

Children of The Dragon
VIRUS



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Antellus
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VIRUS
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FOREWORD

This is the seventh book in a planned series loosely based on a collection of short stories written for a monthly fan magazine during the period 1988 to 1995. My stories featured a character named Antonia Bello, whose creation was a homage to numerous science fiction and horror films and novels I had read over the years. The result was a string of epic adventures of espionage, fellowship, betrayal, murder, conspiracy, political intrigue and a host of other snippets about the human condition within the confines of a rigidly defined universe established by precedent; one which did not leave much room for innovation. I found it challenging to introduce a character which could exist credibly within that universe without violating the basic rules.

As a result of this outpouring of creativity, I decided to embark on writing more speculative science fantasy stories featuring my characters in my own universe, which is as real for the reader as I can make it. These are fresh and original stories and as such I have designed them to stand alone but linked together by a common theme. Each book explores more of the origins and adventures of Antonia's people while keeping faith to the original concept.

The *Children of The Dragon* series is a chronicle of the Xosan, living vampires from the planet Antellus who were once human but who were transformed by a dragon's blood. They are stories of science fiction, fact and fantasy, myth and history, tragedy and triumph; intermixed with real historical events in the theme of the vampire as hero.

There are many facets to this fantasy universe that are as yet unexplored and as I continue to delve into its mysteries the whole is becoming greater than the sum of its parts, much to my own delight. As I write each story, another comes calling to add to the saga and challenges my creativity and imagination.

I hope that you will be fascinated and entertained by the people who are the descendents of Xosan and the inheritors of the dragon's blood.

I am Dracula. Welcome to my house. Come freely. Go safely; and leave something of the happiness you bring." -- Bram Stoker, 1897, as interpreted by Hamilton Deane.

1

Her name was Megan Thereau. She graduated from the University of California School of Journalism in 2358 with a Bachelor's degree in journalism and a minor in the history of world civilization. When she landed a job as a junior writer for The Radcliffe Center for Inquiry, she thought she had a secure position there until her parents were killed in a starliner accident and she was forced to take over the family business.

Not knowing the first thing running a large company, she soon sold the firm to the stockholders and pocketed a few thousand credits a month as a consultant, which afforded her enough comfort and time with which to pursue her aspirations.

She sold freelance articles to other news sites to supplement her income and build a tidy nest egg against her eventual retirement, but at only 27 she still had a long way to go. She had success enough to keep her working steadily. Her insight and attention to detail were apparently what qualified her for those assignments, since the scope of her work included snippets about the background history behind the people and places she wrote about. She enjoyed the research and found in it the benefit of learning something new every day. She could never claim to be bored.

When she had a break Megan toyed with the idea for a novel, but still had not fleshed out more than a detailed outline. She struggled along thinking that fiction was simply not her forte. She was used to finding facts and tying them together into a coherent piece with a definite ending or conclusion in mind, and could not imagine how others could create a different world out of whole cloth.

Megan read a great deal of the classics in the library net but felt she could never match their authors' styles or imaginations. She laid in her bed every night wishing she could find something to write about that broke the mold before she fell into a deep and mostly dreamless sleep.

One day she was sitting in front of her computer screen, editing the outline once again. "It's not working, it's not working, it's not working!" she complained bitterly to the room. "Why isn't it working?"

She glanced over to see her orange cat, whom she named Gandalf, carefully and methodically licking himself clean in the middle of a tumbled stack of datachips sitting on her desk. He glanced up at the sound of her voice and stared at her for a few moments, then resumed washing.

Megan fervently wished her cat could answer. "I just wish someone could tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Little did she know what she was in for when the phone sang its little ringtone into her ear, startling her. She keyed in and said, "Megan Thereau."

The disembodied voice that spoke to her was male, warm and accented, sounding

slightly like Hungarian. Its tone was friendly. *"Hello,"* it said, *"My name is Lucien Arkanon. I hope I am not interrupting you, Miss Thereau. Are you free to speak with me right now?"*

Megan glanced at the computer screen, the wilted petunias sitting in the planter on the wrought iron plantstand near the broad expanse of window. The second hand of the analog clock on her wall moved down three notches. She willed down the urge to scream her frustration and took a deep breath.

"I think I can spare the time," she replied calmly.

"Excellent. I have read your articles with great interest, Miss Thereau. Tell me... are you working on a project that could be set aside for a brief time? I would like to enlist you for a freelance assignment that may be more lucrative and rewarding than the one you are working on now."

She thought about that for a moment, then said, *"I am constantly at work in some form or other, Mister Arkanon --"*

"Just call me Lucien," he interjected with a small chuckle. *"I find that putting ourselves on a first name basis leads to a much warmer relationship, don't you?"*

"-- Lucien. But there is nothing that demands my urgent attention at this time," she continued. *"What would it be about?"*

He said, *"I would like to invite you to come out and see us."*

This piqued her interest. *"Us?"*

"I belong to a very private and select community. We are trying to settle a very important issue in our debate and would like to get an outsider's perspective. Does that sound like something you would be interested in writing about?"

"What kind of debate?" she asked.

"One which could determine a new direction and focus for our projects. Whether we should attempt to reveal ourselves to the outside world, and what the consequences might be for us if we did."

For a moment Megan thought he was the leader of some kind of aberrant cult trying to cultivate free publicity. Such things were rare but not unheard of. *"Are you talking about a religious community, Mister --uh, Lucien?"*

"No. Nothing so mundane as that," the sexy voice replied. *"We are...it would be very difficult to explain without showing you, and I have come a long way. May I come up?"*

Megan felt a creepy feeling run up her spine. She asked, *"where are you calling from?"*

The words caught her unprepared. *"Quite close by. In fact, I am standing in the lobby of your apartment house."*

Megan's breath caught in her throat. He could be a stalker, too. Such things had happened to other journalists with bad results. Then, as if he could feel her apprehension he continued. *"You need not fear me. My offer is quite genuine. Look out your window."*

Slowly, Megan forced herself to get up from her chair and went to the window. She looked, and saw a tall man standing on the ground floor of the lobby below, looking straight up at her.

