

# That Old Time Religion



Will A. Sanborn

Thank you to the fans of my work who continue to support me in my creative endeavors. Your comments and feed-back are always appreciated.

Thank you Heather as well, for sharing your artistic vision to help illuminate the world and characters of this story.

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## Author's Notes

I have some fond memories from this story. It was written as part of the National Novel Writing Month challenge, back in November of 2003. Working on “That Old Time Religion” helped me get out of a big writing slump I was in at the time. I’d heard of NaNoWriMo before, but that year I decided to give it a chance. I hadn’t written much of anything in awhile and I hadn’t done a novel-length project since writing “The Journey” many years before. I tend to like shorter stories better, but it was good to get back into a longer project. I started with a glimmer of some ideas and it was a wonderful adventure seeing where it would take me.

There was some writing that was done to pad out the story to get the word-count up, but it’s all good. Looking back at it now, it does all work together to tell the story, and even the side trips helped flesh out the situations and characters. There are two chapters of love scenes which could possibly have happened off camera. However, besides being fun to write and I imagine fun to read as well, they do have elements which are organic to the plot and the characters’ relationships.

In re-reading and editing the novel again, I was happy to see that the story works well in three acts: the set-up of the situation, character interactions and growth, and the final action in the end. Some aspects of the relationships may have happened a little quickly, but I think I was true to how the characters felt to me and I worked at making the romantic and erotic scenes believable.

Anubis was a fun character to write. He started off as both a nod to and a slight poke at how the Egyptian god is portrayed in the furry fandom. While I’d admit it is a little silly to see how much adult attention he gets, I also find his depictions in the artwork attractive and fun. I knew I wanted to do something with him here and it was entertaining to see how he grew into a fully-realized character. He may be a little emotional, but he’s also quite warm and caring. He and Thoth made a good odd couple to pair up. All of the characters evolved nicely and provided the story with lots of emotional impact.

Finally, some people might have wondered about the use of exotics in this novel. I wanted a different word than just “furries” to use in my stories, so I came up with that term. I think it’s descriptive enough, and more evocative and less cumbersome than “anthropomorphic animals.” When I used the term in my short story “Faded Celluloid Dreams” I’d alluded to the exotics being engineered beings, for use in the entertainment industry. Here though, I wanted to suggest that exotics were offshoots of genetics that occurred naturally. I liked the idea of a world populated by both humans and furries, so I tried to allude to that with the exotics. Of course it was necessary for this novel, given how some of the characters have to pose as mortals.



## Chapter 1: Who Mourns for Anubis?

*Every time I turn around, a year has passed me by  
If only we could stop it for a while  
It all goes by so fast, now becomes the past  
It all goes by so fast, and we're never going back  
Thanks to Gravity, "It All Goes by so Fast"*

*Once I walked a moonlit desert, by shooting stars I felt my pleasure  
Now my heart is insulated, I guess my soul is slightly jaded  
But I will find the time one day, to expose these wires again  
I think I can...  
Thanks to Gravity, "Get Used To"*

The music rolled over him like a wave as he entered the club, with the loud rhythmic pounding bass surrounding him. The noise or the pulsating lights didn't hit him as hard as the smells though. He'd gotten used to that from dealing with the crowding of the cities in this new age of man, but the effects could still be overwhelming, at least briefly. There was the scent of male excitement in the air, mixed with the stink of smoke which overpowered it. The former he was not impartial to, but the latter assaulted his sensitive nostrils.

He took a deep breath, drawing the air into his lungs, to acclimate to the new environment. Once he was over the original shock, the effect wasn't too bad. He still wouldn't have chosen this venue under normal circumstances though. Even after all this time he didn't like crowds. He reminded himself why he was there and walked into the fray. He could feel the eyes upon him as he walked through the crowd, but the attention was brief. He'd managed to get a second look from the handsome gentleman guarding the doors, and that was more than usual. Unable to know his true identity, most people took him as another exotic, and as an exotic, being a humanoid avian wasn't usually considered attractive. It was the felines and canids who got most of the attention.

That was just as well though, since he wasn't there to pick up someone. He wasn't interested in that diversion just then, his goal was much more focused. As his eyes adjusted to the flashing lights, the ibis-headed figure moved slowly along, moving his head from side to side, scanning for a familiar face. The majority of the patrons were human, as was to be expected, but this was the city, so there were some exotics among the dancing, mingling bodies. They were easy to spot, and that made his job easier, as he was looking for someone who stood out, like himself.

After he'd walked along the perimeter of the dance floor, having ignored a couple of half-hearted attempts from strangers trying to flirt with him, he could tell the male he was looking for was not there. He wasn't out on the floor at

least. That didn't rule out the other areas though. He noted the tables off against the walls and continued his search in that direction. A few minutes later he'd spied him, a figure who appeared to be a jackal exotic, sitting alone in a dark corner, nursing a drink. That was about typical of him, especially in the state he was apt to be in.

Making his way through the crowd, the avian reached the seated jackal. He'd approached him from the side, so his old friend hadn't seen him. It wasn't until he'd gently laid a hand on the dark canine's shoulder that the jackal had registered his presence.

