

# ~Media Luna~





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[Intro and Bios](#)

[On the Quay](#)

[Shenanigans](#)

[A Pheasant Plucker](#)

[IT!](#)

[Bonding](#)

[Of Fae and Fiends](#)

[Goodbye](#)

[Hunting Trip](#)

[High Tea](#)

[Down on the Farm](#)

[Unexpected Allies](#)

[May the Circle Be Unbroken](#)

[Sweet Memories](#)

[The Long Uphill Walk Home](#)

## **Intro and Bios**

Media Luna is a collaborative effort between myself and Sally Lombardo. The story presented here is purely fictional, and a result of my own archives of the tale exchanged via email. Enjoy!

### **The players:**

#### **My character:**

Roger Barbosa:

CHARACTER'S AGE: 28

NATURE: Human, mortal

DESCRIPTION: Roger has black hair, in tight curls, swarthy skin, and bright blue eyes. He is 5'11", 190 lbs, and very muscular. He wears his hair mid-length and usually pulled back in a pony tail. He can usually be found in shorts and sandals while on his boat, and bare-chested.

PERSONALITY: Roger seems laid back playing at life with little real direction or motivation. He is cavalier about most things, but will take an odd impulsive action occasionally.

ABILITIES: Roger is unusually agile and stronger than he looks. He has gotten used to living by himself on the water, and is used to periods of loneliness. Those don't usually last long, because in spite of his rather ordinary looks women seem attracted to him (perhaps it's the contrast of his blue eyes and dark complexion). Usually, if trouble finds him, it comes in the female form.

HISTORY: Roger is the descendant of a notorious pirate of the same name, or so he tells it. Nobody knows for sure, but he is descended from a long line of watermen. Once he was old enough, after an uneventful academic career that netted him an associates degree in business, he took over the family company after the death of his father. Now he runs charter fishing cruises out of Puerto Media Luna, a small resort town in the Caribbean, as captain of his late father's fishing boat, the 'Bella Luna'.

#### **Sally's character:**

NAME: Challa

AGE: 150, but looks to be in her early-mid twenties

Height: 5'6"

weight: 115

Hair: Red, wavy and to her waist

Eyes: Dark Emerald Green

As a Sorceress Challa grew up steeped in magic, both of her parents were Mages. Her mother turned dark, and killed her father, Challa then watched as her mother slowly self destructed, evil returning to the evil doer. The rest of her childhood was spent learning and studying so that she could harness and master her powers, preferring to use them for good instead of evil. It was sometimes a struggle because good and evil is not always as clear as it should be, most people had both within them.

She preferred to travel, not remaining in anyplace too long, and she found herself along the coastline. A potentially treacherous place, especially for a woman, all manner of sea creatures and wanderers like herself about. Challa kept alert and walked like she knew where she was heading, if anyone tried to harm her, she wasn't above using her powers to protect herself, killing only if she had to.

## On the Quay

Roger staggered out of the Trey-o-Cups, the dockside bar that he frequented after a lucrative run. The Trey was a nice place, a little touristy but not too much that the locals steered clear of it. Today's 'lucrative run' had been a group of businessmen down from Miami who spent a lot of money to talk business on a fishing boat in the Caribbean. They were still in the bar. The fishing run had been a boring trip as not much fishing was actually done, so expenses were down and they paid top money up front (and they bought him dinner and enough rounds of dark rum to get him quite drunk afterwards). Ellie and Nina had both offered to see him home safely, but he knew where it would lead. He was taking the same group of businessmen out early the next day as well, and since he was still sleeping on the 'Luna, it wouldn't do to kick a lady out before dawn. He hummed a few bars of the last tune he'd heard at the Trey as he ambled down the quay.

It took form in the shadows, seemingly coalescing from mists that drifted off of the water. Sensing the passing sailor, it drifted along behind him, following. As yet unformed on the mortal plane, the succubus hungered for the energy of mortal passion, and flesh, to make itself complete. Unbeknownst to the demon yet another followed it, having sensed it's presence on the docks. The hunter was being hunted.

Hunger gnawed at the demon it silently followed the mortal instead of simply ambushing him. It wouldn't do to be discovered in it's weakened state. The man stopped next to a small fishing boat which had seen better days. Since it was far too late, or early, to be going out fishing the succubus waited for the sound of deep breathing. It's assumption proved right, the sailor was sleeping on his boat tonight. The demon pondered this, wondering why this one was not home or in the arms of a lover. No matter, the dawn would find him gone. Whoever had driven him here would probably blame them self, and the demon felt joy at the additional pain it would cause.

It found the sailor passed out on a small cot in his tiny cabin, hopefully he hadn't drunk enough to be unresponsive. The succubus brushed along his inner thigh, feeling his unconscious response. Encouraged, it worked the unfamiliar bindings with ethereal hands to exposed his burgeoning manhood. With a quick movement from long practice, it sank it's coalescing form onto his warm mortal flesh. As the demon quenched the hunger that burned within it, it took on the guise of a naked, buxom woman and the sailor's heart slowed towards both total quiet, and climax.

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Challa had been walking along the docks, heading for one of the taverns for a late bite to eat and to find a reasonably clean room for the night. She suddenly stopped, the ocean breeze carrying a peculiar scent, one of rot, decay and sexual arousal. It could only mean one thing, there was either an Incubus or a Succubus about.

Opening her senses she followed her nose and unlocked her powers as she went. Finding a somewhat rundown fishing boat, she felt the evil presence inside, preparing to feed on the poor unsuspecting Human inside. Challa stepped on the deck of the boat and uncloaked her own presence, knowing the it would be felt by the Demon. The sex demons were the worst kind of killers, going after their prey as they slept.

"Agree to die on an empty stomach and I'll make it as quick and painless for you as possible," she said in a normal voice knowing the demon could hear her clearly. When the demon didn't quickly appear, she said, "If I have to come and get you it's going to piss me off, and force me to hurt you, before I send you back to Hell. So what's it to be Bitch!" Challa stood her ground as she finally felt the demon move towards the deck. Thankfully the man sleeping below was still unharmed, so she wasn't too late.

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The demon felt the presence of an Other as a challenge. At first it decided to ignore the presence, it was already beginning to feed and the competing entity would have to find it's own prey. The presence then announced it's desire to compete, but the succubus's hunger was so great that it still continued to feed. It was also not sentient enough to respond. The simple, honest life that this victim had led made it's essence that much sweeter, and the succubus was loathe to leave it and face it's challenger.

Finally, the Other offered a third challenge. Irritated, the demon gathered the force that it had already consumed, far too little to effect the mortal plane significantly, and turned it's attention to the challenger. It chose not to parley for it lacked the ability, and would conserve it's strength for the upcoming battle anyway. The coalescing human form it was taking quickly faded as the demon drew energy into itself. The room grew colder, and darker, as it pulled both heat and light into itself. The succubus took on it's natural form.

With a splintering of the cabin's bulkhead the demon moved onto the deck of the boat. It was a misshapen bipedal creature, horned, and approximately human sized. Thin limbs ending in sharp talons splayed from it's hairless, bulbous torso. Like most succubi, it sported pendulous breasts and enlarged genitals. The whole being was pitch black, drawing light energy from the surrounding area, and seemed to blur and fade as if not quite in phase with the mortal plane. Dull red eyes that echoed the fires of hell that spawned it were the demon's only illumination. It opened it's mouth, revealing multiple rows of long, needle like teeth. The demon's gaping maw assailed Challa with the sound of two boat hulls scraping together simultaneous with the scent of long dead carrion.

It took a predatory swipe at the red haired magus with one long arm, attempting to rake her with it's talons.

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Challa watched as the demon showed itself, the thing was not only flat out ugly, but it oozed evil from every pore. Still the teeth and claws were nothing to play around with. Moving just out of range of those claws as it took a swipe at her, she smiled coldly, "Lets dance."

Immediately calling up her powers Challa let them out full force, throwing out a hand she blasted the demon off of the boat and onto the docks. Now that it was off of the boat, she could fight it more fully, without worrying about doing damage to anyone's property.

She hopped onto the docks just as the demon charged her, sidestepping the attack and sticking out her foot, the rampaging entity went sprawling, keeping it's balance at the last second. With a cold smile Challa made a 'come here' gesture with her hand, inviting the demon to continue the fight.

The demon disappeared for an instant and then popped up behind her, Challa turned but not before the

demon got a swipe in, connecting with her arm and leaving a nasty gash. That got Challa's anger up and she got tired of playing with it, summoning her energy she threw a fiery blast at the demon, and uttered the words that were needed to send the thing back to its maker in Hell.

Sinking to her knees she panted as if she'd run a marathon, her arm was bleeding and the man's boat deck had a large hole in it. Both would need tending to, steeling herself Challa got to her feet, her arm throbbing.

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Roger awoke to a commotion on deck with an incredible headache. The cabin was freezing, and his shorts had somehow gotten down around his knees. His first thought was that rum, the good stuff anyway, never did that to him. The second thought was why the cabin wall had a gaping hole in it. Looking through the hole he could clearly see the deck. He stood on unsteady legs, pulled up his pants, and slipped out of the cabin through the hole to see what was going on.

The commotion was on the dock. It looked to Roger as if some ugly dude was beating up a woman, so he nipped back inside for a weapon. Rummaging around, he came up with the gaff hook that he used to drag the big fish on board. Using the door this time instead of the gaping hole he strode on deck with defiant resolve, but the ugly dude had apparently run off.

The woman, however, was kneeling on the dock and apparently injured. Dropping the gaff on the deck, Roger went instead to first aid kit. He didn't have to rummage for that, as he chaperoned plenty of clumsy tourists. He had several well stocked ones, and they all got used frequently. Jumping to the dock he went to the lady's side.

She was in her twenties with long red hair that was pooled around her as she knelt on the dock. Her skin was pale in the meager light, and several long gashes graced her arm. It couldn't be too severe, as she gingerly stood up. Still, the bastard had cut her good, and Roger looked scanned the area for him before approaching her. "Here," he said gently as he opened up the box, "Let's have a look at that before we call the cops."

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Challa stood up just as the man approached, 'Well so much for getting away unnoticed', she thought. Challa looked up into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, with Olive skin and black curly long hair he was definitely a looker.

"No Police, please can we do this inside? Out here I feel like I'm in the middle of Main Street in Dodge City at High Noon," she said. Normally she would just heal herself, but not out in the open and NOT in front of the Human man trying to help her. "My name is Challa, by the way, and your boat sustained some damage. I'll make sure it's repaired, I had to get it away from you before it killed you", she said softly as they went back onto the boat.

She hoped that this Human had an open mind, because she was about to explain exactly what had happened. He'd either believe her or call the men with the butterfly nets to cart her away.

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The girl was kinda cute in a spacey sort of way, Roger thought as she began talking. He wasn't sure whether she really thought that the damage was her fault, or the ugly guy's. He was pretty sure that the hole in the bulkhead, the cabin's outside wall, was his own fault when he came back drunk. "No police," Roger thought to himself as he closed the box back up, "right honey, 'cause it's not really his fault, and you still care about him, and he's not just another asshole he's just misunderstood." What he said was, "We'll talk about it when we get you fixed up. Here," he said offering her his hand as he stepped onto the Luna's deck, "welcome aboard the Bella Luna." He scanned the dock area one more time to be sure that the ugly dude wasn't still lurking around.

Taking her hand he thought, "she called him 'it', maybe she didn't know him, or maybe she just sustained a head injury." One thing Roger was certain of though, the bastard had not attacked him and certainly hadn't tried to kill him. After all, he was snoring his head off, drunk, with his pants around his ankles when the commotion started. The only one that he had seen being attacked was her. He drew her close, gently brushed a stray lock of her copper hair from her face, and looked longingly into her deep green eyes. "Well, both pupils are even and responsive," he thought, "still....."

"I'm Roger," he offered indicating the hatch on the live well as a seat, "have a seat, Challa, and we'll doctor that arm up." Placing the first aid kit between them, he opened it and smiled at her, "don't worry, I'm quite good at this. Nice part is I don't have to remove a fish hook first." He removed an antiseptic wipe, grasped Challa's forearm firmly and began working.

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Challa smiled when he welcomed her aboard, "Thank you", she said. When her drew her closer and brushed the hair from her eyes, and gave them a long intense look, Challa felt it clear to her toes. The moment passed quickly and she took a seat where indicated. Normally Challa would have healed herself, but until she exposed what she was to this man, she'd do things the old fashioned way. Looking at the hole in the cabin wall, she knew she'd need to clue him in, so that she could fix it for him.

Challa gasped a bit as the antiseptic stung, but then the scratch from a demon was no joke, though she doubted that the thing had been venomous the antiseptic would help clean it a bit.

"I'm sorry about your boat, but I had to get that thing away from you," she began knowing no other way to say it other than just to say it. "Let me guess you were having a romantic dream when you suddenly woke up? That was no dream, you were under the trance of a Succubus. A female sex demon, they hunt human men and enter their dreams, satisfaction guaranteed, but they also suck your soul dry, leaving a dried out husk, a very dead dried out husk. I sensed it as I walked by and called it out, and sent it back to Hell where it belongs," she explained knowing it was a lot to process, "I'm a Sorceress, and I have fought demons before." She knew he may not believe her, and she'd need to prove it, but she would give him a few moments to let what she'd just told him settle in his brain.

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Roger smiled gently at her as he worked, wondering why it was usually the pretty ones that were a little crazy. He hadn't seen her around the docks or in the pubs, so she was probably a transient. She was maybe a tourist? Perhaps she was an escaped mental patient! Looking askance at her he hoped that she wasn't the one who was wielding the knife, and the ugly dude was really a nice guy defending himself.



“Don't worry about the bulkhead, I got plenty of tongue and groove around. That's my fault anyway,” he said, convincing himself that he had somehow staggered into it. “I end up fixing something pretty regularly, lots of my clients like to fish while they're drinking. Your guess is off on the dream, I was passed out drunk and woke up to two people fighting next to my boat. As a matter of fact I'm still a little buzzed now that the adrenalin is wearing off.”

He grinned foolishly and added, “A sorceress huh? Well that's okay, I'm the Dread Captain Barbosa, scourge of the seas from Hispaniola to Trinidad. The Bella Luna is a privateer with letters of marque issued by Puerto Media Luna to repel attack and exact justice from any and all manner of fishy beings. We have a foray tomorrow and we sail with the tide.” Looking at her face he softly added, “Sorry. I could site too much rum or adrenalin, but it's no excuse for being an ass.” Finishing the bandage on her arm he said, “Can I see you safely home?”

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Challa smiled, "You're right it's not an excuse. That thing I was fighting was a Succubus, a female sex demon. Incubi and Succubi will give you the time of your life, but after they've finished feeding, you'll be a dried out and very dead husk," she said. "As for the bulkhead I insist you let me help you fix it. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me stick around for a bit, you may need my help."

Meeting his gaze Challa saw the kindness in his eyes, and a touch of wariness, which was completely understandable. "The fact is this, you were attacked by a Succubus, my guess is it was your pure soul that attracted them, and it'll attract other beings as well. Now that your eyes are open, you may be able to see more of them, they won't like it since they prefer to stay hidden." Smiling at him she said, "I can see you aren't believing me, so maybe you'll believe this," she said as she removed the bandages from her arm, putting her hand over the gash she closed her eyes and mumbled some words that were unintelligible to Roger. When she removed her hand her arm was completely healed.

"I thank you for your kindness, but you have repairs. I'll see myself to the boarding house that is on the other side of the bar, if you change your mind about my help I'll be there for a few days." She'd been traveling by foot for over a month and just wanted a few days in one spot to catch her breath. Placing her hand to his forehead she said, "Be well," and then hopped from the deck, onto the dock, grabbing up a backpack she slung it over her shoulder and began to walk away. Knowing that if he didn't call her back immediately, he'd do so very soon. He was SO going to need her.

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Roger could still feel the buzz of the rum in his head along with the lingering effects of recent interrupted sleep, and perhaps even the aftermath of the demon's attack. The combination of those, and perhaps the unbelievability of the situation, made the night's events seem dreamlike. Even so, the bulkhead did have a gaping hole in it and his shorts had been around his knees when he awoke. Challa's attacker had been incredibly ugly and foul smelling as well, and there was that trick with her wounds that he had just bound. He really had no rational explanation for that trick. He felt as if he were being drawn into a delusion, perhaps hers, but now his own as well. She had also offered to assist him in repairs, and although he could manage it himself the assistance would be welcome.

Oh, and she was cute, that was a plus. If he was truly going to lose his sanity, if his train was really slipping off of the tracks, he could do worse for an accomplice. “Hey, Challa,” he called out, thinking that he'd done crazier things in his life. She turned around at his call. “The hostel next to the

Trey is kind of a dump. If you're not too particular about lodgings I'm not going to use my flat tonight." He removed the key from his ring as he jumped to the dock. "Me and the Luna will ship out in about four hours, and we'll be gone all day. You're welcome to the bed, but there's a pullout sofa if you'd rather not use it, clean towels, and a stocked 'fridge. It's two streets over and three blocks off the quay, name on the door is Barbosa." He held the key out to her hopefully and smiled, "I really AM Captain Barbosa."

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Challa smiled before turning around and walking to stand in front of him. His offer was a generous one, not many people would allow a stranger into their home, especially when they weren't going to be there, it was a good thing that she was an honest woman. "Thank you, it's very kind and generous. I should warn you though, I've been on the road for a while and intended to stay anywhere from a few days to a week." When he didn't pull back the offer or the key she shrugged, "Not to many people would open their homes to a stranger these days. In light of what you said about the Hostel I accept," she said taking the key from him. "Now I know you can probably handle it yourself, but would you like my help in fixing that hole. I don't think your customers would have a lot of faith in your boat with a smashed bulkhead. I can at least hold the wood in place while you hammer." She could of course fix it with a spell or two, but she never used her magic unless she had to, it left a small signature that any supernatural, with the ability to track, could trace.

"Not only that I happen to be a really good cook, so if you let me know what time you are due in I can have a hot meal waiting at your flat, to thank you for your hospitality." She smiled, he was not a bad looking man, she could do worse for a new friend. With his eyes starting to open, she knew that he was going to need her help, not only to identify the beings he'd be seeing, but also how to defend himself against the ones that meant him and other humans harm.

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Roger chuckled. "It's nothing, really. I keep the apartment in town mainly because I got tired of sleeping on the Luna every night, she's really my home. Like I said the hostel isn't so great." He gave a sad sigh as he looked back at the aging boat, his home, livelihood, and old friend. "I could probably use the help fixing the bulkhead though, I really should do that tonight. At least I should get the hole covered, but we'll have to be quiet about it."

He thought about the left over tongue and groove sheeting he had stashed, probably enough. He didn't think that there was any structural damage, but if so he could come up with some framing as well. He would have to forgo the electric skillsaw, it would be too noisy, but he had an old handsaw stowed somewhere. "Tell you what, I have to gather some supplies. I've got it all aboard, I just need to find it all. If you'd like some coffee the galley is just aft of the wheelhouse," he pointed toward the bow of the Luna. Hopping back onto the boat's deck he added, "Once I locate everything it shouldn't take us long, if you're really serious about helping." He held out his hand to her like before. "You can stash your pack in the wheelhouse, it'll be safe there."

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Challa smiled and took his hand, allowing him to help her back aboard the ship, "Request permission to come aboard Captain?" she asked jokingly.

Taking her pack she stowed it in the wheelhouse in an out of the way spot and then headed to the galley. The place was spotless and in good shape considering the age of the boat. Maybe she could help him get the boat restored a bit, she had decent bones and was once probably a very pretty vessel. "One thing at a time Challa", she said to herself as she started the coffee. If there was a bakery nearby she'd see about getting some pastry's especially if the guests were arriving first thing in the morning.

While the coffee made, Challa pulled her hair back into a ponytail, she loved her hair, but it could get in her way sometimes. Once the coffee was made she filled two mugs, she preferred her coffee black, but not knowing how Roger took his, she added the small sugar bowl and some powdered creamer to the small tray she'd found and carried it back to the deck.

"I brought some for you too, but didn't know how you took it," she said as she set the tray down out of the way. He had most of the things he needed she was guessing from the nails, boards, hammer and saw, that were laid out.

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Roger had gathered his woodworking tools and supplies and laid them out on the live well hatch. The cover over the live well, where his client's catch would be stored alive, was amidships, centrally located, and the perfect height for either a low table or a high seat. In this case it would also double as 'saw horse'. He had gathered the larger broken pieces, hoping to salvage a few, but they all felt somehow wrong to him. They had a corrupt, slimy feel to them even though they looked no different than the surrounding lumber. He finally consigned them all to the trash can and decided to use fresh all around. By the time Challa approached with the offer of coffee he had strung some work lights and was measuring the first board. She had pulled her hair back, giving him a good look at her face. Her smile was warm and open, and her skin seemed to glow softly. Perhaps it was a combination of her paleness and the harsh lighting. "Au natural," he replied to her query, "no cream or sugar. I am a sea captain after all." He took the cup from her, "You're an angel, this should scatter the last of my drunken fog."

Measuring the first board he said, "I'll need your help holding this while I cut it, I'm not too good with the hand saw."

Holding the wood while he cut, Challa saw the wood that had been removed and understood the reason for it, the thing reeked of Succubus, the creature had left it's essence on the boards. Of course Roger couldn't smell it, or even see it, but it must have felt strange.

The pair seemed to work well together. Several times Roger felt the need to remove a piece of the bulkhead that didn't feel quite right. Challa didn't question it, as if she somehow understood his reasoning better than he himself did. As a matter of fact he didn't understand removing the extra lumber at all, it just felt 'correct' to him. Within several hours and cups of coffee they had the area well patched.

"I'll paint it to match tomorrow. My client's will have to understand, besides I don't want them to get wet paint on themselves," he chuckled softly, "and every other damn thing on board." He smiled at her and took her hand gently in his. "Thank you for the help, I would have been working till dawn on that for sure. Now I can get some rest before I ship out."

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Challa smiled looking at Roger's handiwork, it was good, and would hold up. "Not a problem, happy

to help," she replied. Eyeing the wood in the huge metal trash can she said, "A word of warning though, you will want to burn that wood. It's tainted and is liable to attract all manner of creatures.: Looking him square in the eyes she said, "Make no mistake Roger, all of those things that go bump in the night are very real, and in some cases very deadly. I can take care of it, but you'll need to move it off of the boat first," she told him.

Once it was moved onto the dock a few feet away, Challa took a deep breath, and held out her hands, palms towards the can, "Enflamos", she said softly and a whoosh of air flew from her palms tot he can, igniting the boards and other trash within, in less than 20 minutes all traces would be nothing but Ash, scattering harmlessly to the winds.

As she grabbed up her pack, she asked, "Oh what time do you get in, and what would you like for dinner? You're letting me use your place, so cooking you a nice dinner is the least that I can do." She pretended not to notice his eyes still looking at the burning wood in the can.

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"Ummmm, you do know there's a city ordinance against outdoor burning, right?" Roger said blankly as he watched the flames dance. "Not that I think anyone who cares will be up this late."

Looking away from the burning trash can he said, "Not too sure when I'll get in with this group. Yesterday was kind of late, that's why they treated me to dinner and drinks. They had me going around in circles, almost as if they were looking for something. Mostly they just drink beer and do a little fishing, talk shop, and do some weird 'corporate bonding' crap." He smiled when he remembered seeing them dancing around the live well, chanting, with their shirts off. "I should be back in port by mid afternoon unless they do something truly bizarre. Would you like me to text you?"

He thought to himself, "Clever, Rog, why didn't you just ask her for her cell number outright? Now she'll think you're some kind of goofball. How do you know that a sorceress would even have a cell phone anyway?"

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Challa smiled when he mentioned the city ordinance, he was right, no one of import would notice it. His mention of his clients caught her attention, they sounded like Fey, but whether light or dark she couldn't be sure, unless she saw them. Not wanting to spook him more than she already had she said nothing just shook her head, "Corporate types, they're al alike", she said as if agreeing with him.

She pulled out her cell and they exchanged numbers, "Yeah either text me or call me. But give me a few options here about what you like to eat." she said. She'd have to make something for herself anyway and it was just as easy to cook for two as it was to cook for one.

"Well," he started, "I did stock the fridge, so pretty much anything in there is fair game. A lot of it is fish, kind of a job related thing, but there should be some chicken and even some pre-made stuff for a lazy bachelor to fix. Most of the seasoning is local island stuff. Should be some fresh plantains there as well, a friend dropped them off yesterday morning."

When they finished she hoisted her pack and said, "I'll see you when you get in. Stay safe."

Turning, she headed off in the direction of his flat. Something was up, there should not be so many Supernatural creatures about, but this place was rife with them so far. Although Challa could and would fight them if they tried to harm innocents, it was better she remain as out of sight as possible. Dangerous or not, some Supernaturals would have no qualms about trying to take her out, on principle or spite.

Roger watched her walk away down the quay, thinking about the night's events. He was still fairly sure he would wake up and find this was all some strange dream, but he hoped not. Once she was out of sight he climbed back on board the *Bella Luna*, slipped into bed, and was quickly sound asleep.

Roger's flat was nice, cozy and comfortable even though he said he spent most time on his boat. It was also immaculate which said that he spent little time here. She decided to use the pull-out not wishing to commandeer his bed, after fixing it with fresh sheets, she took a long, hot shower, and slipped into sleep sweats. After double checking the locks, she laid down to get the first real rest she'd had in over a week.



## Shenanigans

The next day started just shy of dawn. Roger awoke as his charter began arriving, and he welcomed them aboard. They greeted him cheerfully, seemingly unaffected by the previous night's drinking. Roger was still bleary eyed and tired, as much from the rum as from the rest of the night's events. Several of the men mentioned his state, and the patched area on the aft bulkhead. With a laugh he explained that he'd had a minor demonic encounter onboard after he'd left them, but it was well in hand now. They laughed with him, but it was a forced, hollow laughter. Afterwards the group became oddly quiet, breaking out the beer early as the Bella Luna's diesel plant belched to life with a puff of thick black smoke.

The trip went very much like the last few, with the client's selecting an out of the way stretch of water with marginal fishing. Roger dropped the sea anchor and the clients began talking about dropping market share and economic trends. Within several minutes the Captain had kicked back and began his first siesta.

He awoke to a heated discussion. Apparently one of the men was complaining that something had escaped their 'portal' during the last 'transfer' and must have followed them. Another other one explained that it happened frequently, and that was why they were anchored over secluded 'ley' lines. When they realized he was awake the discussion quickly turned back to mundane business matters. Roger didn't fail to notice that only three of them were actually fishing, and only a few fish were in the live well, but that was about par for these guys.

The rest of the day was uneventful. As the 'Luna headed for home, Roger made sure to text Challa as soon as he had signal, about twenty minutes out. The boat was docked and unloading just about three in the afternoon. As usual, Roger's fare tipped him generously in addition to his fee and then made verbal arraignments for the next day. Within several minutes, with a bag of laundry over his shoulder, he headed down the quay towards his apartment.

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Challa woke midmorning and felt like a million bucks, the pullout was comfortable, and she'd slept deeply. Getting dressed she returned the pullout to it's sofa position. Making herself some coffee she made herself some toast and then inspected the small apartment.

The kitchen area and living room, were "open concept, the small bedroom and bathroom were off of the living room area. Tiny, but perfect for a man who didn't spend much time here. The fridge was indeed stocked, she pulled out the Plantains, and a head of lettuce, and then went into the freezer to pull out some fish. She wasn't sure what type, other than being a white fish. Broiled fish, fried Plantains and a salad seemed like a decent meal. She found some fruit in the frig and the ingredients in the cupboard to make some fruit tarts for dessert.

By the time she got his text dinner was ready and was being kept warm. She'd even dusted and vacuumed the small apartment. She set the table for two, very nicely, and freshened herself up a bit, a denim skirt and red tank top, leaving her hair loose and wavy down her back. Not that she was dressing for him, but after looking at guys, fish and water all day, Roger might appreciate something nice to look at.

She had to wonder about the clients he mentioned, maybe she'd check things out tomorrow, even if it meant following him at a distance and finding a spot to watch his boat if he was taking them out again. She didn't want to mess with his livelihood, but having been attacked the night before had kind of made him more susceptible to the "otherworldly" beings that tended to pop in and out of this realm.

Hearing someone come up the steps she knew it was him, remembering that she had his key, she opened the door for him.

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Roger walked up the flight on steps to his apartment practically dragging his bundle. He was tired (even though he had slept a bit while his clients 'fished') dirty, and smelled of fish and sweat. The door was opened and Challa greeted him with a warm smile. Her hair was down, and flowed across her shoulders and down her back. She was in a skirt that showed off her legs nicely and a tank top that was just loose enough to flow across her form as she moved. Her eyes sparkled at him, and the scent of a hot meal assailed him as he crossed the threshold. "Permission to come aboard?" He said with a grin.

Challa gave a small laugh, "Granted," she replied, noticing that he looked a bit tired.

