasn't the first person in someone made a thick, viscous substance that should have been coffee. Their attempt burned the pot and shorted the machine. On her first keystroke, she broke a nail. Nancy looked at her clock and wondered to herself, "*just maybe I should set the phones to auto and just go home.*" From her desk, she could watch the men setting in the new glass in the front of the building. She thought how one of the men looked like a young Tom Selleck from his Magnum P.I. Days mustache and all. Just outside she could see the ruins of a brand-new Corvette. Working for the Order wasn't the safest job, but Nancy was a receptionist. Greet people as they come in with no gun needed.

Nancy decided to stay and watch Magnum install the glass. At the door was another handsome man or he appeared handsome at first. She watched this man walk to the door and as he opened it his face changed just a little. The face shifted like it was made of glass. He walked up to her desk and stopped. Nancy thought that something was wrong with his face. It was too perfect as an artist rendering of what the ideal man would be. He looked down and smiled a smile that in no way was warm or inviting and showed way too many teeth. He put his hands on her desk. As he did her desk started to burn. Nancy's last thought just before her life ended was, "*I guess this day could actually get worse.*" In two seconds, the man turned to a red glass and energy expanded from his body in a wave that destroyed the building killing everyone it touched. When the energy filled the lower half of the building, it blew out, and the building exploded sending shrapnel out for miles leaving a black crater and a mushroom cloud. In the center of the crater was the man. He was all red and angles looking like a man made of red glass.

The same event happened all around the world in the many different sites owned and operated by The Order so that by the end of the day they were effectively crippled. Meanwhile,

out in the Pacific Ocean, a storm was approaching a small island with a population of around three thousand people. The category three hurricane jumped to a category five with a tsunami-sized wave following it. The population had little contact with the outside world with little value to any world power. Loto sat in the remains of an airplane that crashed during a war watching the rainfall. It was from a war his island didn't fight in for a world he would never see past his little corner of it. Loto was fourteen and in the last years of adolescents. He was already working the nets fishing for food, but soon he would join in the profession that his family did for centuries since the time they first came to the island. Loto was in an interesting position. He was one of very few boys born to the island with a near four-to-one girl to boy ratio. A law was put in place that women needed to marry a male in the community or leave. Vailea didn't want to leave. She was happy with her life and with her island. She was also lucky to be in love with a boy who loves her back. When Loto comes of age, they will marry, and she would be safe. Or so she thought.

None of them knew about the massive wave coming to wipe their island away. The island was devoid of power with the only connection being a boat ride to the nearest island and a radio that was powered by solar cells in the community hut in the center of the village. A voice over the radio was the first to talk about the wave as it wiped out the community on the other side. The leaders of the island called everyone to the village center to tell them that the end was near and that even trying to leave by boat wouldn't help. As he spoke the storm let up and the full fury of the hurricane was on display as they stood in the eye. Off in the west, they could see the storm and the growing wave of death. Then the storm came to a stop. The rain and wind spun around the island, but the storm didn't move. Just outside of the center of town a bolt of lightning struck the ground. In the lightening was a man. He was white with curly red hair and a presence that was as electric as his arrival. The emperor said, "*my children, today you find yourselves on the precipice of either a tragic end or a new beginning that will make this wonderful place the center of the world.*"

Loto watched this, but he couldn't hear over the sound of the wind and rain. Vailea quietly snuck away from the meeting and found Loto. She said, "*please help me get away from*

this horror.” She told him that this man was promising to save them if they follow his rule and bow. She said, *“he wants to make us his slaves or die in the wave. He said he would own any unmarried women.”* Loto brought her to his plane, and they went inside. She said, *“Loto I don’t think this will fly.”* He said, *“fly, no but it will float.”* Loto went to the back of the plane and pulled on a rope. The plane shifted, and two pontoons moved away from the wingless seaplane PBY Catalina. He said, *“when the water comes back in it will push the plane out to sea, and without the anchor, we will float out.”* Vailea leaned in and kissed him. It was his and her first kiss. She asked, *“then what?”*

The storm parted and reformed just outside of the island. The tsunami also parted and dissipated harmlessly in the deep Pacific Ocean. Back in the center of the village a palace made from lava rock formed. The emperor said, *“I will soon return, and as your new god you will be my first in a series of many followers making you my first children.”* He then picked two of the women and told them they would come to the afterlife and serve him. The emperor waved his hands and an opening formed. He then took the two women who were more teenagers at eighteen and seventeen than women back to his realm to what would be their deaths. Margret was able to watch all this from the mirror the emperor had in his castle. With her willingly giving herself to him she was free to walk around. She saw the two teenagers in the ancient plane and hoped they would be ok. She also saw how this copy or as they were calling it reflection killed hundreds of people.