The jackal turned his head to look up at him; the look of hopeful expectation quickly vanished from his face, to be replaced by surprise. "Thoth, it's you!" he exclaimed as his ears flicked with excitement. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, Anubis" the ibis replied, as he took a seat next to him. The music wasn't as overwhelming back where they were, but it was still loud enough that they needed to talk with their voices raised. He saw the slight gleam in the jackal's eyes as he answered him; no doubt his old friend was relieved to be looking upon a familiar face once again. "But what are you doing here? This is a bit below your usual venues, isn't it?"

Anubis' expression paled slightly. He took a moment to answer, but finally came back with "I needed to be with someone... It's been too long."

Thoth nodded and reached out to touch his old friend's hand. "You could always come back, you don't have to go wandering like this."

"No, that only reminds me of what's been lost."

"So you'd rather drift along as a stranger, than be with your heritage?"

Anubis' ears tilted backwards. "What heritage Thoth? There's nothing left for us in Egypt but ruins. I'd rather spend my time with the living anyway. They don't need us anymore, but they are still vital."

Thoth shook his head slightly. "I wish you could learn to enjoy the afterlife like all of the people you helped to bring there. We had our time, and the torch has been passed."

"But the dynasty was supposed to last for ever, Thoth."

"No, even you know that nothing in this world is eternal. You've seen other great empires fall, just as ours did." He paused as he looked into the jackal god's eyes, studying him. "Just what are you looking for, Anubis? You can't have consorts like you were able to in the old days. I don't think anybody would be all that interested in bedding an ancient god of funerary practices, much less believe you if you told them who you were." He stopped, having seen his friend's reaction, and instantly regretted his words.

Anubis glanced down, breaking eye contact from Thoth. "I know... but it's been so lonely. I figured that people would appreciate this form at least, like they do with the exotics. I just needed to have someone touch me... I want to feel like I have a purpose again, even if just for a night."



Thoth squeezed his hand, and as Anubis looked back up at him, the ibis god could see the jackal's eyes were starting to water. They stared at each other for a few moments, just letting the simple feel of one another's touch connect them.

"How'd you manage to find me anyway?" Anubis finally asked.

"I still have some magic left." Thoth said with a wink, "It took a good deal of searching, especially since you've crossed the great ocean to come to this land." He paused, and then added "I'd heard you'd been gone for some time and I wanted to check up on you, old friend." He punctuated that by brushing his fingers through the black fur on the back of Anubis' hand.

Anubis' expression brightened at that, his ears flicking up. Thoth's eyes were bright at finally having found him. He'd been worried about his old companion wandering alone in this strange new world. He'd also missed the moody jackal and was glad he'd get to spend some time with him again. There was another reason he'd searched him out though, one he wasn't going to mention just then. He'd wait until his compatriot was in a better frame of mind for that.

"Well thank-you for coming to look for me" Anubis replied, and grasped Thoth's hand in both of his.

"I have missed you, old friend... Would you settle for my company to keep you warm tonight?"

"Gladly, hon," the jackal god replied. He let his mouth hang open just slightly, showing a glimpse of his teeth. It was the first genuine smile he'd felt in longer than he cared to think about.

"So, should we retire to someplace better then?"

"Awww, you just got here, why don't we stay awhile and see some more of this new world's culture." Anubis' smile widened as he cocked his ear and added "perhaps I could even get you out on the dance floor..."

Thoth just shook his head again, but said nothing. The gleam in his eyes betrayed the warmth he felt growing in the chambers of his heart at seeing Anubis again. He was remembering the zeal the old jackal possessed, along with his moody disposition, and he could feel his old lover's excitement infecting him.

"Perhaps," he finally said. "Though if I'm going to accept that hospitality, I think more libations are in order" he added with another wink.

Anubis was all too happy to oblige. He was up in an instant and off to the bar, his tail swishing slightly behind him as he walked. It was good to see him happy again, and what did a little celebration hurt? Now that he'd found Anubis, there'd be time for more serious talk and planning later. Thoth realized he could use a little kick-back too; now that he thought about it, it had been some time for himself as well. The quest could wait until tomorrow.



## Chapter 2: Welcome to the Jungle

*There's a big dark town, it's a place I've found  
There's a world going on underground  
They're alive, they're awake  
While the rest of the world is asleep  
Tom Waits, "Underground"*

*I woke up alarmed  
I didn't know where I was at first  
Just that I woke up in your arms  
And almost immediately I felt sorry  
Liz Phair, "Fuck and Run"*

The sound roused him from his sleep, and Thomas opened his eyes at the intrusion to his peaceful slumber. He blinked when he realized he wasn't in his hotel room. A moment later he figured out that he was in the gypsy's trailer. Not only that, but he was in the gypsy's bed, and even nestled against the warm body of the gypsy herself as she lay sleeping beside him. He took in the sight of the blue-skinned dragon's head peaking out from under the covers and the blurred memories from the night before started coming back to him.

He didn't have time for a reverie though, for a couple of seconds later there was a loud pounding on the door, followed by a man's voice "Ishandra, wake up, I've got to talk to you."

Whoever it was, the man sounded serious, and his business urgent; Thomas didn't like the sound of that. He sat up quickly, and in doing so he roused the sleeping reptile exotic next to him. She sputtered awake, and glanced up at him as she blinked the sleep from her eyes.

The knocking came again and she turned her attention to the door. "What is it, Mark?" she asked, her voice still groggy.