He was clad head to toe in black. His hair was dark and long, tied back neatly into a ponytail. His face was very pale, and he kept a hand up to shade it from the late afternoon sun streaming down through the skylight. His other hand was pressed to his ear. He was amazingly handsome, smiling with rosy lips that stood out against his skin, and he waved with his other hand to show that he had seen her.

In that instant Megan remembered the stories her grandfather used to tell her when she was very young; about the strange people he had met when he was a spacer running cargo out to Altair Four; people who kept to themselves and only appeared from time to time among the general populace. He told her they were more than human. He said they were waiting for the time when they would be called upon to save the world.

Of course, that meant little to her then because she was only five years old and did not understand what he meant. She thought it was a wonderful fairy tale until she heard other rumors herself years later. Then the legend was shoved to the back of her mind by other, more pressing and important events.

This man Lucien looked like one of them.

Her curiosity buried her apprehension. Megan waved back and said, "Please come up."

He nodded and replied, "*I will be there directly.*" Then the connection went dead.

Megan looked down at her shabby appearance. When she was writing she was prone to throw on just enough to be decent in case a delivery man came to the door, and she did not really care if the house was clean or not. She went into her bedroom and looked in the closet for something nice to wear while her cat danced around on the bed demanding attention. She was so excited that she found herself unable to choose, and managed to throw on a blue tee shirt and a pair of jeans just as the door chimed. "I'm coming!" she called while she frantically searched for her shoes. "I'll be right there!"

She took just enough time to comb her fingers through her hair and pushed it out of her face while she raced to the door and opened it.

Lucien was tall, about six feet four, and his head nearly brushed the overhead portion of the lintel as he stood in the threshold. His body was lean and solid as a tree trunk. Megan got the sudden impression that he was out of place, from some other space and time, but that could have been part of the romantic haze that had formed in her mind about him. Close up she could not look into his silver grey eyes without feeling off balance; like she was about to faint, and she was not prone to fainting at the sight of a handsome man. Quite the opposite, sometimes to near embarrassment. "Come in," she said. "I'm sorry about the mess, but I was not expecting visitors today."

He passed in and stood looking around at the interior of her apartment while Megan rushed to clear the clutter of unsorted laundry sitting on her living room couch and moved the pile into the bedroom. "It's quite all right," he replied.

When she returned he smiled down at her like an older man, though he did not look that old. His teeth were white and even, with canines that seemed longer than the rest.

Megan stared up at him, suddenly at a loss for words, and her wit deserted her. For a long awkward moment they stood silently. Then he broke the silence with that melodic voice again.

"It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Miss Thereau," he said, and put his right hand out toward her to shake.

She looked down at it. He had piano player's hands, with long slim fingers and strong tendons. He wore a silver ring with the design of a diamond on it in onyx. His fingernails were tapered and sported a strange sheen of pearl. It was not unusual to see men wear makeup and polish their nails if they chose, but everything about Lucien appeared natural.

When Megan took it his hand his skin was cold and dry to the touch like snakeskin. She let go almost too quickly, willed down the odd tremor again and hid it with a shy smile. "Just call me Megan," she told him. "Please, make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Tea?" *Me?*

"Nothing for me, thank you," he replied with a short smile. "But please do not stand on ceremony." He moved toward the cleared couch and sat down while Megan tore herself away from the spot she had rooted herself on and went into the kitchen.

When she returned to the living room with her tea she saw that Gandalf had planted himself in the stranger's lap and was purring like mad while Lucien fondled his ears with a calm affectionate expression on his face. Gandalf (the traitor!) was quite territorial, and for him to accept this stranger like an old friend of the family was the height of hypocrisy for an old cat who hissed at everyone else and hid under the bed. Especially whatever manfriends Megan brought home with her who met with his instant and final disapproval.

"You have an interesting pet," Lucien said. "What is his name?"

"Gandalf," she replied.

"It suits him. He is an old soul in a new life. His wisdom is in loving you without condition, and I think he tries his best to protect you though he does not always succeed. I suspect that he reacts differently to others, but they could never compete with the rapport you two share. I am honored that he has accepted me."

Megan thought his remark a display of rare insight. "That is amazing," she said. "It's as if you could read his mind. He understands me, far better sometimes than I do myself. I can talk to him about things I never share with others. When I am done talking, all he wants to do is play. Maybe he helps me keep a better perspective on life because of it. I spoil him terribly."

"Or perhaps he thinks you are another cat," Lucien replied, as he continued to stroke Gandalf. "You do have an independent spirit. You live alone but you have your work and the friendship of your community to rely on. Some of us have been less fortunate in that regard."

The kernel of curiosity grew into a flame with that cryptic remark. She moved to the plush easy chair she had put close to the holovision set and sat down. "Now. Tell me about this debate you are having among your community," she said, keeping her tone professional.

Lucien picked Gandalf up and set him on the floor, then brushed some of the hair from his arms and lap. The fabric of his black suit seemed to repel both dust and cat hair. In fact, it seemed to repel light as well, but Megan had to think it was made of some special textile she was not familiar with, and it seemed that black suited him far too well.

He crossed his arms and said, "before I explain I would like to clarify a few details. Whatever you write about us must not be disclosed to anyone else while you are working on this project. Not even your closest friends may know what you learn until it is finished."

"That would be a given in my profession," she replied. "I never reveal the identity of my sources without their consent."

He smiled. "Good. Also, in order for you to understand more about our community I ask that you come to spend time with us. Are there any projects you anticipate that would prevent your staying at our compound for at least two weeks?"

"Two weeks?!" she exclaimed, startled at the strength of her own voice. But his request did not seem unreasonable. Other journalists were known to spend months, even as long as a year on a given project.

Lucien looked a little crestfallen. "Too much time?" he asked, his lips forming a charming pout as if he had just been denied a cookie.

Megan hastened to correct herself. "No. I'm sorry, that's not what I meant," she replied. "It's just that I did not think this was going to turn into a new project right away. Have you approached others about this?"

"Actually, it is precisely because of the scope and integrity of your reporting that I came to ask you specifically," he replied. "I have read your work. It is thoughtful, and full of salient facts and details that enable the reader to relate to the subject matter. I wonder why you have not won a Pulitzer Prize by now."

"Perhaps because the winner is not selected according to his or her popularity or mass appeal but on the body of one's work over a series of years. The candidate is selected by a group of judges who decide the winner, and they are kept anonymous to the news community. I have not written nearly enough to be considered," she said.