Linda also watched the island and how the emperor was taking over it to remake Atlantis in the Pacific. The form said, *“neither of them can see me or the source.”* He wiped out the order because of the magic they were stockpiling as well as the fact that they were the only ones that knew what was about to happen. Linda looked at her dead husband’s doppelganger and asked, *“so what’s your angle in this? I am speaking with the source, right?”* The form said, *“no. I am what you would call a child of that source as well as the memories of Jack. I couldn’t let them go, so I merged with them.”* He brushed a tear from her face then put his hand under her chin. He asked, *“I know I could never be your Jack, but just maybe I could be something new to you?”* Linda knew this thing wanted something from her. She also knew she would have to use this

thing to stop the emperor from whatever monstrous plan he has. She asked, “*Jack’s middle name was Charles so how about Charlie?*”

Charlie poured some water into a large bowl then said something in a strange tongue over it. An image of a castle appeared. Then the Image of Margret. He said, “*her and six others. You will need their help to stop his plans, but this one named Margaret will be the key. You must either rescue her or kill her. She carries a seed in her that will bring doom to your world or its salvation.*” He then put his hands on her stomach and said, “*this one is also important, but I can’t see why. When I try to see its fate all I see is you.*” Linda asked, “*how can I help them?*” Charlie replied, “*I will take you after we prepare for what will be a very long trip.*” Linda took a deep breath then asked, “*what will we need?*” Charlie said, “*guns, lots and lots of guns.*”

Invasion (Part Three)

Loto set the sail as the storm moved away. He and Vailea checked for damage while looking for any signs of their home or another ship. A few hours after they left their home a storm moved in, and they found themselves in a new hurricane. With no instruments or even a compass, they had no idea where they were or which way to go. The plane was still afloat, but it took on a lot of water. Loto worked a makeshift pump, and the water slowly was going down. Vailea checked their food and other supplies. Loto said, *“we will have to wait for tonight and the stars to see where we are. For now, we will track the sun for west and east.”* Vailea turned her back to Loto and took off her shirt then she put on a bikini top. She turned to see he had stopped pumping and was just staring at her.

The sail caught the wind, and they were off in the direction Loto thought was east. Finally, the sunset and the stars came out, but Loto didn't know the stars. All he could recognize was the north star. The wind died down and the plane stalled in the waves. Loto and Vailea slipped into the cabin for the night. He said, *“I am not sure if we are going to make it.”* Vailea said, *“I can't believe we made it this far.”* Loto said, *“I'm not sure just how far we can go.”* She said, *“I think just maybe we should go all the way.”* She brought his hand up to her chest then went to kiss him. At first, he didn't do anything. Loto was never kissed on the mouth before and didn't know what his role was. He soon found his footing and was engaged with her as she slowly pulled him back to her. She said, *“I wanted this to be something special and a first of many, not the last thing we ever do.”* Loto went to speak when a loud sound came from outside. A foreign language accompanied the sound.

The USS Hope a new destroyer based in San Diego was out on deep water trials when they saw what looked like a wingless plane in the water. Captain John Warren knew the type of plane from the many history-shows he watched on world war two. As they got closer, they could see it was modified to act like a sailboat. The captain said, *“as far as I'm concerned until we know better that plane is navy property.”* The captain launched a recovery crew to see what was going on. Inside they found two teenagers that didn't seem to understand the marines. The lead

on the crew said that the plane had no navigation equipment and very little provisions. He said, *“I think they went for one of those three-hour tours.”* The captain said, *“yeah that show never made any sense to me either. Who goes on a quick tour with that much luggage.”* The captain looked at the two and said, *“I don’t think we found a terrorist cell.”* He pointed to them and said, *“lieutenant see that the doctor sees them, and they get some food then we will see just where home is.”* Vailea nodded to Loto and said, *“just play along, and maybe they will feed us.”*