Dropping his bundle next to the door he let his eyes meet hers, but this time purely for pleasure. "Dinner smells amazing, and you look incredible," he offered, fighting the urge to hug her. He was filthy. "Sadly I myself neither smell amazing nor look incredible. If you don't mind I'm going to take a quick shower."

"Don't mind at all, there are fresh towels in the bathroom," she told him, she did notice how dirty he was and how he smelled, which aside from the fishy scent wasn't all that bad, she'd smelled worse on people.

Roger's shower truly was a quick affair, he was hungry and he knew Challa was waiting on him. He slipped from the bath to the bedroom wearing only a towel, which was more than he normally wore, and closed the bedroom door to get dressed. Stressing over which shirt to wear, as most of his tees were either well worn, less than appropriate, or in his bundle awaiting laundering, he finally opted for cutoff shorts and a loud Hawaiian shirt that he rarely wore. Re-entering the 'living room' he gave it a good look for the first time. "You cleaned," he said as he sat down at the seat she indicated, "thank you, it looks nice. Dinner looks great too, but you didn't have to do any of this. You must have spent all day in the flat, did you get out for a walk around or anything?" He took a bite of the fish and went into ecstasy.

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Challa shrugged, "Yeah well it just needed some dusting, vacuuming and airing out," she said, indicating a seat. "I did stay in today, I've been on the road for a while, hoofing it, so I've been walking plenty, it was nice just to stay still for a day." She watched as he took a bite of the fish, and she could tell he loved it, which made her happy, he'd been so nice to her that making him a nice dinner and cleaning his flat seemed like a good way to pay him back. "I don't mind, I feel like I'm earning my keep. I couldn't help noticing the laundry, if you point me in the direction of the nearest Laundromat I'll do it for you tomorrow," she held up a hand, "And before you tell me that I don't have to, I have my

own laundry to take care of, it'll be just as easy for me to do yours at the same time," she said. What she didn't say that if it was near the dock, she may be able to get a gander at his clients.

Taking a bite of her own fish, it was pretty good for having not made it in a while. Traveling around as she had Challa usually settled for something fast, that she could eat in the go. Having a place and the time to actually cook a meal felt nice, and having someone to share it with all the better.

"So how was your day," she asked as they enjoyed dinner. She would not interfere unless he was in danger, she'd learned long ago to keep as low a profile as possible. Help when you could but use discretion with great power, comes great responsibility.

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"About average for these clients, they're a bunch of accountants from Miami," Roger said around another bite of fish. "I swear that there's a different guy sometimes, but they look so similar that I can't be sure. This fish is amazing by the way, thank you again." He thought for a moment and added, "The Luna's GPS seems to be off a bit, it took a little longer to get back today. I wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't waiting to text you." He took another bite.

"They had an argument today too, nothing serious but it's the first time I heard any of them raise their voice." He took a bite of plantain. Finishing it he said, "Oh, and they're terrible fishermen. Had me anchor out where there wasn't much of anything running. I suggested several different spots that were much closer, but they insisted on being way out there. The island is know for it's closeness to fishing grounds, but these fellows go out past them. It's almost like they don't want to catch any. Like I said, strange dudes."

Thinking for a moment he asked, "Say, you want to go for a boat ride later?" Looking askance at her he added, "we won't be back till after dark."

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Challa listened as he told her about the clients he'd been taking out, why hire a fishing boat if you didn't want to fish, but then it shouldn't really matter all that much, a charter was a charter. When he mentioned the GPS on his boat she smiled, "Maybe it was because you were out pretty far, and you were waiting to text me. Ever hear the old saying about a 'watched pot never boils', but definitely keep an eye on it just in case something is wrong." She suggested.

His suggestion of a boat ride was unexpected but sounded too nice to turn down, "I'd like that, so long as you aren't too tired." He'd been on the boat all day, and if he was fried from it she'd rather he rested.

"No, I'm not too tired. I had a nice long siesta while my clients were 'fishing'." He gave her a sly grin, "There is an ulterior motive though, I need to compare the GPS with some star sightings. Not too many stars out during the day." Showing her a little of his world would be nice too, and the Caribbean at night was one of the best parts. He wasn't sure why she was visiting the island, but he was fairly certain it wasn't to do his daily chores for him. He glanced at her as he ate, still unsure whether she was crazy, or he was.

After dinner Challa cleared the table and did up the dishes, "I have an idea, I can bring the

dessert I made on the boat, and make coffee while we're out there and enjoy it under the stars?" She liked the idea of coffee and dessert on the boat.

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"That sounds great," Roger exclaimed. "I have to dig a couple things out of a closet, my dad's old sextant and some charts and such. I think there's a lunch box in the closet next to the front door if you want to pack dessert up."

Within a few minutes they were headed back to the quay and the Bella Luna with their questing supplies. "You know," Roger began with a laugh, "thanks to GPS my navigational skills are a little rusty. You'll probably get to hear me curse like a sailor, I hate math."

The pair traversed the streets of Puerto Media Luna under lengthening shadows. Arriving at the docks, Roger gave Challa a hand aboard the boat, set his bundles on the deck, and stepped into the wheel house. A moment later the fishing boat's twin diesels came to life with a puff of black smoke. Roger cast off the fore and aft lines, returned to the wheelhouse, and with a skilled spin of the wheel eased the boat away from the dock and into Media Luna bay. "Here we go," he called out. The Bella Luna crossed the bay under the waning late afternoon sun.

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Challa had dug the pack from the closet, gave it a quick wipe down and packed the fruit tarts, a couple of plates and some napkins into the pack before closing it.

When he mentioned swearing she laughed, "Language doesn't bother me, it never did. Even though I'm fairly good in math I hate it too." She shrugged, "Things like GPS and Radar are all fine and good, but things like that can fail, so learning to read the stars and your maps, are always a good idea," she said as they neared the boat.

Challa had gone right to the galley, and was making the coffee as Roger got them under way. Leaving the lunch bag in the kitchen while the coffee brewed, she joined Roger near the wheel. As they cleared the docks and began to chug across the bay, Challa smiled at the view despite the setting sun. The deck lights came on and there was plenty of light.

The sea was calm and a small breeze blew and Challa was loving it, she hadn't been on a boat much lately, even though she loved sailing. "Is there anything that I can do to help?" She asked as she watched Roger expertly steer the boat.

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Somewhere in the depths, waiting in the sea below the crossed ley lines, it waited. It had crossed into this plane through the hole made in it's own by 'Those Who Passed Through'. They weren't from it's own plane, they merely used it to convey themselves between their plane and wherever it had found itself now. It had been drawn by the glow of a pure soul, an innocent unjaded by evil, but now that soul was gone along with the others. The sunlight above was painful to it, and the hole was gone so there was no return. Now it just waited, forlorn, lost, and very afraid of this bright painful world it had inadvertently entered until the light would fade. Soon, it felt, darkness would shroud this world. Soon, it felt the pure soul once again approach, it could feed.

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“Help?” Roger jibed. “If you wanted to help you could have shepherded a baker's dozen accountants this morning. All I have to do now is not hit anything, and there's nothing out here.” He laughed and added, “As a matter of fact there aren't even many fish, which makes it that much weirder.” The sun was setting with all of the glory that a sunset could muster as they reached the area that the Bella Luna had visited earlier in the day. He touched her cheek softly and added, “Being here and being beautiful is help enough right now.” He killed the engines and dropped the sea anchor just as the stars, as if awaiting a cue offstage, began appearing.

Roger shut off the deck lights and stepped out on deck. “I'll be a few minutes,” he offered. Digging into his bundle he extracted a sextant, notepad, compass, dividers, and several charts. Without the boats wake, and being a calm night, the Caribbean reflected the stars. The Luna seemed to be floating gently in the sky like it's namesake.

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The touch to her cheek, sent a fissure of awareness down her spine, it had been a while since she'd had a Lover, even for one night. This was different of course Roger knew what she was, her last lover hadn't and it had ended up costing him his life.

The stars reflected off of the dead calm water made Challa smile, it was a beautiful sight.

When Roger drew his attention from his equipment she asked, "Okay is the GPS accurate?" If it was then it would be a burden off of his shoulders she knew. He made a decent living but she doubted that he was wealthy enough that a problem like a faulty GPS was nothing, not to mention he needed it to navigate easier, especially when farther out.

Roger laughed. “I'll know after I do some math, with the prerequisite cursing that is. Now might be a good time to pacify me with some dessert.”

Going below she plated the tarts and poured the coffee and brought everything up on the deck, "Here ya go me sea farin Laddie," she joked lightly as she handed him a plated tart and a hot cup of fresh coffee, before sitting down with her own.

"So do you do this much, come out at night I mean." she asked. "It's just so peaceful, especially with calm water like tonight." She noticed that he'd put the deck lights back on, making it easier for her to see him. Gods he was a handsome man, and a nice one as well. His body, while not muscle bound was strong and well defined by simple hard work. Working a fishing boat, even a chartered one, was a lot of sometimes heavy work.

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“Not nearly enough,” Roger answered taking a sip of coffee. “The GPS seems to be spot on, so either it's me or a fissure in the fabric of space-time. We're too far south to be in the Bermuda Triangle, so I'm betting it's just me.” He took a bite of the tart and added, “these are incredible by the way.”

Now that the sun had set it felt safe to approach the surface again. It sensed more than saw the pure soul that had drawn it into this realm earlier that day, and like before it was drawn to it as a moth



to a flame. The being was perched on a vessel about the size of itself that floated at the border of liquid and gas. It poked a tentacle into the air, gently touching the vessel that rested there. It was a device and not a creature. Emboldened it began to emerge only to discover that it's prey was not alone.

Frightened it slipped unseen back beneath the floating device. Now unsure, it pondered it's dilemma. It's prey was not alone, there were two creatures operating the device above. If it attacked the one, then the other might be able to flank it. It did not know how powerful either was, or even if the device was some kind of weapon. As if in answer, the device let out an ominous roar and began shredding the liquid that it floated in. A weapon then, and a powerful one, it thought. It would have to stay well clear of those whirling blades, so it unfolded it's wings and prepared to launch itself into the air.

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Finishing his tart Roger said, "Ready to head back? We can anchor in the harbor for a while and enjoy the lights from the town while we finish the coffee." He slipped back into the wheelhouse and fired the diesels up.

Challa had kind of gotten goosebumps when he mentioned space-time, and the Bermuda Triangle. He might be interested to know that the Triangle was a gateway that could be opened at certain times, if conditions were right. To her knowledge it hadn't been used much in years, due to others being able to punch through to the Human realm in other areas. As he got the boat headed back towards the bay and the docks, Challa cleaned up a bit, leaving the additional tarts and coffee still on the deck, as they'd be enjoying them some more once they docked.

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Realizing that it's prey was once again leaving the creature, 'it', began frantically swimming for the surface as the device that the prey was operating headed away from it.

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As they motored back Challa got the feeling that they were being watched, but she saw nothing in the water, and saw noting in the skies, but the breeze held a chill that was not of this world. Of course being what she was, she was well aware of other beings that had decided to call this realm home, usually they settled in and assumed human identities and went about heir own business, living a normal existence. Since she didn't see or hear anything, she decided to simply enjoy the ride and the company.

She knew Roger was kind of attracted to her, she was attracted to him, so if something did indeed happen, she wasn't going to complain. He knew what she was, but he didn't know how old she was, even though she looked to be in her mid twenties she was one hundred and fifty years old. Due to being a naturally born Sorceress and Mage her aging process had slowed to a crawl once she'd been fully indoctrinated, and charged with keeping the Human realm safe. This was a good spot, tourists came to visit, the locals had little businesses, and there was enough of a supernatural vibe that meant that it saw it's share of unearthly traffic.

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It broke the surface, frantically searching for its escaping prey as its large batlike wings unfurled. The pure soul was now too far away to sense, the creature's device was very fast. It could never have kept up under water, but fortunately it was now airborne. Its wings beat the air as it hovered, tucking its six long tentacles close under its belly to become more aerodynamic. Finally it located the receding boat, which was now brightly lit. It began a flapping, undulating motion as it pulled itself through the thick moist air towards its prey. Its long tail whipped up and down, adding to its now increasing speed. The thrill of the chase coursed through its tiny brain as it once again was close enough to feel the draw of the innocent one, and it howled wildly.

“Wow,” Roger said as he heard what could only be described as something between a steam whistle and jet engine whine. “The diesels have never made THAT noise before.” He scanned the gauges on the console looking for any anomalies. All the gauges were normal, and the shriek didn't continue or repeat. Instead, it seemed to be replaced by a violent flapping sound from somewhere astern. He quickly killed the engines to minimize any damage that the failure was causing, and was rewarded with a loud whooshing as something passed low over the boat. “What the hell?” he exclaimed. “Challa, did you see what that was?”

Challa had heard the sound also, the feeling of dread intensifying. She ducked as she heard the whoosh and felt the breeze that held the smell of rotting fish. Running to Roger she gasped as the thing landed.

The device stopped, causing it overshoot terribly. Its forward momentum was too great to make a tight turn, so it went way out and came back as it slowed. Speed no longer a need, as its prey was almost stationary, it once again unfurled its tentacles and prepared to swoop down on the boat amidships.

Roger stared as something plopped onto the deck. It looked like a squid wearing a eel-tailed bat on its head. The entire thing was almost as long as the Luna, but most of that length was its tail which draped off into the water. It was blue-green and had several rows of very nasty looking teeth inside a gaping beak that smelled of rotten fish. Before the horror of it could sink in, one of the tentacles wrapped itself around his arm and began pulling him towards its 'mouth'. Roger grabbed frantically for anything to beat the monstrosity away with and came up with a first aid kit. He began bashing the offending tentacle loudly with the metal box and yelling obscenities at it. Being dragged up to the live well, he braced himself on it and pitted his human muscles against those of the otherworldly beast to a draw.

That's when another tentacle slithered in his direction.

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Challa stopped dead as the thing eyed them both, before its gaze settled squarely on Roger. She watched as it grabbed one of Roger's arms and began dragging it towards its mouth and the nasty set of teeth. Roger was currently hitting the muscular tentacle with the first aid kit, but that was only pissing it off, as it sent another tentacle out towards the Human.

Challa looked around quickly and spotted an axe, picking it up, she jumped over to stand in front of Roger, but facing the beast, she hacked the tentacle holding Roger's arm, severing it, the beast howled in pain and the second tentacle heading for Roger, now headed towards her. Backing up a bit she gave Roger a quick look over her shoulder, "Get below, NOW!" She yelled and then turned to face

the creature. Stomping on the encroaching she said, "Not so fast. Don't know why you want with my friend, but now you'll need to deal with me," she said as she calmed herself and allowed her powers to rise within her.

Her fingers sparked with energy and the wind lifted her hair, Challa lifted her arms and blew a blast of energy from her hands at the beast, hitting it squarely in the chest. It took off, flapping its wings to get away, but Challa blasted it again, and the thing became a fireball as it plummeted towards the sea, very dead, burned to a crisp.

She didn't know exactly what it was, only that it was not of this realm. Hearing a noise she turned to see Roger returning to the top deck, if he'd ever totally left.

Two things were clear to her, there was something about Roger that was acting like a magnet for the inhuman and supernatural, and someone, somewhere had opened a portal and hadn't closed it properly. When she found him or her she was going to wring their neck. But right now she had Roger to attend to, she'd have to teach him how to defend himself, since she couldn't be with him 24/7.

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Roger didn't head below, instead he went directly to the wheelhouse and got the flair gun. He returned on deck just as Challa lit up the sky with the monstrosity. Realizing that the danger was over, he shuddered deeply. "What the hell was that thing?" he asked after a deep breath. "On second thought, I don't really want to know." He scanned the open waters and added, "let's just get back to town." He fired up the diesels again, but kept one hand on the flair gun just in case.

It bubbled up, mist-like, from its hiding place at the meeting of the ley lines. It watched the demise of the other-worlder that had tried to take the mortals. It was still far too weak to even consider an attack of its own. Instead it took several of the small lives nearest it, and their bodies sank slowly into the cold depths. It was frightened, this place was so different from its home plane, so alien and cold. There was so much life energy to be had here though, in this realm, if one was strong enough to take it. In its home realm the Master held all of the energy, giving only enough for bare subsistence, but here there was more than enough for the taking. It drank in the life force of several more small sea creatures. Here, IT could be the Master..... in time.

It sensed the pure soul much better than the Other had, sensed the direction that it headed when it once again departed, and then slowly followed, drinking in the smaller lives that it passed.

The docks came into view and Roger piloted the boat to its berth seamlessly, casting on the lines and securing the boat. Challa was sitting a few feet away, smiling at him she patted the seat beside her and held up a cup of coffee.

"Okay," Roger started as he sat down beside her taking the offered cup, "I'll admit I thought you were delusional in a cute sort of way. Maybe a little crazy too, but I was willing to take that ride. That thing was real, wasn't it?" He took a deep breath and looked into her face. "Damn it was horrible, any idea what it was? I'm babbling now, aren't I? Maybe I need something stronger than coffee." He stared at the deck between his feet.

Challa handed him his cup and smiled, "Yes it was very real." His admission that he thought she was crazy didn't surprise her, Humans often thought that. "Not quite sure, but I'd be willing to bet

that it won't be the last strange and ugly creature that comes after us, or more to the point, you," she said thoughtfully.

Deciding on honesty she explained, "That thing was not of the Earthly Realm, it was from another dimension, if you will. Somewhere close by a portal was opened, either on purpose or by accident and others beings have been able to slip through. This has only been going on for a couple of days, and you said you have passengers who aren't exactly fishing." She stood up, "When I fought that Succubus last night, I got a whiff of something else, and I smelled it more this evening. It's probably Fey, even though I haven't been around any in quite a while. It's entirely possible that when they opened the "door" to come through, they didn't close it properly." She held up a hand, "And before you can ask, the Fey like vacations too, and they come to hunt, or to find willing female conquests, sometimes taking them back with them," she explained.

"The thing is they have attached themselves to you for some reason." She said as she approached him. Taking his cup and setting it aside, she drew him to his feet, "Relax, look into my eyes Roger, lets see what they see,hmmm..." Challa gazed into Roger's eyes, opening up her senses and gently probing. That's when she saw it, his soul was pure, which was almost unheard of for a Human, but there it was. That meant he'd never lied, cheated, stolen or deceived anyone in any way. "Okay I found out why, you're a good man Roger, but you're going to have to be not so good in the future if you want to live. You are one of the rare people that has a very pure soul, and that soul can act like a beacon to certain creatures who feed on soul energy to survive." She took him by the shoulders, "I can protect you only so much, at some point you will need to learn to spot them, and either avoid them or fight them." She said. "We just need a few things cleared up, First, as much as I like boats and Your boat especially, at night we are a bit safer on land; second we need to cleanse and purify the Bella Luna; and lastly I need to go with you tomorrow to see your clients, they won't know what I am, and they won't be expecting a Sorceress. Once we get them out to where they wish to go, we can confront them. But to do all of that I need you to trust me completely," she told him touching a hand to his cheek, "I would never, in a billion years hurt you. If you believe nothing else, please believe that. Okay?" She asked softly.

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"Yea, okay. I still need something stronger than coffee though." He smiled and sighed. "I think I want to talk to Uncle Mick too. You'd probably like to meet him, he's collected a lot of stories about strange occurrences around the island. Since I now know that these things are real, there are a few local tales that might not be just stories, you know?"

Roger finished his coffee and stood up. "Let me put Bella to bed and we'll go visit Pheasant Plucker's." He secured the various loose things on deck, stowed his navigational paraphernalia in the forward cabin, and locked up the wheelhouse. Once again he offered his hand to Challa when she disembarked, but this time he chose not to let go. Instead, more for his own comfort at having her near him, he placed his arm around her shoulders. As they ambled down the quay towards the local hangout know as Pheasant Plucker's Roger said softly, "I don't know if I said this or not, but thanks for being there today. Thanks for everything."

Challa smiled, liking the feel of his arm around her shoulders, "Not a problem, you don't need to thank me. We need to get this solved and try to close whatever door was opened", she told him. The name of the place had her smiling, "Pheasant Pluckers huh, sounds like quite a place."

## A Pheasant Plucker

Pheasant Pluckers was a quiet, neighborhood bar two blocks from Roger's apartment. The floor and furnishings were worn, but clean, and the clientèle were mostly local working people. As soon as he entered several people looked up. The bartender said, "Hey, Rog, the usual?" Seeing Challa he added, "What's your friend having?"

"Nope, Eddie, rough seas today. Make mine a rum and I'll just chase it down with a Stripe." Scanning the bar he located an old, very dark man at the end of the bar. "And get another Stripe for Unka Mick, I need a good story." Roger turned to Challa and asked, "What would you like? If you don't want alcohol Eddie make a killer fruit punch; he uses it to make his sangria."

Challa sat down beside Roger and looked around the bar, it was clean and comfortable. When Roger ordered a beer known as Stripe, Challa decided to have one herself. She'd had the beer several years ago, and had liked the brew, that was produced and bottled in Jamaica. Due to Jamaica being a major tourist destination many people gone back to the states requesting it, helping to establish Red Stripe as a very popular imported beer.

'Uncle Mick' was an old man, gray where he still had hair and covered in dark brown, almost black, wrinkled leather where he did not. He was dressed in plain work clothes and smelled of too much aftershave, cigars, and coffee. "Seen something today, Unka Mick," Roger said offering him a bottle of Red Stripe beer. "Maybe you heard tell of one. It was kinda like a squid with wings like a bat and a long snaky tail." Having paid the fee and primed the storyteller, Roger leaned back and put his arm around Challa's shoulders.

Mick nodded in Challa's direction, "You gonna be disappointin' a lot of local girls, Rog." The old man grinned at them and took a long drink from the offered bottle. His eyes focused on something far away, searching for a memory. "Things like that started showin' up about seven years ago. Not like what you describe, no, but weird critters. Snakes with wings, two headed fish that nobody could identify, tiny mermaids big as your hand, and some people said that a moth man was hauntin' the hillsides. Like I said, crazy things."

The old man took a long pull on his Red Stripe and continued, "Lot's o' heart attacks seven years ago too. Not old fellas like me, but able, strong men were dropping dead in their tracks. One of 'em was yer pappy, Rog. A strong man like Freddie Barbosa shouldn't have just keeled over dead, no. Now Mambo Naomi, bless her soul, took ta wanderin' the streets every night, watchin' fer sumthin', but she wouldn't say what. That's about the time them bassett faced twins showed up what she adopted too. Poor little dears didn't last but a few months before a fever took them, but that's another story. Naomi showed up one morning after wanderin' all messed up, bit all over an' a 'bleedin', but them heart attacks stopped. She never was right again either."

Mick leaned back on his barstool and finished his beer. "Miss that crazy ol' woman. She passed quietly in her sleep about two years gone. You remember her, Rog, she were always kind to you. I think she was midwifin' yer mom when she passed givin' birth to ya." He got a quizzical look on his face and added, "Odd that nobody could remember what birth date to put on her tombstone. She was older than everybody, ya' know. They checked the church's records, but the only person by her name was born in the early sixteen hundreds. Everybody figured she was birthed in the back hills an' never baptized neither. If I had another Red Stripe, I might be inclined to share my thoughts on the matter."



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Challa had smiled warmly at the old man's compliment, he seemed like a nice , harmless old fella, there was usually one of his type in every small seaport. Grizzled, older and having seen better days he had a fondness for drink and story telling.

It didn't take another Red Stripe or Uncle Mick to tell Challa what the woman probably was, most likely a Sorceress like herself, they tended to live very long lives. The woman had probably found the being causing the heart attacks and either feeding on the souls or the energy of the newly departed. From Mick's description of the woman's condition it sounded like she'd fought whatever it was and won, but that the battle had taken it's toll.

The fact that she'd helped birth Roger could also have something to do with why he attracted the otherworldly beings.

They bought Mick another round and kept him talking a bit, to the others it was just a bunch of wives tales, but to Challa it was forming a picture of sorts, and giving her information that she could use.

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After saying their goodbyes, and buying Unka Mick just one more, Roger and Challa headed out into the night. Thin wispy clouds slipped across the sky, and a crescent of moon floated on them like a sailboat. The sun's heat was gone, and a cool breeze was coming down from inland. Roger put his arm around Challa's shoulders again, it was beginning to feel natural to him, and drew her close. "So, I'm guessing the rumor's about Mambo Naomi were true. Mick was too kind to say it, but she was purported to be a witch, or a Santeria priestess." He leaned in close and added softly, "she and Mick were lovers, I know that to be true. When I was real little I called them 'aunt' and 'uncle', even though I don't think we were related. They were close to my mother's side of the family though, and dad was always on friendly terms with them." He became quiet then, allowing childhood memories to flow past.

They reached Roger's apartment. "I don't usually invite a lady home on the first date," he grinned at her, "but you've slept here more recently than I. So, do you mind if I come up for a while?"

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Challa liked the way Roger's arm went around her shoulders, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "She sounds like she was, maybe a Sorceress like me, we tend to live very long lives. It doesn't surprise me about her and Mick, he was probably quite the charmer when he was younger. Family doesn't always need to be blood, heck that's just genetics, there's so much more to family than that," She told him as they walked.

Challa laughed when he asked to come in, "With what happened earlier you are safer here on dry land, at least until we figure out what is going on," She replied and then looked into his eyes, "And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't attracted to you, because I am. Last night I thought you attractive, as well as nice, and then this evening seeing you with Mick, and the others at the bar made me really like you a lot. Besides I need to teach you how to fight those beings that may come after you, and NOT just the ugly one that tried to eat you tonight." She'd taken his arm and turned him towards the steps leading to

his small apartment.

"We are both adults, whatever happens, happens and when it's done, it's done. I've been on my own for a very long time, so I'm not some clingy female", she told him making herself clear.

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Roger gently pulled her towards him, looked into her sea green eyes, and brushed a stray russet hair from her face. Her lips parted, so he leaned against her, supported her in a strong embrace, and gave her a long, deep kiss. Finally, releasing her, he said, "and yet none of that would matter to me. From the first time I saw you on the dock I knew you were special." He gave her a mischievous grin, "I'm just thankful that you aren't as crazy as I thought you were then." Fumbling momentarily for his key he realized that he'd given it to Challa.

Challa fished the key from a pocket and dangled it, "Looking for this? I forgot to give it back when you came in this afternoon," she said on a laugh.

They finally got the apartment door open and the pair practically fell through it. Using the dim light coming through the small window from the street Roger slipped the red tank top over Challa's head. Her hair spilled over her bare shoulders. He held some of it, bringing it to his nose. She smelled of spices, and musk, overlaid by what he could only describe as lightening. It was the scent of ozone and fresh rain just before a thunder storm. "I know," he began, her scent still in his mind, "that this will have to end. You will leave, or I will leave before you have to watch me grow old and die." He brushed the side of her bare breast and said softly, "it doesn't matter."

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Challa smiled gently at Roger, "No it doesn't matter," she said as she kissed him. It was a sweet, deep and passionate kiss. Their lips remained together as she backed them into the bedroom.

Several hours later, just before dawn, Challa woke snuggled in Rogers arms. Their lovemaking had been incredible, and had gone on for quite a while taking their time, learning what pleased the other. Slipping from his arms she quickly showered and dressed, she was going along with him today as he worked, she wanted to see these clients of his. If they were what she thought they were, they would know what she was, and while it may not stop them from doing what they were doing, at least their plans would not involve Roger, anymore than they already had. Last night had been a close call, and had totally caught her by surprise, her guard would be up from now on, especially after seeing Roger's soul.

She put on a pot of coffee and went to wake her lover, who was now also her student. He wasn't able to pull magic but there were still ways he could defend himself. They were also going to fix up and reinforce the Bella Luna, she was too good a boat to allow other-worldly forces to destroy it.

"Roger, love come on, time to get up. We have some clean-up to take care of before your charter arrives." She wait until he was wide awake before she told him that she was crewing for him.

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Roger's first groggy thought was, 'dear God, again?' His second thought, a little more coherent,

was, 'alright, again!' Of course, as he regained consciousness he smelled the brewing coffee. "Crap," he exclaimed jumping out of bed, "what time is it? I have a charter at dawn!"

He looked at the alarm clock, then the window, and only then did his mind process what she had said. "Oh, sorry," he smiled a sleepy smile. "Thank you for waking me. I'm not used to being this rested, umm, afterward. Last night was amazing." He kissed her. It started as a quick morning peck, then lingered and melted into an embrace.