"Oh, I see. I did not understand how that process worked," Lucien replied. "But that does not matter. Aside from that are there any other obstacles to your accepting this assignment?"

Megan tried to hedge against the temptation to say yes right away. "Well, I have to think about it," she said. "How large is your community? How many of you are engaged in this debate?"

"There are thirteen of us who make up a central council. The rest of the community channels their concerns to us through their local delegates, and we in turn decide what is to be done."

"It sounds a lot like a very democratic process," she said.

"It is, in many ways. But ultimately it falls to me to make the final decision or break the tie vote. Unfortunately we are at an impasse. I cannot make a wise decision that will please everyone, but I must soon for I am under a great deal of pressure from

both sides of the issue. You see what a monumental dilemma that would present.”

“It is difficult for the leader of any group to make that kind of decision,” Megan agreed. “Do you want me to write the story of your debate, or about your community as a whole as it struggles with the outcome? I think I should be thorough if you want me to present a fair and balanced view of the issue involved.”

Lucien shifted back and thought for a moment. He seemed pleased with her question. “With both if you like. You may take as much time as you like if two weeks is not long enough. You will have everything you need in abundance. Materials, research, and so on, plus access to our library at any time, day or night. You may conduct interviews with whomever you like. Do you think it a suitable challenge to your journalistic skills?”

Megan willed down the sudden enthusiasm coming up from the center of her being. It did sound like a wonderful project had just jumped into her lap. Her heart said *yes!* while her brain warned her not to rush into it. “When do you need to render a decision?” she asked.

He sat farther back and smiled, revealing his white but sharp looking teeth. “We have been arguing over this particular decision for several decades. They are waiting on me, not the other way around.”

She was not sure she heard right. How old was this man sitting in front of her? She stared into his eyes, breathless, unable to speak again until he reached over and touched her arm. “Megan?” he said.

The cold touch made her jump. “I’m sorry,” she said. “May I think about it, and tell you what I decide tomorrow?”

He blinked and smiled again. “Of course. Sleep on it. Call me and let me know. I will be waiting.” Then he glanced down at the chronometer around his slender wrist and said, “I must be going now.”

Megan guided him to the door. He paused in the open doorway and said to her, “If you turn this down I feel all of us will be very disappointed. I hope you will join us and learn more about our little world. You may find kindred spirits there, along with the benefit of a new and interesting topic to write about.”

“You haven’t told me what you call your community,” she said.

He smiled again and said, “it is called Nagrasanti. Farewell, until we meet again.”

For an instant it was as if time stood still. And then he was gone, suddenly; vanished like a puff of vapor. Megan started as if she had been released from a trance, and looked down the narrow hall for some sign of him but it was like he was never there.

A sudden chill went up her spine again and she closed the door, wondering how long she had been standing there after he walked away. She must have lost focus, the way she had done when she was younger; moments when she lost all track of time and space and her mind seemed to go somewhere else. Yes, that had to be the answer, because she did not believe in magic.

This only reinforced her curiosity, and she wondered what she would be getting into if she did say yes. All her journalistic instincts were up and active, ready to be put

to use. She turned to the unfinished novel sitting on the computer screen and stared at it while chewing nervously on her thumbnail, at war with herself. She could turn down his offer and be losing the opportunity of a lifetime to document a new facet of humanity living in isolation, or she could keep going writing the long-winded failure in front of her and lose her perspective.

After all, a good journalist never thought about winning anything. The work was about keeping track of the facts and events of human history and recording the truth, without any hope of a reward except for the satisfaction of a job well done.

And there was another motivation for accepting his offer. Megan was now intensely curious about Lucien himself. Something about him stirred a deep affection, as if she had fallen in love, but she could hardly divine why this stranger triggered such a feeling. No man she knew had made such an impression on her before.

After she fed Gandalf and bedded down to sleep Megan laid back in the dark and thought carefully. She tried to examine the situation from every angle, tried to find something that would change her mind; but the only answer she kept coming up with was *do it. What have you got to lose?*

Then her thoughts drifted to Lucien himself, and her mind conjured all sorts of romantic fantasies about him. She willed down her overactive imagination though she could not get him out entirely. "This is crazy," she said to herself. "He's just a man, for Chris'sakes." But before fate could answer fatigue finally won and she drifted off to sleep.

2

The next morning Megan tried to begin her day as usual, and spent the first hour reading over her outline, tweaking, tinkering, trying to add some zest to her story. But after another whole day of butting heads with it she knew she had writer's block. She also knew that it had something to do with her newfound zeal to do the Nagrasanti project instead, and it was distracting her. By now her mind was leaning heavily toward accepting Lucien's proposal.

When the sun went down and tinged the sky orange she finally accepted that she needed a long break from the routine and her decision was made. She keyed the caller ident code on her phone and called Lucien, who answered it on the first ring.

"Lucien Arkanon," his velvet voice said.

"It's Megan Thereau," she said. "Is your offer still open?"

She could hear the delight in his voice. "Yes. I am so pleased that you made the choice to join us. How long will it take for you to pack your things for transport?"

"Not long, I hope. I'm only bringing a few clothes and my datapad. I must also let my apartment manager know that I will be gone and to take care of Gandalf --"

"Bring Gandalf with you," he advised her. "He will be most welcome there. There are other animals living among us. I suspect that if Gandalf could speak he would not like to be separated from you."

Megan breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad," she said. "He's an old friend and I would not like to leave him behind."

"Good. That is settled then. I will collect you within an hour?"

"An hour," she agreed, and closed the link. Then she called the manager. After that she hurried about her apartment and cleared everything into a livable clutter, then threw a few articles of clothing into a suitcase and dressed. Gandalf persisted in getting in front of her wherever she went, nearly tripped her twice; but he seemed aware that something exciting was happening and he wanted in on it.

When she was ready to leave Megan scooped him up, rubbed his broad forehead and kissed it, then tucked him into his pet carrier. With a last look at her apartment, she closed the door and locked it, then went down the hall pulling her luggage toward the elevator.