After a meal of chicken coated with some sort of crust, they called fried chicken Vailea, and Loto were brought to a room with a long table. On the other side of the table was the captain and another person they had not met yet. She was maybe in her forties with graying hair tied in a knot in the back. The Knot was tight and seemed to pull her face back along with the hair. The captain asked, *“do you understand English?”* The woman said the same thing in Spanish than Japanese. Vailea said, *“my name is Vailea, and this is Loto, and we need your help.”* The woman said to the captain, *“it sounds like one of the Polynesian languages, but I am not sure.”* The Captain asked, *“so you don’t understand us at all?”* Loto said, *“I just don’t understand what they are trying to say. How can such a people who can build such a boat not be able to speak a real language?”*

Linda opened the door to a secret bunker the Order kept for emergencies. Inside she found what they lovingly referred to as a grave filler. It was a hardened plastic container on wheels big enough to fit a standard coffin. Inside was the equipment for a six-person tactical team from the standard P90 and FN Five-Seven pistol, a squad automatic weapon or SAW, an M32 grenade launcher with grenades and enough ammunition to fight off an army. It also contained body armor, radios, and other essentials for a six-person war. Linda stopped and opened the case. In the top was a place for a rocket launcher which wasn’t standard. She grabbed two MK 153 Shoulder-launched Multipurpose Assault Weapon or SMAW with two of what the armaments people called party favor packs. She closed the case, and they were off.

The form now going by the name Charlie made a slit in the air with his finger, and he pushed the case through it. Charlie looked at the sky and realized something was different. It turned to Linda and said, “*the emperor has set a foothold on a small island in the Pacific. He is building a palace for himself, so he can launch his invasion. He will first enslave the natives of that island and the surrounding islands then he will start attacking cities starting with the closest to his new kingdom first.*” He pulled her in close and kissed her. Linda felt that same electric pull to him as he held her. She pulled back as she felt her skin starting to burn. She looked down at her arms and saw a line of bluish light just underneath the skin. Where the lines form a corresponding mark was made on the skin until she had what looked like a full sleeve tattoo going down both arms. Charlie said, “*if we separate this will protect you.*” He pulled her back into the bunker and pulled her jeans down with the panties as he opened the robe he wore. He pushed her up against the wall and entered her all the while Linda said to her self how this wasn’t Jack. The feeling was intense and immediate. Soon she didn’t care who he looked like she just didn’t want that feeling to end.

Linda pulled up her jeans noticing how they were tighter than before. She remembered how Providence told her she was pregnant, but it was too soon for anything to show. She wondered why she didn’t see a doctor or even take a test but with everything happening, her life went from a crawl to a run with little time to contemplate. She went from having a husband that was slipping away to be a widow having an affair with something that took her dead husband’s form. She looked back at Charlie. He was in his open robe staring out at the parking lot. Linda pulled the robe off him and said, “*I think we need to find you some clothes that will work in a fight. Maybe some pants.*” In a corner just out of the perceivable light, Providence watched Linda. She could see that Linda was having sex with something, but she couldn’t see who or what it was. What she could see was that Linda’s fate was in flux changing from living through the next few days to not making it to tomorrow. Even the sex of the child Linda was carrying changed from boy to girl then back again. As she watched a light formed in a line and Linda walked through then she saw the form for the first time as he became a true part of the timeline.

Invasion (Part Four)

The seventh sword was put on the pile signifying the meeting of the unaligned clans. They met every year since the man that calls himself the emperor took control of this new land. The other clans took a knee to him and sold their souls for a safe place from the dragons. Callous Theos, the leader of the unaligned clans, stood up. He was one of the last of the Roman Generals who joined the fight with his legion. He looked down at the sword he carried into battle in the times of the wars with the Gulls and said, *“the butcher of our children is planning on going back and starting his war again. He raped our women and children, he fed your soldiers to the dragons, and he thinks he gets to go back.”* The crowd stirred and murmured. Theos knew his audience, he gave a similar speech every year since they came to this place. They came out of hiding every year to meet, share supplies, tell stories and plot their revenge on a man they had no chance against.