Without warning, the door opened, and Thomas was caught holding the bed covers against himself as a man walked in. The sight of him added to the shock. He was an older man, probably in his late 50's. His face showed signs of having lived a hard, wild life, and his eyes burned with intensity. His hair was in need of being cut, growing wild and tangled. It showed no signs of thinning, though the color was starting to fade. To complete the image, he had a chaotic tribal tattoo on the right side of his face, framing his eye and cheek.

The man took a look at Thomas and his expression abruptly changed, showing shock and surprise. He stared at Thomas for a moment, and then his look became that of humility as he turned towards the dragon gypsy. "I'm sorry, Ishandra, I didn't know you were entertaining anyone... I'll wait for you guys to get dressed, but I do need to talk with you. It's very important."

Thomas didn't like how insistent the man had sounded with that last part. Even though he'd left the bedroom and closed the door behind him, the young man knew that the stranger was just waiting in the next room. He did his best to gain his composure, but as he turned to look at his exotic lover, the scared confusion was written all across his face.

"Don't worry about him," came her reply to his wordless question. "That's just Mark, my husband."

"Your husband?" The words fell out of his mouth, mixed with a low gasp.

"Yes sweetie, it's okay" she said as she touched his arm to comfort him. "He knows all about this and we have it all worked out. He's not mad, just a little embarrassed at surprising us."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, though it really must be something important for him to barge in like that." Thomas only stared at her as she continued. "I need to talk with him right away. So get dressed, but don't go anywhere. I really enjoyed last night and I want to have breakfast with you at least." She gave his arm a squeeze, showing her powers of persuasion, as she'd done the night before.

Thomas moved slowly as he got out of bed and found his clothes strewn along the floor. He felt as if he was still caught in dream as he remembered more of the events of the previous evening. Mixed emotions tugged at him. That certainly wasn't something he was used to doing. He stole a look at her body, seeing her back and tail, taking in the sight of her cobalt skin, and a couple of other feelings washed over him.

He finally managed to get out of his stupor and get dressed. She opened the door and ushered him out into the sitting room of her trailer, where the night before she'd offered to tell his fortune, before offering other things. Her husband now stood in that room, looking agitated, but not hostile. He even managed a friendly smile at Thomas as Ishandra made introductions."

"I'm awfully sorry about barging in on you like that," the older man said as he gripped the young man's hand firmly.

"That's okay" Thomas heard himself say as he looked into the face of the gypsy's spouse. And then Ishandra ushered him outside, reminding him again to stick around, that she wasn't finished with him yet.



Thomas' thoughts were clouded as he sat down on the steps to his trailer. What was he doing here? After all the wandering he'd done, he still didn't feel any closer to finding what he was looking for. He certainly felt more lost than usual after the events of last night. Why had it happened? He'd certainly never done something that rash before, but maybe the loneliness of the road was getting to him more than he realized. It was hard trying to find your way, and so far it'd been nothing like the voyage of discovery he'd planned. Drifting between odd jobs from city to city as he trekked cross country seemed every bit as futile as taking classes had been.

The carnival had seemed an interesting stop at first, a chance to see how the other half lived. He'd never seen a real live freak show before, and it had lived up to its promise to amaze and disturb him. That'd probably only added to the feeling of isolation though, so when Ishandra had approached him later on, he'd been open to talking to her. She'd settled his wariness and put him at ease, and had even invited him back to her trailer for a psychic reading. She hadn't told him anything he didn't already know, and had made a few lucky guesses about his background, but otherwise that endeavor had been pretty pointless.

It had got them talking though, and perhaps it was just any port in the storm for him, after driving so many miles alone, but he'd felt a connection with her. Then again maybe it was just hormones and natural curiosity. Having someone give you attention can be intoxicating, especially after spending so much time alone, only listening to your thoughts. It probably didn't hurt that she was an exotic, an attractive and mysterious one at that. Even among the exotics, reptiles were a small minority.

He smiled a little as he thought of her in that way. No matter what else he felt, he couldn't deny that it had been a memorable evening and a rewarding one at that. Even with how quick things had progressed, it had felt good to couple with her. He felt himself blush slightly at the thought of taking a lover so quickly. He chided himself that he didn't even know the first thing about her, such as her having a husband, for instance. That thought jumped out at him, surfacing to the top of his consciousness after he'd tried so hard not to think around it. He felt a dull gnawing in pit of his stomach as he remembered the look on Mark's face when he'd burst in on them and he felt like a fool all over again. Even if what they said was true, that he was truly okay with it, did it really make things alright? It didn't help him feel any better.

He felt the impulse to leave again; to get up off those steps and walk briskly away, not turning around, not saying good-bye. He could make it to his car, then be on the road and never look back. But off to where? That was the question. He didn't feel like driving any more just then. Plus, Ishandra's insistent plea for him to stay around, so they could talk some more, kept on pulling at him. It helped to offset the other thoughts nipping away at him. So, for lack of anything better to do, he stayed and waited. He was good at waiting things out.

He tried to distract himself from the thoughts at hand, so instead of gazing down at his shoes while his mind wrapped around itself, he looked up and checked out his surroundings. Things looked different now that the sun was out. He hadn't gotten a good look at the landscape when they'd come here the night before. It had already been dark for a couple of hours once she'd offered to take him back to her place, and while there had been colored circus lights all around, it had only lit things up partway.