When she reached the lobby Megan stood waiting for the aircar, but was not prepared for the sleek black winged limousine that came straight down out of the sky and landed at the entrance on a puff of compressed air. At first she was not sure if it was for her until Lucien opened the passenger side door and walked up the stairs toward her. She met him halfway. "I must say that I am quite impressed," she said.

He smiled as he replied, "we like to travel in comfort. May I help you with your things?"

"Thank you," she said, and handed her suitcase to him. He guided her to the car and opened the door for her. Megan slid onto the warmest, most comfortable plush cushion in the world. When he closed the door she was plunged into near darkness. The windows had been tinted black, so the light coming through them was reduced to but a fraction of its brilliance. She balanced the carrier on her lap to keep Gandalf close.

Lucien went around to the other side and got in next to her. "Strap yourself in," he said. "We will be going into orbit."

While Megan obeyed, Gandalf looked around with big round eyes and uttered a confused meow. "We're going on a trip, Gandalf," Megan said to him. "I'm right here. Don't worry."

"Gandalf is not used to travel?" Lucien asked.

"When I first met him as a kitten he came to me declawed," she replied. "He's been a house cat ever since."

"How unfortunate," he remarked. "Cats are remarkably intelligent and resilient creatures. To rob them of their natural abilities is cruel and unusual punishment."

Megan smiled. "I agree. That's why I took him in and gave him the love and care he needed."

The engine revved up with a faint rumbling whine, and the car shot straight up again into the sky. Megan had a view of the city receding below her while the acceleration pressed her firmly to her seat. Lucien's voice kept her attention fixed on him. "It should not take longer than ten minutes to reach our destination."

"Where is it?" she asked.

His smile was charming and secretive, with a mischievous quirk to his generous lips. "You'll see."

For the next few minutes they sat in silence while she looked out the dark windows and saw the Earth rotating slowly beneath the car. It was a beautiful sight:

clouds covering the midwestern plains to the east, and patches of light dotting the dark Pacific coast. In another moment the car dipped lower into the clouds and punched through them, gliding quietly down to an area southeast of the bright patch that was San Francisco. It was dark at first, but as it came closer Megan could see a few small street lamps and house lights arranged around a central patch of darkness, then the dusky rush of white water falling over a cliff into a deep dark ravine.

The limousine settled on a landing pad at the top of a gorge overlooking a small river valley. Spanish style white adobe castles topped with terra cotta clay roofs greeted her as she climbed out of the car and was caught by a cold rush of northern air. The tallest bell tower sported a black flag with a figure of a red winged dragon on it, and it danced and fluttered in the wind.

As she got out the air whipped her hair into her face and she used one hand to brush it away, while her other hand clung tightly to Gandalf's carrier. "Yes, it is colder up here," Lucien told her. "In the summer the wind moves down the ravine and cools the place, especially on the hottest days."

"That's very convenient. You never have the need for conditioners," she replied.

He shook his head. "It is not for us, it is for our human friends. We are less vulnerable to extremes of the weather."

His remark was so strange. What did he mean? "I'm sorry. I don't understand," she said.

In answer, he smiled down at her and said, "you'll learn all there is to know in time. That is why you are here."

That seemed to be a sensible reply so Megan did not pursue it. She spotted the driver, who was taking her suitcase out of the trunk. He was dressed in a plain light blue shirt, jeans, and brown cowboy boots. His dark brown hair was tied back, and his eyes were warm chocolate brown. His features were a little broader than Lucien's, suggesting mestizo or gypsy descent, or possibly native American, but his skin was almost as pale and fine as Lucien's. He smiled when he saw she was looking at him. He came to her with her luggage and waited silently for Lucien to lead the way down a narrow lighted footpath from the pad into the upper terrace of the compound.

"This is Tomas Lightfoot," Lucien said. "He is a member of the Poloño band of native Americans. His tribe has been here for over twelve centuries."

"Pleased to meet you," Megan said.

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Thereau," Tomas replied. "Welcome to Nagrasanti."

"Is that a word of your language, Mister Lightfoot?" she asked.

Tomas shook his head with a patient smile. "No."

Lucien added, "it is a name from antiquity, like Gandalf." As he spoke he led the way down the stairs onto the terrace of the upper compound. But he did not explain further.

Megan asked, "how long has Nagrasanti been here?"

"Since eighteen forty nine," Lucien replied. "When California entered statehood. Then, all things were new in that century of progress."

"You mean, this compound has been here for over five hundred years?" she

blurted. The fact shattered any illusions she had of a hastily built cult community based on some secret ritual or lifestyle.

"Yes," he said. "You sound surprised."

"I am. I have never heard of this place before."

"Of course not," Lucien replied. "We have kept ourselves isolated to the world community, have we not? Therefore, only a chosen few know of our location and existence."

"Is this a city or a commune?"

"In fact, we promoted ourselves as a commune back in nineteen sixty four, when the cultural revolution of the hippie was just growing into a force for social change," Lucien explained. "We were all flower children then, and I was their guru. I remember that it was great fun to mingle among the young, listening to their music, protesting the wars, joining the crowds of people protesting the development of nuclear weapons. We were there at Woodstock, at Monterey and in San Francisco, thriving on the life blood of the emerging freedom of expression that marked that generation. Later, we evolved into an artists' colony where promising creators could come and take refuge from the distractions of city life so they could focus all their energies on their work. Still later, we tried our hands at making wine and fresh breads and other organic foods to sell at festivals under our own label. It grew into quite a cottage industry. Nagrasanti is a community ever changing, ever adapting to its surroundings, keeping pace with time and human society."

The way he spoke confused her. It sounded as if he had been there from the beginning, but she was certain she must have misheard him. "That sounds like a rich and varied microcosm of the larger world," Megan said.

He nodded, then took a deep breath. "That is why we are engaged in this debate. I felt that it was time to reveal ourselves and be accepted or rejected for who we truly are, and there are those in the community and on the council who disagree with me. We welcome those of our kind into the fold, and give sanctuary to others in need of it. But we ourselves are hiding, Megan, not giving ourselves the kind of freedom we encourage others to have."

"But you appear to be quite human."

"You're very observant," Lucien replied smoothly. "Some of us are fullbloods and genetic hybrids, and the rest are not. They have been... upgraded. I think that is a better word than 'transformed'."