A fissure opened in the middle of the meeting as a large case of some kind rolled out of it then two figures. The members of the clans drew their weapons leaving the seven swords in place. Linda drew her FN Five-Seven pistol while Charlie produced a Colt Python from seemingly out of nowhere. Linda said, *“nice job jackass you put us right in the middle of his army.”* Charlie said, *“no they’re our army, assuming they don’t kill you.”* Theos asked, *“and why would we side with a monster and this soft woman?”* A blue bolt shot from Charlie’s foot up to the Python. The rounds in the cylinder started to glow. Linda said, *“I am Linda of the Order, and this is the only force that could kill the one you call the Emperor.”* Another man walked up and said, *“we fought to lock that thing up costing us many people, even more than Zed killed.”* Charlie turned to the man and said, *“well hello Cal it has been a very long time. Do your new friends know who you are and just how old?”*

Three juvenile dragons sat around the bodies of seven people and a deer. As they watched the dragons one of the bodies moved. Linda turned to the others and said, *“stand back and let me show you what these bladeless weapons can do.”* Linda stepped out of the woods and yelled, *“hey ass holes why don’t you eat me.”* The largest of the three turned and charged her. Linda

raised the grenade launcher and fired. The grenade hit the dragon in the chest fragmenting and pushing it back. The fragments opened the dragon up and burst the two fluids the dragons generate to breathe fire causing the dragon to explode. The next dragon jumped through the falling body of the larger dragon at Linda who fired another round. The grenade caught the dragon in the face liquidating its head and setting the fluids in the neck on fire. The flames jet down and hit the organs that generated the fluid causing the body to explode. The last dragon turned to run when Linda hit it in the back with a grenade causing the wings to fall away with the dragon breaking in half at the point of impact. Linda turned to the others and said, “*and this isn't the largest of my bladeless weapons.*”

Akio was up in the clouds when he heard the three explosions to the south. He touched down to let the others know he was going to fly that way and see what that was. Iris said, “*I don't know if that's a good idea. There is nothing to the south but dragons and the seven unaligned clans.*” JT just growled. Jenee explained how when they first came to this new land not all the clans fell into line with the emperor. Those that didn't were disowned by the others and had their names stripped and histories erased. She said, “*the seven clans hide in the mountains and brag about how they will one day take over, but brag is all that they do.*” Iris said, “*brag and die.*” Akio said, “*well those unaligned clans have what sounded like a grenade launcher.*” Iris looked at Jenee then back to Akio and said, “*I don't know what that is.*” Akio explained how it was a weapon from their side and something that would be hard to get a hold of.

“*The monster approaches fire, fire,*” and another one said, “*don't let it win.*” Linda looked up and saw a shirtless man with large glowing wings. She didn't know who it was or if it was friend or foe. Linda took out a flashlight and shined it into the sky flashing it on and off. Akio saw the flashing light and followed it down. When he touched down the men of the clans, all went to their knees then further bowing to him. Linda walked forward and said, “*Captain Saito, its good to see you again.*” She smiled then said, “*a pilot with wings. That somehow just sounds right.*” Akio looked at Linda then at the firepower these men had. He asked, “*we met in that mirror pool thing, right?*” His eyes lit up as he said, “*you are from our side.*” His wings

vanished as he walked over to Linda and they embraced. Charlie said, *“We are here to deal with the emperor and bring you and your friends home.”*

After Akio came back with the others, Linda and Charlie told him the plan. How that the emperor was going to split himself in two cutting his power and making him vulnerable to attack. He would travel to the other side to start his invasion with his conscious in the body of the child he would have with Margret. Akio said, *“we’re not going to hurt her.”* Charlie said, *“no and we won’t hurt the baby. We need to separate the emperor from it so we can eliminate him forever. As long as he is in human form, no one can kill him.”* He said how when the soul was dead the mirror image on the other side would fade. Cal asked, *“then what? Are you going to try and take us all back to your world? Are you going to take this one over for your master? What does the first magic want in return for our blood?”* They all stopped and looked over at JT. He was still a wolf and licking his own balls. Iris asked, *“he’s been at it for about twenty minutes now, why would he do that?”* Akio and Cal said at the same time, *“because he can.”*