This morning the bright sun cast a different look at the place. It still had a carnival atmosphere, but not quite the dream-like mood from the night before. It still managed to be surreal enough though. As he looked about from his

vantage point on the gypsy's steps, he could see all the citizens of this little community starting about their daily business. It was perhaps just like any other small town, with people moving about, tending to their own matters, but there were obvious differences. For starters the feel of the place was definitely transient. All the structures were trailers, trucks or tents, and while they were set up as neatly as possible, the order was not perfect. There were setups for utilities strung between the settlements, lines for power and hoses for water.

What made things even more distinctive though were the members of this special community themselves. Never before had Thomas seen such a high percentage of exotics among the crowd, not to mention the freaks. Of course it was a perfect environment for the latter, one of the places they could feel at home and be celebrated instead of shunned. Some exotics from small towns might find the atmosphere inviting as well, especially those with any interest in show business.

As he watched, a couple caught his eye. A female exotic, a white tiger, was walking along with a severely-deformed man. He had lumps on his face, with one of the bulges encroaching on his eye. His left arm was shrunken and withered, and he walked with a slight limp. As the two of them walked along, talking as friends and peers, he noticed the freak looked perfectly at ease; even the imperfection in his step didn't seem to be adversely affecting him. Thomas tried not to look too closely, but his curiosity got the better of him. A moment later they caught his gaze and waved at him. He managed a smile and a little wave of his own, and was thankful that they paid him little heed. He was in their world now, just part of the scenery.

"Well, hello there" a voice next to him rang out, startling him from his reverie.

He flinched, and then turned to look at whoever had addressed him. Unsure of what to expect, he was even more surprised when he had to drop his gaze downward to meet the mysterious stranger who'd addressed him. There before him stood a midget smiling up at him. Even though he was seated, Thomas was still about a half a foot taller than him. That was partially due to him sitting on the top of the stairs, but also due to the very short stature of the little man who stood before him.

At the same time Thomas registered the presence of another person, someone taller, taller than both of them in fact. Standing off to the side and behind the midget was a tall gangly man. He was at least six feet, and probably several inches over that. He was bald, his scalp not looking shaved, but naturally denuded of hair. Even the man's eyebrows were thin. What's more his skin was a dark green, which was probably another by-product of genetics, not cosmetics. The lean tall man was smiling at him as well, but his mouth was open leaving his teeth visible. They'd been filed down to points, which offset the congenial impression he was going for.

Thomas flinched in spite of himself, and then struggled to keep his composure. The midget just laughed at that, but his laughter was warm and

inviting. He offered his squat arm to Thomas, and Thomas found himself shaking hands with the diminutive man.

"I'm sorry to startle you," the midget said. His voice was a slightly higher pitch than normal, and his words came out soft and warm. "We saw you sitting there, looking a little lost and thought we'd introduce ourselves." He paused, and then added, "I'm Jeremy, and this is The Geek. He can't speak much, but he's a nice friend to have around." As he said that, Jeremy glanced up at the midget's giant companion and gave him a warm smile. The green man grinned down at him with warm admiration.

"Uh, I'm Thomas" the young man said, now feeling even more like an outsider. He paused briefly, searching for something more to say, then added "it's nice to meet you guys."

"You a friend of Ishandra's?" Jeremy asked.

Thomas nodded dully, "yeah." He felt like adding that he'd just met her, but that didn't seem necessary to reveal.

"Is everything okay, you look a little worried?" The midget gave him an earnest look, his eyes reflecting genuine concern.

Jeremy's voice was so low that for a moment Thomas got a quick impression of talking to a young child. That faded just as quickly though as he saw the stubble on the midget's chin. "I guess so... They're just inside talking, something important came up, but she wants to talk with me afterwards..." As soon as he'd said it he felt his face heating up at having said too much.

"Oh yeah, the preacher, we heard he came home early. He got in this morning all excited about something. Thali said he'd seemed in a hurry when he'd passed her near the gates." Reading Thomas' expression, Jeremy was quick to add "oh, don't worry about Mark, that wasn't about you, I can assure you of that. If he had a problem with you, you'd know about it already."

That strange assurance didn't do anything to make Thomas feel any better. He still didn't like the idea of Ishandra's husband being so worked up about something, not to mention the fact that she had a husband to begin with.

Noting Thomas' discomfort, Jeremy shifted the conversation. "Ishandra's very nice, isn't she?"

That didn't help matters all that much, but Thomas did have to agree with the midget that yes, the dragon gypsy was quite nice. He blushed again as he voiced that affirmation, but Jeremy just ignored it and gave him another smile.

"Yeah, she's a real piece of work. She can be pretty persuasive if she wants to be, but she's got a heart of gold. She's not really my type, but I don't mind looking. She's a real fun tease too." Getting only nods from Thomas at this, Jeremy added "you're lucky that she took a fancy to you. When she likes you that much that means she thinks you're something special."

"Well thanks" Thomas said; it was the only semi-intelligent reply he could think of making.

“Hey, if Ishandra likes you, then you’re good in my book, Thomas... It’s nice meeting you but we should be going to get breakfast. I’d invite you along, but I’m sure Ishandra and Mark will get you something.”

“Okay, thanks anyways.”