She could not look into his eyes just then. Here she had judged him human but either eccentric or a mutant, a partial albino with mixed traits, and Tomas was like that, too. The thought that he was an alien from some other planet had not occurred to her. Perhaps it was due to all the excitement of meeting him. Just being close to him was a bit of a strange and wonderful thrill, but Megan had to work hard to put a journalist's neutrality on the spin. "You convert humans into your kind? How? and more important, why?"

"Those answers will come later," Lucien said. "I want you to meet some of the other people living in our community. Talk to them, get their stories. Once you hear

them you will have a better understanding of what and who we are, and why we are not a threat to the rest of your world."

They arrived at a landing in the footpath that led to the entrance to one of the most beautiful houses Megan had ever seen. It was an architectural wonder of surpassing simplicity and beauty; a split-level mansion with white washed stucco walls and romanesque arches at the entrance and around the windows. It looked reminiscent of an old California mission house, down to the lovely curlicues in the blue ceramic tiles at her feet, yet also having the clean and modern lines of a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Hodgepodge would never describe it.

Lucien led her into a large entry parlor. Here the Spanish influence in the furnishings was ever present, from the wrought iron grills on the wide double windows to the banisters on the narrow stairs leading up into the upper floor of the house. The upper floor faced onto the parlor, making it into an interior courtyard.

His warm voice rang against the walls as he said, "Tomas, take Miss Thereau's things up to the large bedroom overlooking the valley, and I will show her in later. Make sure that Gandalf is comfortable."

"Of course, Lucien," Tomas replied. He smiled at Megan as he took the carrier from her hand. Up close she could see his eyes, and there was the slight glint of red in them. But the glimpse was cut off when he turned away and climbed the stairs. His voice was gentle and soft as he said, "Come, Gandalf. I will give you some food and a treat, and a toy to play with. Would you like that?"

Gandalf astonished her by responding with a soft meow in reply.

When he disappeared from sight Lucien led Megan through a door into the central part of the house. Here she was admitted to a large open space with a high wooden ceiling, decorated with motifs and flourishes, hung with wrought iron candelabras that sported small pointed bulbs evocative of candleflame. The walls were white and clean, covered with paintings and photographs of ancestors and relatives. The furnishings were of darkly finished Spanish oak, and the wooden floors were covered with broad panels of Moroccan carpet.

Megan had a feeling that she had been here before because everything about the place seemed familiar. Or it may have been that she had seen something like it on the National Geographic site and it had stuck in her mind as particularly memorable. But what especially struck her was the warmth and feeling of comfort she had with the place. Welcoming, familiar. Like home.

Lucien gestured with his open palm toward the couch near the fireplace, which was a huge marble affair that occupied half of the far wall and carved with dragons flanking the maw that served as the hearth. There was evidence that it was used quite often. The back wall was dark with soot. Megan sat down against deep maroon embroidered sateen lining the couch and leaned back to study her surroundings some more. "You have a very lovely home, Lucien," she said.

He looked up and around. "Thank you. I must say I have gotten so used to the place that I hardly think of it that way anymore." He shrugged. "It is just home." He hesitated before he sat down next to her on the couch, but not too close. "May I offer

you coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee," she replied. "Not too sweet, and a little cream."

At this he did not move or say anything, but sat back and closed his eyes. She waited, not sure what he was doing at first.

A young Indian woman wearing a beautiful gold and scarlet embroidered sari appeared at the threshold of another door, bearing a tray laden with a carafe and cups for drinking coffee. Her skin was pale olive, but still dark enough to pass for caste. She wore a red diamond mark in the middle of her forehead, and her long black hair was loose and streamed around her as she entered the room. She wore gold jewelry on her hair, neck and arms, and a tinkle of small bells sounded among her skirts as her rounded hips swayed with every step. Her silver grey eyes were sparkling and hypnotic.

"This is my eldest daughter Parvati," Lucien said. "Parvati, I want you to meet Miss Megan Thereau."

The devi put the service down on the table in front of them and stretched out her hand in greeting. Her voice was warm and exotic like Lucien's but accented with the lilt of well educated Hindu. "Welcome to Nagrasanti, Miss Thereau. I am very pleased to meet you. I have been reading your many articles with great interest. May I call you Megan?"

When Megan took her hand it was as cold and dry as Lucien's. "The pleasure is mine, Parvati," she replied.

"I hope that we will meet later to talk and to share anecdotes about our travels," Parvati said.

"I am sure we will," she replied. She was not too muddled by the excitement of it all to observe that Parvati was a mature woman who looked only a few years younger than her father. This left her feeling even more confused.

"I will leave the two of you to talk, then. Call again if you need me, father," she said.

Lucien caught her arm in his white grip while he kissed her hand and patted it. "I will."

With a short smile at Megan she turned and seemed to disappear. She was there one second and gone the next, just like Lucien from her door. Before she took a drink of her coffee a female voice sounded almost next to her ear. "Father, you didn't tell me you had visitors."

Megan turned and looked up into the silver grey eyes of a white skinned young woman of Swedish or Norwegian stock; tall and slender, with a short perky nose and the palest blonde hair she had ever seen. She was wearing a soft teal blue dress with a collar that revealed her shoulders and a peek of cleavage without seeming obviously slutty. The dress was covered in folk motifs embroidered in dark blue silk. She wore a pair of stark black leg huggers underneath.

"I thought I told you to check on the wine stock?" Lucien asked, looking slightly perturbed.

"I finished already, father. Well, did you or didn't you?" she insisted.

"Freya, this is Megan Thereau. Megan, my obnoxious troublemaker of a baby daughter, Freya," Lucien said with a tone of affection in his voice.

"Baby!? Why, father I am --" her voice cut off when he raised a hand to silence her. It seemed that she was the impulsive sort, quick to go off like an overcharged pulse rifle, but his two fingers were all that were required to put her in check. Her face wilted into a sullen pout as she continued, "Sorry. I forgot." Then she returned her focus to Megan and put out her hand. "Very pleased to meet you," she said.

"And you as well," Megan replied as she took it. The dazzling white smile that greeted her was electric.

Lucien took charge as he said, "Why don't you go help Parvati in the kitchen and leave us alone to talk, hmmm?"

"Oh, very well," Freya said, as if she was in charge. She said to Megan, "I will see you later, won't I? I hope we'll have chance to talk. It isn't often that we have visitors from the outside."