Invasion (Part Five)

Hiba lay next to Margret as she stared up at the ceiling. The emperor had banished her from his bed and was preparing for his trip to the other side when his power was split. It was just a day since she gave in to him, but Margret was already showing. Hiba told her that the emperor was using his force of will to bring about his new vessel as fast as possible. The result of what he was doing left Margret both weak and in pain. The emperor was growing the baby with magic that she wasn't equipped to handle. She could feel the struggle inside her as the baby fought for its life. The baby's will surprised the emperor. He wanted the body, but he also wanted a child. His focus on the red reflection on the other side was splitting him in two. Soon he would be out of this body and into the baby and the reflection on the other side. The baby will be his new form while the reflection degraded with the amount of power he was force feeding it, but that wouldn't matter. The reflection would start a war with the other side, and he would finish it saving humanity, so it can serve him.

Zed found himself split into three parts with one part in the old world, one part in the womb and the last part in his room. He could feel that something was wrong. Three dragons just died while in the old world a warship was approaching his new kingdom. He could also feel his grip on the baby slipping, somehow the baby was winning the fight even before it was born. Off in the distance, he could feel a presence that he hadn't felt in a thousand years. The first magic was here and on its way to him. Emperor Zed knew that it was the only thing that could stop him and his plans. He also knew that it wanted something other than revenge for its imprisonment but what that is he couldn't see. It had attacked him on his first trip across the void, but that might have been the vessel of the first rather than its will. He could also feel the vessel as it approached with an army. Zed got up and opened his doors saying, "*guards there is an army approaching from the east and south prepare for war.*" The guards just looked confused. No one had ever attacked the castle in their lifetimes or their great, great-grandparents lifetimes. Zed watched as his Army bumbled around in what would have been funny to him except that these people were here to defend him and his new form.

His troops sealed the castle doors and took up positions on top so they could fire arrows. Zed tried to summon his dragons, but the first was blocking him. He figured that the invaders would have a hard time with the walls until someone let off a rocket that struck a wall knocking it down along with a tower. Zed watched as his loyal troops surrendered without any kind of fight. Some of them embraced the invaders. Those that remained loyal were soon cut down with the strange weapons from the old world. He then saw a man with glowing wings flying overhead firing into his men. Zed knew that with his power split in three places he couldn't fight what was happening. It didn't help that the warship on the other side was attacking. He had to decide, stay and fight or go to the old world and find a way to save himself in the reflection's body. Part of his choice was made for him when he was forced out of the baby's mind. He gave the baby unimaginable power, and it used that power to save its self.

The castle shook as Margret felt the emperor's grip on the baby slip away. The castle shook again, and a door opened. In the open door was a large wolf. Margret had never seen anything like it. The wolf was the size of a horse with black and electric blue fur. The wolf saw her, and its tail started to wag then the wolf seemed to break out in a dance. Margret asked, "*what the fuck does that mean?*" The wolf shrunk down into the form of a man then he stood up. JT said, "*we've been looking for you.*" Margret and JT came together and embraced. JT looked at Margret and said, "*Jesus Christ.*" Margret said, "*yes I know that monster did this in just two days.*" JT said, "*the emperor was seen going into a tower at the top of the castle.*" Hiba said, "*the tower was built so he could travel from this world to the old.*" At the top of the tower, Zed pulled a dagger out and slit his wrists. Instead of blood a bolt of blue flame shot out and struck the sky. The blue flame started to consume his body as a hole opened.

Akio went to land on the balcony near Margret's room when a gust of wind caught him, and he found himself falling into what looked like a hole in the sky. As he entered that hole, he could see what looked like a stretched-out form of a man with red hair. He came out on the other side near an island in a place much warmer than the one he left. He could see a destroyer firing at what looked like nothing except all its ordinances were exploding in midair. Akio looked back and saw the hole close. He landed on a smaller island near the battle with the unseen wall. He ran

to the beach and watched as the destroyer fired. Ten minutes later they ceased fire, and all went quiet. Akio could see the waves and debris strike against the unseen wall.