Pushing back from her he said, "Sorry, I need to shower and get moving." Still naked, he headed to the bathroom.

~~~

Challa put together a simple but filling breakfast for them, and it was waiting when Roger emerged from the shower, a towel around his hips. "If you want to get dressed first it'll keep," she told him encouragingly, in truth if he stayed the way he was she'd be sorely tempted to jump him, and make them both very late.

The look on Challa's face as she told him breakfast would keep tempted Roger to just drop the towel and blow off the charter. Almost anyway, he would get a lot of money for the charter and the clients were nice guys, if a little strange. He opted to slip shorts and sandals on and forgo the shirt for a while.

Once he joined her at the table and she served up breakfast she said, "I'm coming with you today. I need to check out these clients of yours and be there if anything "hinky" goes down." Shrugging she added, "Just consider me the crew. They might pick up on what I am, and they might not, it all depends on what they are and where they are from."

After the night they'd just shared, the thought of being with him all day on the water was a nice one, in spite of her ulterior motives of trying to protect him. "I'm going to teach you a few ways to defend yourself as well, you don't always need special powers, just some basic dos and don'ts of what will and won't work," she explained as she finished her breakfast and sipped her coffee.

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Roger grinned broadly. He had considered asking her to join him, but hadn't figured out exactly how to broach the subject. Of course, he had considered introducing her as his girlfriend. He liked her idea of 'crew' much better, he hadn't had help on board for over a year. Not that he couldn't wrangle a dozen or so accountants on vacation, but sometimes it did get a little busy.

"I think I'd like a crew," he said between bites. He caressed her bare shoulder, admiring the way her copper locks flowed over her smooth pale skin. "You're going to need sunscreen though, and some good work gloves in your size. I've probably got both on board, but if you have any it would help. You may want to consider a hat too, or tying your hair back. Wind and sun during the heat of the day can be brutal out there."

Challa nodded, "I have sunscreen, and I'll tie this back and put on a baseball cap. The work gloves, well I can work with whatever you have on board," she told him.

They left the small apartment, heading for the quay just as it was waking up and getting ready for a busy day. They walked through the cool predawn streets hand in hand towards the quay, stopping only to bypass a pair of constables talking to someone near the docks. Roger caught a snippet of conversation, hearing something about a 'probable overdose', and felt a little sad for the victim and whatever family they left behind. He wondered what turn of fate would put somebody in that situation and clasped Challa's hand a little tighter.

On the docks the morning breeze was a steady wind blowing towards the harbor. It ruffled Roger's loose shirt and Challa's wavy hair. The client's were not yet there. Roger boarded, helping Challa, and then went to the wheelhouse to fire up the engines. Something was amiss though. Laying across the gauges behind the ships wheel was a long package wrapped in brown paper with a note attached.

Feeling Challa come up beside him, Roger opened the note and read, " Rog, Ol' Naomi said I would know when and where this should go. That girl you got will have to teach you how to use it, I'm jus' too damn old now." He looked at the bottom and saw it was signed simply, "Mick." Carefully he unwrapped the package and found a short, slightly curved sword in a well worn sheath.

His eye's met Challa's. "Should I draw it?"

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Challa shook her head, "Not above deck, I'd take it below. Naomi must have been a warrior, kind of like me. Mick was probably like you are, a novice and innocent that needs teaching now that your eyes are opened," she explained simply. "For now though stow it someplace secure. We need to get the Bella Luna ready to go out, there's no time for a lesson now," she added.

As Roger took the sword below deck, Challa began straightening up and making a checklist in her head of what needed updating and fixing. The Luna was a good boat, and she deserved to shine again. She didn't notice the constable's car pulling into the lot until she heard the car doors shut.

Looking up as they approached she gave them her nicest smile, asking "Morning Officers, can I help you?"

The two Constables looked ultra conservative and no nonsense as they nodded to Challa, "We're looking for Roger Barbosa, is he around?" The older one asked.

"Um yes he's below deck, I'll get him, please wait here." Challa didn't invite them on board, first because it wasn't her boat, and secondly because unless and until the Constables had a reason to board, the boat was off limits to them.

Going below she called found him near the galley, "Roger, there are two Constables here, they asked to see you. I didn't invite them aboard, they might find that sword and ask questions you can't rightly answer," she said warning him without words to say nothing about the gift.

When they returned topside Challa found out why the Constables were there. Mick had passed away the night before and they were talking to anyone who had seen or spoken with him the night before. The Constables split up one talking to Challa at one end of the boat and the other questioning Roger at the other end, both Challa and Roger had stepped back onto the dock to speak to the officers.

Roger was visibly shaken by the news. He was close to the old man, and truth be known he was probably the nearest thing to family that Mick had left.

After checking her ID, the Constable speaking to Challa asked, "So how well did you know the deceased?"

Challa shrugged, " I didn't, not really. Met him last night. We took the Luna out for an evening sail, just some dessert and coffee. When we came back we stopped into Pheasant Plucker's for a nightcap. Old Mick was there, Roger introduced me and we listened to some of his old stories. It seems he knows all of the local legends, and was happy to tell them for a beer or two. He seemed like a nice old guy," she said meeting the Constable's eye.

The Officer nodded as he jotted some notes, "That's all for now, but stick around in case anything comes up. Where can we find you?" He asked doing his job.

Challa waved a hand at the boat, "I'll be with Captain Barbosa, either here on the Luna or at the small apartment a couple of blocks from here, I believe I gave you that address," she said calmly.

The Constables left shortly afterward, "Well I guess we know who was in that alley," she said. "Such a shame, he must have been heading back to his place after dropping off the sword," she reasoned.

They made coffee and finished prepping the Bella Luna for the charter. When the clients arrived Challa made sure that her powers were firmly tamped down, she recognized them as Fey, but wasn't clear as to whether they were the Seelie or Unseelie. Challa was introduced as the "First Mate" and they eyed her a bit but said nothing as Challa helped Roger cast off and the Bella Luna set sail, chugging away from the docks.

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Roger was unusually quiet. He knew Mick was very old, but he still felt that he was taken too early. Heart attack, the constable had said, probably caused in part to too much alcohol consumption. Roger had his doubts about that, he'd seen Mick on a few binges and last night the old man was barely buzzed. He's told the officer as much, and that too went into his little notebook. There would be funeral arraignments to make that would take a bit of his time, and he thought about declining the next day's charter. Maybe not though, it depended on when Mick would be ready for burial. If it truly was a heart attack he would be available soonest, if it was something else who knew when his body would be released.

Roger replayed some of Mick's stories in his mind. In light of what he'd seen the past two days, maybe the old fellow was telling the truth, at least as he saw it. He still doubted the basset faced twins story though, and smiled remembering Mick's face as he told it. The memories started making him feel a little better, and he pondered what the sword was all about. Mick seemed to think Challa would know.

What he really needed from her now though, he thought, was a warm hug. The world suddenly seemed a little colder. He considered fraternizing with the crew, and looked out on deck to see if he could spot Challa.

**IT!**

It watched as the first arrivals at the docks found the elder's body. It cowered, ratlike, in the shadows as the 'ones in authority' arrived and examined the remains of it's meal. It's hunger was sated, at least for now, but the feeding had taken it's toll. The old one had been difficult to overcome, his soul clear and pure but hardened in the forge of strife. It was akin to the diamond that it so resembled.

It saw them remove the body, felt the thirteen other realm beings arrive, and watched as they boarded a boat and departed in the company of the pure soul that it had tracked here. Soon it would be strong enough to take that one, but not yet. Now it must rest, heal itself, feed, and grow stronger. Mostly, though, it would have to learn more about this new realm.

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Challa served drinks and sandwiches to the men, interrupting them politely and with a smile. They didn't seem to be taking her seriously which was a good sign. A few of them were actually fishing, but even she could tell this wasn't a prime area, still they didn't seem upset that the fish weren't biting. Some people just liked the quiet of fishing, sitting around with a pole in the water gave folks time to collect their thoughts and ponder things.

Losing Mick was a blow, and she knew that it bothered Roger, he'd said the two were close. Challa didn't buy the heart attack story either. Yes the old guy loved his drink, but he wasn't all THAT old, and she could have used the help in training Roger. She'd never trained and taken on a Paladin, but Roger's pure soul meant he was a candidate for that honor. She'd have to wait until later to discuss it with him, maybe after laying Mick to rest. If old Naomi's bones were nearby, then she and Roger could place Mick's beside hers, as was proper.

Looking up she saw Roger scanning the clients on the boat as if looking for someone, she guessed it was her and went towards him. Reaching him she asked, "Are you okay. I know that he was like family to you." She said hugging him because he looked like he needed it.

Pulling him aside she lowered her voice, "After we dock, I'm going to follow our friends there and find out what they are doing here. It's definitely not fishing. They're Fey but I'm not sure if they are the of the light or of the dark, and I'm fairly certain they can tell what I am, but they aren't sure if I'm aware of myself yet. I'll be fine, but I just wanted you to know. Once we get Mick settled we have some things to figure out and decide on, things that will change your life in ways you never imagined," she said as she gave him a quick kiss and drifted off to attend to the clients.

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Roger yawned. "Yea, Mick was as close to an uncle as I ever had. I suppose I'm the closest thing to family that he had left too, so it will probably fall to me to lay him to rest. I think he has a plot next to Naomi." He yawned again, this time deeper. "Sorry, we both missed a lot of sleep last night. We can't do much way out here though, and it will be hours till we dock. " He leaned back in his captain's chair and pulled his hat over his eyes, "Besides, it's siesta time." Roger began to snore softly.

Out on deck the thirteen passengers were standing in a circle, clasping hands, with their eyes

closed. They were facing inward towards the center of the circle, and a thin blue line of light appeared. It gained form, becoming a figure of a man. Once fully formed, it stepped into the circle, taking the place of one of the members. The replaced man stepped into the center, and began to dissolve just as the other had resolved, finally becoming a thin blue line that disappeared.

The new man said something undecipherable, and one of the others said, "Use English, get used to it because you'll be using it for the next seven years."

"Another awaits," the newcomer restated, "we need to open the portal again." With that the group began to concentrate on the center of the circle again, and the whole process repeated. This time the newcomer was obviously female.

As the circle broke one of the men said, "Won't the mortals notice a female replacement?"

"No," another responded, "their minds are fogged. As far as they're concerned one of us has always been a woman."

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Challa could feel the glamour used, it didn't knock her out but it did make her feel sluggish. Deciding that it was best to act like a typical human, she feigned sleep. She watched what happened and knew that things were bad, just what were they up to? Seven years, as if it was a program to educate them on the Human Realm. She would be able to tip her hand until she knew what was going on. She wasn't even sure if it was tied to Mick's death or not.

When she noticed Roger starting to stir, she acted like she was slowly waking as well, and went about her business as they prepared to head in. At one point while the clients were occupied with themselves, Challa pulled Roger aside. "When we dock, I'll be following our friends. They won't see me, I've tailed others in the past so I know how to stay out of sight. Something isn't right and I want to try and find out what it is," she said. "Also do me a favor, take the sword and go to the apartment, DO NOT open the door for anyone except me. You say "Trumpet" and I'll reply "Brass Band", if I don't give you the right answer don't open the door," she told him solemnly. She'd also do some recon, something killed old Mick, she wanted to try and find out what. "Whatever you do DON'T stay on the boat. Hopefully I'll be able to explain more when I get back." She leaned in to kiss him, "Don't worry about me. I've been doing this since before you were born."

Going back on the deck she made sure that the clients were all ready to go when they docked.

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The docking went the same as the other days with these particular clients. Upon disembarking their spokesperson, and it wasn't always the same fellow, gave Roger a generous tip and made arrangements for the next day. He also tipped Challa, thanked her for helping with lunch, and asked if she would be assisting the next day. Once they made their way down the quay Challa gave him a quick look and slipped off after them.

Roger finished the day's cleanup and closeout quickly, which was easy considering the lack of actual fishing that had been done, and headed for his small flat with the wrapped sword under his arm. The street somehow felt a bit darker, even though it was hours until dusk. He picked up the scent of

spoiled trash from a side alley, considered investigating it, and then remembered Challa's warning. He figured it was just some spoiled meat that an animal had gotten into anyway.

He reached the flat, entered it quickly, and locked the door behind him. He shuddered a bit, as he never felt the need to lock the door while he was inside before. Truth be know the door wasn't locked while he was gone some days. Today locking it felt right.

Roger carefully unwrapped Mick's gift and looked at it closely. The hilt was gold. It didn't look to be painted or plated, but real, solid gold. The grip was wrapped in stained dark brown leather, perhaps blood stained, and looked well used. The sheath matched the wrappings in color, and had probably seen the same years age and wear. He glanced at the window.

“Well,” he thought to himself, “Challa didn't say I couldn't draw it.” Roger drew the short blade. The business end of the sword was bronze, slightly curved, about two feet in length, and covered in writing. At least to Roger it looked like writing, perhaps Egyptian hieroglyphs or something like them. He held the sword as one would if using it, feeling the weight and balance of it. A chill went down his spine as the letters seemed to glow slightly, then fade again.

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Challa followed the group discreetly, tailing them to a nice, middle class area of homes. The area was set in a resort of sorts that catered to people who wished to live on the Island part time. Not wanting to venture closer for fear of being discovered Challa backtracked to the docks. Keeping to the rooftops she did a visual search of alleys and cubby spaces that something nasty could hide in. One in particular stank to high heaven of rot and decay. It would be interesting to investigate further, but NOT unarmed or unprepared as she currently was.

She was fairly certain that the clients had inadvertently opened a portal and let something through, and that something was hungry and hunting. Mick had been old and seen better days but his soul had been strong and pure. Naomi may have been a Sorceress, and Mick had been her lover for many years but it had left him untainted, which showed that it had been destined.

As she made her way back to Roger's apartment, she knew that she'd have to begin his training right away. If that sword was truly what she thought it was, having it in untrained hands could do more harm than good.

Climbing the steps she reached the door and smiled when she found it locked. Knocking politely she said, “Roger it's me, give me the word to reply to so that I know it's you?” She called, waiting for the word.

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Roger quickly sheathed the blade at Challa's knock. “Ummm, trombone,” he replied, laying Mick's sword on the coffee table. “No, wait, strumpet, uh, trumpet! Sorry, I suck at this.” He quickly and foolishly unlocked the door without waiting for the counter password.

“So,” he said excitedly, “what's the deal?” He couldn't wait to show her the sword, but he knew her news was more important.



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It followed the pure soul. The human had been so close to its new lair that it almost had him, but not quite. Still, it tracked him the short distance to his lair and found the domicile warded against it. Turning to leave, lest it be discovered, it felt the drawing of a Blade, a slayer of demons. Shuddering inwardly, it quickly slunk back into its hole. "Perhaps another day," it thought.

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Challa smiled as she waited for the right word. She was going to chastise Roger for opening the door before her reply, but forgot about it when she saw his face. "I'm fine Love, but next time wait for my response." She told him as she walked inside and kissed him hello. Seeing that he had the sword out she shook her head, "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist the lure of that sword. After what I discovered it's a good thing," she said. Sitting down she told him all about the happenings on the boat that afternoon, "They used some sort of Glamour spell to knock you out. It didn't knock me out, but it did make me sluggish. Apparently every seven years or so a new group comes through as the old group leaves. They do it in stages so that's why they have been hiring you on a daily basis. Unfortunately I think they may have let a couple of things through accidentally." Challa stopped letting Roger absorb what she'd just told him, before continuing. "It may or may not be from their realm. If it isn't, it must have piggy-backed on their spell. Something is definitely here and it probably killed Mick, and you may be next," she finished.

It was a lot to absorb, so Challa made them something light to eat. After dinner they'd clear enough spec and Challa would begin training him. She'd also try to work up a spell of her own to counteract what the Fey clients of Rogers were doing each afternoon. Of course she might just try talking to them first, maybe the woman would be willing to listen.

After dinner they cleared some room in the center of the room, Challa took the sword. "The idea is not just to swing at things, but to actually make it an extension of your arm. Like this," she said demonstrating, as she swung, parried and twisted, as if sparring with a foe. Handing the sword to him, she said, "Now you try, but slowly, concentrate on making it part of you, not so much on form yet. Just get used to it..." she stopped when she noticed the writing beginning to softly glow.

"Oh my Stars! It's glowing! That means that it's in the hands of its true owner. Mick must have depowered it for him, and empowered it to you." Taking a deep breath she said, "Okay, close your eyes, and listen, let the sword guide you as to the movements. It can only be wielded in battle by you. Not even I can use it against anyone or anything," she explained.

~~~

Roger almost dropped the blade when Challa exclaimed, "Oh my Stars!" He was trying to concentrate on the feel of it, the balance. It was like an expensive fishing rod, balanced to cast. Of course, this particular rod was for killing up close and personal. He shuddered a little, thinking of the stained leather grip he held, and closed his eyes. He never in a million years thought he could 'wield' anything in 'battle', and those words scared him a bit. As a matter of fact all of this still felt like some strange dream, and he half expected to wake up late for a charter while Challa and the events of the past few days faded in his memory. Unka Mick would have a good laugh at his recounting of the tale.

"I'm going to cut my own head off," he said flatly. "Can I open my eyes?" He didn't, instead he

concentrated on the feel of the sword. It truly was fashioned to be an extension of his arm, and he tentatively began moving it, slowly, as if fighting some imagined foe. He dropped the point, aiming it at the floor.

"It's a little hard to concentrate with that weird 'trance' music," he complained. "can we turn it down a bit?"

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"You hear music," Challa asked. "That's good, the sword is talking to you. Keep your eyes shut, open yourself up and let it in," she instructed softly. "Don't be afraid Roger I'm right here with you. Just trust me and I'll explain it later. Right now it's important that you accept the sword and her power." Challa knew that what she was going to tell him would blow his mind, but there was no help for it. He had a destiny and it was part of her job to help him come into his own. Once trained they would make a powerful team against the darkness.

For now though she needed to help him get trained with the Blade, and keep him alive.

"Okay Roger take a deep breath. Block out everything except the singing of the sword and my voice," she said softly. "Now allow the music inside of you, let it soak in, and let it move you. The sword knows what to do. I know that sounds nuts but let her move your arms until you get used to the rhythm," she instructed.

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Roger doffed his shirt. Barefoot and wearing only his cutoffs, he allowed the music to take control of his movements, flowing from one position to another. The muscles rippled under the olive skin of his broad shoulders. He felt the balance of the blade transfer to his own core, tightening his stomach and chest. His hips and legs were imbued with a dancer's grace. Faster and faster, trance-like, he moved through the forms that the sword was somehow communicating to him. Finally, his body shimmering with perspiration, he pointed the blade at the floor and stopped completely. So still was he that his deep breathing was his only movement.

Finally he relaxed and looked up at Challa. "Wow," he exclaimed. "I mean wow," he repeated, "what a rush." Still holding the sword in his right hand, he slid his left arm around Challa's waist. Drawing her close, he closed his eyes and kissed her deeply.

Challa was proud of him, and accepted the kiss, kissing him back hungrily.

Breaking the kiss Roger said, "I'm not sure where that came from. I feel so," he searched for a word, "alive." As if to emphasize that statement, he felt himself becoming aroused.

~~~

Challa smiled, "That is part of the power from the sword. There's a whole story to that, and it's important you know and understand what I'm going to tell you. Put the sword away and help me put this room to rights and I'll explain it all," she told him.

Sitting down, Challa began, "Naomi was a Sorceress like me, or maybe a Voodoo Priestess. At

any rate she was very powerful, I'm guessing. Mick must have been her Champion, her protector, her companion. Every Sorceress who fights the darkness has a companion of sorts; a champion if you will. She uses magic and he uses a sword, a very special type, like the one you received this morning."

"The thing of it is, those swords can ONLY be wielded by those pure of heart and soul. The sword is imbued with magic, and responds to the purity within it's owner", she explained. "My guess is that Mick has known about you for years, and stuck close for all that time. When he met me last night he knew that it was time, he probably discharged the magic created by him, and passed on possession of the sword to you. He is, was still a pure soul, but he was done with his fighting."

Challa looked Roger in the eyes, "My guess, is that something jumped Mick after he delivered the sword, and although Mick probably put up a fight, he was no match for whatever it was, unarmed. From now on, the protection for this region falls to us. Each night after work, you will need to practice with the sword, and I'll work on building my Mana, my magic. We were paired up by the fates a long time before either of us was born.

Giving a soft laugh, "You may have noticed an effect of the swords power," she said getting closer, "Want to retire and work some of it off?" She asked with a smile.

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Roger grinned back at her. The energy in the pit of his stomach had been gnawing at him. Straightening up the living room was annoying, and the lesson, however necessary, was pure agony. The pent up energy from his workout was impairing his ability to focus. Now, however, it was if a dam had burst. He felt the sword's power surge up in him as he lifted Challa off of her feet and carried her into the bedroom. Truth be known the couch or even the carpet would have been fine with him, being much closer, but she had suggested retiring.

They quickly reduced their clothing to a pile on the floor, wasting little time with fastenings. Fortunately neither of them wore anything complicated, as Roger's urgency seemed to engulf them both. This was unlike the previous night's tentative, exploring lovemaking.

Roger laid her on the bed, gently pushing aside her inner thighs with his forearms, as the burning inside him drove him crazy. He buried his face in the warmth of her. He needed to taste her, to smell her, to become one with her. He was more aroused now than he could ever remember being, his erection becoming painful. Still he stayed there until he felt her body tense, fully opening up to him.

He moved upwards then, kissing across her mons and the gentle curve and taut muscles of her tummy. Still moving, he kissed and nibbled his way to her pert breasts, paying special attention to each crinkled areola. Finally, meeting little resistance, he entered her and the torch he carried merged with the her own furnace. He began to move with the rolling of a ship in heavy seas. Slowly at first, then faster as wave after wave grew in intensity.

He felt the waves crashing against her shore as fire and wind met water and earth. The elements mingled into a miasma as the tempest reached it's crescendo. The fire that was placed in the pit of his stomach during his sword practice erupted through him, as molten magma, and into Challa.

Roger felt the waves echoing back to him as they ebbed into stillness and the tempest subsided. He rolled onto his back next to Challa, exhausted and covered in a sheen of perspiration from both of

them. He concentrated of the simple task of breathing. The echoing waves began to break on his own shore as he felt her hand stroke his thigh.

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It felt the merging of elements from the nearby dwelling, the purity and the raw power merged, and them merged again with the passion. Fire, Earth, Wind, and Water had come together and allied against it. Only Spirit remained, and Spirit was already forming around the two humans in the apartment. It slithered off, blinded by the flare of raw energy, distraught, angry and scared. The pure soul it had been stalking, the one that would have been the core of it's own power, was now unreachable. It seethed, steeping in it's own hatred and angst.

Wandering aimlessly inland it dampened sounds as it passed. The sound dampening was an effect of it's own entropy, a killing of molecular motion. Dogs couldn't bark at it, nor footsteps echo down narrow streets. Even the trills and chirping of insects failed near it. It roamed out of the dock area in purest silence, past the well groomed neighborhoods and into the not so well lit areas, the dark moldy ones it preferred. It had enough power now to form itself, and slowly it took on the guise of it's most recent human victim. It looked for easy prey in the few it passed, finally settling on a scantily dressed lady who reeked of desperation leaning against a crumbling brick building.

It met her eyes. It had observed enough human behavior to communicate with her, even if speaking to her was impossible. She nodded towards the upper floors of the building. In the guise of Mick it reached into a shirt pocket and flashed a wad of bills. She smiled. Taking his fabricated hand, she led him inside, up a rotting staircase, and into a small dirty room.

It took it's time with her, studying her and literally taking her apart while she watched in silent horror. Her screams went unheard, muffled in the depths of it's silence. Reveling in her fear and agony, it felt sadness when it finally had to allow her the release of death's embrace hours later. Sated, it's form dissipated as it sank into the basement of the building, seeking solitude amidst the shadows of rotting timber and decaying brick.

## Bonding

Roger awakened to a banging on the apartment door. Challa was somehow still atop him, and his flacid member was still buried inside of her. He gently slid out of, and then out from under her, but then realized she had awakened too. Quickly locating and donning his cutoffs, he hurried to answer the resumed knocking, closing the bedroom door as he went.

Opening the door a crack he saw a pair of constables standing on the landing. “Can I help you, officers?”

“Roger Barbosa?” the officer asked. Roger nodded in agreement. “We were told that you might know the whereabouts of one Michael Ramirez,” the officer continued.

“Unka Mick? What's this in regard to, officer?” Roger asked, looking askance at him.

“He is wanted for questioning about a recent event,” the second officer answered, “prostitute was murdered.” The first constable visibly shuddered as the second continued, “Several people identified him talking to her. Do you know where we might find him?”

“Yes,” Roger said slowly, “he's in the morgue. Has been since yesterday morning as a matter of fact. Heart attack.”

“Have you positively identified his body?”

“Not yet, it was just yesterday. I'm still awaiting the coroner's call,” Roger replied.

“Can we get you to do that for us?” the constable encouraged. “We'll give you a lift and bring you back.”

“Um, yea, sure,” Roger answered. “Let me get a shirt on and tell my girlfriend I'm leaving.” The phrase 'girlfriend' crossing his lips felt alien to him, but nice. Opening the bedroom door he said, “Challa, the cops want me to identify Mick's body. Could you please slip down to the Bella and let the clients know that something has come up? Tell them that I'm sorry, but we won't be going out today. We should be good for tomorrow.”

“I couldn't help overhearing. Okay no problem, I'll let them know, then check to make sure that the Bella is secure. Text me to let me know where you are.” Challa said as he quickly kissed her.

Roger winked. “Cops are waiting. I'll text you.”

~~~

His calling her his girlfriend was cute, she was more than that just as he was more than just her boyfriend. Of course he had just scratched the surface last night. She could not complain about the side effect though, it had been amazing! That was another tell-tale sign that he was her champion, and companion. The two fit together as if one being, and the chemistry was nearly instantaneous and fiery between them.

Challa took a quick shower and then headed down to the Bella. When the clients arrived she explained that there had been a family emergency and that they needed to postpone the day sail. "We will be going out tomorrow, regular schedule. And right now Gentlemen, and Lady, suppose you clue me in on exactly what's going on." She said blocking their path of escape with an invisible energy field. "Don't play coy with me. I know you can sense what I am. Your little sleep spell, didn't quite knock me out." She said.

The leader looked at the others and explained, "We are Seelie Fey. Our people have been coming and going for centuries, to learn about and study Humanity. The Fey Realm exists right beside this one. We come for a period of seven years, and then go back, being replaced by another so that the number of us here remains the same."

Normally he would not be so forthcoming but Challa was a Sorceress, and had just as much reason to avoid discovery as they did. Challa nodded, "Okay fair enough. We'll go out at the same time tomorrow, and please, no more sleep spells. Also be careful, there is something hunting out there. It killed a close friend yesterday and then possibly again this morning. I suspect foul play because the suspect for the second killing looks like the original victim." She thought that whether they had caused it or not, it seemed only fair to warn them.

Letting down the barrier they left, not looking back, which may have been for the best. Going onboard she checked around making sure that everything was secure. Stopping in the Galley, she took the small key from her pocket, it had been to the home she shared with her parents and had been charged up by her mother. It was her talisman, small enough to fit anywhere and commonplace enough not to draw attention. Challa guarded it closely, and had told no one of its existence, even Roger was never to know. One day if she was fortunate, she would pass it to a daughter of her own to carry as she did.

As she was locking up the boat, her cell vibrated with the incoming text from Roger.

~~~

Roger finished up at the coroners, positively identifying Mick's body. The officers were very close-mouthed about both incidents, and either unable or unwilling to give him a cause of death. As to the second death, last night's murder, they wouldn't give any information except that it occurred, and that someone resembling Mick was probably there. He did notice that both men paled whenever they mentioned it though, and they wouldn't even let him near the room where the victim's body was being examined.

Once he was back outside one of the officers gave him a ride back to the flat. He was famished, so he texted Challa simply, "brunch? Julio's- two doors down from the hostel near the docks?"

Roger walked into Julio's looking for Challa, but she wasn't in the small lunch counter yet. The place was a local hangout that seated about thirty. It was bright, clean, and very friendly. A long counter ran along the inner wall, with the kitchen behind it. Several small tables sat opposite it against the large clean windows. Several ceiling fans spun lazily, mixing the scents of the kitchen with those that blew in off the harbor as they cooled the air. The few regulars greeted him, asking questions like, "you didn't go out today?", "did you hear about ol' Mick?", and "hear you got a new lady, what's her name?"

"Whoa," he said. "No, I didn't go out today, and yes I heard about Mick. I had to identify his

body at the coroner's, been there all morning. I'm taking suggestions for a wake, something with a lot of booze." He turned to the waitress, Betty, who had asked about Challa. "Yes, I am seeing someone. Her name is Challa and she should be joining me shortly so play nice."

"Coroner's, huh?" one of the men at the counter said. "Get a look at that hooker that was murdered last night? Her name was Mary Kelly. Cops are really hush-hush about her, but the lady that found her said that she was ripped up into little pieces real bad."

"That must be why they weren't letting anybody near the one room. No, I didn't see anyone except Mick there, sorry," Roger explained.

"So," Betty said showing him to one of the few tables near the window, "Challa, huh? What's she like? Pretty? Smart?" The waitress asked those last questions like the two were mutually exclusive.

"You can ask her yourself," Roger replied pointing out the window, "she's here." He waved to her through the glass.