"Of course," Megan said.

Lucien watched her disappear like her sister, then turned to Megan with a short chuckle. "She is a sweet and accomplished young woman but she is also Loki personified. She is energetic, precocious, and sometimes prone to mischief if she is not held back."

Now that came to the crux of the matter. Megan still could not understand what was going on. The age issue nagged at her like a forgotten appointment. "I must admit that I am a little confused," she said, as she took another sip of coffee. "They look more to me like your sisters than your daughters."

"In my -- family, we are all blessed with great longevity and youthful vigor," he said. "But you have not met my eldest son yet. Alexander and his wife Antonia are in isolation awaiting the birth of their first child. I am soon to be a grandfather."

Megan nearly dropped her cup, and her mouth fell open. She stared at him almost paralyzed with amazement.

"Perhaps I had better explain," he said with a small smile. "I sense your confusion, and I know that there is a lot to absorb. I had hoped to cushion the shock but now I must tell you the truth." He hesitated a moment, then continued. "Megan, I am six thousand four hundred and eighty two years old."

Megan's coffee caught in her throat. She broke into a fit of coughing. Her eyes teared up and squeezed shut while she put the cup down on the surface of the table in front of her and tried to govern her convulsing windpipe. She had the idea that he was older than he looked but not that old. The inconsistency crowded out her sense of reality. Sudden blind simian terror galvanized her and she stood up, trying to escape.

She felt his hand seize hers in a grip of cold steel and his warm voice reverberated in her ears and her mind. "*Calm down, Megan. Listen to the sound of my voice and do not fear me.*"

Before the last echoes died away she was calm again as if her body was immersed in comforting warm water. Her heart slowed to a more normal pace and she could breathe again as reason reasserted itself. "I am all right," Megan said, panting, and sat

back down.

Lucien let her go slowly and carefully, his face reflecting his concern. After a few more seconds of reeling from the shock she nodded to him and said, "yes, you're right. It is all quite hard to absorb. I could accept that you were really sixty, or eighty, or even a hundred, but to say that you are thousands of years old...?"

"Was not Methusela thousands of years old?" he reminded her gently.

"Yes, but you are not Methusela," she replied roughly while she tried to clear her throat.

He closed his eyes and chuckled again. "True. Very true. But then, how do you know that he was not one of us?"

There he had her. "I don't," Megan said. "He is a character in biblical mythology, whereas you are real... at least, I think you're real..."

His eyes opened again and he looked at her. "Megan, I am as real as you see me. You have touched me. You have heard my voice. If you cannot rely on the truth of your five senses, how can you possibly understand the realm of possibility? There are worlds, whole universes before you that you cannot see or hear because you think you are blind."

She sat there, stunned, in shock. "I'm sorry," Megan said. "You must think me terribly dense but I just don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

Lucien studied her for a few long seconds. "Perhaps I spoke too soon," he said finally. "Why don't I take you up to your room, where you can freshen up and find your center? After you have had a chance to rest we'll begin your course of interviews. I have several people who have expressed an interest in telling their stories."

"Yes," she said, still wondering and feeling off balance. "I ... I think I can start later this evening."

"Good!" He stood and offered Megan his hand. "Come along then. Gandalf must be wondering where you are."

He led Megan up the stairs to a bedroom the size of a studio apartment. It had large windows overlooking the waterfall, with a sweeping panorama of the valley below just past the rushing water that tumbled over the cliff. The windows were barred with wrought iron so that one could not climb out or fall accidentally to one's death. The glass was clear in the center, surrounded by a border of stained glass of alternating white diamonds and roses. Dark green curtains with filmy subcurtains of white gauze were drawn aside and tied back, to show the stars in their thousands unfiltered by the haze of city air.

The whole bedroom was decorated with a decidedly feminine flair, with painted white furniture. The bed was large, almost king size, with a dark green sateen comforter that looked warm and toasty. Daisies and white roses were placed in white porcelain vases on small tables of green marble. The wooden floor was carpeted with a large green rug sporting a giant mandala at its center. The whole room felt just as cozy as it looked, and as it happened emerald green was Megan's favorite color. The small private bathroom had tiles with seashells, and ivory towels. Someone had placed a litter pan on the floor next to the commode.

She wondered how Lucien knew her taste to redecorate the room, or had it always been like this? She was far too rattled at the moment to think for certain.

Gandalf had made camp in the middle of the bedspread. At their entrance he woke, stretched languidly and rolled over to display his tummy for his ritual rubbing. This too was quite unusual, but Megan thought that if he was comfortable with this place she should be, too. Animals had a strange way of knowing if and when there was danger.

"It's all so lovely," she said.

"Thank you," Lucien replied. "I will leave you now to unpack and rest. Come down when you are ready." With that, he closed the door softly on his way out.

Megan wandered aimlessly about the room. As she did so she slowly shed some of her apprehension. She found her suitcase and things placed on a chair next to a small desk and began to unpack. When she had done that she came to the bed and stared down at her cat. Gandalf squirmed for attention, rolling his overfed body from side to side, reaching for her as he made small plaintive noises amid his purring.

"Gandalf," she said as she sat down next to him and stroked his furry belly, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

3

After she took a short nap and then a warm shower, Megan dressed and wandered down the stairs to the living parlor, where she found Lucien standing at the center of a cluster of young attractive people. He appeared to be holding court and giving them instruction, but her human ears were not strong enough to translate the sotto voce vibrations that teased at her eardrums into words. He stopped speaking when he saw her.

"Ah, there you are," he said in a louder voice. "Everyone, this is Megan Thereau."

She was greeted by a chorus of hellos. Megan responded with a quiet "hello" of her own.

Lucien said, "she is ready to take down your stories. But you will draw lots so that she will not be too overwhelmed. Each of you will have an opportunity to tell her your story, so I will introduce you in turn. Are we agreed?"

"Yes," they all said, three of them in almost perfect unison. They were younger than the rest, teenage boys; but they spoke as one even though they were not triplets. In fact the youngest of them did not look at all like the other two siblings.

"Alright. I have here a pot --" At this some of the group broke up laughing. The pot was an ancient black polystyrene cauldron used to hold candy for Halloween, already brittle and splitting apart from age. The laughter was infectious as their leader tried to put a more serious face on the situation with little success. "Here. What is wrong?" he asked.