Everyone in the castle could see the blue bolt shoot from the tower. The fighting stopped as they watched the emperor's body catch fire then fall from the tower. Those loyal to the emperor dropped their weapons and surrendered while the invading army let out a cheer that could be heard as far as the cradle where Margret, JT, and Akio first learned about this new world. Charlie dropped his weapon then he fell to the ground. Linda went to him trying to help him back up. He looked at her and asked, "*Linda, what's going on where's the plane?*" Charlie fell over. Linda looked at the body then asked, "*Jack?*" Cal asked, "*who's jack?*" Linda said, "*my dead husband.*" The two carried him to a room with a bench. Cal said how they needed to search the castle to make sure Zed is gone and find the first magic. He went on saying how the first magic was worse than Zed and couldn't be trusted. Overhead the hole in the sky closed, and the sky immediately started to lighten.

Invasion (Part Six)

Zed woke up knowing something was wrong. He could see his hands, but he couldn't feel them. His hands and skin were all angles and glass. He also lost a great deal of power as he crossed over. Out in the distance, he could see the wall he put up, and it was holding. The warship was still on the other side, but they had no chance of breaking through. He replayed what happened in his head, his passing over from his kingdom to the new one and how the first magic followed him. He went from the ruler of a thousand miles of magical lands to the ruler of a small island with people who need to be controlled to obey him. He got up to his feet, and the Islanders went to their knees. Among the people was a man in his twenties with a bodybuilders physique. He had a body that Zed could pull in and use to help prolong his life until he could find a way to save his own life.

Akio took off and went east hoping to find a larger land mass and just maybe someplace he could recognize. As he flew, he went higher into the sky. The higher he flew, the colder it got, but he didn't mind the cold. The combination of the warm sun and the cool air made the whole situation feel real. Underneath him, he saw a cargo ship registered through Hong Kong. He didn't know where it was going he just knew that this meant he was home. The ship didn't react to him. He followed the ship for miles until he started to get tired. He flew down to the bow of the ship and landed. The ship was covered in cargo containers with a small crew that didn't seem all that interested in the front of their ship. He found a tarp and went to sleep. The pilot of the ship turned to the captain and asked, "*did we see that?*" The Captain said, "*no we did not.*"

The sky was a bright blue that most if not all the people in the valley had never seen in their lifetimes. Iris thought that Zed was leaching the power out of the world for his own gain. Margret noted how everyone stopped calling him the emperor as soon as he was gone. She looked over at Jack who was just sitting on a stool staring at the sky. They hadn't spoken since he woke up as Jack and not Charlie. What little they said to each other made her think that he wasn't all there. He kept asking about the plane and the stone, but he didn't seem to know about anything else. Charlie was just gone. Cal said that the first magic went through the hole in the

sky and it most likely took its servant with it. Off in the distance, she could see the others dismantling the castle stone by stone. Many of the people just wanted to start a new life in a free world using stones from the castle to build homes. They knew that some of the clans sided with the emperor and some of them thought that when he left, they would rule the land. Iris said, *“unless we can come to an understanding we might see a long war in the future.”*

A helicopter took off from the USS Hope with a small crew, Loto and Vailea. Captain Warren ordered them taken out of danger as they set up for another run against this strange force. When they called in the findings to Washington, they were ordered to breach using all force necessary. After an hour of salvos, they had no progress. The chopper turned as they flew away just in time to see the destroyer cut in half and explode. The shockwave bounced off the unseen wall and struck the chopper knocking it down into the ocean. The lieutenant placed in charge of Loto and Vailea pushed them out of the chopper along with an inflatable raft. She joined them, and they tried to pull in one of the pilots into the raft. The chopper slipped into the water, and the four found themselves alone. The Lieutenant turned to Loto and Vailea and said something they didn't understand.