~~~

As Challa approached Julio's she saw Roger wave from a window table, and returning the smile waved back. Walking inside she leaned over to give him a quick kiss of hello, before taking her own seat.

Giving the waitress, whose name tag said "Betty", Challa smiled.

Once Betty took their orders, Challa told him about her morning. "They now know that I know what they are, so it's anyone's guess as to whether they will be back or not. Sorry about that. They didn't bat an eye or flinch when I mentioned that something has staked a claim in this area and is hunting. But I'd be willing to bet that they either know about it or of it. But being what they are they were very close-mouthed," She said after explaining what happened at the boat.

Their orders were brought and after making sure they had all that they needed Betty went to help others. "So what happened at the morgue, with the cops?" Taking a bite of her salad, Challa paused, it was very good. A normal Caesar Salad, with Caesar dressing, but instead of chicken or even shrimp, the protein source was a small, locally caught fish that was very fresh.

"You can speak freely, no one can hear. I threw out a small dampening spell." Giving him a grin she said, "I think in time you may be able to learn a few simple ones. It's part of what you are, so the ability is inside of you." That was all she said as she continued to eat and enjoy lunch.

~~~

Roger swallowed a bite of jerked goat. "What's the point of coming to Julio's if nobody can gossip? It was definitely Mick's body, but the cops weren't talking at all. Here at Julio's I found out that the victim of last night's murder was a prostitute named Mary Kelly. Her body was badly mutilated, bad enough to make the cops queasy. The suspected killer must have resembled Mick, and I can tell you that not many on the island do. I'm betting whatever got Mick was wearing a brand new Mick suit when it killed the second victim. If so, it's getting bolder. Can these things do that, change appearance? Is that why the one on the docks when we met was so ugly?"

He took a sip of his tea and added, "Oh, and Betty there has always had the eye for me, but I've never been interested. She's a bit jealous of you though, and thinks you're either pretty or smart, but not both." He winked at her. "If the fae come back in the morning, and I'm pretty sure they will, they probably won't pretend to fish. Probably won't tip as well either," he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, maybe I'll throw a few lines in myself tomorrow and catch some dinner." He took another bite of his goat wrap.

~~~

Challa smiled as he seemed to take the situation in stride. "What attacked you when we met was a Succubus, a female sex demon. They hunt their victims at night, providing a very erotic dream, while they are feeding on your soul. The ugliness you saw was it's true form while it was fighting me," she explained.

"The thing that attacked the boat last night was something else. Never saw anything like it before. The thing that killed Mick, and most likely the prostitute is something else entirely. Since they aren't from the Earth realm, I can only say, yeah, shape shifting might be possible. I think the Fae opened a portal improperly, or too close to another one. It allowed something to slither through, and it's our problem now. With a sad look in her eyes, she told him, "Mick was taken out after he left that sword for you."

That thing, whatever it was would not have been successful if he'd still been armed. He may have been able to fight it off in hand to hand, if he hadn't been old and weakened by drink. But Challa didn't say as much, since Mick was like family to Roger, she didn't want him in more pain than he was feeling from the man's death.

"So Miss Betty has a thing for you, huh? Well you're spoken for Buster. That is if you want to be?" Challa knew the rules even if Roger didn't. She had to formally ask him to become her Paladin. It meant binding them via a small spell, and could not be done unless BOTH wished it. The bond was lifetime, and the Paladin's life would be extended to match the life of the Sorceress.

Since there was no charter that afternoon, they'd have to return to the flat so that Challa could lay everything out for him. Roger needed to know exactly what he was getting into.

~~~

Roger laughed. "Nobody can hear us, right? Betty's been flirting with me since high school, problem is she's been flirting with just about everyone, and never seriously." Turning serious he said, "Spoken for would be nice. Let's get real though, our two worlds are different. I live off the sea in a backwater vacation island that few visit, not much call for a full time sorceress here. You are a wanderer and will probably move on after this is over. I have my ties here. One of us will have to change, and probably both of us." He sighed. "Bridges to be crossed I guess." Looking into her sea green eyes he added softly, "I'm losing leeward anchor, especially with Mick gone, but giving in to the tempest feels right."

He took a bite and chewed for a moment, thinking. "The thing that attacked the boat was obviously a sea monster, never heard of one flying though. Mick would have known. I'll take your word for the succubus, I've heard of them. What kills indescribably and horrifically like what got Mick



and the woman last night though? Something that imitates it's victims to taunt the rest of us and hunts at night apparently. A demon of some sort?" He thought for another moment and added, "And what are our friends from under the hills up to right now? I don't think they're golfing or taking pictures of the Spanish fort any more than they were fishing."

~~~meanwhile~~~

As a matter of fact, the fae were back at their resort, and quite upset to say the least. "What will we do for today's transfer?" one of them, a newcomer, asked.

"The loci, the place we used to use, is inland away from all of their cold iron," the eldest replied. "It was dangerous, things slipped through, which is why we started going out to sea near one of the trojan points of the loci. It will be tedious, but we will just have to track any outworld shreds that slip through."

"Do you think there is a shred loose now?" another, the female, asked. "The witch said that something was hunting." The way she said 'witch' suggested that another term for the sorceress would have been preferred.

"Perhaps, but that is the mortal's problem now. Once they breath the local air for a full sunrise they are no longer covered under our law. They are considered dwellers of this plane and can not be returned, nor molested, by us. Let us proceed to the loci and affect today's transfer, but carefully!" They piled into two rented SUVs, being careful not to touch them too much, and headed out into the country.

They passed out of the tourist areas and into the overgrown fields of neglected farms. When the tourist trade expanded on Media Luna, people gave up their farms and headed into town for more lucrative careers. Finally, on a forested hillside near a nondescript stone building, the convoy stopped. The group of faerie piled out and began hiking uphill, finally reaching the hills apex. Unlike it's surroundings the area was open meadow, ringed with trees and underbrush. Like on the deck of the Bella Luna, facing inwards, the group formed a circle with clasped hands until the portal opened.

Once the transfer completed and the portal closed the eldest said, "Shreds, fellow travelers, let us find and return them quickly before the sun sets! Hurry now!" The group dispersed into the surrounding trees. Using their natural affinity for magic and the portal itself, they began hunting down anything that slipped through the portal unwelcome.

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The Fae emerged from the wooded area one by one, having found and slain a shred or two. The female of the group said, "The Witch had a point. It wouldn't surprise me if something did come through and was hunting." The other nodded agreeing with her.

The leader said, "Yes but according to our laws it is now the Human's problem. But we have a decision to make. It's easier to go onto the water to make the exchange. But we can't check to see if anything came through. On land, it's not as easy to get to a loci, but we can police it better once we are done. We need to think and then vote on which way we proceed.

~~~

Kara ran. She ran as fast as her young legs had ever carried her; she ran until she felt her heart try to beat it's way out of her chest. Her fine gingham dress, the one that Mum had made her for her last spring, had torn on some thorns. So had her arm, and her blood ran freely from the scratches and across her hand. 'They' could probably track that, so she splashed down a small stream to throw her scent off. Somewhere she had lost one of her pink ribbons, the ones she had tied around her ears for the party. They could probably track that too.

The others who had been dragged into this realm were gone, the people who had ripped them from their places had trapped or killed them. Kara, as far as she knew, was the only one to escape. She was breathing hard now, her tongue lolled to one side as she loped downhill. The bloody scratch on her arm had clotted, and the bleeding had stopped. She snuffled the ground, not smelling her own scent too much, and turned her ears uphill, behind her, to hear any sounds of pursuit. There were none. She flopped down in a small copse of fragrant trees, hidden for now. She felt the warm sun on her body, and let it soothe her as she massaged her sore legs.

Looking around herself she wondered where in the world she had wound up, how she would survive, and hopefully how she could get home to Mum and Da.

~~~

Challa listened as Roger talked, he had many misconceptions. Reaching out to touch his hand she said, "You aren't alone in that tempest. I'm there too. Naomi was here for years with Mick. Every Sorcerer, or Sorceress searches and wanders until he or she finds their Paladin. It's their other half, the yin to their yang. There are also female Paladins, and male Sorcerers. Each pair is made up of one male and one female." She explained patiently.

"For the most part we can live pretty normally. And you are wrong about this place. With it's long history it has it's own reputation as a paranormal hot spot. It's not so much the Ghosts one needs to worry about, it's the Demons and other predators that this place attracts." She told him. This place wasn't optimal for this conversation. "The bottom line is that YOU are the Paladin and I am your Sorceress. My job is to teach you to use not only the sword, but to help release your inner powers. Then it's OUR job to go about our business as usual, but when necessary we defend this area against whatever paranormal, supernatural being shows up." There was no other way to tell him except to just lay it out for him.

"Roger I know that you are tied here, and I am not asking you to change that. I don't have a problem with how you earn a living. I'm the one who will now settle down, no more wandering. So long as you'll accept me and have me. I'll be your teacher, your student, your lover, your friend and your mate. But you decide if it's what you want", she said with a smile,

"Put it this way, it may curtail Betty's flirting with you," she said to help break things up.

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Roger smiled at that. "And here I figured that you'd break my heart and she would pick me up on the rebound when I was vulnerable. Ah well, lost opportunities, right?" He looked at her then. "Funny, but I've only known you a couple days and I'm ready to settle in with you permanently. I wonder if that is part of what we both are, so of course I'll accept you!" Taking her hand he said, "so how do we go about this, is there some sort of ritual? Do we need privacy? A lot of room? We could

drive out into the hills and I'll introduce you to my parents. They're buried on their farm out there."

His eyes got a far away look. "I've been meaning to sell it but never got around to it. It's not worth much, so maybe I'll keep it now. If we do go into the demon fighting business it would make a good base of operations."

~~~

Challa smiled when Roger accepted her, and seemed to accept his role in life. "There is a ritual to bond us. As you learn to use the sword, it will become second nature and eventually you won't even think about it. You'll also need to learn to listen to your gut, your intuition. Learn to trust it, and to figure out what it's saying. Like Spiderman had a "spidey sense", you'll develop something very similar that will tell you when something hinkey is going on," she said.

"As soon as we are done here, we can go take care of the ritual," she explained, wanting to get that formality out of the way. "We can take a drive out to the family farm. I'd be honored to be made a part of that," she told him.

"You should hold onto the land. Real Estate is always worth it's weight in gold. Maybe we can use it as a vacation getaway. Don't think you need to give up the Luna for us, you don't. You truly love the sea, so for now the flat is perfectly okay for us. Now later down the line, we may have kids, then we may want to think about something with more room. Maybe even the farm, you could commute," she said hoping that her mention of children didn't spook him. It was a very real possibility. She currently had protection against it, so it wasn't as if it was an immediate worry.

~~~

Roger's future wavered in front of him. Of course he would want kids, and of course he wanted Challa, more than anything at the moment. Perhaps this was what old people referred to as a 'leap' or 'jumping the broom'? Whatever it was, he was ready. He looked into the depths of her sea green eyes. The biggest part of his being ready was if he did falter he knew that Challa would be there. "Yea. I guess I didn't really want to sell that place anyway. I always imagined myself settling down there, but it's a little overwhelming now that it's happening. Hell, I don't even know your last name!"

He noticed her empty plate. "You about ready?" He dropped a couple bills on the table, more than enough for the tab and tip. Taking her hand, to Betty's chagrin, Roger asked, "So, where to? We doing this now?"

~~~

Challa stood and took his arm, "Yes, as soon as we get back to the flat. As for a last name I don't really have one, not that I remember anyway," She said as they walked out.

"One thing I need to mention is that I am a lot older than you are. About one hundred and fifty to be exact. Don't worry though, once we bond your life span will be as long as mine," she told him.

Getting back to the flat, Challa had Roger help her move the furniture aside, creating a good sized space in the middle of the living room. Opening her bag she removed a long white hassock style robe, and several other items, a candle, some gold ribbon, and an Athme, a wiccan dagger used for

many purposes.

"Okay Roger, please kneel right here," Challa said positioning him in the cleared space. She set the Candle on a saucer and lit it, placing the dagger on one side and the ribbon on the other. Kneeling in front of him, with the items between them she began.

"Gods of old, you child calls to you to bear witness and bless the Union of this Humble Sorceress and her Paladin." Looking up she smiled at Roger, "Roger Barbosa. Are your prepared to learn and adopt the ways and responsibilities of the Paladin. And are you prepared to join in this Union with your Sorceress," she asked.

Roger took a deep breath. "I am," he replied.

Challa smiled hearing his answer, "This Sorceress, Challa, of clan Macomb, accepts this man as her Paladin and her mate," she said as she picked up the Athme, "Give me your hand," she gently instructed. She made a small slice in each of their left palms, and clasped them together as if shaking hands, then draped and knotted the ribbon around their hands.

To accept and seal the bond, you need to take the dagger and cut the ribbon, as we both say, One heart, one mind and one soul. Got it? Anytime you are ready Love." She told him as she handed him the dagger.

~~~

Roger took the offered athame. It was heavy in his hand, the hilt cool to his touch. He nodded at her and they said in unison, "One heart, one mind and one soul." The severed ribbon fluttered to the floor between them as they gazed into each other's eyes. Finally, breaking the silence, he asked, "now what happens?"

Receiving a sly smile to his query, Roger smiled back.

~~~

Challa took the severed ribbon and used the candle to burn it to ash. Then blowing it out she rose and led her Bridegroom to the small bedroom to consummate the bond and begin their brief honeymoon. Her Paladin still needed training and practice. They also still had something out there to hunt down and destroy. She knew that with each kill it would become stronger and cagier, and much more dangerous.

## Of Fae and Fiends

Deep in its hideout, in the basement of Mary Kelly's building, it felt the bonding of those now allied against it and it seethed with anger and fear. As dusk fell it roamed outward, past the day's police tape and attention. This silence of its passing and the faint stench of rotting flesh the only sign it was there at all.

Finding another building several streets over, it located an empty bedchamber. It formed there, coalescing once again into the guise of its last victim. This time, however, it regarded its own appearance in a dingy mirror. If it was to successfully stalk stronger prey, it would need to adjust this form. It smoothed the years of hard life and drug use from Mary Kelly's visage. Turning to her body, it lifted and firmed what lack of good health care was starting to wear down, giving its new form a rakish air. Within moments, the form had gone from a mid twenties drug addicted prostitute to an attractive, successful woman going out clubbing. It practiced smiling alluringly with borrowed ruby lips and speaking, since it had learned how from Mary's body.

Richard Guerrero was leaning across the pool table, about to take a shot, when he noticed the senorita standing against the wall giving him 'the look'. He smiled at her. She smiled back, winking. "Tourista," he thought, "looking for a little fun. What happens in the islands....." He took his shot, and missed. Taking a sip of his beer, he looked over to her again. She nodded her head towards the door, waited a second, and then slowly walked out rolling her hips seductively.

Looking at the table he said, "I'm losing anyway, keep the twenty. I think I just got a better offer." His friends laughed knowingly as he followed the swaying hips of the disappearing mystery woman out of the bar.

~~~

The female visage was working well for it, it had caught the human male's eye and the message had been clear. Taking to the darker shadows it waited for the man to appear.

As Richard staggered slightly out of the door, it used Mary's voice to whisper, "Hey there handsome. Over here. You looking for me." Allowing itself in Mary's visage to be seen.

"Oh you know it darling. My, my, my you are a hot little thing. Come to Papa," he said as he backed what he thought was a willing female back into the deepest shadow's against the brick wall of the bar.

"I hunger," was all it said before their lips met. Tendrils of black smoke wrapped around Richard, like solid bands of steel as it began to feed. Sucking the life force from the Human's mouth. It took several minutes, but all that was left was a dried out husk, the face of what had once been Richard Guerrero, was a death mask of horror. The flesh sunken in, the eyes bulging, and the face frozen in a combination of shock and horror.

It released the human husk, and slithered on, keeping to the shadows. With the fact that a Sorceress and her Paladin had bonded, it would need to feed as much as possible to gain strength and to be able to assume different forms. Knowing that too many good humans missing would cause a

problem, it slinked along the backstreets where the not so savory humans conducted business.

~~meanwhile~~

Kara walked through the dark forest. During the day she was almost blind without her pet trog, Max. A trog's eyes were much better suited to bright sun, and set into a flat face that gave them stereo vision. Her people had used them since the dawn of time, and the two species lived in a symbiotic state. They were tireless hunters and loyal companions, and she missed her little Max terribly.

It wasn't long before she came upon the dark farmhouse. It wasn't abandoned, as someone had been caring for it, but they hadn't been there in a while. Kara stalked it warily, but saw no sign of occupation. Finally, fearing the unknown dwelling less than the unknown forest, she jimmied a window open and slipped inside.

Other than being empty the house was normal. Kara washed her wounds in the sink, used the bathroom, and found a comfortable bed in an upstairs room. She quickly fell into an exhausted sleep.

~~~

Roger awoke to a pounding on the door for the second morning in a row. He was spooned around Challa and his arm had gone to sleep, but somehow this morning he realized she was already stirring at the interruption as well. Like before he located his cutoffs and quickly slipped them on. Once again there was a police officer there, however this time a detective accompanied him.

"Mister Barbosa?" the detective asked.

"Yes?" Roger replied. "Has my uncle arisen from the dead again?"

"Inspector Dominguez," he replied, apparently unamused. "Do you know a Richard Guerrero?"

"Um, I don't believe so," Roger answered confused.

"He had one of your business cards in his possession," Dominguez prompted. "He also attended high school at the same time as you."

"Okay, half of the island has my cards." Roger looked at him askance, "And high school was a lifetime ago, I don't remember him. Why?"

"He was apparently murdered last night." The inspector watched for any sign of involvement as he added, "By someone resembling the previous night's victim."

"Uncle Mick?" Roger asked, confused.

"No, the killer resembled the murdered prostitute," came his answer.

"The killer looked like Mary Kelly?" Roger asked again, this time even more confused.

The inspector gave him a measured look. "And how did you know the first victim's name?"

“I had lunch at Julio's yesterday, everybody in town knows her name.” Roger said, exasperated. “They know a few grisly details too, lady who found her was talking. How does any of this involve me, exactly? I mean except for my uncle Mick being the first victim.”

“Alleged victim,” Dominguez corrected. “Your name keeps coming up, and I hate coincidences so don't leave town.”

“I'm a fishing boat captain, can't fish in town.” Roger said snidely. “Hooks keep getting caught on the cars.”

“I meant permanently, Mister Barbosa. We'll be in touch.” With that the pair of officers shuffled down the steps and into the street.

Roger turned to Challa, who he somehow knew had heard the entire exchange just as he knew exactly where she was standing. “Should I have explained to him that we live on a small island? Everybody my age went to my high school when I did, most of us fish, and almost everybody knows everybody else at least in passing.” He shook his head and gave her an ironic grin. “Ah, well, we need to be up anyway if we still have a charter. Are you going to be my first mate today?” He already knew how she would answer.

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The knocking had indeed woken Challa up and pulling on some sweats she heard every word.

Going over to kiss Roger good morning, she said, "Of course I'm going along. Until whatever is out there, killing people neither one of us goes anywhere alone. And if our "friends" show up we're going to have a little talk with them once we get underway. They may know better than us what we are dealing with and how to stop it."

Both got showers and Challa put together a light breakfast for them. Packing a lunch and extra supplies to feed their clients should they show up. Heading down to the dock, she said, "Before we go to the farm, I think we should see about getting Mick's body released, so he can be laid to rest beside Naomi. They walked through life together, they should rest beside each other, it's only right." Mick was such a fixture that she had little doubt that most of the town would turn out. Maybe put together a small wake at the Tavern, everyone can share stories and memories of Mick. I didn't know him, but something tells me he'd like that better than everyone crying in their beer," She added.

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It skulked in the shadows of the basement. It now had three visages that it could assume, actually four if it counted the man that it had encountered in the dark alley. He hadn't even woken up when it had fed on him. The man had reeked, body odor that these beings had, and something else, possibly something he had ingested. Thankfully it was immune to any of the known poisons in this realm, as well as any illnesses that his victims may have had.

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When they arrived at the Bella Luna they found a representative of Roger's fae clients already

waiting for them, although it was still before dawn. She was leaning casually against a piling watching them approach. As the captain and crew of the Bella Luna neared the fae woman she addressed them. "Captain Barbosa," she began, giving Challa an icy glance, "I'm afraid we will not be using your services any longer. We have discussed the dangers involved and realized that they could be greatly reduced with a little more diligence on our part. That 'diligence' can not be exercised in open water. We are dreadfully sorry for the short notice."

Handing Roger a small leather sack tied at the top she added, "Please accept this as a small token of our appreciation and friendship." With that the woman turned to walk away.

"Wait," Roger said. "What kills indiscriminately, mimics the guise of it's victims, and seems to be invisible when it's not hunting?"

She slowly turned back around to face them. "The creature you describe is probably some sort of daemon. If so, it will cause a field of silence around it as it dampens vibrations and it will exhibit the stench of rotting flesh." She smiled and added, "be cautious, young knight. Such creatures are good at hiding, and very clever." She turned to walk away again.

~~~

This time it was Challa who talked, but instead of speaking to the retreating back, she ran up and grabbed the woman by the back of her neck and turned her around marching her back to where Roger stood. "Now you Fae Bitch, this is how it's going to go down, so listen up! You and your friends let something in, and now it's staked a claim and is hunting people, Humans. Now I know the rules after 24 or 48 hours you cannot hunt them down yourself. Well the fun stops now, you are to be more diligent in guarding the portal and hunting down whatever else comes through. Because if you don't, I'll contact either your Queen or King, and then I'll gather the Witches of the area and declare open season on ALL of you in this realm. Am I clear!" She said. Releasing the woman and glaring at her Challa said, "Now get out of my sight. I see you again, you WILL be dealt with. Harshly." Her tone brooked no argument and the woman beat a hasty retreat.

Turning to Roger, "Sorry you had to see that side of me, but the Fae love to duck responsibility. Now as much as I'd love to remain and hunt this thing down, you just aren't ready. So let's get Mick's body released and laid to rest and head to the farm for a couple of days. But be ready, I intend to work you until you drop," she explained. "You won't be able to learn everything in a couple of days, but I can teach you enough to stay alive as we fight."

Challa smiled at Roger, her mate for all intents and purposes. He had much to learn, but he also had a lot of natural ability.

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Since they were now out of a job (at least for the day) the captain and crew of the Bella Luna made sure the sturdy craft was secure. Roger posted a note on one of the pylons stating that until further notice the Luna was unavailable for hire, and they managed the short walk back to the apartment. Finally Roger broached the confrontation by saying, "remind me to never piss you off." He held up the little leather satchel and added, "do you think it's safe to see what we got as a parting gift?"

Challa gave a small laugh, "The Fae are never to be trusted. They knew that they had to take a



bit of responsibility for letting things through the portals that they open. So they created that rule that after I think it's 24 hours, they can't touch it. Making it OUR problem.

Opening the sack Roger withdrew an antique compass. It was a beautifully crafted wooden case inlaid with mother of pearl and rare hardwoods. Obviously it was a very expensive and accurate device. Skillfully holding it level in the palm of his hand he opened it. The rim of the compass was covered in strange runes, The little needle spun silently within it's cradle, and then pointed inland. Roger laughed. Indicating a direction decidedly not in the same direction, out to sea, he said simply, "north." With a snort of irony he added, "Great a broken compass, it's pointing south by southeast towards the red light district."

Challa looked over his shoulder. It did seem weird, especially since the creature had most recently hunted there. She kept her theory to herself, because there was no way that Roger was even kind of ready to fight that thing.

Arriving at the apartment building Roger led Challa around back to a neglected storage shed. It was sectioned off, and he opened the one associated with their flat. He dusted off and withdrew a motor scooter. "Morgue is too far to walk," he explained. Sitting on it and firing it up with a puff of dirty smoke he said, "climb on."

~~~

Challa gave a small grin and swung her leg over the scooter behind Roger, "Will this thing carry both of us", she asked raising her voice to be heard over the engine. The Island did have cars and trucks, and even tractors in the farmlands. But most got around by foot, bike or scooter.

"Perhaps," Roger answered as he hit the throttle.

At the morgue they were met with red tape. Technically Mick's remains were part of a murder investigation. But on the other hand there wasn't a whole lot left to bury. Giving the Constable in charge of the case her best smile and a small mental push, Challa said, "Surely you have the forensic evidence and enough photos. Having the actual remains seems moot. Mick had no real family, except Captain Barbosa here. We really would like to give him a decent burial. He was well known and loved by many people that live and work along those docks. Never an unkind word to anyone, so I'm told."

Challa's charm and the telepathic push at the Constable's conscience helped him do the right thing. After arranging for Mick's body to be sent to the only funeral parlor in town, Challa and Roger headed over there. The arrangements were very simple, no frills. Simple pine casket, buried in a private plot beside his beloved Naomi. The wake would be handled through the Tavern and would be organized later that day. Everyone would be notified by either email or word of mouth.

As they were leaving Mick's remains arrived at the funeral parlor. As the gurney was rolled in Challa said softly, "Don't worry Mick, we'll get whatever did this to you. I promise." There were tears in her eyes, she had only known the man a handful of hours but he'd touched her heart. He'd had a good and kind soul.

~~~

Roger watched Challa coerce the constable with a little awe, she had done more in a few

moments that he had in two days. At the funeral parlor he was once again surprised at the way she felt about Mick, a man she had known only a few hours.

As for himself, Roger was lost in his own thoughts. Mick, as well as Naomi, had been around while he was growing up. They were there to support him as a child when his mother passed, and Mick had stepped in and shored him up when his father died a few years ago. He found it odd that he never knew Mick's true relationship with his father. He had always referred to him as 'Unkamick'- one word. With this loss he had no other family, save Challa who he had only met a few days ago and seemed to have known all of his life.

He looked at the still form on the gurney and felt very alone, until a small smooth hand slipped into his large calloused one. "Whence on the sea's horizon comes that roar?" he whispered to Mick's body as he gained back his inner strength. "Tis Barbossa now returning from the Isles. Two hundred vessels ride upon the waves, coming from lands the Crescent lights."