“No problem. You take care and maybe we’ll see you around.”

Thomas nodded again and with that they were off. Jeremy shook his hand again and then as they were leaving, the Geek grunted something to him and smiled again. Thomas was alone on the steps as he watched the two mismatched friends walking away. He was left with his thoughts once again.

He wondered what it meant that Jeremy had said they might see him around again. Could it be possible that he’d end up stopping here awhile? It was true that he didn’t really have any place in particular to be, but how was he going to fit in at the carnival? That seemed like the last place he’d end up.

‘Gooble gobble. One of us... One of us...’ He pushed that thought down. No, that didn’t seem to fit at all.

He wasn’t left alone with his thoughts for too much longer though. He soon heard the door to the trailer open behind him. Turning around he saw Ishandra looking down at him.

“Come on in, Thomas” she said; her voice was just as sweet as ever. “Let’s get some breakfast.”







### Chapter 3: Going Down the Rabbit Hole

*We sometimes catch a window, a glimpse of what's beyond  
Was it just imagination, stringing us along?  
More things than are dreamed about, unseen and unexplained  
We suspend our disbelief, and we are entertained  
Rush, "Mystic Rhythms"*

*But when I look into your eyes you don't believe me  
I can see it in your eyes you don't believe  
Alan Parsons Project, "You Don't Believe"*

Ishandra watched Thomas carefully as he sipped at the cup of coffee she'd given him. He noticed that Mark was watching him too, not as intently, but still with some interest, and maybe a little concern. At least the older man didn't seem to harbor any ill-will towards him, so that put him a little at ease. He still didn't feel all that comfortable sharing breakfast with this couple, one half of whom he'd spent the previous evening with. It didn't seem to matter to him that he hadn't known she was involved with anyone. Hell, it still felt odd that he'd gone to bed with her in the first place. He didn't feel any less uneasy from the talk he'd just had with the midget Jeremy either, he maybe felt even more unsure because of it. He didn't belong here.

Ishandra finally broke the silence. "You're still uncertain about last night, aren't you Thomas?"

He nodded dully and managed to give a curt reply. "Yes."

"You don't regret it do you? I thought we had fun, you had a good time, right?"

He glanced from her to Mark's face before answering. The man was still watching him, but he looked mostly disinterested. He didn't seem concerned about them talking about their carnal exploits in front of him. He seemed more impatient to talk about something he considered more important. Thomas wasn't sure if he wanted to find out what that was. He was still half regretting sticking around, even though the lovely dragon had asked him to. He caught himself thinking that. Even with the mix of emotions he felt sitting between this very strange couple, he couldn't deny there was an attraction he felt for her.

"No, it's not that," he finally answered her. "It was very nice being with you." He half regretted saying that, feeling foolish at admitting that while her husband could hear him. He paused, trying to collect his thoughts. "It's just that I've never done that before... no I mean with someone I'd just met." She smiled slightly at that, but didn't say anything. The look she gave him felt like she wanted more, and soon he heard it being dragged out of him. "I've never been with an exotic before either..."

Then he felt really stupid. He might not be an ivy-league graduate, he wasn't even a student any more, but that didn't mean he was some ignorant rube. He didn't like the way his last confession made him sound so dumb. He dropped his eyes from her face. He kept from looking at Mark as well.

"Shhhh hon, don't worry about it." He felt her take his hand, while her other hand reached out to cup his chin. She lifted his head with gentle insistence, until his gaze met hers once again. "I had a feeling that was the case, it's nothing to be ashamed about."

"I'm sorry it came out that way, Ishandra. I know it didn't sound that flattering."

"Not at all, Thomas. Eloquence is not always required. I asked you for how you felt and you answered truthfully. Now would you feel any better if I was a human woman?"

He shook his head, but still kept focus on her gaze. He couldn't turn away from those green eyes which were looking at him with a warm intensity. "No, it probably wouldn't change things that much..."

"I know you're worried about Mark, hon and that was a bit of surprise. I didn't expect him back so early this morning, but it's better he did come while you were still here, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you feel."

Thomas didn't know how to respond to that, so he stayed silent and let her continue. "I want to tell you again not to worry about that though. Mark and I have an understanding. We've had this agreement for a long time, and it's how things work for us."

"And I want you to know I hold no ill-will against you Thomas" Mark added. The young man felt a shiver run down his spine as her husband finally spoke. "Again I'm sorry for bursting in on you this morning. I should've been thinking more... I'd feel more embarrassed about it if things weren't so important."

Thomas still felt as if his head was stuffed with cotton. His mind was still sluggish as it tried to wrap around everything that'd happened that morning. He did manage to turn his attention, however briefly, towards Mark. He even took the hand the man was offering him and made an effort to shake it, even if he was only going through the motions. Mark met his loose grip with a very firm one. For a second Thomas was afraid the man might try and crush his hand, but then he realized that Mark's handshake was just as serious as the rest of him.

"There, that wasn't so bad was it, hon?" Ishandra asked, drawing his attention back to her after Mark had released his hand. "I know this is a lot for you to take in, but it's important we get over this. I knew last night when I was reading you that you were something special, but after talking with Mark, I think you might be even more than that."

Thomas felt another shiver ripple through him. "I don't understand" he said, hearing how hollow his voice sounded. "I don't even know what I'm doing here, how this even happened..."