The raft washed ashore on a small island near Loto and Vailea's home island. Loto knew the island as one his father used to store supplies that he wasn't allowed to have from alcohol to some sort of phone he could use to contact something he calls a satellite. Vailea and the lieutenant pulled the injured pilot onto the shore while Loto went to his father's hiding place and pulled a bottle and the strange phone. Near the place, Loto found a strange pool of shiny liquid. He passed it and found what he was after. As he went back to the others, the liquid followed him. He came back to see the pilot covered with the lieutenant's jacket. She said something he didn't understand in a slow almost mocking tone that neither Loto or Vailea appreciated. The pool of liquid moved in and covered the pilot as the others moved back. The pilot stood up and looked at them with shining orbs where his eyes should be. He spoke to them without moving his lips, and somehow, they understood him. The first magic said, *“if you stay here you will be killed, but I can only send you to a place on the other side.”*

A hole opened in front of Linda, and a woman in a navy uniform and two teenagers walked through. Vailea asked, *“where did the ocean go?”* Linda said, *“that’s a long story.”* The Lieutenant turned to Vailea and asked, *“you speak English?”* Loto asked, *“what’s English?”* Linda said, *“it’s a long story, and I know you three will have a lot of questions, just understand that you are safe and well here now.”* The Lieutenant said, *“my name is Lieutenant Janice Decker of the United States Navy, you have no right to hold me here and.”* She stopped speaking as a dragon flew overhead. She didn’t speak again for a while. Linda took Loto and Vailea to a small hut near the castle. She told them they could stay there until something could be arranged. Linda asked, *“so you two are brother and sister?”* Vailea said without a beat, *“were married.”* Linda looked at the two and just shrugged her shoulders saying *“whatever.”*

Outside the hut, Linda found Jack. He was standing there staring at the sky. He said, *“with that, we are closed to the other side.”* Linda looked to where the hole was. Jack said, *“everyone that could open a doorway is on the other side, and the first one was ready to kill the former emperor.”* He then turned to the ruins of the castle and said, *“their friend is on the other side. Somebody needs to tell them, maybe after she has that baby.”* Linda looked at Jack then she ran to where Margret was. Inside a part of the castle, she found Iris with Margret and JT. Margret was in labor. Iris asked, *“does anyone know what to do?”* Lieutenant Decker said, *“I helped with my sister’s baby as well as my sister’s birth.”* Linda asked, *“I need to know that you are here and not off on some head trip?”* Decker asked, *“what do you mean?”* Linda said, *“you just spent the last two hours staring at that dragon.”* Decker looked to the sky then back to Linda and said, *“I don’t know if this place is real or I’m dead in that helicopter, but as long as I am here then I will help.”*

Dennis sat on his balcony with a bottle of wine and the papers from the airline. The airline was ceasing their search while they were not admitting the loss of the plane. The papers also seemed to suggest that it was pilot error. Dennis knew that there was no way Akio was responsible and that the airline just didn’t want to pay out for the loss and damages. He sat

staring at the moon on the balcony where he made love to his husband now saying goodbye to him when he saw something coming his way. It was flying to him. It was larger than a bird but smaller than a plane. The form fell below the balcony then came up and landed in front of him. A tall Asian man with tattoos and large wings on his back stared back at him. Dennis asked, “*Akio?*” Akio stepped down, and they met in the middle with a long embrace. Dennis asked, “*what does this all mean?*” Akio said, “*I don’t know how to explain what happened, but I am here now, and I’m never going to leave again.*”

The sky lit up with blues and purples as lightning struck across the sky with the sounds of thunder. The first took over the body of the dead pilot, and he went to war with the wall. As he struck, the wall became visible. On the inside of the wall, Zed consumed the islanders to use their life force to power the wall. He could feel his grip on this reality slipping away as cracks started to spread across the wall. The first magic grew and as he grew the pilot's body broke apart. When the final piece fell away, the first fell into a puddle again, and the sky turned back to blue. Zed dropped to the sand, and the wall fell. The falling wall pushed a wave across the island pushing the first magic into the water and under the sand. Zed saw this and screamed, “*I win.*” Then he looked at his skin. The red lines were spreading across his body. He was breaking apart, and with all the Islanders gone he had no one to use to save his life. Zed put his hand up to the sun and watched as his hand shattered and fell to the sand. Eventually, his head fell into the broken remains of his body as he watched what was left of his immortality end.