Wiping a bit of dampness from his eyes with his free hand Roger said, "we should get back to Pluckers. We have a proper wake to plan."

~~~~

Challa walked with Roger back to the scooter. "What was that you recited to Mick back there? It was beautiful", she said as they got back on the scooter.

Roger laughed. "It was the inscription on Hayreddin Barbarossa's tomb, probably misquoted. To most of Europe he was a pirate, but he was a Turkish admiral, one of the founders of the Turkish navy, and a hero. I've been told he was one of my ancestors, the original 'Dread Pirate Red Beard'." He smiled and added, "hey, it could happen. Lot's of pirates were also heroes, Sir Walter Raleigh and Henri Morgan come to mind. Others just wanted the world to burn like Bartholomew Roberts- 'Black Bart'." He got quiet and added, "or whatever we've got running loose in town."

The ride to Plucker's was a quick one and the Tavern owner was all too happy to host the wake. "Ole Mick was a regular. Hell folks would come in just to hear his stories." Sitting down with them at a table he took out a notebook and began asking what they wanted as far as food. Challa shrugged, "Maybe just some hot and cold finger foods, and a dessert of some type. Mick seemed like a simple man with simple tastes. I didn't know him but something tells me he wouldn't want a huge fuss," She said, having taken a quick read of Mick when she'd met him.

The Tavern owner agreed with, "Wow little lady, you had Mick figured out pretty quick. You're right a big fuss would make him feel self conscious. And we won't be crying in our beer either. Mick would want it to be a party. People just having a drink, maybe a bite and remembering him and his stories. That's the way it should be," He said and Challa could see a bit of sadness in the Owner's eyes. Mick had been a gentle old soul, a friend to any and all who needed one.

## Goodbye

After the arraignments were all made they returned the little scooter to its lonely oubliette. "We have a few hours," Roger suggested, "are you up to some training?" He had been thinking about the current state of affairs and his lack of martial skills, and was actually looking for sword practice. Not that he would turn down any ensuing carnal ventures, but it was not his primary interest at the moment.

Exacting vengeance, and protecting his friends and neighbors (mostly Challa) had become his primary concern. He wondered, as they walked up the steps and into the apartment, if it was only one incident had turned Hayreddin Barbarossa from a potter's son into an admiral. What demons had plagued his ancestors? He went directly to Mick's blade and drew it, feeling the comforting nearness of it in the back of his mind. "Kopis," he said, "a magical Greek sword with, probably Phoenician writing? Wielded by the hand of an Hispanic descendant of a Turkish admiral against a true demon invoked by faeries." He shook his head. "Three days ago I was just a rum-witted fisherman. Isn't the World an odd place?"

He turned to Challa. "Thank you," he said softly as he began following the blades lead.

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Challa listened as Roger explained about the Pirate gentlemen, and his ancestor. "That's quite a pedigree if it's accurate. We can always try and find out. Geneology is gaining in popularity," she told him as they stowed the Scooter and headed back to the apartment.

As he took out the sword, Challa moved the furniture out of the way, and stood back herself. He was getting more comfortable with the sword, which was a good sign. The sword had accepted him, which meant that he was a born Paladin, a guardian of this world.

She agreed with him, "It is odd. But we found one another and now things are different." Watching him with the sword, Challa opened herself up so that she could tune into the frequency that the sword and Rogers mind were now communicating on. "That's it Roger, let the sword guide your hand. Allow it to become an extension of your arm, feel the power going through you. Tune in to it." Challa said as she grabbed a broom and used the handle as a weapon. "Tone it down because I'm going to spar with you a bit. Keep your eyes closed and trust the blade to guide your hand and arm. Don't worry, you will not hurt me, the sword won't let you. Your job is a Paladin, a Guardian, of not only this realm, but of the Witch you are bonded with. The sword knows and understands this and will not allow itself or you to harm me," she explained. "Now come after me!", she commanded, and spent the next thirty minutes or so blocking as parrying his moves.

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Eye's closed, and with all the confidence of one who truly did not know the full magnitude of the situation, Roger attacked. "This isn't my preferred blade to come after you with, my lady," he said with a grin through deepening breaths. The whirling blade missed Challa by a mere hairs breadth again and again, sometimes being parried by the broom handle and sometimes not.

After half an hour of heavy sparring Roger pointed the rune covered kopis at the floor. He was

breathing hard and glistening with sweat. “Enough,” he said opening his eyes. “After all that and putting the living room back together we’ll be pressed for time getting to the viewing and wake, and we still have to shower. We really need a bigger space to spar in, or less furniture; rearranging the room every time we want to play dungeons and dragons is getting old.” He grinned as his eyes softened towards her. “I can feel you when I’m channeling the sword you know. The last thing I want to do with you now is interior decorating.”

Roger laughed as he began moving furniture back. “Hey, maybe we can go out on the Bella Luna and practice. I’ve always wanted to try swordplay on a rolling deck.” He saw the look on her face and added, “maybe not yet though. Maybe we can use someplace out at the farm?”

“So,” he said as they finished straightening up, “what will take us longer, showering together or separately?”

Challa thought about it for a few seconds, “Separately will be faster. If we get in the shower together we may never make it out,” she laughed a bit.

Much later they hurried downstairs, already late for Mick’s viewing

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They rushed and made it to the funeral home in the nick of time, just before the others began arriving. Due to his condition, Mick’s viewing was a closed casket. There was a book for folks to sign in, as well as the small prayer cards.

Pulling Roger aside she said, “Remember Love, you need to say something about Mick, and choose the Pall Bearers. You seemed to have a special connection to him, so it falls to you to fill the role of family for him.”

Challa had been to enough over her long life, but this one bothered her greatly. She could understand if it had been old age, or brought on by too much alcohol, but Mick had been murdered. His life and vitality drained from him, leaving a corpse that resembled a dried out husk.

And then there was that weird compass, the one that did not point North. What was the significance of the direction? One thing was certain, the thing that killed Mick, the Prostitute and the guy at the bar, would be killing again. Unfortunately with Roger still needing training, there was no way they could hunt this thing down tonight. When they returned to the apartment tonight, she’d have to set some wards around to keep whatever it was outside. Once they got to the farm, she’d do the same there. Bottom line was that no one would be safe until they killed whatever had come through.

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It seemed as if half of the town had turned out for Mick’s memorial, even with the short notice ‘word of mouth’ had carried the message as fast as any wireless signal. Eddie, the bartender at Pluckers and one of Mick’s closest friends, had put together a collage of pictures (mostly taken in the bar) to put on the casket. The parlor was standing room only and people milled about outside swapping memories of Mick as they waited their turn to say goodbye. It was a good evening for it, the weather was warm and the sunset was truly stunning. It was as if Isla Media Luna itself had stopped by to pay her respects. Roger stood on the small porch outside, resting against the railing, as the crowd inside was just too

closely pressed for the young sailor. The only person he was against out here was Challa, who he had one arm casually draped around.

Finally, as dusk fell and the stars were coming out, the Undertaker found them and said to Roger, “We need to have at least a short service, would you like to say a few words?”

“Yea,” Roger acquiesced. “We’ll probably want to do it out here though, too many people to have it inside.”

“That we can do,” the man replied, “I’ll gather them out here.” Once the mourners were assembled Roger cleared his throat.

“Mick was as close to family as I had, short of my own parents,” he began. “I grew up with him and Naomi always there, and he was my 'Unka Mick'. The two of them were always together, and always there for me. They were there when my mother passed, when I was just a boy, and helped me through it. Much later, when my father passed, Mick was there for me again. He was a special part of my life, and he will be sorely missed by me and most of the island. I can see by the size of this gathering that he touched a lot of people.” Roger cleared his throat again, more to stay his tears than anything, and continued. “I was thinking of something unique to recite, but I am a sailor by trade, so this will have to do. For those of you who don't know it, it's 'Crossing the Bar' by Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson.

“Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.”

“Thank you all for coming out tonight. If anyone hasn't heard there will be a wake at Pheasant Pluckers tonight. I'm sure it's the kind of send off that Mick would have wanted.” He gave Challa a gentle hug, as if to say, 'thanks for being here'.

~~~

It sensed the sorrow and loss from across the town, and headed towards the people in pain. The

darkening streets were almost empty and it's hunger gnawed at it. Then a strange thing happened, the pain and loss transformed into fondness and love as the people seemed to group together. It quickly turned about, almost overwhelmed by the surge of positive energy that welled forth from the gathering. Needing to feed it slunk back into it's more preferred hunting grounds.

The good choices were scarce in this area, but the victims would be less noticed. It was fairly certain that the energy that had almost overwhelmed it bore the taint of it's first kill, even though it had left the human quite dead. It passed up a young police officer who would have been a good choice for that reason and finally settled on a pair of drug addicts who were squatting in an abandoned workshop. That pair would only be missed, and mourned, by each other.

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The crowd of people surprised Challa, and she stuck close to Roger, knowing he needed her support now more than ever. The poem was beautiful and brought tears to not only Challa's eyes, but most of the others as well.

When they moved to Pluckers things changed, the atmosphere grew lighter and the gathering took on a happy, almost party like feel. The kind of Wake that Mick would have loved. People laughing, talking and sharing stories of Mick.

Challa slipped an arm around Rogers waist, "Wow, listening to some of the stories people are sharing, Mick seemed like quite a character. In a good way of course," she told him. It was true, and every story was positive, Mick never had a bad word for anyone. And he was helpful when he was able to be, even helping the bartender Eddie, clean up after parties at the bar.

The food wasn't bad and seemed to satisfy everyone. Several hours later, the party began to wind down as folks drifted off to their homes. Challa and Roger were the last to leave, letting Eddie know that they'd be gone for a few days. "You should call that Detective as well, just to let him know you are taking a small Holiday. Even though you are innocent, it will look better to them if you keep them appraised of your whereabouts. Otherwise they can construe it as you having something to hide", she explained.

She did not like that the Police were poking around in things they were not prepared to handle.

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"Yea," Roger agreed. "I'd hate to come back to town in handcuffs when they found me out at the farm." They were interrupted when Eddie approached.

"Gotta lock up," he explained. Then, casually he added, "I knew your father, Freddie, way back in grade school. We grew up together. Mick was around then too, him and Naomi. Mick and Naomi would go on 'travels', had some sort of business off island." He sighed then, pondering his own words. "Freddie and your mom, Isetta, who wasn't a local girl you know but a visitor, fell in love and got married. They set up house, but try as they might they didn't have any kids. Years went by like that. Anyway, Naomi come back from one of those 'travels' and next thing we know they have you. Some say the old girl stole you from off island, some say she arraigned an adoption." Eddie looked at Roger then. "I says you was hers. Don't know how she managed it at her age, but you got the old witches bright blue eyes. Eyes like yours don't happen much on the island. That would probably make you

Mick's as well, explains why he always smiled when you came into the bar." Eddie sighed, perhaps in relief. "You got the same smile. Just thought you ought to know, seeing as he's gone now."

With that Eddie shuffled them outside and locked the door. "Wow," Roger said standing outside of Pluckers on the empty sidewalk. "I mean, wow. I knew that Mick and Naomi were close to mom and dad but.... Wow."

He took Challa's hand in his as they began walking toward the apartment. "So, it looks like my entire reality is changed. Even my parents aren't my parents....." He stopped then, placing his back against the wall of a building, and leaned over. Hanging his head low it looked as if he were going to be sick. "I'm okay," he said softly. "It's just a hell of a lot to process in one lump. Give me a few moments."

~~~

Challa could tell that the Bartender's news had left Roger reeling. When he leaned against the building and asked for a moment Challa let him have it.

"It makes more sense now. And it makes you very special. You are a Paladin, born from a Sorceress and her Paladin. They must have discussed it and wanted you to have a normal life, and give your parents, their dear friends, what they most wanted. It was a selfless thing to do." Challa was thinking, "It also explains why Mick gave you his sword, and why it bonded to you so quickly."

"It's also possible that you have a few traits from Naomi. Untapped of course, but we can explore that when you get better with the sword and we kill whatever is out there," she said.

Putting her hand on Roger's shoulder she said, "It's okay Love. Breathe slowly and deeply. You aren't alone, I'm right here and I'll help you through it. My pedigree is different, I'm a full Sorceress, both parents were Mages. The veil will get very thin for you and you'll see almost as much as I can in time. The hardest thing you will need to learn to do is to not react until you need to. You'll know when that is, no doubt at all." She told him.

When he straightened from the wall and had gotten ahold of himself she said, "lets see about getting a jeep and heading to that Farm you mentioned. Not only will it be a good place to practice, it'll also be a nice place to Honeymoon," She said kissing him, and then giving his earlobe a playful nip.

~~~

"In the morning," Roger answered. "Thanks for being here, I'm not sure I could have managed without your support. I don't know for sure if I'm Mick and Naomi's son or not, I could just be adopted, or a 'lost boy'," he stopped for a moment and added, "or abducted."

"Anyway," he said changing the subject, "my, I mean 'our', landlady has an old land rover she usually lets me use. There's a beat up pickup truck out at the farm too, a small one, if we want to bring it back. We can ride out after the graveside service tomorrow, I'm sure there will be plenty of people wanting to see Mick laid to rest so it will be a big deal. Probably won't break free until lunch time. That is, as long as you're okay driving one of them back?"

Challa smiled, "Sure I can drive one back. It'll be helpful to have a vehicle here," she said.

“Anyway, tonight has taken its toll on me both emotionally and physically. I think I'd like to pass on any more swordplay. Maybe a cup of coffee and a cuddle?”

~~~

"Sounds like a good idea. Let's go," she said as she took his arm and they walked back to the apartment. Challa made them coffee and put the radio on softly. Handing Roger his coffee, she sat down beside him with her own small cup. After drinking her she snuggled into his chest, content to just listen to the sure steady beat of his heart.

"We've been through a lot in the few days since we met. And I know it's a lot to process. While you need to learn fast, don't think you need to do it all in a day. This is important too," She told him softly. Never had Challa felt this content.

She could feel IT out there, lurking, hunting and waiting. But IT would need to wait just a bit longer. She knew that more lives would be lost, but there was no help for it. Roger was a born Paladin, but he was untrained and asking him to help her destroy the thing that had been skulking around, would be akin to suicide.

When they retired a short while later, Challa held him as she spooned up behind him. He needed her love and support right now, especially tonight and tomorrow.

~~~meanwhile~~~

Kara had slept poorly and awakened late. She had spent the day exploring the farmhouse and surroundings, finding not another soul about. This was probably a good thing though, as the 'people' here were frightening. Other than one painting she had seen hanging in a small room, depicting men playing cards, the other pictures, mostly photographs, showed normal people with the heads of trogs. She shuddered just thinking about them.

She had found normal cans of food in their pantry, labeled in English to her amazement. At first she was upset about opening any, having no way to pay for them. Finally she convinced herself that she would find a way to make restitution, unless these people were really feral trogs and killed and ate her first. Some contents were familiar, like potatoes, others were not, like 'peas' which she found disgusting. The opener for the cans was likewise both familiar and strange at the same time, and very loud. One thing in particular that she tried was fantastic, something called 'peanut butter' that was in a jar. Surprisingly it was nothing like the 'peas', and quite tasty.

Clothing was another matter. Although their build was similar to hers (in spite of their terrifying heads) there were no young girls dresses to be found. As a matter of fact all of the clothes seemed to be for one solitary individual, which was very troglite indeed! People almost always lived together in packs. She opted to belt a man's shirt around herself until she washed out her dress in the sink and hung it to dry. Her shoes were probably ruined, but she sat them in the sun on the warm front porch to dry anyway.

Finally, after recuperation and exploration, evening found her seated on the porch next to her ruined shoes in the waning light. It was then that the loneliness took her. Kara's people were resourceful and brave, loyal to a fault and sometimes quite ruthless, but they were very social people. She was once



again spending a night alone, like a lost trog. The thought of the animal brought to mind the pictures she had seen and she whimpered quietly to herself, clutching the last of the peanut butter tightly. She would eventually have to confront them. Finally she felt a welling up from her stomach, a primal urge that would not be denied. From deep in her throat it grumbled to life and forced its way out. Kara did something that she had never done in her young, sheltered life. She howled.

She howled like a wounded girl lost in the woods, long and deep. It was a feral, haunting sound that could be heard for miles and miles. Then her ears perked, listening intently. No one replied.

She whimpered again, sinking deeper into her inner darkness, and went inside the strange farmhouse.

~~~

Roger awoke as he had fallen asleep, in Challa's arms. The words of an old Dylan song played in his head, 'I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form. Come in, she said, I'll give ya shelter from the storm.' He raised up on one arm and brushed a stray hair from Challa's face. Her eyes snapped open.

"Good morning, beautiful," he smiled. "No cops banging on the door this morning. Yet. If we hurry and get showered we can get some breakfast on the way to the funeral."

~~~

Challa and Roger quickly showered, Challa going first and telling him, "I saved you plenty of hot water," as she emerged from the shower wrapped in a towel. Seeing the glimmer in his eyes, she gave a laugh, "Oh no you don't. No cute ideas until AFTER we handle the business at hand this morning. After that we are on our Honeymoon, and your training," she explained getting him back on track.

The sword had an effect on the wielders libido, it had to since it affected Testosterone levels. That's why most Paladins were paired with either a Sorceress or a Witch as a mate. The Sorceress or Witch trained the Paladin, and gave them a safe haven to expel all of that sexual energy.

She dressed in a simple dark sleeveless dress and sandals, sweeping her hair off of her neck and into a simple French twist. Before heading out to the farm, she'd change clothes into something more practical.

Challa packed a small bag with some clothing, and toiletries. The less she needed to do after the service, the better.

When Roger emerged a little later in a dark suit, without a tie, she gave a low whistle, "Wow you look sharp Hon," She said placing a quick kiss on his cheek.

~~~

"Bunches in the elbows," he grumbled back. "It didn't used to do that, and it's tight in the shoulders too. Of course, I haven't worn it in almost a year." He smiled and added, "most days I don't even wear a shirt." He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her into a kiss, "You look pretty hot

yourself, too bad we're going to a funeral.”

Roger hadn't packed a bag for himself, he already had plenty of clothes and personal items out at the farm. The only thing he gathered up was the sword, which he concealed by wrapping it in a towel. He realized he would need a better way to hide the blade when out, and idly wondered how Mick had done it. It wasn't going to be easy concealing two feet of sharpened bronze with a blood stained handle. Maybe a customized fishing tackle case would work, or a single strapped, over the shoulder backpack.

There would be plenty of canned goods stocked at the farm, but Roger kept the refrigerator mostly empty because electricity out that far was questionable. He had gone out one time too many to a fridge full of spoiled food. “We can stop on the way out for some groceries,” he suggested, “there's a little place on the way that always has good local produce.”

“Ummm, we have plenty of time for breakfast,” he said, “Julio's? It would temper a lot of the local gossip if we make an appearance there.”

The pair entered Julio's. Betty gave Roger an admiring glance, and Challa the 'stink eye'. “Mick's funeral?” she asked.

“Yea,” Roger replied. “then we're taking off for a few days. I need a short vacation.”

“Cop's won't like that,” one of the old men at the bar said, “looks suspicious.”

Roger laughed. “Already told them, Inspector Dominguez seemed okay with it,” he answered. “That should shut some of the chatter down,” he whispered to Challa. Betty showed them to a table, the same one near the window as last time, and set a cup of coffee in front on Roger.

Turning to Challa she asked, “what you drinking, honey?”

~~~

Challa didn't allow Betty's attitude to get to her, “Coffee please”, she said with a smile and shook her head as the waitress stomped away. Reaching out she took Roger's hand across the table, “We'll get through this Mi Amore, I promise,” she said. The love for him inside of her radiating outward.

“After a few days of rest, and training you'll be energized and refreshed.” She added.

Just then Betty returned with Challa's coffee, and took their order. Challa ordered something light but nourishing, it was going to be a long day.

Roger ordered himself an omelet, but passed on the associated potatoes.

As Betty went to put in the order Challa said, “I really think she hates me. She must have it B.A.D. for you.” It was said lightly, but seriously. Eventually Betty would get the message, until then Challa was determined to kill her with kindness.

Roger chuckled. “I don't think she hates you, I think she's testing you to see if you're good

enough for me.” He smiled as he explained, “we've been friends since school, but we never were romantic. I kinda think that she's 'mom-in-lawing' you.”

The funeral was attended by most of the town, it seemed everyone had known Mick in some way. It was a solemn graveside service as he was laid to rest beside his beloved Naomi. At least they were together again, love like that never diminished, not even in death.

Roger and Challa held hands as they went to pick up the car they were borrowing for a few days. She'd drive home the truck Roger had at the farm. It would come in handy for picking up supplies for the Luna, instead of having stuff delivered.

As they got in the car and Roger started it up, Challa leaned over to kiss him, "I love you Captain," She said looking deeply into his eyes, letting him see the truth of her words.

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He rested his hand on her knee, returning the gaze. “Right back at ya', my Enchantress, more than I believe I've ever loved anyone before.” With a grind-and thump he put the old Rover into gear and headed it out of town.

## Hunting Trip

The road out to the farm, once they had left the vicinity of Puerto Media Luna, was littered with abandoned homesteads and small farms. Apparently Roger's place wasn't the only abandoned farm. The sun beat down on the Land Rover, and all of the windows were down as it didn't have air conditioning. The warm dusty air did a poor job of cool them. "When the tourist trade started to really kick in," he explained, mostly to pass the time, "most of the local farmers went into town where the money is. The farming that's done now is by only a couple families who manage large tracts and other's fields, so not too many people live out here. They cultivate most of the fields around my place, and pay me a small fee for using them." He winked at her, "not enough to live off of, I still have to charter and fish."

Finally, long after lunchtime, Roger turned up a dirt driveway towards a rather plain, but still well kept and friendly house. It was surrounded by an acre or two of unmolested field, a small barn with a few other buildings, a small overgrown garden, and random clumps of native trees. The air was cooler here due to the higher altitude, but still warm, and smelled of plowed earth. "Home," he announced, watching for a reaction.

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Challa smiled when Roger called her his Enchantress, he wasn't too far off of the mark.

As he explained about the abandoned farms Challa shook her head, "I can understand it, but it's sad. The soil is good for crops and farming," she said. She'd traversed some of this Island as she'd traveled and had loved the lushness of the farmland areas.

When they got to his family's place she smiled. The house was simple but sturdy looking and quaint. The overgrown garden could be easily taken care of. The barns seemed to be in decent condition, as well as the acreage around the house.

This was the perfect place for a Paladin to live and train. The farm could be brought back easily, and produce not only food but income as well. But Roger loved the sea, and his boat, and Challa knew that he'd hate giving them up. But in the future, well maybe...

Suddenly she picked up a vibe, getting the feeling that they weren't quite alone. "Roger, something is here. Stay calm but grab your sword. Don't use it unless you need to, remember you are still new to it," she cautioned as she called up her powers in case they were needed.

"Okay you in the house. I know that you are in there and hiding. You can come out, we mean you no harm, but this is our home and we demand that you show yourself. If you come out on your own you WILL NOT be harmed, we'll help you if we can." Challa's voice was calm, pleasant, but firm.

When the creature came to the front door and onto the porch, Challa looked at the creature and then at Roger and then back at the creature. It looked like a female, but had very doglike features. It was obvious that she was alone and unarmed. "Didn't mean no harm, place was empty, please don't hurt me?" The voice was slightly gravelly but definitely feminine.

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Roger wondered if he had just made a hard left off of the reality freeway. The 'girl', for it was in a young girls dress, was barefoot and relatively human from the neck down. From the neck up she resembled nothing less than an Irish setter. It was only a resemblance though, there was an air of sentience about her. It was apparent that she scared out of her wits, and was having trouble looking at them. Then she spoke English. He could hear Mick's voice telling the story about 'them basset faced twins'. He let down his guard with the sword, pointing it towards the dirt. Leaning over to Challa he whispered, "what is she, some sort of Anubis?"

"Don't eat my own dead, mister," the creature said, "that wasn't nice." At that she began to cry, which somewhere between a dog's whine and a little girl's sobbing. Roger felt like a complete ass, and his heart went out to the thing. He started towards her, and then remembered the last few days. Like the succubus, looks could deceive.

Raising the sword back up he said, "My apologies, I meant no insult. What exactly are you then? How is it that you speak English?"

She looked down at herself. "I'm a girl," she answered incredulously. "What are you two, how do ~you~ speak English, and why do you have the heads of trogs? You're very scary." As if to emphasize this fact she shuddered. "Where is this place anyway?" She slumped into a seated position on the worn boards of the porch and started weeping. "What happened to me? I was at a party....." Her speech devolved into sobs.

"Ummm," Roger said to Challa, "you want to handle this one? I've never been very good with crying girls."

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Challa looked at Roger, "I have no idea what species she is." The crying got to her pulling at her heart. "I don't get a dangerous vibe from her so you can pout your weapon down."

To the young girl Challa said, "Okay sweetheart, you on the porch. I'm Challa and this is Roger. I'm going to come over to you so that we can talk. I won't hurt you I promise", she said as she walked across the yard to the porch. Sitting down on the same step but opposite the crying girl Challa placed a gentle hand on her back. "It's okay. I know that you are scared, and not where you should be. We may seem scary to you, but you won't be harmed. We'll fight off anyone who does try to hurt you, you are safe here especially with us." She said noticing that the crying was beginning to lighten up. "Can you at least tell me your name? That way I won't have to say "hey you" every time I want to talk to you," she smiled gently, wanting to gain this creatures trust. Not all "others" wanted to kill Humans.

The poor thing was obviously alone.

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"Kara," the creature managed between sobs.

Picking up on the name Roger asked, "How long have you been alone here, Kara?" He knew it couldn't be more than two weeks since his last visit.

"Couple days," she answered. "Mind if I don't look at you? It's easier if I don't look at you, seems more normal."

"Yea," Roger sighed, "you don't have to look at us until you're ready. You've been here a couple days, have you eaten?"

"Found some cans of stuff. I know how much I took, I'll repay you for them when I can. Ain't no thief," Kara sniffled. Roger sheathed his sword, got the groceries out of the landrover, and headed onto the porch.

"Pay it forward, sweetheart," Roger answered softly as he approached. To Challa he said, "I'll fix lunch then. I'm hungry and I know you and Kara probably are too. Frozen pizza okay? I'll fix two."

Roger stepped past the pair seated on the porch, noting the ruined pair of shoes placed there. Inside everything seemed normal, Kara had tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. Probably because the few pictures on the walls were of people. Poor thing was probably terrified the entire time she was here. Entering the kitchen he noted the empty peanut butter jar on the table and smiled. He began putting things away, but he left the new jar of peanut butter out. I would be good to have something in common with Kara if he was to interact with her.

He listened then, and could hear muffled female voices coming from the porch. "Small bump," he thought to himself, "not a major crisis, at least for us. For Kara, who knew?"

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Challa had nodded at Roger's mention of Pizza. "Kara's a lovely name. Don't worry about paying us back, there's no need, we'd never think you were a thief." Challa reached out and touched Kara's hands, "See Poppet, we are very much alike. We are called Humans, what are your people called?" She asked. She too saw the shoes and noticed the girls feet. Challa made a note to run to the nearest store to see about some sneakers, and some decent clothes for their little guest.

"Kanins," Kara answered softly. Her nose wrinkled in thought as she remembered her science class, "Canis Sapiens. You look like Homo Domesticus, what we call 'trog's'. we keep them as pets." She sniffled a little as she remembered Max.

"Kara, you are welcome to stay as long as you need to. The more we know about you, the better we can help you get home. Come on let's go inside, have you ever had Pizza? It's quite tasty." She said as she drew the girl to her feet and led her back inside the house.

Challa's first look inside was quizzical, it needed a thorough airing and some basic cleaning. Otherwise the house seemed sound. There was even a washer and dryer off of the kitchen to do laundry. Following the sounds she found Roger in the kitchen putting the pizza's into the oven.

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Indeed, Roger was just putting two pizzas in the oven, one pepperoni and one sausage. He figured they would give Kara a choice, and he hoped her people weren't vegan. "I have some fresh peanut butter, noticed that you finished the jar off. You like peanut butter?"

Kara's eyes, which had been vacant, flickered to life momentarily at the mention of peanut butter. "Yes," she answered, then the 'lost' look returned to her face.

"You don't have peanut butter at home?" Roger asked.

"Nope," she replied, "we got potatoes though. Yours are different. They're good, I had a can, but they were mushy and smelled funny." She pulled an empty can out of the trash. "See," she said, holding up a can labeled 'Tomatoes'.

Roger pondered this for a moment. "Kara," he asked, "what is red?" He was presented with a blank stare. To Challa he said, "I bet her people didn't develop color vision. Probably have limited binocular vision too." Roger turned back to Kara, "so tell me about trogs, what do your people use them for besides pets?"

"Well," she started, "they used to be guard animals, and hunting companions. Still are to some extent. They can sense things way off, before they're in earshot, and distinguish between similar things simply by the look of 'em."

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Challa nodded at Roger's assessment of Kara's people. With her Canine like head, it was entirely possible that her vision was color blind like Canines were said to be.

From what Kara said about Trogs it was entirely possible that in her realm, the roles of Human and Canine were reversed. And the looks were somewhat different, so if that was the case it was totally plausible.

Challa smiled, "Kara we'll try and help you get home, but it might take some time. Would it be okay if we got you some comfortable shoes and some more clothing?" She didn't want to insult the young one, but she did need more than just the clothes on her back. Of course taking Kara with her for the clothing wasn't possible, so Challa would have to eyeball the sizes.

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"Do you think it's a good idea to take her off the farm?" Roger asked. "Unless you can give her some sort of glamor to make her appear human, or maybe just something to make people ignore her."

Challa shook her head, "Wasn't planning on taking her. Will see if I can figure out her sizes and go alone. Bring the stuff back, and what fits fits, what doesn't can be returned for a better size. Either way she cannot go around in just one outfit and those ruined shoes", she said giving Kara a smile, even though the girl had yet to look at them.

"You got a picture of normal people hanging in one of the rooms," Kara offered. "we can't be that unknown." Roger looked at Challa and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Can you show me, Kara?" he asked. Without actually looking at Roger's face Kara took his hand and led him into the den. Silently she pointed at a kitschy painting of dogs playing poker. "Ah," Roger said, "that's not real, Kara, that's imaginary."

“Oh,” she answered. “I was hoping,” she sniffed, “that I wasn't alone.”

“You're not alone,” Roger answered, “Challa and I are here now.” He looked towards the door and saw that Challa had joined them. The oven dinged. “Pizza's ready,” he announced.

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“He's right you know, you have us,” Challa said as she walked into the kitchen with Kara. “You may as well know sweetie, I'm a Sorceress and Roger is what's called a Paladin. So if anyone can help you it's us. You are also safe with us as we won't let anyone or anything harm you. You can consider us friends”, Challa told her as she helped Roger plate the pizza.

Giving Kara a smile she asked, “Okay Kara, I'm not familiar with your world or your people so excuse these questions okay,” Challa asked. First have you ever eaten Pizza. If not try it and if you don't like it I can make you a peanut butter sandwich. Secondly can you drink like we do from a glass? What would you like to drink? We have milk, juice, water, tea, so just let us know.” She told the youngster. Having no experience with a creature like her Challa and Roger needed to learn quickly.

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Kara stopped for a moment, she had no idea how these 'people' drank. She had imagined that they lapped up their drinks out of a bowl, and was pleasantly surprised when Challa mentioned a glass. She shuddered a little when she realized that the sorceress had casually mentioned her 'World'. Three days ago there had only been one, and her family and friends were all there. She idly wondered if her parents were still searching for her, and if she was the only Kanin who had come to this 'World'.

“I drink from a glass, I was worried that you didn't,” Kara answered. “but I really like a straw. I don't know what pizza is, but I'm sure we have something similar. Lot's of stuff here is almost the same, but different. I like filbert butter at home, it's almost like peanut butter. You didn't have any bread though, so I ate it with a spoon.” She found herself looking at Challa's face, and was comforted by the smile there, even if it was a little strange. These people smelled like good people, even if they were weird looking.