"You think I took advantage of you, don't you?" Ishandra asked, and he could feel the intensity of her gaze on him yet again. Those eyes were so expressive, but they showed great care for him.

"I don't know, I've never felt like this... I don't know if I've felt that way last night either." As he spoke those words, a thought ran through him, a flicker of memory flashing up from his subconscious. "That drink, you put something in it, didn't you?"

She chuckled at that. "No, it was just regular alcohol. I trust you're used to that, anyone your age should be used to that, especially someone who's been to college." He felt a sting from those words, but realized she hadn't meant it that way, or maybe she had. She did know that part of his history at least. "I may have seduced you, but you were in complete possession of your faculties while I did it."

He stared back at her blankly. Seduced him, but how? All she'd done is worked on his reading, given him a half-assed fortune, something about him finding his way, that a change was coming, something for the better. It'd sounded like the standard shuck and he hadn't paid much attention to it. Then she'd offered him a glass of wine, and he'd decided to drink it, even though it should've been against his better judgment. Even then things didn't seem too odd. He tried to remember it back, but things seemed a little hazy. If he could recall correctly, he thought he'd made the first moves, resting his hand on her arm as he was asking her about her life in the carnival.

She smiled at his puzzled look. "It was just a simple spell, hon, more of a charm really? No, don't be shocked, it wasn't anything drastic. I'd never do anything to someone I didn't want happening to me, 'return thrice fold' as they say. No, it was only a little push to get you to act on your inner feelings. I sensed you were interested in me, even when I'd met you on the midway and invited you back here. If you had no feelings for me then nothing would've happened. The charm wouldn't make you do anything you didn't really want to do anyway..." She gave his arm a suggestive squeeze as she added the last part.

"But why? Why me, why go after someone random at all?"

"Well first because I thought you were cute." He felt himself blush at that comment, even in spite of himself. Again he chanced a glance at Mark, who was smiling slightly, but still looking impatient.

"You also looked a little lost out there, and I thought I might be able to help you in some way. I'd planned on talking with you more this morning... You also felt like someone who was curious, who was open to possibilities, but might not realize it or even admit it to themselves."

He shook his head at that; he didn't feel that way at all.

"Oh really, then why'd you bother to check out the carnival at all? It's not the sort of thing your average person does, especially alone. It's more of a dating activity for someone your age isn't it?"

"So you figured I'd be an easy target then?" Thomas was reminded again that she was an exotic, and a reptilian one at that. He remembered how some

exotics tried to distance themselves from humans, finding themselves more akin to their distant animal counterparts. Could she really be a dragon-lady? She didn't seem cold at all. She'd certainly been warm and inviting last night... He caught himself thinking that and felt his face heat up again in another blush.

"No, not at all, Thomas. You've got to try and trust me when I say that I found you interesting and could see that you were lonely and thought this might be good for you... I enjoyed it a lot myself too. You're an eager lover."

She paused and they looked at each other for a few moments; the silence weighed heavy between them. He just didn't know what to say, he hardly knew what to feel about it. She was right about how it had been good for him at the time though.

Finally she spoke again. "Do you think you can leave it at that for now?" she asked him. "I know you're still unsure, but we've got other things to discuss."

"Okay" he said, his voice still low, but he felt himself rise to her challenge. She seemed to care about him enough to keep him around this morning, so he could stick around and see where things went. As she'd suggested, he really didn't have anywhere else to be just then, and no matter how weird the morning was turning out to be, he had to admit he was at least a little curious as to what this was all about. At thinking that he worried that she might have charmed him yet again, but he forced that thought down. If he double-guessed everything he'd just make it worse.

"Good, it's about time" he heard Mark say. The man's voice was tinged with a hint of annoyance.

"Mark, remember your hospitality" Ishandra said to him, her voice serious, but sounding caring too.

"I'm sorry" he said, nodding to her, and then turned to look at Thomas. "I didn't mean anything by it son, it's just that even after all these years I can still be gruff sometimes... I know it's important what you guys were talking about, but with what I've been itching to say, it's been hard to sit still."

Thomas felt the lump in his throat return as he heard Mark mention that, but as he looked at the man, he still didn't show any resentment. Instead he looked almost like a kid who was bristling with excitement to tell his friends some important secret and could barely contain it any longer.

"Okay dear," Ishandra said to him. I'll put some more coffee on and you can start your story."

Ishandra got up to tend to the coffee pot and Thomas switched his attention to Mark, still feeling unsure as to what exactly was going on. Mark just looked at him for a couple of moments, perhaps studying him, or maybe just searching for the right words to say. The room grew quiet, as Thomas waited for the older man to speak.

Finally Mark began. "Okay son, I know you're going to have a hard time believing this, so just let me get finished with all of it before you say anything, okay?" Thomas gave a silent nod and Mark continued. "I was out exploring the area. I go out for drives sometimes, just to get away and see what's around. I

usually plan on being gone for a couple of days, but what happened last night changed that.” After a brief pause, Mark added “I was out driving on one of the back roads when I saw the angel again...”

“The angel?” Thomas thought and blinked his eyes as he stared back at Mark. He then turned his head to look back at Ishandra, who nodded in agreement and motioned for him to turn back around.

