

The firebird arrived in Invierno later that night.

It landed atop a normal-looking mailbox. The mailbox had a *Tawalisi, 22 Dharma Road* decal printed on its side, and it stood in front of a normal-looking house on a normal-looking street in what was by all appearances a normal-looking suburb. This house was situated between an old folks' home and a small bungalow, bordered on one side by a small cul-de-sac. Despite the town's predilection against natural magic, most people still didn't associate Invierno as a place where anything unusual was likely to happen. That didn't say much about what people actually knew about small towns, or about Invierno in particular.

Rather than retreat to the safety of nearby trees and rooftops as any similarly sensible animal would have done, the firebird drew itself up, as regal as any queen, and waited for the shades to attack.

The shades in question were already closing in, and they assumed frightening, monstrous shapes. Some took human form, with long sharp claws in place of hands. Others took on semblances of wolves and bears and strange winged creatures; black eyeless silhouettes with teeth.

The firebird chirped a warning, but the shades paid no attention. So it sighed, a resigned, I-really-did-warn-you-about-this-you-know sigh, and glowed again. It was as large as an eagle, and had a fascinatingly plump shape; a ham of a bird would be a frank description, if not for its long graceful neck. Its feathers, a variety of yellows and reds and oranges tipped with a subtle silver shimmer, flared. Its majestic tail fanned out like a vestal train, whipping at slow, concentrated intervals.

It chirped out its first, and final, warning.

The nearest shade reached out for the bird, claws extended and sharp.

It was promptly engulfed in an angry red ball of fire.

The shadow screamed. Its right arm skittered across the pavement.

Flames danced around the firebird. With unerring precision it reared back and hurled them at the other shadowy wraiths, bathing the street in ruddy red heat until its enemies were reduced to nothing more than a whisper of cinders and smoke.

But even as they sank, new ones rose to take their place.

The shades were numerous, unrelenting. The firebird was young, inexperienced. Despite its ferocity, even it began to weaken under the unending assault.

And things could have ended very badly, had Lola Urduja not interfered.

Lola Urduja looked nothing at all like a warrior should look. Framed against the moonlight she appeared an incredibly fragile and elderly thing, with her mild brown eyes, dark skin, and thin white hair wrapped in a wispy bun. For armor, she wore an oversized peach bathrobe a size too large for her slim frame, and was for some reason still carrying an abanico fan in her right hand. But when she lifted her head to confront the lurking shadows her back straightened, her shoulders squared, and the once-mild brown eyes blazed with an unexpectedly commanding air that proposed other unimportant things like cars and airplanes and even shades should best get out of her way.

"This house is under the protection of the Katipuneros, by Avalon military decree number one oh eight two," she boomed, in a voice larger and fiercer than her body size allowed for. "Take another step and be snuffed out like the insignificant shadows you are, you reverse-projected, two-dimensional Jungian rejects!"

The shades halted momentarily, as if puzzled by the old woman's audacity. But all too soon their inexorable natures reasserted themselves, and they continued their relentless trek forward.

"Beta formation code one three five, defensive maneuvers!"

More people of indeterminate old age emerged from hiding places behind bushes and trees, vaguely threatening only they had not been wearing bathrobes. But they were armed... with more abanico fans, a cane, and in one instance even a makeshift shiv, because General Luna had once been in prison for three days and had subsequently Learned Things there.

And they were good at it. They knew where to hit, how to inflict the worst hurt. Shadows shrieked as the innocent-looking fans—or more specifically, the hidden blades lining the edges of the thin abaca fabric—dug into them, twisting and grasping, until soon even the endless darkness showed

signs of faltering.

"Teejay," Lola Urduja said, "shade at five o'clock."

The tita, her hair still pinned up by large rollers, obeyed, punching a fan through the shadow's chest before it could reach the other woman.

"Hold your position, general," Lola Urduja said to old General Luna, who had planted himself in front of the house next door. "Don't let them in!"

"Mga antipatika!" The octogenarian barked, then cheerfully shanked a shadow into nothingness.

A few of the shades crept toward her, sentient enough to recognize the little old lady's importance, but Lola Urduja lunged, was quicker than her limp suggested. Her fan twisted, and the sharp knives underneath the stretched cloth tore into the creatures like they were wet paper. She whipped it toward another approaching shadow, and an abrupt flick of her wrist summoned a sudden roaring wind, slashing the darkness into pieces without ever making contact.

The firebird and the elders fought the shades all night long. Finally, as dawn touched the sky with the colors of sunrise, the last of the creatures slunk away, disappearing into the sidewalk just as quickly as they arrived.

Wearily, the firebird watched them leave, the flames in its feathers dimming. When the last flickered out, it sighed and closed its eyes, returning to its perch atop the mailbox.

Adrenaline faded, was taken out of the elders' veins like an IV drip. They mumbled and scuffed at the ground with their good foot and looked rightfully embarrassed. This was technically not appropriate behavior for old men and women, though the awed grins had some trouble leaving their creased faces.

*Hadn't seen this much action since Wonderland,* Boy signed.

"Nakakamiss," Chedeng murmured, reverting briefly to Tagalog. "Good times."

"Punyeta," the general agreed.

"Natakot ba natin?" Baby asked Lola.

The little old woman pursed her lips. "No. They'll be back. Umalis na kayo. Won't be good for Tala to see us out here on the lawn, she'll have questions."

"The firebird is here," Chedeng said, not without some awe. "*Mare*, it really is the firebird!"

"Control your excitement, Mercedes. This is far from over."

The door to 24 Dharma Road opened and Kay Warnock emerged with a can of beer in hand, yawning.

"So good of you to help," Mrs. Sarge said dryly.

"Y'did a good enough job without me."

"A little too early to be drinking."

"On the contrary. After what just happened, I think it's a fine time to start."