Taking the offered plate she said, “Thank you,” and she looked at the offered food. “Flatbread,” she stated, “I like that!” She took a bite. “Different, but the same.”

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Roger watched the interplay between the ladies, and did not miss the fact that Kara started looking at Challa's face. He fought the urge to scratch behind Kara's ears, it would probably be inappropriate, and idly wondered if the 'setter faced girl' had the urge to do the same to them. This would sure make a great story to share with Mick, if he could. He sighed, knowing that he was going to miss that loquacious old man.

His memories went to nights that Mick and his father sat at this very table, in this kitchen, swapping stories and beers. Mom and Naomi would be in the den, what they called the 'parlor' back then, with their own stories and such. He looked up and realized that he hadn't touched his lunch and Challa was looking at him. “Sorry,” he said, “remembering Mick. He sure would have enjoyed this tale.” Grinning, he took a bite of his pizza. “After lunch we'll take a walk out to the grove and introduce



you to mom and dad.”

Challa saw the strange look that Kara had on her face, "What is it Sweetie?", she asked.

Kara looked at them, "I didn't see no one else here." She said softly.

Challa smiled at the girl, "Kara, when people we love die, we bury them, and we usually mark the place. We also sometimes believe that their spirit goes to a better place and that they can still keep an eye on us, even if they can't interact anymore. It allows us to feel close to those we loved. Roger's mother and Father are buried nearby and that's what he meant about taking me to meet his parents. You may come along if you like, we should not be too long. And there is nothing to be afraid of, I promise you." She told the girl. There were some things about this realm that Kara may not understand so it would be up to her and Roger to explain them to her as they came up.

It was only a short walk to one of the groves of native trees that dotted the small fallow acreage of the modest farm. There, nestled in the cool shade were several stone markers, crosses mostly, but several odd ones including one very old pentacle. Roger led Challa to a simple Celtic cross. The inscription on the base simply said "Isetta Barbosa." Next to it, as if added later, was the name "Fredrico Barbosa". Beneath each were the dates of their birth and death, but nothing more.

"Mom, Dad," Roger said quietly as he squeezed Challa's small hand, "You'll be happy to know that I've decided to settle down. Unka Mick approved."

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Challa stood hand in hand with Roger, feeling him squeeze her hand. "Hello Captain and Mrs. Barbosa. I know you must have been great parents because Roger is an amazing man. I love him a great deal and I'll be a good wife to him. If and when we have a family we'll raise them here and they will know the family history, and their ancestors." She said, thinking that it was sad to not be able to truly meet them.

Challa went off a few yards, picking some wildflowers and setting them on the grave of Roger's mother. It was a small gesture but one that showed respect for an obviously very special woman.

She noticed that Kara stood a few feet behind them, unsure if she wanted to get closer or not. Challa did not try and force her.

In the back of her mind Challa thought that if they were unable to find a way to return Kara to her realm, she might have to remain with them. She didn't mind, Kara was a sweetheart, and could look after the place when she and Roger weren't there. Of course they'd need to fix the place up a bit and add onto it, since Kara should by rights have her own place. But all in good time, for right now there were more important things to see to. Such as training and honeymooning.

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On the way back Roger pondered Kara. The unusual child had certainly thrown them a curve ball. They couldn't abandon her, and they certainly couldn't find a suitable family to adopt her. If they couldn't get her home then for all purposes they had a daughter that nobody else could ever know about. Unless, of course, they could disguise her somehow. He felt sorry for her, her life in this world

was going to be very lonely. As if to emphasize this the borrowed flip flops she wore, many sizes too large, flopped sadly on the hard packed ground raising little dust motes. Most of all, Roger wanted to do right for this little lost 'girl'. With some remorse he realized why Unka Mick's 'basset faced twins' hadn't survived very long.

“Something feels strange,” he noticed suddenly as they walked along, “unright. Can you feel it, Challa?” He dropped her hand, which he had been holding, and slowly turned deosil until he was looking towards the nearer hills. “Kara, what direction did you come from?” The Kanin pointed roughly towards where Roger was looking and his shoulder muscles tightened.

“I need the sword,” he said as he began running towards the house.

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Challa did feel something in air. Roger was right, something was just,...off. "Kara honey I want you to go in the house and stay there,' she told the girl. "Roger and I will handle this, whatever it is. Don't worry and don't fear, you will always be safe with us." She told the girl.

Challa began powering up, and when Roger returned to her side she said, "Okay it might be Kara's people searching for her, or it might be something else. We wait and see before we act. Remember be one with the sword. it's a part of you, so listen to what it tells you.' Challa said, knowing that Roger was no where near ready for a fight with the sword.

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Roger quickly outdistanced both Challa and Kara. Retrieving the sword he quickly joined Challa with it in hand, and he felt the blade come alive as they stood in the meadow facing towards the oncoming 'trouble'.

It crested the hill. It's eyes were aflame, and it whiffled and burbled as it galumphed along. It's blue-green scaled skin was mottled with vestigial feathers. Huge slashing claws tore at the soft loam of the meadow and it's teeth gnashed as it drooled and slobbered on the tortured soil.

A pair of large, slender, silver-white hounds with glowing red eyes snapped at it's heels, distracting it and trying valiantly to take it down. As Roger braced himself against it's onslaught he saw one of the hounds, clearly about to meet it's fate under the creatures claws, disappear and then reappear a meter out of it's grasp. Without breaking stride the 'hellhound' attacked again.

Roger stood his ground, slightly in front of Challa. He allowed the trio of combatants to close with them. His mind went blank, and time for him slowed. He became one with the sword as it guided him. As if in uffish thought, so still was he that he went unnoticed until the creature was almost upon them. Too late it looked down, but Roger was already moving. Like a coiled spring he slid under the reach of both gnashing teeth and slashing claws. Bringing the sword up he thrust into it's soft underbelly, dragging the razor sharp bronze along it and disemboweling the gruesome thing. It wailed as the hounds turned on it tearing into it's flesh.

Challa brought a good amount of energy up into her hands and sent a blast into the creatures hind quarters. The thing was wounded and that made it even more dangerous. She was slightly

dismayed that Kara hadn't listened and instead had followed. Challa didn't like that she was in danger, even though she was well back and watching from a distance.

Furious, it turned on Challa. It was, however, already mortally wounded. As it brought its teeth into play, attempting to bite into her, Roger side-stepped into it and drove the sword hard into its chest between its ribs. The blade struck home deep in the creature's heart, and it burred one last breath as it died inches from Challa.

The hellhounds both stood up on their hind legs and faded, seemingly out of sync with reality for a moment. In their place stood a pair of the Fae in their natural form. Gone was the glamor of mortal accountants, before them stood two of the most beautiful, slender, ice cold people that Roger had ever seen. Their skin was alabaster pale and smooth and their hair was softly silver. In spite of their nakedness they held firm to their dignity and aloofness.

Kara, who had disobeyed Challa and was hunkering behind the Land Rover, whimpered at the sight of them. Roger and Challa stood their ground. One of them, the female, stepped forward. "Greetings, sir knight," she offered, ignoring Challa. In spite of her recent exertion she was not breathing heavy. In contrast, Roger was covered in gore and drawing in deep draughts of air. "We apologize for the interruption, something strayed from the containment area. We are grateful for your assistance. As a token of our appreciation we will take responsibility for that," she indicated Kara, "unfortunate mistake and dispose of it."

"Over my dead body," Roger said still brandishing his bloody sword, "and her name is Kara." The Fae woman was visibly taken aback. Roger's mind was still running on hyperdrive from the fight. "You seem to be fairly good at disguising yourselves among us," he said. "For our 'assistance' you will supply a way to do the same for Kara, so that she can integrate with our world until she can be returned."

"So mote it be," the Fae both said in unison.

Roger pointed towards the creature's carcass. "Jabberwocky?" he asked them.

"Snallygaster," the male Fae replied, "the Jabberwocky is a fictional creature created by Lewis Carroll."

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"Disgusting is more like it," Challa said. "Now about Kara,..." she said.

The male Fae nodded, "You will see her as she truly is, but others will see her as a human girl. The spell will be broken if and when she returns to her people. Is that sufficient?" He asked Challa.

Nodding Challa replied, "It is. While you are here we have a question or two, if you do not mind. You are welcome to come to the house and refresh yourselves as we talk," she invited. The Fae were sometimes big on manners, and parlaying over food and drink was considered binding.

"We have met several Fae recently, who have not exercised diligence when opening the Portal. Something slipped through and is killing people. We'd like to discuss it with you, perhaps you can tell us what it is and how to stop it. Also take the report back to your King and Queen. That is if you think

they should be made aware of the actions of the Fae in question," she explained. "Also I think my Paladin would appreciate getting cleaned up a bit," she added.

"Be advised, Kara is under our protection and is to be treated with dignity and respect in our home." She said as they began to head towards the house. She would not allow the poor kid to be put through more crap than she'd already endured.

~~~

Roger looked at the dead snallygaster. It had already begun to decompose, apparently the microbes where it came from were unusually virulent, and was emitting a horrible stench. The gore he was covered in was also beginning to smell. "Um, yea. Probably sooner than later for getting cleaned up. I hope nothing is contagious for humans," he thought for a second and added, "or Kanins for that matter."

For the first time he noticed Kara hunkered behind the Rover. She tried to make herself smaller as the Fae approached, and seemed to be truly afraid of them. He made a note to have a chat with her, mostly about following directions, but also why she feared the Faerie so much.

As Roger approached Challa he leaned over to her and whispered, "How did you know these Fae were different than my prior clients? They seemed like the same lot to me."

Challa shrugged, "They came out in the open chasing something. Your former clients seemed intent on keeping a low profile," she answered.

Once the group reached the house, with Kara trailing quite a bit behind, Roger announced, "Please excuse me, I'm going to get a shower. I'll be out presently."

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Entering the house Roger excused himself to shower. Kara walked in behind everyone and seemed to hover beside the door, obviously a bit scared of their guests. Challa noticed and said gently, "Kara, come here sweeting. These Fae are not going to harm you. They did not know that we accept you and intended to care for you as long as necessary. Now that they do, they cast a spell that will have you appear normal to everyone else except us, or your own people. It will allow you to move about in our realm more freely than you'd be able to before." Putting an arm around her "daughter" Challa said, "Not all Fae are bad, just as all humans or all Kanins are nor bad," she explained.

Kara seemed to remember her manners and looked shyly at the Fae, "Thank you," she said before scampering off to another room, making herself scarce.

## High Tea

Challa put on some tea for her guests as well as putting out some cookies and little cakes.

"My Paladin is new and not well trained. He had no idea of what he was until a few days ago. The former Paladin in this area was killed, but not before he passed his sword to Roger. Being a Sorceress I knew what it meant right away, and have started training him as best as I can. He is pretty good, a natural, but he just needs more practice. But the situation is dire, there is something near the docks that has been murdering people, and is able to assume the identity of its victims in order to hunt. Normally I would have stayed and fought, but my Paladin would insist on helping and he isn't ready. I don't want him getting in over his head and getting killed," she explained to the Fae while Roger was in the shower.

She loved her husband and Paladin with all of her heart, and truly did not want him killed, especially in front of her. She suspected that something like that had happened with Naomi and Mick. They'd gotten separated and Naomi had been killed and Mick had never forgiven himself.

~~~

Roger thought about the encounter as he washed the festering gore off of himself. His shirt and cutoffs, he was fairly sure, would have to be cremated and he was hoping that he wouldn't have to shave all of his hair off. Still, with work, he was coming clean.

He wondered when he had become so reckless, running out into an open field to confront who knew what dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, cutoffs, and sandals with only a sword. "A friggin' sword," he mumbled to himself as the water coursed over him, "should have been driving a friggin' tank." He remembered, not too long ago, detouring several blocks to avoid a nasty chihuahua. The most dangerous thing he ever gutted was a barracuda, but today he disemboweled a dragon. "Well," he mumbled again, "a snallygaster anyway. Hey, it was close." He sat down in the tub, allowing the warm water to wash away not only the filth but also the emotional overload. He stayed like that long enough for the adrenaline to drain away and for the water to get cold, like the state of mind that now blanketed him.

When Roger finally joined their guests he was once again in a flowered shirt, cutoffs, and sandals. He was now, however, wearing his icy demeanor like a suit of armor. He got himself a cup of tea, more for politeness, and took a cookie. "If you are not associated with my former clients," he addressed the pair of Fae, "how is it that you came to be chasing an otherworld monster across my meadow?" He used the 'my' as would a lord of a manor. The Fae could feel that he was the ancestral landholder and took notice.

"It was a simple mistake, Sir Knight," the male said. "We were hunting it for sport, in our own realm, when it shifted through a recently opened portal. The snallygaster can do that, but not consciously, and are not entirely unknown in this realm. You know them as wyvern, lung, and several other names, and they are often mistaken for dragons. We naturally assumed that the girl was pulled through the portal vortex with it, so we again apologize for the misunderstanding and are grateful for your assistance and hospitality."

The female continued, "We were not aware that this portal was being used so poorly, and the high courts will be apprised of the situation. The lower court responsible will be admonished and the portal will, of course, be closed properly and warded when we depart." She turned to Challa, "you mentioned another being that could have inadvertently slipped into this realm, Lady?"

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Challa nodded, looking at Roger, "I began explaining about your former clients and about the being that may be responsible for killing several people, including Mick," She told him, bringing him up to speed. "Whatever it is seems to kill, and then assume the identity of it's victim, to continue to hunt. Hard to find it, because by the time we find latest victim, the thing has already used the identity to hunt and kill again. Law enforcement and us seem to always be a step or two behind it," she said. "And as I said," she looked at Roger, "Forgive me my Love," she said, "My Paladin is not ready for such a fight. He did well against that Snallygaster, but this thing seems much worse. It disguises itself to get close to it's victims so that it can kill,"

Looking at the Fae she asked, "Do either of you have an idea of what it might be. If so, what is the best way to kill it," Challa asked. "Rogers former clients claim that they try to make sure nothing else comes through. But if it does, after 24 hours it is no longer their problem or responsibility to hunt it down. If that truly is one of your laws, then that one needs changing." She said not caring if they liked it or not. The only thing worse than letting something through was refusing to take responsibility for it.

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"Our responsibility lies with the individual transposed, Lady, and not the realm into which it immigrated," the Faerie explained. "It's is common knowledge that all successful species are opportunistic migrators. Being from a highly virulent species yourself I'm actually surprised that you are so concerned. Your Paladin's people, for example, 'immigrated' here and replaced the native people. Nobody was responsible for that replacement except the specific individuals that migrated. Portals will open and close of their own accord, as evidenced by our snallygaster incident, and should a mature creature choose to cross of it's own accord then it is the responsibility of that creature to obey the codex of the new realm. Many do not, but like your Paladin's people it was not the fault of the shipwrights who built the boats. Most of the transposed 'shreds' do not survive for a day's cycle, and that is where the 'twenty four hour' rule stems from. Should our snallygaster have escaped us it would have succumbed to it's own microbes in the higher oxygenated atmosphere of this realm within a day. If it had survived it would have successfully migrated."

"That being said," he continued, "you have a criminal entity at large and as sentient beings it is our responsibility to assist if we can. You said that it shifts shape to emulate it's former victims, but has it ever manifested a complete possession? Does it seem to enjoy killing, or does it simply feed? Is it feeding on the physical body of the victim, or upon it's spiritual essence? If it is what I believe it may be, a third order daemon, it will exhibit a rotten stench and an entropy field. Such a creature will quickly eat itself to death unless suppressed, so the presence of yourself and your Paladin may actually be extending it's life."

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"Okay if it is a third order daemon, how do we kill it," Challa asked. "Allowing it to eat itself to

death is not going to work. Our laws do not permit murder, and if local law enforcement comes across this thing, it'll be more lives lost," she explained.

One thing was certain, she was going to have to step up Roger's training. The sooner this creature was stopped the better.

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"You're implying that it's our fault that it's still out there and not yours that it is here at all?" Roger asked incredulously.

"No, your lordship," the female Fae responded, "like it's transfer through the portal it is no ones 'fault'. It is a mature being, has chosen to immigrate here, and has chosen to disobey this realm's legal codex. If anyone is at fault it is the creature itself."

"The quickest way to dispatch the daemon is to send it home," the male Faerie explained. "a simple banishment spell would work. The trick will be to get it into the circle and then close it. Another would be to poison it, an act of selflessness from a pure soul would work." He looked at Roger then. "I do not feel your Paladin is prepared for that either. Either way, the first step will be to find it, they are fiendishly clever at evading detection."

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Challa nodded, "Yes it would have to be. Even the stench wouldn't give it away as close to the docks as it was. Maybe in town it would be easier to follow our noses", she said. Looking at Roger she said, "We'll have to hunt this thing down, and do it before the Constables find out about it. Can you imagine the panic if it got out that something from another realm was killing innocent people," she said. Most didn't even believe in that stuff, so seeing it in front of them would blow their minds, maybe even make them insane.

"We'll keep in mind all that you said, and I , well we, thank you for your sharing your knowledge with us," Challa said. It was obvious that the Fae were getting antsy and wanted to be on their way.

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"Yes," the male Faerie replied, "we must be gone. Without proper preparations the iron in this realm will slowly poison us. We are grateful for your assistance, and your hospitality." With that the pair rose, and Roger rose with them.

Showing them to the door he asked, "You're sure that you can return home safely?"

"Of course, sir Knight," the male smiled broadly. "When the snallygaster slipped through to this realm we both dropped threads, it will be a minor thing to follow them back. Fare well, and good hunting to you both." Roger looked past them to the snallygaster's corpse, but it was mostly gone. Only a few spare bones stuck up from where the dead monster once lay.

Challa joined them, and Roger slipped his arm around her waist. "So much for mounting it's head on the den wall," he said. As they watched the Fae once again shimmered and before them stood

two of the most beautiful hellhounds imaginable. With a nod and a bound, both were off as quickly as they had appeared. "That pair," Roger began, "didn't seem at all like the Faerie I've been dealing with on the boat. What gives?"

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Challa sighed, "There are different kinds of Fae, the light or Seelie, and the dark, or Unseelie. And within both just like us, there are good and bad. They live by their own code, and don't mix with Humans very much. The Fae that hired your boat were different, they must be explorers or scientists, sent to experience and study Humanity," She said.

Giving him a smile, she said, "lets finish settling in and then we get in some training,... where is Kara?" She suddenly asked. The young Kanin had disappeared when they'd headed into the house. She may have gone to her room, trying to stay pout of the way. At least the Fae had made it so that she would appear human to others. She and Roger were the only Humans who would see her as she was.



## Down on the Farm

“Kara!” Roger bellowed. Receiving no answer he went down the hallway and checked the bedrooms. All of the rooms were empty, so he returned to the living room. “Kara!” he called again. Turning to Challa he said, “her hearing seems to be better than ours, so I know she should have heard me.” He stepped out on the porch and scanned the meadow, but saw no sign of the girl.

The snallygaster was now completely gone, and the Fae in their hound forms had long since vanished. Besides the taller grasses swaying gently in the light breeze there was no movement at all in the meadow. Roger turned towards the copse of trees where his family plot was and saw a glimpse of color the same as Kira's dress. Roger raised an eyebrow to Challa. “Why in the world is she over there? Do you suppose she's visiting my parent's grave site, or hiding from the Faerie?” Sensing no immediate danger, Roger took Challa's hand and began walking towards the small stand of trees.

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Challa had a moment of panic when they could not locate Kara. They widened their search and Roger saw her near the graves of his parents. Walking over to her Challa said softly, "Kara, sweetie we were calling you. We were starting to worry, didn't you hear us Hon?" The girl was looking at the graves with a strange frown, "What is it, what's wrong little one?" Challa asked.

The girl looked at them and asked, "Are you going to die. If you die I'll be alone again," She said her voice trembling as if she might begin to cry.

Challa went to her and hugged her, "We aren't planning on it," she answered. Kara's arms went around Challa's waist, "But I heard you and the Fae talking about how you gotta hunt the thing down and kill it. You have to fight it, what if it kills you?" She said as she burrowed into Challa's breast.

Challa pulled back and took the girl's canine face into her hands, looking into her soft brown eyes, "That's true, we do have to hunt it down and destroy it. I'm a Sorceress and he's a Paladin, it's what we do. We have gifts, that we use to help protect people. And because of those gifts, we are the only ones who can destroy that creature. That's one of the reasons Roger and I are here. We needed an open, private place for him to train because he is new to being a Paladin. Don't worry Kara, we won't leave you alone. Until you return home, consider yourself our daughter. Under the circumstances I don't think your parents would mind," She told the girl. "Anyone that sees you will see a human girl, only Roger and I will see you as you truly are. And to us you are beautiful, right Roger," Challa said looking over at her mate.

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“Funny thing about appearances and Faerie glamor, they can rarely disguise how beautiful someone truly is.” Roger lifted the girl's face up, looking into it, “no matter what happens we'll be here for you, Kara.” He knew it would be difficult for her, and imagined if their roles were reversed. What if he, as a child, had been dropped into a world of full of dogs and adopted by them. He would have to experience their realm through different senses, with heightened hearing and smell, and poorer eyesight. He idly wondered how deep those differences of perception would be.

"I wonder," he said to Challa, "if the glamor the Fae put on her extends to scent as well as sight? How would, say, a dog react to her? Would it know her as a human girl?"

"What is a dog, and why does it matter how it reacts to me?" Kara asked as they began walking back to the house.

"Remember that picture you saw in the house, of the poker game? That picture is called 'Dogs Playing Poker'. Dogs, in our world, are like trops in yours; different, but the same," Roger explained. Turning to Challa he said, "It's getting late, think we can work a practice session in before dark? Maybe without the live monster? There should be plenty of room in the barn."

~~~

Challa nodded, sure we really should, especially now," she said as the three headed to the barn. "Kara you can watch us, and maybe we can teach you some basic moves, to protect yourself," She told the youngster.

Deciding to further explain what Roger had started, she said, "See about dogs Kara, some humans keep them as pets, for companionship and protection. And just for the record, Roger and I would never consider you a pet. Let's just call you our niece for now, well my niece since most folks have known Roger for a long time, and they know he doesn't have siblings." She said giving her mate a loving look over her shoulder.

The fun and games stopped when they got to the barn. After making sure Kara was a safe distance away, Challa had Roger working out like he'd never done before. She was impressed, he was getting better with the sword, each time he used it.

As they cooled down and headed towards the house Challa made plans to take Kara shopping the next day. The girl needed clothes and shoes, and "girl stuff", as she'd explained to Roger.

~~~

"Sounds like a plan," Roger replied. "I need to do some 'boy' stuff if we're going to stay out here on a regular basis. That rusty tractor in the barn is one, I either need to fix it or replace it. There's a few repairs to the house that need doing, and the fence around the garden is down. If we're going to plant anything there we'll need to keep the critters out." He thought for a moment and added, "having a working farm is almost as much trouble as having a fishing boat, only difference is if the farm fails we won't end up swimming home."

He put his arm around Challa's waist as they walked. The sun was now low in the sky, and the sunset was livid with color. Kara skipped on ahead of them. Roger felt both alive from the activity and the earlier battle, and at the same time completely at peace. He was also famished. "We had the pizza's for lunch, so burgers for dinner? I think I can rustle up something resembling a grill if it hasn't rusted out. It's too pretty to be sitting inside."

~~~

Challa smiled at his thinking, with what they are, and now with Kara to consider, the small apartment near the dock was not going to work. Perhaps they could divide their time, taking a slightly

larger place to accommodate their "adopted" niece. Leaving Kara on her own out here was out of the question, too many things could happen.

Burgers outside sounded good, "If you can't find something, or can't get the rust off of it, we can always cook them over and open fire. I think I saw some cast iron cookware inside," she said, slipping her arm around his waist as they walked.

It was peaceful and nice how their lives were falling into place, and meshing. "I'll see if I can find some lanterns or something to provide us all some light," she said as they reached the house. The place needed a thorough cleaning, and a few basic repairs and some updating, but it was a well built place, and provide them all with a refuge. When she did the shopping for Kara, she'd also see about some seedlings. There was no reason why they could not get the garden cleaned up and planted.

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Hours later Roger found himself sitting on the edge of the porch with one of the best burgers he'd ever made resting under his belt. Kara had fallen asleep shortly after eating, the poor girl had a bad few days and apparently now felt safe. He had to carry the child inside and Challa had put her to bed. Several makeshift tiki torches sputtered and belched wisps of black smoke. His arm was around Challa, and her head rested on his shoulder. "I could get used to this," he muttered sleepily.

Challa smiled as she rested her head on his shoulder, "So could I. But that is not our life, at least not now. We can fix this place up and use it as a retreat though. Eventually it will make us a strong, peaceful home," she told him being as honest as she dared.

~~~ (Later that night, in town)

Betty walked down the last three blocks towards home. Thanks to Suzie calling out she had to work a double at Julio's, and now it was almost midnight and she was dead tired. The street people were strangely absent tonight, which was a good thing. Her home was close to the poorest quarter of town, and many nights trouble bled over. Not tonight, officer Brolin was standing on the corner and she nodded and smiled at him.

She knew Ken Brolin from the diner. He coached little league on Saturdays and sometimes brought the team in to celebrate a victory, or more importantly soothe a loss. He always treated the kids to ice cream, even the ones who weren't on his team. Brolin was one of the good guys.

It had been lazy since the Paladin and the Sorceress had slunk off, without the need to build strength quickly It had taken a long nap. After It's rest It was now hungry, and It was once again on the prowl. It watched the waitress pass down the street through Brolin's eyes. This was not a disguise tonight, It had enough power in reserve to manage a true possession. The fact that It now inhabited a police officer was pure chance. The possession was that much tastier since Brolin was now a front row spectator in his own body. It nodded back with the tip of It's borrowed head and waited for the waitress to pass.

With a bound It lunged forward, grabbing the waitress. As Brolin looked helplessly on It ripped the girl's uniform, a short dress, upwards and off of her. Her panties tore easily, and It pummeled her with the cop's fists as It entered her with his member.

Much later it left the waitress for dead. She was not its intended victim, only an end to its means, but her fear and terror filled it now. It walked Brolin's body over to a shop window and let the officer, who was sworn and dedicated to protect the innocent, see his own partially clad body covered in innocent blood. Then, as the cop's soul still reeled in horror at what 'he' had done, It slammed his head first into the brick wall of the shop again and again.

Officer Brolin's soul tasted sweet to It as it was released, much more so since It had tenderized the soul first, and It savored Brolin like a fine wine. Sated and swollen from the feast, it wallowed into a dark corner to once again sleep it off.

Betty had been found and rushed to the hospital, in very serious condition. The Doctors felt good about her chances of her body recovering, but it was her mind that they were worried about. The poor thing had been babbling about a monster.

IT roused itself just before daybreak and slunk back to its basement hidey hole. IT had fed well the night before and each time made it stronger. When the Paladin and his Sorceress came for IT, they would be the ones to die. Once it had fed on their souls, no one would be able to stop IT. With the approach of daylight, the lethargy returned and IT fell back to sleep for the daylight hours.

Brolin's body had been found, mangled beyond belief. The DNA tests from the rape kit on Betty, matched Officer Brolin's, so as far as the Police were concerned one of their own had raped the waitress and then killed himself. The initial theory was a severe brain aneurysm which caused a psychological break.

Inspector Dominguez had begun his day by pounding on Roger's apartment door yet again, only to be reminded by his landlady that he wasn't home. Recovering Roger's contact information from his notebook he sighed, resigning himself to a long drive through the inland countryside.

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The following morning, Challa was up first and make a nice breakfast for the three of them. It was a peaceful, idyllic respite from the few hectic days since they'd met.

The first order of business after breakfast would be to go shopping for Kara. The poor kid needed everything. Thankfully there was a normal looking shopping center not too far away. She'd stick to jeans, skirts and dresses, as well as a comfy pair of waterproof boots, dress shoes and a couple of pairs of sneakers.

At the breakfast table she explained her plans to go shop for Kara and the girl's eyes lit up, "Yes you can go. You have a say in what you wear, plus I want to make sure everything fits," she told the girl. It was going to be a girl's only thing, so Roger would be on his own for a bit.