“Now stay with me here, I know it sounds crazy, but you need to listen to it all.” He was watching Thomas intently now. “Yes, I saw an angel, the same one I’ve seen before. She saved my life once, years ago... She was there, just standing along the side of the road, waiting for me. I know well enough now not to disregard a message from above, so I pulled over. She got in my truck and we had a long talk.”

Thomas glanced sideways. He noted that Ishandra was still behind him and gauged the distance to the door. Neither Mark nor Ishandra looked crazy, but he didn’t like how this was sounding. If Mark noticed his unease, he didn’t mention it to Thomas, instead he continued with his tale. “I don’t know if you’re a religious man son, but I tell you that the angels do exist and they come down here sometimes to do God’s work. Sometimes they even enlist others to help them out. Now ever since that angel saved my life, I’ve been paying back a debt, and trying to do what He’d ask of me... Last night the angel told me that we’re all in danger.”

“Danger?” Thomas asked. His mouth felt dry as he parted his lips to speak. “What kind of danger?”

“It could be the end of everything.”

“You mean Armageddon, the end of the world?” Thomas’ voice belayed his disbelief, but again Mark ignored it.

“Yes, something’s coming that could end it all, and it’s up to us to stop it?”

“What do you mean ‘us’?”

“Well, Ishandra and myself, and I think you?”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense, why you two, and what about me? You just met me.” Thomas heard his voice becoming louder as he offered his challenge.

“Well, myself, I’ve been touched by the power of God, and Ishandra, she has her own qualifications which I’ll let her explain. As for you, I didn’t know it would be you at the time. All the angel said is that we’d meet someone new, someone young and inexperienced, but open to possibilities. She said that we needed to get you come along with us, that you were needed to stop the threat. Then when I got back and found you here, and talked with Ishandra about what she thought about you, we both agreed that you’re the likely candidate.”

Thomas shook his head. His mind felt stuffed up again, like it had earlier. He turned to look at Ishandra for support; surely she couldn’t be going along with this. She was beside him a moment later and placed a hand on his shoulder as he looked up at her. “I know it’s got to be hard to take Thomas, but from what Mark’s told me, I think he’s right, that you are the person we need.

Sometimes things happen for a reason, and I think it was no accident that I met you last night.” She paused, and then added “I was serious when I said I thought you were someone special, I got that feeling when I did that reading on you.”

“Okay, that’s it!” Thomas exclaimed in frustration. “I don’t know what game you guys are playing, but I don’t want to be a part of it. Maybe you think it’s funny to play around with me, to see how much fun you can have with your new playmate, but I’ve heard enough.”

He made an effort to stand up, but Ishandra pushed against him, holding him down against the chair. A shudder ran through him as he realized the strength she was able to muster, which she’d kept hidden before.

“No Thomas, we’re serious,” she said, her voice still soft, but her eyes looking at him intently.

Thomas stopped fighting her and searched his mind for something to say to her. “Okay Ishandra, let’s talk about that reading you did for me then. If you were able to sense so much about me, how come I wasn’t amazed by what you said? Everything I heard sounded pretty run of the mill to me.” He realized that perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to argue with her over her supposed abilities, but he was desperate and the only option he could see was to try and use logic to diffuse the situation.

“I read that you’d gone to college but hadn’t finished” came her reply; her voice was cool and collected.

“That’s not really a big deal, Ishandra. You yourself said that it was strange for a person my age to be around here. You probably just figured out I was a drop-out who was trying to find myself. Everything else you said could’ve just been some clever social engineering. It’s just show-biz anyway...”

He saw her eyes go wide, and felt her grip tighten on his shoulder, if only for a moment. “So you don’t believe me at all then, Thomas?”

He shook his head, “no, I’m sorry Ishandra, but I can’t.”

“Very well then” she said as she took a seat next to him, leaving one hand still on his shoulder. Her voice was still low, but insistent. “Give me your hand.”

“What?”

“Give me your hand. If you didn’t believe the reading I did last night, then I’ll do another one for you. I didn’t tell you everything I felt last night, and now that I know you better I can get deeper.”

When he hesitated, she reached out and took his hand, placing it in her firm grasp. Thomas looked over at Mark who was still sitting across the table from him. He looked impatient again, but not hostile.

Ishandra stared at him. “So you want proof, then I’ll give you something out of a memory that I couldn’t possibly know.” Thomas watched her faced in disbelief. Her brilliant green eyes drew his attention as he looked into her intense gaze. As his eyes focused in on hers, he caught the subtle movement of her pupils. As he watched they expanded and contracted ever so slightly, fluctuating as if in time with her heartbeat.



They stayed like that as the seconds ticked out between them. Finally she broke the silence. "Your cousin, he was about your age."

He paused, digging through his memory for the name. "Fred, what about him?"

"One summer when you were in your early teens your parents drove cross-country to see relatives and you spent a week at your cousin Fred's house."

"So," he asked, as an old memory resurfaced. He didn't like where this might be going, but tried to keep his composure.

"He talked you into playing strip poker, and eventually you had your first sexual experience. It wasn't anything big, but you watched each other get off. You did it a couple more times too. It was exciting and forbidden, but later you felt guilty about it."

He paused and stared at her, his mouth open. "It was just something I did as kid..." he said. A moment later he added "why the hell did you have to bring that up?"