"How long have you had this thing?" one of them asked.

He looked at it closely, admiring its condition. "Too long, I think," Lucien replied with a short chuckle. "Please people, settle."

When they had finally calmed down he continued. "Now then. I am going to put

little slips of duralene with numbers on them in the pot. You will each draw one and only one slip, and if your number matches the one in my mind you will get to go first. No cheating, now. Do not try to read my mind and pick out the slip because it will not work. Are you ready?"

"Ready!" they declared all at once.

"Keep your numbers. I will call upon each of you in turn, and you never know what the next number will be," Lucien said. "All right. Here goes." He brought up his other hand and dropped a sheaf of slips into the black pot, then swished it around and stirred at them until they were properly distributed into a random pile. Each person reached into the darkness and drew out a slip, looked at it, then quietly stepped away.

One of them, a tall lean man with a head of golden brown hair and hazel eyes, hesitated before he put his hand in. He looked to Megan like a veteran, but from which war she could not guess. His upper lip was adorned with the well-trimmed brush of a thin moustache. "What if it's zero?" he asked, prompting more laughter.

"Then there is something seriously wrong with the universe," Lucien replied with a wry smile. "No, there is no zero."

"I mean, just so it's all clear," the young man insisted.

Lucien uttered a patient sigh. "Robert, do you seriously think I would put a zero in this pot?"

"It's happened before," Robert replied. "You remember what happened afterward." Giggles from some of the others greeted his remark.

Lucien's smile was broad and appreciative. "Yes. That's why I chose to keep it out this time."

Robert gave him a thumbs up sign, drew out a slip and stepped back. He looked at his number, rolled his eyes with an expression of chagrin on his face and thrust it at one of the others. The friend was a tall man in black who had dark hair and grey wolfish eyes. He took one look, then grinned and said, "don't worry. Maybe he's saving the best for last."

"All right," Lucien's voice cut through the distraction. "Michael, you go first. Your number is forty two, is it not?"

"Yes," Michael replied. He was medium tall with a solid muscular build, a cloud of dark curling hair and intense cornflower blue eyes. He wore a blue-grey shirt and dark blue jeans, and a broad silver chain around his white neck. He projected raw animal vitality in his body language. Like Lucien all his male beauty and magnetism were natural. Megan felt like she wanted him to kiss her.

As he walked toward her she tucked the thought away into a proper niche in her mind. After all, if he was not married he was probably gay, but the way he looked at her told her he was not. He was like a lion stalking his prey, one slow gracile inch at a time.

Lucien said, "Megan, I want you to meet Michael Burton."

The young man put his hand out toward her and said, "I'm very pleased to meet you, Miss Thereau. I used to write articles for the old San Francisco Chronicle before I made the change and came to live here."

His hand was just as cold as Lucien's. Megan began to wonder if they were all like that; cold to the touch but warmhearted and friendly. "You are... were a journalist?" she asked.

"More of an investigative reporter in search of the next eye-catching headline, but my heart always leaned toward journalism," he nodded. "I still am, and keep up with the latest news. I still write. Mostly fiction, and a little nonfiction in my spare time. I am a compound historian now and my duties keep me busy here most of the time."

"But, you don't look like a reporter," she blurted unconsciously, fascinated by those intense blue eyes.

"What is a reporter supposed to look like?" he rejoined with a sly sexy smile.

Megan found herself suddenly at a loss for words.. Then he broke through her trance by saying, "let me show you to my cottage, where we can get comfortable. It's not far down the trail."

She was not prepared for the change of scenery, and felt that if he could get her alone with him other things might happen instead of an interview. She covered her thoughts of wild hot sex with cold professional control and told herself to take a cold shower later. "We can't talk here?"

"Would you prefer to talk here? I had it in mind that at my place there would be less of a chance we would be interrupted." He stole a furtive glance at the others as they turned away and scattered, falling into animated conversation. "It's...um... quieter there."

"Oh," she said. "Well then, I suppose it'll be alright..."

They left the group behind and walked out onto the flagstones of the entrance to the house. "It's down this way," he said, pointing to the right. He led Megan down the stepped causeway toward a small cluster of cottages set in a rocky cul de sac. "I spend a lot of my time there, writing and studying when I am not at work in the library. Most of my old articles are preserved on chip. If you'd like I can show them to you."

Michael led the way to a small cozy bungalow at the end of the courtyard. He placed his palm on the control pad and the door swept open. Megan asked, "You don't lock your door?"

He replied, "Here there is no need. There is no crime to speak of in Nagrasanti. We're all part of the same family, you might say."

"No crime at all?" she asked him. "Not even the odd infraction?"

"We do have a code, certain rules and regulations by which we must all abide, or we would not be welcome to stay here. There is a history of a few members having been expelled for their sins against the community, but those are very few and far between. But there hasn't been an expulsion here in over a century."

"I see. But I imagine it would take something quite serious to get expelled," she pressed.

He paused for a few seconds before answering, "yes," then preceded her in. The lamp in the living room came on automatically, probably controlled by the house computer.

The place looked like a haven of spartan neatness. Through an open door Megan

could see a large bedroom furnished with little but a bed, a chest of drawers and a lampstand with a single banker's lamp. This was an unusual trait in a man who looked as active and exciting as he did. She had expected him to be hiding a girlfriend or a wife under those covers but the room was empty. She wondered if the bathroom was just as spare and minimal in decor, but could not see it from where she was standing. She could see the small office through an adjoining door, cluttered with stacks of datachips and a bookcase surrounding the central hub of a laptop computer and a storage tower sitting on a round wooden table.

"Please, make yourself at home," he said, indicating the plain leather couch. "I'll bring you something to drink. What would you like? Coffee, tea, soda... or perhaps something stronger?"

Megan did feel like she needed a drink, after all that she had seen so far. "Do you have wine?" she asked.

"Why yes. Something from our own stock. The house brand. Merlot?"

"That would be fine."

He disappeared into the small kitchen and returned with a long necked bottle covered with a black label that sported a small red dragon at the top and elegant lettering in silver, and two wine glasses.