"Honey you do know that we are going to need a bigger apartment right? I mean we cannot leave Kara here alone and unprotected," she said while the youngster was upstairs getting cleaned up to go with Challa. Plus the Lady is going to need some repairs. That fight with the succubus and then the sea creature did some damage above decks. I have plenty of funds to see to what we need. We might as well pull the Lady and give her a complete overhaul, besides you can claim it as a business expense," She said holding up a hand, "And don't worry about taking money from me, it's US now, and I'm not expecting you to give up fishing. Once the boat is renovated it will attract more clients,

legitimate ones," She told him thinking of the Fae that had started this whole mess.

~~~

"The Fae were legit," Roger complained, "and I certainly can't raise the rates. Most of my regular customers are locals who depend on the Luna." He thought for a few moment's and added, "Dry-docking her might not be an option, since there isn't a yard on the island that could handle her. We'd have to sail to Kingston or Port-Au-Prince to have her pulled. It's do-able, but she'll be down for a while. Once we get back I'll have one of my shipwright friends dive down and check the hull, but I think it's sound. Engine probably needs overhauled though, and the deck and cabins could use a fresh coat of wood. Probably do with some upgraded electronics too."

"As to the apartment, mi cielo, I'll have a talk with our landlady," he continued. "I think Mrs. Treach has some two bedroom apartments in another building not to far from the docks, if not a small row home right on the quay. What about school? Kara can't live in a bubble. She needs people her own age, even if they aren't the same species or even from the same World. Dear Lord," he said, a bit overwhelmed, "instant family has so many complications. What if she lets slip some of her own schooling, from her home World? How different could grade school be?"

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Challa said, "Honey by legitimate I meant that they actually wanted to fish, they didn't. As long as the hull is sound that's the main thing. But she could use some updates and repairs. The Luna is a lovely boat, and very well built, but a bit a refitting is definitely in order. And of course the locals that you've dealt with for years get better rates than the tourists."

"If we can find one that's affordable a row home would be nice and give us more space. Plus I can place wards on it easier than I could an apartment," she said. ""As for Kara's schooling, we'll see what our options are. I can home school her if it comes to that. It depends on what her schooling is like where she's from, and how comfortable she'd be with the other kids," Challa kissed him, "Nothing has to be decided just yet, we'll figure it out."

Just then Kara ran down the stairs and into the kitchen, "Someone's coming," she said a bit breathless. Challa didn't know it was from running or from panic. Looking out of the front door, Challa took a deep breath, "It's a Sheriff's car, better make sure your sword is well hidden," she told them. To Kara she said, "We're still going shopping, but we need to see what the Sheriff wants first. I know the Fae cast a glamour so that you look human, but it's better he doesn't see you just yet. Go on upstairs Hon. I'll let you know when it's all clear," She told the young Canin.

As the car stopped beside the jeep, Inspector Dominguez got out, mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and walked towards the porch. "The sooner we find out what he wants the sooner we can send him on his way," Challa said. The whole point of coming out here was to get Roger away from the distractions, not add to them.

## Unexpected Allies

Dominguez scanned the area as if in disbelief that he was on a farm. Wrinkling his nose he shambled up to the house and knocked on the door. "I got it, mi cielo," Roger said. Opening the door he smiled broadly at the morose detective. "Why Inspector Dominguez," he beamed, "what a pleasant surprise. What brings you way out here?"

"Mister Barbosa," the cop replied. Knodding at Challa he added, "Senorita. I'll get right to the point, do you know Beatrice Dunn?"

With an inner shudder Roger answered yes. "She's been attacked and is in bad shape. I understand she is a close friend of yours. Can we talk?"

"Sure, Inspector, please come in. Coffee?" Roger offered leading him into the kitchen. After getting his affirmative Roger poured three cups and sat them around the table. Taking a seat next to Challa he said, "you didn't actually come all the way out here to tell me that, did you?"

"No," Dominguez admitted. "After your name came up several times from several directions I did some research on you. Did you know that I was the senior officer who took the call when your father, Fredrico Barbosa, died?" He looked at his untouched coffee. "Never did buy that heart attack bullshit, didn't buy it with Senior Ramirez either. Know who took the call with me?" He didn't wait for an answer, "my partner, a rookie named Kenny Brolin. Kenny died last night, allegedly committing suicide after raping Senorita Dunn." He looked directly into Roger's eyes, "Mister Barbosa, something weird is happening, Kenny could do neither. It's weird the same way as when your dad was killed." He shook his head. "Same weird," he muttered.

The Inspector finally took a drink of coffee, allowing the information to sink in. "I interviewed Senorita Dunn last night," he continued. "She was mostly incoherent, but she babbled a lot about the 'Dark Monster' and the 'Devil Thing'." He leaned into the pair as he whispered, "last time Mick Ramirez and his Senora got involved, and the trouble stopped. They're both gone now, but you two seem the same as them, especially you, Senorita Macomb, woman of mystery. Yes, I got your finger prints, and yes, it wasn't easy finding you either. I'm very good at my job. I'm not looking at you as suspects, but as a resource. Throw me a bone here, what is this? How can we stop it? Can you help, or at least can I help you?"

~~~

Challa was surprised at seeing Inspector Dominguez, and it could only mean trouble. The three adults sat at the table as Dominguez told them everything. Challa was sad to hear about Betty, the woman had not been friendly, but she had a good heart and in no way deserved what had happened. Once she'd healed up, maybe Challa could help her deal with what she had seen.

She was surprised when Dominguez called her by her last name, she hardly ever used it. When he finished speaking, after assuring them that they were not suspects, Challa said, "Inspector, you won't find much on me, because there isn't much. Let me ask you, do you believe in magic, and in mystical beings, such as Sorceresses, Fairies and the like? Because let me assure you that those things DO exist."

She looked at Roger and said, "I'm all for keeping a low profile, but we do need at least ONE person in Law Enforcement on our side." Turning back to Dominguez she said, "What we are about to tell you needs to remain strictly between us, no one else can know. Are we clear?" She asked.

Dominguez nodded, "I have a Voodoo priestess somewhere in my family tree. So yeah I believe in that stuff, I just don't let it get around," He told her flatly.

Challa began to explain, first about what she was, to his credit he didn't flinch when she admitted that she was 150 years old. After that she began about when she got to town and strolled along the docks, recounting meeting Roger, finding out what Mick was and the legacy he'd passed to Roger.

"We recently found out, that the thing killing everyone is some type of Daemon. It has decided to set up here, it likes this realm, the food is plentiful and plenty of places to hide. The fact is this, you and all of the law enforcement on the Island cannot stop this thing. Only Roger and I can, but the truth is that Roger here, needed more training," she said. Turning to smile at her man, she took his hand, "But it looks as if ready or not we need to face this thing. Hunt it and either send it back to it's own realm or kill it. I'm leaning more towards killing it, otherwise it may look for a way to return," she said.

Giving Dominguez a smile she said, "There's also one other small surprise. A youngling named Kara. For all intents and purposes she is like our niece or daughter, for now at least. She accidentally came through an open portal and is stuck here with no way to get home. Until we can find one, she is with us. She looks like a human child, except for her face, it looks Canine. The Fae we encountered yesterday, cast a glamor spell that allows those that see her to see her as totally human, that is for her safety and protection."

Challa had chosen to trust the Inspector with their secret. He seemed like a good man and had cleared them as suspects but had asked for their help.

~~~

"Daemon, huh," Dominguez said as if discussing rain in the forecast. "No silver bullet for it either. I suspect that it managed to possess Brolin somehow and force him to commit those acts. It also learned quite a bit about our biology too I suspect, I was on the Kelly case." He stopped talking for a minute, sipping his coffee, as he collected his thoughts. "I remember a stench, from several crime scenes both then and now, like rotting garbage. Also a quietness, as if everything was muted, a stillness to the very air. Experienced both most recently in the basement of Senorita Kelly's building, but it was the same as years ago. I'll never forget that smell. Maybe the daemon, or it's passing through?"

Challa didn't say anything, but she and Roger exchanged a look.

"As to the child, I visited with Tia Naomi when she was caring for two of them. She couldn't get them vaccinated, and they were real susceptible to local bugs. Think they contracted some kind of fever, poor things, probably malaria but maybe even chickenpox. Your girl is probably older, healthier, and if what you say is true appears human. I'd get her vaccinated quick, if you can," Dominguez advised.



“See,” Roger interjected, “instant family has a boat load of complications. I didn't even consider vaccinations

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When Roger mentioned the instant family again, Challa had to smile, "I'll see to it when we get back to the apartment. I'm sure the local Dr. will be sufficient. The thing will be to get Kara to trust him," she said.

Giving Inspector Dominguez a look she said, " I was just on my way to take Kara shopping for some clothing and other girl stuff. Plus don't know if you know this but Roger and I got married so it's kind of a Honeymoon; along with his training." Turning to Roger she said, "Looks like the Honeymoon is postponed. It sounds like that thing is evolving, and getting more aggressive. We need to stop it before more people die," she said.

"Are you leaving?", came a voice from the doorway to the dining room. Challa looked over to see Kara, the forlorn look in her soft brown eyes nearly broke Challa's heart. Getting to her feet she shook her head, "No Sweetheart, where we go, you go. For as long as you are here. Kara, this is Inspector Dominguez, and he is a friend, you can trust him.

With a sigh, Challa said, "Okay Roger I'm taking Kara shopping, we shouldn't be gone too long. You and the Inspector can decide what our next move is. Either way I know that we'll probably be heading out later today or first thing tomorrow morning to return home. I'm okay with that." She kissed Roger and nodded to Dominguez as she left with Kara in tow.

The two females got into the jeep and started it up and headed out.

Challa had forgotten how much fun shopping could be. Most of Kara's wardrobe consisted of jeans. But she also bought the girl a few pairs of slacks, some skirts and a few dresses. Along with blouses, shirts and sweaters, socks, shoes, sneakers and underwear. A few nightgowns and a robe and slippers were also added. Challa also picked up some clothing for Roger and herself.

Loading everything in the car they headed back to the farm, laughing and talking like BFFs.

~~~

Dominguez went out to his car and returned with a sheaf of papers. “Here's what I've compiled on the thing's haunts,” he told Roger as the women left. Spreading a detailed map of the town on the table he pointed at his notations. “Blue dots,” he began, “are kills that I'm sure it committed, like the Kelly and Ramirez cases.” Roger wasn't used to Mick being called by his last name, or even his first, so it took a moment for him to realize that the blue dot near the dock was his 'Unka Mick'. He was a little surprised at the number of dots, but the Inspector continued, “the red dots are maybes, mostly probable overdoses and alcohol poisonings, but we're not sure. The numbers of those have increased a bit, so some of them can be attributed to the daemon. The yellow dots are probable sightings of victims after they've been killed. Some of those correspond to the red dots, and in those cases I've overlaid the red with blue. Are you getting this?” he asked Roger.

“Um, I think so,” Roger replied.

“Good,” Dominguez confirmed. “Now, the green dots are places that I or a reliable witness have smelled rotten garbage or felt the weird 'muted' effect. See a pattern?”

“Yes. Kind of looks like a star,” Roger replied.

“Exactly, a pentagram pointed due South, upside down. At the center is the building next to Senorita Kelly's apartment. It's as if it is compelled to complete this pattern, and I feel that it must before it branches out

“The point here,” the Inspector continued indicating a blue dot at the only defined point on the star, the south-east one, “was the attack last night. If its pattern continues it will be at one of the other points, and it seems to be moving anticlockwise. So tomorrow night it will be here.” His finger rested on a spot at the very north end of the quay occupied mostly by warehouses. “A good spot for an ambush, do you think?”

“Yes, we'll have to show this to Challa,” Roger replied. He noticed that his own flat sat just outside of the star. Less than half a block away he himself had smelled rotten garbage the day Mick had died, and that spot was inside the star.

“Of course, but I must get back to town and this map is evidence,” Dominguez replied. Pulling another paper from the sheaf he handed it to Roger. “I have,” he said, “made copies. You can explain my findings when she returns?” he asked.

“I think so,” Roger said. Saying their goodbyes he turned towards the barn. Knowing that he had some time until the girls came back he decided to tackle the tractor first.

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Challa beeped the horn as she pulled up, letting Roger know that they were back, and not wishing to startle him. It didn't surprise her all that much to see him emerge from the barn. He was kind of greasy, his hair was a mess, and he'd removed his shirt and was glistening with sweat. All in all Challa thought he looked sexy as Hell. She handed Kara the bags containing her new clothes, “Why don't you take your new things upstairs Hon. We'll be along in a few minutes, okay?”

Kara nodded and went in the house, Challa left the rest of the clothing in the car, as she went over to see Roger, “The only thing keeping me from dragging you into the hayloft is that Kara may come looking for us,” She said giving him a kiss, but not getting too close. “I got some extra clothing for us as well. How did the rest of the meeting with Inspector Dominguez go,” she asked.

Roger told her everything, including the dots on the map. “You'd better go get cleaned up. I think we need to head back, now. If this thing is upping its game, then ready or not we have to fight it. I mean that's not a bad thing, because you can have all of the training in the universe, but until you are battle tested we won't know how good you are. You have natural ability, it's in your DNA, just get out of your own way and you'll be okay. You won't be fighting alone, I'll be there,” She told him, as she began heading back to the car. She took everything inside and let Kara know that they ALL would be leaving in a few hours. Challa decided to at least get some cleaning and laundry done before they left.

It was already decided that this farm would be their haven, and training ground. It would also be a good place for Kara to grow up. If she could not return to her own realm, then Challa and Roger

would continue to treat her like a daughter, for life.

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Returning to the barn Roger closed up the tractor and tried to fire it up. With a belch of black smoke the ancient machine came to life, grumbled a bit at being awoke, and idled down to a smooth growl. He hopped aboard and took it for a short ride around the barn, 'just to check it out'. Finishing up, he put the tractor away and went into the house to clean up.

After showering he got ready to go, joining Challa and Kara in the kitchen. Challa had done what little laundry they had, and several bags sat on the floor. She had a fresh cup of coffee on the table for him. "Are we ready?" he asked, getting a nod in answer. "We can get lunch on the way, so we won't have to clean up afterwards. We'll have to take both vehicles back too. Kara, honey, who are you riding with?"

The girl looked at Challa, then at Roger. "I don't know," she replied. "Maybe, since I went shopping with Auntie Challa I'll ride with you?"

"Okay then," Roger said, "let's get going." He picked up the bags and put them in the bed of the truck. Turning back towards the house he said, "it always seems a little sad when I leave it." Secretly he wondered what it would look like if he didn't come back.

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"I know, but look at it like this, we have a getaway. Someplace to relax, and where you can train. It's been sitting idle for a while, but it can be brought back. A few minor repairs, some cleaning up and a bit of elbow grease. We'll be back Love," she said kissing him. "I promise you that."

Heading towards the car she said, "Oh I also want to stop and fill the tank. We borrowed the car so it's only right we gas it up."

Sliding behind the wheel, she watched as Kara and Roger got in the truck. She was glad that they were taking the truck back with them. Especially now with Kara they needed a vehicle. They could make do for a week or so but the first thing they'd need to do when they got home, was to have Roger talk to his landlady. A row home on the wharf might be a better option than an apartment. It would be easier for Challa to set wards around for protection. It would also give them room for if and when their family grew in the future.

They stopped at a roadside place for a quick lunch, and then Challa made a stop at a gas station, topping off the tank. On the way back, her thoughts were on ways to deal with the entity they needed to kill.

## May the Circle Be Unbroken

Driving down the road Roger looked over at the girl in the passenger seat. She was looking out the window excitedly as the buildings began getting closer together. "What are towns like where you come from, Kara?" he asked.

"The town looks pretty much like this one," she answered, "but where are your horses? At home most everyone uses them. There are so many automobiles here! I thought you guys were somehow special having two. How do you keep them from running into each other?"

Roger laughed. "We don't always, that's why we're wearing seat belts." The look of surprise he got in return startled him and he added, "just teasing, I won't hit anything. Promise. Why don't you have many autos?"

"It's mostly because of the smell. I guess you people can't smell them as much, just like you drive so fast," she said. Roger figured that Kara's people probably had different perceptions that he did due to their more canine nature.

"I guess our distance vision is a little better. Kind of compensates for our poor hearing and sense of smell," he mused.

"Not really," Kara observed. She smiled at him then, which was a little odd looking considering her features. She started to add, 'just kidding,' but Roger laughed instead.

"We'll manage," he said as they pulled up in front of the apartment building. Roger looked across the street, where he knew Dominguez's map showed the daemon's hunting area. He realized that the next few days would be difficult for all of them and he added quietly, "we'll have to manage, won't we?" Challa pulled up, and drove the Rover around to the back where their land lady usually parked it.

"I watched you with the snally-thing," Kara said. "I got confidence in you." Instead of relief yet another layer of responsibility laid itself heavily on Roger's shoulders.

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Challa parked the Rover in the back, where the Landlady kept it parked. She left the keys in the small box beside the door to her first floor apartment. Heading around to the front, she walked to the truck to help Roger and Kara unload. Seeing the direction of Roger's gaze she placed a hand on his shoulder, "We'll get it. But right now we have to get Kara settled in. Then we can use the maps to determine our hunting plan," she told him, refocusing his attention on the here and now.

The apartment was indeed small, and from the look on his face, she knew Roger would be speaking to the Landlady as soon as he could. At least with two bedrooms Kara could have her own room, her own little space. All young girls needed that.

It was a lot to put on Roger, but so far he was handling things well. It truly sucked that everything was happening to them all at once. Even though Roger was a natural as far as wielding a sword, he was still in the early days of his training. Him trying too much too soon, worried Challa.

She'd be with him, but she could not watch him every second.

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“Yea, catastrophes first, disasters second, crises will have to wait,” he replied with a chuckle. “I need to focus, help me move some furniture. I'm going to get some sword time in, that always seems to ground me mentally. Besides, the blade seems to be beckoning me.” He picked up the coffee table. “I think, until we move, this can go into the storage shed with the scooter. We'll have to drink our coffee at the kitchen table like Philistines.” He muscled the table out the door, down the short flight of steps, and around to the back of the building. After arranging the small space so the scooter was still easily accessible he headed back.

That's when he smelled it. Dominguez's voice played back in his mind, 'a stench... like rotting garbage.' The breeze was coming out of the northeast, from behind him. The street sounds were faintly hushed as time for him seemed to slow. Roger carefully turned, wishing he had the sword, or Challa, close. Facing the source of the smell he realized that it really was a bag of trash gently ripening in the warm afternoon sun. “Ye Gods,” he muttered, “I need to relax.”

He quickly climbed the steps and went back to moving furniture with Challa and now Kara. “Where am I gonna sleep?” Kara asked a little woefully, “there's only one bedroom.”

“You are going to camp out on the sofa until we can get things situated,” Roger explained. “Right now, though, the living room that will be your bedroom is my gym. So stand back, please.” With that he unsheathed the sword and felt it's gentle song enter his troubled mind.

~Meanwhile~

It too was troubled. The Paladin had almost caught It unaware, It could no longer sense him or the Sorceress. It quickly skulked back to It's lair, deferring It's 'branching out' until another evening. This also troubled It, as the easy prey of the street people were becoming scarce. It might even have to go hungry for the first time, and It silently cursed the Paladin for startling It.

~Meanwhile~

Dominguez surveyed the area between the warehouses. He would be surprised if the daemon found any prey here at all after dark. The warehouse district would be nearly deserted soon. He found the second point on his map, and pinpointed it on the street. “Somewhere real close you're gonna show up, Diablo. I might not have the tools to kill you, but I sure as hell can pin you down.” He got his newly purchased bag of salt, paced off a wide circle with the 'point' at the center, and began making a circle. Leaving a small section open, he hunkered down near it and waited.

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Challa smiled when Roger mentioned the blade beckoning him. “Yeah you'll find that happening, it's becoming part of you, soon you'll feel naked without it,” she explained.

To Kara she said, “Don't worry sweetie, the couch is comfortable and we'll make sure your able to rest. Eventually we'll find a larger place and you'll have your own room. But it takes time sometimes, okay?” She reassured the girl.

"Come on, lets get you out of the way," she suggested leading her into the kitchen area. Challa grabbed her own small sword and began to spar with Roger. "Let it guide you, give yourself over to it. It's not a separate thing, it's an extension of your arm. Let it flow," she said instructing as she parried his blows.

Kara watched in fascination as the two humans fought, knowing it was a play fight, did not lessen the excitement. They were guardians, and good ones. If and when she returned to her own realm, she could say for certain that not all humans were bad.

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As always, the workout with the sword both exhilarated and relaxed Roger. This time, like the previous time in the barn, they had a spectator. The final parry brought his face inches from Challa's, and she was off balance. His free arm went around the small of her back to support her, and he drew her close, clutching her to his broad chest. Her eyes, deep and green, met his and her lips parted. His erection pressed hard against her just above her hip bone. They stayed like that for three heartbeats. "We have got," he whispered into her ear in a bedroom tone, "to get Kara her own room. Or a babysitter."

"I need a shower," he announced as he released Challa. Lower he grumbled, "a cold one." Challa smiled as he let her go and went into the bathroom, having a young'un about was going to be an adjustment for all of them.

After showering Roger dug out the map that Dominguez had provided and laid it on the floor. His mind was now clear and focused, and free of worries. "Now," he stated flatly, "we could use that damn coffee table." He grinned at Challa and added, "no, I am not going to bring it back up. It can stay with the scooter." Pointing at the map he said, "this is where Dominguez said he suspected that the daemon would strike next. It's in the middle of the wharf district, not much prey for it there after dark, but it will be a good place to ambush it. Any idea what it might be susceptible to, besides the sword? I'd like a look at this thing first too, is there any way to draw it out into the open? I'm not too happy about going toe to toe with it blind unless I have to."

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Challa straightened up, finding a place for Kara's clothing, that would be convenient and easy for her to get to. She showed her where everything was in the kitchen in case she wanted to make herself something to eat.

"This is important Kara, under NO circumstances are you to go anywhere without either Roger or myself. Not only because there's something out there killing people. Some in this town may be immune to Fae glamour, and seeing you as you truly are may frighten them. Not that you are ugly, you aren't, you're very pretty. But being sometimes people are afraid of things and people who are different. You'll always be safe with Roger and I, we already love you like family," Challa told her giving her a kiss on the head.

When Roger emerged from the shower, he spread out the map and they all looked at it. It had been spread out on the floor, so that it was easy to read. Challa smiled, "Salt is a pretty good bet. I'd also say Holy Water, but this isn't from what we'd call Hell. It's just a nasty creature from another

dimension, a homicidal one. It hunts and kills for food though, so it's following its nature. But it does need to be destroyed." Looking at Kara she smiled and then looked at Roger, "Feel like going hunting. I'll give Dominguez a call and see if there's been any news."

Looking at Kara she said, "Kara, I want you to remain here. The TV is over there and we have a full cable package so enjoy. If anyone knocks do not answer the door, Roger and I have keys and we are the only ones that need to come in. The answering machine is on, and you can here any oncoming call, don't pick up the phone unless it's one of us. Okay?" She said giving instructions designed to keep her safe.

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"Can I have peanut butter?" Kara asked. "Oh, and is it alright to look out the windows if I keep 'em closed? It's so busy out there!"

"Yes to both," Roger answered, "but go easy on the peanut butter and try to stay back a bit from the windows so you're not easily noticed." He dialed Dominguez's cell and got no answer, so he left a message.

"He's not answering," he told Challa. "Want to go for a walk? The wharf isn't too far, and we can check on Bella along the way."

Challa nodded, "Sure, we need to go. And I'm sure the Bella is fine, I set wards on it to make certain," she said.

The afternoon sun was warm, but a cool breeze was blowing off of the harbor bringing all the smells of the sea with it as they strolled along the street. Roger looked back at the flat, and could just make out Kara watching them from the window. From this distance she appeared to be a red haired girl of about ten. "Hey," he said to Challa, "the glamor is working for me, Kara looks human from here."

Soon they came to the Bella Luna resting against the dock. Roger gave her a quick look over, knowing that if he boarded it would be difficult to continue on to the wharf and warehouses. It tugged at his heart to see her idle like that. They strolled along the waterfront, passing fewer and fewer people, until there was almost no one around. Only an occasional late worker passed them, hurrying along to their homes. The buildings here blocked out a good deal of sunlight, the shadows between the warehouses were deeper, and the air was cooler.

Near the point that Dominguez had drawn on the map they came upon a man hunkering in the shadows watching the street. "What do you think he's up to?" asked Roger. "Think it's the daemon in disguise?"

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As they passed the Luna at her moorings, bobbing gently in the water, Challa could feel Roger's sadness. He truly loved the sea. Taking his hand she said, "It'll be okay, we'll be back out on the water again. I'll bet Kara would enjoy it too," she said. "I know that an instant family is a lot to process and handle, but for now she is our responsibility and a member of our family. Even though she isn't human she is still a child in need of protection."

Challa looked closely and then smiled, "Not unless it's overtaken Inspector Dominguez." And while it was possible, it was highly improbable, due to the lack of "rotting garbage" stench. It could disguise itself many ways, but it could not rid itself of that distinctive odor.

She deliberately made a small noise, alerting the figure to their presence. Sure enough it was Dominguez, he motioned them over and pulled them down to hunker beside him. Keeping his voice low he explained, "I triangulated the most likely spot. The fact that it reeked told me it was likely to be there. I used my granny's old trick of salt to keep it from slipping out any other way, The only way it can leave to hunt is through there," he said gesturing towards the door he was watching.

Challa nodded as she prepared herself for a fight, calling up her energy and her power. She said, "Inspector, when that thing shows I want you gone. If we fail you are the only one who truly knows what we are fighting. We'll need you to evacuate as many people as possible. If we can't stop it you will need to cut off it's food supply, until you can find a way to stop it. And if something happens to us, Kara is at our place, please look after her." She expected to be able to put this thing down, but it never hurt to prepare for the worst, just in case. But she was certain of one fact, neither she nor Roger were going down without a fight.

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It was becoming distraught, there was no easy prey left in the area. The street people were becoming wary, traveling in packs and distrusting strangers. Worse yet, the police had been distributing pictures of former victims and warning everyone. It decided to continue it's first course of action, a mostly instinctual decision that followed an unconscious pattern. Giving the place that the Paladin almost discovered It a wide berth, It made it's way once again towards the waterfront.

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"Is there some way to mask us from it?" Roger asked Challa. "I don't want to provide the daemon any easy prey once it's trapped." Subconsciously he sniffed the air, smelling only sea salt, fish, and wharf scents overlaid with the smell of a dusty warehouse. The building in front of them was dark and still. "I take it the thing isn't here yet?"

"No," Dominguez answered, "you will smell it, and everything will get quiet, muffled like." Roger remembered the alley behind the building several hours ago, and reconsidered his initial appraisal. "I'm fairly sure that it has to materialize to kill," the Inspector continued. "All of the eye witness reports state that it was material when it lured it's victims to their deaths, and afterwards when it left them."

"Challa," Roger said, "don't be angry, mi cielo, but I think it surprised me behind the building when I was stowing the coffee table. I forgot to mention it, but I thought it was just my nerves at the time. It may have been stalking me, or I may have stumbled upon it."

"Makes sense," Dominguez offered. "Your place would be on it's way here, but if that's true it should have been here already."

"Maybe it's waiting till sundown," Roger replied. "We've got a little while until dusk." They both turned to the sorceress. "Challa?" he asked.



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"I have no doubt it's going to sense us and come hunting for us", she answered. "Which was one of the reasons I wanted us away from here for a while. You weren't ready, and I had hoped that if it no longer sensed us it would either leave this realm or just go into hiding and not hurt anyone else. It did neither," she looked at Roger, "You have a great deal of natural ability. While your skills could use some more work, we can't wait."

Things suddenly got quiet, and then they caught the scent, rotting garbage. That daemon was on the prowl. Taking Roger's arm, Challa said, "Be strong. Remember it can take on the form of any of its victims, including Mick's. I need you to realize and accept right now that Mick is gone. Say it, and mean it, right now let me hear it from you."

Challa wasn't trying to be mean or hurtful, she was trying to keep them alive. She could not have that thing take on Mick's form and have Roger hesitate.

She saw and felt the thing slither into the area that Dominguez had decided to use as a trap. Stepping into the open, her powers full on, Challa said, "I order you to show yourself! Prepare to die."

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Roger smelled it, the same scent that he encountered in the alley only a short time before, but this time it was much stronger. The area between the buildings became deathly quiet and still. He watched it enter, it appeared to him as a shimmering nothingness that slithered along the ground. It wasn't dark, or shadow, but an emptiness that drank in the light and sound from around it. It entered the area that Dominguez had marked off with salt, and the inspector slipped forward. He quickly completed the circle and touched it with a drop of his own blood. Its path was already turning towards them when Challa stepped forward and challenged it.

Once she ordered it to show itself the 'nothing' of it shimmered. A moment later there was a large police officer standing in the circle in full uniform. Roger recognized him from Julio's as Kenny Brolin, the officer who had allegedly killed himself. Dominguez gasped, perhaps in horror at seeing his deceased friend being used like that. The daemon, as Brolin, spread his arms and looked right at Challa.

"What gives, hon? Don't you recognize me?" Of course Challa did not as she had never met Kenny, but the daemon wouldn't have known this. "Now let me out," it commanded. Roger drew his enchanted kopis, and felt the sword's presence softly enter his mind.

"I take it that it's trapped inside the circle of salt?" Roger asked.

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Dominguez nodded, "The only way out is if we allow it to come out. We'd need to break the circle," He said.