"You don't need to be embarrassed Thomas, it was completely natural."

He felt his face heating up again. He pulled his hand from her grasp and turned away from her. He couldn't help but glance over at Mark though. He saw the older man was smirking, but when Thomas met his eyes, Mark's expression paled slightly. Thomas grabbed the table tightly with his hand, holding onto it as he fought his embarrassment.

It was then when the full gravity of the situation hit him. "Ishandra" he said as he looked up, daring to face her again, "how'd you know that, can you really read minds? You're a telepath?!"

"Not quite, hon, more like an empath. I can mainly read emotions and memories, if I try hard. I'm sorry I brought that up. I was just looking for something good, with a strong emotion with it that would show you what I could do. That was one of the stronger ones that I found with just a quick look."

"But it happened so long ago."

"It still had a strong emotion attached to it, even if you hadn't recalled it in years. It was the best impression I got from you that would prove my abilities were real."

"Can you see the future too?"

"Sometimes, but then it's usually still pretty hazy. Divination is much more difficult, and unpredictable. Even in the old days seeing the flow of time and eventualities could be random, and it's much harder now." She sounded sad as she spoke the last part, but that emotion was fleeting. "There's something else you need to see Thomas, to help you believe." She turned to her husband and held out her hand. "Mark can I see your knife?"

Thomas pushed back from her as she took the knife from the older man; that time she did not try and stop him though. He watched her and held his breath as she removed the blade from its sheath in a casual manner, and he waited to see what she was going to do. She surprised him by bringing the knife

to her other hand and with a quick motion she sliced the blade deep into her palm.

Thomas heard his gasp as her crimson blood spilled from the wound to pour across her blue skin. He saw her grimace slightly, but she made no move to stop the flow. She reached out for a napkin instead, to catch the blood as it fell from her injured palm. Then, as he watched, the flow of blood eased off, and within moments stopped all together. A few seconds later she used the bloody napkin to clean off her hand, then held it up to him. Besides the dark red smear on her palm, her flesh was unmarred. The wound had completely vanished; there wasn't even a scar there, where less than a minute before there'd been a gaping wound.

"I know that wasn't the best of ways to show you that either, Thomas, but it got the point across as well. I trust that will help you believe that there's magic in the world, behind the scenes of what you see everyday?"

"But how?" he managed to ask her.

"I'm not the regular exotic you think I am," she replied as she cleaned the blade of the knife with the napkin and then licked the remaining traces of blood off of her hand.

"What, what do you mean, Ishandra?"

"I'm an immortal, Thomas. I've been here a long time, a lot longer than you could guess." Again there was a momentary flash of sadness in her eyes.

"So what, are you some kind of god?"

"Goddess hon," she corrected him. The light in her eyes returned and a hint of a smile began to spread across her muzzle. "I'm not the goddess, but I am of her."

Thomas was shaking his head when he heard Mark say "It's kind of like the Trinity. It can be hard to wrap your mind around it if you think about it too hard."

Ishandra nodded to her husband. "Yes. The goddess of my people wanted to be closer to us, so she shared her essence with a priestess. The priestess became pregnant and gave birth to a special child. That child was me, the goddess incarnated in the flesh, made immortal. I was way the goddess could commune with her people, and I served that role for centuries."

"So, how'd you end up here?" Thomas regretted his bluntness as soon as he'd said it, but she paid it no mind.

"The goddess is eternal, Thomas, but her dominion was not. As all empires tend to do, ours fell. Our religion died out, to be replaced by other gods. As the followers dwindled, the goddess' powers over this world faded as well. That is why I can't do as much as I once could..."

"I'm sorry Ishandra, I didn't know" Thomas said and instinctively reached out for her hand, even before he knew what he was doing. "You must miss her."

She gave him a slow nod. "I can still feel my connection with her, but it is more of a whisper now." She paused as she squeezed his hand and forced a

smile for him. “That is the way of the world though. I have seen civilizations rise and fall as I’ve watched this world change. It was my destiny to experience this life, and I have taken the world as I’ve found it. The journey continues.”

“So now do you believe that what I said is possible?” Mark asked.

“I suppose so,” Thomas answered after a slight hesitation. His mind still felt numb with it all, but for the moment the best he could do was go along with it. “So I can see that you’ve been chosen by an angel, and Ishandra as well because of the way she is, but what does this have to do with me?”

“I really don’t know son, the angel wasn’t all that specific. It just seems that from what she said, you fit the bill.”

“But what are we even going up against, and why is it up to us to save the world?” Even as he was saying it, Thomas couldn’t believe his own words.

“That’s the nature of God. From what I’ve observed he doesn’t like to show his hand openly all that much. He’d rather work through indirect means, which this time means us. I don’t know much more than I’ve already told you. The angel said that we’re to head east. I imagine we’ll learn more as we’re making the journey, when we’re ready for it.”

“So you’re just going on blind faith?”

“Faith, but it’s not blind. I know you can’t understand why I feel this way, but I trust whatever message God sends me, and I’ll do His will.” Mark paused as he looked at Thomas. The intensity was back in his eyes, but they showed an earnest need as well. “Will you come along with us, Thomas?”

Thomas shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. I need some breathing room to think this over.” He made as to stand up and felt his balance waiver. “On second thought, I think I need to lie down.”