"I am fond of Merlot myself," he explained while he unwrapped the top and inserted the corkscrew in his hand into the cork with a swift stab. He twisted once and the cork came up out of the bottle without the slightest effort. While he poured the dark red liquid into her glass he said, "the vintage is twenty three fifty six. I remember the grapes were blood red that year and fullbodied in texture and taste. Five years is not too long, is it?"

"No, I suppose not," she replied. "Though I am not a connoisseur."

He handed Megan the glass. For a moment it did look like blood. She swished the liquid in the glass and took a sniff. The aroma was strong and heady. She waited until he had poured his glass and sat down on the couch next to her.

"Cheers," he said, took a sip and watched her expectantly.

Megan sipped, savored the dark liquid on her tongue and marked how sweet and subtle the flavor was, loaded with the promise of fire but not yet there. "Oh. That's good," she said. She took another sip and closed her eyes. "In fact, it's wonderful!"

"Thank you. I grew them myself. It took several graftings to get just the right grape," he said.

"You made this?" she asked, wondering what other talents he had.

He nodded, and there was a strange connection like electricity and a flash of red light as she looked deeper into his blue eyes. She thought the wine was affecting her more than she expected, because the room seemed to move. Megan put it down to her wild infatuation with him and looked away. She decided to take slow careful sips rather than to chug it all down at once, else she would become drunk on just one glass.

She finished halfway and set the glass down on the table, leaned back against the leatherbound cushion, activated her datapad and said, "all right. I'm ready to take down your story. Suppose we begin at the beginning?"

"You mean, my beginning? My childhood, my education?" he asked.

"No. That may be too much. I am not writing a biography. Tell me about the things that made you who you are today, and how you came to be here. Lucien asked me to write about those things that make Nagrasanti what it is as a community and about the debate among you whether to open the door or keep it closed."

"Oh, I see," he said, his face betraying disappointment.

"If you feel like it's too much just let me know," she said.

"No, it's not that... It's just that... how I came to live at Nagrasanti was like a bad dream for me at first, so my story may seem a bit unbelievable, even scary..." He took a deep breath and shifted to get more comfortable. "It was nineteen eighty four..."

Megan realized that Michael Burton, who looked no older than twenty five, was also far older than he looked. Over 400 years older. She tried to calm her nerves and listened intently as his warm hypnotic voice washed over her, telling his story in his own words...

4

"WAIT A Minute! Hold it!" Megan exclaimed as she paused the datapad. "Are you telling me that Corvina was a real vampire? And if he was ...and you..."

"Is," he corrected her.

"... then what are you?" Megan's heart started pounding hard, and she tried to stand up while Michael reached toward her. She shrank away from his grasp and nearly fell trying to avoid it. He stopped before he came another inch, hovering halfway, but his voice stopped her cold.

"No, I won't hurt you," he said. "Calm down, please. I didn't know that Lucien never told you what we were. I thought you knew already." Then his voice changed. It grew deeper, echoed in her ears and her mind. "*Calm down, Megan. There is no need to fear me.*"

Before she knew what was happening the pace of her heart slowed again and she was able to breathe. But she still trembled from the strange chill that moved up her spine. Michael sat down slowly and said, "I'm sorry I frightened you. Please, sit down and listen to the rest of my story."

Part of Megan wanted so much for him to kiss her with passion, and the other part to run away screaming. The voice in the middle called for professional calm and self-restraint. After a few seconds of this private little war reason finally reasserted itself. She had to work hard to master the shakes, but she said, "I'm alright. Just give me another few seconds to catch my breath."

Michael drew back and said not a word while she took another sip of his wine and sat back slowly. Then he explained in a quiet voice, "we are not monsters, Megan. Please understand. We think and feel like you do, have hopes and dreams like you do. We live our lives like ordinary people with only a few exceptions. Is that so hard to accept?"

She said, "are all the others' stories going to be like yours?"

"I'm afraid so," he said, smiling at her ruefully. "And stop thinking you want me

to kiss you because if you're not careful I just might. I'm single. I don't have a girlfriend, and you look like just my type..."

"Yes, all right. Thank you for the warning. Can we continue, please?" she replied with sudden indignance.

At this his smile fell. "Oh. Okay..."

Michael continued. He punctuated his story by showing her some of the chips of his articles. He explained the scope of his reporting while telling her more about what happened. At some point in his narrative he refilled her glass.

Megan paused her datapad again and said, "I'm a little confused. Are you saying that you turned into what you are all by yourself?"

"Yes. It surprised me more than anything else that happened. Alexander explained later that my genetic makeup determined when and how it would happen. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time."

"Alexander Corvina. The leader of the Red Dragons," Megan said to verify her memory.

"Yes. Didn't Lucien tell you? Alexander is his eldest son," Michael explained patiently. "The one you haven't met yet."

"The one who is due to have a baby," she said skeptically.

"That would be an amusing picture," Michael said, smiling as he leaned back and took another sip of Merlot. Not wanting to interrupt his train of thought, she took another sip of her own. Then he continued, "but to answer your question, yes. He and Freya helped me to weather the worst of it and I'm grateful for everything they did for me."

A slight headache formed between Megan's eyes and she became dizzy. She felt suddenly overloaded with information. She set the datapad down on his coffee table and leaned back trying to analyze the source of her discomfort. "I'm sorry, but it's all too much for me right now." She pressed her fingers to the spot trying to banish the sensation.

Michael suggested, "you're tired. Why don't I take you back to the main house, and we can continue this tomorrow? Or later in the evening. Whichever you prefer."

"Yes," she agreed. "So far you have told me an amazing story but my poor grey cells are crying out for rest. I need to cool my brain. Let's try again tomorrow. Would nine be all right?"

"Perfectly," Michael said. "Nine tomorrow morning..."

That was the last thing she heard him say. What happened next became a dark blur that went to black.

Megan woke up suddenly just before dawn with Gandalf's warm furry body snoring next to her on her pillow and that lovely dark green comforter drawn up to her chin. She could not remember how she got there or when. She sat up slowly and discovered she was wearing nothing but her underwear. Her clothes were laid out on the bed as if she had taken them off. The headache was gone, but there was a vague aching feeling

in the side of her neck. By the time she even began to think about it, that sensation was gone, too, and she was still too bleary to stay awake.

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