Challa nodded, "Okay Inspector, time for you to go. Remember what I said earlier. No arguments, we've got this," She told him setting her power totally free. She moved to one side and motioned Roger to move the opposite. Distracting the creature attention, since it could not watch both at the same time.

The daemon, disguised as Brolin gave Challa an evil smile, "You'll go first Witch, and it'll be painful. Your Paladin will watch," It laughed, "Maybe I'll even take you, right in front of him, I haven't experienced pleasure in a while." Turning to Roger it said, "Once I'm done with her, you'll be so broken over losing your Bitch that I'll destroy you with a thought. The old man was no match for me, and you won't be either." It taunted them.

Challa knew what it was doing, taunting them, trying to get them to strike in anger. "Don't let it get to you Roger, that's what it wants to do. It wants you to strike out in anger. Stay clam." She cautioned.

Challa sent a blast of energy into the creature. It howled in pain and changed forms, this time to a shapely woman of questionable virtue.

Turning it's attention to Roger it all but purred at him, "Why sleep with that old hag, when you can have me? Release me and we can go have some fun Sugar," IT invited.

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From behind them a horn sounded. It was a pure, earthy tone as if made from a hollowed out goat's horn. Roger watched as the daemon's form wavered like an old television losing horizontal control. A sound escaped the daemon that was something between a hiss and a train whistle. Not wanting to take too much of his attention from their adversary, he glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw Dominguez blowing what truly appeared to be a goat's horn. The creature, still wearing the distorted harlot form, charged at the inspector. When it struck the boundary of the salt circle bits of dark nothingness scattered around It and It hiss-squeeled even louder. Dominguez's lungs gave out about then and the note faded.

The daemon regained It's form, and ran around the inside of the circle. "Release me!" It commanded in a less than feminine baritone, "Release me or I will crush you!" Challa and Roger's attention was on the trapped creature, but Roger knew that Dominguez was still with them despite Challa's warning. The inspector was well aware of the danger, perhaps more so than he himself was, and yet he stayed. The horn sounded again, and once again the daemon wailed and charged the inspector with the same result. This time, however, it was rewarded with a double shotgun blast. The air filled with the scent of gunpowder, burnt rosemary, and several other herbs.

The creature lost it's form entirely then, and the nothingness of it was speckled with starlight where the shotgun pellets had pierced it. It was bleeding the very light of the souls it had taken. Dominguez reloaded and jogged around to where Roger was.

"Salt shot, mixed with herbs," he explained passing the sawed off shotgun to Roger. "Two shells left, don't waste 'em. Goat's horn will disrupt it, but will also piss it off. The circle is mine, you can cross it being of this realm, but It can not. Neither can the full force of the lady's magic, you'll have to physically enter the ring with the thing. Don't disturb the circle and the daemon will starve or bleed to death." He grimaced and added, "of course if somebody comes along and disturbs the circle in the mean time we're all, the three of us especially, pretty much fucked. I'm out of here now, nothing more I can do except warn others should you two fail to kill it." With that the inspector slipped away. As he was talking the creature had comported itself, and now wore the form of Michael Ramirez, 'Unka Mick'.

“Son,” it looked right at Roger with imploring eye's, “why are you doing this to me? Set me free.” Roger steeled his heart as he felt rather that saw Challa powering up. The kopis began to sing in his mind and a warm tear rolled down his cheek. With the blade in his right hand and the shotgun under his left arm, his finger on the trigger, he looked at Challa. Without speaking a word the pair stepped into the circle as one.

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They immediately split up, staying together meant that they presented an easy target. "Remember Roger, that isn't your beloved Uncle," Challa warned as they parted. "You are such a coward. You are trapped, it's over. It's you or us, and neither of us intends to die", she told it blasting it with a nasty charge.

It howled in pain and whirled on Challa, "You'll pay for that, Cow.", It said as it began to stalk her.

It made more sense for Challa to distract it, since Roger had the weapons that could kill it. Challa could blast it, and keep it off balance and focused on her so that Roger could finish it off. The only thing she regretted is that she had not tried to teach Roger how to communicate telepathically with her. All Sorcerers and Sorceresses, could communicate telepathically with their Paladins. It came with the bond, but like all gifts it needed to be accepted and practiced. So much had happened that they hadn't been able to get that far.

"Oh really, you think?" She taunted. Don't forget we can step pout of this circle at any time, you cannot. So long as the salt circle remains, you are trapped. The only way out for you is death," she said before blasting it again. She aimed for the same spot each time, hoping to weaken the area enough to seriously do some harm. She longed to loo at Roger to encourage him, but she didn't dare take her eyes from the daemon.

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But Roger was already moving. He was running, and began spinning widdershins to gain momentum. He blind sided the daemon, the stench of it at this proximity was almost overwhelming. After spinning three times his kopis connected with it, and had it been mortal the slashing blade would have disemboweled it.

Instead, blinding white light spilled from the thing as it lost it's form again and screamed like a boat whistle. It forgot Challa and turned on Roger fast. He was well within it's grasp, and it fought to control it's physical shape. It managed a six taloned hand that raked against Roger's ribs, but not very deeply. Having finally drawn blood it chortled. “Puny mortal!” 'It' bellowed. “Get used to the pain, I will deal you much more!” Roger reached for the dogleg shotgun, but Challa was directly opposite and he didn't have a good shot. His blade came up just as it's taloned arm, now better formed, came down. The phantom hand dropped clean before it touched him, and vaporised as it skittered across the floor and hit the Dominguez's circle. The daemon screamed in pain and anger.

Challa had been moving, when the creature raked Rogers midsection, she saw red. An energy blast to it's midsection caught it's attention. She came up with an idea, that was risky. She'd never tried it before, but she knew how to do it. She needed the thing distracted for a few moments.

Finally seeing an opening, Roger raised the shotgun and fired both barrels into the thing. It's coalescing form was speckled with starlight as it turned from Challa and once again charged Roger. Finally taking form, it was now as black as night and horned. It's body was naked, scaled, obscenely muscled and quite obviously male. The eyes of the beast glowed a dull red, like smoldering coal, and it sported midnight black spikes and talons at every available position. Roger stood his ground until the last possible second and side stepped to the right, bringing the sword across it's midsection again in a disemboweling slash. Once again white light spilled from it, but noticeably less this time. "It that your true form?" Roger quipped through the pain from his own wounds. "No wonder you want to look like something else. You UGLY!"

It let out a low growl as it turned on him, but once again Challa was ready. While Roger was interacting with the daemon, Challa had moved off to the side and begun chanting in a low voice. The Latin words were ancient and designed to raise a huge amount of energy, very quickly. She felt the energy rise, and surround her, the force of it blowing her hair like a strong wind.

Suddenly Challa let loose a fireball of incredible energy, aiming it right at the creatures genitals. The thing howled in pain and began going back and forth between them, almost blinded by rage and pain.

Roger and Challa had played 'monkey in the middle' with the daemon long enough. It had not recovered well from Challa's attack, and instead of attacking her it ran away from both of them straight into the circle. Chips of darkness broke off of it and it turned towards Roger, who was now stalking it. Once again he swung the sword at it's middle with a mighty slash, but this time the daemon's form shattered on impact. Bright white light spilled from the pieces like a thousand fire flies as they slowly fell to the ground and vanished.

"Oooooo, pretty," Roger said as he passed out from his own blood loss and slammed into the pavement.

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Challa dropped to her knees, panting as if she'd run a marathon. Roger had collapsed onto the pavement and Challa crawled over to her mate. Rolling him over, she saw that he was breathing, and his heartbeat was good, but he'd lost some blood. Combined with exerting himself in the fight it had been too much. Taking her cell out she frowned looking at it, The energy she'd raised for that final blast had fried it. Going into Roger's pocket she took out his and called Inspector Dominguez, "Inspector, it Challa. The thing is dead, but Roger is down I need an ambulance right now!" she said closing the phone. As she cradled her mate's head in her lap, she could hear a Siren off in the distance.

## Sweet Memories

Roger awoke, opening his eyes slowly. The bright light in the room hurt, as a matter of fact everything hurt. From somewhere a pleasant, monotonous beeping invaded his consciousness. He lay there just breathing. Finally, from somewhere he identified as the door of the room, a voice said, “I think he's awake.” Closer to him the same voice said, “Mister Barbosa? Can you hear me?”

“S' Captain,” Roger replied. The voice snickered a bit.

“Okay, Captain Barbosa, how do you feel?”

“Like shit,” Roger replied. Someone pried his eyes open one at a time and shined an incredibly bright light in each one.

“That's good then,” a deeper voice with a British accent commented. “I'm Doctor Wellington. You seem to be recovering well, you suffered quite a concussion, not to mention the knife wounds. There's an inspector here to interview you if you feel up to talking.” The voice paused and added, “I could tell him to bugger off if you'd rather not.”

“I'll talk,” Roger replied. He still wasn't sure why he was in a hospital, last thing he remembered was staggering back to the Luna after some of his clients had gotten him drunk. He searched his memory. He must have been mugged on the Luna. There was that girl and the fellow she was fighting with, maybe one of them? No, he was sure that was resolved. Maybe it was a sea monster. He laughed at that thought and began to cough instead.

“Hi, Roger,” another voice said gently. “Doctor said you were conscious, how are you feeling?”

“Told the Doc,” Roger opened his eyes, “like shit.” The inspector's face looked familiar, but lot's of faces looked familiar to a fishing boat captain in a resort town.

“If it's any consolation you look like shit. What do you remember?” the inspector queried.

“Went back to the boat from the Trey of Cups,” Roger explained. “I was pretty drunk, some wealthy clients were buying rounds. I woke up on the Luna. I remember there was this girl, and this really ugly fella, fighting on the dock. Don't really remember much after that, just some crazy shit. Probably from the concussion, huh?” He waited a second and added, “girl was a cute redhead if that helps, don't remember seeing her around before.”

“Alright, get some rest,” the inspector said. “If you remember anything else I'm Inspector Dominguez. I'll leave a card.”

Dominguez left, passing the doctor and two nurses in the doorway. He went right to Challa. “He doesn't remember the fight. He said that the last thing he remembered was returning to his boat drunk, and witnessing a fight between a cute redhead and some 'ugly fella'. Ring any bells?”

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Challa had been back and forth to the Hospital over several days. She would never have left Roger's side, but there was Kara to consider. The young one had been worried, but Challa assured her that he was going to be alright. She turned out to be self-sufficient enough to stay at the apartment by herself while Challa shuffled back and forth.

As Dominguez left the room after speaking to Roger he stopped in front of Challa. He explained that he remembered nothing after the night they met.

Challa nodded, "Yes, it's the night we met. A Succubus had decided to make a meal out of him, I stopped her. Roger woke up and witnessed the fight. That "ugly fella" was a female sex demon." She said softly.

"We'll have to wait and see if his memory comes back, if it doesn't I might be able to do something. But I'd rather not, unless I have to," she explained. Mucking with memories could be dicey and Challa wasn't going to take any chances where her mate was concerned.

Challa was allowed to go into the room, the Doctor had explained that he had memory loss. Unfortunately he was unsure if it was permanent or not.

Sitting in a chair beside the bed, she gently touched his hand, "Roger, can you hear me," she asked softly. When he opened his eyes, she smiled, "Do you remember me," she asked, gently brushing the hair back from his brow. It was a gesture she'd done to him quite a bit and hoped it would jog his memory.

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Roger couldn't remember her. He searched her face, she obviously knew him. Her touch was familiar, and he batted at his own consciousness to identify her. She looked at him encouragingly. "Yea," Roger said finally, "you're the woman from the dock." Seeing Challa's reaction on her face he added, "but I see there's more. Exactly how long was I out?" Thinking a little more he said very quietly, "how many years of memory did I lose?"

He searched her deep green eyes, losing himself in them. Inside her mind, unvoiced, he said, "who are you to me?"

Outwardly he said, "Is my uncle around? He would be here if he knew I was in the hospital. His name is Michael Ramirez, lives in an apartment on Second Street. He can usually be found at Pheasant Plucker's Bar." Roger tried to sit up, to see out of the room's door and into the corridor. Several of the monitors complained as he became distressed, beeping loudly. Panicking he looked into Challa's eyes again. This time his mind pleaded into hers "Help me." A nurse slipped in and injected something into his I.V. line and his eyes slowly closed.

"We need to let him rest, Ma'am," she told Challa.

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Challa smiled at the nurse and said, "I'm his wife, please let me stay a while longer? I promise not to disturb him." All the while she smiled gently, her mind giving a small push.

The nurse nodded, "Alright, but if anyone asks, you snuck in. We clear," she said feeling for the patients wife. Challa smiled and nodded, thanking the nurse as she left the room.

There was so much that he'd forgotten, almost a month! But once he'd rested some more and regained his strength, they'd start to fill in the blanks. Of course it would be easy for Challa to simply link up with his mind to replace his memories while he slept, but she could wait. If possible she'd like his memories to return on their own. The sword might help as well, but until she got him home, there was no way for her to sneak it in and put it in his hand.

His thoughts had been very clear to her, so a psychic link had been established, at least Challa had heard him, it would remain to be seen as to whether or not he could hear her.

Taking his hand, she kissed it, using her mind she said, "It'll be okay Love, we'll get through this. For now I want you to rest and heal. I'll be back in the morning," she told him. Getting up she quietly left the room.

At the small apartment Challa walked in. "How's Unca Roger?" Kara asked from the couch, although in her pajamas, and looking as is she'd turned in, the Canid was wide awake.

Challa sat down beside her foster daughter and hugged her, "He doesn't remember us at all. He forgot everything, from the night we met forward. The Doctors don't know if it's permanent or not, so we need to wait and see. Don't worry I have ways for him to remember if he can't do it on his own," she told the youngster.

"While I am going back and forth to the Hospital, I will be in and out. I know you can take care of yourself but I'll have a friend come by to check on you. His name is Inspector Miguel Dominguez, and you can trust him, he knows all about us. He even helped Roger and I kill the Deamon. Okay?" Challa asked, she knew that Dominguez would stop by and check up on Kara if Challa asked. But she'd only do it if Kara was alright with it.

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Meanwhile Roger dreamed the dreams of the heavily medicated. His subconscious heard Challa state that she was his wife, and went with it.

He met her on the docks, during her fight with the 'ugly fellow'. This part he remembered. After she had run the guy off, he came back to the dock while they were drinking coffee and had thrown a flying octopus at them. Roger's clients then surrounded them and began chanting and dancing.

Somehow they arrived at his parent's farm because Challa wanted to ask them for his hand. When they arrived someone was there, but not his parents. Instead Unka Mick and Mambo Naomi were there. As gifts, perhaps wedding gifts, Mick gave them a short sword and Naomi gave them a dragon. It got really strange from there. Two elves showed up to the wedding ceremony dressed as dogs. The ceremony was under a copse of trees on the farm, and the elves upset their dog. The dragon, during the commotion, tried to eat their daughter (which he hadn't even known about until then) and he had to kill it with the sword.

Then they all had to go back to town because a policeman told them that the flying octopus was killing people and it was all their fault.

Roger awoke. It was dark and he reached out his hand, grasping towards where Challa's hand had been hours before. "It doesn't make sense," he said, reaching out with his mind. "None of this makes any sense. How long have I been gone? Where am I?" He slipped back into fitful dreams, this time dark seething forms stalked him across a bleak landscape as he hid mouse like amid the shadows.

In the morning he opened his eyes to find Challa there. "Tell me," he said hoarsely as he reached for her, "who you are. Tell me about our daughter, and the dragon." A tear rolled down his cheek, because he already knew the answer to his next question somewhere deep inside. "Tell me why Mick isn't here."

~~~

Challa had gotten a couple of hours of sleep and then quietly left the apartment. Inspector Dominguez had been only too happy to agree to check in on Kara. The young'un was very self sufficient, which was a Godsend since Roger needed her.

In the early morning she quietly snuck into Roger's room and sat down beside the bed, "'Tell me. Who you are. Tell me about our daughter, and the dragon.'" A tear rolled down his cheek "Tell me why Mick isn't here."

Challa's heart broke seeing his anguish and the confusion in his eyes and hearing it in his voice.

Leaning near him, so that she could speak softly, she gently brushed the hair from his brow, and placed a kiss on it, before speaking. Taking his hand in hers she began, "My name is Challa, I'm a Sorceress. I met you when I fought a Succubus that was trying to seduce you in order to feed. It would have killed you if I had not intervened. We began to see each other, and you even let me sleep on your couch. There is no dragon, although we have encountered several creatures that one would consider not of this world. One of those creatures is the reason you are in here, we managed to destroy it, but it got a good swipe in at you. Afterward you went down like a ton of bricks and hit your head on the pavement, which is why you can't remember." She paused to give him a few seconds to digest what she was saying.

"As for Mick, unfortunately he passed away, that creature we killed had killed him as well as several other innocent people. He gave you something though, a very special sword. See Mick was what is known as a Paladin, a warrior. Usually a Sorceress, or Sorcerer, and a Paladin join forces and fight evil beings that come to this realm. Mick and his mate Naomi were two such people, like us. You and I fell in love very quickly and married. In spite of something skulking around killing people we went to the farm your family owned, for kind of a honeymoon. I was also going to help you continue to train with the sword. We encountered a young girl, she is known as a Canid, she looks like a normal child except that she has the head and face of a dog. We encountered some Seelie Fae who bestowed a form of Glamour on her so that others will just see her as human. Since we cannot return her to her own realm, we have decided to keep her with us and raise her as our child, or for now at least a niece." It was a lot to process so she tried to let him know everything as gently as she could. Hopefully once he was released and was able to hold the sword it would help him remember.

"I know that it's scary, and a lot to take in. But trust me my Love, that's all I ask of you." She told him. She did not mention that they suspected that Old Mick and Naomi were his biological parents. They still were not one hundred percent sure and until they were, Challa was so not going to



give him something that was speculation.

"Right now you need to concentrate on getting better. The Doctors aren't sure if your memory will return or not. Don't worry, I'll be here to help you all that I can. There are things that we can try to help you, but they can't be done here. And no one else is to know what we truly are. Only a couple of others know about us, about our powers." she told him, giving him a kiss on the lips, very soft, very gentle, but letting him know how much he was loved.

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It was mid afternoon before Roger was released from the hospital. Doctor Wellington had done all he could for Roger's body, the wounds would heal with time and regular fresh bandages. The cranial swelling was gone, and he was strong and healthy. His memories, such as they were, were intermixed with dreamlike scenes and peppered with the occasional dark abyss-like holes. The hospital staff could do little for his mind, and had done everything they could for his body, so he was released to the care of his 'wife'.

The concept of a wife boggled Roger's mind, as well as the friend he had gained in Miguel Dominguez. He was still anticipating meeting his 'niece' as he was wheeled out of the front door and deposited into his pickup. At least the truck was familiar, even though he remembered it being back at his farm, and he was grateful that he didn't have to go home on the back of the scooter. He stroked the smooth warm plastic of the dashboard as he was helped in.

"If it's not too much trouble," he said to the woman driving his truck as she put it into gear, "could we swing by Bella? I don't need to get out, just see that she's still alright." 'Wife' he mentally admonished himself, 'Challa'.

Challa was glad that she was finally taking Roger home. When he asked to go see his boat she nodded, "Of course we can," she said simply. She pulled onto the docks and practically right up to the Bella Luna, stopping the car.

The Bella Luna was mostly as he remembered her. Sure, there was some fresh woodwork on the cabin and railings, but she was still there and waiting. He watched her gently rock in her berth from the truck window, but felt no desire to climb aboard. She was the same, but somehow different.

Arriving at his building he goggled at it a bit, the 'strangeness' he felt at the dock was the same here. Everything was as he remembered, but completely different as well. The warm afternoon sun still shone on the tan brick, the window still had the same dingy shade and the door still needed fresh paint. The sky was the same azure blue. Smells of salt sea air and cooked food still wafted on the same cool breeze coming off of the same harbor, and Roger realized that it was he himself that had altered.

Upon entering the apartment he was hit with a small rocket powered child. "Unka Rog!" she cried as she buried herself against him. He hugged her, and though he remembered her story from Challa's description he was taken aback by her appearance. Then it hit him that her own plight and his echoed each other, both of them were out of sync with their realities. He melted into her embrace then, and wept a bit.

Finally turning to Challa he said, "You mentioned a sword, a gift from Mick? I would like to hold it, I believe that I need to, does that make sense? Or does that sound a little crazy?"

~~~

Challa had pulled away after Roger assured himself that his boat was safe. She could sense his disorientation and confusion, it was a product of his amnesia, and the concussion he'd suffered. Due to Challa being what she was, her injuries had healed in a day.

Once home Roger had looked around, his eyes showing recognition of their things, but confusion as well, as if seeing it through new eyes. She could tell he was a bit shocked by Kara's appearance, but he quickly recovered and hugged the child back. Challa had explained that Roger may not remember her and had asked the girl to be patient with him.

When he asked about the sword, telling her that he felt he needed to hold it, and asking if it sounded crazy Challa shook her head, "It's not crazy at all. You bonded with the sword, it will always be a part of you until the day you bestow it on a new Paladin, " she explained. "Actually I am hoping the sword can help you remember. First though we aren't taking any chances. Stand aside, Kara and I need to make some room," she said as she and the young girl moved the couch and tables out of the way.

Going into their bedroom, she took the sword, and brought it out. Handing it to Roger she said, "Okay don't fight it, just relax and allow yourself to feel it. The sword knows you and will guide you. I know how that sounds but trust me Roger, please."

She handed the sword to her husband and stood back out of the way. He may not be at full strength, but the sword won't allow him to do more than he is ready for.

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At first Roger was unsure whether he would turn the blade on his own throat, or the woman standing in front of him. He did neither. Instead he arrived in a dreamlike landscape of intertwining threads of light where he floated weightless. The sword was still in his right hand, so he reached out with his left and touched a single one.

He saw his father, sitting on the Bella, holding a fishing line with a small squirming fish. The sun was shining, and his dad was laughing. Roger felt that he was absolutely terrified, and realized it was a memory of his first fishing trip. He touched another, and was once again presented with one of his own memories complete with his feelings at the time.

The sword glowed, as if knowing that he now realized he was exploring his inner space, his own mind. It indicated a direction, and Roger floated where it led, occasionally touching a thread. Some brought tears, some brought a smile, but most, like the one of a fourth grade math quiz, brought no real response at all. He wandered among them for what seemed like hours. Finally, seeing a dark area, he drifted towards it.

There, nestled in a small knot of threads, was an oily, blackened nodule. Roger poked it with the point of his sword and it squirmed. Reaching with his left hand he touched it, and felt nothing but frigid emptiness. Holding it in his left hand, he cut into the nodule with the sword. There, nestled in the tangle of dying memories, was a piece of the daemon, its last gift. Perhaps it was forgotten during the battle, or perhaps it was left intentionally. Either way it would eventually cause his madness, killing his mind

and slowly turning him into a daemon himself. He brought the sword down on it hard, shattering it. The light released, like when the daemon perished, momentarily blinded him. When he could see again he saw the infected threads had turned to gray ash, and he knew those memories were forever lost to him. The other memories, the much greater share, were once again his however and he cherished them.

Roger opened his eyes. “Whence on the sea's horizon comes that roar?” he said loudly, spreading his arms wide. “Tis Barbossa now returning from the Isles. Two hundred vessels ride upon the waves, coming from lands the Crescent lights.” He smiled at Challa and Kara. Although it had been hours to him, it had only been a moment from taking the sword to uttering the incantation.

His only regret was that he could not remember the end of Unka Mick's life. Oh, he knew from related memories that it had occurred, that there was a wake and funeral. He knew that they had identified his body. He couldn't recall the way Mick smiled when he introduced him to Challa, nor the out-welling of love at his wake. The daemon had picked the one place in his memory to hide that it knew, Mick's demise, and had begun eating outward killing the memories.

## The Long Uphill Walk Home

Roger walked up the long hill that defined High Street towards home. The day's fishing had been good, and he carried a brace of redfish with him. The warm afternoon sun pressed against his bare chest and shoulders. His second mate skipped along beside him, singing some song to herself that she had picked up earlier in the week. He still rued the missed opportunity to rent a townhouse nearer to the dock, but the big old house two thirds of the way up the ridge to the old Spanish fort was too good to pass up. Besides, with Challa cooking for him now he needed the extra exercise. He looked at the rambling house as it came into view.

It was a classic sea captain's home, two stories high with a basement, a full attic, and even a small 'widow's walk' on the peak of the roof. It had been built shortly after Puerto Media Luna was taken by the English two centuries earlier as the Magistrate's home. In the interim it had been the temporary customs office, a boarding house, and even a brothel before it was abandoned.

Right now, as he got closer, he saw that the wide porch which went all the way around it and was sprinkled with wicker furniture was also covered in random toys. Sure, when he and Challa had bought the place it needed some work but it was worth it. As he told her at the time, "I like my houses like I like my women- well built and over a century old." It had gotten him punched in the shoulder, but they both loved the place and it was a great home to raise Kara. He looked at the girl who still skipped along beside him.

She had grown a bit, and was becoming quite a sailor when she wasn't in school. Sometimes she still surprised them with tidbits from her previous life, but usually these could be explained to outsiders as 'overactive imagination'. They also had to list her as color blind and slightly near sighted even though her sight was perfectly normal for her kind. "Papi," she said as she stopped skipping. She had inexplicably began calling he and Challa 'Papi' and 'Mami' a few months ago instead of 'Unka Rog' and 'Auntie Chal'. "Why are we having peanut butter pie?"

They were half a block away, upwind, and the girl could smell dinner. Yup, sometimes she still surprised him. He smiled and patted her furry head. "What day is it?" he asked her. He watched her concentrate for a second, but then she became aware of the figure rocking on the porch.

"Unka Dom!" she exclaimed as she ran the rest of the way. The inspector watched her, and caught her as she launched herself into his lap like a cruise missile. "Guess what day it is?" she asked.

"Adoption day?" he asked. She giggled and winked at Roger as he climbed the steps to the porch.

"That's cheating you know," Roger advised.

"Nope," Kara countered, "I used all available sources of information to determine the most appropriate answer." Challa stepped out of the house with a smile and considered the trio on the porch.

"Arrrrr, just got punked by me own crew," Roger said in his best pirate voice. Turning to the child he said, "Go get washed up for dinner, wastrel." Kara scurried inside.

Challa laughed softly. Since defeating the daemon, they had gotten on with making a somewhat normal life for themselves. Roger still trained daily, as did Challa, and she was working on his telepathic skills. Challa deeply loved the man, and the youngster. Kara was in no way human, but thanks to the glamour, she was able to pass. She did surprisingly well in school, and because of that she was allowed to go out on the boat and help Roger, whenever she didn't have school.

Miguel Dominguez had become a very good friend and was the equivalent of a Godfather to Kara. He'd been invited to dinner to celebrate the adoption being finalized. To the human world, Kara was legally their daughter. Despite her best efforts Challa had not been able to find the portal to send Kara home.

The sword has done its job and had restored most of Roger's memories. A small shred of the daemon had survived and had eaten those away before Roger could destroy it. But that was okay Challa made sure that he had all of the information. Even if he didn't have the memories he would at least know what happened.

Roger was still missed the memories of Mick's wake, funeral, or death. Yes, he knew all of these things happened, but they brought no feelings to mind and no memory of the actual events. Still, he was a strong man and had moved on without them.

Inspector Dominguez had been a regular around their home, frequently stopping by for input on a case or just dinner. He had also been a regular at Julio's since Betty had returned to work, and it was said that he interviewed her a few to many times than was necessary to close her case. It was also said around town that several people had seen him smile in her presence, and that she referred to him as 'Miguel' instead of Dominguez. People talk, especially at Julio's.

They also talk about how their own Roger had won the heart of a wealthy red haired widow from off island. He had finally settled down, they said, bought his own house and had fixed up his parent's place. He had also sold some of the farm land, bought a remote hillside that nobody wanted, and was building a vacation lodge. The curious design for the main hall there included a salt infused brass ring and a large pentagram set into the floor, but that's just rumor.

"While I have you two to myself," Dominguez stated once Kara was out of earshot, "what do you know about zombies? Seems my cousin on Anguilla suspects an outbreak." Roger and Challa both looked at each other and Roger sighed. There 'special consultant' stipend from the police department was more of a token 'thank you' than any real payment, after all.

Challa looked at him, "Zombies, you gotta be kidding me," she rolled her eyes. "That would be more a fight for a VooDoo Priestess than for us." Even though she and Roger were sworn to protect the innocent from any and all evil. "Okay, we celebrate Kara's adoption. Once she goes to bed, you tell us the whole story. We'll see what help we can be, she told him. The look in Roger's eyes told her that his mind was already made up. Go figure she was bonded to a man who liked being a champion for the innocent. It made her love him all the more.

"Anniversary vacation?" he asked her.

Challa smiled, "Well I did hear Anguilla is very romantic. Without the Zombies of course, she said with a small laugh, as they all went inside.